

Opportunities and constraints for civic and political engagement of young immigrants: the cases of Angolans and Brazilians in Portugal¹

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Introduction

This paper consists in a preliminary study as part of PIDOP (Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation), project involving eight European countries (Portugal, Germany, Turkey, Czech Republic, Sweden, Italy, Belgium and United Kingdom). The main goal of the study is to provide an understanding of civic and political participation of young people in Portugal. The concept of “**political participation**” is used to refer to activity that has the intent or effect of influencing either regional, national or supranational governance, either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of individuals who make that policy (definition adapted from Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). By contrast, the term “**civic participation**” refers to voluntary activity focused on helping others, achieving a public good or solving a community problem, including work undertaken either alone or in cooperation with others in order to effect change (definition adapted from Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins & Delli Carpini, 2006).

¹ Paper presented at the 6th Annual Conference of the Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism (CRONEM), *Living Together - Civic, Political and Cultural Engagement Among Migrants, Minorities and National Populations*, 29th-30th June 2010, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK. Address for correspondence: Maria Fernandes-Jesus, Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, University of Porto, Rua do Dr. Manuel Pereira da Silva, 4200-392 Porto PORTUGAL; email: maria.fernandesjesus@gmail.com. The research reported in this presentation was supported by a grant received from the European Commission 7th Framework Programme, FP7-SSH-2007-1, Grant Agreement no: 225282, *Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation (PIDOP)* awarded to the University of Surrey (UK), University of Liège (Belgium), Masaryk University (Czech Republic), University of Jena (Germany), University of Bologna (Italy), University of Porto (Portugal), Örebro University (Sweden), Ankara University (Turkey) and Queen’s University Belfast (UK).

The literature shows declining levels of participation suggesting 'political apathy'. Furthermore some groups have been identified as minorities in terms of civic and political participation especially youth, women, migrants and ethnic minorities. Portugal has a recent immigration history and the immigration has increased especially in the 1990s. Therefore, there is a need to produce more scientific knowledge about civic and political participation of young people both from the 'majority' population and from the minority/immigrant groups.

Method

To explore these issues with reference to youth in Portugal we have developed a qualitative study, relying on focus groups as methodological technique. As such, they generate a rich understanding of participant's experiences and beliefs (Morgan, 1998), about civic and political participation. Ten focus groups were conducted with 71 participants (34 male, 37 female) in two different age groups (16-18 years, and 20-26 years old): two groups of Angolans in the age group 20 to 26 years, involving 7 boys and 7 girls; four groups of Brazilians, three of them inserted in the range of 20 to 26 years and one in the range of 16 to 18 years of age, involving 13 boys and 10 girls; four groups of Portuguese, two groups of each age group, consisting by 14 boys and 20 girls.

Analysis

Our analysis revolved around four major themes: 1) Understandings of citizenship and of the environmental and human rights issues. 2) Views on civic and political engagement: importance, resources, personal experiences, trustworthiness and efficacy. 3) Sources of information and influence. 4) Perceptions of groups excluded from civic and political participation and engagement. In this presentation we will focus on the second and fourth themes.

Importance, resources, personal experiences, trustworthiness and efficacy

The focus group with majority youth show that the participants tend to consider that demonstrations, petitions, volunteering and involvement in youth groups are common

personal experiences for some of the youth, more frequently for older groups. However, the efficacy of demonstrations is contested: for some, they are tools for protest; for other, demonstrations are not effective. Youth felt that there is a lack of information about politics and a difficult access to political issues. The lack of interest and involvement is viewed as resulting from young people's own responsibility but also from the State's vision of adolescents: when they participate they are looked down as mere adolescents, with no political maturity.

The focus groups with the Brazilian youth showed that their own experiences were in Brazil, episodic and short lived, linked to religious, social and students' associations. For them, to be political and civically active is essentially through public demonstrations that are seen negatively because associated with vandalism, violence and social disorder. The Brazilian youths mentioned some factors behind their non-participation: disinterest, very low effectiveness of participation, lack of information related to opportunities and low contact with contexts of participation. They argued that there should be more information about participation opportunities. Moreover some participants stressed that people among immigrant communities do not have time for participation, as they are concentrated in work or finishing their studies before returning to their country of origin.

The data of the focus group with Angolans show that their participation experiences are mainly episodic and linked to community activities. Their involvement was quite low in conventional forms of political participation, such as membership of youth branches of political parties, political parties and voting in elections. However, they showed a great interest in politics, and were keen on comparing the political systems of their origin country and Portugal. During these discussions, they stressed the importance of voting, and the lack of democracy in Angola.

They linked their low involvement with the fact that they are not Portuguese citizens. They argued that they do not want to be actively engaged civically and politically in a society 'that they not consider as their own'. In addition, they consider, on the one hand, that they have opportunities for participation, but on the other, they contradict this view, as they think that existing policies actually promote their involvement and participation, for lack of minority inclusion.

Perceptions of groups excluded from civic and political participation and engagement

The Portuguese youth felt that they are excluded by adults and they were not taken seriously. They believed that the most severely excluded groups are immigrants, ethnic minorities and women. Their attitudes towards immigrant communities were ambivalent. Indeed, their presence was viewed as important in economic and cultural terms, therefore making political participation something to encourage, but some also associated immigrants with crime rates, echoing widespread prejudice in the Portuguese media and some sections of the society.

Brazilian youth said that Africans were the most excluded and discriminated group in the Portuguese society. Youth also mentioned the existence of strong prejudice around Brazilian female prostitution. They talked about feeling excluded and discriminated in the job market, in employment, in the spheres of housing, transport, social services and during encounters with the police.

Young Angolans emphasized racism and prejudice as main reasons for exclusion in the Portuguese society, particularly in relation to their racial identity and their 'African-ness'. They identify institutional and political opportunities for participation, but also deplored that these opportunities were not being translated in practice. Some also deplored the existence of criminal activities among the community providing a negative image of Africans and therefore hindering their integration into the Portuguese society. However, they were very critical of the media and their tendency to link African immigrants with high crime rates, which, for them, would increase stereotyping and prejudice even more.

Some preliminary conclusions

- Youth tend to show low levels of political and civic engagement, however they recognize the importance and value of participation. Their participation experiences are episodic and mainly linked to community activities.

- Concerning conventional forms of political participation, as youth parties, political parties and elections, they have low rates of participation.
- In general, youth also stress the low contact with contexts of participations and low levels of political efficacy - self and collective.
- Immigrant youth recognise that policy efforts have been developed in order to achieve fairer conditions for civic and political participation (e.g., voting rights, citizenship law, the citizen's card), but they also stress that they have no real access to these conditions in practice.
- When compared to the Brazilians, Angolan youth have more interest on their country's socio-political events and on the politics of the host country.
- In terms of source of information, the immigrant youth tend to show low levels of information and also low levels of interest.
- All groups recognise some problems of racism and discrimination in Portugal, including public institutions such as the police.

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