Historically, civic mindedness may be traced to the medieval concept of ‘noblesse oblige’, and was later a motivating force behind nineteenth century movements for the abolition of slavery and the introduction of universal suffrage, and twentieth century movements promoting civil rights and anti-apartheid activism. At the macro level, civic mindedness provides the raison d’être for global endeavours such as the United Nations and the Red Cross. At the micro level, it underpins individual efforts to assist others, seen in behaviours such as volunteering, overseas aid work and philanthropy. Civic mindedness features in psychological theories about personality development and human development over the lifespan, and in sociological theories about the ways in which individuals fit into and influence their wider society.

Psychologists, most notably Erikson (1965), argue that understanding one’s roles and connections to the broader society are an important part of healthy psychosocial development, and are a facet of successful identity formation in adolescence. Within a humanist psychological perspective (for example, Maslow 1972) civic mindedness is an expression of self-actualisation, an individual’s developing philanthropy. Civic mindedness features in psychological theories about personality development and human development over the lifespan, and in sociological theories about the ways in which individuals fit into and influence their wider society.

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capacity to identify with, respect and promote the welfare of other human beings. For sociologists, civic mindedness represents an important aspect of ‘social capital’ in that it contributes to the culture of trust and reciprocity that underpins social relationships and networks and facilitates collective action and civic engagement (Winter 2000).

Civic mindedness has been defined as the willingness of an individual to actively take on the role of being a citizen (Bowes, Chalmers and Flanagan 1996). This definition emphasises a general, as well as personal, concern for the welfare of others. The term civic mindedness is used quite broadly in this article to mean ‘attitudes and behaviours that are beneficial to society’. More specifically, these attitudes and behaviours focus on political and community issues and the belief that it is an individual’s responsibility to actively participate in and contribute to his/her society’s political and community life.

Civic mindedness may take various forms. Community responsibility involves positive actions and behaviours that are intentional and voluntary (Eisenberg 1982; Eisenberg and Mussen 1989). It refers to behaviours that help or benefit others more remote than family or friends. Political civic
Civic mindedness could be considered a prerequisite for a successful democratic society (Flanagan and Sherrod 1998). It comprises attitudes and behaviours that foster participation in the political arena. Another aspect of civic mindedness involves the individual's belief system, or feelings of responsibility towards the local and global community. This involves the perception of a shared identity with others and a belief in collective responsibility; that everyone has a role to play in resolving community and political issues (Sanson, Johnson and Letcher 1999).

There has been little research into the development of civic mindedness to date. However, two conclusions may be drawn from the literature that does exist. First, adolescents have stronger feelings of responsibility to personal contexts (family and school issues) than more general contexts (societal and global issues) (Bowes, Chalmers and Flanagan 1996). Additionally, Australian adolescents show a relatively low level of political awareness and understanding (Print 1994; Noller and Callan 1991).

Second, factors associated with higher levels of civic commitment and community involvement include: a sense of connectedness to school (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo and Sheblanova 1998), higher cognitive capacities (Rosenthal, Feiring and Lewis 1998), being female (Bowes et al. 1996; Flanagan et al. 1998; Rosenthal et al. 1998), and being a member of a family which encourages an ethic of social responsibility, empathy and altruism, and participates in volunteer activities (Bowes and Flanagan 1999).

Clearly, we are still at an early stage in understanding the development of civic mindedness and the factors that may facilitate its development. In particular, little is known at present about the childhood precursors of adolescent civic mindedness. The Australian Temperament Project, a longitudinal study following children’s psychosocial development from infancy onwards, provides an opportunity to study the strength of civic commitment among Australian adolescents, and to investigate a range of precursors, including prior and concurrent child and family functioning and environmental influences.

The present study therefore has four aims: to investigate the nature and extent of civic mindedness among Australian adolescents; to investigate connections between different forms of civic mindedness; to investigate sex differences in civic mindedness; and to identify concurrent and longitudinal predictors of adolescent civic mindedness.

Based on earlier research findings, it could be expected that child-specific factors such as school adjustment, social skills such as empathy and responsibility, and family attachment will contribute to the development of civic mindedness, as will aspects of the family environment.

**Australian Temperament Project**

Data reported here come from a longitudinal community study of Australian children's development known as the Australian Temperament Project (Prior, Sanson, Smart and Oberklaid 2000). The project began in 1983 with the enrolment of a representative sample of over 2000 infants and families from across the state of Victoria. Data were collected via mail surveys every one to two years from parents, teachers and, in later years, from the children themselves. There have been eleven waves of data collection with the twelfth wave under way at present. A number of domains have been assessed over the years, including temperament, behaviour problems, school adjustment, health, social competence, family functioning, parenting styles and peer relationships. Approximately 1650 adolescents and their families continue to participate in the study, a retention rate of 67 per cent. The data presented here involved 1310 of these adolescents (642 males and 668 females) who completed questionnaires during the eleventh data wave.

As part of the 1998 survey, collected when the adolescents were 15–16 years old and most were in Year 10 of secondary school, adolescents were asked to respond to questions concerning various aspects of civic mindedness. One set of questions investigated political interest, awareness and activity. Another asked about attitudes toward, and involvement in, community activities. Other questions asked about the adolescent’s belief in individual responsibility for social issues. (Adolescents were also asked about environmental awareness, religious beliefs and activity, and empathy toward family and friends. These data will be reported at a later date). Factor analysis identified three scales assessing civic mindedness and these scales are reported here.
have been named responsibility/efficacy, community activity, and political awareness.

Predictor measures were drawn from the concurrent and longitudinal data set and included: aspects of child functioning such as temperament, behaviour problems, personality, social skills, school adjustment; relationships with others, particularly parents and peers; and aspects of the family environment such as parent–child relationships, parenting styles, and family socio-economic background. All measures were obtained via mail surveys; for many measures, multi-source data from parents, teachers, and/or children were available.

**Levels of civic mindedness among Australian adolescents**

As shown in Table 1, the great majority (80–90 per cent) of 15–16-year-old Australian adolescents endorsed beliefs that it is everyone’s responsibility to address global problems, and that individual actions can make a difference. However, Tables 2 and 3 show that fewer adolescents engaged in community or political activity (a range of 20– 60 per cent). There were quite high levels of participation in school activities (about 55 per cent, combining ‘sometimes’ and ‘very often’ responses), and a similar proportion (58 per cent) reported active support for organisations helping disadvantaged people (through voluntary work or giving money) and involvement in fund-raising activities (52 per cent).

A somewhat higher level of participation was evident when the focus was on more localised issues. Two-thirds of adolescents reported following international news but rather fewer reported following Australian political news. Politics, whether local or international, evoked strong feelings in only one-third of adolescents, and the proportion who showed any active involvement in politics was even smaller (less than 20 per cent).

Correlations between these three aspects of civic mindedness revealed significant but modest relationships between political awareness and community activity, and political awareness and belief in the individual’s responsibility. The relationship between community activity and belief in the individual’s responsibility was significant, but weak.

Girls showed significantly higher levels of community activity, and belief in the individual’s responsibility. No significant gender differences were found for political awareness.

**What were the predictors of civic mindedness?**

For these analyses, multiple regression analyses were used to identify significant predictors. Each

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**Table 1** Levels of civic responsibility/efficacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Definitely disagree %</th>
<th>Disagree somewhat %</th>
<th>Agree somewhat %</th>
<th>Definitely agree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To solve global problems, people need to act locally</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone has the responsibility to work to make the world a better place</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are things which people can do as individuals to help solve the world’s problems</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Table 2** Levels of community activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rarely/never %</th>
<th>Sometimes %</th>
<th>Very often/always %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actively support organisations that help disadvantaged people</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active in a group working for social change</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take part in fund-raising activities – e.g. 40-Hour Famine, Walk against Want</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit elderly or disabled people to cheer them up</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active in my school’s organisation – e.g. SRC, class or school captain</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active in school activities – e.g. sports, clubs</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Table 3** Levels of political awareness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rarely/never %</th>
<th>Sometimes %</th>
<th>Very often/always %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Follow the news about politics in Australia</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have strong feelings about politics</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow the news about international affairs</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get involved in political activity – e.g. write letters, attend protests</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three aspects of civic mindedness which were identified – community activity, political awareness, and responsibility/efficacy – appeared to be relatively distinct. The strongest links were between political awareness and the other two factors. It also seemed that involvement in one type of civic mindedness did not imply involvement in others to any substantial degree.

A discrepancy between beliefs and action was evident. Adolescents reported a strong commitment to the ideal of individual responsibility for problems at the community or global level, but this did not always translate into action. There were moderate levels of community activity and a relatively low degree of political awareness. These results are consistent with previous research. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect high levels of civic-mindedness at 15–16 years of age. This is a busy time of life for many young people, and participation might require the support of adults (for example, with transportation, financial assistance) as well as self-direction. Perhaps civic-mindedness comes at an earlier stage in the developmental sequence than actions. Girls had higher levels of community participation and belief in the individual's responsibility, but there were no gender differences in political awareness, perhaps due to the low levels of political awareness in general.

Several individual and family factors were found to be related to the development of civic mindedness. The strongest prediction came from factors assessed at 15–16 years. Across all three outcomes, reasonable levels of prediction were found from 11–12 years onwards, and there was some, but much weaker, prediction from earlier time points. There was greatest predictive power for 'community participation'. School adjustment and empathy were, as expected, significant precursors. However, parental reports of the adolescents' family responsibility (helping family members, completing chores) and adolescent-reported attachment to family were not related to levels of civic mindedness.

Some facets of functioning were important for multiple aspects of civic engagement. A high level of bonding to school featured in all three outcomes, while empathy and high quality friendships were predictors of both community activity and belief in individual responsibility. Political awareness and belief in individual responsibility were predicted by high openness/intellect, academic achievement and

wave of the data set was examined separately to determine the age at which significant precursors could be identified. Variables were retained if they contributed 1 per cent or more of explained variance.

**Predictors of responsibility/efficacy**

Adolescents who believed in individual responsibility showed higher levels of bonding to school, higher levels of a personality style called openness/intellect which could be broadly described as an ‘inquiring mind’ (ratings of open-mindedness, intelligence, imaginativeness, curiosity), higher quality friendships and lower attraction to risk taking at 15–16 years. Twelve per cent of variance was accounted for by these concurrent individual characteristics.

At 13–14 years adolescents had been more empathic and were less likely to have been antisocial, with around 6 per cent of variance explained. At 11–12 years, they had been more empathic and teachers had more frequently rated them as doing well at school, with 5 per cent of variance explained. Very weak prediction (2–3 per cent) was found for earlier timepoints, with family socio-economic status (a composite of both parents’ occupational and educational levels) consistently emerging, as well as teacher-rated task orientation (being able to concentrate, to complete tasks).

**Predictors of community activity**

Adolescents who took part in community activities were more confident in social situations, showed higher levels of bonding to school, were less likely to have engaged in antisocial behaviour, and more frequently had close friendships at 15–16 years. Together, these concurrent aspects of functioning accounted for 22 per cent of variance. At 13–14 years, adolescents had shown higher levels of empathy and social confidence, and participated more often in organised peer group activities. This cluster of characteristics explained 13 per cent of variance. At 11–12 years, they had been more socially confident by self and teacher report, and had better quality friendships, with almost 6 per cent of variance being explained. Even at 9–10 years some prediction to later participation was found, whereby children who had been less shy and more empathic during mid childhood were more likely to participate in community work in mid adolescence, although the amount of variance explained (3 per cent) was small. Teachers had rated them as more flexible in the early school years, although here too, the amount of variance explained was small (1–2 per cent).

**Predictors of political awareness**

The strongest concurrent predictors of political awareness were the personality style called openness/intellect, high commitment to school and higher family socio-economic status. Approximately 14 per cent of variance was explained by these concurrent aspects of functioning. Teenagers with higher levels of political awareness had shown greater preference for thought-provoking activities (for example, searching for answers, finding out how things work, being excited by the prospect of learning new things) and were more likely to come from more advantaged families at 13–14 years. These characteristics explained 12 per cent of variance.

At 11–12 years, adolescents were more likely to be rated as doing well at school by their teachers, and to come from more advantaged backgrounds, with 6 per cent of variance accounted for. At earlier timepoints, family socio-economic status consistently emerged as a substantial predictor (around 5 per cent). Reading achievement at Grade 2 and social confidence/leadership at Grade 4 also predicted political awareness in mid adolescence.
living in a more advantaged family environment.

Other facets of functioning had more specific connections. Confidence in social situations, and the temperament dimension of flexibility (sociability and adaptability in interacting with others) assessed at several earlier timepoints emerged as precursors of community activity. The temperament dimension of task orientation (attending to and persisting with school learning requirements) was associated with responsibility/efficacy. A liking for intellectually stimulating activities characterised adolescents who had high levels of political awareness.

Family socio-economic background was an important milieu for the development of political awareness. Why might this be so? Since family functioning did not contribute to civic engagement, this does not appear to be the explanation for socio-economic differences. A likely explanation is that more advantaged families can provide more resources and may act as role models, a question that could be taken up by future research.

In summary, adolescents with high levels of civic mindedness in mid adolescence seemed to be functioning well in a variety of ways. They were likely to be doing well at school and to value their school experiences, they tended to be caring and confident, have close friendships with peers, to be interested in intellectual pursuits, and to come from more advantaged families.

Future directions

Civic mindedness has been shown to peak in early adulthood. As we follow the sample over the coming years, it will possible to ascertain whether there is increasing concordance between beliefs and action as the adolescents reach adulthood; in other words, whether beliefs in responsibility for societal problems become reflected in behaviour. Further, we will be able to see whether there is an overall increase in interest in civic issues in adulthood and to ascertain the factors that are associated with growth in civic engagement. It may be that there are differing trajectories for the three types of civic mindedness that have been identified here, with political awareness, for example, developing later than the others. Finally, an important question will be whether and how adolescent civic mindedness is related to later adjustment, interpersonal relationships, and occupational choices.

References


Diana Smart, Ann Sanson and Lisa Da Silva, are researchers at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, engaged as Research Officer, Acting Research Manager, and Research Officer respectively; John Toumbourou is with the Centre for Adolescent Health at the University of Melbourne. This article was first presented at the Seventh Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Family futures: issues in research and policy, held in Sydney on 24-26 July 2000.