The Psychology of Citizenship and Civic Engagement
S. Mark Pancer
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Reviewed by Dr Sevasti–Melissa Nolas

In this book, *The Psychology of Citizenship and Civic Engagement*, Mark Pancer, a social psychologist, brings his expertise in social, political, health and youth psychology, to bear on questions of citizenship and civic engagement, and people's connections with their communities.

Organised with an ecological understanding of the person in mind (although not explicitly articulated as such by the author), the book is concerned with the contribution that research in psychology and related social science disciplines can make to our understanding of how 'civic engagement develops, the major factors that influence its development, and the impact that civic involvement can have on individuals, communities, and society' (p.10). Consequently, Pancer starts by presenting the evidence for the most proximal influences around the person (e.g. parents, family and peers) and moves outwards to more distal influences (e.g. school, neighbourhood, work and places of worship, and society) before exploring the impact of civic engagement across the lifespan (organised into two chapters on youth and adults) and for the social groups we live in (programmes, organisations, neighbourhoods, and societies). The book concludes with two chapters. The first of these tackles the question of why civic engagement might have consistently positive effects on individuals; and the second, and final chapter, deals with the issue of how civic engagement might be initiated, developed and sustained. The book's 10 chapters are all written in an accessible and fluid style making it easy to read.

This is an ambitious book covering a breadth of scholarship on citizenship and civic engagement that draws together insights from developmental, social, community and political psychology. The topic is approached from a lifespan perspective and a longitudinal mixed methods research design (much of the evidence reviewed in the book derives from studies using such a design). This approach is a welcome departure from the cross-sectional studies that tend to dominate scientific and public discussions on citizenship and civic engagement. The longitudinal approach preferred by Pancer allows for interesting questions to be raised about the dynamics of participation across a lifetime, the continuity and change of traditions of participation and the relationships between history and biography, macro and micro experiences of social change. It is a longitudinal approach that allows for important and nuanced insights to emerge such as the finding that positive experiences and supportive social milieu's being key to sustaining *long-term* civic engagement (p.18); the fascinating finding that 'civic engagement appears to run in families' (p.22); and the everyday spaces and times (playing, eating and doing things together) that create the opportunities to talk about issues of common concern (p.25). It is also in this context of the longue durée that we can ask more profound questions about why
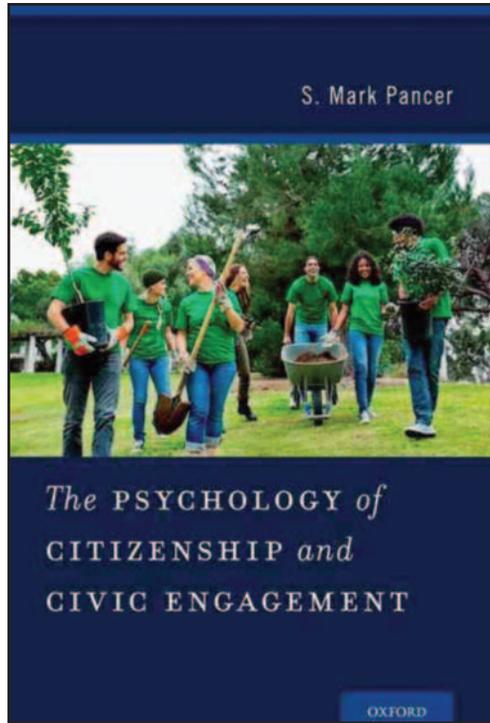
civic engagement appears to impact positively in other areas of a person's life such as their health and well-being, answers to which lie in the capacity for civic engagement to enable identity formation, to provide a sense of agency and purpose, and to build skills and relationships. In this sense, Pancer's book is a fine resource and introduction to the always popular, amongst students and researchers, and important topic of political participation in public life. The book would make a valuable addition to undergraduate and postgraduate reading lists in social, community and political psychology, as well as political science and sociology.

Nevertheless, while the breadth of scholarship is impressive and certainly important in charting a psychological approach to understanding civic engagement, it comes at the cost of important depth and interpretative power. Pancer concludes the first chapter by making explicit the values he brings to the study of civic engagement: that civic engagement is a broad set of behaviours, that notions of citizenship change across the lifespan, that a mixed methods approach is most useful for carrying out research on the topic, that it's important to analyse civic engagement at both the individual and the systems level, and that basic research in this area ought to have an impact on policy and practice. It's hard to disagree with any of these values. This epistemological reflexivity is important and necessarily for research rigour and integrity. But this is not critical reflexivity (Gergen, 2009), typical of cognate social sciences the book purports to engage with, and it is the absence of a more critical take on the topic that is the book's main weakness.

A critical reflexive approach to citizenship and civic engagement would have led to a much more challenging problematisation of the evidence base on citizenship than what we are presented with, and a more robust contextualisation of the work. For example, the underlying model of socialisation that Pancer relies on (social learning theory) has long been challenged by researchers in sociology (Corsaro, 1992), and repeated studies demonstrate children's and young people's agency and the subtle and overt ways in which children socialise their parents, and those around them (James, 2013). In terms of contextualisation, the majority of the research that Pancer draws on speaks to a North American context, and in this respect the book provides an insight into the role of civic engagement as that relates to the national-cultural social contract of Canada and the US. As a European reader, I was left wondering where the state, and traditions of welfare provision and social citizenship, fit into the picture of citizenship that Pancer puts forward. As such, this book is not so much *the* psychology of citizenship as it is *a* psychology of citizenship bound to specific histories and cultures. Similarly, another curious omission is any mention of the media, traditional or new, on or offline. With seminal international studies now available that explore the relationship between the Internet, social media in particular, and civic engagement and/or social movements (cf. Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014) it's hard to make sense of why there is such a gap in the book (a minor exception to this is the mention of negative political campaigning, p.79).

For a book that focuses on everyday dynamics and processes of connecting to and creating political life, the interpretations offered are strangely apolitical at best, and reinforcing of the status quo at worst. Indeed, I found the omission of the political concerns of some of the research sited quite troubling. For example, the Iowa Youth and Families Project is described as 'a longitudinal investigation of American families living in rural communities in the north central part of the state of Iowa' (p.30). This is not incorrect but it omits important information about Glen Elder's research programme concerned as it is with human development and social mobility, and how lives are changed by changing environments, in particular Elder's seminal study on *Children of the Great Depression* (1999). The Iowa Youth and Families project emerged in response to the Great Farm Crisis of the 1980s and provided Elder with an opportunity to investigate resilience and social mobility in rural youth given that the Great Depression study has been mainly concern with urban childhoods (Elder, 2005). Both events are

socio-economic and political in nature reminding us that context matters and that our interpretations of such contextual relationships matter too.

In making a utilitarian argument for citizenship ('it's good for your health') as opposed to an ethical and political argument much of the book suffers from an absence of the sort of interpretation that matters (Flyvbjerg, 2001). For example, we are told about the asymmetrical relationship in terms of hours between the volunteering work contributed by men and women in a martial relationship (p.23): increase in a husband's volunteering leads to increase in a wife's volunteering time, but the opposite is not true. When married women volunteer more their husbands volunteer less. The asymmetry is explained in terms of the family as a contributing unit of two and says nothing of gender inequalities involved in the observed dynamic or the relationship between women's volunteering, their employment status and caring responsibilities which often makes volunteering more difficult for women than it does for men (Taniguchi, 2006). Similarly, Pancer repeatedly refers to a finding from his own study of the introduction of the somewhat paradoxical policy of mandatory volunteering for high-school aged Canadian youth in the Province of Ontario in 1999. The evaluation found that little or no infrastructure was provided to support students in finding voluntary placements; those students successful in finding volunteering positions in the community relied on parental employment and professional networks. For this reader this raises serious questions about the accessibility and opportunities that such a regional programme offers for 'citizenship' and the risks it carries in perpetuating existing social exclusions along educational, socio-economic, racial, ethnic and class lines. Such troubling responses to the evidence raise questions about whose and what evidence counts and what of the structural explanations for the inclusiveness/exclusiveness of citizenship (Fine, 2011).

In summary, this is a book that charts the territory of some psychological research on civic engagement and does so in a manner better suited to understanding the changing and unfolding dynamics of the emergence of political selves and communities. The critical reader however is likely to get the most out of this book by reading it alongside critical social science texts on citizenship (cf. Cockburn, 2012; Lister, 1997) that would help to address some of gaps identified above.

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