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Citizen X: Exploring Connectedness and Engagement: Among Engaged Youth - An Existential Analysis

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Abstract

What value do we place on *being* engaged? Civic engagement connects us to social institutions that enhance well-being, self-worth and quality of life satisfaction. Yet, for youth (ages 18–22), there exists the phenomena of civic engagement in spite of isolation, lack of skills or discrimination. This article explores the explicit and implicit meanings of civic engagement among our youth, and the elements needed to achieve meaning in their lives – even through civic engagement. This analysis explores the interpretation of civic engagement among youth, and the individuals who present as connected and engaged. Forty individuals were surveyed with 18 comprising the youth group (ages 20–22). The results show the types of civic duties they participated in and the relationship to their satisfaction with their quality of life. It is believed that the respondents who presented as most connected and engaged were those who were saturated with strong civic messages pre-adolescence. These individuals presented a strong sense of hope, a conscious choice in serving others and a strong sense of community that are central to existential theory.

Keywords: civic engagement, existential meaning, connectedness, efficacy, civic commitment, political affiliation, volunteerism, voting, philanthropy, minority, minorities

1. Introduction

Civic engagement is an indicator of one's connection to society [1–6]. More than one's level of volunteerism and voting practices, civic engagement is social, emotional and financial participation in civic life to positively influence the future of the community through shared governance [1, 5, 7, 8]. Civic engagement constitutes a range of activities, such as voting, volunteerism, association membership or political and community activism, that strengthen participatory democracy [1, 7–10]. However, civic engagement also involves an individual's commitment to the common good as well as a sensitivity or empathy to positive social change [2–4, 9, 11].

Through the explicit practices of voting, volunteerism, and association membership, civic engagement enhances one's feelings and perceptions of citizenship [2, 7, 8, 11–15]. Engagement allows individuals to develop a greater sense of

community as extensions of their diverse civic identities [4, 16, 17], and emphasizes an individual's social connectedness, social integration and influence in self-governance as depicted by their civic commitment, political affiliations, and external efficacy, or belief that one can make a difference in society [2, 3, 9, 11, 12, 15, 18].

This article explores both the explicit and implicit meanings of civic engagement among young minorities. A qualitative analysis, the article presents findings that are theoretically driven by an existential perspective of freedom, choice and self-discovery through *being*. This exploration concludes with a discussion on the meaning of civic engagement and the process of being engaged as it may be interpreted by young minorities.

2. Literature review

Civic engagement connects minorities to social institutions that enhance well-being and feelings of self-worth in society [1, 2, 7, 8, 19]. Yet, for minorities, there exists the phenomena of civic engagement and the will to be engaged in spite of racism, discrimination or marginalization [1, 3, 4, 18, 19].

Alienation, suffering, feelings of aloneness and estrangement from various aspects of society can diminish connectedness, hopefulness and one's self-discovery as an engaged citizen, especially among young minorities [3, 4, 18–21]. Individuals who may be likely to experience disengagement, social exclusion or alienation due to race, ethnicity or cultural background, may be less likely to experience social connectedness and civic engagement, be involved in civic activities, or able to positively evaluate the worth of their engagement [1, 3, 11, 20, 22].

For minorities in communities plagued by poverty, crime and sustained estrangement from mainstream society, aspects of disengagement abound [3, 10, 12, 20]. There is less voter turnout often in these communities, fewer member associations to promote volunteerism, and minimal political involvement to promote external efficacy, for instance [10, 11, 14, 15, 17]. In essence, these individuals, who have a great potential to being engaged in society, are more likely to believe themselves as and feel alienated from civic and political institutions [3, 10, 18, 20, 22].

However, social connectedness and civic engagement enhance hope and increase the likelihood that an individual feels included, understood and valued by society [4, 16], as well as feel a sense of confidence about their contributions to society [8, 11, 19]. From an existential perspective, being engaged decreases the level of inertia and feelings of aloneness and helplessness especially among our young minorities [19–21, 23–26].

Being connected and engaged has, in itself, a myriad of meanings for each individual [19, 21]. This will to *being* socially connected and civically engaged provides an individual with the ability to make civic choices, feel a sense of freedom, and evaluate those choices and feelings as they relate to a loss or gain of one's civic value to society [19, 21, 22]. An individual demonstrates external efficacy by acting on securing his or her future to shape its outcome through civic activities, association memberships, political activism and voting practice [12, 19, 21]. But when an individual struggles to find meaning or purpose in their lives, when he or she experiences worthlessness or even nothingness, this individual is thrust into an "existential vacuum," an existence Frankl [24] notes as a "state of boredom," or apathy and cynicism that can lead to distress, depression and aggression (p. 111).

There are, however, several elements that help us achieve meaning overall in our lives (**Figure 1**). Persons achieve meaning when they 1) achieve valued goals; 2) engage in inspiring activities; 3) perceive the world as fair (i.e. general social trust); 4) understand their own abilities and limitations (self-efficacy); 5) exhibit a level of

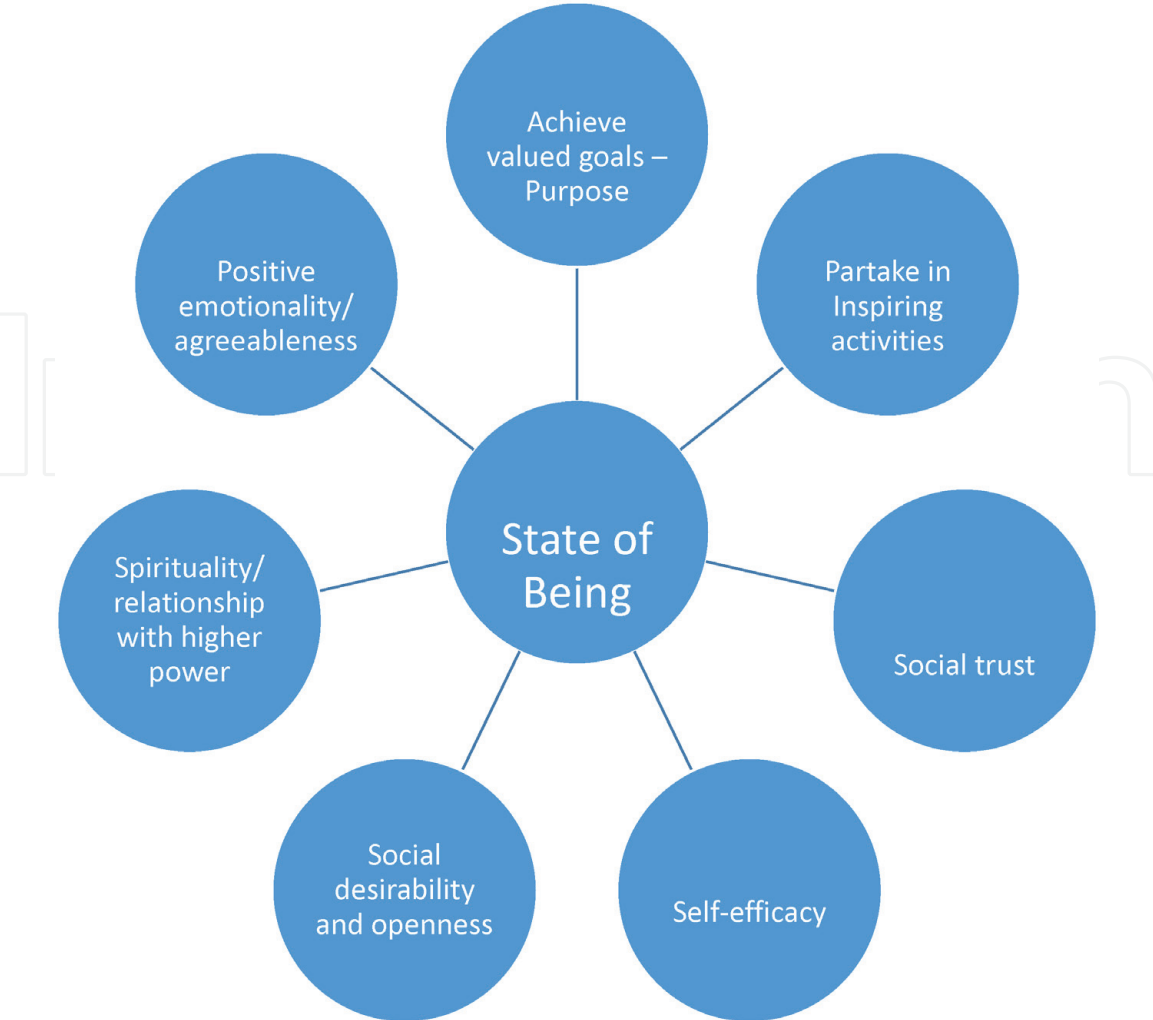


Figure 1.
Existential elements to achieving meaning.

social desirability and openness among others; 6) demonstrate some level of spirituality and exhibit a relationship with a higher power; and, 7) exhibit positive emotionality and a level of agreeableness [19, 21]. When presented in the form of civic meaning in the life of an individual, several civic indicators can be applied to this model to assist in informing whether an individual has achieved civic meaning.

Specific civic indicators serve as the focus of this article. These indicators are 1) *Commitment* – one’s level of commitment to their civic activities and contributions to the common good [2, 3, 12]; 2) *External Efficacy* – one’s level of external efficacy, or the belief that one’s actions have a positive influence on others and society [12]; 3) *Service Satisfaction* – one’s level of satisfaction with helping others and contributions to the common good [7, 12]; 4) *Political Affiliation Satisfaction* – one’s level of satisfaction with a political party of choice and/or one’s political activism [14, 15, 27]; 5) *Volunteerism* – one’s volunteer activities [4, 11]; 6) *Philanthropy* – one’s level of philanthropy and how one directs their resources toward the common good [8, 28]; and, 7) *Voting* – one’s voting routines [22, 27].

While voting, philanthropy and volunteerism appear to illustrate explicit meanings of the individual’s actual civic experience; commitment, efficacy, and satisfaction appear to describe implicit meanings of an individual’s connectedness and engagement [19]. It is the relationship between explicit and implicit meaning that helps to capture the depth and breadth of an individual’s connectedness to and engagement with society [19]. Thus, *being* connected to society and engaged as *citizen* is defined by the individual’s own existence.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore social connectedness and civic engagement as interpreted and evaluated by minority young adults. According to Strauss & Corbin [29], grounded theory allows us to study subjects or areas we know little about. Grounded theory allows conceptual models to emerge from immersion in the field of study and data collection. This allows themes to become known that can clarify the area under study [29, 30]. While research exists that defines and measures minority civic and political participation [7, 12, 17, 22], grounded theory helps us further explore reasons for civic participation in specific activities and how these elements intersect among young minorities.

3.1 Research background, the study sample & focus group

This qualitative exploration emerged from a descriptive study on how participation in youth mentoring programs influenced educational outcomes and community service involvement [28]. The study consisted of economically disadvantaged minorities between the ages of 20 through 27 years, from communities throughout the U.S. – New York, California, Massachusetts, Texas, Louisiana, Ohio, New Jersey, Illinois, and Maryland to explore civic involvement and civic beliefs from adolescent through young adulthood.

The principal investigator returned to the original respondents requesting participation in an asynchronous, web-based focus group. The qualitative study consisted of a detailed, online survey that allowed respondents to present a reflective journal on their civic experiences from adolescence to young adulthood. These questions included “In looking back on your years of voting since turning 18 years of age, are you now more likely or less likely to believe your vote counts? *Please explain?*” Or, it included questions such as “How would you characterize your level of satisfaction with the service you performed? (Describe your satisfaction with what you do or have done in serving others?)”

Out of three initial mailings, only 29 respondents expressed an interest in being involved in the self-directed, intensive web-based focus group. Much of the contact between the principal investigator and the respondents occurred via internet-based interaction. Regular follow-up through additional mailings (a total of three) were required to ensure respondents’ reflective journals were completed. With attrition, the focus group consisted of 13 respondents.

3.2 Data analysis

Each journal entry was downloaded from the server and converted to a text file (ASCII format; .txt). The text files were transferred to Atlasti, a qualitative data management program. Coding of data occurred by coding each reflection according to questions posed. The reflections were reviewed for emerging themes such as degree of external/political efficacy; types of service performed by respondents; voting practices; and, satisfaction with political affiliations.

4. Limitations

There are several limitations within this qualitative study. First, the length and duration of the journal reflections were much longer than the principal investigator initially considered. The journal took, on average, two to three weeks to complete,

rather than the three days presumed by the investigator. Thus, the time factor was more of an investment for the respondents than initially intended. Also, the requests to participate in this study came within six months of the completion of the previous study. Potential respondents may have experienced fatigue, as the second survey was less direct (open-ended) and much longer than the first.

In addition to the length of the survey, technology may have also encroached on the strengths of this exploration. The qualitative study was particularly reliant on technology and web-based interaction between the respondents and the principal investigator. This required more than minimal technological skill of respondents to properly engage in the study. As such, it is unknown the degree to which an emphasis on technology prevented potential respondents from participating.

5. Results

There were thirteen respondents in the focus group. Four of the respondents were males and nine of the respondents were females (**Table 1**). The average age is 23.85 years. The median salary range is \$25 K to 30 K. Respondents were given pseudonyms.

	Age	Respondents' Gender	Current Salary	Current Field/ Vocation	U.S. Region	Residential Type
Archie	22	MALE	<15 K	Customer Service	South	Urban
Ella	23	FEMALE	25-35 K	Business	Mid West	Inner City
Meris	22	FEMALE	35-50 K	Business	Pacific Northwest	Urban
Lynda	26	FEMALE	<15 K	Unknown	Midwest	Suburban
Olivia	25	FEMALE	35-50 K	Education	Midwest	Suburban
Ben	24	MALE	35-50 K	Unknown	Northeast	Suburban
Jack	23	MALE	<15 K	Arts & Entertainment	Northeast	Inner City
Colin	23	MALE	25-35 K	Science/ Engineering	Mid West	Urban
Gemma	25	FEMALE	<15 K	Military/ Medical	Northeast	Inner City
Harmony	23	FEMALE	25-35 K	Science/ Engineering	Mid West	Suburban
Ana Lee	25	FEMALE	35-50 K	Education	Northeast	Urban
Gia	26	FEMALE	15-25 K	Graduate student	Northeast	Urban
Charlotte	23	FEMALE	<15 K	Graduate Student	South	Unknown
Average	23.85 yr.	Males (4) Females (9)	Approx. 25 K		South (2) Midwest (5) Northeast (5) Pacific NW (1)	Urban (5) Inner City (3) Suburban (4) Unknown (1)

Table 1.
Current demographics (N = 13).

5.1 The group

“Ella” is a 23 year old African American female from Ohio, and received an associate’s degree in business. She credits her religious faith with influencing her civic activities. “Meris” is a 22 year old Hispanic female from Illinois. She serves on the board of a public cultural institution designed to promote and serve the Hispanic community within the state. Finally, she is the first in her family to attend and graduate from college. “Lynda” is a 26 year old African American female from Ohio, who already attained an advanced degree and is seeking another. “Archie” is a 22 year old African American male from Louisiana, and is a graduate of a selective university. He credits his parents with influencing his commitment to civic activities. “Olivia” is a 25 year old bi-racial female from Ohio. In addition to her advanced degrees, Olivia has association memberships that have sustained since her early adolescence.

“Colin” is a 23 year old African American male from Maryland, a college graduate and currently involved in the field of engineering. “Jack” is a 23 year old African American male from New York and is a graduate of a selective university. “Charlotte” is a 23 year old bi-racial female from Louisiana and expressed strong community attachment. “Ana Lee” is a 25 year old immigrant female from the Caribbean who identifies herself as African American. She took over six years to complete her college degree because, as she indicates, of limited finances and family support. She is from New York.

“Ben” is a 24 year old immigrant male from the Caribbean and also identifies himself as African American. He also resides in New York, and acknowledges irregular involvement in civic activities. “Gia” is a 26 year old African American female from Maryland who has a strong belief in the public good and general welfare, but does not involve herself in the activities that would benefit the public good. “Harmony” is a 23 year old African American from Ohio who expressed feelings of alienation and disengagement from the school community. Finally, “Gemma” is a 25 year old African American female from New York. She is an officer with the United States military where she is also studying to be a physician. Gemma always wanted to join the armed forces and completed college in order to fulfill her dream of becoming an officer.

While this summary provides an overview of the respondents’ general characteristics, how is connectedness and engagement explicitly and implicitly represented among the group? Respondents’ reflections are coded into groupings of explicit meaning and implicit meaning of civic indicators (Table 2).

5.2 Explicit meaning of civic indicators of connectedness and engagement

Civic indicators that illustrate explicit meaning of connectedness and engagement are volunteerism, level of philanthropy and voting practices. Responses indicating volunteerism were coded and expressed through the respondents’ hours of volunteer service as well as the types of service performed. Philanthropy is represented as “high contributions” (i.e. more than \$200 per year), “moderate contributions” (i.e. \$1 to \$200 per year), and “no contributions” (i.e. \$0 per year). Voting responses were grouped into three categories – 1) respondents who voted regularly; 2) respondents who voted sometimes; and, 3) respondents who had not voted.

Volunteerism: Archie completed more than 50 hours the year prior to the study. The bulk of his service was directed to after school tutoring for elementary children, serving as an adult mentor, and participating mostly through his worship center. Ella completed over 50 hours of service. Ella’s service included volunteering at nursing homes as well as cultural organizations. In addition, she is very active in

Civic Indicators of Implicit Meaning of Social Connectedness and Engagement					Civic Indicators of Explicit Meaning of Social Connectedness and Engagement		
	Level of Commitment	General/ Political Efficacy	Satisfaction with Service	Satisfaction with Political Affiliation	Volunteer Activity	Philanthropy	Voting
High Outcome Levels	Ella† Meris† Lynda Olivia Charlotte	Ella† Lynda Harmony Charlotte	Ella† Meris† Olivia Jack	Ella† Meris† Charlotte	Archie† Ella† Meris†	Ella† Meris† Gemma	Ella† Lynda Gemma Harmony Charlotte
Moderate Outcome Levels	Archie† Jack Colin Ana Lee	Archie† Meris† Olivia Gia	Archie† Colin Ana Lee	Archie† Lynda Olivia Colin Ana Lee	Lynda Olivia	Lynda Olivia Gia	Archie† Meris† Olivia Ben Ana Lee
Low Outcome Levels	Ben Gemma Harmony Gia	Ben Jack Colin Gemma Ana Lee	Lynda Ben Gemma Harmony Gia Charlotte	Ben Jack Gemma Harmony Gia	Ben Colin Jack Gemma Harmony Gia Ana Lee Charlotte	Archie† Ben Jack Colin Harmony Ana Lee Charlotte	Jack Colin Gia

† = high levels of civic participation.

Table 2.
Categories of groupings.

her religious community visiting the sick. Meris completed more than 20 hours of service in the year prior to the study. Her volunteerism is filled with various activities from working with “soup kitchens” to board leadership. As a board member, Meris creates programs designed to address and improve quality of life issues for the state’s Hispanic community. In addition to her community leadership, Meris mentors a young girl who had been involved with the state’s juvenile court system. These three individuals exhibited the highest levels of volunteerism among the focus group.

Respondents with moderate levels of volunteerism had an irregular continuum of service since early adolescence, and were less likely to have volunteered in the year prior to the study. In particular, Lynda completed over 100 hours of service in high school and college, in the year prior to this study, she did not perform service. Ben performed about 10 hours of service during college where he helped out at neighborhood pantries, and assisted with home building through an affiliate of Habitat for Humanity. Yet, in the year prior to this study, Ben did not participate in service. Jack completed only 5 hours of service raising money for Lupus, breast cancer or HIV/AIDS awareness through the running of marathons. Olivia completed less than 20 hours of service with a women’s crisis shelter and sometimes with her local library.

Respondents with the lowest levels of volunteerism either did not perform service at all during their youth or performed service on an irregular basis. This may signify little attachment to volunteerism. These individuals were Harmony, Gia, Colin, Gemma, Ana Lee and Charlotte.

Philanthropy: Only three respondents contributed more than \$300 per year to a charity. Ella donated \$2000 to her church community in the year preceding the study. Much of her donations were attributed to “tithing” or special offerings to her church community, in addition to in-kind gifts of clothes, food and other non-financial gifts. Gemma contributed \$350 to charity, and Meris contributed \$300 to charitable causes. While Gemma did not elaborate on the recipients of her donations, Meris elaborated that she gives back to the youth programs that helped her. The consensus in this sub-group was that they were financially giving back to meaningful institutions that influenced their engagement – religious community and youth programs.

Moderate contributions were provided by Gia, Lynda and Olivia. In the year preceding the study, Gia gave a total of \$110. The recipient of her gift was a mentoring program that guided her through high school and college. In addition, she noted that all of her current and future “monetary donations go to programs that support children and/or education.” Lynda gave a total of \$50 to charity in the year preceding the study. Finally, Olivia gave a total of \$30. The recipients of her gifts are the Sierra Club, the Arbor Day Foundation, or her alma maters (high school, college, and graduate school). Olivia expressed that she never considered donating significant financial contributions until this survey arrived.

The remaining respondents did not give any financial contributions to charitable causes in the year preceding the study. This sub-group includes all of the males, Archie, Ben, Jack and Colin, as well as Ana Lee, Harmony and Charlotte. Some of the reasons presented were lack of funds, no time to contribute, or contributing was not an immediate focus.

Voting: Respondents discussed their beliefs about voting, but also their voting history or likelihood of voting. Interestingly, for some of the respondents, they had not considered voting as a civic behavior until the receipt of the surveys. Five respondents identified themselves as regular voters. Gemma noted that she votes regularly to “affect change,” and Lynda noted that she goes out of her way to vote with others, as a group, to make an impact. Ella votes in all of the elections, no

matter the type of election, and Harmony votes regularly because of her faith and belief in the power of voting. Charlotte indicated that by regularly voting she's "participating in the community [and] its decisions."

Moderate voters included Ben, Ana Lee, Olivia, Meris, and Archie. Their voting practices were irregular. However, the strong consensus of this sub-group was that their votes counted for less in national elections than in local elections. The non-voters are Jack, Colin and Gia. Gia expressed her cynicism about voting. Yet she indicated she was more likely to vote in local elections rather than in national elections.

5.3 Implicit meaning of civic indicators of connectedness and engagement

Civic indicators that illustrate implicit meaning of connectedness and engagement are commitment to service, external/political efficacy, and satisfaction with service along with satisfaction with political party affiliation. Responses indicating level of commitment to service were coded and expressed through the following areas – extremely committed, committed, somewhat committed, not very committed, not committed. Responses indicating external/political efficacy – or the belief that one's actions, particularly one's vote, has a positive influence on society – were coded and expressed through the following areas – a *strong* external efficacy, or belief that one's actions, particularly one's vote, have a positive influence on society; *moderate* external efficacy, or the belief that one's actions, particularly one's vote, have some positive influence on society; and, *weak* external efficacy, or the belief that one's actions, particularly one's vote, have little or no positive influence on society.

Responses indicating satisfaction with civic activities, particularly civic service, were coded and expressed through the following areas – "extremely satisfied," "satisfied," "somewhat satisfied," "neither satisfied or dissatisfied," "somewhat dissatisfied," "dissatisfied," "extremely dissatisfied." Responses indicating satisfaction with political party affiliation were coded and expressed through the following areas – strong democrat, weak democrat, independent, weak republican, strong republican, and then grouped by level of satisfaction.

Level of Commitment: When looking at the study group, only five respondents (all female) appeared more committed to service in adulthood than the other respondents. Meris expressed she was extremely committed to her service in community leadership as well as her mentoring of at-risk youths. She cited that "[c]ommitment is shown through time and resources dedicated." Charlotte also expressed extreme commitment to service through voting and her service to others through her in-kind gifts. Lynda, Olivia and Ella presented as "committed" to service. Lynda expressed a strong attachment to her community and its improvement, while Olivia expressed being committed to service but also trying to balance this commitment with her responsibilities to her family. Ella cited her commitment as a result of her religious beliefs.

Ana Lee, Jack, Archie and Colin presented as "somewhat committed" to service. However, the consensus among this sub-group was the many other obligations or commitments obstructed or diminished their level of commitment to civic issues or activities. Finally, Harmony presented as "not committed" to service. Both Gemma and Harmony see their vocations as their contributions to society and do not have an interest or level of commitment to volunteerism or other civic activities beyond the parameters and requirements of their vocations.

External/Political Efficacy: Lynda, Ella, Harmony and Charlotte exhibited strong external/political efficacy in their responses and strongly believed their voting practices counted. In particular, Harmony expressed that she knew her vote

counted because of her faith, and Charlotte believed her vote affects outcomes in her community. Olivia, Meris, Archie and Gia exhibited moderate external efficacy in their responses. Olivia believed her voting practices, in particular, counted, but not in races where candidates were “pre-selected by party brokers.” Meris indicated that she was more inclined to participate more in local races and school board elections rather than participate in national elections. Archie concurs with Meris and is more inclined to vote in local elections because “there are no electoral colleges at these levels of governments.” Finally, Gia believes in voting but admits she is still too cynical.

Colin, Jack, Gemma, and Ben and Ana Lee exhibited weak external efficacy. This sub-group presented a significant level of cynicism post-2000 Presidential elections. In particular, the 2000 Presidential election decreased Jack’s desire to vote again – even in local elections. Gemma does not believe her vote counts or that she has any power in the governance of her community or nation. The two respondents who immigrated to the United States while they were children also exhibited a weak level of external efficacy. Ben strongly believed that votes count more in suburban areas that are less likely to be populated by “persons of color,” and Ana Lee expressed that she did not believe her vote counted.

Satisfaction with Service: When looking at the responses, most respondents expressed they were either “extremely satisfied” or “satisfied” with their civic service. Respondents who feel less than satisfied with their service were Ana Lee, Archie, and Colin. Ana Lee indicated that she feels guilty about her current level of service. Archie was somewhat dissatisfied because of his level of participation is not comparable to his past performance of service in his youth. Colin, however, is significantly dissatisfied with his performance of service and expressed a lot of concern regarding his lack of service. “I don’t have the time to involve myself in community activities.”

Satisfaction with Political Party Affiliation: A majority of the group identified themselves politically as “independent” while the remaining respondents identified themselves as strong or weak democrats, or strong republicans. Jack, Ella, and Gia identified themselves as strong democrats. However, Jack is not satisfied with the Democratic Party, and asserts that “I don’t think [my needs] have been met.” Ella, on the other hand, expressed satisfaction with the Democratic Party and noted that the “democrats have lived up to my expectations.” Gia, finally, is neutral in her satisfaction, as she faults Democrats and Republicans for having “both hurt the Black community.”

Archie and Lynda identified themselves as weak democrats. Archie, in particular, leans more toward the Democratic Party as he said he found that “democrats tend to do what is best for the community, especially economically.” Archie indicated that while a person can never expect candidates to do everything that they promised in their campaigning, he feels more satisfied with the Democratic Party. Lynda, on the other hand, did not have a strong affinity for the Democrats. Charlotte was the only respondent who identified herself as a strong republican. She expressed that she is “very pleased so far with my decision to be republican.” Charlotte noted that while she votes consistently for the party’s candidates, she votes for the person and on character rather than the candidate’s affiliation with the Republican Party.

Given the results, who are the independents within the group? Ben, Ana Lee, Gemma, Olivia, Harmony, Meris, and Colin all identified themselves as independents. Ben and Ana Lee are the only immigrants within the group. Ben cited he had no specific affinity for either party – Democrat or Republican, or any other political group, and indicated that he did not “feel like I am mainstream with democratic or republican....” Ana Lee identifies with the Green Party, but is not active with the

Green Party. Gemma does not “trust the wisdom or motivations of [any] political party...” and prefers to retain her objectivity, while Harmony just identifies herself as an independent and purposely desires not to belong to *any* political party. Olivia leans more toward the liberal party. She expressed that she grew up with republican parents but always felt her views were more liberal. She’s satisfied with her political choices as she identifies them as “well-balanced.” Meris identifies herself as independent and votes based on a person’s character and their public service history. Finally, Colin identifies himself as independent and indicates that while he leans toward the Democratic Party he is less than satisfied with the Democrats and the extent of their liberalism.

6. Discussion: an existential analysis

When looking at all of the results and how connected and engaged respondents appear, we see the seven elements highlighted by Mascaro and Rosen [19]. The minority respondents who presented as most connected and engaged were those who were saturated with strong civic messages and modeling since pre-adolescence. These individuals presented a strong sense of hope and conscious choice in serving others [19, 23]. Also, they presented a strong sense of community – or community attachment [4, 10, 16] that is central to existential theory [23–25].

Ella presents as the most engaged and connected of the respondents and appears to possess a purpose to her civic involvement and engages in inspiring activities that appear attributed to her religiosity. In addition, Ella appears to perceive the world as fair and exhibits both self and external efficacy. Further, she presents a good level of social desirability through her various civic activities, and exhibits some level of spirituality. Finally, she exhibits positive emotionality.

Likewise, Meris is also significantly engaged and connected, and maintains an influential role throughout her state in the Hispanic community. Not only does she involve herself on an individual level by shaping the future of a young teen she mentors, Meris also shapes the future of her community and her state through her community leadership role. She, too, presents a purpose to her civic activities, which are in themselves inspiring. In addition, she exhibits a strong degree of self and external efficacy as well as a level of social desirability. While it was unclear her level of spirituality, she did exhibit a level of positive emotionality in her responses.

Archie is the only male in the group who demonstrated a significant level of connectedness and engagement. Archie’s parents were strong role models for him and how one “gives back” to the community. Being a contributor to society is a part of his emotionality and how he may see himself in society. In addition to his level of spirituality, Archie also engages in inspirational activities, and demonstrates some levels of efficacy.

When looking at the respondents who exhibited less than strong social connectedness and engagement, it is very important to look at their outcomes in view of the elements by Mascaro & Rosen [19]. Gemma presents that her vocation in the armed forces is her service to society. In addition, Gemma gives large amounts to charity and votes regularly. However, she does not volunteer or link herself with any group that serves the public good, nor does she articulate a satisfaction with her political affiliations. Finally, while she is a member of the armed forces, she does not see herself making a difference in society nor is she committed to serving others except through her role in the armed forces. It is possible that Gemma prefers the impersonal aspects of philanthropy and voting and that she may find civic involvement through volunteerism outside her role in the armed forces and, thus, *meaningless* [19, 23, 25].

Harmony is another interesting respondent who exhibited less than strong social connectedness and civic engagement. From high school, Harmony did not feel as if she “belonged” in the school community because it was predominantly White and she was African American. She felt alienated at school, and did not feel as though her concerns had an audience in her home community. Although she may vote regularly, Harmony is less likely to volunteer, less likely to contribute to charitable causes, and is less likely to feel committed to service. Harmony is a good example of one who existed in an existential vacuum. Hopelessness, according to Mascaro and Rosen [19], is the loss of existential meaning and the will to *being*. It is this lack of meaning and hope that results in an existential neurosis leaving an individual experiencing the world as alone, estranged, and excluded.

This analysis helps us understand that exploring civic engagement is more than measuring explicit indicators such as voting or implicit indicators such as external efficacy or satisfaction. What value do we place on *being* engaged? According to existential theorists, we thrive in society when we have an *experience* not just an explanation of our existence [19, 23–26].

Overall, respondents with moderate to high external efficacy and regular voting practices and service behaviors are able to self-categorize their civic and political development [3, 14, 17, 22, 27]. Respondents who exhibited higher levels of disengagement were young persons who had a history with immigration as a child, or young adults who had strained relations with their parents or their educational settings. However, those individuals who embody the process of achieving civic meaning – Ella, Meris and Archie – consciously chose to be connected and involved in society [19, 23] based on their experiences, role models and meaningful connections in their early years [3, 4, 7, 9, 12, 17].

Ella, Meris and Archie appear to have been guided toward discovering their civic identities either through their parents, mentors or positive peer groups [12]. They remind us that spirituality combined with feeling supported and having an inspiring purpose keeps an individual from experiencing an existential vacuum. Spirituality, faith or religiosity cannot be overlooked when discussing connectedness and engagement. One’s religious experiences contribute to one’s civic values and sense of *being* connected and engaged.

7. Conclusion

Participation in service alone is not enough to sustain service and promote social connectedness and civic engagement. Young minorities must feel a sense of purpose and be inspired to participate in the activities while exhibiting social trust and efficacy. While being engaged in civic society may be an ideal goal for many citizens, civic engagement is not something that automatically occurs upon one’s transition to adulthood. Too many young minorities have little or no background in civic or political participation. In order to alter this disparaging fact, we must ensure that minority youth and their families are intrinsically and regularly involved in aspects of society from volunteering to voter mobilization to association and community memberships and charitable giving. Such processes diminish alienation and feeling dehumanized and ensures a person has a say in determining the worth of their *civic existence*.

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