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What is This?

Cultural Values and the Well-Being of Future Generations: A Cross-National Study

Tim Kasser[1]

Abstract

Cultural values may influence the extent to which nations care about the well-being of current and future generations of children. The author used archival data to examine this possibility in a sample of 20 wealthy nations. As predicted, after controlling for national wealth, a general pattern was evident such that the more a nation prioritized Egalitarianism versus Hierarchy values and Harmony versus Mastery values, (a) the higher was children's well-being in the nation, (b) the more generous were national laws regarding maternal leave, (c) the less advertising was directed at children, and (d) the less CO_2 the nation emitted. Potential causal pathways and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords

Culture, values, children, well-being, and ecological sustainability

> "In all of your deliberations in the Confederate Council, in your efforts at law making, in all your official acts, self interest shall be cast into oblivion. Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground—the unborn of the future Nation."
>
> The Iroquois Book of the Great Law

The Great Law of the Iroquois was designed hundreds of years ago to lead decision makers to consider what future generations might need in order to survive and thrive. Its injunctions rest on a particular set of values, or beliefs about the ideal and what is important in life (Rokeach, 1973). Specifically, the Iroquois' Great Law states that self-interested values should be "cast into oblivion," assumedly because such aims conflict with what the Iroquois considered to be a more important value, that of caring for the well-being of other people and of generations yet to be born.

Contemporary cross-cultural studies of people's values and goals clearly show that the Iroquois were correct to be worried about an inherent value conflict between caring for the welfare of others and caring a great deal about one's self-interest. For example, the seminal work of Shalom Schwartz

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and colleagues (Schwartz, 1992, 2006) yields strong support for a "circumplex" model of personal values in which *self-transcendence* and *self-enhancement* values lie in opposition to each other. Self-transcendence aims are of two main types: *benevolence* values, which involve enhancing the welfare of members of one's in-groups, including friends and family, and *universalism* values, which involve enhancing the welfare of all people and of nature. These values stand in contrast to the two types of self-enhancing values: *power*, which involves dominating people and resources, and *achievement*, which involves demonstrating one's own personal success. Similar conflicts are documented by cross-cultural research on people's personal goals. Specifically, Grouzet et al.'s (2005) study of 1,800 college students in 15 nations found that personal aspirations for financial success and wealth were 192° opposed to community-feeling aspirations, which involve trying to make the broader world a better place; 180° would represent perfect opposition.

Other correlational studies similarly suggest that a focus on self-enhancing, materialistic goals such as power, achievement, financial success, and popularity are associated with a variety of behaviors that diminish the well-being of other people, and of other species. For example, a strong focus on goals like money and status (vs. community feeling) has been associated with being less warm and more controlling towards one's children (Kasser, Ryan, Zax, & Sameroff, 1995), expressing lower levels of empathy (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995) and more Machiavellian (McHoskey, 1999) and prejudicial (Duriez, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & De Witte, 2007) attitudes, being less cooperative and more greedy in resource dilemma games (Sheldon & McGregor, 2000; Sheldon, Sheldon, & Osbaldiston, 2000), and living in ways that are more ecologically damaging (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Kasser, 2005).

The results of all of the studies described thus far suggest that the more an individual person cares about self-interested, materialistic goals, the less likely she or he is to prioritize the values and act in the ways that are likely to facilitate the well-being of contemporary and future children. Can the same be said at the level of culture? That is, do cultures characterized by certain values differ in the quality of experience that they create for the children living in that culture and for the children yet to be born into that culture? Might cultures that follow the Iroquois' injunction to reject self-interested values actually promote greater well-being for children? Might cultures that embrace such self-interested values diminish their children's well-being?

Answering such questions requires the use of national-level outcomes to assess children's well-being and, in a parallel way, culture-level measures to assess the value orientations of nations (Hofstede, 2001; Smith & Schwartz, 1997). Culture-level values are most appropriate not only for these analytic reasons but also because, theoretically, culture-level values are assumed to organize the manner in which social, political, and economic institutions function and to influence how social leaders use different ideologies to justify the decisions that affect the nation (Schwartz, 1999). Thus, culture-level values are the values most likely to influence the policies and practices that affect children's interactions with their social world, and thus children's well-being (see, e.g., Bronfenbrenner's, 1979, ecological model of development).

As in his model of individual-level values, Schwartz's (1999) cultural-level model of values suggests that certain cultural values that promote self-interest tend to be in conflict with other values that are likely to promote caring for children and future generations. Two of the dimensions of Schwartz's empirically validated cultural-value model seem particularly relevant to this conflict. First, Schwartz differentiates between *egalitarianism* values that promote cooperation and a sense that everyone is equal and should be cared for versus *hierarchy* values that validate the unequal distribution of power and resources often found in cultures. Second, the model differentiates *harmony* values that promote an acceptance and appreciation of the world as it is versus *mastery* values that attempt to actively change the world to fit one's own self-interests. Because Hierarchy and Mastery cultural values, with their focus on power, wealth, and achievement, are fundamentally about self-interest, they might undermine children's well-being, whereas Egalitarianism and

Harmony values, with their focus on social justice, helping others, and protecting the environment, might promote children's well-being. Consider, for example, a nation that relatively strongly prioritizes Hierarchy but cares relatively little about Egalitarianism. Such a value orientation might result in that nation developing policies that maximize the ability of individuals to work hard so as to obtain resources and status rather than policies that maximize the opportunity to nurture children in a caring environment. Similarly, a nation focused on manipulating resources for one's own gain (i.e., Mastery) rather than taking care of the world as it is (i.e., Harmony) might promote policies and pursue practices that result in economic actions that use more of the Earth's limited resources and spew more pollutants into the water and atmosphere (see Sagiv & Schwartz, 2007), thereby making it harder for future generations to meet their own needs.

I tested these ideas by obtaining measures of the relative priority 20 wealthy nations placed on the cultural values of Egalitarianism versus Hierarchy and Harmony versus Mastery. I then correlated these value measures with five indices that seemed to represent a nation's concern for the well-being of present and future generations of children. First, to measure the well-being of contemporary children, I used an index recently developed by UNICEF (2007) that summarizes 40 different measures of children's well-being across a variety of domains. The second and third variables were chosen to reflect national differences in policies and practices relevant to a differential focus on economic profit versus children's well-being. Specifically, I obtained measures of the extent to which a nation's laws guarantee paid leave for new mothers (versus forcing them to take unpaid leave or go back to work immediately) and of how much advertising was directed at children (which, while creating economic profit, also is known to damage children's well-being; Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004). The fourth and fifth measures tapped into the concern for generations of children yet unborn by using the ecological footprint (Wackernagel & Rees, 1996) and CO_2 emissions per capita of each nation studied. Nations were assumed to be showing less concern for future generations to the extent that they have higher ecological footprints (which entail using large amounts of resources to produce goods and to absorb wastes) and higher CO_2 emissions (which are known to contribute to global climate changes that will affect the quality of life of future generations).

To summarize, I predicted that the more a nation places a high priority on the value of Egalitarianism versus the value of Hierarchy, and the more a nation places a high priority on the value of Harmony versus the value of Mastery, the higher child well-being will be in that nation, the less advertising will be aimed at children, the more generous will be that nation's maternal leave laws, the less CO_2 it will emit, and the lower will be its national ecological footprint. Furthermore, I predicted that these patterns would remain significant even after controlling for variations in the wealth of nations.

Method

Sample

My primary sample consisted of 20 wealthy nations on which data were available for most of the variables described below. These nations were Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

Measures

Values. The values of each nation were operationalized as the relative priority citizens placed on the aims of Egalitarianism versus Hierarchy and of Harmony versus Mastery. For each of the 20 nations under investigation here, I used the means reported by Schwartz (2007), which were derived from data collected from multiple samples of thousands of students, teachers, and general

community members between 1988 and 2002 (see Schwartz, 2006). These means were then *z*-scored and combined into the two dimensions of interest, by first subtracting Hierarchy scores from Egalitarianism scores and Mastery scores from Harmony scores. This procedure is justified by the substantial empirical research documenting that these contrasts represent two of the fundamental dimensions organizing cultural values (Schwartz, 2006). Indeed, in this sample, Hierarchy and Egalitarianism were significantly negatively correlated ($r = -.76$, $p < .001$) and Mastery and Harmony were significantly negatively correlated ($r = -.66$, $p = .002$). Among these 20 nations, Japan had the strongest orientation towards Hierarchy relative to Egalitarianism, whereas Italy was most oriented towards Egalitarianism relative to Hierarchy. The United States had the strongest orientation towards Mastery relative to Harmony, and Finland was most oriented towards Harmony relative to Mastery.

Children's ill-being. UNICEF (2007) presented data on 40 different indicators of children's well-being across a variety of economically developed nations; most of these data came from information collected between 2000 and 2003. These 40 indicators were classified by UNICEF into six categories: material, health & safety, educational, peer & family, behaviors & risk, and subjective well-being. UNICEF created a single child well-being score by averaging each nation's ranking on the six categories of child well-being relative to the other nations on which sufficient data were available. This summary variable was available for 17 of the 20 nations studied in the present article, excluding Japan, New Zealand, and Australia. Because this summary score is based on the average of six rankings, high scores indicate lower child well-being; for ease of interpretation, below I refer to scores as reflecting child ill-being. Children in the Netherlands had the lowest score (i.e., the lowest ill-being and the highest well-being), whereas children in the United Kingdom had the highest score (i.e., the highest ill-being and the lowest well-being).

Parental leave policies. The McGill Institute for Health and Social Policy and the Project for Global Working Families documented the guaranteed maternal leave laws of almost every nation in the world for 2006. Shea (2007) reported these data in map form by dividing nations into one of five categories: those nations with no guaranteed paid leave (coded as a 0 for in this study), those that guaranteed under 15 weeks of leave with varying wages or any leave with less than half wages (coded as a 1 here), those that guaranteed at least 14 weeks with at least half wages (coded as a 2 here), those that guaranteed at least 14 weeks with full wages or at least 52 weeks with half wages (coded as a 3 here), and those that guaranteed at least 52 weeks with full wages (coded as a 4 here). The United States and Australia scored lowest, offering no guaranteed paid leave, whereas Austria had the most generous parental leave policies, scoring a 4.

Advertising to children. Consumers International (1996) assessed the amount of advertising directed at children by monitoring television broadcasting in 12 of the nations studied here. Between January and March of 1996, consumer organizations in each nation recorded approximately 20 hours of commercial television broadcasting on one or more stations during broadcasting periods aimed at children under age 12. Of the variables collected by Consumers International, I used the average number of minutes of advertising per hour in each nation (Table 4 of their report). Australia had the highest at 13 minutes per hour, whereas Sweden and Norway had the lowest at 1 minute per hour.

Ecological footprints. Ecological Footprints (EFs) are a means of quantifying the amount of the Earth's resources necessary to produce what is consumed and absorb the wastes created by a particular individual or by a particular group (e.g., a business, city, or nation). High levels of consumption, particularly in the domains of food, transportation, and housing, coupled with high levels of waste and pollution, contribute to relatively high EFs. Redefining Progress (2004; Table 2) reported the per capita EFs of most nations in the world. Of nations studied in this article, the United States had the highest EF while Italy had the lowest. It is worth noting, however, that all nations in the current sample have ecological footprints that are unsustainable, meaning that if humans continue consuming and polluting at these rates, little of the Earth's resources will be available for future generations.

Table 1. Correlations and Partial Correlations (Controlling for GNP Per Capita) Between Cultural Value Dimensions and Outcomes Representing the Well-Being of Children and Future Generations

	Egalitarianism vs. Hierarchy		Harmony vs. Mastery	
	r	pr	r	pr
Child ill-being	−.50*	−.54*	−.54*	−.52*
Generosity of parental leave policies	.53*	.52*	.49*	.54*
Advertising minutes per hour	−.86**	−.98**	−.65*	−.62*
CO_2 emissions	−.39+	−.39+	−.53*	−.54*
Ecological footprint	−.20	−.20	−.33	−.34

Note: Sample sizes vary between 12 and 20.
+$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Carbon emissions. Clarke and Capponi (2005) reported 2003 CO_2 emissions for nations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). These statistics reflect how many millions of tons of CO_2 were emitted from burning coal, gas, oil, and other fuels for the purposes of electricity and heating, industry, transport, residential, and other purposes in 2003. I used per capita indices, for which the United States had the highest rates and Portugal had the lowest. CO_2, of course, is a major contributor to the greenhouse gases recognized as causing global climate change, which will affect the environment in which future generations must live.

National wealth. To explore whether observed associations between the cultural value variables and the five variables representing concern for future generations were due to variations in the wealth of nations, I obtained data on the GNP per capita for each of the 20 nations from http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/english/modules/economic/gnp/datanot.html. Data from 1998 were used, as this year was approximately midway between the range of years from which data for the other variables in this study were collected. Portugal was the poorest in this sample at $10,670, whereas the wealthiest was Switzerland at $39,980.

Results

First, I calculated zero-order and partial correlations (controlling for GNP) between the two cultural value dimension variables and the five indicators of present and future children's well-being. As can be seen in Table 1, the results were largely supportive of hypotheses and were essentially unchanged when GNP was controlled. The more a nation was focused on Egalitarianism in comparison to Hierarchy, the lower was children's ill-being (i.e., the higher their well-being), the more generous were parental leave policies, and the less advertising was directed at children. These same three outcomes were significantly correlated with a nation's relative focus on Harmony versus Mastery; in addition, this value contrast predicted lower CO_2 emissions. Neither value dimension significantly predicted ecological footprints, although the correlations were in the predicted direction.

Because some of the scatterplots suggested the possibility of curvilinear trends, I conducted a series of regressions in which I regressed each of the five child well-being variables on each value dimension and its square (representing a potential curvilinear effect). Of these 10 regressions, only one was significant ($p < .05$). This showed an exponential increase in children's ill-being (i.e., a decrease in their well-being) for nations that are especially focused on Hierarchy values relative to Egalitarianism values.

Finally, I conducted additional regressions in which I simultaneously entered the cultural value variables that the previous analyses suggested were significantly associated with the outcomes of

interest so as to (a) determine which, if any, value variables had the strongest independent associations with the outcomes and (b) explore the amount of variance in the child-relevant outcomes that could be accounted for by the cultural values variables. Given that controlling for GNP per capita had not affected results reported in Table 1, I did not include this variable so that I could maximize degrees of freedom. Given that neither value variable significantly predicted Ecological Footprints, I did not conduct a regression for this outcome variable.

Together the two value dimension variables and the curvilinear Egalitarianism versus Hierarchy variable accounted for 46.5% of the variance in child ill-being, $F_{(3,16)} = 3.77$, $p < .04$, with none of the variables remaining significant unique predictors of child ill-being. 73.8% of the variance in the amount of advertising to children per hour in a nation, $F_{(2,11)} = 12.69$, $p = .002$, was accounted for by the joint influence of the two value dimensions, but only the contrast between Egalitarianism versus Hierarchy made a unique contribution ($p = .009$). When the two variables were entered as predictors of parental leave policies, 32.5% of the variance was accounted for, $F_{(2,19)} = 4.09$, $p < .05$; neither of the individual variables remained unique predictors. Regarding CO_2 emissions, 28.3% of its variance was accounted for, $F_{(2,19)} = 3.35$, $p = .06$, by the joint influences of the two variables, although again neither variable remained significant. In sum, except for the prediction of advertising directed at children, neither of the two values were uniquely and significantly predictive of the outcomes, suggesting that their shared variance was primarily responsible for associations with the outcomes.

Discussion

Using archival data from 20 wealthy nations, analyses demonstrated a general pattern that the more a nation prioritizes values for Hierarchy and Mastery and the less it prioritizes values for Egalitarianism and Harmony, (a) the lower is children's well-being in the nation, (b) the more advertising is directed at children, (c) the less generous are national laws regarding maternal leave, and (d) the more CO_2 the nation emits. These associations were rather strong, with between 28% and 74% of the variance accounted for in the outcomes, and did not depend on the economic wealth of the nation. Together, these results suggest that the values espoused by a nation may affect the extent to which it enacts policies and pursues practices that promote or diminish the well-being of present and future generations of children. Specifically, when nations follow the Iroquois' advice to "cast into oblivion" self-interested values (i.e., Hierarchy and Mastery) and focus instead on values that promote caring for others' welfare and for the environment (i.e., Egalitarianism and Harmony), societal practices appear to be created that support and nurture the well-being of current and future generations of children.

At the level of the individual person, values have their effects in part by creating interpretive frames through which people understand their environments (Feather, 1995) and by acting as broad, motivational forces that organize lower-level goals and behaviors (Emmons, 1989), with eventual consequences for the experiences of people, and thus their well-being (Kasser, 2002). At the level of the nation, cultural values tell citizens what is appropriate to strive for in their culture and thus organize the institutions people live under and the behavior of social leaders (Schwartz, 1999). As such, when people in a nation care a great deal about certain aims, they are likely to interpret indicators about the state of their nation in particular ways and also to pursue certain policies and practices that create a particular set of experiences for children. Although it is of course extremely difficult, if not impossible, to provide compelling data for the causal role of cultural values in the creation of such dynamics, at the level of personal values, some experimental evidence does support the idea that self-interested, materialistic values create unfortunate social outcomes. For example, Vohs, Mead, and Goode (2006) found that, compared to subjects who created sentences out of neutral words, subjects randomly assigned to create sentences out of money-related words (i.e., words

related to the values of Hierarchy and Mastery) later spent less time helping others and donated less money to charity (i.e., behaviors related to Egalitarianism). While Vohs's experiment is most relevant to the functioning of personal values, its results suggest that if politicians and other leaders frequently mention money, status, and achievement, then self-enhancing personal values may be primed within their own minds, and Mastery and Hierarchy values may be primed within their constituents' minds. Such a state of affairs, in turn, is likely to result in the relative de-prioritization of self-transcendent personal values and of Harmony and Egalitarian cultural values. As such values become de-prioritized, politicians and citizens may pay less attention to information suggesting that their nation is pursuing policies that damage the well-being of future generations and may be less likely to use the resources at their disposal to develop policies and support institutions that promote children's well-being.

Of course, the correlational nature of the present study leaves open the possibility that values do not cause the outcomes documented here; values might instead be the result of these outcomes. For example, perhaps generous maternal leave laws create more opportunities to nurture children, which in turn create stronger national values for Egalitarianism or Harmony. Or perhaps when individuals see many models of ecological destruction, this reinforces the cultural belief that Mastery values are worth pursuing. Such explanations would be consistent with theories of how individuals develop their values through social modeling and through their experiences of nurturance in the environment (Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004).

It is also possible that some unmeasured, third variable is responsible for the observed associations. While the analyses reported above ruled out the possibility that economic wealth explained these associations in this sample, another possible culprit is the economic system of the nation (i.e., the laws and practices governing economic transactions among government, businesses, and the people). Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, and Ryan (2007) proposed that the more a nation organizes its economy around neo-liberal free market principles highly focused on profit, competition, and self-interest, the more that nation prioritizes self-enhancing values and the less it is likely to care about self-transcendent values. Schwartz (2007) found empirical support for these ideas, demonstrating that nations that put a higher priority on Mastery and Hierarchy and lower priorities on Harmony and Egalitarianism had more competitive (vs. cooperative) forms of free-market capitalism (as measured by an index developed by economists Hall & Gingerich, 2004). Thus, it might be that the broader institutional arrangements that maintain a nation's economic system produce both particular types of value orientations and the child-relevant outcomes documented here.

In all likelihood, given the complexity of societal dynamics, all three of these causal arrows are simultaneously at work.

Limitations and Future Directions

The relatively weak results concerning the Ecological Footprint measure were somewhat surprising. One possible interpretation is that the Ecological Footprint measure is not associated with the values of citizens but depends on other features of a nation. Another possibility, more consistent with the fact that all correlations were in the predicted direction, is that error variance in the EF measure makes it difficult to predict statistically. Notably, the Harmony versus Mastery measure did significantly predict CO_2 emissions, which are one component of EF; perhaps other elements of EF are more unrelated to values or are less reliably measured.

Another clear weakness of the study was its low sample size, which was limited by the availability of some of the key outcome variables (i.e., child ill-being, advertising to children). The focus on 20 wealthy, economically developed nations substantially limits the generalizability of the present findings, and it may be that these correlations would not replicate in larger samples that include poorer nations. For example, perhaps economic wealth plays a more important role than do values in predicting children's ill-being or ecological destruction when poorer nations are

included in the sample; it may be that values come into play only among relatively wealthy nations. That said, these data make it clear that among nations with substantial economic resources, those who emphasize Hierarchy and Mastery cultural values apparently do not always use those resources to benefit the well-being of children living in their nation. Such results suggest that relatively wealthy nations that are attempting to improve the well-being of their children might do well to focus less on policies designed to maximize economic growth and more on policies that encourage Harmony and Egalitarian values among the populace.

Another clear limitation of this study was that it could not empirically explore the mechanisms through which values are related to these outcomes, as the sample size was insufficient to test valid structural equation models. It would be fascinating, for instance, to apply Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of child development, with its nested set of proximal and distal environments, to the questions explored here. Could, for example, a model be supported that shows that the effects of cultural values and economic systems on children's well-being are mediated by policies such as parental leave laws and practices such as advertising to children?

Finally, it would be worth expanding the types of outcomes examined here to include other laws and practices that influence children's well-being, including funding of education and health programs, child labor laws, and so forth.

Conclusion

"The ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world it leaves to its children." (Quote attributed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

It is of course a truism that the future of a society is its children. Each person living in the present moment will one day die and must make a choice about his or her time here on Earth: Shall it be spent maximizing one's own selfish concerns, or shall it be spent working to ensure the continuation of society and the well-being of the children here today and to be born tomorrow? The results of this study clearly show the relevance of a nation's values in confronting this fundamental moral question.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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