

Social Participation in Canada Viewed through a Life Course Approach

Research Brief No. 7



The level of participation in civic and public life in Canada fell significantly from 1992 to 2005. This prompted author Stéphanie Gaudet to ask: how has social participation evolved from 1992 to 2005? And, who are the individuals who participated socially in 2005? Previous studies and policy development on social participation have largely neglected the collective dimension of communities and life course approaches. At the heart of Gaudet's research, therefore, is a need to further understanding of changes in the life courses of Canadians. In turn, this understanding can help policy makers develop finely tuned policies to foster greater individual engagement within communities.

In this study, social participation by the individual is operationalized as the gift of time to an organization or other individuals. In essence, this captures formal (volunteer) and informal (mutual aid) engagement with the community. The General Social Survey on Time Use for the years 1992, 1998, and 2005 provides data on social participation changes in the lives of Canadians.

Key Findings

Social participation over the life course

- Gaudet confirms earlier research on the significant drop observed in the level of participation in civic and public life from 1992 to 2005, for Canadians in all age groups. Overall, less than 20% of the Canadian population engages in these activities. The investigation revealed one exception however: during this period, Canadian women maintained a steady involvement in mutual aid, an informal type of social participation. Taken as a whole, the drop in social participation has important implications for policy makers with regard to individual social capital, intergenerational socialization and fostering a sense of belonging.
- In spite of the steady decline in participation for all age groups, as Canadians aged and progressed in their life courses, time given to social participation increased. This trend has many potential implications where adopting a life course approach could contribute to preventative policies. For example, the low participation of Canadians most likely to have pre-school and school-aged children (25 to 49 years) yields two inter-connected policy implications. First, low social participation at the beginning of a life course generally translates into low participation later, which means potentially not setting an example for children. Second, this also implies lack of engagement from those in a life course phase who would be most inclined to defend children's interests in relevant organisational settings.
- Canadians in the pre-retirement stage of their life course (50 to 64 years) demonstrated the largest increase in time involvement in volunteer activities, regardless of sex and cohort (1992, 1998, and 2005). The marked drop in formal social participation, especially among those at the beginning (15-24 years) and at the end (65-74 years) of their life courses, might imply a loss of institutional influence over these life phases.



Social Participation and Life Courses

Background

The life course paradigm is an approach that analyses continuity and change within individual itineraries (Sapin et al., 2007). Each itinerary is embedded within multiple social relations – including those linked with age, generations and sex – and the public policies that frame it. In contrast to static categories – such as student, retiree or unemployed – a life course approach tends to shun silo policies preferring instead to integrate the wide range of programs that impact individuals at each phase of the life course.

This research addresses a persistent blind spot encountered in social policy and longitudinal studies: a lack of understanding into the dynamic social ties individuals maintain with the community. The innovative indicator deployed in this article maintains a focus on the individual while capturing the dynamic relationship between the individual and the community. The indicator is social participation (volunteering in organizations or mutual aid to other individuals) as time given to others in the community, with sensitivity to institutionalization (see definitions in Box 1).

Objectives

The article explored two main questions:

- How has the social participation of Canadians evolved from 1992 to 2005?

- Who are the individuals who participated socially in 2005?

The guiding hypothesis was that there is a redefinition of the relationship between the individual and the collective level. To study this redefinition, the author investigated Canadians' engagement in social participation through a life course approach.

Methodology

Data were obtained from Statistic Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) on Time use (cycles 7, 12, and 19). The article focused mainly on cycles 7 and 19 and cycle 12 confirmed the trend for the 13-year period. The two binary variables created for analysis reflected absence of social participation or at least some social participation activity in a given day. In spite of not having longitudinal data, tests revealed that age groups could approximate cohorts in the respective study years (1992, 1998, and 2005).

The cohorts were further characterized by similar time use (as opposed to age group characteristics). For example, 15 to 24 year olds organizing time around studies and leisure, 25 to 49 year olds organizing time around paid full-time employment, 50 to 64 year olds with a diversification of time devoted to paid employment (i.e., part-time, holidays, retirement), and 65 to 74 year olds organizing time around retirement (discussion in Marucchi-Foino, 2007). Individuals over 75 years of age were excluded because

Box 1: Definitions

Social Participation designates the action of participating in an activity where an individual contributes at the collective level by freely giving time. This type of engagement is therefore outside of paid work and is anchored in social interaction either between individuals or with an organization. In this study, Gaudet further conceptualizes social participation in two categories, formal engagement (volunteering with organizations) and informal engagements (mutual aid within primary and secondary social networks, excluding domestic activities).

Institutionalization of life courses is defined as the process through which certain social forms or structures develop as institutions, therefore becoming symbolic references with values, meanings and norms, firmly anchored in a desire for perpetuity. Gaudet distinguishes between sequential institutionalization (such as norms linked with biological age), adjacent institutionalization (such as dealing with independent time-related structures like work schedules and leisure time) and parallel institutionalization (such as conciliating multiple family member time frames with children's schedules and parents' work schedules).



Social Participation and Life Courses

of statistical representation. The cohorts also doubled as sequential phases in life courses (see sequential institutionalization in Box 1), closely associated with a time considerations (in this case Canadians' age).

Findings

Social participation over the life course

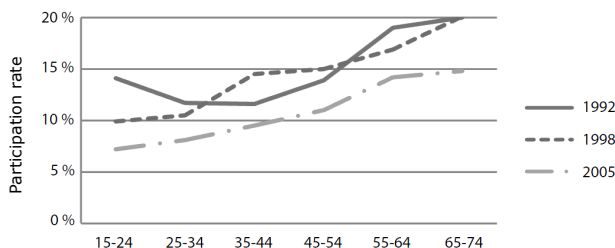
The following findings related to social participation over the life course of Canadians.

The significant drop in social participation for Canadians from 1992 to 2005, is captured in these three trends:

- A general decrease in volunteering (44%).
- A decrease in mutual aid for men.
- A decrease in volunteering for women, most notably between 1998 and 2005.

The only constant in Canadians' social participation is the stable continuity of women engaging in mutual aid.

Figure 1: Participation rate, by age (10 year period), for 1992, 1998 and 2005



Source: Statistics Canada, GSS, 1992, 2005.

Figure 1 illustrates how, as Canadians aged, they tended to increase time given to social participation. In spite of increased engagement over life courses, social participation declined from 1992 to 2005 for each age group. The decrease is particularly stark for the youngest (15-24 years), with a 50% drop, and the oldest (65-74 years). However, socio-political and socio-economic contexts can help explain the higher participation of 15 to 24 year olds in 1992 at the height of an economic downturn. Youth tended to view volunteering as an opportunity to gain experience. The 50% drop therefore, is relative.

Canadians in the pre-retirement stage of their life course (50 to 64 years) demonstrated the largest increase in time involvement in volunteer activities, regardless of sex and cohort (1992, 1998, and 2005). Comparing cohorts across years, there was a marked drop in formal social participation especially among those at the beginning (15-24 years) and at the end (65-74 years) of their life courses.

In contrast to large fluctuations in formal social participation in volunteer activities, Canadian involvement in informal mutual aid activities maintained steadier time commitments throughout their life courses.

Characteristics of Canadians who participate socially

Following are select characteristics of Canadians who engaged in social participation:

- Most Canadians who participated socially, and who were between 25 to 74 years of age, lived with a partner. What is more, Canadian women gave the most time to social participation and in 2005, women in the 50 to 64 years stage of their life course were least likely to hold full-time paid employment.
- Slightly over 70% of women in the child bearing and rearing stage of their life course (25-49 years), and who gave time to volunteering, lived with at least one child. For men in contrast, living with at least one child did not seem to impact volunteering.
- Canadians who engaged in volunteering had a higher socio-economic status (a post-secondary diploma) and most lived in households with average or above average income.
- Canadians between 25 and 64 years of age with a household income above \$40,000 per year were proportionally more likely to engage in mutual aid. Women with lower income (less than \$40,000 per year) were proportionally more likely to engage in mutual aid than were men.
- Finally, women from 65 to 74 years bucked the trends, and gave time equally in volunteering and mutual aid in spite of low socio-economic status linked with personal income, household income and education level. In this case, Gaudet advanced that social participation might have been one solution for older Canadian women to gain access to resources, social relations and facilitate integration in the community.



Social Participation and Life Courses

Conclusion

Gaudet concluded that the drop in formal and informal social participation by Canadians confirmed the hypothesis of a redefinition of relations between individuals and the collective level. Furthermore, social participation is intricately linked with life courses. This study confirmed previous research into the decline in social participation. Viewed through the lens of giving and of life courses, Canadians seem less likely to create social networks outside of their close proximity networks.

Policy implications

- Taken as a whole, the drop in social participation has important implications for policy makers with regard to the right of citizenship, the sense of belonging in a community, inclusion and social change.
- Even when using longitudinal data, policy makers must attempt to integrate the relationship between the individual and the collective level.
- When using a life course approach, policy makers should take care not to place undue emphasis on professional trajectories by focusing on changes in retirement age, for example. The latter could have the perverse effect of accelerating an increase in domestic and professional activities at the cost of social participation. Policy makers are therefore called upon to reflect on the relationship between the individual and the collective level in terms of conciliation between personal and professional lives, throughout a life course.
- The low participation of Canadians most likely to have pre-school and school-aged children (25 to 49 years) yields two inter-connected policy implications. First, low social participation at the beginning of a life course generally translates into low participation later, which means potentially not setting an example for children. Second, this also implies lack of engagement from those in a life course phase who would be most inclined to defend children's interests in relevant organizational settings.
- The marked decline over 1992 to 2005 in formal social participation, especially among those at the beginning (15-24 years) and at the end (65-74 years) of their life courses, might imply a loss of institutional influence over these life phases. For the earlier phase, teaching organizations might hold less influence. For the later phase, community and religious organizations appear to be losing influence. Low voter turnout for individuals in the earlier phase, for example, can be understood as of lack of confidence towards democratic organizations that in turn could help understand the drop in formal social participation.

References

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About the study

"La participation sociale des Canadiens : une analyse selon l'approche des parcours de vie" was published in Canadian Public Policy—Analyse de Politiques, Vol XXXVII, Supplement/Numéro spécial 2011S33-S56. The paper was written by Stéphanie Gaudet, Professor, University of Ottawa. The brief was prepared by Joanne Gaudet.

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The quantitative analysis carried out for this article is one component of a larger research project that also included qualitative analysis. The latter gave investigators in the research team the opportunity to understand the meaning Canadians give to their actions based on individual life narratives.

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