Differing Parental Approaches to Cultivating Youth Citizenship

Lynn Schofield Clark & Maria José Brites

Abstract

In this chapter we reflect on how parents and their children negotiate their digital responsibilities and rights during the adolescent years, in light of their expectations regarding agentive involvement in life decision-making. Parents are expected to exercise their parental responsibilities for keeping children safe and for nurturing them into adulthood, which includes into the duties of active citizenship. To discuss these issues, we use two different qualitative samples within family contexts, in the U.S. and in Portugal. Our results suggest that families who embrace a commitment to social justice when they are considering digital activities of their children may produce agentive environments. Given this, we posit that young people may come to view practices of citizenship as an extension of their experience of agency within their home contexts. In contrast, families with low levels of agentic discussion and decision making may reinforce low digital agentic options, actions, and decisions.

Keywords: agency, digital parenting, digital rights, family context

Introduction

Children's rights are bound up with the rights and responsibilities of the parents and caregivers with whom they live. On the one hand, parents and caregivers are expected to exercise their parental responsibilities for keeping children safe and for nurturing children into adulthood, which includes nurturing them into the responsibilities of active citizenship. On the other hand, each nation-state has interests in securing the conditions that allow for the continuation of a society's social, political, economic and cultural institutions. This chapter looks at how these two expectations interrelate in

the negotiations that occur between adolescents and their parents in relation to the digital realm.

As Livingstone (2016) has documented, much of the existing research on parenting in digital environments, and indeed even the conversations among parents themselves, focuses on keeping children safe from harm. But how do parents and their children negotiate their responsibilities and rights during the adolescent years, as young people grow closer to the age of adult citizenship with its expectations for agentive involvement in life decision-making?

The research that informs this chapter is drawn from two ethnographic studies. In the U.S., Lynn Schofield Clark worked as a member of a research team that conducted participant observation, interview-based, and youth participatory action research (YPAR) in an urban public school and in 54 households in the southwestern U.S. with young people under the age of 18 who came from lower, middle, and upper income backgrounds (Clark, 2013; Clark & Marchi, 2017). Like almost all U.S. young people, those in the sample lived with a parent or guardian at least through their eighteens birthday, when youth become eligible to vote, age out of foster care, usually complete a high school degree or its equivalent, and enter the workforce, the military, or university. Thus, family environments shape the years just prior to voting age and give shape to civic habits (Clark, 2013; Clark & Marchi, 2017).

In Portugal, Maria José Brites conducted a Portuguese PAR project (ANLite, SFRH/ BPD/92204/2013), in the city of Porto, concentrated on two different contexts: a middle-class community (public school) and a deprived area (youth center), with the use of participant observation, media production and semi-structured interviews (25 young people/15 families). In Portugal, family environments are also important contextual elements that shape young peoples' experiences with digital media, and can be important predictors of young peoples' abilities to be agentive within civic life (Brites, 2015; Brites et al., 2017).

In our qualitative research in both the U.S. and in Portugal, while we have had many discussions about parental authority and teenage autonomy in digital spaces, we have encountered very few parents who are conscientious about their role in relation to political socialization or civic cultures. Dafna Lemish (2007) similarly found that even when families talk about news and television environments, conversations about online spaces were commonly oriented towards risk and danger prevention. In fact, when young people consult their parents about dilemmas related to rights and citizenship, adults emphasize personal safety issues over ethical considerations (James, 2016). Thus, it is not surprising that existing research into digital parenting affords few insights into how parents might encourage young people to seek out political information or engage in political and civic acts.

Our focus in this chapter is on what has been termed political socialization, or research that explores the development of political agency among youth. This work has explored the ways young people grow into self-awareness of their distinctive human rights and of the social responsibilities that are regulated by the nation-state(s) in

which they live. First, we consider how young people become aware of themselves as persons who are granted certain rights in the contexts of their parents' wishes. Then, we consider the differing paradigms of developmental and critical citizenship, arguing that whereas most parents are aware of the developmental aspects of youth citizenship, a critical approach to citizenship suggests that differing parenting practices might also be at work and worthy of greater examination and support. We offer examples of parents who embrace this second approach.

We argue that many parents express a great deal of concern about the risks that they believe their young people face in the digital realm, which leads them to curtail their children and youth's online expressions in various ways. In some cases, young people might comply with their parents' decisions without concern, whereas in other situations, young people do what they prefer without parental approval. Our findings suggest that the parental provision of space for youthful ethical decision-making is an important foundation for the development of an engaged and agentive approach to citizenship. We explore the possibilities for such connections in our final section.

Growing into human rights

All parents seek to develop in their children a capacity for leading good lives. During the adolescent years, young people experience an increase in autonomy as they develop stronger decision-making capacities and as they attain the means for independence through access to education and transportation. At this point, they also develop a greater range of responsibilities, as they come to learn that the exercise of their rights must not disadvantage others or impinge upon others' rights.

As young people enter their teen years, they find themselves increasingly negotiating over their rights. What are their rights to privacy? To participation? To being heard? Where are these rights negotiated in relation to family members, in schools, in workplaces and in other public places? Conflicts emerge as parent's exercise what they believe are their rights to assert parental will and their responsibilities to set rules about access to and use of the digital realm, and as young people seek to exercise what they believe are their rights to autonomy and independent decision-making. These conflicts often emerge in relation to where and when young people use their mobile phones and for what purposes (Clark, 2013).

Many parents express a great deal of concern regarding the risks they believe that their children may face in digital spaces. For example, Alexis, age 13, whose parents and siblings had a low level of education, lived in a low-income area and attended a low-income school. Because his grandmother worried about pedophilia, she intrusively supervised his activities on Facebook and directly asked him about men that he might have interacted with on Facebook, reminding him that she would see all of his online interactions. Alexis had relatively few opportunities to consider his own communication rights. Even though he regularly participated in a youth center that emphasized human

rights, he did not articulate and did not seem aware of the idea that access to the internet might be understood as a human right.

Other young people discover a conflict over rights through their encounters with their peers, but they believe that their parents' need to protect them overrules their own rights to privacy. Carmen, age 16, had parents who upheld strict rules about when and where she could use her mobile phone, which was not permitted when she was with other family members. Her father also felt that it was within his rights to view his daughter's text messages whenever he chose. "It's not like I say anything bad, so it's okay", Carmen explained to her peers and the interviewer. Several of her peers bristled at this comment, with one bursting out, "That would suck!" Carmen then shrugged with discomfort and in response to the objections of other peers, she added that she believed that her parents trusted her. She noted, "My dad just worries". Carmen felt that her parents' assertion of their parental rights, while deemed intrusive by others, was appropriate and consistent with their desire to raise her as a person who was growing into adulthood with rights, but also with responsibilities that were tied to her family and were subjugated to the rights of others.

Kayla, age 16, had a similarly protective single mother, but unlike Carmen, Kayla chose to conceal many of her actions. She acted out of her sense of her right to participate in actions that her mother would consider dangerous, often participating in self-harm through her engagement in online bullying. She chose to go online at a friend's house so that she would be away from her mother's supervision.

In contrast to the tendencies of Alexis, Carmen and Kayla to view their rights in direct relation to their parents' actions, Ivone, age 16, was a good student who was very conscious of her own rights to information, even if she was not aware of the fact that access to the internet might be considered a human right. Although she came from a family in which both parents were college-educated and she was active in her middle-class school and in the community and had many internet-related school assignments to complete, she noted that "My parents don't want to give me home internet access", primarily because they believed that her younger brother was addicted to games. When she learned through the interview process that others considered access to the internet a human right, she said that this new information could be used to alert her parents that their household policy was impinging upon her human rights and creating ambivalence about how she could exercise her rights in her home. Her parents, she noted, liked to listen to her opinions and she believed they would take that in consideration.

Through their interactions with their parents, these four young people have learned that they have some, yet limited, rights, and that their options are constrained by the parameters of their family's approaches to those rights. They might choose to comply, as did Alexis and Carmen, or resist, as did Kayla, or they may choose to renegotiate the terms of their relationship, as did Ivone.

In contrast to the great deal of research on protecting children from potential internet risks, there is little research on how information and communication rights such as those established by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are related to human rights.

In the context of the U.K., Carter (2014) has argued that the well-being of the child rests on the child's ability to exercise communication and information rights as a human right. In today's digital context, giving children opportunities to critically and actively read the world is an important part of preparation for citizenship. As Buckingham (1999) has argued, "The media are central to the political process in modern societies; and media education – teaching about the *media* – could become a highly significant site in defining future possibilities for citizenship" (Buckingham, 1999: 182). Citizenship must be understood as rooted in civic cultures that can be fostered by the digital, beyond the traditional idea of politics and participation as Dahlgren (2009) has stated.

Initially, a great deal of optimism surrounded the ability of the internet to provide the architecture for active participation in public life. But almost three decades after Tim Berners-Lee created the world wide web, we know that the internet is not a space that is free from the constraints of power relations.

Developmental vs. critical approach to citizenship

In both U.S. and Portuguese societies, youth under the age of 18 (age of majority) are often positioned within what might be termed a developmental approach that views youth as not-quite-ready for citizenship, or in which youth are included in activities of citizenship in a symbolic or token manner. This is consistent with a protective approach to childhood that views children as not quite ready for adult decision-making and in need of supervision or direction, as we saw in the four previous examples.

A developmental approach to citizenship, however, is premised upon the assumption that young people grow up in a context where basic rights are assured and where they can look forward to a future in which their rights and responsibilities will expand. This is of course not the case for many young people who have experienced marginalization due to disability, race, sexual orientation, lack of access to resources, or their parents' citizenship status (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Harris, 2011).

While many have viewed children as "incomplete" human beings, then, more recent work on children's rights suggests the need to better conceptualize children's interests so as to understand the moral claims they have to the rights they and all people are afforded (Archard & Macleod, 2002). When young people cannot count on basic rights and are skeptical about whether or not they or others they know have ever had those rights, it is difficult to imagine why they would want to participate in the civic or collective life of a society (Flanagan, 2013). From a critical perspective, then, hope for change becomes a key dimension of how youth citizenship must be reconceptualized.

A number of young people in our samples expressed hope for change. In the U.S., this was expressed in relation to issues of immigration and support for the right to higher education (e.g., the DREAM Act), support for continued participation in the Paris climate change treaties as well as support for confronting Islamophobia, racism, sexism, and discrimination that is based on sexual orientation (Clark & Marchi, 2017).

In both the U.S. and Portugal, hope for change was also expressed in relation to issues of being heard and having a voice in matters of public concern.

We argue that young people learn about how they may participate in social change through the experiences they have in their home lives. The civic environments where young people live, especially in relation to their families and their own willingness to participate in public life, provide important contexts that can reinforce civic interests (Brites et al., 2017). One example is Jada, age 16, who underwent a terrible experience that she and her mother reframed as a social justice issue and whose story was covered in the news media (Stewart, 2014). Jada had attended a party, where she accepted a drink and did not remember anything after that. Several weeks later she received a text with a photo that apparently had been taken at the party. In the photo, Jada was unconscious and half undressed. The photo and story of her rape circulated on social media, and other young people disparaged her as it came to be shared widely as a meme. In response, rather than retreating in shame, Jada, with her mother's support, decided to make a public statement about her experiences of rape and cyber harassment. When asked why she supported her daughter's decision to approach local news media with her story, Jada's mother explained her daughter's wishes to journalist/writer Lynette Holloway: "She wanted to make a difference so that other young ladies can come forth and say what is actually going on" (Holloway, 2014). Her mother thereby encouraged Jada to reframe the digital space as a location through which Jada could reclaim her dignity. This experience included both a recognition of the violation of a young woman's rights and an expression of the hope that both she and her mother had that things could be different. As she gave voice to her experience, Jada was able to claim an agentive role not only for herself, but on behalf of other young women who might similarly experience such online mediated humiliations.

Another example of a civically engaged young person was Rui, who at age 19 lived in a low education and low-income family with his mother and sister, as his father lived abroad for work. For Rui's parents, education was a high priority. Although they lived in a lower income area, both Rui and his sister attended a middle-class school, where Rui was student union leader. Rui identified as interested in politics and in civic matters and was a great driving force to create student radio at his school. Rui's family was not particularly politically involved, although his home life, like Jada's, created the context through which agentive political action could be envisioned and enacted. Rui and his sister lived in a house full of books that represented special interests in architecture, politics, religion, culinary arts, and school, and thus this family differed from other lower income families where there are fewer reading materials and fewer interests represented among those materials. In fact, his mother was so committed to being informed on current events that, when she was cleaning the train as part of her work, she collected the expensive news magazines that others left behind, reading them thoroughly in order to gain an informed opinion on a variety of children's issues, including those related to the internet. Rui's mother was very committed to the idea that young people deserve a right to have a voice in public matters and encouraged her children to participate in a

variety of situations. Echoing his mother's views, Rui said that he considered information as power (Brites, 2015), and he wanted to use that power to improve his and others people's lives. He clearly viewed his access to the internet as a birthright, like the right to expression, even if, at the same time, he was not familiar with the ways that some speak of access to the internet as a human right.

Unlike Jada and Rui, Marta, age 14, lived in a family context (with a younger sister, mother and father) heavily directed to the cultural and political environment. In Marta's home, where they opted for no television, family members had a habit of talking about news and each person brought home daily news themes of which they became aware during the day to be discussed in family, which family members viewed as an instructive but also a fun activity. Through her school, Marta and her mother participated in a variety of volunteer projects. Viewing the internet through the framework of a larger context in which decision-making occurs, Marta's mother explained that she was especially concerned to "prepare and educate to life, as there is no point in [attempting to] control [internet use]". With rights come responsibilities, Marta's mother pointed out.

The parents of Jada, Rui, and Marta provided a supportive environment for the fostering of a civic identity among their children by creating an ethic of social justice. Jada's mother supported her daughter's desire to see her individual problems as those that are shared by others. Rui's mother modeled what it means to be well-informed and to take advantage of every available opportunity to learn and to utilize that learning to shape one's environment. Marta's mother engaged her children in conversations about current events, thereby supporting the idea that young people have a stake in what is happening in the world around them and responsibilities that go along with their rights.

Conclusion

Family life is an important location for the development of civic culture, and the online spaces through and in which young people communicate are key locations in which the civic habitus is enacted (Dahlgren, 2010). When young people are denied the right to make decisions that affect their lives, or when they are encouraged to see themselves as less agentive than the adults in their households, they may experience themselves as powerless, which in turn can impact both the development of a civic sensibility and a more general sense of well-being.

As we have pointed out, it is important to consider how young people might grow into greater awareness of themselves as civic actors as they gain decision-making authority over their own lives and as they become increasingly aware of the discrepancies between what is and what ought to be in society. When young people in their teen years are encouraged to see themselves as able to take agency in how they are represented, in how they speak about current events, and in how they participate in activities orchestrated to amplify youth voice and to secure rights for themselves and others, they learn to embrace an ethic of care through the enactment of civic actions.

Embracing a critical approach to citizenship, therefore, raises new questions in relation to parenting in a digital age, such as: in the emergent digital context, how might adults provide the resources youth might need in their own efforts towards embracing critical citizenship? How can parents encourage young people to take debates that are often framed as individual moral issues into online spaces and reframe them as issues of justice and rights that affect both the individual and others in society?

As we have discussed in this chapter and in other work (Brites, 2015; Clark, 2013), parents are continuously making decisions regarding how they will establish and maintain the digital contexts in which their children grow up. Whereas many parents mostly consider possible negative consequences of digital media, some parents are focusing on broader questions related to how young people live out the values that their parents and indeed all family members deem important.

This chapter highlighted the stories of some families who embrace a commitment to social justice and who therefore view the digital activities of their children and youth in relation to the question of whether or not those activities support the family's broader commitments to social justice and active civic engagement. We argue that this might be considered consistent with a critical approach to citizenship in that in these cases, both parents and their young people are aware of how certain rights may be curtailed due to structural systems of oppression, whether related to class, race, gender, sexual orientation or something else. When both parents and youth prioritize actions offline and in digitally mediated realms that acknowledge and are responsive to these lived inequitable situations, we argue that young people may come to view practices of citizenship as an extension of their experience of agency within their home contexts.

References

Archard, D. & Macleod, C. M. (2002). Introduction. In D. Archard & C. M. Macleod (Eds.) *The Moral and Political Status of Children* (pp. 1-18). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brites, M. J. (2015). *Jovens e culturas cívicas: Por entre formas de consumo noticioso e de participação* [Youth and Civic Cultures: Between Forms of News Consumption and Participation]. Covilhã: Livros LabCom.

Brites, M. J., Ponte, C. & Menezes, I. (2017). Youth Talking About News and Civic Daily Life. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(3), 398-412.

Buckingham, D. (1999). Young People, Politics and News Media: Beyond political socialisation. *Oxford Review of Education*, 25(1-2), 171-184.

Carter, C. (2014). News Media and Child Well-Being. In A. Ben-Arieh, F. Casas, I. Frønes & J. E. Korbin (Eds.) *Handbook of Child Well-Being: Theories, Methods and Policies in Global Perspective* (pp. 1979-2011) Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media.

Clark, L. S. (2013). *The Parent App: Understanding Families in a Digital Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clark, L. S. & Marchi, R. (2017). *Young People and the Future of News*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Dahlgren, P. (2009). *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dahlgren, P. (2010). Opportunities, Resources, and Dispositions: Young Citizens' Participation and the Web Environment. *International Journal of Learning and Media*, 2(1), 1-13.

Flanagan, C. (2013). *Teenage Citizens: The Political Theories of the Young*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Fraser, N. & Gordon, L. (1994). Civil Citizenship Against Social Citizenship? On the Ideology of Contract-Versus-Charity. In B. van Steenbergen (Ed.) *The Condition of Citizenship* (pp. 98-101). London: Sage.

Harris, A. (2011). Dodging and Waving: Young Women Countering the Stories of Youth and Citizenship. *International Journal of Critical Psychology*, 4(2), 183-199.

Holloway, L. (2014, July 12). Mom of Victim in "Viral" Rape Video Speaks Out. *The Root*. [online]. Available at <http://www.theroot.com/mom-of-victim-in-viral-rape-video-speaks-out-1790876359> [Accessed 22 July, 2017].

James, C. (2016). *Disconnected: Youth, New Media and the Ethics Gap*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lemish, D. (2007). *Children and Television: A Global Perspective*. Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing.

Livingstone, S. (2016). Reframing Media Effects in Terms of Children's Rights in the Digital Age. *Journal of Children and Media*, 10(1), 4-12.

Stewart, A. (2014, 18 July). #IamJada: When Abuse Becomes a Teen Meme. *CNN*. [online]. Available at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/18/living/jada-iamjada-teen-social-media/index.html> [Accessed 22 July, 2017].