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Adolescent civic engagement and perceived political conflict: The role of family cohesion

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Abstract

Adolescents are often exposed to the lasting effects of political conflict. Complementing existing research on negative outcomes in these settings, this paper focuses on the role of the family ($N = 731$ mother/adolescent dyads, 51% female, 14.72 ($SD = 1.99$) years old at Time 1) in promoting constructive youth outcomes in response to perceived conflict in Northern Ireland. Exploratory factor analyses revealed two related forms of youth civic engagement: volunteerism and political participation. Structural equation modelling revealed that compared to males, female adolescents reported more volunteerism. Older adolescents reported higher political participation and lower volunteerism. Moreover, over three time points, the primary model test revealed that the impact of perceived political conflict on adolescent volunteerism and political engagement was partially mediated by family cohesion. These findings suggest that amid protracted political conflict, the family may be a key factor underlying adolescents' contributions to post-accord peacebuilding.

Key words: Civic Engagement; Families; Resiliency; Political Behavior; Prosocial Involvement

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Psychological research on youth and political violence has overwhelmingly explored the mechanisms surrounding negative outcomes, such as internalizing and externalizing behaviours (Boxer et al., 2013; Cummings et al., 2013; Taylor, Merrilees, Goeke-Morey, Shirlow, & Cummings, 2014a). However, there is an emerging shift in this area of research that considers other forms of youth agency, such as prosocial acts (Taylor et al., 2014). Past research has shown that a positive family environment can have implications for these adaptive youth outcomes (Cummings et al., 2010), but less is known about the processes underlying behaviours such as civic engagement that can have a potentially wider social impact. Thus, this study examines how family factors relate to youth civic engagement in Northern Ireland, a setting of protracted intergroup conflict. Understanding the different forms of, and the factors that underlie, youth civic engagement may have implications for future peacebuilding.

Protracted Intergroup Conflict

Conflicts that have evolved over generations may take generations of peacebuilding to resolve; thus, conflict transformation calls for a ‘decade-thinking’ approach that brings attention to the involvement of youth (Lederach, 1997). Yet, the study of youth agency in settings of violent conflict has been overshadowed by the binary portrayal of youth as either perpetrators or victims (Barber, 2013). Additional research is needed to understand the processes through which youth develop as supporters and leaders of new, and potentially constructive, social interactions (Barber, 2013; Yates & Youniss, 2006). In contexts of protracted conflict, breaking the cycles of violence requires knowledge about youths’ abilities to affect social change and actively engage in rebuilding society (Bužinkić, 2013; Corkalo Biruksi, Ajdukovic, & Low Stanic, 2014;

McCouch, 2009). Identifying the factors that relate to civic engagement among youth may enhance the effectiveness of broader peacebuilding efforts (McEvoy-Levy, 2006).

Political Violence and Constructive Youth Outcomes

The harmful impact of political violence and protracted intergroup conflict on adolescents is well established (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Merrilees, Taylor, & Shirlow, 2014). This literature demonstrates that in addition to direct exposure, perceptions of conflict and threat also have implications for mental health and well-being (Cairns & Wilson, 1984; Schmid & Muldoon, 2015; Shirlow, Taylor, Merrilees, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2013). For instance, Shirlow et al. (2013) found that *perceptions* of sectarian crime in Northern Ireland predicted negative attitudes toward policing more strongly than *recorded* incidents of sectarian crime, thus reinforcing feelings of insecurity, distrust, and anxiety. Bar-Tal (2007) has described this as the socio-psychological foundation of protracted conflict, wherein beliefs about the conflict influence individuals' identities, attitudes, and behavior – particularly for youth (Bryne & Jarman, 2011; Hammack, 2011). This body of work highlights how young people, born after the height of intergroup violence, may have perceptions of conflict that influence their developmental outcomes (Nasie, Diamond, & Bar-Tal, 2016; Reidy et al., 2015).

Although the majority of the literature focuses on negative youth outcomes, such as internalizing and externalizing problems, a risk and resilience approach expands the study to include diverse ways that young people respond to adversity (Barber, 2013). Within this framework, researchers have begun to study prosocial behaviours, defined as voluntary acts that benefit others without personal profits or external awards (Bar-Tal, 1976). A recent set of studies has documented the prosocial behaviours of young people in settings of political conflict. Some found that political violence was related to fewer prosocial acts (Cummings et al., 2010;

Betancourt, Brennan, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice, & Gilman, 2010; Keresteš, 2006; Kithakye, Morris, Terranova, & Myers; 2010; Taylor et al., 2014), while others found that different types of war-related stress (Macksoud & Aber, 1996) and intragroup threat (Taylor et al., 2014) predicted *more* prosocial behaviour for youth in settings of protracted conflict. The second set of studies suggests that in response to perceived threat, youth may “become sensitive to altruistic issues, such as condemning injustice, being committed to others, helping others in need, and protecting the vulnerable” (Macksoud & Aber, 1996, p. 84).

Across both sets of studies, research has also identified how the family can foster prosocial behaviours (Cummings et al., 2010; Kerestes, 2006). For example, Kerestes (2006) found that positive parenting, such as greater accepting and less psychological control, was associated with higher levels of prosocial behaviours across child, parent and teacher reports. Family environments marked by cohesion, including support and feelings of closeness within the family unit (Moos & Moos, 1994), also have a positive effect on adolescent development (Taylor et al., 2016). Thus, important steps have been made to understand the role of the family in promoting prosocial behaviours at the interpersonal level. However, less is known about the processes leading to other potentially constructive youth outcomes in settings of protracted conflict.

Youth Civic Engagement

Civic engagement may reflect the peacebuilding potential of young people (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). Distinct from prosocial behaviours, youth civic engagement involves a broader “process in which people take collective action to address issues of public concern” (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013, p. 1894); that is, it involves “promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes” (Ehrlich, 2000, p. 4). This definition is

intentionally broad as to capture diverse forms of participation, including two primary forms of engagement (Banaji, 2008; Jahromi, Crocetti, & Buchanan, 2012): (a) *volunteering*, such as community service or service-learning encouraged or required by schools (Bringle, 2005), and (b) *political participation*, such as demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, or signing a petition (Cicognani, Zani, Fournier, Gavray, & Born, 2012). The consensus across various definitions of both volunteering and political participation focuses on the “behaviours and attitudes that express [young peoples’] will to become involved in their society or community in a manner consistent with democratic principles” (Kinlen, Hansson, Keenaghan, Canavan & O’Connor, 2013, p. 5). Thus, an approach that includes both volunteer and political activities should be considered when studying youth civic engagement.

Global explorations of civic engagement (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010; Yates & Youniss, 2006) have demonstrated wide-reaching implications at the individual level, incurring mental and physical health benefits (Piliavin, 2005), and at the societal level, fostering a civic consciousness about democracy and support for social reconstruction after war (Bužinkić, 2013; Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Cheung, Lee, Chan, Liu, & Leung, 2004). Yet, despite the clear potential benefits of youth civic engagement at both the individual and societal levels, which includes benefits for peacebuilding (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006; Taylor, 2015), the study of this construct in settings of political violence is relatively sparse (Barber & Schluterman, 2009).

As with the findings on prosocial behaviours in settings of protracted conflict, the pattern of results related to the link between political conflict and youth civic engagement is mixed. The majority of this research assesses youth exposure, but the current study will extend this to focus on the role of conflict perceptions (Bar-Tal, 2007; Shirlow et al., 2013). For example, in Uganda,

former child soldiers that had been abducted reported higher levels of political leadership after reintegration, but not other forms of non-political participation (Blattmann, 2009). In Gaza, although the specific patterns of activism varied by gender, both male and female Palestinian youth reported *more* political activism in response to the Intifada (Barber, 2008). However, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, political conflict was related to *less* community and political participation (McCouch, 2009). These studies present ‘contrasting portraits’ of patterns underlying the links between intergroup conflict and youth civic and political engagement (Barber, 2008). More longitudinal research that identifies how the underlying processes among these variables may unfold over time is needed.

Moreover, in the limited research on political conflict and youth civic engagement, the role of the family is often overlooked (Muldoon, 2013). Adolescent development does not occur in a vacuum; past research has found that family factors, including the individuals’ sense of emotional security within the family, mediate the impact of violence on other youth outcomes (Proctor, 2006; Cummings et al., 2010). Family Systems Theory (FST; Bowen, 1978) conceptualises the family as an emotional unit in which the relationships are interconnected and interdependent. According to FST, when members act differently than the roles they are expected to play or do not follow the rules they are expected to respect, the family system responds by forming new behaviour patterns. In an intergroup context, youth’s experiences and perceptions of threat may impact the family’s equilibrium and lead to relational changes. For example, heightened tension felt by one member of the family may lead other family members to accommodate this change, thus increasing family cohesion and cooperation (Bowen, 1978). In response to youths’ perceptions of political conflict, families may try to reduce tension by

pulling together and showing more support and togetherness, which may in turn shape other youth outcomes.

Outside of settings of political conflict, there is increasing attention to the role of the family as an underlying factor in youth civic engagement in particular. Parental attitudes and behaviours may influence youth engagement in volunteer and political spheres (Cheung et al., 2004), with potentially differing influences on male and female youth (Cicognani et al., 2012). In addition to factors such as the parents' own engagement in volunteerism and political life or family discussions about such issues (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2016), broader family processes have also been found to relate to youth civic participation. For example, the closeness between parents and their adolescent children is related to greater adolescent civic responsibility (Lenzi, Vieno, Santinello, Nation, & Voight, 2014). The positive parent-child relationship has also been shown to affect long-term political engagement, even in the face of community violence, in a prospective longitudinal study (Diemer, 2012). Although this research is not from settings of political conflict, it suggests that a family environment defined by close and warm relations may play an important role in fostering both youth volunteerism and political engagement.

Yet, in settings of protracted conflict, a note of caution is warranted. Though there is support for the relevance of civic engagement to peacebuilding; youth participation in divisive intergroup politics may actually serve to prolong conflict or even contribute to the escalation of new waves of violence (Nordås & Davenport, 2013). This calls for a contextual understanding of these forms of engagement among young people in settings of intergroup conflict (Barber, 2013).

Current Study: Belfast, Northern Ireland

The current study explores the role of the family in youth civic engagement in Belfast, a setting of protracted political conflict. Despite the signing of a Belfast Agreement in 1998, many

young people in Northern Ireland continue to be socialized in divided contexts (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006). That is, although the constitutional dispute between Catholics/Nationalists/Republicans and Protestants/Loyalists/Unionists has largely been resolved among political elites, annual cycles of violence continue. For example, the parading season and anti-Belfast Agreement armed groups have continued a small-scale shooting and bombing campaign (Ferman, 2013). Thus, on-going sectarianism contributes to a sense of intergroup threat, and to varying degrees, perceptions that political conflict over power, resources and territory continues.

There has been some progress toward consolidation of peace, however. Throughout the past decades of violence, efforts have been made to support civic engagement through programmes such as inclusive citizenship (Arlow, 2001), among others. These efforts have grown since 1998 with the increase in funding from the European Union to promote peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, particularly among young people (McKeown & Cairns, 2012). Many of these interventions occur in the school setting, attempting to address both the legacy of a divided society as well as the challenges of social reconstruction (Arlow, 2001). Despite challenges posed by a largely segregated educational system, previous research in Northern Ireland has found that “post-primary education plays a crucial role in fostering learning, action and critical awareness for the engagement of young people in their schools and wider communities” (Kinlen et al., 2013. 2). Thus, as annual cycles of violence continue alongside intensified efforts to promote peace through civic involvement, some youth may be left feeling “‘stuck’ somewhere between the ceasefire mentality of paramilitaries and the ambiguous messages of peacebuilding” (Harland, 2011, p. 14). In times of uncertainty or threat, youth may

turn to their families (Bowen, 1978) to decide how to navigate the path of on-going sectarianism or conflict transformation.

Thus, the current study investigates two related research questions: (1) how do youths' perceptions of continued political conflict affect adolescent civic engagement over time? And (2) what is the role of family cohesion in the link between these factors? For the first question, given the mixed findings about the relation between political conflict and civic engagement, the direction of this path is not hypothesized. For the second question, based on the community violence literature, it is hypothesized that family cohesion will mediate the link between perceived political conflict and youth civic engagement. Importantly, both mother and adolescent reports will be included to limit the potential confounds of mono-reporter bias. Based on the theory above, an example of this underlying process might be: youth perceive intergroup threat, and talk to their families, which in turn, pull together to support the young person through more cohesion. This sense of togetherness in the family helps to give the youth a firm foundation and the motivation to engage in civic life. By identifying such processes underlying youth civic engagement, the paper will conclude with implications for policy and practice in Belfast and other settings of protracted conflict.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

This study included mother-adolescent dyads ($N=731$) drawn from the last three annual waves of a larger longitudinal project examining the impact of political violence on youth and families in Belfast, Northern Ireland. All data were collected in the spring; Time 1 was collected in 2010, Time 2 in 2011, and Time 3 in 2012. The mean age of adolescents at Time 1 was 14.72 years old ($SD=1.99$) with an even split between gender (51% female, 49% male). Consistent with

the traditional demographics of Northern Ireland, the families were White European and slightly over-represented Protestant backgrounds (59%) compared to Catholic backgrounds (41%). Attrition analyses showed that there were no significant differences in the study variables of interest between participants in Times 1 and 2 (perceptions of political conflict) and Times 2 and 3 (family cohesion). At the trend level, adolescents who perceived more political conflict at Time 1 were less likely to return to the study by Time 3 ($t(328) = 1.78, p < .10$).

The surveyed neighbourhoods were selected by an expert in the political geography of Northern Ireland (for more details, see Author Identifying Citation). Each neighbourhood in Belfast was relatively homogenous in terms of Catholic/Protestant identity and social deprivation (NINIS, 2011), and the majority were interfaced (i.e., adjacent to a neighbourhood comprised of the other community). Stratified random sampling was then used to select families within these neighbourhoods, from which the mother and one of her children between the ages of 10 and 17 years old participated in the study.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face in the participants' homes by trained staff from an established market research firm, lasting approximately 60 minutes for the mother and 30 minutes for the adolescent. Families received £40 at Time 1 and £50 at Times 2 and 3 for their participation. Mothers and adolescents were interviewed separately, and both provided informed consent and assent, respectively, prior to participating, consistent with IRB approval at all participating universities.

Measures

Perceptions of political conflict in Northern Ireland. Youth reports were used to gauge perceptions of on-going conflict; each adolescent at Time 1 was asked "Is there still political conflict in Northern Ireland?" and responded with 1 (*Yes*) or 0 (*No*). This item derives from the

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT), which comprises questionnaire data from 1998-2015 on a range of issues related to political attitudes and community relations in Northern Ireland (ARK, 2014). Thus, this question was specifically designed to assess the overall perception of intergroup tension in Northern Ireland.

Family cohesion. To reduce the potential threat of mono-reporter bias, mother reports on the 9-item family cohesion sub-scale of the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1994) were used to assess the amount of support and togetherness in each family at Time 2. This subscale has been shown to have adequate test-retest reliability with normative and distressed families (Moos & Moos, 1994), with lower internal consistencies (Lucia & Breslau, 2006). This measure has previously been used in Northern Ireland to assess how family cohesion relates to adolescents' aggression (Taylor et al., 2016), overall adjustment, emotional security, and prosocial behaviour (Cummings et al., 2010). In this study, mothers were presented with nine items related to family cohesion and reported a 1 (*true*) or 0 (*false*) for each statement. Sample items include "People in my family really back each other up;" and "We really get along well with each other." The internal consistency was .48, calculated using the Kuder-Richardson statistic because of the binary nature of the data.

Civic engagement. Youth reports on items from the 2004 Young Life and Times (YLT; ARK, 2006) were used to measure adolescents' civic engagement at Time 3. Since 2003, the YLT has surveyed 16-year-olds living in Northern Ireland on an annual basis to document and understand the first-hand experiences of young people regarding their experiences of school and their views on politics, sectarianism and other social issues. In the current study, each adolescent was asked to indicate how frequently in the past 12 months they had participated in a list of events on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = *never* to 4 = *always*. The items were compared

to other scales; two non-overlapping civic participation items were added from Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner, and Lerner (2010): “helped out at your school” and “volunteered your time.” Higher scores indicated more engagement; as indicated below, preliminary analyses identified two 4-item subscales, each with good internal consistency: volunteering subscale ($\alpha = .83$; volunteered your time, helped with fundraising and collected money (for charity), helped out at your school, taken part in a sponsored event) and political subscale ($\alpha = .73$; signed a petition, boycotted certain products, campaigned on behalf of a group (or charity), became a leader in a group or organization).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 includes the means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all study variables. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted in SPSS 20.0 in order to examine the relations among the civic engagement items. Maximum likelihood was used and promax rotation allowed the factors to be correlated. The results revealed two distinct, yet related ($r = .50, p < .01$), types of civic engagement in the pattern of participants’ responses: volunteering and political participation.

Latent variables for family cohesion, volunteering, and political engagement were constructed using parcels in order to increase the efficiency of estimation (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Aggregating multiple items into a manifest variable (or parcel) achieves a more normal distribution with smaller intervals between points on the original scale of items. In addition, latent variables with three parcels have a stable factor solution among the items (Little et al., 2002). The items-to-construct balance approach was used to create three parcels for each of the latent variables. In this procedure, the factor loadings are ranked from

highest to lowest. The three items with the highest loading are allocated to each parcel, while the remaining loadings are assigned in snake order (e.g. 1, 6; 2, 5; 3, 4) to achieve balance within each parcel. The 9-item family cohesion subscale had three items allocated to each parcel. The 4-item volunteering and political engagement subscales each included the fourth item on the parcel with the largest loading.

Primary Analyses

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used in Amos Graphics 22 to test family cohesion at Time 2 as a mediator between adolescents' perceptions of political conflict at Time 1 and their volunteering and political engagement at Time 3. The primary model was tested using maximum likelihood estimation with the assumption that data are missing at random (Enders & Bandalos, 2001). Model fit was assessed using the following guidelines: χ^2/df index ≤ 3 , Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) and comparative fit index (CFI) $\geq .90$, and a root mean square residual (RMSEA) $\leq .08$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

The full structural equation model is shown in Figure 1, including both direct and indirect effects. Overall, the model adequately fit the data ($N=731$, $\chi^2(51)=203.37$, $p<.001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.99$; TLI=.84; CFI=.91; RMSEA=.055 (CI: .047, .063)). Regarding the control variables, both age and gender had significant effects on civic engagement; older participants reported more political engagement ($\beta=.09$, $p<.05$), and younger participants reported greater volunteerism ($\beta=-.25$, $p<.001$). In addition, female adolescents reported higher levels of volunteerism than males ($\beta=.13$, $p<.05$), whereas political engagement did not vary by gender. The effect of Catholic/Protestant identity was non-significant for both volunteering and political engagement.

To test the hypothesis that family cohesion mediates the link between youth perceptions of political conflict in Northern Ireland and their civic engagement, the direct and indirect effects

were analysed. Perceived political conflict significantly predicted greater family cohesion a year later ($\beta=.29, p<.001$), and in turn, greater cohesion was positively related to both political engagement ($\beta=.21, p<.01$) and volunteerism ($\beta=.22, p<.01$) over time. The direct effect of perceived political conflict on adolescents' political engagement two years later was non-significant. However, the direct effect of perceived political conflict on volunteerism remained marginally significant ($\beta=.14, p<.10$). Amos does not allow for estimation of bootstrapped confidence intervals for the indirect effects with missing data; therefore, the Sobel method was adopted as simulations have shown it to produce unbiased estimates for similar models with sample sizes of at least $N = 400$ (Stone & Sobel, 1990). The Sobel test found that family cohesion acted as a significant mediator between youth's perceived conflict in Northern Ireland and both their civic ($z=2.08, p<.05$) and political engagement ($z=2.25, p<.05$). As a robustness check, the same model was run in Amos on complete case data and found the same pattern of results. Thus, family cohesion partially mediated the link between adolescents' perceptions of political conflict in Northern Ireland and later volunteerism and political engagement.

Discussion

Building on the growing body of research that focuses on political violence and youth adaptive outcomes (Keresteš, 2006; Macksound & Aber, 1996; Taylor et al., 2014), this study attends to resilience processes in the face of adversity (Barber, 2013). The results identified two forms of engagement – volunteerism and political participation – among youth in Belfast, a setting of protracted intergroup conflict. Older adolescents reported higher levels of political engagement, such as boycotting products, while younger adolescents endorsed more volunteerism, such as helping at school. Female youth also reported higher levels of volunteerism compared to males. Supporting FST, the SEM with multiple reporters across three

time points revealed that family cohesion was a significant partial mediator between perceived political conflict and youth volunteerism and political engagement. That is, perceiving political conflict related to increased support and togetherness among youth and their families, which in turn related to more youth political engagement and volunteerism in their schools and communities. These findings have implications not only for individuals, but also for civic and political spheres.

The inclusive definition of civic engagement allowed for the meaningful differentiation between volunteerism and political forms of youth participation, with similar patterns found in other cross-cultural studies (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Jahromi et al., 2012; McCouch, 2009; Yate & Youniss, 2009). For example, volunteerism as a form of civic engagement is related to participation in school, community service, and charity events; these types of behaviours may be the antecedents to peacebuilding (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006; Taylor, 2015). In addition, the political forms of civic engagement included in the current study represent important building blocks for democratic participation and non-violent means to resolve intergroup differences (Bužinkić, 2013; Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; De Maio, 2013). Moreover, civic engagement during adolescence may have long-term implications for societal involvement and participation (Finlay, Wray-Lake, & Flanagan, 2010; Zaff, Malanchuk, & Eccles, 2008).

The findings also support previous research that has found a cohesive family environment may lead to more positive youth outcomes (Cummings et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2016), with strong family bonds relating to youths' volunteerism and political participation (Zaff et al., 2008), particularly for marginalized adolescents (Diemer, 2012). Prior research has also found that family life influences the development of civic engagement, such as volunteerism, over the life course (Lancee & Radl, 2014). Consistent with FST, in the current study youth who perceive

greater political conflict may turn to their families for support, strengthening the cohesive bonds over time. This suggests that practitioners who aim to promote greater civic engagement among young people should take the family environment into account (Bringle, 2005).

Although there were no differences by Catholic/Protestant identity, the gender- and age-related main effects warrant some discussion. Consistent with previous research, females were more likely to be engaged in volunteerism, such as charity work (Einolf, 2011). However, both male and female adolescents participated in the political forms of civic life, in line with other research (Cicognani et al., 2012). With regard to age, on the one hand, older youth reported more political engagement; older adolescents may have increased autonomy which allows them to increase participate or take on more leadership roles. On the other hand, younger participants reported greater volunteerism. This finding may be related to the fact that youth in Northern Ireland have the opportunity to leave formal schooling at age 16. Thus, one possibility is that the older youth had dropped or aged out of schooling, lowering the possibility for volunteering through the school. This suggests that the formal school environment may be a key space of civic engagement (Finlay et al., 2010; Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Outside of the home, educational institutions have become central in promoting social engagement in civic life (Cheung et al., 2004); therefore greater efforts may be needed to include and motivate participation of older teens and emerging adults in volunteerism and civic life.

Despite the study's strengths, limitations of the current approach may be addressed in future research. First the longitudinal design allowed for assessing the sequence of effects; however, limited assessment occasions did not permit controlling for earlier time points (i.e., stability coefficients). Using Amos limited the ability to test for bootstrapped confidence intervals for the indirect effects; however, our sample size was large in relation to the model,

which allows the Sobel method to be used for assessing the indirect effects (Stone & Sobel, 1990, p. 349-350). With longitudinal data, future research could also examine developmental trajectories of other factors related to youth civic engagement in settings of protracted conflict (Youniss, 2006; Zaff et al., 2010).

Second, although measurement error was accounted for in the SEM, future research could be refine and expand measurement in the future. For example, the low alpha for family cohesion in the current study, perhaps related to the binary nature of the response scale or the high number of reverse coded items, could be addressed in future research that includes other family constructs to complement the cohesion subscale. For example, additional mediators such as family communication or family ethnic socialization may also be considered in future research. Follow-up studies could also apply other measures for civic engagement, as the ones utilized were developed in Northern Ireland to increase contextual validity. Additional forms of assessment may help to address uncertainty around adolescents who responded ‘no’ to perceived political conflict; that is, responses in the current study could be due to lack of direct exposure, low levels of political awareness, or desensitization, for example. In addition, in the current study youth reported on perceived political conflict and civic engagement, so mother-reports of family cohesion were included to avoid mono-reporter bias. Future research should continue to include multiple reporters, as possible.

Finally, as noted in the introduction, in settings of protracted conflict, it is necessary to understand the context shaping various forms of volunteerism and political engagement. That is, extending the exploratory factor analysis in this paper, future research could also seek qualitative information about types of civic engagement and the targets of such acts, including the potential dark side of participation in civic life (Banaji, 2008). However, in other settings, higher levels of

civic engagement is related to less youth delinquency (Gatti, Tremblay, & Larocque, 2003). That is, when youth feel connected to the social institutions around them, even if a majority are ingroup members, they are less likely to engage in violent or disruptive behaviours (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Therefore, future research should continue to unpack the potential peacebuilding implications of youth civic engagement in settings of protracted conflict.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study points to the need to understand the ways young people growing up in situations of political conflict may engage and participate in civic and political life, highlighting the role of the family in fostering prosocial behaviours (Barber, 2013). Adopting a competence-based approach that recognizes youth agency, this paper found that youth may be the drivers of positive social change, not merely the beneficiaries. Policymakers and practitioners should cooperate with youth as partners and encourage intergenerational collaboration in research and interventions. Moreover, there is global support for this direction through the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989). This agreement establishes that youth have a right to participate in decision-making that affects their lives, to express their views and be heard, to create and join associations, to assemble peacefully, and to participate in change processes (CRC, 1989).

The current study also points to a set of policy recommendations for young people in post-accord Belfast. For example, since 2007 citizenship curricula in schools have already been shown to foster civic attitudes and behaviours (O'Connor, Beattie, & Neins, 2009). This approach to local and global citizenship has been perceived to be “process-orientated learning, directed at participation in all aspects of society, including party politics, volunteering, business and social life” (Niens & McIlrath, 2010, p. 77), in line with the current findings related to forms

of civic engagement such as volunteerism and political participation. In addition, school initiatives in Northern Ireland have fostered school-community partnerships through the voluntary sector that have a wider community impact (Kinlen et al. 2013). However, agencies and institutions interested in promoting greater participation among youth should also include factors outside of school, such as families (Diemer, 2012; Zaff et al., 2008). Working with parents to support their children to participate in constructive forms of civic and political life may yield stronger results. In addition, programmes should be developed that encourage volunteerism among older teens and those outside formal schooling in the transition to emerging adulthood (Henn & Foard, 2014). Given the potentially divisive nature of politics in Northern Ireland, the impact of programmes should also be critically evaluated to promote constructive and non-violent forms of civic engagement to increase the peacebuilding potential of youth (McKeown & Cairns, 2012).

Overall, these findings support a ‘decades thinking’ approach to conflict transformation in settings of protracted conflict (Lederach, 1997). The focus on adolescent agency and constructive behaviours that may help to rebuild society (Bužinkić, 2013; Corkalo Biruski et al., 2014; McCouch, 2009) addresses the question of whether young people in Northern Ireland will be “troublemakers or peacemakers” (McEvoy-Levy, 2006).

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all study variables ($N = 731$)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	1	2	3	4	
1. Female	50.89% Female			-				
2. Catholic	40.90% Catholic			-0.02	-			
3. Age (T1)	14.72	1.99	10-19	-0.01	0.03	-		
4. Youth Perceptions of Political Conflict in Northern Ireland (T1) ^a	0.61	0.49	0-1	-0.04	.34**	-0.02	-	
5. Family Cohesion (T2) ^m	6.94	1.55	1-9	0.01	.22**	-0.02	.24**	
6. Youth Political Engagement (T3) ^a	0.59	1.53	0-13	-0.01	0.09	0.08	0.06	.1
7. Youth Volunteerism (T3) ^a	3.24	3.12	0-14	0.11*	0.02	-.24**	0.11	.1

Note: ^a = Adolescent's report; ^m = Mother's report. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1. Structural equation model of family cohesion as a mediator between youth perceptions of political conflict in Northern Ireland and their levels of political engagement and volunteerism. Standardized coefficients are reported. Error variances are omitted from the model for readability. Exogenous predictors were correlated and estimated errors for endogenous outcomes were also allowed to correlate. Black full lines represent significant paths; dashed lines represent trends; and dotted lines are non-significant. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Model Fit: ($N=731$, $\chi^2(51) = 203.37$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.99$; TLI = .84; CFI = .91; RMSEA = .055 (CI: .047, .063)).

