

# PREDICTORS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG HIGHLY INVOLVED YOUNG ADULTS: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AGENCY AND SYSTEMS WORLDVIEW

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*Civic engagement maintains the viability of democratic society and promotes positive outcomes for those who participate. Young adults' patterns of civic engagement differ according to the type of activity, yet little is known about the psychological mechanisms that lead to different types of participation. We tested the relationship between two types of sociopolitical beliefs (sense of agency and systems worldview) and two distinct forms of civic engagement: political involvement and community service. We hypothesized that agency would predict both forms of engagement and that systems worldview would moderate the relationship between agency and political involvement, but have little effect on community service. Using data from a racially diverse national sample of highly engaged young adults ( $n = 259$ ), we conducted hierarchical linear multiple regression analyses and found that agency predicted both political involvement and community service. We found that systems worldview moderated the relationship between agency and both forms of civic engagement. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

Thank you to Jalaya Liles Dunn, Wendy Shenefelt Fleming, Robert Jagers, and the Children's Defense Fund for their support with this project.

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Civic engagement is essential for the maintenance of a democratic society and the promotion of social equality (Verba, 1987). In addition, civic engagement promotes a range of positive outcomes for individuals, including increased self-esteem, compassion, and social competence (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006; Yates & Youniss, 1996). Civic engagement “fulfills a need to belong and provides opportunities to work in concert with fellow citizens to realize shared ends” (Flanagan & Levine, 2010, p. 173). These experiences support the development of moral and civic identities that help young adults successfully transition to adulthood.

*Civic engagement* can take many forms. Most generally, civic engagement refers to actions that individuals undertake to improve the lives of others and, sometimes, influence the futures of their communities (Adler, 2005). Researchers most often characterize civic engagement behaviors according to the domain of the activity’s intended influence, creating categories such as political involvement and community service (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). *Political involvement* refers to action that is attentive to the effects of macrosystems on individuals and communities and is intended to create system-level change. Political involvement includes both traditional electoral activities embedded in existing political structures, such as voting and communicating with elected officials, and extragovernmental activism, such as boycotts, petitions, and protests. *Community service* refers to voluntary work that is meant to improve the conditions of individuals or communities but is not intended to create system-level change. Volunteering in a soup kitchen or planning a neighborhood cleanup are examples of community service because they treat symptoms of social inequities (e.g., hunger); however, they do not inherently address the root causes (e.g., unemployment, poverty).

Current patterns of civic participation among young adults vary according to the type of behavior. Political involvement among young adults today is notoriously low (Childers, 2012; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Lopez & Donovan, 2004). Even in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, when the massive turnout of young Americans was widely celebrated, the turnout rate of 18- to 29-year-olds was only 51%. This rate was lower than every other age bracket and, most noticeably, over 20% lower than the turnout of voters older than 65 years of age (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2013).

Researchers from the Black Youth Project found that fewer than 20% of youth aged 15–25 years had participated in *any* of a range of political behaviors (e.g., contacting public officials, participating in boycotts or protests, giving money to political issues or candidates, working with others in their neighborhood on a political issue or problem) in the year before data collection (Cohen, 2005). The proportion of youth involved in political campaigns, rallies, and government committee service has also declined over the past 50 years (Putnam, 2000). Findings like these have led researchers to conclude that young adults in the United States are becoming “increasingly disconnected from their communities and apathetic about politics” (Childers, 2012, p. 8). Yet focusing only on political participation provides a limited picture of young adults’ involvement in their communities.

Young adults today participate in different ways than previous generations (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Syvertsen and colleagues (2011), analyzing 30 years of data from the Monitoring the Future study, found that while political involvement decreased, the percentage of high school seniors who engaged or intended to engage in community service at least once a month increased from 21% in 1976 to 35% in 2005. Whereas only 20% of 15- to 25-year-olds surveyed by the Black Youth Project

reported political involvement, 48% of Black youth, 54% of Hispanic youth, and 62% of White youth had participated in organized volunteer or community service work (Cohen, 2005). Researchers have found that young adults are more likely than older individuals to participate in community projects outside of the political sphere, such as marching for cancer (Childers, 2012). The differences in young adults' rates of participation in political and community service activities suggest that different forms of civic engagement behaviors are predicted by different psychological mechanisms. Thus, when exploring predictors of civic engagement among young adults, it is vital to differentiate between forms of civic engagement (e.g., political involvement and community service).

### ***Predictors of Civic Engagement: A Theoretical Framework***

Sociopolitical development theory (SPD; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Watts & Guessous, 2006; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003) offers a framework to explore the processes by which young people become involved in society. SPD is defined as the "process of growth in a person's knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and capacity for action *in political and social systems*" (Watts et al., 2003, p. 185) and the framework emerges from the field of liberation psychology, which seeks to strengthen democracy and empower citizens, to transform "both the conditions of inequality and oppression and the institutions and practices producing them" (Montero & Sonn, 2009, p. 1). SPD theory focuses on individuals' participation in action that creates system-level change and addresses societal injustice. As such, the SPD model provides a useful framework for predicting young adults' political involvement. Yet Watts and Guessous (2006) included both political involvement and community service activities as outcomes of SPD. We propose that the psychological mechanisms that lead to community service may differ from those that predict political involvement. Accordingly, the SPD model may be relevant to political involvement and not community service.

Whereas researchers agree that individuals' beliefs are related to their civic engagement behaviors, the directionality of that relationship is cause for debate (Christens, Peterson, & Speer, 2011). Some researchers contend that beliefs precede behavior (e.g., Bekkers, 2005) and others believe that engaging in behaviors can encourage development of beliefs (e.g., Ohmer, 2007). Watts and colleagues (2003), however, describe SPD as a "cumulative and recursive process" (p. 192), in which individuals' beliefs and behaviors affect each other. Participating in civic activities provides opportunities for individuals to develop relevant beliefs and skills; furthermore, individuals who hold certain beliefs are more likely to be civically engaged. With this in mind, the SPD model contends that one's involvement is influenced by several individual and contextual factors, including a critical understanding of how systems affect individual and community well-being (*systems worldview*), belief in one's ability to affect change (*agency*), and occasion to practice leadership and civic skills (*opportunity structures*; Watts & Guessous, 2006).

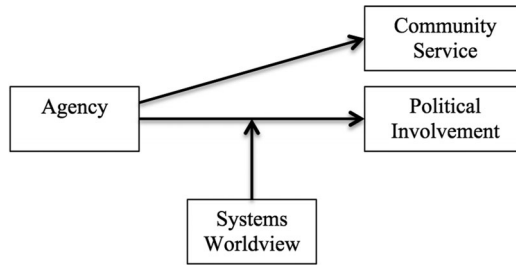
*Systems worldview.* The SPD model suggests that a systems worldview promotes political involvement. The concept of a systems worldview emerges from Paolo Freire's (2000) idea of critical consciousness and is similar to the cognitive, or interpersonal, component of psychological empowerment (Christens, Collura, & Tahir, 2013; Zimmerman, 1995). Systems worldview refers to one's awareness that social inequities are caused by structural factors associated with racism, sexism, and social classism (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). A systems worldview is developed through critical social analysis requiring individuals to

attend to factors beyond individual attributions. Rather than assuming that the world is inherently fair and people get what they deserve (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), critical social analysis enables individuals to understand the historical and contemporary factors that contribute systemically to social inequities. Many researchers have measured systems worldview using proxies such as beliefs in a just world (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) or social dominance orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Bertram, 1994), although few directly assess individuals' beliefs about the causes of social and political inequities.

The SPD model predicts that awareness of the structural causes of social inequities will promote civic engagement, including both political and community activities (Watts & Guessous, 2006). Hope and Jagers (2014) found empirical support for the proposed relationship in a nationally representative sample of Black adolescents and young adults. They found that beliefs in institutional racism were related to greater civic engagement, which included both political involvement and community service. Yet it is unclear whether systems worldview influences young adults' political involvement and community service in the same way. Indeed, Hope and Jagers (2014) noted that future research needs to explore whether "the psychological processes that relate to civic engagement broadly hold true when considering specific types of civic engagement" (p. 468). Awareness of structural issues is likely to prompt young adults to take action and create structural change (political involvement); however, systems worldview may not be a necessary precursor to community service, which is intended to meet the needs of individuals and does not seek system-level change.

*Agency.* Agency refers to the ability to intentionally influence one's life circumstances (Bandura, 2006), much like the emotional, or intrapersonal, component of psychological empowerment (Christens et al., 2013). According to SPD and empowerment theories, people are more likely to participate in civic action when they believe that their voice and behavior can have the intended effect on change for them or their community (Watts & Guessous, 2006; Zimmerman, 1995). Researchers have found that positive beliefs about agency are related to greater community participation, more positive sense of community, and more positive psychological well-being (Christens & Peterson, 2012; Christens, Peterson, et al., 2011; Zimmerman, Ramírez-Valles, & Maton, 1999). Political efficacy, a similar concept that refers to beliefs about one's ability to affect political change, has been linked to voting behavior (Diemer & Li, 2011) and commitment to future political involvement and community service among late adolescents and young adults (Hope & Jagers, 2014).

The SPD model suggests that positive agency beliefs may strengthen the relationship between systems worldview and civic engagement, but empirical support is limited. As illustrated in Figure 1, we propose two modifications to the model. First, given the strong and consistent relationship between agency and diverse forms of civic engagement, we propose that agency directly predicts both political involvement and community service. Second, systems worldview is expected to operate differently in relation to political involvement and community service. We propose that systems worldview influences the relationship between agency and political involvement but has no effect on community service. Young adults who believe they can effect change are more active participants in both political involvement and community service (Hope & Jagers, 2014); however, young adults who both believe they can be a part of meaningful change *and* perceive that structural social inequalities create the need for such change may be even more likely to be involved in political activities.



**Figure 1.** Proposed model of sociopolitical development.

*Opportunity structure.* SPD is highly dependent on the opportunities available to young people for engagement (Diemer & Li, 2011; Diemer, Voight, & Mark, 2011; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Within the SPD framework, opportunities for engagement provide occasions for young people to practice behaviors that promote participation (Watts & Guessous, 2006). Young people may participate in activities with their schools or youth programs that offer opportunities for them to practice skills, build relationships, and cultivate new perspectives that promote continued civic engagement. As individuals engage in these activities over time, their sociopolitical understanding and capacity for civic engagement increases (Watts et al., 2003). Opportunities for engagement vary widely and systematically (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Hart & Atkins, 2010; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

### **Current Study**

To learn more about the psychological mechanisms that lead to different forms of civic engagement, we examine how two types of sociopolitical beliefs (agency beliefs and systems worldview) are related to two types of civic engagement (political involvement and community service) in a sample of highly engaged young adults. We are interested in promoting civic engagement and so we explore the question of how beliefs promote behaviors, although we acknowledge that the relationship is likely recursive and engagement behaviors are likely to influence individuals' beliefs. To control for some of the variation in opportunity structures available to young adults, we focus on individuals who have had access to opportunities for involvement and have chosen to participate. We use data from a unique sample of young adults who are both highly engaged and racially diverse, which enables us to explore the ways that sociopolitical beliefs influence young adults' choices regarding the types of civic action in which they participate.

Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated relationships between agency and various forms of civic engagement (e.g., Christens, Peterson, et al., 2011; Hope & Jagers, 2014); accordingly, we hypothesized that agency would predict both community service and political involvement. These two forms of civic engagement differ in that political involvement is intended to create system-level change, whereas community service is altruistic and designed to augment existing systems. Therefore, we hypothesized that systems worldview would predict political involvement but not community service. Based on our modifications to Watts and Guessous' (2006) SPD model, we hypothesized that systems worldview would moderate the relationship between agency and political involvement. More specifically, we predicted that systems worldview would increase the association between agency and political involvement. Individuals who believe that they have the ability to effect change (high agency) and also believe that social problems are the result of system-level

**Table 1. Variable Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges, Cronbach's Alphas, and Bivariate Correlations**

Measure	Mean	SD	Range	$\alpha$	Correlations		
					1.	2.	3.
1. Agency	4.27	.57	1–5	.87			
2. Systems worldview	2.78	.46	1–4	.63	.06		
3. Community service	18.47	4.62	1–24	.70	.25***	–.03	
4. Political involvement	8.58	5.78	1–28	.83	.23***	.08	.30***

Note. SD = standard deviation.

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

problems (high systems worldview) should be most likely to engage in activities intended to create structural change (political involvement).

## METHODS

### Participants

The data were collected as part of the program evaluation of a national leadership training held by the Children's Defense Fund. Because all identifying information was removed from the dataset before its use in the current study, the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board considered the study to be secondary analysis and exempt from review. The analyses in this study used the baseline data from the evaluation (we could not examine the data longitudinally because individual participant codes were not used for tracking individuals pre- and posttraining). Participants were recruited for the training based on their past experience or expressions of interest in community organizing, leadership, and child advocacy. Accordingly, the sample was a group of highly engaged young adults.

The sample comprised 259 individuals between 18 and 24 years of age, with a mean age of 20.86 (standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 1.92). The sample was 69.9% female ( $n = 181$ ). The sample was 50.1% African American ( $n = 130$ ), 19.7% White ( $n = 51$ ), 15.1% Latino ( $n = 39$ ), 5.8% biracial or multiracial ( $n = 15$ ), 2.3% Asian or Pacific Islander ( $n = 6$ ), .4% Native American ( $n = 1$ ), and 6.6% other or unspecified racial group ( $n = 17$ ). Participants represented large cities (51.4%), suburban areas and smaller cities (41.7%) and rural areas (6.9%) across 35 states in the United States. The majority of participants (76.1%,  $n = 197$ ) indicated that they were students at the time of the survey, and others were engaged in a range of occupations (e.g., teachers, youth program leaders, retail workers), or were not currently working (e.g., recent college graduates looking for work).

### Measures

Participants took an online survey that included measures of agency, systems worldview, and civic engagement. Demographic information was also collected, including birth date, gender, and race. Race was recoded into three groups: African American ( $n = 130$ ), White ( $n = 51$ ), and Other ( $n = 77$ ). Table 1 reports mean, standard deviation, range, and Cronbach's alpha for study variables, and bivariate correlations between variables.

Agency was measured using an eight-item scale comprising five items from the Policy Control subscale of Zimmerman and Zahniser's (1991) Sociopolitical Control Scale (e.g.,

“There are plenty of ways for me to have a say in what our community does” and “Most community leaders would listen to me”) and three items from the Beliefs about Individual Action Scale (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013). Participants responded to all items using the same 5-point scale, in which high scores indicated strong agreement.

*Systems worldview beliefs* were measured using six items (Watts & Guessous, 2006). Participants used a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), to indicate their levels of agreement with statements about the causes of social problems, including crime and violence, drug use, blight in poor neighborhoods, and juvenile delinquency. The scale included items indicating systems attributions (e.g., “Youth don’t do well in their studies *because schools don’t get enough money or support*”), as opposed to individual attributions (e.g., “Youth don’t do well in their studies *because they don’t care about school*”). Higher scores indicated stronger endorsement of systems worldviews.

*Civic engagement* was measured using items from the Youth Involvement Inventory (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007). Participants were asked to indicate the frequency of their involvement in a range of activities, where possible responses included “never,” “once a year or less,” “a few times a year,” “monthly,” and “weekly.” Intensity of engagement was calculated by summing the frequency scores for each activity. Items were divided into two subscales—community service and political involvement—and separate intensity scores were created for each. The community service subscale comprised six items, including “led or helped out with a children’s group or club” and “donated food or used items to a good cause.” The political involvement subscale included seven items related to traditional political involvement (e.g., “worked on or volunteered for a political campaign”) and activism (e.g., “participated in a boycott”).

### **Data Analytic Strategy**

To examine the relationships between predictors and our two outcome variables—community service and political involvement—we conducted two hierarchical multiple linear regression analyses. To control for the effects of demographic variables, we entered age, race, and gender in Step 1. We then entered agency and systems worldview in Step 2, testing the hypotheses that systems worldview would predict political involvement and agency would predict both community service and political involvement. To test the hypothesis that systems worldview would influence the relationship between agency and the outcome variables, we added a two-way interaction term between agency and systems worldview in Step 3. According to the procedure recommended by Hayes (2013) and Jose (2013a), we centered the two continuous variables before calculating the interaction term. We also included mean-centered values of the independent variables to aid in interpretability of the model.

To interpret the interactions, we plotted the regression of agency on the outcome variable for three values of systems worldview: the mean, one standard deviation below the mean, and one standard deviation above the mean (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Finally, we conducted simple slopes analyses using ModGraph-I software (Jose, 2013b) so that we could learn more about the nature of the interactions.

## **RESULTS**

Age was correlated with agency,  $r = .17$ ;  $p = .01$ , but not with systems worldview, community service, or political involvement.

**Table 2. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Community Service (n = 258)**

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$
Age	-.19	.15	-.08	-.30	.15	-.12	-.29	.15	-.12
Gender	-.31	.64	-.03	-.49	.62	-.05	-.47	.61	-.05
Race: White	.04	.78	.003	.16	.77	.01	.19	.75	.02
Race: other	-.37	.67	-.04	-.15	.65	-.01	-.07	.63	-.01
Agency				2.23***	.51	.27***	2.61***	.51	.32***
Worldview				-.43	.61	-.04	-.40	.60	-.04
Agency $\times$ worldview							-3.53**	1.05	-.21**
R <sup>2</sup>		.01			.08			.12	
F for change in R <sup>2</sup>		.53			.07***			.04***	

Note. SE = standard error.

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

### Sociopolitical Beliefs and Community Service

Results of the hierarchical linear regression for community service are shown in Table 2. The demographic model in Step 1 accounted for 1% of the variance in community service and none of the demographic variables were unique predictors. In Step 2, we added agency and systems worldview and the main effects model accounted for an additional 7% of the variance in community service,  $F(6, 251) = 3.65, p = .001$ . Agency was related to more frequent participation in community service,  $b = 2.23, t(251) = 4.41, p < .001$ , but systems worldview was not,  $b = -.43, t(251) = -.71, p = .48$ . In Step 3, we added the interaction term and the model accounted for an additional 4% of the variance in community service,  $F(7, 250) = 4.88, p < .001$ . Agency continued to predict more frequent participation in community service,  $b = 2.61, t(250) = 5.13, p < .001$ , and the interaction term for agency and systems worldview also predicted community service participation,  $b = -3.53, t(250) = -3.38, p = .001$ .

Figure 2 illustrates the interaction effects for community service. Post hoc tests revealed that the relationship between agency and community service was strongest for participants who had low and medium levels of systems worldview and weakest for those who had a high level of systems worldview. At low and medium levels of systems worldview, agency was a positive predictor of community service; simple slopes were 4.23,  $t(256) = 5.47, p < .001$ , and 2.61,  $t(256) = 5.13, p < .001$ , respectively. At high levels of systems worldview, the relationship between agency and community service was negligible, .99,  $t(256) = 1.59, p = .11$ .

### Sociopolitical Beliefs and Political Involvement

Results of the hierarchical regression for political involvement are shown in Table 3. The demographic variables entered in Step 1 accounted for 10% of the variance in political involvement,  $F(4, 253) = 6.73, p < .001$ . Compared with African American participants, members of the Other group reported less political involvement,  $b = 3.59, t(253) = 4.52, p < .001$ . In Step 2, we entered agency and systems worldview and the model accounted for an additional 5% of the variance in political involvement,  $F(6, 251) = 7.66, p < .001$ . After controlling for demographic factors, agency was related to more frequent political



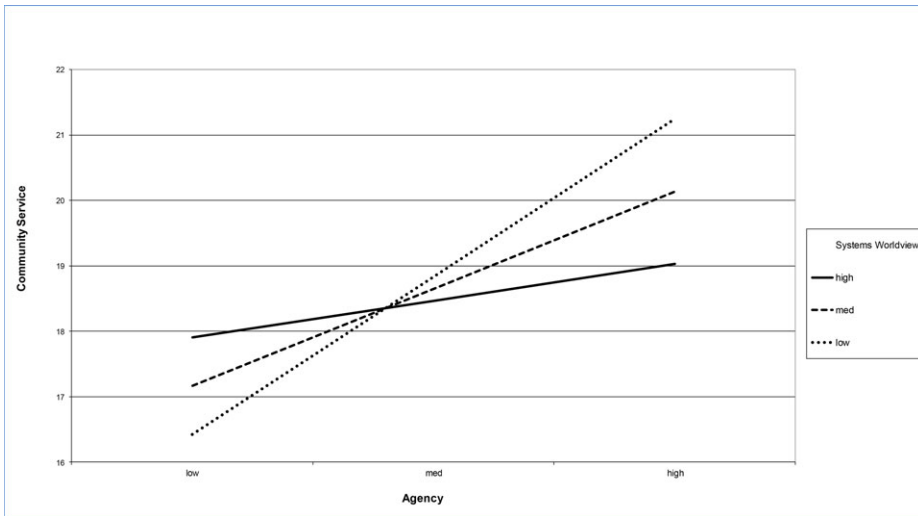


Figure 2. Moderation of the effect of agency on community service by systems worldview.

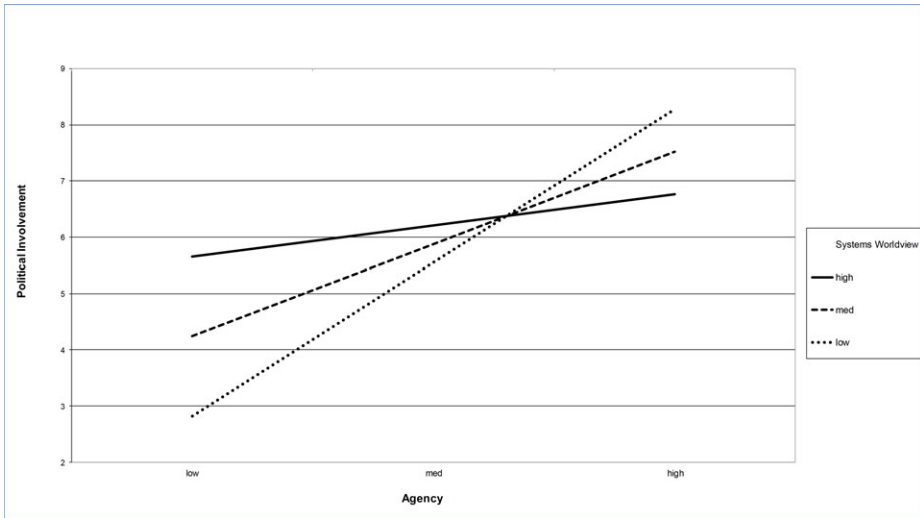
Table 3. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Political Involvement (n = 258)

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Age	.18	.18	.06	.05	.18	.01	.06	.18	.02
Gender	.94	.76	.07	.82	.74	.06	.84	.73	.07
Race: White	-.33	.93	-.02	.04	.92	.003	.07	.90	.01
Race: other	3.59***	.79	.29***	3.86***	.77	.31***	3.96***	.76	.31***
Agency				2.44***	.61	.24***	2.88***	.61	.28***
Worldview				.68	.73	.05	.72	.72	.06
Agency × worldview							-4.15***	1.25	-.19**
R <sup>2</sup>		.10			.15			.19	
F for change in R <sup>2</sup>		6.73***			.06***			.04**	

Note. SE = standard error.  
 \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

involvement,  $b = 2.44$ ,  $t(251) = 4.01$ ,  $p < .001$ , but system worldview was not  $b = .68$ ,  $t(251) = .93$ ,  $p = .35$ . We added the interaction term in Step 3 and the final model accounted for an additional 4% of the variance in political involvement,  $F(7, 250) = 8.39$ ,  $p < .001$ . Agency was associated with more frequent political involvement,  $b = 2.88$ ,  $t(250) = 4.72$ ,  $p < .001$  and the interaction term between agency and systems worldview also predicted political involvement,  $b = -4.15$ ,  $t(250) = -3.31$ ,  $p = .001$ .

Figure 3 illustrates the interaction effects for political involvement. Post hoc tests revealed the same pattern as for community service. The positive relationship between agency and political involvement was strongest at low and medium levels of systems worldview, with respective simple slopes of 4.79,  $t(256) = 5.17$ ,  $p < .001$ , and 2.88,  $t(256) = 4.72$ ,  $p < .001$ . At the high levels of systems worldview, the relationship between agency and political involvement was negligible,  $.97$ ,  $t(256) = 1.31$ ,  $p = .19$ .



**Figure 3.** Moderation of the effect of agency on political involvement by systems worldview.

## DISCUSSION

Sociopolitical development theory provides a framework for understanding how sociopolitical beliefs, such as agency and systems worldview, relate to civic engagement (Watts et al., 2011; Watts & Guessous, 2006). We found that young adults who endorsed feelings of sociopolitical control and political efficacy (agency) were more engaged in political activities and community service activities. This finding is consistent with the assumptions of the SPD model and extant literature on the relationship between agency and civic engagement (Diemer & Li, 2011; Hope & Jagers, 2014), and it reinforces the importance of supporting young adults in developing beliefs that they can effect positive sociopolitical change. Systems worldview had no direct effect on either community service or political involvement.

Although this finding does not support our a priori hypothesis that systems worldview would function differently in relation to varied forms of civic engagement, it is consistent with past research on the relationship between civic engagement and psychological empowerment. Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated an association between civic engagement and emotional empowerment, the component of psychological empowerment that is conceptually similar to agency (Christens, Speer, et al., 2011; Peterson, Hamme, & Speer, 2002). These same researchers found no relationship between civic engagement and cognitive empowerment, the component of psychological empowerment that is conceptually aligned with systems worldview.

While the SPD model suggests that agency influences the relationship between systems worldview and civic engagement, we tested the alternative proposition that systems worldview would strengthen the relationship between agency and civic engagement. We found that systems worldview did influence the relationship between agency and civic engagement, but it was in the opposite direction as we hypothesized. We expected that the relationship between agency and civic engagement would be strengthened for participants with a high level of systems worldview. Instead, we found that the relationship

between agency and both political involvement and community service was strongest for individuals with a low level of systems worldview.

Regarding individuals who did not identify structural attributions for social inequities (low level of systems worldview), community service and political involvement were highly contingent on their beliefs about their own individual abilities to affect change. For those individuals, a high level of agency was related to a high level of engagement, but a low level of agency was related to very low levels of engagement. Conversely, individuals who perceived structural causes for social inequities (high level of systems worldview) were likely to engage in community service and political activities regardless of their beliefs about their individual capacity to influence change. Our finding that individuals with high levels of agency and systems worldview actually had lower levels of engagement than participants with a high level of agency and a *low* level of systems worldview is somewhat puzzling. One possible explanation for this finding is that among the highly engaged young adults represented in our sample, the prospect of countering large systemic issues can become daunting and inhibit higher levels of civic engagement.

Another explanation is that our measure of systems worldview did not adequately capture the construct for the young adults in our sample. They may have had more detailed, critical, and historically based systems worldviews than we assessed in our scale. Research using other measures of individuals' beliefs about the world may provide additional insight into the relationships between systems worldview and civic engagement. For example, the Perceived Inequality subscale of Diemer, Rapa, Park, and Perry's (2014) Critical Consciousness Scale provides a robust measure of individuals' "critical analysis of socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and gendered constraints on educational and occupational opportunity" (p. 11).

A third possible explanation for these counterintuitive findings is that participants' critical analysis of the contexts in which they have served as change agents may not match up with the specific aspects of systems worldview assessed in the measure used. For example, individuals who mentor incarcerated youth may be aware of ways in which social inequities lead to violence and drug use, but they may be less aware of systemic causes of issues that are less relevant to their mentoring experiences (e.g., unemployment, neighborhood blight). Our results suggest that systems worldview may need to closely fit the context of engagement to be relevant to behavior. This idea is similar to self-efficacy, in that general self-efficacy may not be so relevant in assessing a specific context. Thus, one may feel generally self-efficacious but in the particular instance of, for example, a sports-related skill (e.g., hitting a curve ball in baseball, doing a double axel in skating), one's general self-efficacy may be irrelevant. Similarly, our results suggest that future research that measures systems worldview that is more connected to the context of engagement may be beneficial and may help tease apart general perceptions and context-specific engagement.

Another possible issue with our measures lies in the way that we measure and categorize civic engagement. Researchers typically consider either the sum score of activities completed or the average time spent participating over a given period of time (Pancer et al., 2007) and classify activities according to sociopolitical domain (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Yet it may be the case that we should consider *why* young adults participate in particular activities, rather than attributing the type of activity to a sociopolitical domain. For instance, a young person may volunteer at a local soup kitchen because she believes the hungry are simply down on their luck and volunteering is a morally considerate way to help the less fortunate, indicating a low level of systems worldview. Equally, a person may be motivated to volunteer at the local soup kitchen because of a deep belief in a

systems worldview that societal factors perpetuate poverty and food deserts. Similarly, one may vote because of moral obligation, as part of one's civic responsibility or as an empowered act to change local policies that have a negative and disproportionate effect on one segment of the population. Thus, young adults engage in the same civic action but with different motivation.

Another direction for future research is to explore *why* people participate in particular civic behaviors. A few existing frameworks highlight motivation for civic engagement as a contribution to help understand how and why young people engage as citizens. Batson and colleagues (2002) posit four motivations for community involvement: the *egoist* is engaged because of personal welfare, the *altruist* because of the welfare of the other, the *collectivist* because of the welfare of the group, and the *principlist* because civic engagement is morally conscionable. Further, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) conceptualized three dimensions of citizenship that encompass both the goals of the civic engagement action and the types of participation that most readily align with those goals. By understanding *why* young people pursue citizenship through particular actions (or inactions), we may be able to untangle if and when systems worldview supports or detracts from civic development and participation.

### **Limitations**

Several study limitations require attention. First, our sample comprised highly engaged young adults and so our results may not generalize to all young adults. Data from this unique sample allowed us to focus on the experiences of individuals who have had opportunities for engagement and consider the psychological mechanisms that predict their engagement behavior. Yet participants in the sample are not representative of the population, in which enormous variation exists in the opportunities available to adolescents and young adults (Hart & Atkins, 2010; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Some individuals whose neighborhoods and schools offer few opportunities for civic engagement still find ways to be engaged, whereas other individuals may have many opportunities and choose not to participate. Future research that explores the role of sociopolitical beliefs among individuals with varied levels of civic engagement is necessary to develop a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that promote civic engagement and identify strategies to promote greater engagement among diverse populations of young adults. Nevertheless, studying a group of highly motivated individuals can provide useful insights about the ways that sociopolitical beliefs influence their choices regarding the types of civic action in which they participate.

Another limitation of the study may be the measure of systems worldview we studied. As we noted earlier, it may have been too general, or not specific enough, for the contexts in which the participants were engaged. Our results suggest that systems worldview may need to be more specifically tied to the context in which one is engaging for it to have an effect on participation. Of course, it is also possible that we overestimated the effects of systems worldview and that agency may be the most vital factor for motivating people to engage regardless of the purpose. Nevertheless, future research with more specific measures of systems worldview may need to be developed to more completely test the sociopolitical development theory and understand motivations for engagement.

A third limitation of our study is that we studied engagement with cross-sectional data. One reason why we did not find the hypothesized effects for systems worldview is because this perspective may require some time to establish itself in individuals' motivational

scheme. They may need more experience or help in connecting the dots between their actions and their systems worldview for it to be a motivating factor in their engagement.

### **Conclusion**

These limitations notwithstanding, our results are consistent with existing theory and past research. Our study extends our understanding of the mechanisms that support civic engagement among young adults, a population that is increasingly engaged in community-based volunteerism and cynical of traditional political processes (Childers, 2012; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Syvertsen et al., 2011). Our sample provided a unique opportunity to consider civic engagement among a racially diverse sample of highly engaged individuals.

Our findings suggest that supporting the development of young adults' positive beliefs about their abilities to effect change in the world (i.e., agency) may help increase their engagement in activities that improve their communities. Schools and community organizations can contribute to the development of agency by offering educational interventions that teach participants relevant skills and reinforce their beliefs that they can make meaningful contributions to society. For example, service learning programs that encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and their contributions may contribute to participants' beliefs about their abilities to be change agents (Checkoway, 2013; Childers, 2012; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Osgood, & Briddell, 2011). Zeldin, Gauley, Krauss, Kornbluh, and Collura (in press) studied youth programs in three countries (United States, Portugal, and Malaysia) and found that opportunities for involvement that provided youth with decision-making power and enhanced trust with adults were most likely to result in positive developmental outcomes. Families can also help by reinforcing the message that young people have the power to contribute to their world and offering support and guidance as they try to find ways to get involved.

Whatever strategies schools, programs, or families choose to motivate young adults, our results suggest that an effective way to promote civic engagement is to build their confidence about their capacity to effect change.

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