

# What Do Citizens Have to Do? Parents' and Adolescents' Messages About Civic Duty

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## Abstract

The current study examined demographic and civic behavior correlates of observed messages concerning civic duty coded from dyadic, semi-structured interactions between 160 adolescents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 14.42$ , range = 12–18) and their parents (144 mothers, 52 fathers). Anecdotal statements are provided to illustrate the eight themes that emerged within parent-adolescent civic discussion. Three themes concerned community and political involvement—*community service*, *voting*, and *other standard political involvement* (e.g., keeping up with current events)—and five themes concerned informal civic duties—*be productive* (e.g., working and becoming educated), *follow regulations*, *help others*, *respect country*, and *respect others*. In mixed-effect logistic regression models, coding categories were differentially associated with parent and adolescent demographic characteristics and parent-reported civic behavior.

## Keywords

civic engagement, parenting, positive youth development, religion

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Political scientists and developmental psychologists have held long-standing interest in investigating the antecedents of adult civic and political engagement. A great deal of this research has sought to identify factors that may contribute to demographic and individual variation in adult community and political involvement, and some research suggests these differences may be rooted in adolescents' divergent civic understanding (Metzger & Smetana, 2009; Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003). Parents may be an especially important contributor to teens' understanding of civic responsibility, as parents directly communicate social expectations, cultural norms, and civic values (McDevitt, Kiouis, Wu, Losch, & Ripley, 2003; Rosenthal, Feiring, & Lewis, 1998; Seider, 2012). In addition, adolescents may initiate political and civic discussion with parents and express their own opinions on political and civic issues (McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002). However, previous research examining political or civic communication between parents and adolescents has focused on discussions of political news and current events. Parent and teen discussions of civic duty have received less empirical attention. Furthermore, most research has relied on parent and adolescent self-reported frequency of political communications, so little is known about the actual content of these discussions. The current study used a video-recorded, semi-structured discussion task between adolescents and parents to document the content of parent-adolescent messages about civic obligation. In addition, we examined individual and demographic correlates of these observed messages.

### **Civic Engagement and Civic Duty Messages**

Developmental scholars have long recognized the importance of parents in facilitating adolescent civic development (e.g., McIntosh, Hart, & Youniss, 2007). Previous research has utilized political socialization theory, which posits that older generations convey civic attitudes and promote youth civic behavior through discussion and modeling (for review, see Niemi & Sobieszek, 1977). Consistent with political socialization theory, parents may use political and civic discussion to express political attitudes and social expectations (Sigel, 1970). However, to account for more dynamic processes, civic development researchers have incorporated developmental systems theories, which suggest that developmental outcomes result from interactions between individuals and nested ecological systems (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These systems perspectives promote the consideration of factors that exist within adolescents, such as attitudes and values, which are hypothesized to work in concert with social and contextual factors to promote or inhibit civic outcomes (Zaff, Malanchuk, & Eccles, 2008). Developmental researchers have referred to this synthesis of internal and

external influences that impact civic development as “civic contexts” (Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss, & Levine, 2010). Discussions with parents about political and civic issues may be an especially important component of adolescents’ civic context, as several studies have found positive associations between the frequency of parent-adolescent discussions and adolescent civic engagement (e.g., McIntosh et al., 2007; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Previous measures of political and civic discussion have primarily assessed how frequently parents and adolescents talk about topics such as political news or current events (e.g., Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003; McIntosh et al., 2007). Less research has directly explored how parents and adolescents discuss definitions of civic obligation or the importance of civic participation. In particular, parents’ and adolescents’ explicit messages about civic duty may more directly contribute to adolescents’ civic contexts because these messages contain views of the normative expectations and requirements of being a U.S. citizen.

Although research has not explored the ways in which parents and adolescents discuss dimensions of civic responsibility, political philosophers have long argued that democratic forms of government require that citizens are engaged in community and political behaviors (e.g., Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). In democratic societies, citizens are expected to contribute to the electoral process by becoming involved in standard political activities, such as voting and joining political parties (Walker, 2002). Citizens may also voice opinions and engage in behaviors that strive to influence the status quo through social movement involvement, such as protesting (Youniss et al., 2002). In addition, citizens are expected to be engaged within their local community by volunteering and attending community events (Putnam, 2000). Parents and adolescents may recognize the importance of these political and community activities and incorporate them into their discussion of civic duty.

However, conceptualizations of good citizenship incorporate a wide range of diverse attitudes and behaviors, and this range may be reflected in the ways parents and adolescents discuss civic obligation. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have shown civic educators promote a diverse array of civic orientations, including the “personally responsible,” “participatory,” and “justice focused” citizen. Similar distinctions are highlighted in youth’s understanding of “good citizenship.” For instance, Sherrod (2003) assessed open-ended responses to the question, “What does it mean to be a good citizen?” in a sample of 14- to 24-year-olds and found substantial heterogeneity in youth’s definitions of citizenship. Many youth stated that good citizens obey laws or help others and improve things, and other frequent responses included being patriotic, being productive, and respecting others. Similar conceptualizations have been found with 8th- and 11th-grade students

(Chiodo & Martin, 2005), in cross-cultural studies (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001), and in studies using adult (Anderson, Avery, Pederson, Smith, & Sullivan, 1997) and child samples (Brown, 2011). In addition, adolescents' and adults' conceptualizations of good citizenship may also include attitudes concerning respect, loyalty, and obedience, or productive behaviors such as working or getting an education. Examining the relative frequency of these messages may provide valuable insight to the degree to which the parent-adolescent relationship comprises a context that supports community and political involvement and other dimensions of civic engagement. Furthermore, capturing parents' and adolescents' messages about the importance of community and political involvement and informal civic duties allows for the examination of demographic and individual differences that may distinguish those who discuss these divergent dimensions civic duty.

Parents' and adolescents' views of civic duty are diverse, and the range of responsibilities expressed within parent-adolescent discussions may mirror the heterogeneity found across conceptualizations of good citizenship and scholars' definitions of civic engagement. However, capturing this heterogeneity poses unique methodological challenges. Previous studies examining parent-adolescent political and civic discussion have almost exclusively relied on self-report survey measures and examined the frequency of political and civic event discussion (e.g., McIntosh et al., 2007). These self-reported survey items do not assess the breadth of activities adolescents and parents may be discussing and only include a priori operationalizations of civic behavior. The current study used a semi-structured, video-recorded parent-adolescent interaction task to more comprehensively examine parents and adolescents messages about civic duty. This method allows researchers to capture the richness and complexity of the actual content of parents' and adolescents' messages about civic duty without being prompted by researchers' a priori conceptualizations of civic engagement.

## **Correlates of Parent and Adolescent Civic Messages**

Several studies have identified demographic differences in adolescent and adult civic participation (e.g., Zaff et al., 2008), and similar demographic variables may be associated with parents' and adolescents' messages concerning political and community involvement. For instance, compared with men, women and adolescent girls report lower levels of political knowledge and political efficacy (Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003; Bennett & Bennett, 1989). However, adolescent girls more strongly prioritize and more frequently participate in community service activities (Metzger & Smetana, 2009; Youniss,

McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999). Furthermore, families more frequently encourage values that stress social responsibility for adolescent girls (Flanagan et al., 1999). Compared with younger adolescents, older adolescents more strongly prioritize standard political activities (Metzger & Ferris, 2013). In addition, parents' education is positively associated with intentions to participate in political behavior (Reinders & Youniss, 2006). Thus, older adolescents, boys, fathers, and members of families with higher education may be more likely to convey standard political messages. In contrast, adolescent girls and mothers may prioritize community service messages within their discussions of civic duty.

Parents' engagement in different civic and religious activities may also influence the types of messages about civic responsibility parents and adolescents mentioned within dyadic discussions. For example, parents draw on their own personal experiences with cigarette smoking (Wakschlag et al., 2011) and sexual health (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006) when discussing these topics with their adolescents. In addition, church involvement and spirituality have been linked with a host of volunteer and community behaviors (e.g., Seider, 2007) and beliefs about community service (Metzger, Oosterhoff, Palmer, & Ferris, 2014). Parents involved in community and political activities may use these experiences to illustrate or support their views on why certain forms of participation are important civic obligations. Similarly, teens may view parents' community and political involvement as examples of "good citizenship" and incorporate these examples within adolescent-prompted discussion of civic duty. Examining demographic and individual differences in parents' and adolescents' messages about political and community involvement may help explicate social mechanisms responsible for demographic differences in adolescent and adult civic engagement.

The primary goal of the present study was to explore the content of parent and adolescent messages concerning civic duty in semi-structured video-recorded conversations and provide anecdotal statements that illustrate the richness of parent-adolescent civic duty messages. Based on previous operationalizations of civic engagement, it was hypothesized that parents' and adolescents' civic duty messages would reference community and standard political behaviors (e.g., voting, keeping up with current events). However, it was also anticipated that parents and adolescents would discuss informal civic duties such as respecting others, obeying laws, and supporting the nation. The second goal of the current study was to examine demographic and behavioral correlates associated with these messages. It was hypothesized that age, gender, and education differences would distinguish parents and adolescents who mentioned political and community messages. In addition, it was hypothesized that parents involved

in specific civic and religious activities would be more likely to include those same civic activities in their discussion of civic responsibility.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The total sample consisted of 161 adolescents and their parents (145 mothers, 53 fathers), recruited as part of a larger study examining parent-adolescent communication. One adolescent and two parents were missing all dependent variables and were removed from further analyses, making the final analytic sample 160 adolescents and their parents (144 mothers, 52 fathers;  $M_{\text{age}} = 44.00$ ,  $SD = 7.22$ ). Adolescents (60% female) were between the ages of 12 and 18 ( $M = 14.42$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ). Although most adolescents lived in two-parent households (78%), the majority of adolescents (77%,  $n = 121$ ) participated in the study with one parent, and a large percentage of these adolescents participated with just mothers ( $n = 108$ ). The remaining 23% of adolescents participated with both parents ( $n = 36$ ). The majority of parents were biological (mothers = 135, fathers = 42), but two adolescents participated with another primary female caregiver (aunt, grandmother), two mothers and six fathers were adoptive parents, and three mothers and six fathers were step parents. These parents were grouped with mothers and fathers in the current study. Adolescents were primarily Caucasian/White (77%), biracial (9%), or African American (3%) and the remainder identified as Hispanic/Latino (3%), Asian American (2%), Native American (1%), Other (5%), and one participant did not report ethnicity. The majority of mothers (89%) and fathers (93%) identified as Caucasian/White. Most mothers (72%) and fathers (85%) were married. Parents varied in their education levels and ranged from high school graduates (18% mothers, 29% fathers), business or technical school (13% mothers, 8% fathers), 4-year college/university degree (36% mothers, 33% fathers), and graduate/professional degrees (30% mothers, 27% fathers).

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited from local high schools, community events, community clubs, and religious organizations in and around a Mid-Atlantic town, and were given monetary compensation for their involvement. The majority of the data were collected in families' homes (71%), though some families (29%) participated at the research lab or in a public place (e.g., public library). Informed consent and permission for the adolescent were obtained from parents, and informed assent was obtained from the adolescent. Parent-adolescent dyads participated in a 33-minute semi-structured, dyadic communication

task on a variety of topics, including civic engagement, followed by the completion of questionnaires in separate rooms. Research team members were present to answer participant questions about the survey. In addition, due to slower reading abilities among some of the younger participants, survey items were read aloud for 12 (8%) of the adolescents and partially read aloud for 4 adolescents (3%). Responses to all study variables did not differ across collection location or whether the survey was read aloud.

### Questionnaire Measures

*Civic behavior and religious involvement.* Parents reported their involvement in five distinct types of civic and religious activities using a questionnaire adapted from previous research (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Participants reported how often they engaged in *community service* (three items; for example, volunteer to help poor, sick, or disabled people in your community), *standard political involvement* (one item; keep up with current events and politics), *social movement* (three items; for example, take part in a political protest or rally), *community gathering* (two items; for example, attend a community social event or dance), and *religious* activities (three items; for example, attend religious services) in an average month. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*), and higher scores indicated greater involvement in civic and religious activities. Alpha coefficients for most scales ranged from .65 to .88, though the community gathering scale demonstrated less robust internal reliability ( $\alpha = .44$ ).

### Observational Measure

Adolescents and their parents participated in a 33-minute video-recorded semi-structured discussion task, which was divided into five separate discussions ranging from five to seven minutes in length. The order of each discussion topic was fixed for all parent-adolescent dyads and presented in the following sequence: general family life, eating behavior, internet and cell-phone use, alcohol, and civic engagement. Similar to previous parent-adolescent communication studies, discussions for each topic were semi-structured using prompt cards to facilitate active conversations (Cui & Conger, 2008; Wakschlag et al., 2011). Throughout the interaction, parents and adolescents alternated reading prompt questions aloud to facilitate dyadic conversation. If families discussed all prompt cards for a given topic, they were encouraged to return to any previously discussed prompt card within that segment. To improve the ecological validity of the discussions, researchers left the room during the task and returned to the room briefly between each segment of the talk to introduce the new topic. For the

majority of participants, ecological validity was also increased by holding the discussion task within families' homes.

**Civic discussion task.** Civic engagement was discussed in the final seven-minute segment of the dyadic discussion task. Six questions prompted discussion of civic beliefs. The order of the six civic prompts was fixed in the following sequence: (a) [teen reads] *Let's talk about how people in our family feel about being citizens of the United States. What does it mean to be a citizen of the United States?* (b) [parent reads] *Does being a citizen mean you have to do anything? What do citizens have to do?* (c) [teen reads] *Let's talk about some of the ways that people in our family participate in activities or groups in our community,* (d) [parent reads] *Do people in our family talk about politics? If we do, what do we talk about and who does most of the talking? Let's talk about this,* (e) [teen reads] *Should teenagers be expected to contribute to their community, city, or country? If so, how?* and (f) [parent reads] *If our family was asked to describe our community or city, what would people in our family say? How do we feel about our community or city?*

### Analytic Strategy

The entire seven-minute civic discussion segment was content coded for statements that related to civic expectations. A single codable statement began when a participant started to speak and ended when the speaker willfully allowed the other person to speak. In some instances, interruptions occurred when either member of the dyad broke the continuity or flow of the other's statement. If the focal continued a statement after an interruption, the entire statement (pre- and post-interruption) was coded as a single statement, and the interruption was coded as a separate statement.

Based on theory, previous research (Sherrod, 2003), and pilot videos ( $n = 10$ ), eight coding categories were created to classify parents' and adolescents' statements referring to civic duty. Civic duty was defined as specific behaviors and attitudes that people should or have to do as citizens of the United States (alternatively, some participants stated that particular behaviors that were important or required, and these were also coded as statements regarding civic duty). One primary and one reliability rater coded parent and adolescent statements for themes that concern community and political involvement (*community service, voting, and other standard political involvement*) and informal civic duties (*being productive, following regulations, helping others, respect for country, and respect for others*). Criterion statements for *political and community involvement* coding categories are displayed in Table 1, and criterion statements for *informal civic duties* are displayed in Table 2. Due to the novelty of the content coding system, raters



**Table 1.** Community and Political Code Categories, Criterion Statements, and Kappa Coefficients.

Code category	Criterion statements	Kappa Parent (teen)
Community service	Community service Volunteer	.77 (.90)
Voting	Vote	.80 (.94)
Other standard political	Keep with current events Know your representatives	.88 (1.0)

were trained using a subset (5%) of videos from the current study. Both coders rated two videos at a time and discussed discrepancies. This pattern continued until a criterion reliability level of Kappa = .70 was obtained. Once this criterion was met, 31% of videos were coded by the reliability coder. Weekly meetings were held to prevent coder drift and make final decisions on discrepancies for double-coded interactions (analyses were conducted on these final consensus codes). After coding was complete, common themes were identified referencing distinctions highlighted in coding transcripts and through meetings among the coders and other experts in the field. Reliability coefficients for code categories are displayed in Tables 1 and 2. Kappa coefficients for the majority of parent and adolescent coding categories ranged from .73 to 1.0, though adolescents' *respect for others* messages had lower internal consistency ( $\kappa = .49$ ).

First, a description of the coded categories is presented along with anecdotal statements taken from the observed dyadic conversations to illustrate the richness and variety of parent and adolescent messages about civic responsibility. Next, a series of mixed-effect logistic regressions were used to test associations between parent and adolescent demographic characteristics, parents' civic and religious behavior, and parents' and teens' observed messages about civic responsibility (Luke, 2004). Twenty-three percent of adolescents participated with two parents, so analyses were conducted to examine whether within-family variance for parents in the same family was greater than the variance between families. Clustering at the family level for these two-parent families accounted for a significant amount of the variance in four of the dependent variables, including parents' *respect others and country* (Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) = .25,  $p < .001$ ) and *community service* (ICC = .43,  $p < .001$ ) messages and adolescents' *respect others and country* (ICC = .73,  $p < .001$ ) and *standard political involvement* (ICC = .86,  $p < .001$ ) messages. To both account for this non-independence, and following similar procedures as researchers using random-effects models with

**Table 2.** Informal Civic Duty Code Categories, Criterion Statements, and Kappa Coefficients.

Code category	Criterion statements	Kappa Parent (teen)
Follow regulations	Obey laws	.86 (.86)
	Follow rules	
	Pay taxes	
	Join the military during draft	
	Attend jury duty when required	
Be productive	Work	.79 (.84)
	Pay bills	
	Be educated	
	Speak English	
Helping others	Helping others	.78 (1.0)
	Protect each other	
Respect for country	Take pride in your country	.74 (.70)
	Respect for the flag	
	Support the troops	
	Stand up for your country	
Respect for others	Don't cause harm to others	.73 (.49)
	Treat each other kindly	
	Respect others	

family data (e.g., Gentzler, Wheat, Palmer, & Burwell, 2013), a multilevel approach was used with parents nested within families.

## Results

### *Qualitative Analysis of Parent and Adolescent Civic Messages*

Frequencies of parent and adolescent observed messages about civic duty are displayed in Table 3. Overall, 79.4% of parents and 70.2% of adolescents mentioned at least one codable civic duty, and a large percentage of adolescents (40.4%) and parents (57.3%) discussed multiple civic duties within the discussion task. Notably, 30.6% of adolescents mentioned at least one community or political statement, and 60.6% of teens mentioned at least one informal civic duty within the observed discussion task. Similarly, 46.4% of parents mentioned either community or political involvement, and 67.3% of parents mentioned at least one informal civic duty. There was some overlap in these messages, with 31.6% of parents and 18.8% of teens mentioning both community or political messages and

**Table 3.** Frequencies and Percentages of Civic Message Codes for Adolescent-Parent Dyads by Category.

Coding category	Adolescent		Parent	
	Mother (n = 144)	Father (n = 52)	Mothers (n = 144)	Fathers (n = 52)
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
<b>Political and community</b>				
Community service	11 (7.6)	11 (21.2)	23 (15.9)	8 (15.1)
Voting	35 (24.3)	9 (17.3)	49 (33.8)	19 (35.8)
Other standard political	4 (2.8)	0 (0.0)	13 (9)	7 (13.2)
<b>Informal civic duties</b>				
Follow regulations	65 (45.1)	25 (48.1)	52 (35.9)	29 (54.7)
Respect for country	6 (4.2)	11 (21.2)	17 (11.7)	7 (13.2)
Respect for others	7 (4.9)	4 (7.9)	17 (11.7)	3 (5.7)
Being productive	22 (15.3)	10 (19.2)	14 (9.7)	13 (24.5)
Helping others	6 (4.2)	2 (3.8)	32 (22.1)	11 (20.8)
<b>Overall messages</b>				
No duties	41 (28.5)	15 (28.8)	31 (21.4)	10 (18.9)
One duty	43 (30.0)	14 (26.9)	34 (23.4)	9 (17.0)
Two duties	32 (22.2)	14 (26.9)	38 (26.2)	12 (22.6)
Three + Duties	28 (19.4)	9 (17.3)	42 (29.0)	22 (42.0)

informal civic duties. Thus, 14.8% of parents and 11.8% of adolescents mentioned only community or political behaviors, and 35.7% of parents and 41.8% of teens mentioned only informal civic duties. The following is a detailed discussion concerning the community and political (*community service, voting, and other standard political involvement*) and informal civic duties (*being productive, following regulations, helping others, respect for country, and respect for others*) themes identified within parents' and adolescents' discussion of civic duty. Select non-sequential verbatim examples of each code have been provided for both parent and adolescent to demonstrate the richness of the civic message.

**Community and political messages.** Three themes emerged within parent-adolescent civic discussion that represented community and political activities, which included references to community service, voting, and other standard political involvement. *Community service* messages specifically referenced formal volunteering in a community organization as a civic duty. These statements highlighted that citizens have an obligation to provide aid for others

channeled through established community organizations. Typical community service messages pertained to specific types of volunteer experiences, but sometimes these messages would reference both volunteering and community service, more generally. Overall, 15.8% of parents and 9.3% of adolescents mentioned community service involvement within civic discussion. Example statements include the following:

Teen: . . . helping with community advocacy doing things to make your community better whether it's helping with a homeless shelter or volunteering with kids, I think that stuff is important.

Parent: I think there are lots of things good citizens do anyways like volunteer some of their time and things like that.

*Voting* was another frequently observed message about civic duty. Voting statements explicitly referred to voting in national and local elections as an important civic duty. These statements were typically conveyed in broad, rigid terms (e.g., citizens have to vote). However, some parents and adolescents acknowledge that voting was not required, yet still important for democratic systems. In general, 34.7% of parents and 26.1% of adolescents mentioned voting as an important civic duty. Example statements include the following:

Teen: [as a citizen] you have to vote.

Parent: You have to vote, it's not a law, but you should vote, if enough people don't vote then . . . well the people who do vote that's who they elect.

*Other standard political involvement* was infrequently mentioned as a civic responsibility by both parents (10.2%) and adolescents (2.5%). Other standard political involvement statements included those that referenced keeping up with current events and knowing representatives. Messages that contained other standard political statements typically focused on political and community awareness (e.g., know what's going on in politics) and often occurred in tandem with statements that concerned the importance of voting. For example,

Teen: You should stay in touch with the news so you can know what's happening with the world.

Parent: I think it is a responsibility for us to keep current to know so that we know who to vote for.

*Informal civic duties.* Parents and adolescents also mentioned informal civic duties within civic discussions, which included general attitudes of respect

and obedience, as well as additional non-community and political behaviors, such as working and informally helping others. For example, *be productive* codes contained statements that referenced “working,” “becoming educated,” or “speaking English” as an important civic duty. These messages entailed responsibilities similar to Protestant work ethic (Furnham, 1990), including a duty to be self-sufficient, independent, and uphold traditional American customs. *Be productive* statements often not only concerned self-enhancing behaviors (e.g., earn money) but also connected individual progress to larger social contributions, as well as highlighted that one should avoid inaction which could absorb communally shared resources without reciprocation. Overall, 13.8% of parents and 9.2% of adolescents mentioned *be productive* as an important civic duty, which included statements such as the following:

Teen: . . . you do everything you can to get an education.

Parent: I think that working and not taking money from the government is an important thing but that’s not always an easy thing to do.

The *helping others* category included all statements that referenced informal helping (not through a community organization) as a civic duty. *Helping others* messages stressed the importance of contributing to other individuals without specifying the need for involvement in established community structures or organizations. These messages typically referred to statements about general and informal ways of helping community members. Parents and adolescents would also stress the importance of helping one another by characterizing “good citizens” as “Good Samaritans.” Whereas 21.9% of parents mentioned *helping others* messages within civic discussion, only 5.0% teens made similar statements. Example statements include the following:

Teen: Being a good neighbor or helping others when their car breaks down . . .

Parent: What about being a Good Samaritan? I think that’s something you have to do. What if you see someone who needs help or that you need to give first aid to or something?

Informal civic duty themes also contained general attitudes of respecting and obedience. Indeed, *following regulations* was the most frequently discussed civic duty by both parents (41.3%) and adolescents (56.5%). Parents’ and teens’ observed *follow regulations* statements stressed obedience and referenced “obeying laws,” “paying taxes,” and “following rules” as important civic duties. Following regulations often entails an obligation to abide by social rules and uphold social order, which manifested in statements pertaining to

mandatory contributions to society (e.g., pay taxes, attend jury duty) as well as general patterns of obedience (e.g., follow rules). Although regulations that entail both contribution and compliance were mentioned, a unifying theme for this category is the acknowledgement of legal consequences for one's action or inaction. Example statements include the following:

Teen: You just have to follow the laws or you go to jail.

Parent: As a citizen of the United States, I have to pay my taxes based on their formula otherwise I get in trouble . . .

*Respect for country* messages stressed the importance of allegiance to and support for the nation, and an obligation to be connected to the larger polity. These messages typically included statements about taking pride in one's nation and honoring its symbols (e.g., honor the flag, support the troops). Within *respect for country* messages, some parents and adolescents would mention that respecting one's nation was important regardless of political beliefs. Overall, 12.2% of parents and 8.1% of adolescents mentioned *respect for country* messages, which included statements such as the following:

Teen: [as a citizen,] you respect your country.

Parent: Regardless of your beliefs, you should still support the troops.

*Respect for others* messages captured statements that referenced courtesy and an obligation to consider other individuals. These messages stressed the importance of being connected and thoughtful of others and typically concerned being conscious of the effect one's actions may have on others. In addition, *respect for others* messages contained elements of tolerance and acceptance of other's differences. Generally, 10.2% of parents and 5.6% of adolescents mentioned *respect other* messages, which included statements such as the following:

Teen: You have to be responsible for your actions towards other citizens in the community.

Parent: To be a citizen of the U.S., you have to respect everybody because there's a bunch of different people here.

### **Quantitative Analyses: Correlates of Parent and Adolescent Civic Duty Messages**

To address low levels of missing data on parents' self-reported civic behaviors (<2%), scale-level mean imputation was used. Due to low frequencies,

coding categories that were conceptually similar were collapsed for further analyses. Specifically, *voting* and *other standard political involvement* statements were combined into one measure of *standard political involvement* (parents,  $n = 88$ ; adolescents,  $n = 42$ ). Voting has been conceptualized as a traditional form of civic participation that upholds current democratic structures and has been included in previous operationalizations of standard political involvement (Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Similarly, statements regarding *respect for country* and *respect for others* were collapsed into one category that represented *respect others and country* (parents,  $n = 44$ ; adolescents,  $n = 21$ ). Respect for others and one's country both require citizens to be aware of the implications of their actions and stress an obligation to be connected to others on an individual or macro level. Adolescents rarely mentioned *community service* ( $n = 13$ ) and *helping others* ( $n = 7$ ), so these codes were not included in the further analyses. Descriptive statistics and biserial correlations for all study variables are displayed in Table 4.

Mixed-effect models (six models predicting parents' observed messages, four models predicting adolescents' observed messages) were conducted to account for nested effects of families who had both parents participate. For parents, outcomes included *follow regulations*, *community service*, *standard political*, *respect others and country*, *helping others*, and *be productive* messages. For adolescents, outcomes included *follow regulations*, *standard political*, *respect others and country*, and *be productive* messages. For each model, demographic characteristics (adolescents' age, adolescents' gender, parents' education, and parents' gender), parents' self-reported civic behavior (community service, standard political, social movement, community gathering), and religious behavior were added as predictors. To ensure associations were not attributed to parents discussing a greater frequency of codable statements more generally, the total number of coded messages parents or adolescents expressed within the civic discussion were summed and added as a covariate. Thus, the final mixed-effect logistic regression equation can be represented by

$$\begin{aligned} \ln(o) = & \beta_0 + \beta_1(T) \text{age} + \beta_2(T) \text{gender} + \beta_3(P) \text{edu} + \\ & \beta_4(P) \text{gender} + \beta_5(P) \text{comservice} + \beta_6(P) \text{stanpol} + \\ & \beta_7(P) \text{socmove} + \beta_8(P) \text{comgath} + \\ & \beta_9(P) \text{relig} + \beta_{10}(P) \text{or}(T) \text{overall} + u + \varepsilon, \end{aligned}$$

where  $\ln(o)$  corresponds to the natural log of the odds of the outcome (i.e., each parent and teen message),  $\beta_0$  represents the intercept,  $\beta_{1-10}$  represent the beta estimates for each independent variable ( $P$  for parent variable,  $T$  for teen

**Table 4.** Biserial Correlations among Demographic Characteristics, Parents' and Adolescents' Observed Civic Messages, and Parents' Civic Behavior.

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1. Teen gender <sup>a</sup>	.09	.06	.03	-.08	-.04	.10	-.09	-.07	.22**	-.12	-.05	-.01	-.06	-.02	-.07	.03	-.01	.10
2. Parent gender <sup>a</sup>	—	.07	-.13	.01	.01	-.03	-.17*	.05	.04	.07	-.12	.01	.01	.17*	-.16*	-.05	.13	.03
3. Parents education	—	.10	.03	.13	.25***	-.06	-.10	-.02	.14	.03	.09	.07	.19**	.21**	.20**	.25***	.14*	.14*
4. Parent age	—	.03	.01	.16*	-.04	.11	.02	-.04	.11	.02	-.02	-.11	-.12	.04	.35***	.06	.07	.12
Parent messages																		
5. Community service	—	.15*	.07	—	—	.07	-.02	.11	-.00	-.05	-.15*	-.12	-.07	.09	.10	-.02	.06	-.06
6. Help others	—	.00	.02	.01	.05	.12	-.14*	.03	.05	.17*	.08	-.08	.13	.03	.03	.03	.03	.03
7. Standard political	—	.00	.03	.09	.02	-.06	-.01	-.20**	.06	.16*	.12	.09	-.07	.06	.16*	.12	.09	-.07
8. Follow regulations	—	.17*	.01	.01	-.03	-.01	.12	-.17*	.05	.06	-.05	.06	-.05	.06	.06	.06	.06	-.05
9. Be productive	—	.05	.01	.01	.03	-.03	-.14*	-.03	-.03	-.14*	-.03	-.07	-.03	-.07	-.03	-.07	-.03	-.14
10. Respect others/country	—	.13	.08	.06	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	-.06
Adolescent messages																		
11. Standard political	—	.02	.01	.07	.08	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06
12. Follow regulations	—	.20**	.15*	-.03	-.01	-.08	-.01	-.08	-.01	-.08	-.01	-.08	-.01	-.08	-.01	-.08	-.01	-.08
13. Be productive	—	.54***	-.06	-.05	-.13	-.07	-.11	-.07	-.11	-.07	-.11	-.07	-.11	-.07	-.11	-.07	-.11	-.07
14. Respect others/country	—	.05	-.06	-.10	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03
Parent behavior																		
15. Community service	—	.17*	.34**	.47***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***
16. Standard political	—	.26***	.47***	.11	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02
17. Social movement	—	.47***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***	.25***
18. community gathering	—	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**
19. Religious	—	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**	.24**

Note. Correlations among teen variables were assessed using the total sample of adolescents (N = 160). All other correlations were assessed using the total sample of parents (N = 196).

<sup>a</sup>1 = female, 2 = male.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



variable),  $u$  corresponds to the between-subject error, and  $\varepsilon$  represents the error introduced by non-independence (i.e., parents from the same family).

**Predicting parent civic duty messages.** Adolescent gender predicted parents' observed messages about following regulations ( $B = -0.90$ ,  $SE = .38$ , odds ratio [OR] = 0.41, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.19, 0.88],  $p = .025$ ) and respecting others and country ( $B = 1.45$ ,  $SE = .48$ , OR = 4.30, 95% CI = [1.59, 11.60],  $p = .005$ ). Parents were 59% more likely to communicate *follow regulations* messages to adolescent boys and 330% more likely to express messages about the importance of respecting others and country to adolescent girls. In addition, parents' education significantly predicted parents' observed messages concerning standard political involvement ( $B = 0.41$ ,  $SE = .15$ , OR = 1.51, 95% CI = [1.10, 2.07],  $p = .012$ ); with increasing education, parents were 51% more likely to communicate standard political messages.

Parents' self-reported civic behavior also predicted their own observed messages about civic duty. With increased community service involvement, parents were 38% less likely to give observed messages related to following regulations ( $B = -0.66$ ,  $SE = .26$ , OR = 0.52, 95% CI = [0.30, 0.89],  $p = .020$ ) and 112% more likely to express messages about *helping others* ( $B = 0.75$ ,  $SE = .27$ , OR = 2.12, 95% CI = [1.22, 3.70],  $p = .009$ ). In addition, parents who were engaged in higher levels of social movement activities were 77% less likely to convey messages pertaining to helping others ( $B = -1.45$ ,  $SE = .46$ , OR = 0.23, 95% CI = [0.09, 0.59],  $p = .004$ ).

**Predicting adolescent civic messages.** After controlling for adolescents' total coded messages, no parent or adolescent demographic variable or self-reported civic behavior significantly predicted the likelihood of adolescents mentioning *follow regulations*, *be productive*, or respect others and country messages within the observed conversations. Parents who self-reported greater social movement behavior had adolescents who were 244% more likely to mention standard political messages within the observed discussion task ( $B = 1.24$ ,  $SE = .53$ , OR = 3.44, 95% CI = [1.16, 10.22],  $p = .027$ ).

## Discussion

Adolescence is characterized by substantial growth in civic and social-cognitive development (Metzger & Smetana, 2010), and recent research has highlighted the importance of civic contexts in facilitating civic attitudes and behaviors (Zaff et al., 2010). However, little is known about the way that parents and teens discuss civic duty or which factors distinguish individuals' discussion of different citizenship responsibilities. The current study builds

on previous research (e.g., McIntosh et al., 2007) by utilizing an observational, semi-structured interaction task to explore parents' and adolescents' messages about civic duty. Furthermore, demographic and behavioral correlates of these observed messages were examined. Though some parents and adolescents discussed community and political activities within observed civic discussion, the majority of parents and teens frequently stressed a wide variety of informal civic attitudes and behaviors. In addition, findings hint at coordination between parents' report of current civic involvement and parents' and adolescents' observed messages during these discussions, which suggests that the specific messages parents convey to their teens concerning civic duty may be closely tied to individual experiences.

Civic engagement encompasses a variety of activities that sustain community and political organizations (Youniss et al., 2002). Consistent with multiple operationalizations of civic duty (e.g., Andolina et al., 2003), some parents (41.4%) and adolescents (30.6%) mentioned the importance of standard political involvement and community service activities. Traditional forms of political involvement, such as voting and keeping up with current events, are colloquially referred as one's "civic duty" (Metzger & Smetana, 2010). In addition, volunteering is a way for adolescents to take action and contribute to the welfare of others, especially because legal barriers (e.g., age restrictions) prevent engagement in certain forms of political action (Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003; Youniss et al., 2002). Moreover, community service involvement has been linked to adolescents' moral reasoning about community service (Metzger & Smetana, 2009) and the development of civic identity (Youniss et al., 1999). Previous research suggests that the parent-adolescent relationship may be an important context for obtaining information concerning community service and political behaviors (e.g., McIntosh et al., 2007), and findings from the current study suggest that these activities are stressed within some parents' and teens' spontaneous messages about civic duty for some families.

However, political and community involvement were not the most frequently discussed elements of civic duty. Consistent with research highlighting heterogeneity in individual conceptualizations of good citizenship (Sherrod, 2003), parents and teens referenced a variety of informal civic expectations, including notions of respect, kindness, patriotism, and efforts to maintain social order. Approximately two-thirds of parents and adolescents referenced at least one of these informal civic duties, a rate that was nearly double that of political and community messages. Furthermore, a large percentage of parents (35.7%) and adolescents (41.8%) *only* mentioned informal civic duties within the observed dyadic tasks, suggesting that these statements are not only common across parents but may also be the predominant focus of parent-adolescent civic discussion.

The prevalence of statements regarding political and community involvement and informal civic duties holds important implications for civic educators and scholars interested in adolescent civic development. Previous research suggests that parent-adolescent civic and political discussion is an important component of teens' civic context that facilitates positive civic attitudes and greater involvement in civic activities (McIntosh et al., 2007). However, less than half of parents and one third of teenagers mentioned community and political messages within civic discussion, which suggests that community and political involvement may not be highly stressed in parent-adolescent civic discussion. Civic educators may design interventions to increase parental discourse centered on political and community engagement, which may be embedded within service-learning projects.

In addition, these findings suggest that teens may draw upon other social experiences to form normative attitudes and beliefs that concern the importance of engaging in community and political activities (Metzger & Smetana, 2010). Social-cognitive theorists have posited that civic development is an extension of moral and social understanding, and one additional source of adolescents' understanding of civic participation may be experiences with political and community organizations (Metzger & Smetana, 2009), peers, and school contexts (van Goethem, van Hoof, van Aken, Orobio de Castro, & Raaijmakers, 2014; Zaff et al., 2010). Potentially, beliefs about the importance and obligatory nature of political and community involvement may be less dependent on parental civic discussion and more contingent on other social experiences. Alternatively, community and political involvement may be stressed by parents, but such messages may not be integral to discussion concerning civic expectations. In the current study, prompt questions used to facilitate civic discussion specifically referenced conceptualizations of civic duty. Parents and adolescents may stress the importance of community and political engagement in conversations about general responsibility or within conversations tailored to each specific behavior. Future research is needed to examine the frequency and content of parent and adolescent political and community messages that occur within other discussion contexts, and examine adolescent political and community discussion within other social contexts, including with peers and at school.

The frequency of statements concerning informal civic duties indicates that parents' and adolescents' messages about civic responsibility commonly extend to domains outside of politics and community to school and work, and even encompassed the importance of specific values (e.g., be respectful to others, loyal to the country, and obedient). These largely unexplored facets of civic duty highlight the diversity among parent-adolescent civic contexts and may largely influence adolescents' developing civic understanding. Future

research should examine the extent to which parental messages about these diverse elements of civic engagement interact with adolescents' beliefs about specific forms of political and community involvement. For example, parental messages concerning loyalty, respect, and obedience, may promote values that uphold social order and conventionality. Whereas adolescents view standard political involvement (e.g., voting) as a conventional activity necessary for the functioning of democratic systems (Metzger & Smetana, 2009), social movement activities (e.g., protesting and boycotting) typically oppose social order and the status quo (Youniss et al., 2002). Examining the intersection between these messages and adolescents' prioritizations of distinct political and community activities may provide valuable insight into the social mechanisms responsible for heterogeneity in adolescent and adult civic participation (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014).

Demographic and individual differences in parents' and adolescents' civic duty messages may also help explicate social processes tied to systematic differences in civic participation. In the current study, parents' education and parents' political behavior distinguished parents and teens who conveyed standard political messages. Specifically, more educated parents were more likely to discuss standard political involvement within observed discussions, and parents more involved in social movement activities had adolescents who were more likely to stress standard political involvement within observed discussion. These findings are consistent with previous research that has shown education discrepancies within young adult political engagement (Zaff et al., 2003) and associations among parents' and adolescents' political behavior (Andolina et al., 2003). Potentially, those with lower education may feel excluded from the political system (Verba et al., 1995) and therefore be less inclined to stress the importance of political involvement within civic discussion. In addition, teens with politically active parents may have greater exposure to political systems and place a stronger emphasis on the importance of voting and keeping up with current events as fundamental civic duties. These education and behavioral differences may contribute to family-level variation in adolescent political involvement (Andolina et al., 2003; Zaff et al., 2003).

Similar demographic variables and civic behaviors distinguished parents and teens who discussed informal civic duties. Parents were more likely to convey messages concerning following the rules and obeying laws to adolescent boys and were more likely to discuss respect for others and the country with adolescent girls. These findings may reflect gender differences in socialization of care versus justice orientation, with adolescent girls more concerned with harm and welfare and adolescent boys more concerned with fairness (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000). In addition, parents who reported higher levels of engagement in community service were more likely to stress the importance

of helping others and less likely to convey *follow regulations* messages. In contrast, parents who reported higher levels of engagement in social movement activities (e.g., protests) were less likely to discuss civic duty in terms of helping others. The variety of individual differences found among informal civic duty statements suggests that although these messages are prevalent within parent-adolescent civic discussions, they may be highly dependent on individual experiences. Thus, adolescents' beliefs about these other dimensions of civic duty may be open to a wider variety of social influences.

Findings from the present study should be taken in light of several limitations. The cross-sectional nature of this study does not allow for examination of causal associations, and observational and self-report survey measures used to assess civic and religious behavior are subject to social desirability biases. Standard political behavior was examined using a single-item scale, and the community gathering behavior scale had notably low reliability. Future research should employ survey measures that assess a wider array of civic behaviors, especially community gathering and standard political activities. The sample was mostly White/Caucasian and born in the United States. Future research should include adolescents with foreign-born parents and make a more general query about citizenship that is not tied to specific country. For example, informal civic duties may be especially important for adolescents from undocumented or mixed citizenship homes, as legal barriers may thwart conventional forms of civic participation. Furthermore, parents from social minority backgrounds may stress alternative values within civic discussion, such as those concerning social change. The sample was also overwhelmingly comprised of biological parents from intact families, which may limit generalizability to teens from single-parent and adopted backgrounds. Although the sample was drawn from a region with a high representation of Christian and Protestant religious organizations, participants did not report specific religious affiliation. Future research should examine these processes across heterogeneous religious affiliations and family backgrounds. The low number of fathers who participated did not allow for the examination of structural differences that varied by parent gender. Future research should explore the extent to which these processes are distinct for mothers and fathers. Compared with parents, a lower percentage of adolescents conveyed messages that qualified as codable statements within the current coding scheme and were less frequently engaged in civic activities, which may have decreased the likelihood of capturing associations among both constructs. Finally, additional individual-level variables not included in the current study, such as intelligence and amount of completed civic course work, may be more closely associated with adolescents' expressed opinions on civic duty and should be examined in future research.

Despite these limitations, findings from the current study have important implications for youth programs which promote adolescent community and political involvement. Some adolescents may be coming from families which provide limited exposure to messages supportive of political and community involvement. Recruiting youth from these families may require an adapted approach that involves either targeting the family as a unit or increasing the integration of pro-civic engagement messages into other ecological contexts, such as school. Similarly, youth programs should be aware that some parents may express views that potentially discourage certain types of civic involvement. Designing interventions that are sensitive to these conflicting messages may increase efficacy and retention among youth-serving civic and community organizations.

Civic engagement is a multifaceted construct deeply rooted in social relationships. While a large amount of research has examined contextual factors that influence engagement (e.g., Zaff et al., 2010), research also needs to more rigorously explore the specific components of adolescents' civic contexts, as well as variations in these contexts which may help to explain different trajectories of civic development. Findings from the current study aid in our understanding of one important facet of adolescents' civic context: parent-adolescent discussion of civic responsibility. These findings point to considerable heterogeneity in parents' and adolescents' messages about civic duty and suggest that the types of messages parents and adolescents express concerning civic expectations may be associated with their own civic experiences. However, the dynamic interplay and multiple components of parent-adolescent interactions are complex. Scholars and educators need to consider the multiple dimensions of parents' and adolescents' messages about civic duty and use nuanced methodologies to capture the complex intricacies of the parent-adolescent interactions.

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