**Human
Development**

Illuminating Pathways to Civic Purpose

Commentary on Malin, Ballard, and Damon

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A multitiered sculpture entitled *The Illuminated Crowd* adorns a popular street in Montreal. The sculpture depicts a diverse group of people confronting a new idea. The people on the foremost tier, where the sunlight shines brightest, are best positioned to see and appreciate the idea for what it is. There is a collective attention among them, with all eyes concentrating on the spectacle ahead. Yet, the view forward is increasingly obscured for people standing on the lower tiers. Heavy shadows gradually swell and eventually blanket those positioned furthest behind, leaving them seemingly disorganized, disengaged, and directionless.

The spread of new scientific insights bears a resemblance to the narrative embodied by this sculpture. New ideas rarely penetrate society deeply enough to impact all of its members uniformly. Even seemingly well-known strategies for promoting greater happiness, health, and longevity are not embraced or enacted by everyone. Indeed, there are discernible impediments, both personal and structural in nature, that influence how and by whom new ideas are accessed, construed, and utilized. Thus, whenever scholars advance promising new ideas, a parallel need emerges to consider the barriers that prevent it from being fully actualized by all potential beneficiaries. In what follows, I attend to this need in the context of Malin, Ballard, and Damon's target article [this issue], by first acknowledging the insights they advance and then considering some potential impediments to the proliferation of those insights. I take this approach not to leverage opposition to the ideas they put forward but instead to add further dimensionality to them in hopes of broadening their impact.

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Civic Purpose among Youth

Malin et al. introduce a new idea to existing scholarship on youth civic engagement. They label this new concept *civic purpose* and define it as "a sustained intention to contribute to the world beyond the self through civic or political action." The novelty of their contribution flows from the use of civic purpose as a starting point for unifying personal motivations and prosocial aspirations to form a richer kind of engaged citizenship. In line with notions of youth thriving [Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010], Malin and colleagues view purpose as a life-organizing aim with personal and social benefits. Indeed, having purpose has been routinely discussed as a developmental asset for positive youth development [Benson, 1997; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003], and a compelling research literature supports these claims, linking purpose with indicators of psychological health and positive behavior during adolescence [Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010; Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010; Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2014]. It is also worth noting that these findings resonate with studies of purpose in adulthood [Ryff, 2014], suggesting that early cultivation of purpose may yield dividends across the lifespan. As a specific form of purpose, cultivating a civic aim for one's life may offer a valuable context for establishing this important resource.

For Malin and colleagues, that all youth should feel empowered to participate civically and politically is not just an ideal but a necessity for a healthy, functioning democratic society. Yet, there is an important nuance in their theorizing that should be highlighted: They believe that traditionally marginalized youth represent a key barometer in this endeavor. Specifically, the authors contend that marginalized youth must cultivate "a sense of themselves as effective civic agents with the responsibility and capacity to cause change in their communities, in U.S. society and in the world." Without youth participation, including those who have been historically marginalized, Malin and colleagues assert that our democracy cannot flourish.

Based on their claim, it is essential to identify marginalized youth and begin to illuminate factors that might limit their capacity to develop and fully pursue a civic purpose. Of course, there are myriad ways youth can experience marginalization within society, yet some appear particularly prominent in traditional civic and political arenas. Minimum age requirements in national voting laws, for example, categorically disenfranchise adolescents younger than 18 from participating in political elections. Moreover, other demographic distinctions may contribute to marginalization with respect to inadequate representation among existing leaders. Data show that ethnic minorities, women, sexual minorities, and youth from immigrant and low-income families each are vastly underrepresented in political leadership at state and federal levels [Cobb, 2014; Reflective Democracy Campaign, 2014]. Hence, like the sculpted figures positioned farthest back in *The Illuminated Crowd*, individuals with marginalized group memberships or interests may feel disconnected from opportunities to cultivate a civic purpose. In the next section, I begin to articulate the nature of barriers that may jeopardize marginalized youths' actualization of civic purpose by considering (a) the *pathways* they may take to find it, (b) the *personal content* they may use to define it, and (c) the *partnerships* they may rely on to cultivate it.

Pathways to Civic Purpose

Despite robust evidence of the advantages of having a purpose in life, how youth find a purpose remains an understudied issue. Recent work [e.g., Hill, Sumner, & Burrow, 2014; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009], however, suggests three plausible pathways to finding a purpose: *proactively* (an aim that emerges after sustained engagement with consistent goals over time), *reactively* (an aim that emerges in response to a specific life event), and *social learning* (an aim that emerges based on observations of others). For marginalized youth, cultivating a civic purpose may follow any of these pathways, yet success along each may also require navigating unique barriers. For example, maintaining proactive involvement in civic activities (e.g., campaigning, attending protests) over time may be difficult for youth from low-income families where household responsibilities and the need to work may be greater. Youth with limited resources such as time and money may be constrained and feel less in control over their ability to participate in activities, thus increasing the likelihood of disengaging from civic goals [Haase, Heckhausen, & Koeller, 2008; McBride, Sherraden, & Pritzker, 2006].

With respect to reactive pathways, the types of events that might spur civic purpose among traditionally marginalized youth and the manner in which they respond to them may find minimal support from the broader society. As Malin et al. found among ethnically diverse youth with a sense of civic purpose, many were motivated by specific "identity group attachments." But such group attachments may also reinforce perceptions of social distance between themselves and out-group members. For a recent example, the slogan "Black lives matter," used by many youth as an expressive act of protest against police brutality perpetrated against Black citizens [Brunson & Miller, 2006], has been frequently changed in other venues to "All lives matter," reflecting a more inclusive sentiment. Despite its inclusivity, however, this alteration may discourage some youth from engaging in expressive civic acts that they believe will eventually be co-opted in ways that lose their personal significance. Thus, efforts to support the development of civic purpose among marginalized youth may require greater sensitivity to constraints on resources and an ability to help youth reconcile their chosen modalities of civic expression with realistic expectations of how others will likely construe them.

Personal Content of Civic Purpose

An important caveat in Malin et al.'s investigation is that only a small percentage of the youth they assessed met criteria for having civic purpose; less than nine percent of youth demonstrated a full civic purpose of any type. The remaining youth showed either no evidence of civic purpose or some moderate but precursory form of civic purpose. Contributing to these estimates may have been the fairly exclusive characterization of purpose examined. The authors contend that "the motivation that drives purpose cannot be antisocial or immoral: Individuals who aspire to have an impact on society but use harmful or immoral means are not, by definition, acting with purpose." While their position on this issue is clear, from whose perspective "immoral means" should be determined is far from settled. Thus, another challenge to actualizing a civic purpose is simply lacking the ability to self-determine what qualifies as

such. There is evidence to suggest that although youth are capable of discerning between good and bad purposes presented to them [Staples & Troutman, 2010], individuals may rarely nominate the content of their own purpose as reprehensible despite the number other people willing to promptly label it as such.

This issue becomes even more salient in the context of marginalized youth such as those from religious minority groups or even those who have street gang affiliations. The specific content and nature of purposes cultivated by these youth may be shaped by the fact they are often tasked with balancing civic responsibility and participation with what they view to be their religious, ordained rights or desire to be loyal to protective peers. Because the circle of community for these youth may be much more circumscribed than for others, stakeholders may fail to recognize the amount of community service, volunteering, and interest in helping others that may actually be present. Going forward, researchers must continue to unpack what successful adaptation within these specific communities is truly required of youth so as not to deem individuals as lacking purpose based simply on a top-down scheme of which contents count and which do not. This issue is not trivial since some of the very youth who may fail to qualify as civically purposeful according to researchers' definitions may subsequently reveal themselves as invested in aims that contribute meaningfully to communities engaging in harmful acts of violence.

Partnerships for Civic Purpose

Based on interviews conducted with youth exemplars, Malin and colleagues conclude that guidance from adults figures prominently in the development of civic purpose. Specifically, they state, "Teachers, counselors, church group leaders, family members, and older classmates were likely to pick them out for opportunities, bring civic opportunities to their attention, and recommend them for opportunities that relate to their interest – if they were alert to those interests." Unfortunately, not all youth interact with adults who are capable of or willing to guide such development; therefore, even some youth who express interest may receive little invitation to participate in civic or political activities. In such cases, civically-oriented adult mentors could play an important role. However, while the available data generally support benefits associated with adult-youth mentoring relationships [e.g., DuBois & Neville, 1997], there is also evidence to suggest that, for youth at greater risk for personal problems (e.g., engaging in risky behavior, less socially competent), adult mentors with little specialized training can potentially adversely affect their development [DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002]. Thus, it is important to consider how relationships with adults whom youth naturally nominate as mentors may be capitalized on and provided with additional guidance and strategies for promoting civic purpose.

Beyond limited opportunities for individual adult partnerships, some marginalized youth may find it difficult to establish momentous connections with organizations or specific programs that foster civic purpose. For instance, youth living in rural areas may have fewer opportunities or be required to travel much further distances in order to participate in service learning or volunteer with community engagement programs [Ley, Nelson, & Beltyukova, 1996]. Thus, what may be interpreted as apathy for civic issues among these youth may actually reflect constrained opportunities

for involvement. In addition, organizations that are not sensitive to youths' perspectives in their programing may fail to sustain civic interests of marginalized youth whose voices may otherwise go ignored. There is promising evidence that when youth are invited and encouraged to actively participate in the construction of programs that serve them, they are much more likely to remain engaged and feel supported in developing a sense of purpose [Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010; Moran, Bundick, Malin, & Reilly, 2012]. Therefore, successful programs may require establishing true partnerships that elevate youth voices to be equal with adults and willfully incorporating aspects of what youth nominate for themselves to be worthy of civic purpose.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the notion of civic purpose as introduced by Malin et al. reflects an innovative idea that expands and strengthens existing scholarship on civic engagement. My aim in this commentary was to suggest that, as the study of civic purpose unfolds, it would be wise to consider simultaneously the characteristics of those who have it and the challenges facing those for whom it has not yet fully materialized. I stand in agreement with Malin et al. that it is only then that we can begin to effectively create and illuminate pathways for all citizens to fully participate in and contribute to our democracy.

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