



# Research Report:

## Civic Mindedness Components, correlates and implications for the public service

March 2011

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# Civic Mindedness

## Components, correlates and implications for the Public Service

It has often been mentioned that it is important for public servants, in particular public service leaders, to be civic minded. While 'civic mindedness' is a term that is commonly used, seldom is it clearly defined, and it is at times associated with different concepts by different people. Thus, this paper begins with an exploration of how research has defined civic mindedness and why it is important. It then considers the factors that influence civic mindedness and the means by which it can be assessed and developed. The implications for public service are discussed at the end of the paper.

## Defining Civic Mindedness

### 1. What is Civic Mindedness?

*Civic mindedness* is often used interchangeably with the term *social capital*, a multi-faceted construct which includes social trust, social altruism, equality, tolerance, humanitarianism, civic participation, civic responsibility and civic engagement. A simpler way of looking at civic mindedness would be to consider its two different facets—the emotional component and the behavioural component.

The more complex component of civic mindedness is its emotional facet as it is more abstract and not directly observable. It refers to the voluntary and intentional sense of community, or the feeling of responsibility towards community (Smart, Sanson, Da Silva, & Toumbourou, 2000). Other writers have also defined the attitude of civic mindedness to be a sense of civic duty (Price, 2002), a strong feeling of membership or belonging to the community (Davidson & Cotter, 1989) or having civic orientation, a psychological attachment to the polity and the general community (Crystal & DeBell, 2002)

While the emotional aspect of civic mindedness is harder to observe, the desire to have a positive impact on one's community may be demonstrated behaviourally. Broadly these behaviours can be categorized into two general areas: political engagement and civic engagement. Both types of engagements serve as evidence of a desire to positively impact one's immediate surroundings. Political engagement is often reflected in actions such as voting, campaigning, working on public problems and generally demonstrating an overall interest in society's politics. Civic engagement is less clearly defined, often referring to any action that helps or benefits others more remote than one's family and friends (Smart et al., 2000). Beyond involvement in community service efforts, civic engagement also includes less direct means such as obeying the law and respecting the rights of others.

### 2. The Value of Civic Mindedness

As a result of individuals having increased civic mindedness, society as a whole is theorized to be strengthened and subsequently better off (Bertlesmann Foundation, 2003). The ethnic diversity of Singapore means civic mindedness may be the only glue holding

society together. A society of civic minded individuals ensures that democracy remains robust (Price, 2000) because when social trust is high, individuals have an increased likelihood of reaching beyond close ties to build a cooperative relationship with strangers. As a result, the higher level of cooperation allows greater collaboration and tolerance of diversity within a society that is often not homogenous. Subsequently, individuals will also have a higher level of resilience (Tatsuki & Ayashi, 2000) as they are able to foster stronger bonds between each other and cooperate to overcome adversities such as natural disasters. Ultimately, these positive feelings towards society will lead to having a greater motivation on the part of the individual to engage in civic and political engagement, benefitting society as a whole.

In the public service, a landmark finding by Putnam (1993) has indicated that the level of civic mindedness an individual has is correlated to his performance as a public servant. In fact, having higher civic mindedness would make that individual a better citizen on top of being a better public servant.

## *Understanding Civic Mindedness*

### **1. Factors Influencing Civic Mindedness**

An individual's civic mindedness can be influenced by a whole range of factors, from predispositions to demographic and family influences. These include personality factors, belief systems, whether they feel a sense of belonging, and demographic factors.

#### Personality

Certain types of personality traits have been found to predispose an individual to having higher levels of civic mindedness. Individuals who have experienced success in controlling specific facets of their own life are more likely to experience feelings of empowerment (Davidson & Cotter, 1989). In other words, these individuals possess civic efficacy; they believe that any action they take can actually have an impact on the entire community. The belief that one has significant influence over the government and its practices (Bekkers, 2008) will further enhance one's sense of responsibility and obligation towards ensuring that the community as a whole is improved (Serow, 1991). It also increases an individual's motivation to take actions that are beneficial to society at large, as these actions have a foreseeable benefit.

Individuals who are highly trusting will also be predisposed to expect goodwill and benign intent from others (Barber, 1983). This allows them to trust others more easily, and they will subsequently find it easier to engage in activities that require cooperation with others. Brewer (2003) found that social trust is the foundation of moral behaviour upon which civic mindedness is built. As a result of their belief that others harbour only benign intent towards themselves, the individual is more likely to reciprocate in kind with positive attitude and actions.

Another personality type that would predispose an individual towards civic mindedness would be religiosity or religious valuation. Individuals who are more religious are more likely to be affected by its values, which generally include cooperation with others beyond the family system. Also, religion encourages the world view that one should focus on problems lying outside the self (Smith, 1999). Such ideas are in line with the basic idea of civic mindedness. Researchers have also hypothesized that the level of religiosity is linked to civic mindedness, because it is a route through which values are instilled (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2003).

#### Belief System

Different individuals hold different world views, which in turn influence their mindset about helping those less fortunate than themselves. An individual who sees poverty as the fault of the poor themselves, perhaps due to their laziness in not holding their jobs, are less likely to volunteer his or her services in charity events. On the other hand, an individual who sees poverty as a result of systemic flaws in society are more likely to demonstrate compassion towards the less fortunate (Bekkers, 2008).

#### Feeling of Belongingness

The psychological feeling of belongingness also plays a part in changing the mindset that one has about society (Miller, Gurin, Gurin and Malanchuk, 1981). When the individual

feels that he or she belongs to the group, this will bring about feelings of responsibility to ensure that the group welfare is taken care of, and his or her actions will benefit the group's welfare. Group belongingness, or group consciousness, will subsequently affect political perceptions (Davidson & Cotter, 1989). An individual who feels a greater sense of belonging towards the group is more likely to evaluate political issues with a focus on the group's best interests rather than seeking individual benefit.

#### Demographic factors/ family background

Family also plays an important part in influencing an individual's civic mindedness. Socioeconomic status (SES), in terms of education level, social class and affluence are positively correlated with levels of civic mindedness. For an individual to demonstrate civic mindedness, he must first have the means, and this is tied to his SES (Smart et al, 2000). Having the means, such as affluence and ample resources, suggests that the individual is able to engage in higher order activities that do not revolve around struggling to eke out a living, and is able to divert energy into activities which benefit society at large. Education level has also been found to positively correlate with political activity, civic mindedness and tolerance towards others (Brewer, 2003). Part of the reason for the relationship between level of education and civic mindedness may be because a higher level of education has been linked to a preference for thought-provoking activities, such as service learning projects that get participants to think further into social issues. As a result, these individuals gain a greater awareness about the society and display greater civic and political engagement.

Parents also influence their child's level of civic mindedness through factors such as their level of education, their level of religiosity and whether they engage in volunteering activities. Parents who are highly educated will have a higher affinity for political and civic knowledge, and this knowledge is subsequently passed on to their children. Parents with high religiosity influence their children to have the same, opening them up to the same opportunities to carry out community service and influencing their value systems through constant reminders (Bekkers, 2008; Metz & Youniss, 2005). Parents who participate actively in volunteering activities provide their children with resources to do community service. Resources such as transport or financial assistance are invaluable, particularly for younger children who have yet to attain independence (Smart et al, 2000). Parents can further influence their children by volunteering aside them, particularly when their children are at a young age, instilling in them a sense of civic duty (McLellan & Youniss, 2003).

## *Increasing Civic Mindedness*

While many individual predispositions and family background influence civic mindedness, one's level of civic mindedness can also be profoundly shifted by significant personal experiences. Significant changes which happen to the individual over the course of his or her lifetime, such as a large- scale disaster, offer the opportunity to reappraise his concept of community and his effect on it.

In the case of widespread disasters, for example, the individual is likely to be driven by tragedy to strengthen his sense of civic engagement beyond the limited bounds of his individual social milieu (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2003). Tatsuki and Hayashi (2000) identified this change in internal value system as a protective function, because increased civic mindedness will increase one's ability to cope with current life stressors and offer an elevated subjective evaluation of life recovery. Previous examples of this includes the Kobe earthquake (Tatsuki & Hayashi, 2000) and the September 11 terrorist attacks (Metz & Youniss, 2005), where researchers found a spike in the average level of civic mindedness immediately after the tragedy struck. In these situations, the individual was profoundly affected by the disaster situation, and subsequently constructed a new reality in order to adapt during the aftermath. Furthermore, as a result of a disaster, the perception that the government would be able to meet all public needs was shattered as government functions were paralysed for several months. Although this compelled some to engage in opportunistic behaviour such as looting, people also discovered the difficulty of surviving as an individual without close ties to others. This drove a majority of individuals to learn to respond to public needs and serve public interest on their own, demonstrating an increase in civic efficacy (Tatsuki & Hayashi, 2000).

Another suggestion within the literature and in common practice to develop civic mindedness is to involve individuals in service learning programmes. Bringle and Hatcher (2005) define service learning as:-

“Course based, credit bearing educational experience in which [individuals] (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility.”

Thus, unlike community service, service learning includes a component of reflection, rather than purely participation, and it is this reflection that enhances participants' level of civic mindedness. Therefore, the most important issue would be to ensure that the service learning programme is well-constructed (Crystal & DeBell, 2002). Factors such as whether participants are given the autonomy and leeway to act independently and whether they maintain responsibility over the project, whether they are given the chance to contribute their own abilities, interests and solutions to problems, and whether the activity they participate in is fun and meaningful (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2003), all play a role in affecting an individual's civic mindedness. Eyler and Giles (1999) suggest only sending participants to sites which can generate meaningful reflections on social issues such as poverty.

Researchers have reviewed case studies from the United States and Netherlands, finding evidence that civic mindedness is indeed developable through well-constructed service learning programmes. Even when controlling for individuals who were already inclined to serve, there were still significant gains in civic mindedness as a result of the programme (Metz & Youniss, 2005).

## *Implications for the Public Service*

Research on civic mindedness has shed light on its components and impact, factors that influence civic mindedness, and ways to cultivate civic mindedness. A high level of civic mindedness is desirable for public servants because it drives them to take actions that are beneficial for society at large. Therefore, it would be useful to assess civic mindedness in an individual applying for a career in the public sector. Assessment of civic mindedness can be done through assessing underlying attitudes or behavioural evidence that uncovers the motives of an individual for doing community service or volunteer work. This is often done through the administration of a questionnaire on the motivations of an individual for getting involved in community service projects. This may involve asking the extent to which one's participation was motivated by, for example, "a sense of satisfaction from helping others", "asked by someone (else to participate)" and "a duty to correct societal problems" (Serow, 1991).

Further questioning, in an interview on the answers provided by the individual can further unveil his genuine intent for taking part in community service projects. This will also help to ascertain whether the individual was genuine in his responses or was affected by his desire for the job and therefore provided socially desirable responses. This is particularly important, as the direct questionnaire items often have high face validity and candidates are unlikely to deliberately portray themselves as having low civic mindedness regardless of how they genuinely feel about contributing to society.

An alternative method would be to assess an individual's level of civic literacy, his awareness of community affairs, political issues and the processes by which citizens are able to affect change (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). It is also possible to infer an individual's civic mindedness from the attitudes that he has, such as the level of generalized social trust and sense of civic duty (Bebek, Zaff, Li, & Lerner). Interview questions or questionnaire items such as "In a typical week, how often do you seek out news about politics and current events?" and "How often do you participate in school government" are indicative of interest in and willingness to participate in society can help decision-makers to infer civic mindedness.

Nonetheless, while people come with certain personalities and beliefs, demographic backgrounds and personal histories that influence their level of civic mindedness, it is still important to remember that civic mindedness is not a fixed entity but can continue to be developed during an individual's life time because of experiences that change one's beliefs and values. Furthermore, it is also possible for organisations to introduce deliberate efforts to increase civic mindedness, such as well-constructed service learning programmes. Thus, by making a concerted effort to improve civic mindedness, organizations can benefit from having employees who are oriented towards enhancing the public good.

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