PRIVATE MATERIALISM, PERSONAL SELF-FULFILLMENT, FAMILY LIFE, AND PUBLIC INTEREST

THE NATURE, EFFECTS, AND CAUSES OF RECENT CHANGES IN THE VALUES OF AMERICAN YOUTH

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Abstract From the early seventies through 1986–87, private materialism as a life goal increased greatly in importance among American youth, goals relating to family life increased somewhat, public interest concerns diminished modestly, and the goal of personal self-fulfillment declined sharply. Accompanying this shift in values was a change in young people's college majors and career plans toward those leading to higher paying jobs and a marked increase in the attractiveness of working in large corporations. Jobs offering money and status became more preferred relative to those with opportunities for self-fulfillment or public service. Support grew for capitalist institutions such as profit making and advertising. At the same time, there was a retreat from political involvement, and a conservative shift in political beliefs. Explanations of the shift in values in terms of the impact on the young of major political and social events or the emergence of a feeling of economic insecurity among the young are

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not supported by the evidence. Nor are a number of hypotheses relating to changes in young people's family structure or socialization experience. The shift in values of the young does, however, apparently correspond to a similar change in the values of adults generally and, thus, may reflect changes in the values transmitted to young people as they were growing up. We speculate that the shift in values among adults was, in turn, caused by a growing feeling of economic deprivation in the post-1973 period as real wage rates declined and material aspirations continued to rise. In the last few years, the shift in the life goals of the young appears to have ended and may even have started to reverse, but young people today are still much different from those 15 years ago.

Although much has been written about the values of today's youth, there is little consensus even on the facts of recent trends. In studies published in the same year, Levine and Yankelovich reached diametrically opposed conclusions. Yankelovich, in an approach influenced by the Maslovian hierarchy-of-needs framework, asserted that personal self-fulfillment was increasingly coming to the fore (Maslow 1954; Yankelovich 1981). Levine, in an almost despairing paean, *When Dreams and Heroes Died,* saw a return to private materialism, along lines suggested by Altbach (Altbach 1974; Levine 1981).

These conflicting views echo the more general literature on changing values of the American population described by Hammond (1986). Hirschman (1982) and Schlesinger (1986) have claimed, like Levine, that there is an on-going shift from public concerns to private materialism. Bellah and his associates (1985) see, similar to Yankelovich, a growing emphasis on personal self-fulfillment. Inglehart (1977, 1981, 1985) is able to have the best of both worlds. Although he also sees through Maslovian eyes a long-term trend from materialism to postmaterialism (the latter embracing both public interest concerns and personal self-fulfillment), he allows for materialistic lapses from trend in periods of physical or economic insecurity.[1]

This article draws on two national sample surveys of American youth in an attempt to clarify: (1) the nature of recent trends in private materialism, personal self-fulfillment, family life, and public interest as life goals of American youth, (2) possible effects of these trends on the personal plans and attitudes of American youth, and (3) the causes of trends in life goals. As shall be seen, the evidence suggests a sharp shift toward private materialism from the seventies through 1986–87, with important effects on plans and attitudes. The causes of the shift

1. Indeed, Bellah and his associates (1985) too mention this possibility (p. 285), although they do not suggest that it is relevant to their period of study.

appear to be linked to the impact on the values of the American population generally of declining real wage rates and rising material aspirations in the post-1973 period.

Concepts, Data, and Measurement

Concepts

Private materialism is taken here to mean the pursuit of one's own material well-being; family life, to mean those goals relating to family formation and welfare; public interest, to mean concerns for the welfare of the broader community; and personal self-fulfillment, to have to do with aspirations for personal development and self-actualization as in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. As in the economic model of preferences, we view these goals as largely competitive with one another. Each person's time is limited, and the more time spent pursuing one goal, the less there is available to achieve others. Pursuit of personal gain is likely to mean giving up time that might have been devoted to societal concerns. Similarly, family goals, such as having children, may be sacrificed to enhance personal material well-being. This conception leads to interpreting life goal statements in a relative sense. Rather than looking at the importance of each goal singly, we are interested chiefly in the set of life goals. If the stated importance of goals A, B, and C remains unchanged but that of D increases sharply, then there has to have been a relative decline in the importance of A, B, and C.

Data

The analysis uses data from two unusually valuable surveys: one of college freshmen, the other of high school seniors. The data on college freshmen are from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), which is an ongoing annual national survey conducted since 1965 that is now under the auspices of the University of California, Los Angeles, Higher Education Research Institute. We use data beginning in 1966 because the questionnaire format was better established by the second year. Each year the CIRP surveys more than 200,000 full-time students, constituting the entering freshman classes at approximately 550 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities across the United States. A subset of the data, amounting in 1985 to 192,000 cases, is weighted to provide a nationally representative sample of all first-time, full-time students entering institutions of higher education in the fall of each year (Astin, Green, and Korn 1987).

The data on high school seniors are from Monitoring the Future, a nationally representative survey of high school seniors that is remarkable for its scope and has been conducted annually beginning in 1975 by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center (Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley 1987; Johnston, Bachman, and O'Malley 1986). Again, we use data beginning in the second year of the survey, 1976, in order to maintain comparability over time in questionnaire design. While about sixteen thousand respondents are queried each year, the survey comprises five different questionnaires with only partially overlapping questions. Most of the variables of interest here were collected on only one of the five forms; thus, the sample size for each response is usually somewhat over three thousand students. The school drop-out rate has averaged a fairly constant 15–20 percent; hence, this survey covers about 80–85 percent of American youth (Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley 1987, p. 3; U.S. Department of Education 1988, p. 54).

Because the wording or item order on the CIRP questionnaire was intermittently changed before 1974 and after 1986, the periods selected for the main part of the present analysis are 1974–86 for CIRP and 1976–86 for Monitoring the Future. In addition, available comparable data on the life goals are shown for the CIRP data for 1966–73 and for both surveys for 1987 through 1989. The cross-sectional analysis is based on data for 1985, the most recent year for which data tapes from both surveys are available.

A number of investigators involved in these surveys have produced valuable studies relevant to the present topic (Astin 1985, 1988; Bachman 1987; Bachman and Johnston 1979a, 1979b; Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley 1986; Green 1989; Green and Astin 1985; Herzog, Bachman, and Johnston 1978). Although their results are generally consistent with those presented here, the present study differs somewhat in conceptual framework, in covering a longer period of time, in adding cross-sectional data, and in fuller consideration of causes and effects of changing values. Also, this study differs from that of Hoge, Luna, and Miller (1981) in that it is based on nationally representative data rather than on data for a few colleges.

In addition, the present study differs from earlier ones in drawing on two sets of data for generalization. Although differences between CIRP and Monitoring the Future in the population sampled, the rating scale, the nature and wording of life goals, and the order of life goals prevent direct comparison of point-of-time responses, the availability of two data sets has the advantage of enabling one to check whether generalizations about patterns of association among life goals and trends over time are consistent between the two. Also, because the range of questions other than those on life goals differs between the

surveys, their joint use permits a wider scope of inquiry than either would alone.

MEASUREMENT OF VALUES

Both surveys include quite similar questions probing respondents' life goals, and these questions contain individual life goal items that provide fairly direct counterparts of the four concepts of interest. These four "primary indicators" in each survey are the principal focus of the subsequent analysis; however, additional life goal items closely related to the primary indicators provide useful insights that strengthen and expand the interpretation of the data. Table 1 lists the primary and subsidiary indicators included here, classified according to their conceptual counterparts.

Nature of Life Goals and Their Trends

IMPORTANCE OF LIFE GOALS IN 1985

How important to American youth are the goals of private materialism, family life, personal self-fulfillment, and public interest? In 1985 among college freshmen, all of the goals except personal self-fulfillment evoke substantial support; 63–71 percent rate them as essential or very important (table 2*A*, col. 11). Personal self-fulfillment is seen as somewhat less important—the importance of developing a meaningful philosophy of life is placed in the top two categories by 43 percent of freshman.

Among high school seniors, all four goals are considered important, but their relative order is different from that for college freshmen (table 2*B*, col. 11). Personal self-fulfillment is a close second to the family goal, while private materialism and the public interest goal find somewhat less support. The differences between the surveys in ranking and level of support for the four goals are due chiefly to differences in the goals included, their wording, and order. Although the population of youths included among high school seniors is considerably greater and less homogeneous, this cannot account for the difference in ratings between the two groups in table 2, because the life goals of high school seniors with no college plans differ very little from those with college plans (Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley 1987, pp. 36–38).

In general, then, among the goals specified in the two surveys, private materialism, family life, personal self-fulfillment, and the public interest all are quite important to American youth. However, those

Table 1. Classification of Life Goals in the CIRP and Monitoring the Future Surveys

Life Goal	CIRP Survey	Monitoring the Future Survey
1. Private materialism	Being very well-off financially[a]	Having lots of money[a]
	Being successful in a business of my own	Being successful in my line of work
		Being able to find steady work
2. Family goals	Raising a family[a]	Having a good marriage and family life[a]
		Living close to parents and relatives
		Being able to give my children better opportunities than I've had
3. Personal self-fulfillment	Developing a meaningful philosophy of life[a]	Finding purpose and meaning in my life[a]
4. Public interest	Helping others who are in difficulty[a]	Making a contribution to society[a]
	Influencing the political structure	Being a leader in my community
	Influencing social values	Working to correct social and economic inequalities
	Participating in a community action program	
	Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment	
	Helping to promote racial understanding	

NOTE.—In the CIRP survey the instruction is "Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following," and the rating categories are "essential, very important, somewhat important, and not important." In the Monitoring the Future survey the instruction is "How important is each of the following to you in your life," and the rating categories are "not important, somewhat important, quite important, and extremely important." Seven items in the CIRP survery and four items from the Monitoring the Future survey are omitted because they were not considered indicators of the four concepts of interest.

[a] Taken as the principal indicator of the specified life goal in each survey.

Table 2. Life Goal Correlations ≥ .20, 1985

	A. College Freshmen										
Life Goal	Money[a] (1)	Own Business (2)	Family (3)	Philosophy of Life[a] (4)	Political Structure (5)	Societal Values (6)	Community Program (7)	Environmental Program (8)	Racial Understanding (9)	Helping Others[a] (10)	Percent, Top Two Ratings[b] (11)
Very well off financially[a]	. . .	.37									71
Successful in own business	.37	. . .									52
Raising a family[a]			. . .							.21	70
Developing a philosophy of life[a]				. . .	.26	.30	.38	.31	.37	.27	43
Influencing political structure				.26	. . .	.50	.30	.28	.29		16
Influencing societal values				.30	.50	. . .	.35	.26	.32	.33	33
Community program				.38	.30	.35	. . .	.42	.47	.38	23
Environmental program				.31	.28	.26	.42	. . .	.39	.26	20
Racial understanding				.37	.29	.32	.47	.39	. . .	.37	32
Helping others in difficulty[a]			.21	.27		.33	.38	.26	.37	. . .	63

Table 2 (*Continued*)

	B. High School Seniors									
	Money[a]	Success in Work	Steady Work	Good Marriage/ Family Life[a]	Live Close to Parents	Give Children Opportunities	Find Meaning/ Purpose in Life[a]	Leader in Community	Correct Inequalities	Contribute to Society[a]	Percent, Top Two Ratings[b]
Lots of money[a]	. . .										61
Success in work		. . .	.30			.20				.21	91
Find steady work		.30	. . .			.27					95
Good marriage/ family life[a]				. . .		.31					89
Live close to parents/relatives					. . .	.20					34
Give children better opportunities		.20	.27	.31	.20	. . .	.27	.21			86
Find purpose/ meaning in life[a]						.27	. . .		.25	.27	86
Being leader in community						.21		. . .	.33	.51	26
Correct societal/ economic inequalities							.25	.33	. . .	.37	32
Contribute to society[a]		.21					.27	.51	.37	. . .	55

SOURCE.—Micro-data tapes for 1985.

NOTE.—There are no negative correlations of .20 or less. In panel *A*, for each bivariate correlation, N = approximately 175,000; in panel *B*, N = approximately 3,250.

[a] Principal indicator (see table 1).

[b] In panel *A*, indicates rating of "essential" or "very important"; in panel *B*, "extremely important" or "quite important."

who rate one goal highly do not necessarily rate the others highly. This is clear from the correlation matrixes in table 2, where, to simplify interpretation, the entries are confined to correlations of .20 or greater, disregarding sign. Note that in both panels there is a virtual absence of correlations between the indicators of private materialism and those of the public interest. Clearly, those who rate one life goal highly usually do not rate the other highly, a result consistent with Hirschman's (1982) and Schlesinger's (1986) contrast between those with private versus public involvements. (This is not to say, of course, that there is an inverse relationship between the two.) In contrast, within the public interest groupings there are consistently high positive correlations among the indicators.

There are other notable consistencies between the two surveys. In both, those who consider personal self-fulfillment important are likely to consider the public interest important, but not private materialism. This is consistent with Inglehart's assimilation of self-actualization to a public interest orientation in his postmaterialist versus materialist groupings (Inglehart 1981, p. 892).

Also in both surveys, the family goal emerges as a distinct one, with only one case out of a possible six of a correlation at the .20 level or higher with the other three primary indicators. Because of the financial requirements of family life, one might have expected a noticeable positive correlation between the goals of family life and private materialism, but in neither survey is this true. This suggests that the goal of private materialism is interpreted by respondents primarily as goods for oneself, not for one's entire family. There is, however, a relationship between giving children better opportunities and the goals of steady work and being a success at work, suggesting that the latter goals may be chiefly seen as instrumental to successful family life, rather than linked to one's own material aspirations.

TRENDS IN LIFE GOALS

What of trends in the life goals of American youth? Again, the two surveys give quite similar results in the period in which they overlap, although the changes are more pronounced in the college freshmen data. The most sizable changes are a sharp increase in private materialism as a life goal and a decline in the importance of personal self-fulfillment (fig. 1). This shift appears to date from the early or mid-seventies, although precise dating is difficult because of uncertainties about the reliability of the pre-1974 data. Compared with private materialism and personal self-fulfillment, the public interest and family goals change more moderately. Among high school seniors both remain fairly constant in absolute magnitude. Among college freshmen

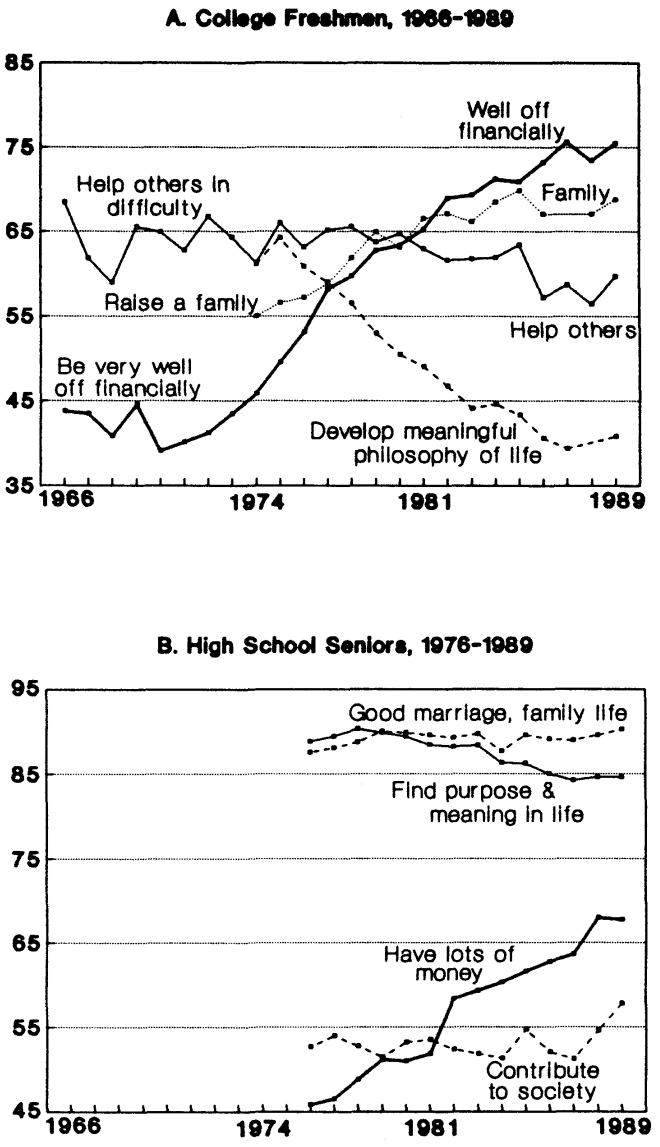

Figure 1. Life goals of college freshman and high school seniors. Source: See table 3. Because of format change, *A* data are omitted for "Raise a family" in 1987 and "Philosophy of life" in 1988.

the importance of family life increases and public interest declines slightly. In relative terms, however, these goals, as well as personal self-fulfillment, have diminished in importance.

This shift in goals appears to have ended in recent years. Particularly in the freshman data, but to some extent also in those for high school seniors, one sees a leveling off in the period starting around 1986–87. (Indeed, newly released freshmen data for 1990, taken together with those in fig. 1, hint at a possible reversal [see Astin, Korn, and Berz 1990].) This is an additional reason for focusing the trend analysis here on the period from the mid-seventies through 1986.

If the analysis is expanded to include the subsidiary as well as primary indicators of table 1, a clearer picture emerges of the trends through 1986 suggested by figure 1. Consider, for example, the parameters of simple least squares trend lines fitted to the time series for each life goal for the period from the mid-seventies to 1986 (table 3). Comparing average rates of change as measured by the slope coefficient, b, one finds a similar pattern in both surveys. Private materialism and family life goals increase in importance, with the specific goal of making money having by far the greatest rate of increase. In contrast, public interest concerns usually decrease in importance (though the trends are not always statistically significant), and personal self-fulfillment declines the most.

Within the public interest grouping, there is a similar and instructive pattern in both surveys among the subsidiary indicators. Public concerns relating to specific social objectives—promoting racial understanding, participating in community action or environmental programs, and correcting social and economic inequalities—have statistically significant negative trends of mild or moderate magnitude (rows 7–9, 19). Public concerns of a more general nature—influencing social values, influencing the political structure, and being a community leader—have positive (though not always significant) trends (rows 4, 5, 17). Our primary indicator in each survey, the importance rating of which is considerably greater than any of the subsidiary indicators (see table 2), falls between these two groupings, apparently averaging them in some degree. To the extent one emphasizes commitment to specific social objectives, there has seemingly been a turning away from the public interest, not only relative to private materialism and family life but in an absolute sense as well.

In both surveys the pattern in the trend results of the full set of survey items in table 3 is generally consistent with that in the cross-sectional analysis of table 2—those items that have sizable positive correlations cross-sectionally usually have similar directions of change. Thus items positively correlated with private materialism usually have significant positive trends, while those positively correlated

Table 3. OLS Regression Parameters for Importance of Specified Life Goal against Time

Population and Life Goal[a]	Percent, Top Two Ratings		Regression Statistics		
	1974	1986	b	*t*	$\bar{R}^2$
College freshmen (1974–86):					
Private materialism:					
1. Very well off financially[b]	46	73	2.19	14.1	.94
2. Successful in own business	38	49	.80	4.9	.66
Family life:					
3. Raising a family[b]	55	67	1.19	9.4	.88
Public interest:					
4. Influencing social values	27	33	.30	4.3	.59
5. Influencing political structure	13	15	.06	.9	.00
6. Helping others in difficulty[b]	61	57	−.34	−2.3	.26
7. Promoting racial understanding	36	27	−.61	−3.9	.62
8. Participating in community action program	28	19	−.82	−7.9	.84
9. Participating in environmental program	26	16	−.91	−6.5	.77
Personal self-fulfillment:					
10. Developing philosophy of life[b]	61	41	−1.98	−17.1	.96

High school seniors (1976–86):					
Private materialism:					
11. Lots of money[b]	46	63	1.84	14.1	.95
12. Success in work	88	91	.40	8.8	.88
13. Steady work	92	94	.37	5.6	.75
Family life:					
14. Live close parents/relatives	26	33	.81	6.3	.79
15. Give children better opportunities	83	88	.49	8.5	.88
16. Good marriage and family life[b]	88	89	.09	1.0	.00
Public interest:					
17. Being leader in community	21	28	.43	4.4	.65
18. Contribute to society[b]	53	52	−.04	−.3	.00
19. Correct social/economic inequalities	33	32	−.17	−2.0	.22
Personal self-fulfillment:					
20. Find purpose/meaning in life[b]	89	85	−.44	−5.1	.22

SOURCE.—For college freshmen data: Astin et al. (1986), Astin, Green, and Korn (1987), and Astin, Korn, and Berz (1989). For high school senior data: Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley (1980a, 1980b, 1981, 1984, 1985, 1987); Johnston, Bachman, and O'Malley (1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1982, 1984, 1986).

NOTE.—For college freshmen, $N = 13$ for each regression; for high school seniors, $N = 11$ for each regression.

[a] Ranked by b within each life goal category.

[b] Principal indicator (see table 1).

with public interest tend to have small or negative trends. In this sense the micro data lend support to the time series analysis.

As regards recent generalizations about values of American youth, the evidence supports the Levine (1981) interpretation over that of Yankelovich (1981)—a growing emphasis on private materialism relative to personal self-fulfillment—and with regard to American society more generally, the Hirschman (1982)–Schlesinger (1986) view over that of Bellah and his associates (1985)—a shift from public concerns to private materialism. Although Inglehart's argument for a postmaterialist trend is not supported here, he might explain the shift toward materialism as due to the emergence of an "environment of insecurity," as in his analysis of European trends in the seventies (Inglehart 1985). Evidence testing this hypothesis will be looked at shortly.

Effects of Changing Values

The changes in life goals described in the preceding section have been accompanied by changes in personal plans and desires for the future among young people. In addition there have been related trends among young people in attitudes toward societal institutions, views of social problems, political beliefs, and expected political involvement. Each of these topics is itself a subject of substantial research and the observed trends doubtless reflect multiple causes. Our aim here is to point out a pattern of relationships, both in time-series and cross-sectional data consistent with the hypothesis that changing life goals have had wide-ranging effects.

PERSONAL PLANS AND DESIRES FOR THE FUTURE

If young people become more materialistic and less interested in making contributions to society, then one would expect them to shift toward college majors that are likely to lead to higher-paying jobs and away from those relating to public service employment. The trend in favor of business and away from education is illustrative of this shift (table 4, cols. 1–3).[2]

2. Green (1989) and Astin (1985) present a fuller analysis of the change over time in desired majors in the CIRP surveys. Data just released indicate a recent reversal in the trends reported above, consistent with the shift in life goal trends after 1986 noted earlier (Higher Education Research Institute, 1990). Shifts in enrollments by college major might also reflect differential trends in the prospective earnings associated with different majors. Although starting salaries are not necessarily the last word (Berger 1988), it is worth noting that there is little difference in the trends in starting salaries for majors in business and engineering compared with those in humanities and social sciences from the early seventies thru mid-eighties (College Placement Council, 1981; updated with unpublished data supplied by Dawn Oberman, College Placement Council).

Table 4. *OLS Regression Parameters against Time for Students' Personal Plans and Desires for the Future*

	Percent Giving Specified Response		Regression Statistics		
	1976 (1)	1986 (2)	b (3)	*t* (4)	$\bar{R}^2$ (5)
Expected college major (college freshmen):					
Business	18[a]	25	.54	9.0	.87
Education	10[a]	8	−.29	−4.4	.61
Career plans:					
College freshmen:					
Business	16	20	.69	8.1	.91
Teaching (elementary and secondary)	8	7	−.11	−1.2	.05
High school seniors:					
Business	9	18	.82	8.4	.86
Work setting (high school seniors)—How would you rate as a place to work (% acceptable and desirable):					
Large corporation	59	74	1.68	11.0	.92
Social service organization	52	41	−1.02	−6.0	.78
Job characteristics (high school seniors)—How important is a job . . . (% very important):					
With chance to earn a good deal of money	47	58	1.20	9.0	.89
With high status and prestige	20	32	1.05	9.2	.89
Where chances for advancement and promotion are good	57	67	.79	5.2	.72
Most people look up to and respect	34	42	.75	11.0	.92
Which is interesting to do	88	86	−.26	−4.6	.67
That allows you to establish roots in community	42	38	−.33	−4.3	.64
Where you do not have to be a person you are not	73	71	−.37	−4.8	.69
With opportunity to be directly helpful to others	51	45	−.53	−5.8	.77

SOURCES.—See table 3.
[a]1974.

After schooling, the next major life choice a typical young person faces is a career. Trends in career plans, the setting in which young people would like to work, and what they consider important in a job are highly consistent with the changed structure of life goals.[3] Both surveys report a significant increase in business as a planned career (table 4). In ratings by high school seniors of the desirability of nine different work settings, the biggest increase is in the desirability of working in a large corporation and the largest decrease in that of working in a social service agency. In ratings of the importance of twenty-four job characteristics, those that increase in importance are typically related to money and status, while characteristics that decrease in importance are linked to helping others or personal fulfillment (see table 4, where the four job characteristics with the strongest positive trends are shown, as are the four with the strongest negative trends).

TRENDS IN ATTITUDES TOWARD CAPITALIST INSTITUTIONS, ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION, AND POLITICAL LIFE

Inglehart (1981) sees those with materialistic values as being more supportive of business and the status quo, being less politically involved, and showing less concern for specific social issues such as the environment. Consistent with this, Herzog, Bachman, and Johnston (1978) find that less "concern for others" is correlated with reduced support for government efforts to address social problems.

Trend data, which come largely from the high school seniors' survey, lend support to these views. Students are increasingly satisfied with the job being done for the country by corporations, and there seems to be growing support for what one might call "capitalist values": an increased endorsement of profit making and the advertising of products that are not really needed (table 5, cols. 1–3). Both college freshman and high school seniors have become less supportive of the idea that the government should do something to clean up the environment.

High school seniors have also retreated from the idea of active political involvement. There is a significant decrease in support for the idea that a "good citizen tries to change government policies he disagrees with" (table 5). Also, students are less likely to expect that in their future lives they will write to public officials, work in a political campaign, participate in a demonstration, or participate in a boycott. A recent study finds that trends such as these are more pronounced

3. Changes of the type that we report have been noted in Astin (1985), Bachman (1987), Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley (1986), Easterlin and Crimmins (1988), Green and Astin (1985), and Herzog and Bachman (1982).

among younger than older Americans (Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press 1990).

Finally, there are significant trends in young people's political beliefs and party identification over this period. In both surveys students report themselves increasingly conservative and decreasingly liberal (although one cannot be sure, of course, that the interpretation of these terms has remained constant over time). Among the high school seniors, this shift seemingly translates into a statistically significant increase in identification with the Republican party and decreased identification with the Democratic party (table 5).

CROSS-SECTIONAL VERSUS TIME SERIES RELATIONSHIPS

We have previously noted that cross-sectional relationships among life goals are fairly consistent with time series trends. Is the same true when we consider relationships between life goals and personal plans and attitudes? To answer this we examine the correlations in 1985 between indicators of the four-value orientations and those of plans and attitudes. Because of the five-questionnaire format of the high school senior survey only a limited number of indicators of plans and attitudes can be related to life goals at the micro level, but those that can, span the topics discussed above fairly well. It should be borne in mind that we are looking here only at simple correlations without control for other influences; moreover, the sample of college freshmen is so large that statistical significance is obtained even with correlations as low as .01.

Among college freshmen the relationship between private materialism and choosing a business major and career is positive, while that between materialism and study and work in education is negative (table 6, lines 1, 2). In contrast, emphasis on public interest shows correlations with school and career plans opposite in sign to the correlations for private materialism. People who emphasize personal self-fulfillment are more likely than others to reject business as a field of study. All of these relationships support the idea that the change over time in college major and career plans is related to changing values of the young.

A strong emphasis on private materialism is mildly related to less support for government action on the environment, and less support for political involvement (lines 3, 5). Once again, orientation toward the public interest shows the opposite relationships—more support for government action and political involvement.

Finally, although the relationships between life goals and political beliefs are quite weak, so far as they go they are consistent with the

Table 5. OLS Regression Parameters against Time in Attitudes toward Corporations and Capitalist Institutions, Environmental Action, and Political Life: Expected Political Involvement and Political Beliefs

	Percent Giving Specified Response		Regression Statistics		
	1976 (1)	1986 (2)	b (3)	*t* (4)	$\tilde{R}^2$ (5)
Support for corporations and capitalist values, high school seniors:					
How good or bad a job is being done for the country as a whole by large corporations (% very poor + poor)	17	8	−1.16	−4.0	.60
In the U.S. we put too much emphasis on making profits and not enough on human well-being (% agree + mostly agree)	75	62	−1.25	−10.6	.92
There is nothing wrong with advertising that gets people to buy things they do not really need (% disagree)	44	27	−1.64	−5.6	.75
Environmental problems:					
High school seniors:					
Government should take action to solve our environmental problems even if it means that some of the products we now use would have to be changed or banned (% agree)	51	34	−1.68	−13.3	.95
College freshmen:					
The federal government is not doing enough to control environmental pollution (% agree)	83[a]	78	−.41	−6.2	.76

Political involvement, high school seniors:					
I feel a good citizen tries to change the government policies he disagrees with (% agree)	34	22	−1.17	−8.7	.88
Have you ever done, or do you plan to do, the following things (% will do + have done):					
Vote	88	88	.07	0.5	−.08
Write to public official	36	30	−.73	−5.4	.74
Work in a political campaign	18	14	−.46	−4.4	.64
Participate in a lawful demonstration	20	17	−.42	−3.6	.55
Boycott certain products or stores	25	17	−1.55	−4.8	.69
Political beliefs:					
Party preferences, high school seniors:					
% Republican (strong + mild)	16	28	1.04	5.3	.73
% Democrat (strong + mild)	26	20	−.46	2.4	.31
Political views:					
High school seniors:					
% conservative	14	17	.22	2.0	.23
% liberal + radical	27	22	−.50	−3.5	.53
College freshmen:					
% conservative/far right	15[a]	20	.51	8.5	.86
% liberal/far left	30[a]	24	−.74	−4.3	.59

SOURCES.—See table 3.
[a] 1974.

Table 6. Correlations between Life Goals and Various Plans, Attitudes, and Beliefs: 1985

	Life Goal			
	Private Materialism	Family	Self-fulfillment	Public Interest
College freshmen (N = 175,000):				
1. College major:				
Business	.13*	.04*	−.07*	−.06*
Education	−.10*	.07*	−.01*	.07*
2. Career plans:				
Business	.13*	.05*	−.05*	−.06*
Education	−.11*	.07*	.00	.07*
3. Government not doing enough to control pollution	−.02*	.00	.09*	.07*
4. Political beliefs	−.02*	−.05*	.05*	.03*
High school seniors (N = 3,150):				
5. A good citizen tries to change policies	−.05*	.01	.04	.09*
6. Political beliefs	.03	−.05*	.00	−.04
7. Political party	.02	−.02	.05*	.00

SOURCE—Micro-data tapes for 1985.

NOTE.—The coding is as follows. Life goals: 1 = not important to 4 = essential, for college freshmen; 1 = not important to 4 = extremely important, for high school seniors. Line 3: 1 = disagree strongly to 4 = agree strongly. Line 4: 1 = far right to 5 = far left. Line 5: 1 = disagree to 5 = agree. Line 6: 1 = very conservative, 2= conservative, 3 = moderate, none of the other categories, 4 = liberal, 5 = very liberal, 6 = radical. Line 7: 1 = strongly Republican, 2 = mildly Republican, 3 = don't know, Independent, 4 = mildly Democrat, 5 = strongly Democrat.

* Significant at .05 level.

trend results. Among college freshmen, those interested in money were more likely to lean toward the conservative end of the political spectrum, while the opposite was true of those stressing the public interest (line 4). There were no significant relationships among these variables for high school seniors (lines 6 and 7).

Clearly this is only a preliminary look at links between life goals and the plans and attitudes of American youth, and the correlation values are, at best, quite modest in magnitude. Nevertheless, one's impression is that it lends some micro-level support to the associations noted between the time series trends of table 3 and those of tables 4 and 5.

Causes of the Shift in Values

Why the shift in values of American youth? As a start on this question, this section first evaluates hypotheses that have been advanced with reference specifically to youth: the impact on young people of (*a*) major political and social events, (*b*) adverse economic changes breeding economic insecurity, and (*c*) important changes in family structure and/or the socialization of children. Then we turn to a hypothesis that sees the shift in the values of youth as part of a more general shift in values in the population as a whole due to the post-1973 slowing of the economy. Our procedure is a simple one: to examine the consistency between the time series trend in private materialism and that in each of various indicators of the proposed causal factors. We do not rule out the possibility of multiple causes; however, our interest here is in looking at each hypothesis individually.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGES

To a number of analysts, the rise in private materialism is seen as the result of a retreat from public concerns. Bachman and Johnston (1979a) argue, for example, that without dramatic events to rivet students' attention like the Vietnam War (and associated draft concerns) or the civil rights movement, they would naturally drift toward more immediate issues in their personal lives. Levine (1981) notes that, even after the Vietnam War ended, college students of the 1970s received continued exposure to negative national events including Watergate, conflict in the Middle East, the growth of international terrorist activities, and the vulnerability of our society to such international events as the OPEC oil crises. These events, he argues, led to cynicism and a sense of despair about public life and to a consequent focus on private material concerns. Similarly, Inglehart (1981), arguing in Maslovian terms, sees negative views of the world situation among youth, and a resulting

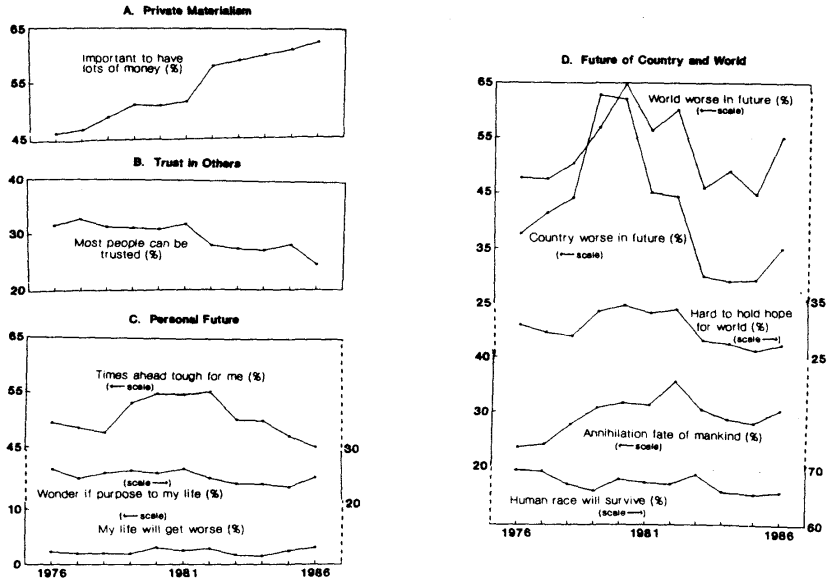

Figure 2. Private materialism among high school seniors, their trust in others, and views of the future, 1976–86. Source: See table 3.

feeling of physical insecurity, as causing increased emphasis on private materialism.

One difficulty with these arguments is that most of the events actually mentioned took place before 1980, while the shift in values continued beyond that date. Although one might try to argue in terms of lagged relationships, this seems implausible because of the dramatic nature of the events cited.

A second problem is that these arguments do not seem supported by trends in high school seniors' subjective views: their reports of how much faith they have in others, and their evaluations of their own futures and those of the country, the world, and "mankind." Figure 2 presents trends from 1976 to 1986 in responses from high school seniors to questions on such issues, together with that for private materialism.

On the whole, the time series patterns on students' trust and their view of the future are quite different from that on the importance of private materialism. Although students' trust in other people did diminish, the decline was concentrated in the years after 1981 and was small compared to the change in the importance of private materialism (fig. 2*A*, *B*). With regard to their evaluations of their personal future, there is very little change in the percent wondering "whether there is any

real purpose in life in light of the world situation," and in the percent feeling their life will get worse in the next 5 years (fig. 2*C*).

There is, however, a sizable jump in the period 1979–82 in the percent feeling that "times ahead will be tougher for me." This pessimistic shift occurs also in several indicators of high school seniors' views of the future of the country and the world (fig. 2*D*, esp. the top three series). It seems likely that this pattern is linked to dramatic world events in the Middle East such as the overthrow of the Shah of Iran and the taking of hostages at the American Embassy in Iran, and perhaps also to the state of the economy. By 1983–86 most of these series are back to levels like those in 1976–78. Regression lines fitted to the series in figure 2*D* show no statistically significant trend over the full period, except for the last series, which has a barely significant negative trend. In general, it would seem difficult to argue that the movements in these series could explain the uptrend in private materialism.

In sum, examination of the pattern of change over time in students' levels of trust in others and optimism for themselves and the world leads to the conclusion that there is little consistency with the hypothesis that students have turned to pursuit of private materialism as a result of growing despair about dealing with others or about their own or world futures.

ECONOMIC INSECURITY

This hypothesis sees adverse conditions in the economy as causing young people to worry more about their personal economic prospects and to pay correspondingly less attention to "higher order" concerns, such as self-fulfillment or the public interest (Bellah et al. 1985; Inglehart 1981, 1985).

To consider this, we look first at the CIRP series on private materialism along with two economy-wide indicators—the unemployment rate of 20–24-year-olds and the consumer inflation rate. The latter is the indicator used by Inglehart (1985) to account for a materialistic swing in Europe. These indicators provide little support for the hypothesis. Private materialism rises fairly smoothly in both recession and expansion periods; neither of the macroeconomic series has a similar pattern (fig. 3).[4]

It is possible that the macroeconomic series do not capture correctly the immediate economic circumstances influencing teenagers' values. Perhaps more directly pertinent is the job situation of teenagers them-

4. The unemployment rates for all workers and 16–19-year-olds have trends and fluctuations virtually identical to those in the rate for 20–24-year-olds, though all three differ in average level.

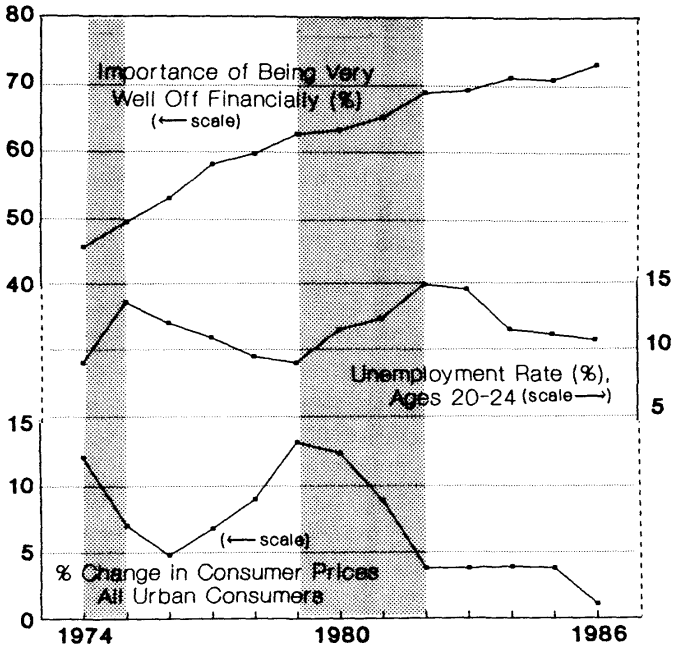

Figure 3. Private materialism among college freshmen, unemployment rate of 20–24-year-olds, and inflation rate, 1974–86. (Economic recession periods are shaded.) Source: The first series is from Astin et al. 1986, 1987; the others, from U.S. Bureau of the Census, various dates.

selves. If there were a trend toward poorer labor market experience among teenagers and greater concern among them about finding and keeping jobs, then increased emphasis on material success might result. Indeed, labor market experience and job worries do fluctuate with the business cycle in the way that one would expect (fig. 4*B*, *C*). However, there is little evidence of adverse trends. Note especially that the proportions working, average weekly hours, and concerns about getting or losing high school jobs are about the same at the end of the period as at the beginning. There is a modest decline in real weekly earnings before 1981, but thereafter the trend is flat.

One might discount teenagers' job experience as a significant factor in shaping their longer term outlook, on the grounds that such jobs have little bearing on their adult occupations. Teenagers themselves clearly downplay the relevance of these jobs to their future. In 1986 when asked whether their high school work was "a good stepping stone toward the kind of work you want in the long run," 56 percent

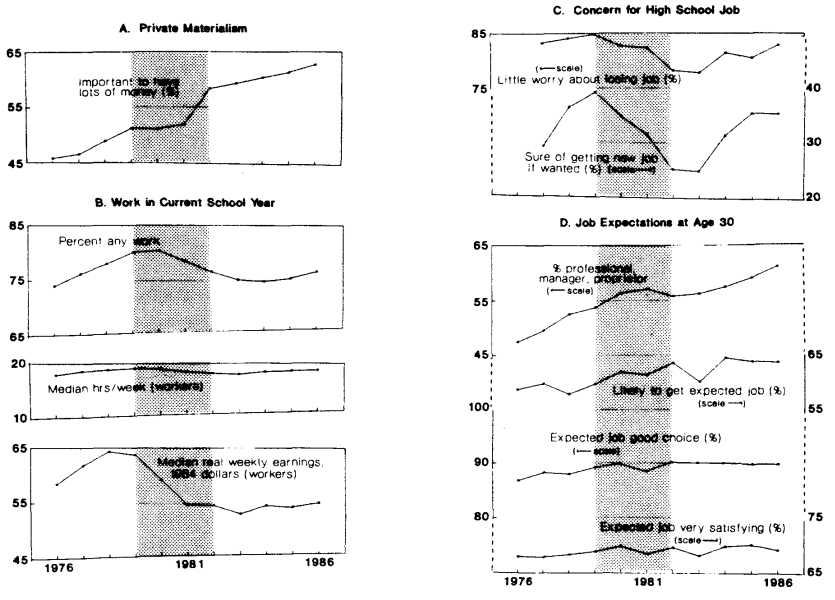

Figure 4. Private materialism, high school work, and job expectations at age 30, high school seniors, 1976–86. (Economic recession periods are shaded.) Source: See table 3. The earnings series in *B* is reported money earnings adjusted by the Consumer Price Index, CPI-X1 (U.S. Congressional Budget Office 1988).

said "not at all" and another 16 percent only said "a little" (Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley 1987, p. 165).

More to the point, perhaps, are their responses to questions about the kind of work they expect to be doing when they are 30 years old, and, in particular, their certainty about actually getting this work. If deteriorating economic conditions bred uncertainty about being able to get jobs in the future, one might expect it to show up in responses to such queries. But, in fact, today's teenagers expect better jobs than did those in 1976 and feel more certain about getting such jobs and that their choice of job is a good one (fig. 4*D*). There is little in any of these data to suggest that rising materialism among high school seniors reflects greater worry about their own economic future. Nor is there evidence that they have become more worried about the nation's economic prospects. The proportion saying that they worry sometimes or often about the nation's economic problems was down from 68 percent in 1976 to 61 percent in 1986 (Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley 1980a, p. 169; 1987, p. 177).

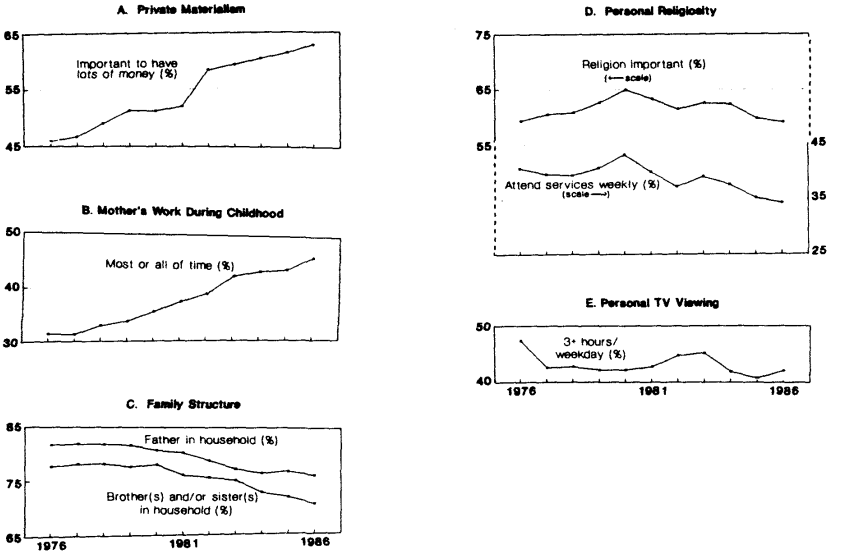

Figure 5. Private materialism and background and personal characteristics of high school seniors, 1976–86. Source: See table 3.

SOCIALIZATION AND FAMILY EXPERIENCES

A third set of hypotheses relates to changes in family structure or young people's socialization experiences that may have caused an increasingly materialistic orientation. Inglehart (1981) and Lesthaege and Meekers (1986) are among those stressing the importance of early socialization in the formation of values. As will be seen, we agree with this general idea, but our notion of the specific mechanisms at work is different from others.

The dramatic growth in mothers' labor force participation has been cited by some as the cause of greater materialistic emphasis among young people (Greenberger and Steinberg 1986). In fact, among the mothers of high school seniors, the increase in labor force participation is quite similar in both the timing and the amount of change to the growth in emphasis on materialism (fig. 5*A*, *B*). As will be seen shortly, however, we take this trend in mothers' labor force participation as symptomatic of a more basic cause.

Other family structure and socialization hypotheses come out less well. For example, a growth in single parent families and/or decline in number of children per family might be expected to lead to increased material and self-centered emphasis among young people. But the

trends in these variables are flat in the latter part of the 1970s, while materialism increases noticeably (fig. 5, cf. *A* and *C*). Nor does it seem that the rise in materialism is linked to decreased religiosity (Lesthaege and Meekers 1986; Preston 1986; Thornton 1989). Between 1976 and 1986 the importance of religion to young people first rises and then falls, returning to its initial value. Also, although religious attendance declines in the eighties, it is fairly constant in the seventies (fig. 5*D*). Similarly, while television is now recognized as a major influence in the socialization of children (Clapp 1988), TV viewing has actually drifted slightly downward over the period (fig. 5*E*). (This does not rule out, of course, the possibility of a change in TV content.) Finally, the "premature affluence" hypothesis sees a growth in work and spending among high school students as leading to increased emphasis on material values (Bachman 1983; Freedman and Thornton 1990; Greenberger and Steinberg 1986). As we have seen, however, there has been virtually no trend in the proportion of high school seniors who work, and average real weekly earnings actually declined somewhat between the seventies and eighties (fig. 4*B*). Thus, there is little to suggest a trend toward increasing affluence among the young during this period that might account for greater materialism.

ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION IN THE POPULATION AT LARGE

So far we have focused on hypotheses relating specifically to American youth. It is possible, however, that the trends for youth mirror those for the adult population more generally. Although directly comparable life goal data for adults are not available, there is some evidence that this is so. Trends in responses to a question asked by the Roper Organization probing Americans' views of the "good life" reveal a startling number of similarities to those in the aspirations of high school seniors. Shown in Table 7 is the percentage change from 1975 to 1988 in answers to the "good life" question, along with that from 1976 to 1986 in responses to roughly comparable questions asked of high school seniors. Although the questions and period covered differ between the surveys, the general pattern is quite similar—a strong shift in favor of private materialism (rows 1–3) and away from public concerns and personal self-fulfillment (rows 4 and 5). While more needs to be done to explore similarities and differences between adults and youth,[5] it

5. The Roper question was asked in 1975, 1978, 1981, 1984, and 1988 (Roper Organization 1989). The temporal changes for the money question are somewhat different from those in the data for American youth, although increases occur both in the 1970s and 1980s. By age the overall change in the importance of money between 1975 and 1988 is quite similar for persons 18–29, 30–44, and 45–59 years old.

Table 7. Percent of Adults Identifying Specified Item as Part of the Good Life, 1975–88, and Percentage Point Change in Comparable Item for High School Seniors, 1976–86

Components of Good Life	All Adults		Change	High School Seniors: Change,
	1975	1988	(Col. 2 − Col. 1)	1976–86
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1. A lot of money	38	62	24	17
2. Really nice clothes	36	44	8	15
3. A vacation home	19	42	23	10
4. A job that is interesting	69	61	−8	−2
5. A job that contributes to the welfare of society	38	35	−3	−6

SOURCES.—The good life data are from the Roper Organization (1989). We are grateful to Bickley Townsend for providing these and related unpublished data, on which the present discussion draws.

NOTE.—N = about 2,000. The specific question wording is as follows: "We often hear people talk about what they want out of life. Here are a number of different things." (Card shown to respondent.) "When you think of the good life—the life you'd like to have, which of the things on this list, if any, are part of that good life as far as you personally are concerned?" The high school seniors' data in row 1 are the same as those used in fig. 1 and table 3; in rows 4 and 5, the same as those used in table 4 concerning job characteristics. Those in rows 2 and 3 are reported in Crimmins, Easterlin, and Saito (1991) and cover 1977–86. All of these data are from the Monitoring the Future survey.

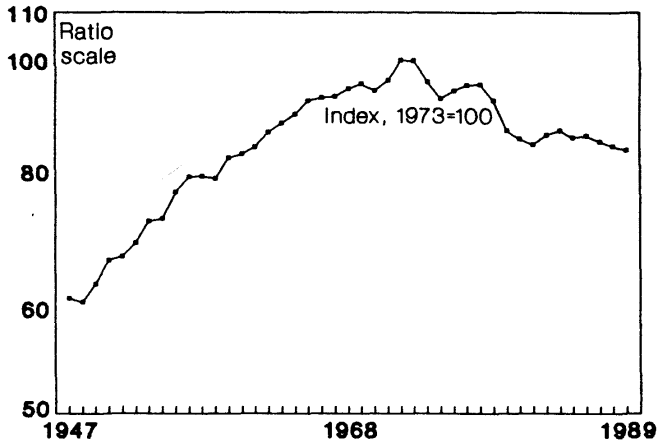

Figure 6. Average real weekly earnings of all workers, total private nonagricultural sector, 1947–89 (1977 dollars). Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, various dates.

seems likely that the changes in values among American youth reflect those in the population at large. Over three-fourths of high school seniors say that their ideas of what values are important in life are very or mostly similar to those of their parents; since 1978, when this question was first asked, there has been a mild trend toward greater agreement (Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley 1980b, p. 164; 1987, p. 171).

In turn, this leads one to ask, what could have produced such a dramatic change throughout the entire population? Our speculation is that it is linked to the widely recognized slowing of the American economy after 1973 and, in particular, to the downturn in real wage rates, illustrated in figure 6 by average real weekly earnings. From the end of World War II to 1973 the uptrend in real wage rates was remarkably steady; thereafter, a downtrend and leveling off occurred. The decline in real wage rates implies that if Americans wished merely to maintain their per capita living level of 1973, then they would have had to change their economic and social behavior, for example, by working more. But the living level to which Americans aspired in the post-1973 period did not remain fixed at its 1973 value; rather, the desired living level was itself trending upward—this is clearly shown by the Roper data cited above. When considered in relation to the change in material aspirations, therefore, the economic deprivation being faced by the American population after 1973 was even greater

than that suggested by the decline in absolute wage rates, and probably growing. Unfortunately, we cannot measure very well the movements in economic deprivation, for lack of an annual time series that captures accurately the movement in material aspirations in the population at large. But there is clear evidence, consistent with the hypothesis of growing economic deprivation, that Americans changed their behavior in ways that would improve their living levels. Mothers increased their labor force participation dramatically, childbearing was deferred, and family size was reduced (Easterlin 1987; Easterlin, Macdonald, and Macunovich 1990; Levy and Michel 1986). Note that the rise in mothers' labor force participation shown in figure 5 is taken here as resulting at least in part from a growing sense of economic deprivation.

A population faced with growing difficulty in achieving its material aspirations, and, in consequence, changing its behavior to reduce or eliminate this shortfall, is likely to place increasing emphasis on the importance of making money and to pass this sense of importance on to the young as part of young people's socialization experience. This happened, we suspect, not only in relations between adults and the young at home but also in school, in the workplace, on the playing field, and via the content of the media. The young learned the lesson by mirroring adults' shift in values toward private materialism and also by changing their own behavior appropriately, reorienting themselves toward pursuits that would increase their earnings capacity. This change in behavior of the young may explain why there is no evidence of growing economic insecurity among them. Although today's youth want more money, they feel, whether rightly or not, that they are better able to get it. Evidence of growing confidence among the young appears in freshmen ratings of self-confidence and in high school seniors' responses to questions about how good they think they would be in each of several roles—worker, parent, and spouse (Astin, Green, and Korn 1987, p. 84; Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley 1980a, pp. 104–5; 1986, pp. 107–8).

Earlier, note was made of evidence that the retreat from political life has been greater among the young than old. Does this contradict the evidence that the shift in values was similar across age groups? Not necessarily. The young are at the age where they are just starting to get involved in political life. A greater response by the young to the same change in values that older persons are experiencing would be plausible, because the young are less committed and less entrenched in their ways of life. Thus, not only in their political behavior but in their economic and social behavior generally one might expect a greater impact on the young of a given change in values because the young have more options for change available to them.

Summary and Conclusions

Since the early seventies there has been a marked shift in the value orientations of American youth. There has been a substantial increase in private materialism as a life goal, a modest turning away from the public interest, and a sharp decline in emphasis on personal self-fulfillment. Compared with public interest and personal self-fulfillment, family concerns have increased modestly, but not nearly as much as has the emphasis on private materialism. Relative to private materialism, the other three goals have all declined in importance. Since about 1986–87, this shift appears to have ended and may even have started to turn around, but the life goals of young people today are still much different from those of their predecessors 15 years ago.

The change in life goals through 1986 has been accompanied by changes in personal plans and desires for the future among young people. There has been a shift both in expected college majors and career plans toward those that lead to higher paying jobs—for example, toward business and away from education. The desirability of working in large corporations has risen substantially while the attractiveness of work in a social service agency has declined. Trends in preferred job characteristics show an increase in importance of those related to money and status and decreased importance of those related to public interest and personal self-fulfillment.

There has also been a marked increase in support for capitalist institutions, such as profit making and advertising, and increased belief that corporations are doing a good job. At the same time, there has been a retreat from support for government action in areas such as cleaning up the environment.

In addition, there has been a decline in actual or potential political involvement of American youth, such as writing to public officials, working in a political campaign, or participating in demonstrations or boycotts. This has been accompanied by an increase in those identifying themselves as politically conservative and supporting the Republican party.

Some scholars attribute the decline in public concerns to the changing political and social climate of the period and to growing cynicism and disillusionment among young people connected with this. But the subjective attitudes of American youth during this period fail to show a trend toward greater cynicism or increasing disillusionment with either their own prospects or the societal or world outlook.

Others argue that insecurity about their economic futures has caused young people to focus more on their personal economic situation and to pay correspondingly less attention to "higher order" concerns such

as the public interest or self-fulfillment. Again, however, there is little evidence that the attitudes of American youth toward their economic prospects changed in a way consistent with this hypothesis; on the contrary, young people have, if anything, become more optimistic about their economic outlook.

Neither is there support for a number of hypotheses that look to changes in young peoples' family background or socialization experience. The break-up of families, decline in family size, and changes among the young in religiosity, personal affluence, and TV exposure—none of these changes in a way similar to the trend in private materialism. The exception, the growth in labor force participation of mothers, is symptomatic of a more basic cause.

The clue to this cause is the apparently quite similar shift in values among adults and young people generally. Among adults this shift in values, we speculate, reflects a growing sense of economic deprivation connected with the slowing of economic growth after 1973 and the behavioral changes thus induced, such as greater labor force participation of mothers and reduced childbearing. These feelings of economic deprivation, in turn, arose from a growing disparity between rising material aspirations, on the one hand, and lower real wage rates, on the other. There is evidence of both these developments post-1973, but it is too fragmentary, unfortunately, to measure the time series movement in economic deprivation for comparison with that in values.

The shifting values of adults were, we believe, transmitted to the young in their varied contacts—at home, in school, in the workplace, on the playing field, and via the media. The change in values led young people, in turn, to reorient themselves toward jobs and careers that would pay more. Because of these adaptations, young people, on average, have ended up feeling more secure about their economic prospects.

Some may have wondered at the lack of reference heretofore to the 1980s "decade of greed" and its possible impact on values. The answer should now be clear. The shift in values we have been experiencing antedates the 1980s and, and in our view, reflects the onset after 1973 of what Levy (1987) has called the "quiet depression." The "decade of greed" and its political and social concommitants was itself a result of the more fundamental economic forces at work.

As mentioned, this explanation is speculative. If it is correct, however, it implies that value orientations may shift back and forth in conjunction with longer-term swings in the growth of the economy of the sort observed in historical experience (Easterlin 1968; Maddison 1982). The idea of longer term swings in values has also been advanced by Hirschman (1982) and Schlesinger (1986). But while they see such swings as due to an endogenous mechanism, we see them as the prod-

uct of an exogenous force, alternating phases of rapid and slow growth of the economy. Indeed, it is possible that a new upswing in the economy's longer-term growth is now underway and that the recent leveling of the materialistic trend may reflect this.

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