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School and Community Climates and Civic Commitments: Patterns for Ethnic Minority and Majority Students

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The developmental correlates of diffuse support for the polity and civic commitments were explored in a survey of 1,052 students (mean age = 14.96 years) from African American, Arab American, European American, and Latino American backgrounds. Results of structural equation modeling revealed that regardless of their age, gender, or ethnic background, youth were more likely to believe that America was a just society and to commit to democratic goals if they felt a sense of community connectedness, especially if they felt that their teachers practiced a democratic ethic at school. Discussion focuses on the civic purposes of education in inculcating a sense of identification with the polity in younger generations.

Keywords: democratic school climates, school's civic role, diffuse support, ethnic minorities, students' civic commitments

Interest in the developmental roots of patriotism and commitment to the values that sustain democracy in America tends to wax and wane with the times. Attention increases when events make politics more salient or when there are concerns about the younger generation's values and commitments to the common good (Flanagan, 2004). In recent years, concerns about the younger generation's civic commitments have been spurred by trends showing declines in conventional measures of civic participation such as voting or reading the newspaper (Galston, 2001). These concerns have motivated renewed attention to the mission of public schools to nurture the civic knowledge, interest, and engagement of younger generations (Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, 2003).

This is not the first time that scholars have theorized about the developmental roots of civic loyalty and engagement. Three decades ago, theorists of political socialization argued that it was important to understand how younger generations came to believe in and be loyal to the political system, because stable democratic systems depended on diffuse support among the people. Those scholars distinguished trust in the system from trust in particular incumbents in power (Easton, 1975; Levi & Stoker, 2000) and argued that

> every society introduces its members to the political system very early in the life cycle. To the extent that the maturing members absorb and become attached to the overarching goals of the system and its basic norms and come to approve of its structure of authority as legitimate, we can say that they are learning to contribute support to the regime. (Easton & Dennis, 1967, p. 25)

The mechanism whereby support for the regime was thought to develop was via young persons' sense of political efficacy—that is, their sense that when people like them spoke, political authorities paid attention.

Subsequently, interest in the preadult origins of political commitments waned. Cook (1985) analyzed the decline and critiqued the extant body of work for three shortcomings: its preoccupation with political theory to the neglect of psychological theories of human development and learning, its focus on system stability rather than on how younger generations developed within a political system, and its misappropriation of research methods borrowed from political surveys of adults to research with children.

In this article, we revisit the issue of the developmental foundations of diffuse support for the political system. We look at adolescents' beliefs that America is a just society where equal opportunity is the rule and their commitments to the polity and the public good. Consistent with scholars in the political socialization tradition, we emphasize the importance of affective ties and the responsiveness of authorities as mechanisms whereby the civic attachments and commitments of younger generations develop. However, we take seriously Cook's (1985) critique that there was an absence of psychological work in early political socialization theorizing. First, we draw from theory concerning the psycholog-

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ical underpinnings of democracy, which holds that laws and institutions are a necessary but insufficient foundation for democracy. For democracy to work, society has to nurture certain key dispositions in the people, with a commitment to civic participation figuring prominently as one of these core dispositions (Sullivan & Transue, 1999).

Second, we build on a key tenet of the early socialization research concerning the young person's political efficacy—that is, his or her perception of the responsiveness of political authorities as the mechanism whereby diffuse support developed. However, rather than distal relationships to elected leaders in government, we focus on the proximate experiences young people have with teachers and fellow community members. Our focus on proximate authorities in children's lives is consistent with Cook's (1985) critique, in which he drew from Lev Vygotsky's work to argue that children's concepts of political authority are constructed from their proximate experiences with adult authorities. The significance of proximate authorities in the development of a sense of political efficacy is also underscored in Bandura's (1997) discussion of collective efficacy: "Children's beliefs about their capabilities to influence governmental functioning may also be partially generalized from their experiences in trying to influence adults in educational and in other institutional settings with which they must deal" (p. 491). Finally, Dewey (1927) pointed to the critical importance to democracy of local community ties when he declared, "There is no substitute for the vitality and depth of close and direct intercourse and attachment" (p. 213).

Third, early political socialization theory framed children's experiences as being preparatory for later citizenship and mediated through their perceptions of adults' political experiences. Instead, we draw from the political theorist Michael Walzer's (1989) work on citizenship and argue that young people learn what it means to be a citizen through their own experiences of membership in local communities and institutions and through opportunities they have to exercise rights and assume responsibilities as members of those local communities. Messages of inclusion and membership (who belongs, to whom authorities attend in a serious way) are communicated everyday in children's proximate interactions with those who wield power over their lives.

In summary, we argue that adolescents' perceptions that people who wield authority over their lives are fair and responsive to them and that fellow citizens in their community are committed to a common good are the bases on which young people come to believe that America is fundamentally a fair society and the bases on which they develop an allegiance to the principles that make democracy work. We know from research with adults that confidence in the political system is associated with perceptions that institutional processes (not outcomes) are fair (Citrin & Muste, 1999). In a similar vein, we argue that young people's confidence in the system occurs via the accumulated experiences of fair (due) process and responsive interactions with adult authorities.

Although the early political socialization studies focused on young children, we have focused on adolescents for several reasons. First, whereas the young child's sense of efficacy may be filtered through the experiences of key adults in his or her life, adolescents should have a better grasp of "the system" and how it treats them. Most societies recognize adolescence as a period when learning about the political system is appropriate and include some formal civic education for students during these years (Hahn, 1998). Second, as Erikson (1968) argued, although identity is reworked throughout life, it is a focal task during adolescence. And, by late adolescence, an individual's political identity status shows a consistent relationship with his or her political orientation and voting behavior (Goossens, 2001). Further, Erikson contended that in consolidating identities, adolescents need ideologies or systems of ideas that help them locate themselves within their society's traditions and values and that provide a basis for youth's commitments (Youniss & Yates, 1997). In light of this work, we argue that adolescents' sense of trust in the political system is a foundation for their exploration of identity. Affective ties to the political system and habits of civic commitment and participation that occur prior to adulthood set one on a civic path that predicts civic participation later in adulthood (Jennings, 2002; E. S. Smith, 1999).

Schools as Democratic Institutions

Schools are the institution with the most universal mandate for incorporating younger generations into the polity. Not only is education supposed to redress inequalities of birth by equalizing opportunities for achievement, schools are also the means by which all members of the younger generation can develop a sense of themselves as part of the body politic. Despite the many challenges that schools face in meeting these goals, they are the most likely social institution to provide individuals with opportunities for democratic practice (Carnoy & Levin, 1985).

Although schools have an important role in increasing students' civic knowledge (Niemi & Junn, 1998), we contend that they have an equally important task to nurture students' affection for and commitment to the polity and that teachers accomplish this task by establishing a democratic climate for learning and social interaction. Classroom and school climates have been studied as factors in students' affection for and achievement in school (L. H. Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Goodenow, 1993; Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989; Murdock, 1999; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996).

An open classroom climate in which discussion of controversial issues can take place has also been studied as a factor associated with the development of democratic skills such as perspective taking, tolerance, and trust (Hahn, 1998). In their study of 14-year-olds in 28 countries Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, and Schulz (2001) define an open classroom climate as one in which "students experience their classrooms as places to investigate issues and explore their opinions and those of their peers" (p. 138). Several studies have shown that students' reports of an open classroom climate are positively correlated with their knowledge about international affairs (Torney-Purta & Lansdale, 1986), ability to think critically about civic issues (Newmann, 1990), tolerance of dissenting opinions (Ehman, 1980), and commitment to voting in the future when they are of age (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

Teacher–Student Relationships

There also is a considerable body of research on the psychological environment at school, as captured by elements such as trust between teachers and students, students' perceptions that teachers care about them and value their opinions, their feelings of belonging at school, and their sense of identification with and pride in the school as an institution (Roeser et al., 1996). In all of this work, the teacher's role in terms of the way he or she interacts with students and negotiates his or her authority is key. We interpret this as reflecting the civil climate for learning that teachers create at school. That is, by the kind of interactions teachers have with students, they convey messages about social inclusion (i.e., who belongs, whose opinions count) and about tolerance and respect for differences of opinions, core principles of democracy in the United States (Hanson, 1989; Sandel, 1996; Sullivan & Transue, 1999). In summary, when teachers set standards of civility, respect, and fair and equal treatment, they create a democratic climate for learning.

Teachers' behaviors and relationships with their students are key in creating a welcoming climate for learning. Perceptions of teachers as caring, fair, and respectful are positively correlated with motivation (Midgley et al., 1989; Wentzel, 1997), engagement (Murdock, 1999), and achievement (Midgley et al., 1989) and negatively correlated with dropping out of school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Not surprisingly, students' sense of belonging at school is positively associated with their engagement and motivation to learn (Goodenow, 1993; Roeser et al., 1996). With demographics and other factors controlled for, this sense of belonging predicts increases over time in middle school students' focus on learning for its own sake (L. H. Anderman & Anderman, 1999). Students' perceptions that teachers apply fair standards, challenging all students rather than privileging only the high achievers, actually boosts students' beliefs that they are capable of learning (Roeser & Eccles, 1998). In short, students' sense of efficacy or agency as learners (Bandura, 1997) is highly related to their perceptions of how their teachers treat them and fellow students.

In addition, according to national studies, these relationships hold for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. With demographic factors controlled for, schools are more effective in promoting academic interest and achievement and minimizing dropout, class-cutting, and disorder when students perceive that teachers are interested in them and when there is consensus among the teachers in a school that all students are capable of learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Similar patterns have been found in studies focusing on students from ethnic minority backgrounds. Among ethnic minority youth, perceptions of noninclusive school climates are associated with less engagement and lower achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Ferguson, 1998). Indeed, although the effects are small, teachers' expectations have a stronger effect on African American students than they do on White students (Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996). When their teachers have low expectations for their achievement, African American students tend to disengage from school (Steele, 1992) and have lower confidence in their abilities (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Unfortunately, analyses of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) reveal that African American and Native American adolescents report a lower sense of school belonging than do their European American peers (E. M. Anderman, 2002).

How does a civil climate promote both learning and the development of a civic identity? It is important to understand that an open classroom climate is not a free for all. The rules of social interaction include mutual respect, offering one's own perspective and listening with an open mind to others' perspectives (Hahn, 1998). Such ground rules also reflect an egalitarian and open-minded view about learning and authority—i.e., the authority (teacher) is not "all knowing" but, rather, continues to learn with his or her students. In this regard, Deborah Meier (2002) shared relevant insights about learning as a public process in her book *In Schools We Trust.* When teachers create an open climate, they communicate several lessons to students: First, they welcome students into the community of fellow learners and, by implication, reveal a belief in students' capacity to learn. Second, they reveal that the best way to learn is to be public and open, trusting fellow learners enough to leave oneself vulnerable to their judgments:

> There is no way to get around it: The willingness to take risks, ask questions, and make mistakes is a requirement for the development of expertise. We can learn secretly, but at a price. The trustful relationship with the world that this acceptance of uncertainty allows—with respect to people, ideas, and things—is at the heart of learning. (Meier, 2002, p. 14)

Building on these principles of learning, we contend that in the context of such interactions, students are constructing concepts of democratic citizenship—that is, that it is based on membership in a community in which the members have rights and responsibilities to fellow citizens (Walzer, 1989).

In summary, we maintain that a democratic climate for learning affects students' diffuse support and civic commitments, because the students develop a sense of themselves as members of a political community and as effective civic actors in that community, developing a sense of efficacy because proximate authorities listen and pay attention to them.

Affective Ties to the Community

In the youth development literature, adolescents' health and well-being are consistently correlated with their affective ties to their communities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). According to national studies, when youth feel that there are adults they can count on and community institutions to which they are connected, they are less likely to experience negative outcomes and more likely to report feelings of well-being and competence (Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996; Resnick et al., 1997). For ethnic minority youth specifically, a sense that they matter to other residents of their communities provides the emotional sustenance that enables them to bridge to the mainstream (McLaughlin, 1993).

Typically, connectedness in these studies taps youth's views of "others" in their communities—that is, the extent to which people in their communities have a shared sense of belonging and caring about one another and a readiness to contribute to the common good and the extent to which a young person feels a sense of inclusion and security in his or her community. For adults and adolescents alike, feelings of community connectedness are associated with positive views of adolescents and with the belief that adolescents make positive contributions to their communities (Zeldin, 2002; Zeldin & Topitzes, 2002).

Such positive views of the generalized "other" also are correlated with adolescents' commitments to give back to their communities, and they are higher for youth who actually participate in community-based organizations (Flanagan, Gill, & Gallay, 2005). Organizational involvement during one's youth appears to set one on a path toward later civic engagement. According to longitudinal work, when early adolescents connect to fellow members of their communities—whether through family, religious institutions, or extracurricular activities—they are more likely to be civically engaged as young adults (E. S. Smith, 1999). Taken together, these studies shed light on the reciprocal relationship between civic participation and social trust (i.e., beliefs that people are basically fair and trustworthy) noted in the literature on social capital (Putnam, 2000). From a developmental perspective, adolescents' sense of community connectedness (i.e., their sense that trust, inclusion, and collective efficacy characterize the people who make up their community) is the kind of proximate experience of belonging that nurtures an impulse to pitch in and make the community a better place.

Trust in the American Promise and Civic Engagement Among Ethnic Minority Youth

Although there has been relatively little research in recent years on the processes whereby adolescents develop affinity for the polity and become engaged citizens, even less is known about these processes among ethnic minority youth. This is problematic in light of the growing representation of ethnic minorities as a percentage of the United States population (Hernandez, 1997). And what little we do know should give us pause (Garcia, 1973; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002).

National studies of adults point to lower levels of trust in government and of people in general among ethnic minorities when compared with majority groups, with experiences of discrimination and exclusion significant correlates of these beliefs (T. W. Smith, 1997). Likewise, ethnic minority youth are more cynical and less trusting of the government than are their ethnic majority peers (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Hepburn & Popwell, 1992; McLaughlin, 1993; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). In national studies of high school students, Latino and African American teens have been found to be less likely than their White peers to trust the government (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001) and more skeptical about the amount of attention the government pays to the average person (Niemi & Junn, 1998).

Other work indicates that although members of marginalized groups might believe in the promise of the American dream as a guiding principle, they may be less convinced that the specific tenets will pay off for people "like them" (Flanagan et al., 2003; Hochschild, 1995; Mickelson, 1990). Phinney, DuPont, Espinosa, Revill, and Sanders (1994) reported that as ethnic minority youth mature, they are exposed to a broader range of groups, opinions, and mores. In the process, they become more aware of how discrimination operates in society and how their group fares vis-à-vis the majority culture. Feelings of marginalization are associated with lower allegiance to the polity. According to Stepick and Stepick (2002), for immigrant youth, feelings of marginalization erode allegiance to the United States and increase allegiance to the native or sending country.

On the basis of the extant literature, two hypotheses were tested in this study: First, we expected that youth would be more likely to believe that America is a just society where equal opportunity is the rule and would be more committed to civic goals if they felt that their teachers practiced a democratic ethic at school and if they perceived that people in their community were committed to the common good of the community. Second, we expected that similar processes would operate for ethnic minority and ethnic majority groups.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Data were collected in the spring of 1997 in three midwestern communities in the United States. The project was presented to school superintendents and principals and then discussed with the social studies teachers. The project was described to students and in letters sent home to their parents as a study of adolescents' opinions about their schools, communities, and life in America. Written consent was sought from parents as well as students prior to their participation. These active consent procedures resulted in a response rate of 68%. Surveys were administered by research assistants during regularly scheduled social studies classes.

The sample contained 1,123 American students ranging from 11 to 18 years of age, with a mean age of 14.96 years. Of the 1,052 students reporting their ethnic origin, 104 were of African American, 115 were of Arab American (Lebanese/Syrian), 136 were of Latino American (Puerto Rican), and 697 were of European American descent. There were approximately equal proportions of male (48%) and female (52%) respondents.

Table 1 provides information about the age and gender characteristics of the overall sample as well as for each ethnic group. The Arab American students were, on average, older than those in the other ethnic groups, and the Latino American students were younger than the Arab American and European American students. Older students were concentrated in high school, whereas younger students attended middle school. The African American sample included more male students than did the Arab American and European American groups.

Measures

Using 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*; or 1 = *not at all important*, 5 = *very important*), students reported their perceptions of teacher practices, characteristics of their communities, belief in the American promise, and the importance to them of a set of civic commitments. For each set of items, a principal components analysis revealed that the items in each scale formed only one factor.

Table 2 presents a summary of the items in each construct. For theoretical purposes, we have grouped the items in three of these scales (Adolescents' Civic Commitments, Teachers' Democratic Ethos, and Sense of Community Connectedness) into subcomponents. In the text that follows, we present the measures of internal consistency for each and note that these constructs were used in the structural equations model (SEMs).

Belief in a Just America. Adolescents' beliefs that America is a just society were measured with three items about equal opportunity in America—that is, that regardless of their race or social background, all people are given a fair chance and an equal opportunity to get ahead ($\alpha = .71$). This is a core tenet of the "American dream"—that is, through dint of hard work, any person, regardless of how humble his or her origins, can get ahead. The belief in equal opportunity is one of the subcomponents used in Phinney et al.'s (1994) measure of what "being American" means to adolescents from different ethnic backgrounds.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Variable	African American (n = 104)	Arab American (n = 115)	Latino American (n = 136)	European American (n = 697)	Total (N = 1,052)
Age (years): M (SD)	$14.48_{a,c}$ (1.84)	16.41_{b} (1.49)	14.11_{c} (1.99)	14.90_{a} (1.62)	14.96 (1.77)
Gender (%)					
Male	66	36	47	57	48
Female	34_{a}	64_{b}	$53_{a,b}$	53_{b}	52

Note. Values with different superscripts are statistically different at the $p < .01$ level (based on Scheffe tests).

Adolescents' Civic Commitments. Students' commitments to civic goals were assessed using Kasser and Ryan's (1993) method of indexing aspirations on the basis of personal importance (1 = *not at all important*, 5 = *very important*) individuals attach to a set of future goals. A set of eight items, similar to those used to measure public interest goals in other studies of American youth (e.g., Johnston, Bachman, & O'Malley, 1977–1988) formed this measure. For the SEMs, these items were grouped into three constructs—that is, commitments to patriotism (α = .74), building tolerance (α =.77), and helping people in need (α = .75).

Teachers' Democratic Ethos. The 10 items of this scale were adapted from extant measures, including the *school relationship* dimension of a scale developed by Roeser et al. (1996) and the *teacher fairness* item in the Add Health school belonging scale (data source with specific items is available at http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth/data [see Resnick et al., 1997]). We also added items tapping students' perceptions that teachers refused to let students ridicule or bully fellow students. For the SEMs, these items were grouped into three constructs representing students' perceptions that their teachers were fair (held the same high standards for all students [α = .71]), respectful (listened to students' ideas and opinions even when they were at odds with the teachers' ideas [α = .66], and maintained an inclusive ethos (insisting that students respect one another and actively intervening to stop acts of intolerance [α = .71]).

Sense of Community Connectedness. Items measuring an adolescent's sense of community connectedness were developed for this study and were organized into constructs tapping perceptions of trust (i.e., that there were adults in the community that he or she could trust [α = .70]), collective efficacy (i.e., that residents pitched in to make the community a good place to live [α =.72]) and inclusion (i.e., that people were open and welcoming to newcomers [α = .73]). This measure tapped both the bonding and the bridging aspects of community connectedness discussed in the literature on social capital (Putnam, 2000). These items tapped the attachment relationship at the heart of measures of a "sense of community"—that is, of emotional support and mattering to fellow residents and of being part of something larger than oneself (Lorion & Newbrough, 1996; McMillan, 1996). Two "inclusion" items in our Sense of Community Connectedness measure (i.e., that the community welcomes newcomers) were added in response to critiques of the social capital literature, which has noted that strong social bonds within a community can be maintained by excluding newcomers or outsiders (Portes, 1998).

Data Analysis Plan

Data analyses proceeded through a series of steps. As the first step, we used factor analysis for data reduction and constructed summary scales based on the mean scores for items in a scale. Table 3 presents a summary of the mean score on each construct for each of the ethnic groups in the study.

As the table shows, there were no significant differences between groups in Sense of Community Connectedness or Belief in America as a Just Society. Latino American students had higher reports of democratic teaching practices than did African American or European American students, but their reports were not different from those of Arab American students. In addition, Latino American students reported higher levels of Adolescents' Civic Commitments than did European American students.

Table 4 presents bivariate correlations for all of the variables in our models. As shown in the table, all of the main constructs in our models are moderately but significantly positively correlated. Besides these positive relationships, age is inversely, though weakly, related to both the independent and dependent variables, and gender (female) is correlated with higher levels of civic commitments. Because there were some age and gender differences between ethnic groups (as noted above), we included these variables in our SEMs, along with reports of teacher practices and community connectedness, as predictors of young people's civic commitments and beliefs that America is a just society.

Next, we used SEMs to test measurement and structural invariance in the models for the three ethnic minority groups. Following that, we merged the three ethnic minority groups into one group and tested the measurement and structural invariance between the minority and majority group. Finally, we tested mean-level differences among the groups, following a similar strategy to the one used for the measurement and structural parts of the models (i.e., we first compared the differences among the minority groups and then the mean difference between the minority and the majority group). Given the number of nonindependent comparisons, we decided to use a stringent alpha value (α = .01) to control for Type I error. For these mean comparison analyses, we constrained the factor loadings and allowed the covariances among the latent constructs to be freely estimated.

Analyses and Results

The measurement model tested with SEM is presented in Figure 1. Given the smaller sample sizes for the Arab American, African

Table 2
Scales Measuring the Dependent and Independent Variables

Belief in America as a Just Society

- In America, you have an equal chance no matter where you came from or what race you are.
- America is basically a fair society where everyone has an equal chance to get ahead.
- Basically people get fair treatment in America, no matter who they are.

Adolescents' Civic Commitments

When you think about your life and your future, how important is each of the following for you personally to achieve?

Patriotism
- Helping my country
- Serving my country
- Helping society

Building tolerance
- Working to stop prejudice
- Improving race relations

Helping people in need
- Helping those who are less fortunate
- Helping people who are poor

Teachers' Democratic Ethos

In my school…

Respect
- teachers expect students to listen to each other's opinions.
- teachers treat students as individuals, not as members of groups.
- teachers listen to students' ideas.

Fairness
- teachers give all students a fair chance.
- teachers set high standards for all students.
- teachers believe that everyone can learn if they try.

Tolerance
- teachers really care about the students, all the students.
- teachers expect students to respect one another.
- if students threaten other students, teachers put a stop to it.
- teachers won't let students make fun of other students.

Sense of Community Connectedness

In my community…

Trust
- there are people I can ask for help when I need it.
- most people try to make this a good place to live.
- people trust each other.
- you can count on others for help.

Collective efficacy
- most people feel safe.
- in general, people in my town work together to solve our problems.
- in general, people pull together to help each other.
- you can ask the government to get a problem solved.

Inclusion
- when someone moves here, people make them feel welcome.
- when someone moves here, people are pretty nice to them.
- you can meet others of different races.

American, and Latino American groups and the number of parameters estimated in the model, we ran SEMs for the three ethnic minority groups exclusive of the larger European American group. The unconstrained measurement model for the three minority groups (i.e., allowing different loadings in each group) fit the data reasonably well, $\Pi^2(160, N = 365) = 217.43$, $p = .0017$, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .95, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .054. The constrained measurement model did not decrease significantly the fit of the model, according to the chi-square difference test, $\chi^2(16, N = 365) = 22.75$, $p > .05$, suggesting a degree of measurement invariance among the three groups. In the same way, constraining the beta coefficients to be equal across groups did not decrease the fit of the model, $\chi^2(12, N = 365) = 16.27$, $p > .05$. This suggested that the relationships among the latent factors presented in Figure 2 held constant across the three ethnic minority groups.

We hypothesized that adolescents' perceptions of the climates in their communities and schools would be significant predictors of their belief that America is a just society and of their civic commitments. As noted, we controlled for age and gender in the

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for the Four Ethnic Groups

Scale	African American ($n = 104$)	Arab American ($n = 115$)	Latino American ($n = 136$)	European American ($n = 697$)	Total ($N = 1{,}052$)
Sense of Community Connectedness	3.03 (0.77)	3.29 (0.65)	3.27 (0.71)	3.20 (0.68)	3.20 (0.69)
Teachers' Democratic Ethos	3.45_a (0.83)	$3.67_{a,b}$ (0.69)	3.87_b (0.73)	3.48_a (0.72)	3.55 (0.74)
Belief in America as a Just Society	2.90 (1.04)	3.15 (0.91)	3.16 (0.95)	2.99 (0.89)	3.02 (0.92)
Adolescents' Civic Commitments	$3.78_{a,b}$ (0.71)	$3.85_{a,b}$ (0.60)	4.04_b (0.66)	3.67_a (0.74)	3.75 (0.72)

Note. Values are means (with standard deviations in parentheses). Means with different subscripts are statistically different at the $p < .01$ level (based on Scheffe tests).

models. The structural model is depicted in Figure 2, which presents data for the sample as a whole and shows only significant relationships. Age was not significantly related to Belief in America as a Just Society but was inversely related to Adolescents' Civic Commitments ($-.04$, $p < .01$). Female participants were less likely than their male peers to endorse beliefs that America is a just society ($-.11$, $p < .05$) but endorsed greater civic commitment (.21, $p < .01$).

The pattern of relationships was the same for the three ethnic minority groups, but the percentage of variance explained was different. The model explained 31% of the variance in adolescents' beliefs that America is a just society for the African American group, 24% of that belief for the Arab American group, and 42% of that belief for the Latino American. The model was also powerful in predicting the civic commitment of the ethnic minority groups (predicting 19%, 25%, and 19% for the African American, Arab American, and Latino American youth, respectively).

Given that there were no significant differences in the measurement or the structural parts of the models among the minority groups, it was sensible to group them together to compare the models against the European American group. The results of those analyses are summarized in the second part of Table 5 (*Minority vs. majority*).

The chi-square difference test showed a significant difference in the measurement part of the model ($p = .03$). However, the indices of practical fit showed minimal differences, $\chi^2(8, N = 1{,}005) = 16.9$, $p = .031$, $\text{TLI}_{\text{diff}} = .00$, $\text{RMSEA}_{\text{diff}} = .001$, indicating that it was reasonable to assume invariance—that is, there were no differences in factor loadings between the ethnic minority and majority groups. The comparison between Models 2c and 2b, holding constant the regression coefficients, also supported the assumption of invariance in the structural part of the model, $\chi^2(4, N = 1{,}005) = 4.82$, $p > .05$, $\text{TLI}_{\text{diff}} = .00$, $\text{RMSEA}_{\text{diff}} = .00$. Again, this suggests that the pattern of relationships among the constructs is the same across groups.

Across groups, both the perception that teachers treated students fairly and with respect and that community members pulled together to realize a common good were positively related to the belief that America is a just society. In other words, youth were more likely to believe that America is a just society in which all people get the same treatment when they felt their teachers were fair and respectful of all students and insisted that students treat one another in a civil fashion and when they felt more connected to their communities.

Adolescents' civic commitments were also significantly related to their perceptions of these teaching practices and of their community connectedness. For both dependent variables perceptions of a democratic ethos practiced by teachers was a stronger predictor for the ethnic minority youth. The model predicted 32% of the variance in the ethnic minority youths' beliefs in the American promise and 23% of the variance in the majority youths' beliefs. With respect to civic commitments, the model predicted 24% of the ethnic minority youths' commitments and 26% of the European American youths' commitments.

Discussion

According to political socialization theory, for a democratic political system to persist, younger generations have to develop an attachment to it by endorsing the principles on which the system is based and adopting the basic norms and habits of behavior that

Table 4
Bivariate Correlations

Variable	Belief in America as a Just Society	Adolescents' Civic Commitments	Sense of Community Connectedness	Teachers' Democratic Ethos	Age	Gender (female)
Belief in America as a Just Society	—					
Adolescents' Civic Commitments	$.228^{**}$	—				
Sense of Community Connectedness	$.328^{**}$	$.328^{**}$	—			
Teachers' Democratic Ethos	$.367^{**}$	$.383^{**}$	$.476^{**}$	—		
Age	$-.061$	$-.161^{**}$	$-.081^{**}$	$-.121^{**}$	—	
Gender (female)	$-.047$	$.151^{**}$	$-.003$	.032	.007	—

** $p < .01$.

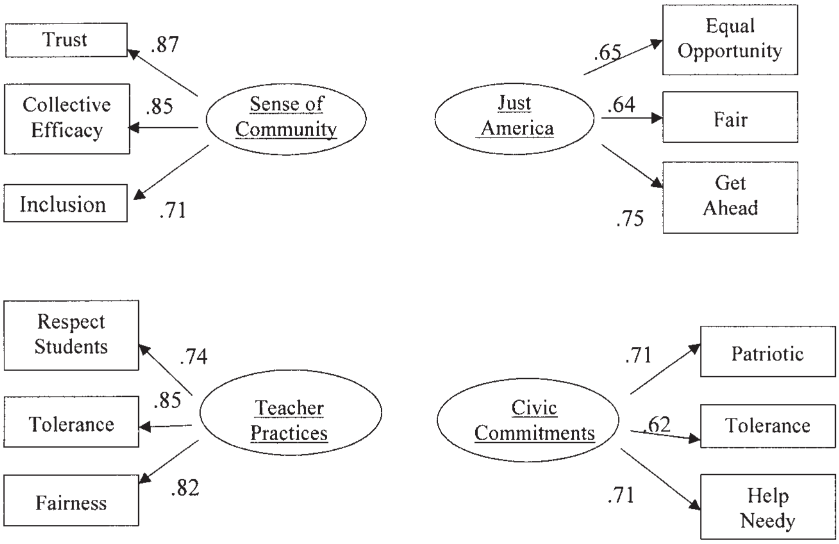
Trust
.87
Collective Efficacy
.85
Sense of Community
Inclusion
.71
Just America
.65
Equal Opportunity
.64
Fair
.75
Get Ahead
Respect Students
.74
.85
Tolerance
Teacher Practices
Fairness
.82
Civic Commitments
.71
Patriotic
.62
Tolerance
.71
Help Needy

Figure 1. Measurement model.

sustain it (Easton & Dennis, 1967). Thus, understanding the origins of the younger generation's "buy in" or belief in the political system and their sense of obligation to serve the polity has implications for the stability of democratic governance in the future.

Theorists of political socialization have contended that the roots of diffuse support and allegiance to the polity are based on a child's belief that public officials rule with his or her best interests in mind. But for most children, civic leaders—from the president of the country to the president of the local city council—are distal entities. Few young people from an ethnic majority background and even fewer from ethnic minority backgrounds have personal contact with elected officials. The results of the present study suggest that it may be through youth's relationships with proximate authority figures that diffuse support for the polity develops.

Regardless of their racial/ethnic background, adolescents were more likely to believe that America is a just society and to endorse civic goals if they felt that their teachers were fair to and respected students and if they felt that, in general, residents of their communities pitched in to make them good places to live. In fact, the models explained a greater percentage of the variance in the ethnic minority adolescents' beliefs than in those of the majority. We interpret these results to mean that the kinds of public spaces our schools and communities provide and the behaviors of adults in those settings communicate to the younger generation what it

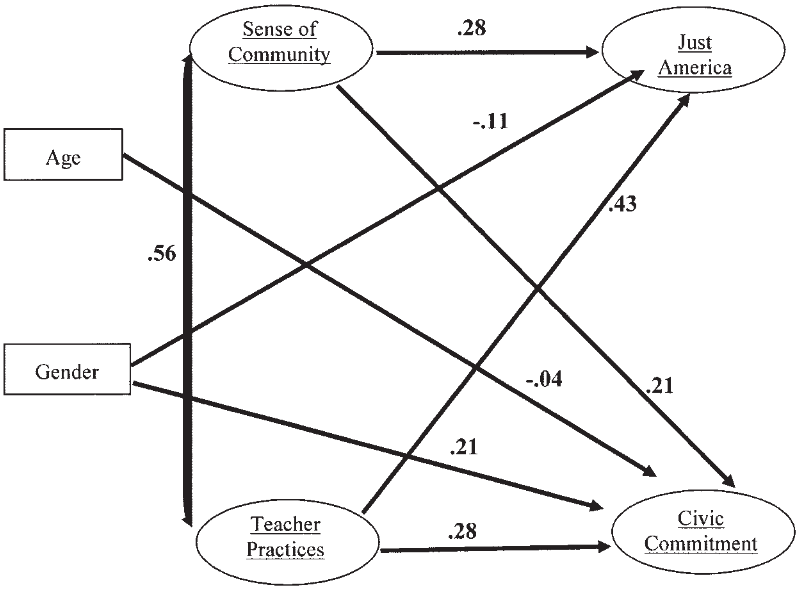
Sense of Community
.28
Just America
-.11
Age
.43
.56
Gender
-.04
.21
.21
Teacher Practices
.28
Civic Commitment

Figure 2. Structural model.

Table 5
Fit Indices for Nested Models for Comparisons of Ethnic Minority Groups With the Majority Group

Model	χ^2	*df*	TLI	RMSEA	χ^2_{diff}	TLI_{diff}	$\text{RMSEA}_{\text{diff}}$
1. Minority groups							
a. Unconstrained measurement	217.43*	160	.95	.054			
b. Constrained measurement	240.18*	176	.95	.055			
Difference between 1b and 1a		16			22.75	.00	.001
c. Constrained structural	256.45*	188	.95	.054			
Difference between 1c and 1b		12			16.27	.00	.001
2. Minority vs. majority							
Unconstrained measurement	252.48*	104	.96	.051			
Constrained measurement	269.38*	112	.96	.050			
Difference between 2b and 2a		8			16.9*	.00	.001
Constrained structural	274.20*	116	.96	.050			
Difference between 2c and 2b		4			4.82	.00	.000

Note. TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation.
$^* p < .05$.

means to be part of the body politic and to what extent principles of inclusion, fairness, and justice figure in that process. The critical role of proximate relationships in schools in democracies was also highlighted by Torney-Purta and her colleagues in their comparisons of adolescents in six democratic nations. They argued that in countries with low levels of stable democratic governance, high corruption, and high levels of poverty, face-to-face interactions in schools are likely to be a better basis for developing trust when governments and other distal authorities have not earned the public's trust (Torney-Purta, Barber, & Richardson, 2004).

With respect to students' civic commitments, regardless of their ethnic background, youth were more committed to the kinds of public interest goals that sustain a democratic polity (serving their country, helping people in need, and working to improve race relations) to the extent that they felt their teachers were respectful of and fair to all students and insisted on students respecting one another. Historically, public schools in the United States have been charged with a civic mission—to educate the general public for participation in the life of democracy. In fact, the constitutions of many states justify public financing for schools on the basis that education insures a healthy democratic culture (Carnegie Corporation & CIRCLE, 2003). Schools are "the only institution with the capacity and the mandate to reach every young person in the country. Of all institutions, schools are the most systematically and directly responsible for imparting citizen norms" (Carnegie Corporation & CIRCLE, 2003, p. 12).

However, the school's civic role is regularly challenged by pressures to increase student achievement (Boston, Pearson, & Halperin, 2005; Carnoy & Levin, 1985). Our study did not test whether these twin roles can be realized simultaneously. The results do show, however, that perceptions of teachers (as fair, caring, and respectful) that have been associated in other studies with students' academic motivation and achievement (Goodenow, 1993; Midgley et al., 1989; Roeser et al., 1996) are also related to students' civic commitments.

Besides schools, adolescents' perceptions of their communities also were related to civic outcomes. With democratic teaching practices in the model, youth's reports that trust, inclusiveness, and a sense of collective efficacy characterized their communities were positively related to their trust in the American promise and to their civic commitments. These results are a logical extension of youth development research, which has shown that affective connections to communities promote individual health and well-being (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997). Our study contributes to a growing body of work showing that affective ties in the community also are a means for incorporating younger generations into the body politic (Flanagan et al., 2005; Zeldin & Topitzes, 2002).

The data for our study were based solely on adolescents' reports, and this is clearly a shortcoming. The views of multiple reporters would provide a more reliable picture of the climate at school or in the community. However, subjective perceptions are the way in which individuals construct meaning and the basis on which they act (Zeldin & Topitzes, 2002). For students, such perceptions mediate the connection between objective conditions at school and their beliefs and actions (Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Murdock, 1999; Roeser & Eccles, 1998). The data also were correlational, and it is possible that those adolescents who already believe that America is a just society and are committed to civic goals tend to see the best in their teachers and fellow community members. However, according to the SEMs, the data were a good fit for the relationships that we had hypothesized.

The timing of data collection prior to September 11, 2001, may pose some limitations on generalization of our results. In a post-9/11 America that is engaged in a war in the Middle East, one might hypothesize, for example, that the levels of the Arab American students' beliefs that America is a just society would be lower. Insofar as the civic commitment construct taps youth's commitments to improve race relations and assist the less fortunate, we would not expect to find lower civic commitments among Arab Americans in the current context. Furthermore, we would expect that the pattern of relationships in our models would hold up for all youth in a post-9/11 world.

The results of this study suggest that the sense of connectedness, the feeling of belonging that promotes flourishing for individual children, is also likely to nurture the kinds of beliefs and commitments that ultimately sustain democracy. That is, young people are more likely to develop a vested interest in and a sense of obligation for the public good if they feel affective ties to people and institutions in their communities. In this regard, the results confirm the importance of affective ties noted in political socialization theories. However, the key is to ground such ties in concrete relationships with authorities in local institutions rather than in abstract "ties" to authorities who are symbols of the system (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

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