

An ethnographic exploration of a student subculture of sustained civic engagement

Dennis McCunney, Assistant Director, Center for Community Service and Justice, Loyola University Maryland [dmccunney@loyola.edu]



Keywords: Ethnography, cultural context, engagement, student activism, qualitative interviews

Track: Theoretical or conceptual frameworks to advance research

Format: Research paper

Summary:

The purpose of this study is to describe how students understand their own participation in civic engagement activities, particularly as members of a supportive community. Research questions include: How do students understand their own interest in civic engagement, and what are motivating factors that propel them to be civically active? Weber's types of authority and Vygotsky's concept of cultural tools frame the study.

While some scholars have used qualitative methods to study civic engagement, lacking in these studies is a consideration of the role that other like-minded students play in these student activists' efforts and, ultimately, self-understandings. The cultural context has not been primarily addressed. Instead of attempting to understand the essence of the activist impulse for the individual, an ethnographic approach to the problem incorporates "detailed accounts of the concrete experience of life within a particular culture and of the beliefs and social rules that are used as resources within it" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 10). Such an approach broadens the lens through which the situation is viewed, taking into account the entire context and implicit and explicit rules, assumptions, and expectations.

Considering the relative uncertainty with which scholars have dealt with campus activism and civic engagement in the past, the historical roots of today's movement may contain some unanswered questions and unexplored terrain. Looking more closely at groups of students involved in activism and civic engagement efforts may help shed light on this interesting -- yet continually contested -- area

within higher education. As this full study nears completion and further interviews and focus groups are conducted, the dynamics of subcultures as described and voiced by engaged students themselves will hopefully paint a more holistic picture of this movement.

References:

- Colby, A., Ehrlich, T., Beaumont, E., & Stephens, J. (2003). *Educating citizens: Preparing America's undergraduates for lives of moral and civic responsibility*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gee, M. K., & Ullman, C. (1998). *Teacher/ethnographer in the workplace: Approaches to staff development*. Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED423721>
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1995). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. London: Routledge.
- Kuh, G. (2001). Assessing what really matters to student learning: Inside the National Survey of Student Engagement. *Change*, 33(3), 10-17.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weber, M. (1946). Politics as a vocation. In H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills, C. (trans.). From *Max Weber: Essays in sociology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press