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How Children Understand Civic Actions: A Mixed Methods Perspective

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Abstract

The development of civically engaged citizens is vital for democratic societies. Although several studies have explored children and adolescents' conceptualizations of civic engagement, less is known about youths' understanding of the individual skills and attributes best-suited for civic action. The current study utilized a Q-sort methodology to explore the types of character strengths children and adolescents (n =87; M_{age}= 13, 9–19, 52% female) assigned to people who engage in different types of civic activities. Participants sorted 12 character strengths (amazed, creative, forgiving, future-minded, generous, grateful, humble, joyful, leader, purposeful, responsible, thrifty) into five categories ranging from "most like" to "least like" based on their perceptions of individuals engaged in four distinct civic activities: volunteering, voting, protesting, and engaging in environmental or conservation behaviors. Youth differentially applied certain character strengths to individuals engaged in distinct civic activities but also identified a set of character strengths (future-minded, leader, purposeful, and responsible) as core to multiple forms of civic engagement. Results provide new insights into youths' budding conceptualization of the individual characteristics, attributes, and motivations which undergird different forms of civic action. Qualitative analysis of youths' justifications for their rankings provided additional nuance into their developing understanding of civic actions.

How Children Understand Civic Actions: A Mixed Methods Perspective

Democratic states depend on an active and engaged populous in order to function efficiently. Developmental theorists have argued that highly engaged citizenship does not abruptly materialize in adulthood, but rather is developed and anteceded by multiple developmental processes across childhood and adolescence (Astuto & Ruck, 2010; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009; Youniss & Yates, 1999; Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss, & Levine, 2010). Part of this process is undoubtedly rooted in the opportunities young people have to learn about different civic activities and the people engaged in them. Despite the theoretical relevance of character for understanding positive youth development (Lerner & Schmid Callina, 2014), to date, the empirical literature has revealed little about the types of personal attributes, motivations, and aptitudes young people believe are important for civic action. Such information may provide valuable insights into youths' developing understanding of civic engagement and potentially enhance our applied understanding of how character education promotes civic engagement. The current study utilized a Q-sort task and semi-structured interview to explore the types of skills and attributes children and adolescents explicitly associated with different forms of civic action. Analyses included complementary qualitative exploration of youths' justifications for their assignment of specific character strengths to different civic behaviors.

Civic engagement is a multidimensional construct comprised of behaviors, values, attitudes, and knowledge (Amnå, 2012; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009) that are rooted in young people's day-to-day lived experiences with family, peers, school, community, laws, and injustice (Youniss et al., 2002). Political scientists have long argued that civic participation requires a general knowledge of government structure and political process (Furnham & Stacey, 1991).

Developmental models stress the importance of relational and identity dimensions such as coming to define oneself as a member of a community (Flanagan & Stout, 2010; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011), civic-related prosocial values, and civic efficacy (Flanagan et al., 2007; Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Benavides, & Shubert, 2013; Zaff et al., 2011).

Cognitive and social-cognitive dimensions of civic development have also been explored including adolescents' views of good citizenship (Sherrod, 2003). Less developmental research has explored the way that adolescents reason about and conceptualize civic action (Metzger & Smetana, 2010). Civic behavior comprises a wide array of community and political activities including volunteering and community service, political behavior (e.g., voting), social movement activities (e.g., engaging in political protest), and environmental or conservation activities. Age restrictions limit the kinds of civic and political activities children and adolescents' can engaged in (e.g., voting in local, state, or national elections). Nevertheless, youth may form beliefs and attitudes toward civic action including whether such activity is obligatory for citizens or what types of skills and capacities are necessary for specific forms of civic involvement. Exploring the ways youth think about, understand, and appraise different civic activities may provide vital information concerning youths' knowledge of the demands, function, and aims of different forms of civic action. It has also been argued that such nascent civic understanding plays an integral role in the development of individual civic identity and may also be an important antecedent of later civic behavior (Metzger & Smetana, 2010).

Youths' conceptualizations of civic action may be linked to their broadening understanding of civic duty and the multidimensional nature of civic involvement. For instance, previous research has explored the types of social and moral reasoning (judgments and justifications) that youth apply to different forms of civic involvement, as well as links between

such civic reasoning and youths' civic behavior and socio-political values (Metzger, Oosterhoff, Ferris, & Palmer, 2014; Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Youth apply moral justifications and judgments (entailing the welfare of others) to community service behavior but utilize conventional reasoning (entailing rules and standards which coordinate social interactions in specific contexts) when reasoning about standard political behavior such as voting (Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Age differences in adolescents' civic judgments are suggestive of developmental shifts in civic understanding, as compared to early and middle adolescents, older youth view political involvement as more important and obligatory (Metzger & Ferris, 2013).

Understanding the social and moral attributes of civic engagement is an important component of civic development, but less research has explored children and adolescents' knowledge of the individual skills and characteristics required of different forms of civic behavior. The current study seeks to redress this gap in the literature by investigating youths' budding understanding of the individual and social attributes that motivate civic action by investigating youths' answers to the question: What type of person becomes civically involved? Although some civic actions are viewed as more obligatory than others, civic actions are diverse, often require some concern for others, and are not regulated by legal mandate. Given that individual choice and agency are fundamental to civic engagement (Lerner, Wang, Champine, Warren, & Erickson, 2014), individuals' motivations, skills, and personal characteristics may play a large role in decisions to pursue specific forms of civic action. Recognizing the correspondence between personal attributes and civic activities requires detailed and nuanced understanding of the dimensions of civic engagement including what behaviors are involved and the personal qualities and abilities needed to carry out those activities. Assessing the types of individuals engaged in civic activity also involves a comprehension of the potential motivational

primes for engaging in a specific civic activity (e.g., help others, contribute to political process) and the individual aptitudes that could stimulate an individual toward accomplishing those goals through civic engagement. Recognition of the intersection of character strengths and civic actors may reflect broader understanding of the activity. Hence, exploring children and adolescents' understanding of the link between individual characteristics and civic action could provide valuable insight into youths' developing understanding of the motivations and demands of different forms of civic participation. Existing civic developmental theory would also be bolstered by exploring age-related differences in youths' civic understanding, as these analyses may help to identify whether adolescents' understanding of civic involvement changes or potentially becomes more sophisticated over time.

There are potentially endless qualities, capacities, and motives distinguishing civically involved and non-civically involved individuals (Amnå, 2012; Clary et al., 1998; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009). As an initial investigation into how youth understand civic action, the current study focused on the *character strengths* of individuals engaged in different forms of civic action. Within the field of psychology, character has been operationalized as the psychological manifestations of "virtuous qualities" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). While prior research has focused on youths' assessments of their own character strengths (e.g., Hilliard, Bowers, Greenman, Lerner, & Lerner, 2014; Park & Peterson, 2006), little is known about how youth assess the character strengths of others or how these character strengths are related to various forms of civic action. Theory and research point to the importance of considering character, broadly defined, as a facilitator of civic development (Lerner, 2005), but less research has examined associations among specific character strengths and civic involvement. The current study focused on youths' conceptualization of six key character strengths, theorized to undergird

and motivate specific forms of civic action: future-mindedness, generosity, humility, leadership, sense of purpose, and responsibility. These six strengths were chosen because, although they share a common positive valence, they also represent conceptually distinct strengths that have been operationalized and measured within multiple theoretical models of character (Josephson, 2014; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seider, 2012). In addition, previous research has linked dimensions of these character strengths to civic behavior. Specifically, associations have been found between volunteering and generosity, humility, and future-mindedness (Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998; Piliavin, 2009; Tangney, 2000), political action and purpose (Damon, 2008), and leadership and general civic consciousness (Cheung, Lee, Chan, Liu, & Leung, 2004). The primary goal of the current study was to explore the ways children and adolescents applied different types of character strengths to individuals involved in four types of civic involvement: voting, volunteering, protesting, volunteering, and engaging in environmental or conservation activities. Specifically, the study examined whether youth viewed six character strengths theorized to be civically-oriented (future-mindedness, generosity, humility, leadership, purpose, and responsibility) as more important for civic action than six additional positive character strengths (amazed, creativity, thrift, joy, gratitude, forgiveness) that lack a civic orientation.

The current study employed Q-methodology (Brown, 1961) to investigate how youth assign character strengths to individuals engaged in various forms of civic action. Within a Q-sort task, participants rank different statements or words based on how closely they align with or represent a larger concept. Q-methodology has been used to examine how adults conceptualize various aspects of citizenship (Theiss-Morse, 1993), as well as in research exploring variation in political ideology and attitudes among adults in Latin America (Zechmeister, 2006). A Q-method

ranking task is well matched to the goals of the current study, as results illuminate ways in which youth conceptualize and understand civic action. The forced-ranking element of the Q-sort provides information on the ways youth prioritize different character strengths as being important for civic behaviors relative to other positive character strengths. In addition, comparing the character strengths youth apply to different types of civic action illustrates the degree to which youth distinguish between these activities. Aligned with previous research (e.g., Metzger & Smetana, 2009), we expect youth will find that some forms of civic action are more closely aligned with certain character strengths than others. However, we also anticipate that older youth will possesses a more nuanced and integrative understanding of civic action that will allow them to consider connections among multiple character strengths and different forms of civic behavior (Metzger & Ferris, 2013).

We broadly hypothesized that the six civically-oriented strengths would be more highly ranked across Q-sorts than the other six strengths, and we explored variations in youths' ranking strengths across types of civic action without *a priori* hypotheses. Analyses also examined grade-level differences (elementary, middle, high school) in youths' character rankings. Although the current literature does not support specific hypotheses concerning age differences in youth civic understanding, previous research has found domain-specific age differences in youths' social and moral judgments about civic involvement (Metzger & Ferris, 2013). Similarly, we broadly anticipated that compared to elementary students, older youth would display a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of civic behavior. For example, compared to children, adolescents may be better able to recognize that a single strength could typify multiple civic actions, and adolescents may also have more variability in the character strengths they apply to a single action as they develop more complex understandings of the many skills that could be relevant.

Additional analyses explored context (urban, rural, suburban) and gender differences to assess the generalizability of ranking patterns. The current study also included a semi-structured interview component, in order to more thoroughly explore youths' conceptualizations about the links between character strengths and civic action. After each sort, youth provided justifications for their rankings, and the current results include illustrative quotes from participating youth describing their reasoning behind why specific character strengths matched different types of civic involvement. The use of Q-sort and qualitative interview approaches in this paper provides a unique opportunity to answer two complementary questions: (a) How do these character strengths cluster by civic action? (b) Why do youth think these civic actions and character strengths align?

Method

Participants

Participants were 90 children and adolescents who were recruited from three research sites located in different regions of the United States with varied levels of urbanicity: southern California (suburban), Minnesota (urban), and West Virginia (rural). The Q-sort tasks were part of a larger semi-structured interview protocol focused on civic engagement. It is worth noting that our sample size is large relative to typical Q-methodology studies that are designed to provide in-depth examinations of viewpoints within a small targeted sample (Brown, 1980). Three youth were missing data on one or more of the separate Q-sorts leaving a final analytic sample of 87 youth (M_{age}= 13.0, SD = 2.67, Range= 9-19). Quota sampling was used to ensure equal gender and grade distributions across sites. Each research site initially recruited 8 elementary school students (grades 4-5), 10 middle school students (grades 6-8), and 12 high school students (grades 9-12). Participants (51% female) were White (43%), Hispanic (19%),

Black (7%), and Asian (9%). A small number of youths self-identified as biracial (8%) or another race-ethnicity (8%). The majority of the participants reported earning "mostly As" (49%) or "mostly Bs" (40%), while a smaller percentage of participants earned "mostly Cs" (9%) or lower grades (2%). Nearly one-third of participants' mothers had graduated from college (33%), while fewer mothers had graduated from high school (14%) or not finished high school (7%). An additional 15% of participants reported not knowing their mothers' education level, and 33% of maternal education data were missing due to researcher error.

Procedures

Each participant completed four separate Q-sorts in which they ascribed twelve character strengths to individuals engaged in four different types of civic action: *volunteering, voting, protesting, environmentalism.* Six of these strengths were theorized to be civically oriented: future-minded, generous, humble, leader, purposeful, and responsible. While the other six positive strengths were theorized to be less directly linked to civic engagement: amazed (i.e., noticing and appreciating beauty and excellence), creative, forgiving, grateful, joyful, and thrifty. The Q-sort tasks were the initial step of a larger semi-structured interview. The entire interview was facilitated by trained research staff, audio-recorded, and transcribed. Participants were interviewed outside of their classroom in quiet spaces provided by the schools. Because some participants were elementary-aged, the current study included a number of procedural elements in an effort to ensure participant comprehension. For instance, prior to the Q-sort steps were taken to ensure participants had an accurate understanding of each character strength, and the instructions for the sorting task were repeated throughout the activity.

The Q-sort task was divided into several steps. To begin, the interviewer asked the participant to define each character strength, which was printed on 12 sorting cards (e.g., "What

does < *insert character strength* > mean?"). In situations where participants were unable to provide a definition, the interviewer defined the strength in age-appropriate terms operationalized for consistency across sites and interviewers. Most participants required at least a small amount of clarification for some terms, and such clarifications were more common among the elementary students. Throughout this process, interviewers were instructed and trained to be supportive of participants in order to build rapport and avoid potential discouragement.

Next, participants were presented with a large "sorting board." The sorting board had five columns, each with one of these labels: "exactly like this person," "mostly like this person," "sort of like this person," "less like this person," and, "least like this person." Under each of these columns, there were two card-sized rectangular boxes – the one exception, however, was the "sort of like this person" column which had four boxes. As a warm-up procedure, participants were asked to try the sorting task by thinking about "someone who is a firefighter." Participants were than instructed to place the 12 character strength cards on the sorting board based on how well they described a firefighter: 2 cards in the "exactly," "mostly," "less," and "least" like this person columns and 4 cards in the "sort of" like this person column. Following procedures recommended for Q-sort methodology (Brown, 1980), participants were asked to sort through all of the cards place them on the board. Participants were told they could change their minds and revise card placement anytime during the sorting process.

After participants demonstrated they understood the procedure, they sorted the character strengths for four different types of civic action: volunteering, voting, protesting, and environmental or conservation activities. The behaviors were presented in a counter-balanced order across participants. For each sort, participants were presented with a prompt card that

contained a black and white, gender-neutral image of someone participating in that specific civic action. Respectively, these images were labeled: "Think about someone who…" (a) "volunteers to help people in their community," (b) "votes in political election," (c) "engages in protests, marches, or demonstrations," and (d) "engages in environmental or conservation activities." A chart with definitions of the character strengths was also placed next to the sorting board for participants to reference.

After each Q-sort, the interviewer selected one of the cards the participant had sorted into the "exactly like this person" column and asked the youth to explain why she/he thought an individual engaged in the targeted civic action embodied the character strength identified on the card. For example, if the participant placed "leader" in the "exactly like" column during the sort for volunteering, the interviewer would then say to the participant "You placed *leader* in the 'exactly like' category. Why do you think someone who volunteers is a leader?" Interviewers rarely prompted participants for elaborations beyond this question, given the need to proceed through the rest of the Q-sorts and complete the full semi-structured interview in the time allotted. After the participant answered, the interviewer removed the cards from the sorting board and moved on to the next Q-sort. The decision about which of the two character strengths sorted into the "exactly like" column to select for follow-up was at the discretion of each interviewer, although interviewers were trained to select — whenever possible — a different character strength for follow-up for each of the four sorts by any given participant.

The purpose of this follow-up question was to gather rich qualitative insights on new phenomena about why youth attribute particular character strengths to various civic acts. To do this, participants' responses to these follow-up questions were transcribed and analyzed using a grounded theory approach; an approach that sets forth guidelines for iteratively and

systematically gathering and organizing data to discover heretofore unspecified theory (Charmaz, 2008; Creswell, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Per the principles of grounded theory, two members of our research team conducted an iterative content analysis of young people's responses using open coding to identify and conceptualize emergent themes and to sort data into codes. Our approach was very much one of discovery, thus we were careful to suspend our own theoretical and conceptual preconceptions and remained open to the emergence of concepts from the data. As concrete themes emerged, codes (and underlying responses) were being constantly compared to one another to identify commonalities and differences. Importantly, the qualitative analyses were done by separate researchers from those focusing on the quantitative analyses. Thus, the qualitative coders were not privy to the quantitative findings until they had completed the thematic coding process.

Results

Data from participant Q-sorts are presented in a number of steps. First, descriptive statistics are displayed to illustrate the character strengths that were most consistently applied to the civic behaviors. Next, a qualitative summary of youths' reasoning behind aligning the most prominent character strength for each type of civic action is showcased. Finally, ANOVAs are presented to demonstrate how participants differentially applied character strengths to the different forms of civic action.

Consistencies in Character Strength Rankings

Table 1 presents the percentages of "exactly like" and "mostly like" for the four character strengths that participants most frequently applied to each of the four civic behaviors. For brevity, only the four most highly rated character strengths are listed. Several character strengths were ranked by youth as important for individuals engaged in multiple civic behaviors.

Purposeful and *responsible* were highly prevalent character strengths for all four civic behaviors. Likewise, *future-mindedness* was highly ranked for individuals engaged in all forms of civic behavior except for volunteering. Based on the sum of "exactly like" and "mostly like" categories, character strengths that youth were mostly likely to assign to each civic behavior were as follows: *future-minded* to voting, *generous* to volunteering; *leader* to protesting; and, *responsible* and *future-minded* were equally applied to environmentalism.

Qualitative Explanations of Top-Ranked Character Strengths

Illustrative explanations for youths' rationale for linking highest ranked character strengths with civic behaviors are provided in Tables 2 and 3.

Voting and future-mindedness. Many participants (88%) rated future-mindedness as "exactly" or "mostly" like individuals who vote. When asked to explain their reasoning, one major and two minor themes emerged (see Table 3). Major Theme 1, the most prevalent idea to emerge, was rooted in the premise that when people vote they are making a choice about who they want in office for a long period of time, requiring voters to assess whether the elected official's vision for the future aligns with their own. This was the only theme to emerge for middle school and high school-aged youth, but was one of three justifications provided by elementary-aged youth; thus, older youth tended to offer explanations focused on the long term opportunity costs of a voter's ballot. Youth in Grades 4 and 5 also applied *future-minded* to the more proximal future (i.e., Minor Theme 2; voters must decide who they will vote for before they cast their ballot) or themselves (i.e., Minor Theme 3; the act of voting motivates individuals to consider running for political office in the future).

Volunteering and generosity. Seventy-nine percent of participants identified individuals who volunteer as embodying the character strength of *generosity*. The connection

between volunteering and generosity for most participants emphasized one of two Major Themes: (a) volunteers are generous because of the time, energy, and aid they offer by "giving," "helping," "doing," "donating," and "making" for others; or, (b) volunteers are generous because they are giving altruistically, and volunteers' actions stem from their own will (see Table 3). The former theme focuses on *what volunteers give to others*, while the latter focuses on the *intrinsic motivation that drives volunteers* to engage in such behaviors; the *what* vs. the *why*. Both themes were articulated most frequently and clearly by middle school- and high school-aged youth. In contrast, elementary-aged youth provided more limited explications that rarely went beyond giving examples of volunteering that they felt were generous (e.g., "give money to a food drive or food," "do favors").

Protesting and leadership. Three out of four (75%) participants identified individuals engaged in protesting as leaders. This leadership quality is evidenced in specific protest-related behaviors like "encouraging other people to go out and fight for what they believe in," "leading the group around to different places to protest," "organizing," "stepping up," and "trying to get everyone to understand." Identification of these leadership behaviors in the act of protesting was the sole Major Theme that emerged from young people's explanations for why protesters exemplified leadership. Compared to the other Q-sorts, youth were more likely to reference the image (four 3D stick figures, one holding a megaphone and three holding blank protest signs) in their justification than for any other sort. While infrequent, the notion of protesters as leaders evoked some references to historical figures like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez. Youths' responses reflected variability and nuance in the depth of what it means to lead others that did not appear to be age related. For example, while the majority of youth relied on traditional notions of leaders as gathering and telling other people what to do (e.g., "…a person

who leads [groups] around"), there were others who discussed the importance of leaders who listen to and consider the opinions and ideas of others (e.g., "…they wouldn't tell you but they would like ask for your opinion and ask if you want to do this thing with us.").

Environmentalism and responsibility. Sixty-one percent of participants identified individuals who engage in environmental and/or conservation behaviors as responsible (*Note.* An equal number of youth described individuals engaged in environmental activities as *future-minded*. However, future-minded was overwhelmingly applied to individuals who vote, so we focused on the explanations for the responsible environmentalists to highlight variability in youth reasoning about the different character strengths). Follow-up responses predominately focused on manifestations of responsibility including being regular and consistent in one's care for the environment (particularly the watering of plants, as suggested by the image on the prompt card) and incorporating environmentally-friendly behaviors into one's daily habits and routines (see Table 4, Major Theme 1). Although in the minority (Minor Theme 1, Table 4), several youth articulated the need for all community members to take responsibility for caring for their neighborhoods. In the words of one 14-year old, "Well if it's your community, and you live there, you should have responsibility to at least do something and, like, taking care of the plants or, like, picking up garbage on the street – that's your responsibility. 'Cuz if somebody else came into your neighborhood…they would think you were the one not cleaning it up."

Character Strengths in Relation to Civic Behaviors

A series of ANOVAS were tested with civic behavior as the within-person factor (environmentalism, protesting, volunteering, voting) to demonstrate how participants differentially applied character strengths to the civic activities. The main effects for each character strength across the four civic behaviors are presented in Table 4. All of the ANOVAs

were significant except for the model with the character strength *amazed*, and pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni corrections indicated differences in how character strengths were applied to individuals engaged in the four civic behaviors. Youth viewed *future-mindedness* as more important for voting than for protesting or environmental activity, and also viewed future-mindedness as more important for protesting and environmental behavior than volunteering. *Generosity* was most frequently applied to volunteering followed by environmental activity whereas generosity was not ranked as important for protesting and voting. *Leadership* was rated highest for protesting followed by volunteering while leadership was rated as significantly less important for voting and environmental activity. *Purpose* was ranked higher for both protesting and voting compared to environmentalism and volunteering. Youth rated r*esponsibility* as more important for voting and environmental behavior compared to protesting, and responsibility was also ranked higher for voting compared to volunteering. Although humility was not ranked as an important character strength for any of the civic activities, volunteering was rated as entailing relatively more humility than both protesting and environmental behaviors. Turning to the other positive strengths hypothesized to be less civically oriented, gratitude was viewed as least important for protesting compared to the other civic activities while *creativity* was ranked higher for both environmentalism and protesting. Youth rated *volunteering* as entailing more joy compared to protesting and environmental behavior, while individuals engaged in environmental activity were rated as the most *thrifty*, but the least *forgiving*. As hypothesized, mean rankings indicated that five of the six civically-oriented character strengths (with the exception of humility) were most often rated as high across civic actions. Likewise, all six of the other positive strengths were ranked low by youth in relation to civic actions, with most having a mean below 0.

Age as a Moderator

Exploratory models tested whether age was associated with youths' application of character strengths to the civic behaviors. Separate 3 (grade: elementary, middle, high school) X 4 (civic behavior: environmentalism, protesting, volunteering, voting) mixed model ANOVAs were performed for each character strength. The main effect for *purposeful* was qualified by a significant grade level X civic behavior interaction (F (8, 134) = 2.43, p = .02, η^2= .13), indicating that high school students ranked individuals engaged in environmentalism (M = .97, SD = .91) and voting (M = 1.14, SD = .79) as being more purposeful than both middle (environmentalism: M = .10, SD = .99, voting: M = .33, SD = 1.12) and elementary school students (environmentalism: M = .04, SD = 1.12, voting: M = .50, SD = 1.29). Additionally, high school students (M = .19, SD = 1.26) attributed significantly more *humble* qualities to volunteers compared to middle school students (M = -.77, SD = 1.33), F(8, 134) = 4.81, p = .01. Age X civic action interactions were not significant for the other character strengths.

Exploring Geographic Location and Gender as Moderators

Additional exploratory models were tested to determine if youths' rankings varied as a function of both geographic location (urban, suburban, rural) and youth gender. A geographic location X civic action interaction emerged in models predicting youths' rankings of generosity (F (8, 134) = 2.75, p < .01, η^2= .14). Youth residing in suburban (M = 1.07, SD = .94) and rural (M = .83, SD = 1.05) communities attributed more generous qualities to individuals engaged in environmental action than did students in urban communities (M = .17, SD = 1.05). No other significant action X geographic location emerged. The main effect for *future-minded* was qualified by a significant gender X action interaction (F (4, 67) = 2.73, p = .04, η^2= .14) indicating that male (M = 1.00, SD = 1.06) participants rated individuals engaged in

environmental activities higher on future-minded than female (M = .59, SD = 1.31) participants. No other significant civic action X gender interactions emerged.

Discussion

Civic developmental theories have stressed the importance of considering civic engagement as a multidimensional construct which includes skills, beliefs, values, and a wide array of both political and non-political behaviors (Metzger & Smetana, 2010; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2008; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011; Zaff et al., 2009). The current study contributes to our understanding of this broadened definition of civic engagement by exploring youths' understanding of the links between character strengths and four distinct forms of civic behavior. Findings demonstrate the importance of considering youth cognitions and reasoning in models of civic development and provide a potential guide for future research aimed at examining the role of character in civic development.

Youth civic reasoning. Findings from youths' Q-sort rankings indicated that youth viewed several character strengths as essential for multiple forms of civic action, but also that children and adolescents viewed certain strengths as being relatively more characteristic of individuals engaged in specific civic activities. Differences across civic behaviors demonstrate that youth, even young people in elementary school, have a nuanced view of the different character strengths that uniquely motivate different forms of civic participation. This finding is consistent with previous research in which adolescents differentiated forms of civic involvement in their socio-moral judgments and justifications (Metzger & Ferris, 2013; Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Findings from our qualitative analyses point to a refined understanding of these links, with the reasoning growing in complexity with age. Youth distinguish between different forms of civic involvement, which means youth understand that civic engagement is not unidimensional.

Rather, youth view civic behavior as multifaceted with distinct types of activities drawing on different types of individual characteristics and skills.

This study contributes to civic development theory by highlighting the importance of youth cognitions and conceptualizations as potentially important components of civic development (Metzger & Smetana, 2010). While previous research focused on the types of social and moral reasoning that youth apply to different forms of civic involvement (Metzger & Smetana, 2009), current findings demonstrate that youth also recognize the unique sets of character strengths required of individuals engaged in civic activities. Thus, how children and adolescents think and reason about civic activities and the individual attributes best suited for engagement may be an important component of their developing civic understanding and identity. Similar to findings indicating age differences in youth civic reasoning (Metzger & Ferris, 2013), the current study hints at age-related differences in youth understanding of links between character strengths and civic action, as both humility and purpose were more frequently applied to individuals engaged in civic action by high school students relative to middle and elementary students. Adolescents' increased abstract reasoning skills may increase their understanding of links between such higher-order character strengths and civic action. Previous research has found links between youths' civic judgments and their own engagement in specific forms of civic engagement (Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Future research should explore whether youths' assessment of their own specific character strengths and skills is aligned with the types of civic activities in which they engage. Furthermore, youths' beliefs about the qualities that best define civic actions may play an explanatory role in their decisions to participate or refrain from certain civic actions. Future research could benefit from exploring whether these beliefs moderate the link between youths' self-reported character strengths and their own civic

behaviors; youths' cognitions about the skills needed for a particular civic action may help determine whether they recognize their own skills as relevant for that type of civic action.

Character strengths and civic action. We hypothesized that certain character strengths had more of a civic-bent and would thus be viewed by youth as essential across different forms of civic activity. Indeed, findings indicated that five out of six of these hypothesized strengths were consistently ranked high across all four forms of civic action. For instance, purpose was viewed as important for all of the studied civic activities. Purpose is a multi-dimensional character strength, which includes the desire to meet life goals which positively impact the world (Damon, 2008). Youth saw such an ability to look beyond oneself with a commitment to make a difference as an essential personal attribute of individuals who engaged in voting, volunteerism, political protests, and conservation efforts. However, purpose was seen as most relevant for individuals engaged in political activities such as voting and especially protesting. Protesting has been described as a social movement form of political participation aimed at influencing or even changing existing structures (Metzger & Ferris, 2013). Individuals with such transformative political aims were particularly viewed by youth as possessing a sense of purpose. Compared to younger youth, older adolescents were more likely to apply purpose to a wider array of individuals engaged in civic behaviors including environmentalism and voting. With age, youth may develop a broader understanding of the ways in which multiple forms of civic activity can have substantive impacts on individuals, communities, and even on the broader social order. Increased knowledge about civic activities may be accompanied by enhanced understanding of purpose and the motivational function it may serve for civic actions. As an idea to be explored in future research, cognitively understanding the role of purpose for civic activities may give way to older youths' personal development of purpose-driven civic engagement. It was notable that

youths' open-ended reasoning about protesting was much less developed or nuanced compared to their reasoning about other civic activities. Perhaps due to lack of knowledge about or exposure to acts of protest or demonstrations, many youth may have more difficulty forming views of it – this difficulty may also make it less likely for youth to incorporate this kind of action into their civic identity.

Future-mindedness was essential for all forms of civic involvement except volunteering. Civic involvement entails engagement in lengthy projects with long-term goals of making substantive change for individuals and institutions. Thus, individuals who are able to planfully view the future and have foresight into the potential positive outcomes of their involvement would be well-positioned to engage activities that may lack short-term or immediate rewards. Future-mindedness may also contribute to perseverance in the face of obstacles and adversity, as optimism and hope for the future have been linked with higher levels of resilience (Callina, Johnson, Buckingham, & Lerner, 2014; Snyder et al., 1997). In fact, ethnographic research has directly linked future-mindedness to civic involvement, as future-orientation was found to be key feature of youth engaged in a school reform project when youth activists faced barriers and unanticipated outcomes (Kirshner, 2009). Similarly, many youth may view individuals engaged in civic behavior (especially political or environmental behavior) as possessing the ability to look forward and anticipate the long-term impact of their actions. Youth ranked future-mindedness as especially important for individuals who vote in political elections. Qualitative responses indicated that youth, especially middle school and high school students, viewed voting as an opportunity for citizens to influence the long-term direction of government and policy. Because of these long-term implications, many youth were especially attuned to the need for alignment between an individual's values and the candidate for whom they would vote. Interestingly,

compared to females, males viewed individuals engaged in environmental activities as being more future-minded. Future research should explore potential gender differences in youths' conceptualization of environmental activity, especially as it pertains to the potential long-term impact of such activity.

Youth viewed individuals engaged in volunteering as possessing high levels of generosity. Previous research has found that adolescents judge volunteering to be obligatory activities based on moral reasoning due to its potential effects on the welfare of others (Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Generosity entails a compassionate orientation toward others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Piliavin, 2009). Volunteering involves helping others in a variety of ways, and youth recognized that such helpful, caring behavior may be fueled by a generous disposition. Qualitative responses demonstrated that youth recognized the importance of having high levels of generosity for individuals who volunteer, as such behavior entails donating both time and energy in the service of others. Likewise, some youth explained the link between generosity and volunteerism by making connections to giving freely and altruistically, without expecting reward. In addition, older adolescents in particular were more likely to ascribe the character strength of humility to volunteers. Youths' reasoning about generosity and humility indicated a nuanced understanding of volunteering activities as enacted out of one's own volition and not compelled by external influences.

Leadership was viewed as a key characteristic of individuals who engage in protests. As noted above, social movement forms of political involvement often have a broad aim of changing social policy through collective action. Youth may view leadership as a necessary quality for individuals bold enough to engage in non-mainstream political activities. Perhaps given the collective nature of this protests, youth described leadership qualities of speaking out

and encouraging others as indicative of protestors. Indeed, many social movements that involve protests and demonstrations have a face and a name to their cause (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr., as one youth noted), so perhaps these leaders and their qualities are most salient to youth when they think about protesting. In addition to their social movement focus, large protests require a great deal of coordination, organization, and planning. Youth may recognize the practical elements of this form of civic participation require an individual who is capable of managing and leading individuals.

Responsibility can take the form of both personal (accountability for one's decisions and actions) and social responsibility (desire to aid others in need; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). The current study focused on the former definition. Youth believed accountability for oneself was a primary motivating quality across a variety of civic activities. Thus, youth may see individuals who are civically engaged as simply doing "what they are supposed to do." This may be especially true of voting and volunteering, as responsibility was also ranked highly for both. Voting is often colloquially referred to as a "civic duty," and youth may view individuals who vote as fulfilling a communal and shared responsibility (Metzger & Smetana, 2010). Adolescents have been found to conceptualize community service as a moral obligation (Metzger & Smetana, 2009), so it is possible that many youth were focusing on the moral elements of *social* responsibility and its focus on helping others (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Future research should consider more thoroughly exploring and differentiating these elements of responsibility and how youth apply them to civic action. Interestingly, however, responsibility was also frequently applied to individuals engaged in environmental or conservation activities. Although there were nuances to youths' reasoning about responsibility and environmentalism, the common thread across responses is that environmental protection requires individual action,

and thus protecting environmental resources is everyone's responsibility. A useful next step for this research would entail further understanding variability in youths' reasoning about responsibility, as some youth may view civic responsibility as a moral issue whereas other view it in conventional terms (Metzger & Smetana, 2010).

Although we had hypothesized that humility may be a key character strength of individuals engaged in civic action, youth ranked humility much lower than other civic strengths and also lower than some of the additional character strengths. Thus, at least from the perspective of the youth in our study, humility is not very connected to civic engagement. However, exploratory analyses indicated that there may be some developmental differences in youths' understanding of the importance of humility for civic action. Compared to younger youth, older adolescents in high school ranked humility more highly as a character strength of volunteers. Potentially, older youth recognize that volunteering involves putting others' needs ahead of one's own. Still, however, older youths' rankings of humility placed it in the middle of the scale, suggesting that many other strengths are viewed as relatively more important for civic action.

Overall, the age findings revealed a pattern that supported our general hypotheses. In particular, as suggested by the purpose finding, older adolescents may be better able to see a complex or higher-order strength like purpose as useful for a broader array of civic actions. Furthermore, the humility finding illustrated that older youth may be able to apply a broader array of related, yet less obvious, skills to a particular civic action. In fact, certain character strengths are seen as higher-order qualities, meaning that they grow in correspondence with gains in abstract thinking and other cognitive skills (Park & Peterson, 2006). In line with this work as well as research showing increasing complexity in youths' reasoning and civic judgments

(Smetana & Villalobos, 2009), our work suggests a potential developmental trend toward increasingly sophisticated thinking about the skills and attributes needed for diverse civic actions. Future research would benefit from further exploring developmental patterns in youths' thinking about civic actions using longitudinal data.

Limitations and Future Directions. The current study has a number of strengths including a diverse sample and the use of a unique, multi-method methodological strategy. However, findings must also be understood in light of several weaknesses. Although large by Q-sort study standards, the analytic sample contained only 87 youth. Primary analyses focused on within-person distinctions in the application of character strengths to individuals engaged in different civic behaviors, but the small sample size did limit our ability to explore additional inter-individual differences and moderators. Because of the small sample, the few interactions which were found, though intriguing and potentially instructive for future developmental research, should be interpreted with caution. The Q-sort task used in the current study included 12 sorting cards, which did allow for quantitative comparison of the sorted cards, but is fewer than traditional Q-sort research (Watts & Stenner, 2005). The 12 character strengths used in the current study were chosen based on careful consideration of both the civic and character literatures (Damon, 2011; Seligman, 2004). Although selecting a smaller subset of character strengths is justified by the desire to be sensitive to the cognitive demands of the task on our younger participants, it is possible that our limited number of character strengths did not capture the full array of strengths youth believe are essential attributes of civic agents. Specifically missing were strengths such as concerns for fairness or justice, which might be more strongly associated with confrontational forms of civic action (Watts, Diemer, & Voiht, 2011). We provided neutral pictures of each civic activity in order to make the cognitive task of Q sorting

more concrete for youth in elementary school and to ensure an equivalent baseline of understanding of the civic actions across participants. However, in retrospect based on some of the qualitative responses, the pictures may have unintentionally narrowed youths' thinking about the activities. Our study, and in particular, the qualitative data, seemed to pull for youth to reflect on motivations for civic engagement – youths' reasoning touched on both extrinsic and intrinsic motives that may underlie civic actions. Yet because we did not explicitly ask about motivations, this theme would be best explored in a future study.

The current study provides new insights into the ways children and adolescents assess the characteristics of individuals engaged in diverse forms of civic action. Findings contribute to research on the development of social cognition, more generally, by demonstrating that youth have complex and multifaceted understanding of different character strengths and their implications for different forms of behavior. An important future direction for research is to further explore links between youths' developing civic understanding, civic values, and actual civic behavior. Examining the inter-relations between these dimensions of civic development may provide key insights into the origins of civic identity. In addition, a key contribution of this study is that it sets the stage for important future research examining the intersection between individual variation in specific character strengths and the development of particular civic capacities. Youth have a sophisticated nuanced view of how character and civic behavior align. An intriguing application of the current research is that youth service organizations may be able to help increase the cognitive connections between civic engagement and character strengths through education by providing youth opportunities to experiment with and discuss different forms of civic behavior, including how their involvement in these civic actions made them feel and what made various forms of civic action more or less meaningful for them, personally.

Through such engagement, youth organizations may be well-positioned to help youth identify specific types of civic action which are best aligned with their own character strengths. Engagement in activities which are best matched with youths' own character strengths may help to facilitate longer-term investment in multiple forms of civic engagement.

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Table 1. The top four highly rated character strengths for each civic behavior.

Civic Behavior	% sorted as "exactly like"	% sorted as "mostly like"	Sum of "exactly" and "mostly" like
Voting			
Future-Minded	14.4	73.3	87.7
Responsible	40.0	45.6	85.6
Purposeful	32.2	27.8	60
Grateful	22.2	8.9	31.1
Volunteering			
Generous	15.6	63.3	78.9
Responsible	37.8	21.1	58.9
Leader	14.4	36.7	51.1
Purposeful	36.7	13.3	50
Volunteer			
Protesting			
Leader	20.2	55.1	75.3
Purposeful	27.0	46.1	73.1
Future-Minded	27.0	46.1	73.1
Responsible	33.7	10.1	43.8
Environmentalism			
Responsible	28.9	32.2	61.1
Future-Minded	23.3	37.8	61.1
Generous	25.6	28.9	54.5
Purposeful	22.2	21.1	43.3

Table 2. Youths' illustrative explanations of the perceived link between the character strength with the highest mean rating for each civic behavior.

Civic Behavior	Strength with Highest Mean	Illustrative Explanations
Voting	Future-Minded	**MAJOR THEME 1. Vote has lasting impact on the future.** "…they would have to be future minded to think of what the future would hold, who they vote for, not just thinking about, 'Oh, if they're Republican, I don't want to vote for them,' 'Oh, they're a Democrat, I don't want to vote for them." *11-year old, Male, mixed race* "…they definitely think about the future, you know if they have kids they want to see who would be a good leader. You know, for them, and if it's the right choice, because you know it is our future. They're trying to pick the best person who would lead them to good things." *15-year old, Female, Hispanic* **MINOR THEME 2. Casting a ballot requires one to make a decision.** "I think future minded, because voting is... ummm...a part that you have to think before you vote…like you only get one chance." *10-year old, Male, American Indian* **MINOR THEME 3. Youths' own presidential ambitions.** "Because they might want to figure out, like if they voted for someone and they won, maybe they would want to be like...if they were voting for the President, maybe they would wanna be president one day…so thinking about their future." *10-year old, Female, White*
Volunteering	Generous	**MAJOR THEME 1. It is generous to give time, energy, and aid to others.** "….'cause they're giving their time, their free time…to help somebody else that needs help." *17-year old, Male, Black* "…because people who are generous give to others and by volunteering in the community, they're giving to their community something that maybe they didn't have before or…that doesn't get done on a normal basis." *16-year old, Female, White* **MAJOR THEME 2. It is generous to act on behalf of others on one's own will.** "because they're doing it for other people and not themselves…they're doing it without nobody telling them that they're gonna get something" *13-year old, Male, Hispanic* "…because they're putting others before themselves…and they're not like saying oh I can't." *17-year old, Male, White*

Note. After each sort, the interviewer selected one of the cards the participant had sorted into the "exactly like this person" column and asked the student to explain why she/he thought an individual engaged in the targeted civic activity embodied this character strength. A total of $n = 37$ youth were asked to explain why they thought someone who votes is future-minded, while $n = 31$ youth were asked about the perceived link between volunteering and generosity.

Table 3. Youths' illustrative explanations of the perceived link between the character strength with the highest mean rating for each civic behavior.

Civic Behavior	Strength with Highest Mean	Illustrative Explanations
Protest	Leader	**MAJOR THEME 1. Leaders organize and rally support from others.** **"**Because they're going, OK, like this person right here has the microphone…they're going to try and take other people in the group and get 'em to go for his cause they he has and that he is engaging in and the reason that he's trying to change…so he's going to try and lead them into battle with him." *16-year old, Male, White* "…you need a leader so you would know, um, who you're chanting for, why you're chanting, and, um, where you're gonna go." *13-year old, Female, White* "Because I was thinking about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He, um, stopped segregation so I was thinking about that and so a protest, march, or demonstration, that's exactly what he did so that's why I thought he was a leader." *10-year old, Male, Hindu*
Environmentalism	Responsible	**MAJOR THEME 1. Acting on behalf of the environment is responsible.** "…cause if you forget to water your plants, they're gonna die." *10-year old, Female, White* "…they're responsible for just not caring about theirself [sic]." *9-year old, Female, Filipino* "Well, because, like, everybody is saying today that the world is gonna end. You know stuff like that, because we don't have enough trees and I think they are being responsible because they're planting trees and they're trying to help the environment by being, like, responsible and taking good care of our environment and, you know, helping conserve our forest and stuff like that." *11-year old*, *Female, White* **MINOR THEME 1. As a community, we have an obligation to be environmentalists.** "Because I think it's, like, the community's responsibility to take care of our environment because if we don't, like, what's gonna happen to us? Like, people littering and stuff like that – it's not really a good idea!" *18-year old, Female, Black*

Note. After each sort, the interviewer selected one of the cards the participant had sorted into the "exactly like this person" column and asked the student to explain why she/he thought an individual engaged in the targeted civic activity embodied this character strength. A total of $n = 29$ youth were asked to explain why they thought someone who votes is future-minded, while $n = 17$ youth were asked about the perceived link between volunteering and generosity.

Table 4. *Main effects of repeated measures ANOVA for character strengths for each civic behavior.*

	Civic Behaviors				
Character Strengths	Voting M (SD)	Volunteering *M* (SD)	Protesting *M* (SD)	Environmentalism *M* (SD)	*F*-test
Civic Character Strengths					
Future-minded	1.52[c] (.96)	.01[a] (1.07)	1.02[b] (1.18)	.79[b] (1.20)	*F* (4, 67) = 36.59***
Generous	-.08[a] (1.08)	1.38[c] (.93)	-.30[a] (1.03)	.69[b] (1.08)	*F* (4, 67) = 32.22***
Leader	-.17[a] (1.32)	.60[b] (1.32)	1.15[c] (1.18)	.07[a] (1.31)	*F* (4, 67) = 51.17***
Purposeful	.70[ab] (1.11)	.39[a] (1.06)	1.10[b] (1.02)	.43[a] (1.08)	^*F* (4, 67) = 8.87***
Responsible	1.23[c] (.93)	.68[ab] (.99)	.31[a] (1.03)	.82[bc] (1.05)	*F* (4, 67) = 23.89***
Humble	-.43[ab] (1.10)	-.24[b] (1.35)	-.51[a] (1.04)	-.53[a] (.96)	^*F* (4, 67) = 3.70**
Non-Civic Character Strengths					
Grateful	.24[b] (.87)	.32[b] (1.10)	-.55[a] (1.07)	.06[b] (1.22)	*F* (4, 67) = 9.15***
Creative	-.62[a] (1.09)	-.52[a] (1.12)	.25[b] (1.22)	.19[b] (1.25)	*F* (4, 67) = 24.01***
Joyful	-.30[ab] (1.01)	.08[b] (1.12)	-.51[a] (1.08)	-.63[a] (1.11)	*F* (4, 67) = 6.42***
Thrifty	-.78[ab] (1.17)	-1.03[a] (1.02)	-.53[b] (1.13)	-.19[c] (1.36)	*F* (4, 67) = 8.88***
Forgiving	-.71[b] (.94)	-.77[ab] (.96)	-.78[ab] (1.07)	-1.07[a] (1.00)	*F* (4, 67) = 4.02**
Amazed	-.61 (1.12)	-.89 (1.01)	-.66 (.99)	-.62 (1.13)	*F* (4, 67) = 2.08

Notes. Means are scaled from -2.0 = "least like this person" to 2.0 = "exactly like this person. Means that do not share the same superscript are significantly different from one another after Bonferonni post hoc differences. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. ^ significant interaction qualifies the main effect.