



Living life for others and/or oneself: The social development of life orientations



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ABSTRACT

A range of social science research suggests Americans are becoming more self-oriented over time, and that this focus comes at a cost to general concern with community. Examining data from a large-scale national study of college students, we explore this influential hypothesis on two fronts. First, we empirically investigate whether people who are especially concerned with personal achievement are necessarily less concerned about contributing to their community. Contrary to most iterations of the individualism thesis, we find that significant numbers of individuals are concerned with *both* personal success and political/social involvement. To explore further, we expand this supposed single dimension into a fourfold typology, showing that many people are ‘idealists’ (concerned with both self and others) and ‘apathists’ (relatively unconcerned with either). After broadening the taken-for-granted egoist/altruist continuum, we explore antecedent social structural, aspirational, and social psychological factors that predict membership in these value preference groups. The findings from our preliminary model suggest that these broad orientations are shaped by a complex array of factors across multiple domains.

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1. Introduction

In their introduction to the updated edition of the classic text, *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah et al. (1985) make the strong claim that “(m)uch of what has been happening in our society has been undermining our sense of community at every level. We are facing trends that threaten our basic sense of solidarity with others.” (p. xxx). This is part of a theorized general capitalistic shift away from the public sphere (Habermas, 1976), supposedly heightened in America as framed by Tocqueville (1835) and Putnam (2001) across a variety of substantive domains (Hewitt, 1989) including religious contexts (Wuthnow, 1992), political and economic spheres (Callahan, 2004), and educational outcomes (Hunter, 2000). Research using college students, the common place to explore claims about broader social trends in America, aligns with this pessimistic approach (Kasser and Ryan, 1996; Twenge, 2006; Twenge and Foster, 2010). Konrath et al. (2011) find that student empathy has declined precipitously over the last 40 years. Twenge et al. (2008) suggest that levels of narcissism have risen strikingly among college students over the past 30 years. Astin (1998) remarks on a 30 year trend of increasing concern with “being very well off financially” at a loss of concern with civic life.

Lichterman (1995) refers to the general construction as the “seesaw” model “which assumes that the fulfillment culture and public commitment counterpose each other” (p. 276). The common seesaw conception – a guiding principle in Parsons’s (1951) schematic, and D’Andrade’s (2008) work, for example – is a sense that Americans show lessening concern with their community and that shifts are, in the whole, toward individualistic concerns (see also Turner, 1976). While sociologists have

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advanced various theoretical reasons for the forces underlying these shifts, this paper begins with an even more basic question. What if we have been asking the wrong empirical question? Is the “seesaw model” insufficiently simplistic; even as it forms the implicit motivation for the aforementioned concern over shifts among Americans, as represented in longitudinal studies of college students?

The idea that individuals and societies fall somewhere on a self vs. community continuum is at the root of cross-cultural research (e.g., Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz, 1992) and is viewed as a core tension in American life (Bellah et al., 1985; Hewitt, 1989). It is at the root of experimental studies of altruism (e.g., Simpson and Willer, 2008), as well as suggesting how working-class collegiate students are at a disadvantage based on a mismatch with American universities’ values (Stephens et al., 2012). We suggest that in practice these two goals are not necessarily *experienced* as oppositional, demonstrating that individuals might view *both* orientations as being important. We explore how different constellations of self- and community-oriented goals project different life course trajectories when formed at early adolescence. Conceptually, at least, a person might find it important to both give to the community and to achieve personal success, and such people will meaningfully differ from those strongly focused on one or the other set of goals.

We utilize data from a large-scale, national study of traditional-aged, full-time collegiate freshmen to offer a *social* model of the development of these orientations. Using data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, a national study of the experiences and outcomes of a liberal arts education across a range of differently structured higher education institutions, we model these broad orientations within theoretically important sociological and social psychological antecedents at a time in the life course when these socially-shaped preferences likely influence future life course pathways.

2. The supposed shift toward self-focus in America

Models of social action tracing back to Max Weber stress the importance of perceived ends within individuals’ courses of action across social domains. Scholars ranging from the rational choice tradition to classic stratification models largely agree that people strive to achieve valued ends (Freese, 2009). We know less about what establishes these abstract goals, especially as we get farther from domain-specific models like those focused on status attainment or ongoing criminal careers. These ends shape future life course trajectories – what Heinz (2002) refers to as self-socialization. We suggest that adolescence is a key period of the life course for exploring these orientations, as it is a time where individuals must begin to adjudicate between a variety of potential domain-specific work and family trajectories (Shanahan, 2000).

Since human life involves limited resources, individuals necessarily juggle competing priorities about how to orient their time and energy, often grouped in meaningful ideological systems (Jost et al., 2008). Personal success and concern with others are fundamental psychological orientations (Wicker et al., 1944) underlying these ideological systems. Research on values finds that self-enhancement and self-transcendence are two ends of a universally recognized structure of human values (Schwartz, 1992) intertwined with ideological systems that shape individual orientations. Social psychologists often label individuals who exhibit these broad orientations as egoists or altruists (see Simpson and Willer, 2008). Some suggest that self-orientation is *necessarily* opposed to concern for immediate others (e.g., (McLintock, 1972; McIntock and Liebrand, 1988).

Orientations toward career, family, community, and self as shaped by adolescence influence self-selection into situations that will reinforce particular individual orientations over time (Alwin et al., 1991). College-bound adolescents select higher education institutions, majors, peer networks, work, and leisure activities that, in turn, influence their individual development (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). A popular view, somewhat supported empirically, is that collegiate experiences shift students toward a more humanistic, less self-oriented set of values (Pascarella et al., 1988), though this process may largely represent self-selection into experiences that accelerate individual differences.

Our paper explicitly models an abstract conception of concern for others, tantamount to Schwartz’s (1992) notion of ‘universalism’, related to but distinct from a concern with intimate others. We model the development of a wider concern for one’s community, distinct from laboratory and psychological (Konrath et al., 2009) studies focusing on altruistic, localized behavior or narcissistic personality traits (Twenge and Foster, 2010). Our data allow us to engage Bellah et al.’s (1985) focus on the widest range of individualism captured in a concern with civic engagement.¹

Social scientists often implicitly utilize the “seesaw model” to posit a self-vs.-community dichotomy that varies only in the degree to which individuals are hypothesized to trend toward one side of a dichotomy at the expense of the other. Stivers (1994) claims American values have shifted to a definition of success as based on interior feelings rather than economic gain, but that success is still of foremost importance and contains a radically individualistic focus. There is also evidence of this shift globally (e.g., Inglehart and Baker, 2000). Interestingly, America is an outlier from this global pattern for industrial societies, an odd mix of traditional values and a heightened concern for self-expression values. American culture hosts core contradictions (Baker, 2005; Hewitt, 1989) such that Americans largely agree that public sphere engagement should still be an individual’s choice (Fischer, 2010; Wolfe, 1998).

Bellah et al. (1985) influentially find a great deal of evidence for a general theme of individualism suffusing all aspects of American’s discourse, though they suggest more nuance than a simple ‘seesaw’ model, differentiating between four forms of

¹ Our analyses distinguish from the helpful typologies in Konrath’s et al. (2009) work by taking a sociological bent less concerned with interpersonal/independent construal and more on competing life goals.

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