

Extended Abstract:

The Transformation of US High School Seniors' Life Goals, 1976-2010: Social Origins, Global Consciousness, and Cohort Effects.

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Abstract

This study investigates the transformation of US high school seniors' life goals from 1976 to 2010. The findings, based on repeated cross-sectional survey data from a national representative sample, suggest that recent cohorts of high school seniors have higher expectation for markers of adulthood developmental goals that are work- and family-related as well as non-marker goals that concern altruistic, intrinsic, and exploratory values of life. We also find patterns of variation by social origin, with race, class, and gender playing an important role in shaping the structure of aspirations and prioritization of different life goals in one's imagined future. Global consciousness, defined as perceptions about the world and its changes, is also significant in predicting the structure of life goals desired by high school seniors. (125 words)

I. Introduction

Demographers and social researchers have uniformly pointed towards drastic changes over the past decades in young Americans' transitions traditionally associated with adulthood, namely finishing school, getting a full-time job, leaving parents' home, getting married and having a first child. They find that the transition to adulthood has become less age-graded, in that age is no longer a good predictor for transitions into these respective adult roles, making the transition to adulthood both more ambiguous and less predictable. Using US census data from 1900 to 2000, Fussell and Furstenberg (2005: 29) show that young people have been generally moving towards later and later ages at which they fill the roles associated with adulthood, evident in the prolongation of the period of education, the growth of a period of nonfamily living after leaving the parental household, and delays in the age of marriage and childbearing. At the same time, the sequencing of these role transitions has also changed. Young people's life today reflects non-linear patterns of returning to higher education after leaving school and a temporal mixing of employment, schooling and parenthood – which clearly depart from the orderly lock-step sequence of schooling, followed by work, then marriage, and parenthood characteristic of the 1950s and 60s (Hogan and Astone 1986, Shanahan 2000).

Scholars of the transition to adulthood (see Hogan and Astone 1986, Kohli and Meyer 1986) have long called for more research examining individuals' perceptions and expectations of their adult lives, as those would provide important insights as to their future transitions into adult roles. Life goals have been a subject of interest in particular (Johnson 2002). Defined as "organizers" of developmental regulation where individuals envision their future life as they adapt to the constraints of a given context (Heckhausen 1997), life goals reflect youth's orientations of their future and their prioritization of different tasks. Prior research on life goals has suggested that youth typically set goals that reflect major developmental tasks such as finishing school, getting a job, and starting a family, as well as other self-actualization goals such as leisure and acquisition of property or material (Chang et al 2006, Nurmi et al 2002, Solantus 1982).

In this study, we examine the transformation in life goals of high school seniors in the U.S. from 1976 to 2010. We identify continuities and changes in the importance of various life goals across historical time and for three different cohorts, including their appraisals of work, family formation

and other self-actualization goals. We then draw on multivariate analysis to better understand variations by subgroups and other predictors of life goals.

II. Data and Method

1. Data

The data used in this study comes from the Monitoring the Future survey, a repeated cross-sectional survey of US high school seniors that was done annually since 1976 (Johnston et al 1976-2010). The project employed a multi-stage sampling method each year to draw a national-representative sample of high school seniors (12th grade) in the United States. The dataset contains responses from successive cohorts of high school seniors every year from 1976 to 2010, asking the same set of survey questions of each cohort year – which makes this dataset an ideal venue for a comparison of different cohorts over time. Each year the sample consisted of approximately 16,000 students, who were then randomly assign to 5 different forms that focus on different aspects. In this study, we use only Form 1 which contains various questions about life goals and world consciousness. After eliminating missing responses, the total number of observations is 81,384.

2. Analysis

We analyze nine items measuring life goals of US high school seniors. Detailed descriptions of each item are given in Table 1. We include both traditional goals that concern specific adult-marker tasks as well as non-marker life goals covering broader ends in the future such as the pursuit of happiness and maturity. Specifically, traditional adult-marker goals are measured in three items, namely getting steady work, succeeding in work, and having good marriage and family life. Having two dimensions of work would allow us to understand how high school seniors' perception about work has changed over time. Non-marker life goals are measured by six items, i.e. making a contribution to the society, having lots of money, having time for hobbies and recreation, discovering new ways to experience things, living close to parents and relatives, and having strong friendship.

In our multivariate analysis, we estimated nested OLS models with each of the nine life goals items. Model 1 measures the effect of cohort replacement. To measure cohort effects, we use the definition of birth cohort in the US developed by Pew Research Center (2012). Three birth cohorts are identified, which are the Trailing-Edge Baby Boomers – who were born between 1958 and 1964, Generation X – who were born between 1965 and 1980, and the Millennials – who were born between 1981 and 1993. In our analysis, we treat the Trailing-Edge Baby Boomers as the reference category.

Model 2 measures the effect of social location. Here we include three measures of social location, namely race, class and gender. We use parents' education as a proxy for social class. The binary dummy variable distinguishes between respondents with at least one college-educated parent and those whose parents did not attend college. Race is also a binary variable with two categories, White and non-White – as the early surveys only distinguished between White and African American respondents.

In the last model, we incorporate high school seniors' ratings on the world consciousness measures, in order to capture the relationship between global thinking and high school seniors' life goals. The world consciousness items are measured on a scale from 1 to 5 in which respondents are asked to rate their agreement with statements about conditions of the world and position of the US. The questions ask if the respondents agree that the US is still the best system in the world, that the future will be tougher, and that they enjoy the fast pace of change in today's world.

III. Preliminary results

1. Patterns of change

We find that trends in changes over time align most closely to the “over-ambition” thesis (Newman 2012). Figure 1, 2, and 3 reflect changes from 1976 to 2010 in how high school seniors in the United States rate the importance of various life goals. Traditional adult-marker goals relating to work and family remain central in the high school seniors’ expectations of their future, with consistent high scores of importance reported throughout this period. Figure 1 shows the importance of two traditional markers roles – work and family. Reports about the importance of having steady work and a good family life remain very stable through the period, as the mean values stay well within the range of 3.5-3.6 throughout 34 – which means a majority of respondents report that having steady work and a good family life are “extremely important” to them. Assessments of the importance of being successful at work further show a clear increase over time. Half of the respondents (52.2%) stated that being successful at work was “extremely important” to them in 1976, and the percentage grew to 68.1% in 2010.

At the same time, we also see a consistent increase from 1976 to 2010 in the importance US high school seniors give to non-marker life goals. Figure 2 and 3 shows trends in the importance of making a contribution to the society, finding new ways to experience things, having time for hobbies and recreation, having lots of money, having strong friendships, and living close to parents and relatives. Having time for recreation and hobbies is rated as more important by more recent cohorts, as 33% of the respondents in 2010 rating hobbies and recreation as “extremely important” to them, compared to only 23% in 1976. Similarly, more recent cohorts are more concerned about finding new ways to experience their life, with 30% of the respondents rating that it is “extremely important” to them, compared to only 20% in 1976.

However, it is important to note that while the recent cohorts of high school seniors do value lifestyle more than those coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s; the mean values of lifestyle indicators never surpass those of the traditional markers of adulthood of work and family. In 2010, the mean values for the importance of non-marker life goals are between 2.0 and 3.5; while traditional markers (work and family, as shown in Figure 1) are always well beyond 3.5 – which means the recent cohorts of high school seniors still prioritize these social landmarks of adulthood over other lifestyle values. Nevertheless, the gap is closing.

2. Multivariate models

Table 2 presents the result for high school seniors’ ratings of three traditional developmental goals. We find clear cohort effects in all three life goals: having steady work, succeeding at work, and having a good marriage and family life. These developmental goals are rated as more important by Generation X and Millennial US high school seniors, compared to the Trailing-Edge Boomer seniors. Models including race, class, and gender point to clear variations in traditional adult-marker life goals by social origins. White US high school seniors assign higher importance to work-related goals but lower importance to marriage and family life compared to their non-White counterparts. Women seniors rate these traditional goals higher than do men seniors, and seniors with college-educated parents put higher value on a steady job and family life but lower value on success at work.

The third model includes measures of world consciousness, which adds to the explanatory power of the analysis of these three traditional goals. Those who agree that the US is still the best system in the world also place higher valuation on all three goals. Those who enjoy the fast pace of changes in the world prioritize work-related goals over marriage and family life. Finally, seniors who expect a

tough future rate job stability as more important than success, while expectations of a tough future has no impact on seniors' valuation of marriage and family life.

Table 3a and 3b present the results for six non-marker life goals: making a contribution to society, having lots of time for hobbies and recreation, discovering different ways to experience things, having strong friendships, living close to parents and relatives, and having lots of money. Again, we see clear cohort effects in that US high school seniors belonging to the Generation X and Millennial cohort give a higher valuation to all six non-marker life goals than the Trailing-Edge Boomer cohort. There is also patterned variation by social origin. White high school seniors put higher value on hobbies and friendships, while non-White prioritize making contribution, different experiences, money, and living close to parents and relatives. Men value hobbies and money, while women value making a contribution, friendship, and being close to their parents. Those with college-educated parents rate money and being close to parents higher in importance than those whose parents had no college education.

All measures of seniors' world consciousness have statistically significant relationship with their non-marker life goals ($p < 0.001$). Seniors who believe that the US is the best system in the world are more likely to rate all non-marker life goals highly, except for the goal of discovering new ways to experience things. High school seniors who enjoy the fast pace of world's changes also value the non-marker life goals more highly, except for being close to parents and relatives. By contrast, those who expect that the future will be tougher place lower value on most non-marker life goals except for having lots of money and living close to parents and relatives.

IV. Discussion and next steps

Drawing on data from high school seniors over a period between 1976 and 2006, we have been able to detect trends in high school seniors' traditional goals of work success, marriage and family, as well as in non-marker goals of making a contribution to society, having lots of time for hobbies and recreation, discovering different ways to experience things, having strong friendships, living close to parents and relatives, and having lots of money. We find identifiable differences in life goals by cohort, with greater importance given to the goals of stable, successful career and good family life by the more recent cohorts. This is important, since the Millennials and Generation X individuals are often depicted as less interested in conventional occupational success; we find this is not the case, even though they also rate non-marker goals, especially having time for hobbies and recreation and living close to parents, as especially important.

Our next step will involve clarifying the results for subgroup analysis based on race, class, and gender; as the patterns are not very clear from the current multivariate OLS models. Also, the current model has limited explanatory power, mainly due to the limited variation in the dependent variables. We will examine the differences in greater details, by grouping life goals into groups and employ other modeling strategies to improve the fit.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Trends and continuities in traditional adult developmental goals, US high school seniors, 1976-2010.

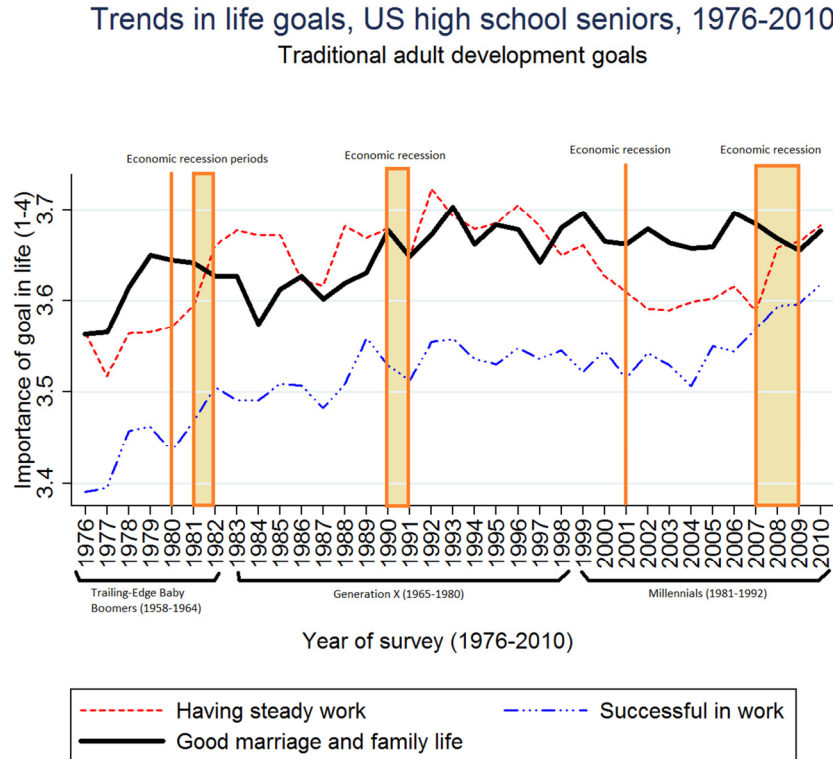


Figure 2: Trends and continuities in life goals relating to money, friendship, and proximity to parents, US high school seniors, 1976-2010.

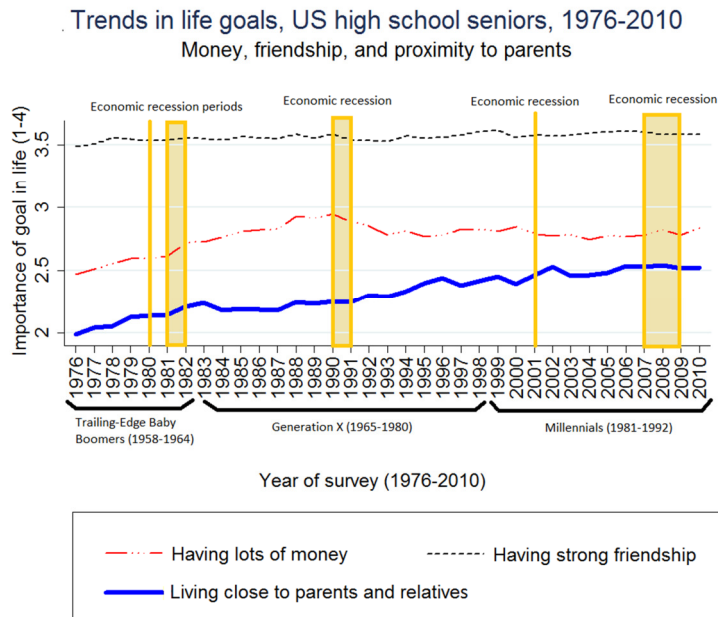


Figure 3: Trends and continuities in life goals relating social contribution, experience, hobbies and recreation, US high school seniors, 1976-2010

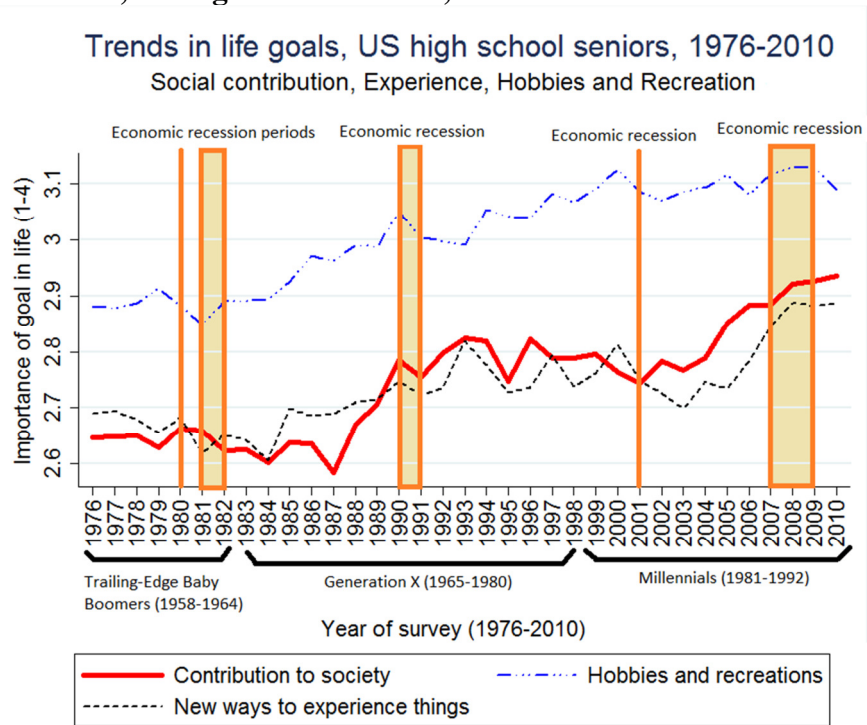


Table 1: Means/proportions for variables in the analysis, US high school seniors, 1976-2010 (N=81,184)

Variable (coding)	Question text	Mean	(SD)
<i>Life goals items</i>			
	<i>How important is each of the following to you in your life?</i> (1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = quite important, 4 = extremely important)		
Steady work (1-4)	Being able to find steady work	3.64	(0.62)
Success at work (1-4)	Being successful in my line of work	3.51	(0.69)
Marriage and family life (1-4)	Having a good marriage and family life	3.64	(0.73)
Contribution (1-4)	Making a contribution to society	2.73	(0.86)
Hobbies (1-4)	Having lots of time for hobbies and recreations	3.00	(0.78)
Experiences (1-4)	Discovering new ways to experience things	2.73	(0.88)
Money (1-4)	Having lots of money	2.76	(0.88)
Close to parents (1-4)	Living close to parents and relatives	2.29	(0.94)
Friendship (1-4)	Having strong friendships	3.56	(0.67)
<i>Social origin variables</i>			
Gender (0 = Female)			
Male		0.48	(0.50)
Race (0 = non-White)			
White		0.75	(0.43)
Parent's education (0 = Less than college)			
Parent is college-educated	(At least one parent has a college degree)	0.56	(0.50)
<i>Cohort variables</i>			
Trailing-Edge Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964)	Reference group		
Generation X (born 1965-1980)		0.48	(0.50)
Millennials (born 1981-1993)		0.28	(0.45)
<i>World consciousness items (1-5)</i>			
	<i>Please show whether you agree or disagree with each statement</i> (1 = disagree, 2 = mostly disagree, 3 = neither, 4 = mostly agree, 5 = agree)		
US is best	Despite its many faults, our system of doing things is still the best in the world	3.62	(1.17)
Enjoy world change	I enjoy the fast pace and changes of today's world	3.30	(1.23)
Tough future	I think the times ahead will be tougher and less fun than things are now	3.15	(1.43)

Table 2: OLS Regression coefficients for models of traditional developmental life goals, US high school seniors, 1976-2010

	Steady work			Success in work			Marriage and family life		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 3	Model 3
<i>Cohort effect</i>									
(Reference category: Trailing-Edge Baby Boomers 1964-1964)									
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	0.09*** (0.01)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.14*** (0.02)	0.14*** (0.02)	0.02** (0.01)	0.12*** (0.03)	0.15*** (0.03)
The Millennials (born 1981-1993)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.14*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.01)	0.20*** (0.02)	0.22*** (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.11*** (0.03)	0.16*** (0.03)
<i>Social origins</i>									
Race									
White (0 = non-White)		-0.06*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)		-0.11*** (0.01)	-0.13*** (0.01)		0.03*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Gender									
Male(0 = female)		-0.03*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.00)		-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)		-0.19*** (0.01)	-0.20*** (0.01)
Parent's education									
Parent is college-educated (0 = less than college)		0.05*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)		-0.01* (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)		0.01 (0.01)	0.01* (0.01)
<i>World consciousness</i>									
US is best in the world (1-5)			0.04*** (0.00)			0.05*** (0.00)			0.07*** (0.00)
Enjoy world's change (1-5)			0.02*** (0.00)			0.04*** (0.00)			-0.02*** (0.00)
Future will be tough (1-5)			0.03*** (0.00)			-0.01** (0.00)			0.00 (0.00)
Constant	3.58*** (0.01)	3.59*** (0.02)	3.32*** (0.02)	3.45*** (0.01)	3.52*** (0.02)	3.25*** (0.02)	3.62*** (0.01)	3.63*** (0.02)	3.46*** (0.03)
Observations	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384
R-squared	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.02	0.03
Adjusted R-squared	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.02	0.03
Change in R-squared		0.0042***	0.0096***		0.006***	0.0123***		0.0169***	0.0109***

Standard errors in parentheses
 * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Table 3a: OLS Regression coefficients for models of non-marker life goals, US high school seniors, 1976-2010

	Making contribution to the society			Have time for hobbies and recreation			Discovering new ways to experience things		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Cohort effect</i>									
(Reference category: Trailing-Edge Baby Boomers 1964-1964)									
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.03)	0.11*** (0.03)	0.11*** (0.01)	0.18*** (0.03)	0.17*** (0.03)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
The Millennials (born 1981-1993)	0.19*** (0.01)	0.23*** (0.03)	0.28*** (0.03)	0.22*** (0.01)	0.21*** (0.03)	0.22*** (0.03)	0.13*** (0.01)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.13*** (0.03)
<i>Social origins</i>									
Race									
White (0 = non-White)		-0.08*** (0.01)	-0.11*** (0.01)		0.08*** (0.01)	0.07*** (0.01)		-0.15*** (0.01)	-0.16*** (0.01)
Gender									
Male (0 = female)		-0.09*** (0.01)	-0.10*** (0.01)		0.24*** (0.01)	0.24*** (0.01)		-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Parent's education									
Parent is college-educated (0 = less than college)		-0.15*** (0.01)	-0.14*** (0.01)		-0.09*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.01)		-0.07*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)
<i>World consciousness</i>									
US is best in the world (1-5)			0.07*** (0.00)			0.02*** (0.00)			-0.01** (0.00)
Enjoy world's change (1-5)			0.02*** (0.00)			0.04*** (0.00)			0.06*** (0.00)
Future will be tough (1-5)			-0.02*** (0.00)			-0.01*** (0.00)			-0.01*** (0.00)
Constant	2.65*** (0.01)	2.86*** (0.02)	2.61*** (0.03)	2.88*** (0.01)	2.76*** (0.02)	2.60*** (0.03)	2.67*** (0.01)	2.87*** (0.02)	2.75*** (0.03)
Observations	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384
R-squared	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.01	0.04	0.05	0.00	0.01	0.02
Adjusted R-squared	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.01	0.04	0.05	0.00	0.01	0.02
Change in R-squared		0.0113***	0.0134***		0.0308***	0.0049***		0.0063***	0.0083***

Standard errors in parentheses
 * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Table 3b: OLS Regression coefficients for models of non-maker life goals, US high school seniors, 1976-2010 (cont.)

	Friendship			Living close to parents			Having lots of money		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Cohort effect</i>									
(Reference category: Trailing-Egde Baby Boomers 1964- 1964)									
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.13*** (0.02)	0.13*** (0.02)	0.17*** (0.01)	0.43*** (0.03)	0.45*** (0.03)	0.24*** (0.01)	0.33*** (0.03)	0.31*** (0.03)
The Millennials (born 1981-1993)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.14*** (0.02)	0.38*** (0.01)	0.53*** (0.03)	0.57*** (0.03)	0.21*** (0.01)	0.33*** (0.03)	0.32*** (0.03)
<i>Social origins</i>									
Race (0 = non- White)									
White		0.20*** (0.01)	0.19*** (0.01)		-0.10*** (0.01)	-0.10*** (0.01)		-0.28*** (0.01)	-0.28*** (0.01)
Gender (0 = female)									
Male		-0.07*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.01)		-0.13*** (0.01)	-0.14*** (0.01)		0.28*** (0.01)	0.27*** (0.01)
Parent's education (0 = less than college)									
Parent is college- educated		-0.09*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.01)		0.08*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.01)		0.06*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)
<i>World consciousness</i>									
US is best in the world (1-5)			0.04*** (0.00)			0.05*** (0.00)			0.01** (0.00)
Enjoy world's change (1-5)			0.02*** (0.00)			-0.03*** (0.00)			0.08*** (0.00)
Future will be tough (1-5)			-0.01*** (0.00)			0.03*** (0.00)			0.04*** (0.00)
Constant	3.54*** (0.01)	3.42*** (0.02)	3.26*** (0.02)	2.11*** (0.01)	2.08*** (0.02)	1.91*** (0.03)	2.59*** (0.01)	2.52*** (0.02)	2.12*** (0.03)
Observations	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384	81384
R-squared	0.00	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.04	0.01	0.06	0.08
Adjusted R-squared	0.00	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.04	0.01	0.06	0.08
Change in R-squared		0.025***	0.0067***		0.0091***	0.0061***		0.0448***	0.0142***

Standard errors in parentheses
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001