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Youth civic development from the ecological
perspective

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Abstract

This habilitation thesis aims to gain novel insights into the area of civic development in adolescence. It covers four main topics nested in the general framework of the ecological approach to human development: (1) how adolescents' civic activity affects their civic beliefs and attitudes, (2) how adolescents' interactions with family and peers reinforce each other to affect civic development, (3) how adolescents' personality traits affect their civic development, and (4) how effects of the broader social context shape civic development in proximal contexts. These topics are translated into more specific research problems focusing on concrete developmental outcomes, social environments, and adolescents' characteristics. A core of the thesis is represented by seven studies containing original empirical research on adolescents' civic development. The studies employ survey-based longitudinal, cross-national, or cross-cohort data from diverse adolescent samples and perform quantitative statistical analyses to test research hypotheses.

Overall, the studies extend the current knowledge by providing concrete illustrations that adolescents are active agents who develop their beliefs and attitudes through their civic engagement and interactions within multiple contexts, such as families, peer groups, schools, or civic associations. The presented research also shows that the interactions within family and peer groups have their irreplaceable roles and form one interconnected system contributing to adolescents' civic development. Next, the studies provide concrete examples of personality traits that young people bring with them into various developmental contexts and that shape both the form and outcomes of civic development. Finally, the studies show that the proximal processes of adolescents' civic development (e.g., the development of civic beliefs through civic engagement) cannot be taken for granted as universal, but they are co-determined by the broader sociocultural context in which civic development takes place. In the concluding section, the thesis draws theoretical and practical implications of the presented findings and suggests directions for future research.

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Introduction

Civic development in youth

An active young generation, which is attentive to social issues and has a sense of social responsibility, is often perceived as an asset valuable for the whole society. Civic engagement enables young people to take part in decisions that affect their everyday lives and might potentially have far-reaching consequences their futures. Even though we put aside a normative perception of civic engagement as something inherently good, youth civic engagement has its pragmatic benefits. Putnam's classic studies have shown that citizens' active involvement in the grassroots-level civic life has a positive impact on the general wellbeing of the whole society (1993; 2000). In addition, there is an initial evidence that adolescents' community-level civic engagement contributes to the improvement of their mental health (Wray-Lake, Shubert, Lin, & Strarr, 2017) and the lower occurrence of problem behaviors (Pancer, 2015). This thesis presents a contribution to current research on youth civic development and aims at investigating the ways in which an active young generation can emerge.

Civic development can be broadly understood as a set of processes through which people become engaged in actions aiming to contribute to community and society, both at local and global levels (Flanagan, Lin, Luisi-Mills, Sambo, & Hu, 2015; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2008). Contemporary approaches to this area typically underscore that the processes of civic development are inevitably multidimensional. This means that the development of communal and societal engagement is closely related to the development of relevant beliefs, attitudes, values, skills, or habits. Thus, the study of civic development must pay attention not only to behavioral, but also cognitive and affective changes of individuals (Barrett & Zani, 2015; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009; Torney-Purta, Amadeo, & Andolina, 2010; Wray-Lake, Metzger, & Syvertsen, 2017). In addition, the behaviors constituting civic development share a common orientation, which is to change or improve something in the public sphere, but they can take various practical forms. These forms include, for instance, informal community-level hands-on work and helping, work in civic groups and associations, donating money, protesting, voting, or participation in formal political institutions. Only by grasping a broad set of behaviors, including various forms of passivity, a complex picture of possible trajectories of civic development can be obtained (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Youniss et al., 2002; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

Although civic development is a lifelong process, occurring in all stages of life (Jones & Gasiorowski, 2009), a vast majority of research in this area focuses on adolescents and young adults. This tendency builds on the finding that adolescent years are characterized by a considerable openness to civic socialization influences, while the openness (or the susceptibility to change) decreases later on in life. Consequently, a large number of civic beliefs, attitudes or habits, formed in adolescence, tend to remain relatively stable in the following life periods (Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2012; Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008; Krosnick & Alwin, 1989; Prior, 2010; Sears & Levy, 2003; Vollebergh, Iedema, & Raaijmakers, 2001; Wölfer, Schmid, Hewstone, & van Zalk, 2016). The uniqueness of adolescence for civic development can be explained by the concurrence of several factors. Not until adolescence, young people possess cognitive abilities that enable them to understand abstract social and political concepts (Adelson & Beall, 1970; Adelson, Green, & O'Neil, 1969; Adelson & O'Neil, 1966; Berti, 2005) and perspectives of people from different social groups (Selman, 2003). Adolescence is also a period when young people form their identity, of which civic identity is an important component (Hart, Richardson, & Winkelfeld, 2011; Youniss et al., 2002). Furthermore, young people are typically exposed to a number of external incentives for civic learning in adolescence, for instance in schools or extracurricular organizations (Niemi & Hepbur, 1995). Based on these reasons, my research is consistent with the existing tradition and is primarily focused on adolescence.

What develops in civic development?

Apart from communal and societal engagement, which constitutes a key element of civic development, scholars pay attention to a variety of other cognitive and affective constructs that are developing during adolescence and are relevant to adolescents' civic activity. I will now briefly summarize those that are investigated in my own research.

Interest in social and political issues. Interest refers to the degree to which social and political issues arouse adolescents' curiosity or, in other words, to the degree to which adolescents pay attention to these issues (Martín & van Deth, 2007). Interest is often considered as a powerful predictor of civic engagement in both adults and adolescents (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Zukin et al., 2006), although it is sometimes acknowledged that interest might also be an outcome of civic engagement (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995). Mean levels of interest in social and political issues continually increase over adolescence, while the growth becomes gradually slower in young adulthood when the overall level of interest stabilizes (Neundorf, Smets, & García-Albacete, 2013; Russo & Stattin, 2017).

Stabilization of interest at the inter-individual level can be observed even earlier as the differences between young people in their interest tend to be relatively stable already from middle adolescence (Russo & Stattin, 2017).

Civic identity. Civic identity is a sense of connection and responsibility to one's fellow citizens (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). It helps adolescents to acknowledge the fate, interests and goals shared with others, which, in turn, facilitates their civic engagement (Atkins & Hart, 2003). Similar to other identity domains, civic identity is assumed to develop through the process of active exploration during which young people are exposed to different civic practices and ideologies (Youniss et al., 1997). Both formal and informal civic associations are typically considered as important venues for the development of civic identity (Kirshner, 2009; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Hardy, Pratt, Pancer, Olsen, & Lawford, 2011; Yates & Youniss, 1998).

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a belief in the personal capacity to achieve desired results in a certain domain, constructed by a person by selecting, interpreting, and integrating information about his or her capabilities (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy beliefs in the civic or political domain are typically understood as important psychological factors boosting one's civic engagement (Beaumont, 2010; Caprara, Vecchione, Capanna, & Mebane, 2009; Manganelli, Lucidi, & Alivernini, 2015; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009; Verba et al., 1995; Zukin et al., 2006). The other way round, civic and political self-efficacy is theoretically expected to develop through skill-building mastery experiences, observing successful models of civic engagement, social encouragement, and positive political outlooks (Beaumont, 2010).

Trust in public institutions. Institutional trust can be broadly defined as a belief that institutions, such as government or courts, observe the rules and serve the public (cf. Citrin & Muste, 1999). Although there is no straightforward link from adolescents' higher or lower institutional trust to their civic engagement, lacking trust might erode people's willingness to comply with public policies (Hetherington, 2007), and increase their preferences for non-institutionalized (Kaase, 1999) or illegal civic activities (Dahl & Stattin, 2016; Kuhn, 2004). Institutional trust reflects, to a considerable extent, adolescents' perceptions of public institutions that are close to their everyday lives (e.g., schools) and it seems to be relatively stabilized already in middle adolescence, that is before most adolescents gain direct experiences with the performance of the political system (Abdelzadeh, Zetterberg, & Ekman, 2015; Claes, Hooghe, & Marien, 2012).

Support for equality and tolerance. Finally, some scholars argue that next to factors encouraging civic engagement as such, attention must be paid also to development of adolescents' societal views that give direction to their civic activity. In particular, support for social equality (including a low orientation on social dominance or a critical awareness of social injustice) and tolerance toward different social groups are typically studied as both determinants and products of prosocial forms of civic engagement (Flanagan, 2003; Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Sherrod, 2006; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2008; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003; Yates & Youniss, 1998).

The ecological approach

The present thesis collects studies that are guided, explicitly or implicitly, by the ecological approach to civic development. Traditional approaches often conceptualize adolescents as passive objects who *are being formed* by external influences, either towards conformity with the existing society (i.e. the socialization approach), or towards developing a specific worldview characteristic of their generation (i.e. the generational approach; Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss, & Levine, 2010). In contrast, the ecological approach is built on the holistic idea of dialectical interactions between individual and contextual factors that boost or weaken adolescents' civic engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner, 1991; Zaff et al., 2010). In other words, instead of asking about the ways in which adolescents manage to fit into the political world of adults or develop a unique generational experience that would be persistent over their lives, the ecological approach asks what type of experiences of young individuals with their immediate environments contribute to the growth or the decline of their engagement.

One of the most influential formulations of the ecological model of human development comes from Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). According to the latest version of the model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the primary mechanisms producing individual development are *proximal processes*, that is, interactions between developing *persons* and environmental *contexts* enduring over certain periods of *time*. Thus, the first proposition of the model states: “[...] *development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active [...] organism and the persons, objects, and symbol in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time*” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 797). The specific nature of proximal processes is elaborated by the second proposition maintaining that “*the form, power, content, and*

direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of [1] the characteristics of the developing person, [2] the environment [...], [3] the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration, and [4] the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period”

(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 798). As emphasized by the authors, the characteristics of the person appear twice in the model – they represent one of the four factors shaping the processes through which the person develops, but they are also products of development.

The environment is expected to consist of several nested structures according the ecological model. Activities, social roles and interpersonal relationships that are experienced by the person immediately “face-to-face” are referred to as a *microsystem* (e.g., family or a group of peers). A more complex situation when the effects of several microsystems interact with each other (i.e. a system of two or more microsystems) is called a *mesosystem*. An *exosystem* refers to those contexts that are not experienced immediately by the person, but influence the person indirectly by influencing the microsystems (e.g., parents’ peer groups). Finally, all micro-, meso-, and exosystems that are set to the same culture (defined by country, religion, social class etc.) share certain consistencies that are referred to as the *macrosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In addition, the processes and outcomes of human development might vary as a function of changes in the larger society, which can be referred to as *macrotime* or the *macrochronological system* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Implications of the ecological model for civic development research

The ecological model has several implications that apply to human development in general as well as civic development in particular. First, the model assumes that development can occur only if the person engages in an activity that takes place on a regular basis and becomes increasingly complex (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Hence, civic engagement should not be conceptualized as a final developmental outcome that suddenly emerges after the appropriate cognitive and affective basis is formed in the young person (e.g., sufficient interest, civic identity or self-efficacy). Civic engagement represents also a *means* of civic development – a necessary condition without which civic cognitions, emotions and future behavioral tendencies cannot be formed (cf. Amnå, Ekström, Kerr, & Stattin, 2009; Zaff et al., 2010).

Second, development consists in person’s reciprocal interactions with a growing array of microsystems, starting with families and extending to peer groups, schools, mentors or associations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Thus, when investigating social

environments playing a role in adolescent civic development, it is critical not to focus on one privileged microsystem, but to consider the roles of all microsystems in which the person is nested. Moreover, it is essential to consider all relevant mesosystems, that is, how microsystems relate to each other and how developmental relevance of different microsystems changes over time (Wilkenfeld, Lauckhardt, & Torney-Purta, 2010; Zaff et al., 2010).

Third, the emphasis on the “ecology” of human development might lead to the underestimation of the role played by person’s stable characteristics. That is why the latest formulation of Bronfenbrenner’s model explicitly acknowledges the person as a factor codetermining the nature of developmental processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Consequently, according to the ecological perspective to civic development, adolescents’ individual characteristics (dispositions and abilities) influence how much and how they are civically engaged (Motti-Stefanidi & Cicognani, 2018).

Finally, the ecological model implies that cross-cultural and historical (dis)continuities modify the effects of lower-order systems. This means, in other words, that the outcomes of specific interactions between microsystems and adolescents might considerably differ across different regions, countries, social classes or generations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Thus, in the context of civic development, it is necessary to acknowledge that some types of adolescents’ experiences (e.g. in families, schools or civic associations) that are known to encourage or deter civic engagement in some cultural contexts might not work in other contexts or stop working if the cultural context is changed. In the similar manner, favorable and unfavorable personal characteristics might have more or less serious consequences for civic development in different contexts (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014; Emler, 2015; Zaff et al., 2010).

Key contributions of the presented thesis

Following the four implications of the ecological model, I will now describe four key contributions of my research. Although the ecological model cannot be tested all at once due to high levels of abstraction and complexity, it enables to derive a set of particular hypotheses for empirical testing (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The below-mentioned topics represent such hypotheses on selected research problems in the area of civic development, derived from the ecological model.

Civic engagement as a predictor of developmental changes

Based on the idea of civic engagement as a *means* of civic development, my research investigates the time order between adolescents' civic engagement and related psychological variables (interest and efficacy). Despite the prevailing tendency to understand interest and efficacy as antecedents of civic engagement, there is some initial evidence suggesting that these variables change considerably as a *consequence* of adolescents' civic activity (Metzger, Ferris, & Oosterhoff, 2018; Quintelier & Van Deth, 2014). My research aims to strengthen this evidence and to broaden the existing knowledge by showing that adolescents' engagement in specific types of civic activities (e.g., institutionalized versus protest) is meaningfully related to concrete cognitive changes in developing persons (Study III).

Specifying microsystems and mesosystems relevant to civic development

Previous research on civic development has identified family and peer groups as microsystems relevant to civic development. However, there is only a limited evidence on how person's interactions with these microsystems relate to each other to produce civic engagement (McDevitt, 2006; McLeod, 2000; McLeod & Shah, 2009; Saphir & Chaffee, 2002). Specifically, I test the idea of a mesosystem in which interactions with peers represent a primary force contributing to civic engagement in late adolescence (voting), but interactions with parents serve as a "playground", based on which adolescents are more prone to start interactions with peers (Study I). Moreover, I aim to take a closer look at the processes occurring within the family microsystem. Because previous research has often put an equal sign between family and parents, there is almost no knowledge on the role of siblings in civic development (Urbatsch, 2011). Hence, I investigate whether and under which conditions siblings can influence adolescents' sociopolitical attitudes (support for equality and tolerance) over and above the effects of their parents (Study V).

Personal characteristics as powerful explanatory factors

Further, my research provides two examinations of the idea that personal characteristics of adolescents play important roles in their civic development. Focusing on factors boosting adolescents' preferences for normative versus non-normative civic engagement (i.e. engagement that follows versus violates social norms), I investigate whether such preferences are meaningful extensions of adolescents' political beliefs and other stable characteristics such as optimism, or rather outcomes of problematic relationships with their close social environments (Study IV). In addition, I study to what extent differences in

political self-efficacy between adolescents can be attributed to their stable personality characteristics versus proximal processes occurring within their schools (Study VII).

The role of macrosystems in civic development

To scrutinize macrosystem (and macrotime) influences on civic development, my research pays attention to a well-known positive effect of adolescents' involvement in civic associations and volunteering on their civic identity (Pancer, 2015). I test whether this effect is constant across two generations of Czech adolescents or whether the nature and impacts of associational membership and volunteering have changed over time (Study II). In a similar manner, I study whether well-known socioeconomic inequalities in institutional trust and engagement (Verba et al., 1995) are constant for adolescents from different national contexts, or whether there are country-level characteristics that mitigate or aggravate the inequalities (Study VI).

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Overview of the studies

List of the studies

There are seven original studies included in this thesis. I have created six of them as the first author and one of them as the second author. All studies have been published in foreign academic journals with impact factor. The order of the studies is chronological, based on the year of publication. Overall, the studies provide novel insights into adolescent civic development from the ecological perspective. Analyses are based on either longitudinal data, or data from large cross-cohort and cross-national surveys.

Study I: Šerek, J., & Umemura, T. (2015). Changes in late adolescents' voting intentions during the election campaign: Disentangling the effects of political communication with parents, peers, and media. *European Journal of Communication, 30*, 285-300.

Study II: Šerek, J. (2017). What's the matter with civil society? The declining effect of civic involvement on civic identity among Czech adolescents, *Youth & Society, 49*, 879-901.

Study III: Šerek, J., Macháčková, H., & Macek, P. (2017). The chicken or egg question of adolescents' political involvement: Longitudinal analysis of the relation between adolescents' political participation, political efficacy, and interest in politics. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie, 225*, 347-356.

Study IV: Šerek, J., Macháčková, H., & Macek, P. (2018). Who crosses the norms? Predictors of the readiness for non-normative political participation among adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence, 62*, 18-26.

Study V: Eckstein, K., Šerek, J., & Noack, P. (2018). And what about siblings? A longitudinal analysis of sibling effects on youth's intergroup attitudes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 47*, 383-397.

Study VI: Šerek, J., & Jugert, P. (2018). Young European citizens: An individual by context perspective on adolescent European citizenship. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology, 15*, 302-323.

Study VII: Šerek, J., & Macháčková, H. (in press). Role of school climate and personality in the development of Czech adolescents' political self-efficacy. *Applied Developmental Science*, Advanced online publication (<http://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1364163>).

Author's contributions

In Studies I, II, III, IV, VI and VII, I drafted initial outlines of the studies, coordinated writing first drafts of the manuscripts, and led all revisions based on reviewers' and editors' comments. I also conducted 100% of statistical analyses in these six studies. My contributions to final texts, expressed quantitatively, are: Study I – 90%, Study II – 100%, Study III – 80%, Study IV – 80%, Study VI – 80%, Study VII – 90%.

In Study V, I helped the first author to conceive the study and had contributions of about 30% to the analysis and the final text. This study illustrates my collaboration with a foreign research team.

Studies III, IV and VII employ data from the same research project. I coordinated development of research design and measures, and co-supervised data collection in this project. I also processed and cleaned collected data. Next, I developed all measures used in Study I. Studies II, V and VI are secondary analyses of previously collected data.

Summary of research questions

Study I investigated how first-time voters' intentions to vote and actual voting behaviors changed as a consequence of interactions with different environments – parents, peers, and media. The study examined whether changes in voting intention and voting were predicted by political discussions with parents or with peers, whether political discussions with parents preceded discussions with peers, or vice versa, and whether exposure to political news predicted political discussions. **Study II** examined the effect of youth involvement in civil society on their civic identity and whether this effect had changed in different social contexts (between 1990s and the present). An additional aim was to examine whether the impact of adolescents' economic background on their involvement in civil society had changed between the social contexts. **Study III** tested the directionality of the effects between three psychological variables (political interest, internal political efficacy, and external political efficacy), and three types of participation (protest, representational, and volunteering) in adolescence. **Study IV** asked whether adolescents' readiness to violate social norms for political reasons could be explained by their interpersonal problems in family and school, or more stable characteristics such as optimism, political efficacy and institutional trust. **Study V** examined whether adolescents' sociopolitical attitudes (intolerance towards immigrants and social dominance orientation) were affected by their siblings' attitudes. The study further investigated how these effects were moderated by age and gender constellations of sibling

dyads. **Study VI** aimed to identify individual, school, and country level predictors of adolescents' institutional trust and civic participation (both at the national and the European level). A special focus was on the question whether country-level characteristics moderated the effects of individual and school variables. **Study VII** examined the link from adolescents' self-reported learning of civic skills at school to their higher political efficacy at the community level. The study primarily focused on the question whether higher levels of civic learning and political efficacy were predicted by school climate or adolescents' personality.

Summary of methods

Data

Study I used data from a larger panel study of Czech high school students aged 18 to 19 ($N = 223$). Longitudinal data from three time points were selected for the analysis (T1 = February 2010; T2 = May 2010; T3 = June 2010). Participants completed online questionnaires at their homes at every time point. **Study II** employed data from two cross-sectional samples of Czech adolescents collected in 1995 ($N = 1,127$) and 2010 ($N = 976$). Both samples comprised eight- and tenth-graders ($M_{age1995} = 16.04$; $M_{age2010} = 15.43$) who completed paper questionnaires at school (1995) or at home (2010). **Study III** and **Study IV** used the same two-wave longitudinal sample of Czech adolescents ($N = 768$). Participants were mostly tenth-graders ($M_{age} = 15.97$) surveyed in May/June 2014 (T1) and again in November/December 2015 (T2). Data was collected at school where participants completed paper or online questionnaires (based on school's preferences). **Study V** employed two-wave longitudinal data from 362 sibling dyads, and their mothers and fathers. Younger siblings were aged 12 to 17 ($M_{age} = 13.61$) and older sibling were aged 13 to 26 ($M_{age} = 17.77$) at T1. Mean age difference between siblings was 4.1 years. Data was collected in Germany in Summer/Autumn 2003 (T1) and approximately one year later (T2) at participants' homes. **Study VI** utilized cross-sectional survey data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS). A subset of data from 22 European Union member states was selected for the analyses ($N = 72,466$). Data was collected from eighth-graders who had on average 14 years and completed paper questionnaires at schools. **Study VII** employed data from the same research as Studies III and IV, but it focused only on data collected at T1, complemented by additional cross-sectional data from ninth-graders. Hence, the study analyzed a cross-sectional sample of ninth- and tenth-graders ($N=1,954$; $M_{age} = 15.60$) collected in May/June 2014 at school using paper or online questionnaires.

Measures and analyses

All studies used self-report questionnaires in which participants indicated their answers on presented questions. A vast majority of constructs was measured using scales with multiple items. Predictive statistical models were used to analyze the data. **Studies II, III, IV and V** employed structural equation modelling in which the variables of interest were treated as latent constructs, indicated by manifest questionnaire items. **Study I** employed path modelling of manifest items. **Study VI** employed multilevel regression of standardized scales that were estimated using item response modelling. **Study VII** utilized multilevel path modelling of manifest summary scores.

General conclusions

My research presented in this thesis employs the principles of the ecological model of human development to gain novel insights into the processes of civic development in adolescence. The aim is not provide a comprehensive test the model as a whole, but to derive more specific research hypothesis about selected developmental outcomes, social environments, and adolescents' personal characteristics. As described in the introduction, adolescence is a sensitive life period for civic development because it is characterized by an increased openness to civic learning, which is followed by a gradual stabilization of civic beliefs, attitudes or habits later in life. That is why I consider as important that research on civic development pays attention to this particular stage of life. Overall, my studies show young people as active agents who develop their individual approaches to citizenship through their active engagement in multiple contexts such as families, peer groups, schools, or civic associations. At the same time, however, there are considerable differences between young people, given by their personality dispositions, stable political beliefs, or socioeconomic resources available to them. These differences, which young people bring with them into various developmental contexts, shape both the form and the outcomes of civic development. Moreover, the form and the outcomes of adolescents' civic development in proximal contexts is determined by broader societal influences, causing that factors boosting or hindering civic engagement in one societal context might working differently in the other (cf. Motti-Stefanidi & Cicognani, 2018). In the following sections, I will summarize and discuss a number of more specific conclusions stemming from my studies. After that, I will briefly discuss practical implications and possible directions for future research.

Interpretation of the results

Civic engagement as an antecedent of civic beliefs and attitudes

Results of Study III suggest that civic engagement precedes changes in adolescents' beliefs and attitudes, but it is less clear whether beliefs and attitudes precede changes in civic engagement. Specifically, engagement in protest activities (e.g. demonstrations) predicted positive changes in one's political interest and perceived capability to participate in politics (political self-efficacy). At the same time, evidence for the opposite effects, that is greater interest or efficacy predicting greater engagement, was not found. These findings cast doubts on the common idea that if we manage to instill favorable beliefs and attitudes in adolescents (e.g., high interest in politics), their greater civic engagement will appear as a natural

consequence. Such an idea is, for instance, built in civic education programs that aim at increasing youth civic engagement, but cannot or do not want to provide adolescents with opportunities for actual participation. Unfortunately for these programs, it seems that the link from beliefs and attitudes to civic behavior is less straightforward than one might expect.

Certainly, it would be premature to conclude that there is *no* effect of interest and efficacy on adolescents' civic engagement because the evidence on their causal relations is still limited (Quintelier & van Deth, 2014). Moreover, there is one very recent study suggesting the presence of effects in both directions (Metzger, Ferris, & Oosterhoff, 2018). As a more appropriate and modest conclusion, I propose that we should acknowledge that existing correlational evidence on the relations between civic beliefs or attitudes and behavior has two equally plausible interpretations. Next to the traditional and the most common approach, according to which civic beliefs and attitudes explain civic behavior, the correlational findings might equally well indicate that civic behavior explains the formation of beliefs and attitudes. Hence, it is possible that a large number of existing studies needs to be reinterpreted in a way acknowledging a more central role of adolescents' civic engagement. Additional longitudinal and experimental evidence is needed to specify to what extent and under which conditions civic beliefs and attitudes affect adolescents' civic behaviors, and vice versa.

The idea that adolescents form their civic beliefs and attitudes through their civic engagement has a solid theoretical basis. As anticipated in the introduction, the idea is directly implied by the first proposition of the ecological model, according to which development occurs as a product of interactions between active persons and their environments (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A crucial role of personal activity is also acknowledged by Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, which assumes that people form their efficacy beliefs based on mastery experiences, that is, when they confront and successfully deal with tasks in a specific domain (Beaumont, 2010; Bandura 1997). Next, the idea is in line with theories suggesting that people seek consistency between their attitudes and behaviors – the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962) and the self-perception theory (Bem, 1972). A general expectation stemming from these approaches is that adolescents infer their civic self-concept and attitudes, among other things, from their knowledge that they have been previously engaged in some civic activity. Hence, young people might reason that their own civic engagement indicates a high interest in social and political issues or a strong belief in own personal capacity for engagement (self-efficacy), and accordingly

accommodate their beliefs and attitudes. The most intriguing component of this theoretical view is that we can expect civic engagement to change one's beliefs and attitudes regardless the initial motivations driving the engagement. Thus, civic engagement might influence adolescents' civic development even though it is driven, for instance, by a mere habit, conformity, or self-interest.

A role of the content of civic engagement

When studying the outcomes of adolescents' civic engagement, attention must be paid to its form, because it is not the case that *any* civic engagement would contribute to adolescents' civic development in a pro-participatory way. Results from Study III indicated, for instance, that while adolescents' engagement in protest activities predicted increases in their political interest, it also predicted a *decreased* perception of the political system as open to citizens. In order to change their perceptions of system openness in a positive way, adolescents had to engage in volunteering, not protest, according to the results. A similar conclusion that diverse forms of civic engagement have different consequences for changes in adolescents' civic beliefs and attitudes comes from the study comparing outcomes of adolescents' engagement in online versus offline civic activities (Macháčková & Šerek, 2017; not included in this thesis).

Based on these results, it might be tempting to start listing civic activities that are "favorable" or "recommendable" for adolescents' civic development (i.e. those for which we have evidence that they contribute to positive changes in adolescents' pro-participatory characteristics such as interest or civic identity). I believe, however, that this is not actually possible. The varying consequences of engagement in different civic activities (e.g., protest versus volunteering, online versus offline) is probably not given by the form of activity *per se*, but rather by the content of adolescents' experiences when being engaged in the activity. Thus, I assume, for instance, that there is nothing inherent to political protests that would hamper adolescents' beliefs in the openness of the political system. Instead, it is likely that protest activities, compared to volunteering, are more often characterized by the absence of immediate and visible successes (e.g., due to their confrontational nature), which can be a true reason for adolescents' increased doubts about the system openness (cf. Bandura, 1997). In this context, it seems useful to apply the concept of quality of participation experience, coming from the area of citizenship education. The concept refers to the assumption that civic learning through "action" is successful only if the activities have certain qualities, such as opportunities for students' personal integration and reflection of the participation experience,

or interactions with people with different worldviews (Menezes, 2003). I believe that it would be an extremely useful step to extend this concept also to adolescents' participation experiences in non-educational settings and to develop a comprehensive classification of those dimensions of adolescents' civic experience that are relevant to their civic development.

The content of civic engagement, and thus the quality of adolescents' participation experiences, does vary not only across different activities but also as a function of broader social contexts (i.e. macrosystems and macrotime). Study II showed that while adolescents' volunteering positively predicted their stronger civic identity in the era of early post-communism, the effect was missing 15 years later in the era of established democracy. Based on the literature on the transformation of Czech civil society and some indirect indicators (e.g., a stronger economic determination of adolescents' volunteering and associational membership in the later era), I suggested that the explanation for the missing effect could lie in the professionalization of Czech civil society, and thus a changed context in which adolescents volunteered. Specifically, volunteering in more professionalized contexts can be expected to involve more limited opportunities for friendly interactions between young people, increased inequality between them, and a more homogeneous environment in terms of people's worldviews – in sum, the qualities that are unfavorable to the processes of building adolescents' civic identity (cf. Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Thus, volunteering, just as any other civic activity, cannot be approached as a universal generator of adolescents' civic identity because broader macrosystems, and their changes over time, shape the specific contents of adolescents' participatory experiences.

Microsystem and mesosystems contributing to civic development

The proposition that civic development takes place through person's increasingly complex active interactions with the environment cannot be reduced solely to civic engagement. In microsystems such as family, peer groups or schools, the active interactions typically occur through everyday discussions about social and political issues, during which young people are exposed to others' beliefs and attitudes or new information, and can be forced to formulate and justify their own views (e.g., McIntosh, Hart, & Youniss, 2007). Results presented in this thesis have three important implications for our understanding of these proximal processes.

First, findings from Study I provide evidence that interactions with particular microsystems can be structured in a specific order, giving every microsystem its distinctive role. More precisely, the study has found that first-time voters' (i.e. late adolescents') voting intentions and actual voting were boosted if young people discussed about politics with their peers in a pre-election period, while political discussions with parents did not have such effects. However, more frequent political discussions with parents predicted an increase in the frequency of political discussions with peers; thus, there was an indirect effect of adolescents' political discussions with parents on their voting, mediated by discussions with peers. A likely explanation is that late adolescents' political behavior, at least in a short-term perspective, is affected more by their peers than parents, which is consistent with an assumption that parental influence on youth's attitudes decreases during the transition to adulthood while there is an opposite trend for peer influence (Arnett, 2006; Vollebergh, Iedema, & Raaijmakers, 2001). At the same time, discussions with parents can serve as a "playground" – a safe environment where young people practice political talk before they start discussions in less private settings (Kioussis, McDevitt, & Wu, 2005; McDevitt & Chaffe, 2002). From the ecological point of view, these results indicate that interactions within peer groups and families form a mesosystem, in which the peer and the family microsystem have their irreplaceable roles and jointly contribute to adolescents' civic development. An important implication is that a full account of how adolescents develop their voting intentions cannot be grasped if both microsystems are studied separately as two mutually independent explanatory factors.

Second, results from Studies VI and VII suggest that adolescents are affected by their interactions within microsystems (schools) primarily if the content of these interactions is explicitly linked to the concrete developmental outcome in question. Next to families and peer groups, schools represent another microsystem playing a role in young people's civic development. In this context, classroom openness to discussions on various social and political topic, promoted by teachers, is traditionally considered as an important characteristic of school environment positively contributing to students' civic development (cf. Campbell, 2008). Therefore, it came as a surprise that there were only limited between-classroom differences in studied civic outcomes, namely political self-efficacy, institutional trust and civic engagement, in Studies VI and VII. On top of that, classroom openness to discussion did not predict these differences in civic outcomes. I believe that a possible interpretation of these findings is that school discussions affect primarily the development of those civic

beliefs, attitudes or behaviors that are thematized in the discussions. One illustration of this point comes from Study VI in which students' civic engagement at European level was positively linked to opportunities for learning about Europe in school, while there was no relation between learning about Europe and civic engagement at national level. Hence, it seems that discussions of social and political issues within school – and likely also within other microsystems – contribute primarily to those aspects of civic development that can be explicitly related to the content of those discussions by adolescents. On the other hand, the assumption that the involvement of adolescents in *any* kind of discussion on social and political issues will affect, all at once, their civic development in multiple cognitive, affective and behavioral domains is rather doubtful.

Third, results from Study V show that the outcomes of interactions within adolescents' microsystems are substantially co-determined by age and gender characteristics of adolescents and their interaction partners. Specifically, this study focusing on mutual influences within sibling dyads found that only younger sisters but not younger brothers were influenced by intolerant attitudes of their older siblings. Also younger siblings were able to have certain influence of on their older siblings' attitudes, but only if younger siblings were old enough, and thus, the relationship between the siblings was more likely to be more equal. Although this study did not explicitly investigate a means of sibling influence, based on the ecological model it can be assumed that active interactions between siblings, that is discussions between them, play a prominent role. The finding that the interactions within the family microsystem are structured by adolescents' age and gender can be easily integrated into the ecological model. The first proposition of the model maintains that proximal processes of adolescents' civic development become progressively complex with age, involving a growing array of interactions. This is consistent with the finding that the scope of mutual influences between siblings increases (i.e. younger siblings start having influence) as the dyad becomes older. In addition, consistent with the second proposition expecting effects of the macrosystem on microsystems, the familial interactions appear to be influenced by gender-based normative expectations embodied in the broader social context, regarding, for instance, girls' general submissiveness or boys' greater competence in politics.

The effects of stable individual differences

The role of individual characteristics in civic development is not exhausted by structuring adolescents' interactions within their microsystems. Results of my research suggest that some civic outcomes are directly linked to adolescents' relatively stable and

general personality characteristics. Adolescents' readiness to participate in normative civic activities was linked to a greater optimism (controlling for political self-efficacy) in Study IV, while political self-efficacy was associated with a greater need for cognition and a smaller shyness in Study VII. These findings on personality determinants of civic engagement and political self-efficacy are consistent with previous research on adults, employing personality traits taken from the five-factor model (Mondak, 2010). My research extends this knowledge by analyzing individual dimensions coming from different conceptualizations of personality and by showing that the links between personality and civic outcomes are identifiable as early as in middle adolescence. Although adolescents' personality is only one of a number of factors contributing to civic development (cf. Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), its role should not be neglected as, for instance, shyness was the most powerful predictor of political self-efficacy across different contexts in Study VII.

What remains an open question is how exactly personality translates into civic outcomes. The ecological model implies that personality has effects on civic development because it shapes proximal processes in one's social environment. Thus, for instance, we can expect shyness to hinder the development of adolescents' political self-efficacy because it prevents adolescents from discussing politics or having participatory experiences that would boost their political self-efficacy. However, there is also an alternative explanation assuming that personality traits reported by adolescents are reflected in their self-concepts. Consequently, we can expect that adolescents seek consistency of their self-concepts across different domains, and thus, for instance, shy adolescents might tend to adjust self-related beliefs in the civic domain, such as political self-efficacy, to their more general self-concept involving their own shyness (cf. Bandura, 1997). Study VII provided an initial attempt to test these mechanisms, showing that the effects of shyness and need for cognition on political efficacy *cannot* be explained by the fact that adolescents with different personalities learn in school different amount of civic skills. At the same time, Study IV comprised an indirect evidence that adolescents gradually tend towards consistency among their civic beliefs (specifically, adolescents' readiness for non-normative civic engagement, i.e. activities violating social norms including law, increased over time if adolescents had a low trust in institutions). Nevertheless, proper tests of the above-mentioned hypotheses are still missing.

Macrosystem as a moderator of socioeconomic effects

Finally, two of my studies show a moderation effect of the broader social context on socioeconomically determined inequalities in adolescents' civic development. I have already

suggested that broad social contexts can affect the quality of adolescents' participation experience. In addition to that, results from Studies II and VI show that the impact of adolescents' socioeconomic background on civic development differs across social contexts. In Study II, family economic hardship had an effect on adolescents' volunteering and associational involvement in one generation of Czech adolescents, but not in the other. In Study VI, adolescents' socioeconomic background was related to European-level civic engagement more strongly in some European countries than others, the relation being stronger in less wealthy and more economically unequal countries. These results illustrate that even the well-known tendency of disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds to limit people's civic engagement (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) can be relative to broader social settings – the macrosystem. The specific mechanisms through which the macrosystem moderates the effects of socioeconomic background on youth civic development are likely to be manifold. For instance, I have proposed above that one moderating factor (attenuating or amplifying the consequences of socioeconomic inequality) might be general characteristics of the civil society, in which a young person is involved. Another factor can be how and how much the society addresses socioeconomic inequalities in general, for instance, how much are high education tracks accessible to all young people. Thus, it must be assumed that the exact nature and outcomes of proximal processes involving socioeconomic factors cannot be taken for granted, even within the same society over time or across culturally close countries. Although such ideas are hardly new in the scholarship on civic development, a number of concrete empirical illustrations, alike those presented in Studies II and VI, is rather limited because a cross-national or a cross-cohort research is a necessary requirement.

Practical implications

Before I move to implications for future research, first I would like to highlight several practical recommendations that can be drawn from the presented studies. There is a strong indication that one of the most powerful forms of civic learning is *learning by doing*. Hence, it is advisable that civic education, in both formal and informal settings, is structured in a way providing young people with an abundance of easily accessible opportunities for real-life civic engagement. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that some participation experiences contribute to young people's civic development more than others do. Previous research has underscored that participation experiences should involve interactions with people having diverse backgrounds and worldviews, opportunities for personal reflection of the participation experience, or equal interpersonal relationship. The

presented research indirectly supports these notions and points out the importance of other factors such as opportunities for discussions with peers or opportunities for learning new information about specific social and political issues. Finally, civic educators should be aware that students' personality dispositions play a role in civic development and might advantage or disadvantage young persons from the very beginning of any educational process.

Future directions

The ecological model turned out to be a useful general framework for generating research hypotheses and integrating research findings on adolescents' civic development. However, while the model consists of general propositions, hypotheses tested in the presented studies are inevitably limited to specific developmental outcomes, environments, or adolescents' personal characteristics. Hence, it would be beneficial to direct future research towards systematic investigation whether the processes described by the presented studies are general to civic development as such, or rather specific to given outcome, environment, or personal characteristic. For example, future research should investigate whether the mesosystem, in which political discussions with parents serve as a "playground" stimulating discussions with peers that, in turn, increase adolescents' voting intentions, also applies to other forms of civic engagement or the development of sociopolitical attitudes. As an another example, it would be beneficial to test whether the age- and gender-related patterns of influence identified between siblings do apply to comparable extra-familial contexts such as peer groups. Research done in this direction would help not only to generate new knowledge on adolescents' civic development, but also to further assess the usefulness of the ecological model in the civic domain.

In addition, there is still a number of expectations that stem from the ecological model but still wait for testing in the area of civic development. One of these expectations is that active interactions between the person and the environment must proceed *on a regular basis over extended periods of time* in order to contribute to one's development. Hence, the *regularity* and *permanency* of adolescents' civic engagement or discussing social and political issues might be an important factor intervening in the developmental processes. Unfortunately, measures of civic engagement and discussing are usually very rough, inquiring too long periods of time, and thus making it difficult to determine whether the activities were done regularly or not. Next, there is an expectation that youth development is influenced by exosystems, that is, environments that do not contain the developing person but influence person's microsystems. Classic examples of exosystems are groups of parents'

friends or their workplace. To my knowledge, there are no direct tests of family-related exosystem effects on adolescents' civic development so far (cf. Wilkenfeld, Lauckhardt, & Torney-Purta, 2010), even though it is likely that parents' everyday experiences have an impact on subsequent interactions between parents and adolescents. In other words, if we believe that parents have a not negligible influence on their children's civic development, it is only natural to ask by whom parents themselves are influenced.

Methodologically speaking, it is advisable to employ longitudinal designs with a high number of measurement time points in the future research on civic development. Although the majority of studies included in this thesis provide longitudinal evidence that is substantially stronger than cross-sectional, the analyses typically utilize cross-lagged designs with two measurement time points. Such designs are common in current developmental research, but it has been argued recently that they might provide biased results if very stable, trait-like constructs are analyzed (Hamaker, Kuipers, & Grasman, 2015). Although my research does not involve constructs with these characteristics as outcome variables, still, to be on the safe side, an alternative analytical approach proposed by Hamaker et al. (2015) would mean more stringent tests of the studied hypotheses. Because this approach requires a minimum of three measurement time points, future studies would surely benefit from more extensive research designs.

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