Immigrant Civic Engagement and Religion:

The Paradoxical Roles of Religious Motives and Organizations

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Between 1960 and 2002, the proportion of the U.S. population that was foreign-born more than doubled from 5.4% to 11.5%. Currently about 20% of children and adolescents in the United States were foreign-born or have a parent who was, and this number is predicted to continue to rise (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). As the number of immigrants in the United States has reached unprecedented levels, public and academic debates have started to address the issue of their commitment to and engagement in the civic life of their new society. Some have argued that immigrants with their ties to foreign cultures are unlikely to become engaged in American civil society (Huntington, 2004). Recent research, however, has demonstrated variation among immigrant groups, with a number of groups showing substantial civic engagement (Jensen, forthcoming; Lopez & Marcelo, forthcoming; Stepick, Stepick, & Labissiere, forthcoming). A next research question to address, then, is: what are the individual motives and institutional contexts linked to immigrant civic engagement? The present chapter addresses this question in regards to religious motives and organizations.

The Role of Religion in Civic Engagement

Putnam (2000) argued that in the United States, religion is a crucial source of civic engagement. He observed that nearly half of all associational memberships in the U.S. are church related, half of all personal philanthropy goes through religious institutions, and half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context. Religion rivals education as a powerful correlate of most forms of civic engagement, and it is an

especially strong predictor of volunteering and philanthropy. Putnam suggested that the tie between religion and civic engagement reflects religious values. Based on survey analyses, Putnam also argued that affiliation with religious organizations may be just as important as religious values in explaining volunteerism and philanthropy.

Stepick and Stepick (2002) noted that religious involvement is often important to immigrants to the U.S., including immigrant youth. They also argued that religious involvement may well encourage immigrant civic engagement. Stepick and Stepick, however, emphasized that while the connection between religion and immigrant civic engagement seems likely to be important, "research on immigrant youth, church and civic engagement is virtually nonexistent" (p. 250). Furthermore, there appears to be no research on what the nature might be of such a connection, that is, the relevance of affiliation with religious organizations and of religious values and motives.

Civic Engagement and Positive Outcomes

Before proceeding to the specific nature of the present study, it should be noted that most observers agree that civic engagement in the United States—whether by immigrants or non-immigrant—is typically positive. From a societal standpoint, Putnam (2000) has demonstrated how civic engagement provides for a wealth of formal and informal social contacts and networks. In turn, such social capital is linked to better functioning communities, including schools and neighborhoods. From an individual standpoint, too, Putnam (2000) noted that the breadth and depth of one's civic and social engagements predicts life satisfaction and physical health.

Developmental psychologists have also recently pointed to the benefits of civic engagement for youth development (e.g., Flanagan, 2004; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss,

2002a; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Larson (2000), for example, noted that the time youth spend in structured voluntary activities, such as civic ones, is characterized by high levels of both intrinsic motivation and concentration—something that is uncommon in other contexts, including school and peers. Lerner (e.g., 2004; Lerner, Alberts, & Bobek, D. L., 2007; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003) has also emphasized the connection between the establishment of civic identity in youth and positive development along a number of dimensions, including a sense of competence. For immigrant youth, in particular, research has shown that civic engagement both affirms existing cultural ties and creates new social networks (Jensen, in press).

The Present Study

The research questions of the present study were four: 1) To what extent are immigrant adolescents and adults civically engaged? 2) To what extent does their engagement occur through religious organizations? 3) To what extent are religious or spiritual motives linked to the presence or absence of engagement? 4) What is the specific nature of their religious or spiritual motives?

Since there is limited research with immigrants on this topic, qualitative interviews were conducted that would tell us about immigrants' own conceptions of their civic engagement. One of the times when qualitative research is particularly helpful is precisely when we need to understand the categories emerging in new situations and the indigenous meanings associated with those categories (such as immigrants' motives for civic engagement). Furthermore, qualitative research is particularly helpful when connections among different phenomena are not well understood (such as the relation

between civic engagement and religion) (Fisher et al., 2002; Jessor, Colby, & Shweder, 1996).

Since the two main sources of current immigrants to the U.S. are Asia and Latin America, data were collected for one group from each of these two parts of the world, namely, India and El Salvador. In 2001 and 2002, the largest number of immigrants to the U.S. from Asia came from India, and the second largest number of Latino immigrants to U.S. came from El Salvador (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

Also, immigrants from India and El Salvador arrive to the U.S. under notably different circumstances and they arrive with access to markedly different resources. For example, over 60% of immigrants (aged 25 years or older) from India report having attained college degrees, whereas the comparable figure for Salvadorans is less than 5% (Zhou, 1997). The marked difference between the two groups can serve two purposes. First, it helps to capture a larger possible set of conceptions and connections pertaining to civic engagement and hence broaden the present findings. Second, to the extent that there are similarities in the findings from these two otherwise very different groups, such findings are likely to be particularly robust and common to diverse immigrants.

From each cultural group, first generation adults and second generation adolescents were included. In order to understand present and future civic engagement, it is important to understand the engagement of not only adults but adolescents (e. g., Flanagan, 2004; Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Flanagan & Tucker, 1999; Jennings, 2002; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

The present study addressed both political and community engagement.

As Sherrod, Flanagan and Youniss (2002a, 2002b) have argued, for today's youth and culturally diverse populations, research on citizenship needs to pertain not only to political and legal considerations but also to more general involvement with others in the community. Also, research with youth has shown disengagement from formal political activities (Galston, 2001), but high engagement in community activities and volunteering (e.g., Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Furthermore, emerging research with immigrants notes the importance of considering both community and political involvement (e.g., Jensen & Flanagan, forthcoming).

<div align="center">Method</div>

Participants

The participants were a total of 80 immigrants residing in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The sample consisted of two immigrant groups: Asian Indians (n = 40) and Salvadorans (n = 40). Within each of these two immigrant groups, there were 20 adolescents ages 14 - 18 years (M = 15.25, SD = 2.86) and 20 parents (M = 43.74, SD = 4.05). (There was either a mother or father for each adolescent). The parents were first generation immigrants (i.e., they arrived in the U.S. in their late teens or after). The parents' average age of entry into the United States was 24.54 (SD = 4.61). The adolescents were second generation immigrants (i.e., they were born in the U.S. or arrived prior to starting elementary school). Their mean age of entry was 2.69 (SD = 2.06). (Different researchers use somewhat varied definitions of immigrant generations. Here we follow Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

The adolescent groups had even distributions of girls and boys (9 female Asian Indians and 12 female Salvadorans). In the two groups of parents, there was a predominance

of mothers (14 female Asian Indians and 16 female Salvadorans). The participation of more

mothers than fathers in research on families is common.[1]

As Table 1 shows, most Asian Indian and Salvadoran parents were married. As

expected, the two groups of parents differed on a number of demographic characteristics.

The Asian Indians had higher levels of education and income, compared to Salvadorans.

The Asian Indians were particularly likely to hold professional or technical occupations,

whereas Salvadorans held a broad range of occupations.

Participants were initially recruited through local religious institutions (Catholic

churches and Hindu temples) and subsequently by means of snowballing off of

participants recruited through these institutions.[2] In accordance with recruitment criteria,

all Asian Indian participants were of Hindu religious background (rather than for example

Muslim or Sikh) and all Salvadorans were of Catholic background (rather than for

example Pentecostal). Of all families contacted, 59% agreed to participate.

Procedure

Participants took part in a one-on-one, semi-structured interview ($\underline{M}$ = 77 min.,

$\underline{SD}$ = 21) addressing civic engagement and other topics. In an effort to decrease socially

desirable answers, the civic engagement questions were asked at the end of the interview.

Our expectation was that participants by then would feel comfortable and hence be most

honest on the topic. Also, the questions required detailed answers (e.g., about the specific

nature of engagement), making it harder to embellish.

The interview language for all Asian Indians and the Salvadoran adolescents was

English (a language in which they were fluent). The Salvadoran parents preferred to be

interviewed in Spanish. The interviewers who conducted the Spanish language interviews

were of Salvadoran background and fluent in English and Spanish. For the Spanish language interview schedule, standard back-translation procedures were used.

Interviewers received extensive training in interview techniques. This included learning about the cultural and religious backgrounds of participants. Furthermore, two of the interviewers had resided in India. Almost all interviews (97.5%) took place in the homes of participants. This also increased the likelihood that participants would feel at ease during interviews.

At the outset of interviews, written informed consent was obtained from parents on behalf of themselves and their adolescents. The adolescents provided oral assent. At the conclusion of an interview session, each participant received compensation in the form of $25. Participants were also debriefed in the sense that they were asked if they had questions or thoughts about the interview.

Subsequent to interviews, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by professionals. For the Spanish language interview, professionals first transcribed into Spanish and then translated into English. These transcribers were of Salvadoran background and fluent in both languages.

Materials

With respect to civic engagement, participants answered a series of eight interview questions. These assessed participants':

1) Engagement in political activities (including organizational venue, if engaged).

2) Motives for being politically engaged or not being engaged.

3) Views on whether or not political engagement is important for people in general.

4) Motives for why political engagement is or is not important for people in general.

5) Engagement in community activities and volunteering (including organizational venue, if engaged).

 6) Motives for being communally engaged or not being engaged.

7) Views on whether or not communal engagement and volunteering is important for people in general.

8) Motives for why communal engagement and volunteering is or is not important for people in general.

Participants also completed a questionnaire (again in Spanish for Salvadoran parents) which included demographic and other questions.

<div align="center">A Narrative Analysis and Discussion</div>

Coding

In order to code the data, three researchers reviewed all interviews. This was done blind to participants' age, cultural background, and other demographic information. As the interviews were reviewed, coding manuals and a qualitative database were gradually constructed. The manuals were continuously refined in the process of reading interviews in order to account for all interview materials and clearly define coding categories. The qualitative database recorded both the coding categories and the verbatim response for each participant answer. By sorting all verbatim answers in the database according to coding categories, the coherency of categories was continuously assessed and the coding manuals continuously refined.[3] Once the coding manuals had been completed, inter-rater reliabilities were assessed on 20% of all interviews. They are reported below for each coding category. The researchers resolved discrepant coding through discussion.

In order to address the civic engagement of the immigrant participants and the religious component of engagement, the data was coded in four ways:

1) *Engagement of Self and Others*. A distinction was drawn between whether or not participants themselves were engaged (at the political and community levels), and whether or not they regarded engagement as important for people in general. Inter-rater reliability was 100%.

2) *Types of Organizations*. For every civic behavior that participants' described for themselves, coders assessed the type of organization through which it occurred. There were eight categories: cultural, medical, political, religious, school, social service, sport, and other. (A category of environmental organization was never used). Inter-rater reliability was 85%.

3) *Motives*. Every motive that participants provided to explain engagement or non-engagement for self and others was coded into one of three Ethics of Autonomy, Community, or Divinity (Jensen, 1991, 1997, 1998, 2004; Shweder, 1990; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). Briefly, the Ethic of Autonomy defines the moral agent as an autonomous individual. Moral reasoning within this ethic includes references to an individual's rights, interests and well-being, and equality between individuals (e.g., "[Volunteering] makes you feel good," "It helps you get into college"). The Ethic of Community defines the moral agent in terms of her membership in social groups. Moral reasoning within this ethic includes references to a person's obligations to others, promoting the interests of groups, and interpersonal virtues (e.g., "It's my responsibility to do it", "We can make a difference when we all vote together"). The Ethic of Divinity defines the moral agent as a spiritual entity. Moral reasoning within this ethic includes reference to spiritual

virtues, and divine authority, lessons, and examples (e.g., "Service to the community is service to God", "That is what has given me spiritual strength"). Inter-rater reliability coding with the three ethics was 91% (Cohen's Kappa).

4) *Religious or Spiritual Themes*. All Ethic of Divinity motives were then further analyzed in order to identify diverse themes. Themes were identified both on the basis of the preexisting subcategories in the Three Ethics Coding Manual (Jensen, 2004), as well as any new concepts introduced by participants in response to the present topic. As detailed below, four religious or spiritual themes pertaining to civic engagement were identified. Inter-rater reliability was 83%.

Engagement of Self and Others

Table 2 shows that all participants considered it important for people to be civically engaged at the community level, and almost all also held this view for political activities. When it came to the immigrants' own engagement, 81% were engaged at the community level and 30% at the political level. Community engagement was an almost universal activity among Asian Indian adolescents (95%), and Salvadoran parents stood out in regards to politics where 50% were engaged. Overall, it was the rare person who was not engaged. Furthermore, all thought that some kind of civic engagement was important.

Types of Organizations

Our next question addressed the types of organizations through which the immigrants' own civic activities occurred. Table 3 shows that half of all participants were engaged through religious organizations. Only school also served as a venue of engagement for close to 50%. Engagement through religious organizations was common

across both age groups and both cultural groups. For other types of organizations, there appeared to be more age and/or cultural group variation (e.g., twice as many parents were engaged through political organizations as adolescents, and almost twice as many Asian Indians were engaged through school as Salvadorans). Religious organizations, then, were a common context of engagement for immigrant participants.

Motives

Did the fact that many immigrants were engaged through religious organizations also mean that their behaviors were motivated by religious or spiritual considerations? The answer to this question seems to be "rarely." Nor did they appear to think that it was important for others to be motivated by such considerations. Table 4 shows that participants never spoke of religious or spiritual motives to explain why they or others should *not* be civically engaged. For engagement, 9 - 11% invoked divinity motives to explain their own behavior, and 1 - 10% did so to account for the engagement of other people. The use of Ethics of Autonomy and Community motives was far more prevalent. (The details regarding Autonomy and Community motives will not be discussed here as the present focus is on religion and spirituality).

Looking across age and cultural groups (not shown in table), Salvadoran parents in particular spoke of religious and spiritual considerations. Averaged across the four engagement behaviors (self and others, and political and community), 15.6% of Salvadoran parents invoked Divinity motives. The comparable figures for the other groups were 7.6% for Indian parents, 4.5% for Salvadoran adolescents, and 1.4% for Indian adolescents.

Religious or Spiritual Themes

While religious or spiritual motives were fairly uncommon, it still seemed useful to have an understanding of how the participants who did have such motives spoke of them. Emic research on people's civic motives has been highly limited (e.g., Friedland & Morimoto, 2005; Pearce & Larson, 2006), and as far as we know there has been no research addressing divinity considerations.

The present content analysis of the motives for engagement identified four religious or spiritual themes: 1) Divine Inspiration, 2) Service to the Divine, 3) Building Religious Foundations, and 4) Spiritual Virtues.

Divine Inspiration was where participants spoke of how God (or gods) approves of rendering service to others, especially those in need. One person spoke explicitly of divine approval, saying "Jesus is looking at you and saying 'Good job!'" Others spoke of God teachings and examples. One Salvadoran immigrant explained, "Jesus taught us to help those in need." Another said, "the first commandment of God says to love God above all else and your neighbor as yourself. So this is a way of loving thy neighbor— helping him." Coming from a Hindu perspective but expressing a similar conception, a participant explained "Hinduism says that we're all the same, we're all connected. You can feel that more if we all work together." Still others felt the intervention of God in their lives to awaken them to service:

> I came from poverty, right. And I came from a large family, so I started having a large family, and it wasn't just like that that I was able to watch over people. That was a change that the Savior made for me, he converted me to where I started seeing the needs that fellow man has.

In the eyes of these participants, God is guiding them to civic service and they are fulfilling a valuable purpose set forth by God (cf., Colby & Damon, 1992).

A second theme, **Service to the Divine**, involved a related conception of civic engagement. While the first theme emphasized civic engagement as a divine goal, this theme highlighted how such engagement is a means to pay homage to the divine. One parent explained that, "in Hinduism we say that service to the community is service to God." Using similar language, another person said "by helping others, we are doing service to God." Divine Inspiration and Service to the Divine, then, seem to be two sides of the same coin where civic engagement is either a means or an end linking people to divinity.

Building Religious Foundations was a third theme. Here the focus was on nurturing or building religious or spiritual values in others. A Salvadoran parent explained that "[it] is to help others that are in need, not just in an economic way but spiritually." A Salvadoran adolescent was similarly motivated,

> I try to influence the little kids in the right direction. Especially little kids, they need you growing up. Like making them want to learn about God and stuff. Because I think that's a good thing, it gives you something to base your beliefs on—a foundation.

Also linking civic engagement to spiritual recruitment (and perhaps even to church recruitment), a parent said "it makes me feel good that because of us more people are coming to church." In this view, then, civic engagement helps to build religion or spirituality in individuals and communities.

The fourth and final theme was **Spiritual Virtues** where participants felt motivated by virtues such as spiritual strength, faith, and humility. Combining feelings of empowerment and modesty, one immigrant parent described how:

> I've gotten involved and that is what has given me spiritual strength…. And that is what drives me. At school I have done many things. And it's not because I have done it alone, but with everyone else.

An adolescent spoke of faith as a motive, saying "I believe in doing good, and helping others is doing good. 'Do unto others…'—it's my faith to do good." Here then civic engagement was an expression of a moral commitment by persons who saw themselves and their behaviors in a spiritual light.

Conclusion

The present immigrant adolescents and parents from El Salvador and India regarded some form of civic engagement as important for all people. Moreover, they were engaged themselves, more so at the community than the political level. Furthermore, as previously shown, the majority of the immigrants' civic behaviors are focused on issues that do not pertain specifically to their cultural group or even to immigrant generally (Jensen, in press).

Lopez (2003) found that 75% of high school seniors in a national survey reported community service or volunteering within the past 12 months. Here, 87.5% of the adolescents (all but one of whom were in high school) described being engaged. The present sample is of course not representative of all immigrants (it is a small sample from one metropolitan area partly recruited through religious institutions). Nevertheless, these socio-economically diverse immigrant participants were civically engaged.

The civic activities of half of all the immigrant participants occurred in the context of religious organizations, a number similar to what Putnam (2000) noted for the general American population. This religious affiliation turned out to be far more important for civic engagement than immigrant participants' religious motives. Few participants spoke of religious or spiritual motives when explaining their political or community engagement, and the importance for others of such engagement. The present

study thus highlights the importance of distinguishing individual religious motives from religious contexts in examining civic engagement.

A next step will be to further examine the meanings and functions of religious organizations in regards to immigrant civic engagement. In the words of immigrants, why is it that they get involved through religious organizations when individual religious motives for such involvement are infrequent?

In conclusion, religious or spiritual motives were rare. Religious organizations, however, played an important role in positive engagement with society for the present immigrants to the U.S. In fact religious organization, unlike other institutions, pulled participants across age, immigrant generational status, and cultural background.

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Endnotes

1. The nature of the data was dyadic, consisting of adolescent-parent pairs, but the present focus on religious organizations entailed a reduction of the dataset that rendered dyadic analyses impossible.

2. The fact that initial recruitment occurred through religions institutions may entail a stronger presence of religion in the civic engagement of the present immigrant participants than in other immigrants. Partly, this recruitment strategy reflects the difficulty of otherwise locating and recruiting immigrant adolescents and parents who form part of coherent cultural communities (such as Hindu Indians).

3. In grounded theory analysis, this process is what is referred to as "open coding" and the integration of categories (based on their properties and dimensions). The process is also referred to as the "constant comparative method" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory analysis can take different forms based on the research purpose, the nature of the data, and the approach of the researcher. Even Glaser and Strauss, the originators of grounded theory, eventually parted company on whether various techniques are necessary or even desirable for an approach to be considered grounded theory (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Here we followed the constant comparative method steps.

Table 1: Parent Demographics

	Asian Indian	Salvadoran	Difference
Marital Status (%)			
Never Married	0	5	
Married	100	75	
Separated	0	5	5.71 ns
Divorced	0	10	
Widowed	0	0	
Other	0	5	
Education (%)			
Some Elementary/Junior High	0	16	
Completed Elementary/Junior High	0	11	
Some High School	0	16	
High School Diploma or GED	0	16	40.25 ***
Some College	0	26	
College Degree	32	5	
Post-Graduate Education	68	11	
Yearly Family Income (%)			
< $15,000	0	15	
$15,000 - $29,999	0	10	
$30,000 - $59,999	0	50	
$60,000 - $69,999	0	0	61.93 ***
$70,000 - $99,999	21	25	
$100,000 - $199,999	68	0	
> $199,999	11	0	
Occupation (%)			
Unskilled Work	0	0	
Service	0	11	
Clerical, Sales	5	22	
Business Owner or Manager	10	11	14.55 *
Professional or Technical	75	17	
Homemaker	5	22	
Not Employed	0	0	
Other	5	17	

Notes. a) X^2 values are indicated for marital and occupation, and F values for education and income.

   ***$p < .001$, *$p < .05$, ns = not significant.

Table 2: Self's and Others' Civic Engagement (percent)

Engagement	Adolescents		Parents		All
	Salvadoran	Asian Indian	Salvadoran	Asian Indian	
Self's Political	20	20	50	30	30
Self's Community	80	95	75	75	81
Others' Political	90	90	100	75	89
Others' Community	100	100	100	100	100

Table 3: Types of Organizations for Civic Engagement (percent)

	Adolescents		Parents		All
Organization	Salvadoran	Asian Indian	Salvadoran	Asian Indian	
Religious	45	50	65	40	50
School	40	70	25	50	46
Political	20	20	50	30	30
Social Service	20	45	10	20	24
Medical	10	35	5	0	13
Cultural	0	10	0	5	4
Sport	5	0	0	5	3
Other	15	35	5	20	19

Note: a) Percentages do not add to 100 as participants could report more than one kind of civic behavior and hence more than one organization as well.

Table 4: Use of Ethics of Divinity, Autonomy, and Community Motives (percent)

	Divinity	Autonomy	Community
Engagement			
Self's Political	8.7	52.2	69.6
Self's Community	10.5	71.9	78.9
Others' Political	1.4	42	72.5
Others' Community	10.1	50.6	82.3
Non-Engagement			
Self's Political	0	90.6	26.4
Self's Community	0	92.9	35.7
Others' Political	0	87.5	50
Others' Community	n/a	n/a	n/a

Note: a) No participants held that it was not important for other people to be engaged at the community level, and hence no one provided reasons to explain this position.
b) Percentages do not add to 100 as participants could provide more than one motive.