



Socialization and development of the work ethic among adolescents and young adults

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Abstract

Work ethic is part of a broader field of attitudes, identified as cultural conservatism. The results of this longitudinal study—three repeated measurements with 620 adolescents and one of their parents as participants—show that parents' social economic status and educational level are associated with their cultural conservatism, and with the educational level and cultural conservatism of their children. During adolescence, parents effectively transfer their own cultural (non-)conservatism to their children. These socialization factors of adolescent cultural conservatism and adolescent educational level are important determinants of their work ethic. Lower educational level and higher cultural conservatisms of adolescents predict a stronger work ethic. Work ethic is a stable type of attitude, with work ethic at a younger age strongly predicting work ethic at a later age.

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1. Introduction

This study explores the social transmission and development of work ethic during adolescence and young adulthood. We examine the extent to which socialization concerning the fundamental value of work is part of the transfer of a broader set of political attitudes from parents to children, and we discuss how social class and education affect this process. Furthermore the theme of individual development of

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this ethos through adolescence and young adulthood is addressed. In a longitudinal design we trace the way in which the notion of the value of work becomes a steady feature of a system of political attitudes during this part of the life course.

2. Work ethic

Work ethic should be distinguished from related concepts like work motivation, work attitudes or job satisfaction. In his seminal study *Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism) (1904/05) Weber considered the following elements to be characteristic of the Protestant work ethic (PWE): work is a central, religiously legitimated fact of life; it is man's duty to work hard; a rational attitude to life and good time planning serves man's diligence; success is important; consumption and leisure should be treated with a degree of suspicion; caring for others and good citizenship are civil duties (ter Bogt, 1999). By Weber's definition work ethic is a multidimensional construct and it has been operationalized as such in the psychological research of the last four decades (Furnham, 1990). In an important piece of research Miller, Woehr, and Hudspeth (2002) constructed and validated new scale to measure work ethic. Their measure is a multidimensional inventory of the concepts originated by Weber.

Contrary to these multidimensional approaches, Raaijmakers (1987) and ter Bogt (1999) focused on one key element of work ethic. Weber stated that the central point of an *ethos* of work consists of the idea that one *has* to work in order to lead a purposeful life and *so should others*. Raaijmakers (1987) and ter Bogt (1999) took elements from Weber's concept of work ethic and designed a scale for the measurement of the contemporary variant of the classic work ethic. This one-dimensional instrument measures to what extent work and a regular job represent core life motives, and, to what extent work and a steady job are more significant than leisure time. It tries to assess work as a basic value: no matter what one's motivation to work is—money, power, social contacts—no matter if one likes certain aspect of a job or not, work ethic precedes these attitudes and evaluations as a core imperative that one *should* work.

3. Work ethic and conservatism

Weber (1904/05) himself connected the Protestant work ethic (PWE) with bourgeois values; work ethic was therefore in the first instance a concept that was embedded in conservative economic ideals about the distribution of wealth and power. He believed that the PWE trickled down to the lower strata of the working population, most of which started to believe that hard work, thriftiness, and sober consumption were key features of a decent way of living. Authors such as Bernstein (1980), Buchholz (1983), Hobsbawm (1986) and Thompson (1986) do not refute the political function of this duty-to-work ideology, but they do dispute the general support for that idea. In their view, work ethic has always been and has remained a matter for the conservative part of the elite and middle class. Especially conservative

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