

Higher Education and Civil Society: Exploring the role of higher education in individuals' engagement with civil society. (0035)

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Background

Sociological and political research has documented relationships between education and civic engagement (Dee 2003; Nie et al 1996; Egerton 2002; Verba et al 1995; Paterson 2014). Indeed, understandings about the relationship between participation in higher education (HE) specifically and civic engagement (Egerton 2002; Hillygus 2005) has prompted the argument that HE is an important site for the development of civic skills, knowledge and values (Emler 2000; Crossley 2001). Whilst this research is hugely valuable, there is a paucity of in-depth examination of the ways in which people's propensity to take part in civic activities might also be framed by their personal circumstances and contexts (including their religious and secular beliefs or values). Drawing on both survey data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS 1958) and biographical narrative interviews with 64 Welsh domiciled adult participants (aged 50-55), this paper considers not only the extent to which civic engagement reflects individuals' participation in HE, but also their subjective interpretations of their opportunities for civic engagement and the meanings and significance it brings to their lives. By drawing upon two sources of data, survey and interview, to examine why people either do or don't engage with civic associations, clubs and societies, the paper aims to deepen our understanding of the socially uneven distribution of social capital, as manifest in civic engagement in UK society. It also addresses debates about the implications of widening participation in HE by highlighting the role that widening participation can have in addressing the socially uneven nature of civic engagement which is a key source of social capital.

Methods

This paper draws upon two separate sources of data. This includes survey data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS, 1958), and qualitative data from biographical narrative interviews conducted with a sub-sample of NCDS respondents. The NCDS is a pioneering birth cohort study which began in 1958. It followed the lives of 17,000 people born in a single week in 1958, in England, Scotland and Wales. The paper begins by examining cross-tabular relationships between respondents' civic engagement at aged 50 and

their attainment of HE qualifications. Most of this paper, however, focuses on data derived from biographical narrative interviews conducted with a sub-sample of NCDS respondents, all of whom were aged 50, lived in Wales and have participated in the NCDS since birth.

The biographical interviews explored relationships between higher education participation, individual circumstances and social contexts and civic engagement. In total 64 respondents, all aged 50-55 and resident in Wales were interviewed. 32 of these participants were graduates (having experienced higher education in higher education institutions in the UK in the 1980s) and 32 were non-graduates. Our focus on people in their early 50s is empirically and theoretically important; formal civic engagement (here defined as membership and activity in associations, clubs or societies) is strongly associated with the life course, with middle-aged people having particularly high rates of engagement (Putnam, 2000). Thus, focusing on people who are in their early 50s enables us to examine civic engagement when it is likely to be at its peak. It also enables us to examine life-course fluctuations in civic engagement and to consider the extent to which changes in personal or family circumstances, such as marriage, having children and then children growing up, might bear upon civic participation. In so doing we explore some of the individual as well as social barriers and enablers to civic engagement.

Emerging findings and conclusions

In their early 50s, our graduates were more civically engaged than our non-graduates; they were more likely to participate in formal associations, societies and clubs and to do so more frequently. This is consistent with a body of research which has documented the positive relationship between higher levels of education (and hence income and socio-economic status) and civic engagement (Verba et al 1995; Nie et al 1996; Putnam 2000; Dee 2003) and is consistent with the notion that HE may be an especially important site for the cultivation of civic values and skills needed for civic engagement (Crossley 2001). In this perspective, higher education participation is an important factor underpinning civic engagement and provides an important explanation for the socially uneven distribution of social capital.

However, the interview data suggest that participation in HE provides insufficient explanation for civic engagement. The middle-class graduates in our qualitative sample (both male and female) were not homogenous in terms of their civic engagement; some of them participated in numerous activities (associations, clubs, societies), and engaged in them intensely, whilst others not at all. By the same measure, many of our non-graduates engaged in multiple forms

of civic participation whilst others not at all. The homogeneity amongst our graduates and non-graduates could be explained at least in part by a range of individual contexts and circumstances, including their subjective interpretations of their opportunities, personal preferences, religious and secular beliefs and values, and the meanings they attach to their civic engagement and the significance it has to their lives and personal identities.

This paper, therefore, not only illuminates the way in which opportunities for civic engagement are socially structured and organised, but also that people's propensity to take up opportunities are contingent on their personal preferences, interests and values. We see how opportunity structures (defined by higher education opportunities) constrain and enable civic engagement in the association between higher education and civic engagement. However, the interviews with our 64 respondents illustrate that in addition to these opportunity structures are a range of factors relating to individuals' interests, beliefs, values and social constructions of the meaning of civic engagement in their lives which also strongly influence their engagement in civil society. Attending to people's social constructions of their civic participation and their intersection with objective constraints and opportunities is crucial if we are to gain a deep understanding of the socially structured nature of civic engagement.

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