CHAPTER TWO

Adolescents’ Theories of the Commons

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Abstract
Drawing from research on civic engagement and environmental commitment, we make a case for the processes inherent in how adolescents’ ideas about the commons (those things that bind a polity together) develop. Engagement in the public realm with a plethora of perspectives and a goal of finding common ground is fundamental. Adolescents participate in the public realm through mini-polities (e.g., schools, community organizations). Practices in those settings can reinforce or challenge dominant political narratives. Special attention is given to the natural environment as a commons that transcends generations and to the opportunities in schools and in community partnerships that enable adolescents to realize their interdependence with nature and to author decisions about the commons.

Over the past few decades, there has been a growing awareness of the civic/political domain as a context for adolescent development. The field has valued the reciprocal relationship between practice and theory and has benefitted from the insights and experiences of teachers, youth workers, and staff of community-based organizations who have informed the questions and designs of studies and interpreted the implications of results for practice.
As the field has evolved, three bodies of scholarship have contributed to our understanding of development in this domain. Each, in their own way, has emphasized the civic agency of adolescents and the contributions they make to local communities. First, positive youth development (PYD) challenged the overemphasis in research on adolescence on the problem behaviors of young people by focusing on an alternative “assets” paradigm—noting both that adolescents were assets who contributed to their communities and that they built up a stock of personal assets through the community connections that they forged (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2007). Second, the field of service learning stressed that students’ classroom learning was enriched when they engaged in community service and reflected on the connections between their community-based experiences and academic content (Furco & Root, 2010; van Goethem, van Hoof, van Aken, Raaijmakers, & Orobio de Castro, 2013). Because service is typically done through nonprofit organizations, service-learning projects also expose young people to public issues and to people in need. Thus, compared to the more homogeneous range of “others” with whom they engage in extracurricular activities, community service is a venue through which adolescents can meet individuals who are members of stereotyped groups (e.g., the elderly, the homeless). Such encounters provide fodder for questioning group stereotypes, for expanding concepts of “our community,” and the ties that bind members together (Flanagan, Kim, Collura, & Kopish, 2013).

Finally, youth organizing has focused on the collective actions for social change in which adolescents, primarily from marginalized communities, have engaged. That work has drawn attention to myriad forms of social injustice experienced by adolescents from ethnic minority and poor communities. Through empirical studies of grass roots efforts challenging injustice, it has added constructs such as collective identity and empowerment to the field of civic/political development (Christens & Kirshner, 2011). Taken together these models highlight the role of younger generations in contributing to social change. The emphasis on development in the civic/political domain contrasts with the political socialization models of earlier eras that emphasized the transmission of political loyalties from older to younger generations.

Convergent evidence from this evolving field points to some key findings. First, youths are more likely to be civically active as adults if they have had opportunities during adolescence to work collaboratively with peers and adults on engaging issues and to discuss current events with parents, teachers, and peers. Interest in political issues tends to be generated by controversy, contestation, discussion, and the perception that it matters to take a stand
(Flanagan, 2013). However, all community or extracurricular activities are not equal in the opportunities that they offer for adolescents to develop civic identities. Longitudinal analyses following a US sample of adolescents into young adulthood showed that involvement in community service, political action, and public performance in adolescence predicted voting, volunteering, and joining community organizations in adulthood (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). These authors point to the public quality of the adolescent activities of community service, political action, and public performance. Other work with a sample of Belgian youth suggests that political participation is associated with adolescents’ engagement in multiple organizations as well as with the opportunities afforded by those organizations to practice leadership, organizing, and engagement in political affairs (Quintelier, 2008). In short, adolescents’ engagement in public action with a wide range of fellow members of the public is most predictive of their civic engagement in adulthood.

Second, young people’s sense of social incorporation (solidarity with others, identification with community institutions, being respected and heard by adults) is a psychological factor that is positively related to youth assuming social responsibility for others in their community and for taking civic actions (i.e., voting, volunteering, joining, and leading community groups) in young adulthood (Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2009). These relationships are true for youth from different social classes and ethnic minority backgrounds and suggest that an ethic of civic participation, of social responsibility for the community is nurtured because adolescents feel that they belong and matter to others in the community.

Third, there is a class and racial divide in the civic opportunities available to young people, one that has widened in recent decades (Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Osgood, & Briddell, 2011). Scholars have traced the early and cumulative effects of poverty at birth to low political participation in adulthood (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003). Cumulative disadvantage built up over the K-12 years (including the lack of opportunities to practice civic skills, the competing demands on attention and time of living in economically stressed communities, and especially events such as dropping out of school or getting arrested) depresses civic incorporation and civic action later in life (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Others have shown that students have fewer opportunities for civic practice if they live in low-income communities or if they are tracked into “low-ability” classes (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009).

In this chapter, we draw from the work in this evolving field and put forth a theory to explain how adolescents’ experiences inform their ideas about the commons. By the commons we refer to the environmental
resources (e.g., water, air) on which life depends, the public spaces and institutions (e.g., parks, schools) where we gather and negotiate how we want to live together, and the culture, values, and beliefs that we share. In short, the “commons” is an expansive definition of the things that bind us to one another. Consequently, it moves the discussion of civic engagement beyond narrow frameworks of electoral politics and helps us think about experiences that prepare adolescents to author their lives in a democracy. In our chapter, we pay special attention to the natural environment as a commons. Although climate change is arguably the biggest civic challenge facing younger generations, the natural environment has been relatively neglected as a space for adolescents’ civic/political development.

In her book, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt (1958, p. 50) points to the intergenerational legacy and social responsibility implied in the commons:

>The common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our life span into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn into it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us.

Arendt used the term “public realm” interchangeably with the commons and we have chosen the commons because of its public nature. For Arendt, the “public” meant that things that appear in this realm can be seen and heard by everybody. Opinions aired in public and actions taken there reveal who we are and where we stand on issues. Furthermore, in the public realm, there will be diversity in perspectives on the values, principles, and policies that we believe define our collective identity and tie us together as a society. Although people may choose different ways to live their private lives, it is in the public realm that a wide range of beliefs on how best to live together in a civil society can be aired and debated. According to Arendt, the very survival of the commons depends on this gathering together to define who we are and the legacy that will outlive us:

>But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public. It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time. Through many ages before us— but now not any more—men entered the public realm because they wanted something of their own or something they had in common with others to be more permanent than their earthly lives. (p. 50)
Our use of the expansive construct of a commons that binds us together is more useful for a discussion of the civic/political domain as a meaningful context for adolescent development. All too often this domain has been narrowly conceived within a “representative democracy” paradigm with voting behavior or partisanship the outcomes of interest. Not only are most adolescents too young to participate in electoral politics, but popular sovereignty is not even what democracy means. As legal scholar Robert Post (2006) has pointed out, self-government does not concern the making of decisions but the authorship of decisions. If adolescents are going to identify with and have a stake in the commons, they have to have opportunities to author decisions about the commons with others who are affected by those decisions. This implies a belief in their capacities to do so, a belief about youth as assets whose collective actions contribute to social change, and a framing of adolescents that is consistently employed in the fields of youth organizing and PYD.

Belief in the capacities of human beings to negotiate and arrive at common ground also challenges rational choice theories with their assumptions that people, driven by self-interest, will use up and destroy the natural resources on which their communities depend. Here, we turn to the work of Elinor Ostrom (1998), political scientist and winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in economics. Ostrom contended that humans have more capability and motivation to solve social dilemmas than suggested in rational choice theory. She contested the inevitability implied in the “tragedy of the commons” and challenged the notion that states or markets were better than communities of people to determine how best to manage natural resources. Rather, Ostrom (2010) and her colleagues demonstrated empirically that communities throughout the world use collective decision-making processes to determine how to sustain environmental resources that are their commons.

1. LAY THEORIES

Our focus on adolescents’ theories of the commons draws from the concept of folk or lay theories in social psychology. Just like scientific theories, lay theories are an attempt to explain or make sense of phenomena. They provide a lens through which we filter our experiences and give them meaning. Lay theories enable us to act: based on assumptions about the outcomes our actions will have, lay theories boost our confidence, reduce uncertainty, and the anxiety associated with it (Levy, Chiu, & Hong, 2006).
With respect to political issues, people make sense of an issue by developing a lay theory about its causes and solutions. Adolescents do this as well, as we discovered when we asked a large group of adolescents in the United States (12–18-year olds who came from different social classes and racial-ethnic backgrounds) to “explain to someone from another country who was visiting our country, why some people are rich and other people are poor” (Flanagan, 2013; Flanagan & Tucker, 1999). The teens’ theories about inequality were logically consistent with their beliefs about opportunity in the United States: those teens who held individuals accountable for their economic station (e.g., some people are poor because they are lazy; people who are poor probably did not work hard when they were kids in school and now they do not want to work hard at a job) also were ardent in their commitment to meritocracy and in their belief that there is a level playing field in the United States (i.e., that anyone, no matter what their background or challenges, can succeed if they work hard). In contrast, adolescents who mentioned structural or systemic causes of inequality (e.g., people might be rich because they inherited money; many people are poor because plants shut down and jobs are going overseas) questioned whether equal opportunity and a level playing field characterized American society.

Ultimately, our theories about society and how it works are not objective truths: they are entangled with our affection for and allegiance to what is familiar and to the groups with which we identify. In fact, children’s emotional bonds to fellow members of their community and positive affect for the symbols of their ethnic or national group occur before they have knowledge about the group. In this sense, societal cognition is “hot” cognition, laden with affect. Hatano and Takahashi (2005) make this point by comparing people’s understanding of society (societal cognition) with their understanding of the biological or physical world (“natural” cognition). Whereas we describe and explain the biological or physical world, our descriptions of and explanations for societal phenomena (i.e., economic inequality; the purpose of laws; gender roles; use of natural resources) are braided with emotions, justifications, legitimations, and sometimes with challenges. As Hatano and Takahashi put it, “how the entity is’ is almost always associated with ‘how it should be’” (p. 290, 291). As we discuss later in our section on mediating institutions, younger generations tend to adopt the beliefs (about institutions, laws, roles, mores) that are widely shared in their society because those beliefs are reinforced in the settings of development.

We contend that, in the course of growing up, adolescents will develop theories about the commons (i.e., their own explanations of relationships,
institutions, laws, systems of authority, and the natural environment) based on their accumulated experiences. Theories about the commons are political theories because they concern our membership in the polity and the prerogatives and responsibilities associated with that membership (Walzer, 1989). Theories about the commons, then, reflect our beliefs about the ties that bind us to fellow citizens.

Where do our lay theories come from? Here, we emphasize the primacy of experience as a foundation for our ideas and beliefs. As Vygotsky (1978) argued, people’s concepts, ideas, and beliefs—the intrapsychological, to use his term—are internalizations of the experiences they have with other people on the social plane. Civic action does not happen in private but in relationships and collaborations with others—within particular economic and political systems and at particular historical junctures.

Concerning the natural environment as a commons, young people’s theories can be based on anthropocentric or biocentric beliefs (Kahn, 2003; Persing, 2007). In an anthropocentric orientation, nature or natural resources are valued because they are useful to people. Defending or protecting those resources (e.g., for fishing or hunting) is likely, but the goal is for human use. Conservation of nature is important because it is the basis for preserving human life. In contrast, a biocentric orientation does not prioritize the utility value of the natural environment for humans; rather, it respects the inherent value and rights of other living things. The interdependence of species, human beings among them, is valued but a commitment to preserving the natural environment includes respect for the ecosystems of all species and an awareness of the impact or pressure of human actions on those other species. These different theories about the natural environment have implications for behavior. For example, someone with an anthropocentric orientation would look at a forest for the resources it can provide for humans and support the management of the forest by humans (i.e., cutting of trees for timber to build homes or other goods and planting seedlings to replenish the resource). Young people with anthropocentric beliefs may use a state park for recreation such as off-roading, hunting, and fishing. In contrast, a person with a biocentric world-view would call for the preservation of a forest as it is with little management from humans, wanting protection of the habitat for the species that live there. A young person with a biocentric orientation would utilize parkland for less intrusive recreation such as hiking, and might choose to be a vegetarian or only eat meat that was raised in humane conditions. Both viewpoints see value in nature that would be reflected in behavior that conserves natural systems rather than degrading them.
According to meta-analyses of research with adults, proenvironmental behavior is associated with civic dispositions and motivations including awareness of one’s interdependence with other people and species and responsibility for the commons (Bamberg & Moser, 2007; Hines, Hungerford, & Tomera, 1986/87; Schultz, 2001). Likewise, environmental action is positively correlated with generative concern (about the impacts of one’s actions on future generations). This is true for adolescents and their parents and parents’ environmental actions and values impact the behaviors of their children (Pratt, Norris, Alisat, & Bisson, 2012). Generative concern—with the implications of one’s actions for future generations—reflects an awareness of the commons that transcends individual or generational life spans (Arendt, 1958).

Proenvironmental behavior is also correlated with a sense of belonging or connection to something larger than oneself, including the nonhuman world (Arnocky, Stroink, & De Cicco, 2007). The term environmental identity has been used to capture this identification of one’s own interests with a larger commons that includes other people, species, and future generations. From studies of adults, we know that the motivation to transcend self-interest and preserve the environment as a commons in the interests of other people, species, and future generations is due, in part, to the formation of an environmental identity (Schultz, 2001). Not surprisingly, an environmental identity is positively related to the amount of time an individual associates with nature (Dutcher, Finley, Luloff, & Johnson, 2007).

The psychological role of an environmental identity is similar to that of other collective identities—providing a sense of connection to a larger whole (Clayton, 2003). Importantly, the basis of this identification is not the similarity that one perceives between the self and others or between humans and other species. Rather, it is the recognition of the interdependence of one’s fate with the fates of other living things. Here, we have extended arguments about the interdependence of fate put forth by social psychologists studying intergroup relations (Brown, 1988; Lewin, 1948). When individuals see their fate as intertwined with that of a group, they are prepared to assume responsibility for the welfare of that group. By extension, we would argue that identification with the commons occurs when people realize that their fates are intertwined with the fates of others—humans and other species as well—and that this realization motivates actions to preserve the commons. As adolescents develop their own identities, proenvironmental behavior and concern should be tied to the degree to which they define themselves as independent, interdependent with other people, or interdependent with all living things.
Lacking an awareness of our interdependencies with other persons and species is a major reason why moral standards may not be activated in behavior. In fact, selective moral disengagement—a failure to identify with and take responsibility for the commons—underpins environmental degradation (Bandura, 2007). Moral disengagement from environmental responsibility occurs, in part, due to the phenomenon of “free riding,” that is, people absolve themselves of personal responsibility out of beliefs that “others” are taking care of the problem. Other reasons for disengagement from environmental responsibility include a lack of awareness of the magnitude of the problem, beliefs that there is nothing one can do, or that the only solution is to deprive oneself of material goods that have become so integral to one’s identity and way of life (Giddens, 2009). For adolescents, consumption is one of the main avenues available through which they can claim identities. To act in the interests of the commons they will need lifestyle choices, including consumption, that allow them to act on their ideals and still live rewarding lives.

Adolescents’ disengagement may also be exacerbated by society’s emphasis on independence as a marker of maturity and by the contradictory messages that young people hear about whether they are, in fact, responsible mature adults. Independence was a false ideal of maturity even in times (now gone) when youth could find remunerative jobs fresh out of high school; it is even more so in a time when such jobs are elusive. In fact, emphasizing the interdependence of their fates with other human beings and species and enabling adolescents to act on that knowledge will build the kind of relational networks they will need to deal with the uncertainties they are sure to encounter. This shift to valuing interdependence will also require a shift from the liberal interpretation of “liberty” to a rediscovery of the civic republican interpretation. Whereas the former emphasizes the rights of citizens to live independent lives unencumbered by responsibilities to the commons and to determine on their own what they value and how they want to live, the civic republican interpretation holds that citizens can only guarantee their liberty by participating in communities with fellow citizens where they deliberate together how they want to live (Sandel, 1996).

Moral disengagement from environmental action may be more common among certain generations due to the dominant views in vogue when that generation comes of age. According to longitudinal work, the late adolescent/early adult years are a politically formative time. The way that individuals wrangle with and take positions on issues that are salient when they come of age and the beliefs and points of view circulating in political
discourse at that time shape those individuals’ political positions into mid-life (Jennings, 2002). Indeed, American adults seem to consider the important moments in the history of their nation from the vantage point of their late adolescence/early adulthood. According to a national survey, no matter what their age, the events that people nominate as most important in the history of the United States tend to be those events that took place during their late adolescent and early adult years (Schuman & Scott, 1989). This period in the life course may stand out as a politically definitive time because, at least in societies where formal schooling precedes work, exits from schooling and into careers are times in life for taking stock. As adolescents reflect on the direction of their own lives and their goals for the future, it is likely that they are also taking stock of their polity and the direction that it is going (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

Because of the dearth of longitudinal work tracing adolescent’s political trajectories into their adulthood, we tend to ignore the implications of economic and political policies in place when a generation comes of age for the formation of political views in that generation. Trend studies can provide an alternative historical lens. For example, analyses of trends over 25 years in the environmental attitudes and behaviors of America’s high-school seniors found that teens’ beliefs that environmental resources were scarce increased and decreased over those years in line with national attention to and leadership on the environment (Wray-Lake, Flanagan, & Osgood, 2010). Adolescents were also more likely to take personal action to preserve the environment (e.g., using public transportation or bike riding) during periods when they believed that resources were scarce and that technology could not solve the problem of finite resources. The personal resolve of young people to deal with environmental problems followed a similar trend with their resolve to hold the government accountable for the problem. In other words, in years when youth wanted government to act to conserve natural resources, they also were more committed to personally engage in actions to achieve that goal (Wray-Lake et al., 2010). In summary, adolescents are willing to act and to lobby their government to act if they are aware of the magnitude of environmental issues and the lack of a quick technological fix. The paradox with climate change, as Giddens (2009) has described it, is that people fail to act because the dangers posed by global warming are not immediate or tangible in their everyday lives; yet, waiting until those dangers become acute will be too late.
2. MEDIATING INSTITUTIONS OR MINI-POLITIES

Concepts such as “the commons” and “the common good” are useful in framing one’s role in the world, but they are often too abstract as a starting point. Adolescents will internalize theories about the commons by participating in the concrete practices of what we refer to as mediating institutions or mini-polities (e.g., schools, extracurricular activities, media, faith-based, cultural, and other community-based organizations). These institutions are public spaces where young people spend time with other members of the polity. The terms, mini-polity or mediating institution, allude to the fact that these are concrete, local contexts where the principles, values, and policies of the “macro polity” are enacted, often reinforced, and sometimes challenged.

By participating in the routine and repeated practices of mediating institutions, adolescents form beliefs about their society, concepts of themselves as part of that society, and habits and dispositions to participate with fellow members of their society. Here, we draw from the notion of practices in cultural psychology: practices are routine ways of acting that are followed by most of the people in one’s group. Because they are both routine and because everyone “like me” does them, these practices tend to reinforce beliefs that they are the natural, proper, perhaps the only way to do things (Goodnow, 2011).

The mediating institutions of civil society can be physical or virtual but they are the public spaces where members of the public gather to decide together what is in their common interest (Arendt, 1958). Mediating institutions are interpretive spaces where people’s actions and decisions are influenced at once by forces that justify, stabilize, and reproduce existing systems and those that challenge the status quo and contribute to social transformation. Because schools are contexts where most adolescents spend a significant part of their time, they are perhaps the best example of how this works.

3. THE SCHOOL AS A MINI-POLITY, TEACHING FOR THE COMMONS

Outside of their home environment, schools are the first place that young people are exposed to policies and practices that directly affect their lives. Unlike the family, schools are part of the public realm and, in this sense, are spaces where children become actors in the polity. They are arguably the
most important context where young people learn about their place in society and about the rules of the social order. As social institutions, schools are settings where youth learn justifications for the status quo as well as places where they can learn to question the status quo.

Concerning their reinforcement of the status quo, according to sociological theories of education, schools teach young people the norms of society and inculcate an identification and sense of solidarity with the dominant society (Wexler, 2009). They do this, in part, through three sets of practices: the ethnocentric biases of curricula, explicit positive narratives about the nation’s history, and adoption of symbols and practices of civil culture (Barrett, 2007).

The routine practices of mediating institutions, borrowing from cultural psychology, reflect the values and principles of the polity in which those institutions exist. So, although schools will universally employ these practices, the political content that children learn varies in ways that reflect the political discourse and policies in place at a particular time. One has only to consider contemporary debates in American education about whether evolution should be taught and, if so, whether it should be “balanced” with the alternative of intelligent design. Cross-national research provides evidence that the content taught in social studies classes is consistent with national priorities. For example, comparisons of middle school students in 27 countries reveal that students are more knowledgeable about international human rights in those countries that mentioned human rights in their reports to United Nations affiliated groups (Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, & Barber, 2008). Cross-national comparisons also show that the view that adolescents hold about democracy as a form of government is consistent with the principles emphasized in their nation. When ninth graders in the United States were asked to select the important qualities that define a strong democracy, they chose “protecting human rights,” but were less likely than peers in other nations to support a proactive role for government in controlling the economy or distributing income (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001). Their theories about democracy were informed by what was familiar to them, in particular, the defense of human rights and the rather minimal role that their government plays in curbing market forces or providing social entitlement programs compared to the role played by the governments of other nations.

Schools also reinforce the status quo through the differential opportunities for civic practice that they offer students including things such as debate, service learning, and leadership opportunities (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009).
In addition, practices that encourage self-determination and democratic participation (such as problem-solving, discourse, and debate) tend to privilege affluent students. In contrast, students of working class families are more likely to attend schools that focus on memorization and skill building rather than problem-solving and questioning. By participating in those different practices, groups learn their different places of status and value in society. Schools in this sense can be mechanisms that reproduce and are responsible for social inequalities (Anyon, 1981). Social reproduction theory shows how schools can be the very places that keep people at their current social status, perpetuating inequalities in society. Ultimately, many young people will come to adopt as natural and proper those mores and principles that make their social order work. At a macro level, the process of political stability depends on societies being not just economic and political systems with constitutions, laws, and institutions, but also thinking systems with widely shared beliefs. By participating in regular and routine practices, younger generations will also adopt these widely shared beliefs. Although there are rare exceptions, polities tend to remain stable across generations. Justifying the system also enjoys a psychological advantage over challenges to it. As John Jost and his colleagues argue, people typically accept the way things are rather than try to challenge the system. Accepting the way the things are or “justifying the system” requires relatively little cognitive effort, whereas challenging the system implies a capacity to see alternative perspectives to the way things are and to critique the system in light of those other possibilities (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

Concerning the implications for adolescents’ theories of the commons, the Western or Eurocentric bias of schools tends to value the individual over the community, self-interest over the common good, and the human commodification of nature rather than human interdependence with nature. These have negative implications for sustaining the commons. However, schools can take a different pedagogical approach, becoming beneficial institutions for developing citizens of a democratic society. First, to learn how to be citizens responsible for the commons, students need to be given some autonomy in their learning, with teachers giving up some control. Only through everyday practice in authoring their fates will younger generations become authors of their collective fate as citizens of a democracy. Second, students will need to be open to ways of thinking that differ from their own. As Arendt argued, in the public realm there is a diversity of perspectives about what constitutes a just society. Thus, civic practice for adolescents would necessitate exposure to different perspectives. The scope of their
concept of “community” should grow wider with more varied experiences grounded in intentional engagement with people and perspectives that differ from their own. Their experiences should aim to meet the two criteria that John Dewey (1916) nominated as factors that qualify associations as “democratic”: How numerous and varied are the interests, which are consciously shared; how full and free is the interplay with other forms of association. In other words, to nurture democratic dispositions of open-mindedness, trust, and commitments to a broad common good, building diversity into adolescents’ social life is essential. As Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci (2011) promote, the more voices in community decision making, the more likely it will be that the group will come up with ideas and decisions that will lead to a healthy community. But specific skills in discussion and communication are essential, as Barber’s (1989) concept of “public talk” implies.

Active listening to others, stating one’s own position in public but being open-minded to alternative perspectives, and feeling motivated to find common ground are skills that adolescents will need. When schools and other settings of development, what we have called mini-polities or mediating institutions, build opportunities to develop those skills into their settings, adolescents will begin to identify themselves as members of the public.

In contrast to reproductive theories of education, schools can be settings where all young people learn to identify themselves as members of the public, gain skills and dispositions that enable them to work collectively with others, and develop the motivation and commitment to act. But this depends on the practices that schools enact. Education that focuses on learning rooted in real-world issues and that considers hands-on, active engagement as essential to the process encourages students to engage in identifying issues in which they all have a stake. Typically, these issues are complex and require multiple perspectives, expertise, and collective action.

Examples of these practices are regularly found in exemplary service-learning and place-based or community-based education. A common denominator is that they involve students in collaborations with community-based organizations outside of the school around issues of the commons. Students’ motivation to seek out knowledge, to learn more about issues, is enhanced by the fact that they feel a sense of shared ownership and are passionate about the need to take a stand, to do something to solve a pressing problem. Such qualities of students’ community-based work should be considered as school systems decide about community service requirements for high-school graduation. Although concerns have been raised that mandating service might have negative consequences, research suggests that it is the quality of the
service experience rather than whether it is mandated or voluntary that matters. Some studies find no differences in students’ prosocial attitudes based on whether their service was required or not (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007); others do find differences but also note that, compared to peers who do no community service, prosocial attitudes are higher among students who do service, regardless of whether it is required or voluntary (Horn, 2012). Ultimately, it is the content and context of an adolescent’s service that is related to his/her civic development, specifically, whether s/he engaged in projects of direct service rather than in busy work (Hart et al., 2007) and whether the service was provided through a humanitarian organizations (Horn, 2011).

Working with others in organizations dedicated to humanitarian action is a form of collective action. The very notion that the action is collective conveys a sense of shared commitment to the commons (i.e., that fellow citizens share the young person’s commitment to taking a stand and doing something to “fix” the problem). By partnering with “elders” in an organization, adolescents learn that there is expertise and a history of commitment to the commons. By extending adolescents’ experiences of the community to include multiple generations with common commitments, adolescents’ concepts of the commons should reflect Arendt’s notion of transcendence across time. Through such intergenerational encounters over common concerns, youth should also become aware that their own actions in the present have consequences for generations that come after them. Organizations or coalitions composed of multiple generations benefit from the unique strengths that each generation brings to the enterprise, although the historical record is full of examples of intergenerational tensions about tactics to achieve social change with youth more prepared than their elders to take militant action. This may be due to their idealism, their willingness to take risks, their relative lack of historical perspective, or the fact that they have a greater stake than their elders in defining what the future holds. Whatever the reasons, youth’s risk taking and commitment to a vision of social justice that they want to see in their lifetimes have invigorated social movements: in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, it was the younger generation’s militancy that rejuvenated the African National Congress (Ngomane & Flanagan, 2003). Similarly, in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the nonviolent civil disobedience of groups like SNCC, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, energized organizations such as the NAACP (Halberstam, 1998). Community groups and organizations that work with younger adolescents also benefit from the energy and creativity that they bring to the group. In particular, research
on youth–adult partnerships indicates that, when adults take a supportive coaching rather than leadership role and youth are encouraged to assume more leadership in the organization, the adults feel that the organization is rediscovering its core values (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013).

Other practices common in place- or community-based models that develop the democratic skills and dispositions of students include team work, deliberation, and collective decision making; these practices are used both in community partnering and within class projects. Members of each team or class may have different perspectives on identifying and solving a problem but the goal is for the students and/or community members to deliberate together, to consider one another’s views, and to try to find common ground. Clearly, there are civic skills and lessons inherent in this process. That is, citizens have different points of view but, to move forward, they have to find common ground because civic issues are only solved by citizens working together.

4. MOTIVATIONS FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The tragedy of the commons reflects a belief in rational choice, that humans are motivated only out of self-interest, and consequently that states or markets are better than communities of people in determining how best to manage shared resources. It assumes that people, driven by self-interest, will deplete, possibly destroy the “resources” on which their communities depend. But Ostrom’s work has shown that communities throughout the world utilize collective decision making to sustain resources that they hold in common.

Like Ostrom’s challenge to the inevitability of a tragedy of the commons, political scientists, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) contest that a self-interest model is the only motivator of human behavior. They note that the rational choice theory predicts that few people will be active in community affairs when, in fact, many are. Indeed, people contribute to the common good of their communities because there is a sense of satisfaction from “performing a civic duty or doing one’s share to make the community, nation, or world a better place” (p. 10).

There are also psychological needs satisfied by doing one’s share for the greater good. Involvement in community organizations satisfies the human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For adolescents the affective ties associated with belonging to community institutions are inversely associated
with a host of risk behaviors (Resnick et al., 1997). In short, when young people feel wanted, feel that they count, and have a voice in the affairs of their community they are less likely to violate its norms. In fact, youths’ sense of “mattering” has been identified as the *sine qua non* of effective community-based youth organizations (Eccles & Gootman, 2001). Mattering also has been identified as the mediator linking volunteer work with adult well-being. Adults’ health and well-being is also predicted by the diversity and consistency of their volunteer work (Piliavin & Siegel, 2007). A case can also be made for the role of community engagement in adolescents’ well-being, although there is scant longitudinal evidence for causal effects (Flanagan & Bundick, 2011). In summary, contributing to the commons is psychologically rewarding in large part because of the social connections and sense of purpose associated with contributing.

5. THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AS A COMMONS

As we have argued, the commons is a public space where people come together, form relationships and group identities, and develop feelings of social responsibility for one another and for the (tangible and intangible) things they hold in common. To truly incorporate the commons then, the definition of community should follow the lead of Aldo Leopold (1948), who expanded community beyond human beings to include “the land”: soil, water, plants, and animals collectively.

To revisit the discussion of lay theories, Leopold was arguing for a biocentric perspective, one that recognized the interdependence of different species and valued other species for more than their use value to people. Environmental activists also have extended the practice of democracy beyond the borders of nation-states. For example, in *Earth Democracy*, Vandana Shiva (2005) speaks of the equality, rights, and worth of all life on earth and its natural systems and of having the right and responsibility of voice and participation, with decisions being made by all for the benefit of all. In an Earth Democracy, one would be aware of the connections, rights, and responsibilities to and with the “community of all beings supported by the earth” (p. 1). In this sense, the planet is a commons that global citizens share, a commons that they have to defend against corporate globalization and privatization. Earth’s resources are not just commodities but have intrinsic value. The fact that they are finite is a global concern but one on which citizens can act in local contexts.
As noted earlier, concepts such as “the commons” and “the common good” are useful in framing one’s role in the world, but can be too abstract as a starting point. Young people come to understand the commons by participating in concrete actions in partnership with community members in local contexts. The natural environment is uniquely suited to helping adolescents develop their ideas of the commons, motivating them to see the links between their own interests and those of other people and species, and engaging them in thinking about their future and the future of their communities. Why?

First, environmental issues are more accessible to young people than many other areas of political discourse. Whether they live in urban, suburban, or rural communities, the environment is something young people engage with everyday. While the term “environment” may conjure images of idyllic natural settings, it also refers to the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the land and species we encounter daily. Because they are a part of everyone’s everyday lives, issues of environmental quality are experienced by everyone. The environment is also something we learn about from an early age insofar as nature, animals, and the outdoors are common elements of children’s early lives. Whether caring for pets, walking by wildlife, or playing at public parks or at school recess, nature and the environment are part of most children’s early experience. Long before their exposure to discussions of race relations or poverty, they will be likely to participate in discussions about nature. Perhaps most important, compared to many political issues, adolescents, even children, can take a stand and do something about the environment. Regardless of the action or inaction of elected officials, youth can take action in the local environmental spaces that they share with others.

Engagement in environmental projects develops young peoples’ views of the commons through hands-on learning about real-world issues. Concentrating on the environment as a commons and a realm of civic action, young people can be effective citizens in the here and now, no need to wait until adulthood. Data collected in our current research project point to concrete ways that students are transforming their communities and leading the way through civic environmental projects. Examples include the report that students shared with the local water quality manager about the health of a local stream based on data they had collected; energy efficiency assessments of neighborhood homes leading to implementing energy saving upgrades and student-led workshops teaching residents how they can do energy audits and be more efficient users.

Second, environmental issues have local, regional, and global manifestations. Thus, adolescents can understand the connections of their personal,
local behavior to public, regional, and global impacts. Student learning is centered around community action and problem-solving through education addressing real environmental and community needs. There are civic lessons inherent in such projects—that the natural environment is a commons that we share and, as citizens, we have a responsibility to monitor and preserve.

Third, as the environment is something we all share, it is part of a global commons, essential for the survival of life on earth. So it is everyone’s responsibility to preserve and, minimally, to ensure that it is maintained at an adequate level of quality to sustain life. This identifies a third way in which young people develop an understanding of the commons through environmental action. Because environmental work brings adolescents into contact with a wide range of others and of networks and organizations in their community, it tends to meet the expansive definitions of community encounters that Dewey considered essential markers of democratic associations. In order to take concrete action on an environmental issue, deliberation as to the course of action must take place with consideration of the views of those on all sides of the issue. Thus, in environmental projects, young people are exposed to differing points of view and learn that everyone’s opinions and interests must be considered, a staple of a democratic society.

Fourth, as we already noted, civic action is collective action. In civic environmental projects, adolescents are not working alone. Rather, they are working with fellow students as well as with other generations in their local community. Indeed, most environmental projects require collaboration that extends beyond the walls of the school and involves students working side by side with nongovernmental organizations in the local community whose mission is to protect the environment. Such projects enable students to develop identities as community members. As members, they assume responsibilities for the commons that bind them to other members of those communities. Working on common problems with fellow members of one’s community is a form of collective action that conveys the fact that fellow citizens share the young person’s commitment to taking a stand and doing something to “fix” a problem, a commitment to the commons. By partnering with others, students also learn that there is expertise and history in their community through the experiences of their “elders.” Through collective action addressing common issues with members of their community, youth also gain a sense of the moral commitment of their fellow citizens. In this way, the meaning of “the commons” and the joint responsibility to preserve it deepens for the youth involved.
Interdependence, a key concept in shaping ideas of collective responsibility of the commons, is also inherent in the solutions to environmental issues. Interdependence is a core concept in ecology and we have discussed its relevance to an environmental identity. But interdependence also describes the nature of decision making and action that is necessary. No one individual or group can address environmental preservation alone. Rather, coalitions need to form and stakeholders need to be brought to the table. And, those coalitions and stakeholders have to be committed for the long haul.

As noted earlier, Arendt (1958) alluded to the importance of generative concern when she invoked the intergenerational commitment needed to sustain the public realm: “If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected and planned for one generation only; it must transcend the lifespan of mortal men” (p. 50). Through environmental action in their communities, young people are introduced to the idea that their actions can benefit or negatively affect their future, as well the future of generations that come after them. But they may be unaware that they have a choice in the matter if the opportunities to decide and to act are never presented to them.

6. CONCLUSION

We have made the case for the processes and practices that figure in adolescents’ developing a theory of the commons, those things that bind individuals with their community or polity. Building on research from the evolving field of youth civic development, we focus on the natural environment as a commons that adolescents share with others from different backgrounds and generations. As in other aspects of the civic domain, adolescents’ theories (beliefs or explanations) about the natural environment as a commons develop out of their actions in the public realm—through community and school projects that expose them to differing perspectives and through collective problem-solving to find common ground. Environmental projects offer unique opportunities for youth to frame ideas about protecting common goods and spaces, both cultural and environmental. Certain features of exemplary programs include an emphasis on local place, partnerships between schools and community organizations monitoring environmental quality, feelings of ownership, agency, and action on the part of everyone involved. Through such projects young people gain an understanding of the local, regional, and global impacts of civic decisions, of the need for collective action to protect the environment, and of the implications of their own behaviors for current and future generations.
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REFERENCES


