

Cultural Evolution: Measuring Differences in Generational Values

Early Results Show Millennials and Gen Z are More Egalitarian, Fatalistic than Older Generations

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Overview

For years, researchers have documented how Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Gen Z (born between 1997-2012) are emerging as unique generations with distinct political attitudes that differ from older generations. Studies and popular polling have found that Millennials and Gen Zers are notably more progressive than previous generations (Della Volpe, 2022; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Rouse & Ross, 2018; Twenge, 2023), with young people signaling more left-leaning views on policy issues like climate change and universal health care, and on social issues like racial justice, immigration, and LGBTQ+ rights (Pew, 2018). Their progressive views have even helped Democratic candidates win elections, including the 2020 Presidential election when Joe Biden won roughly 60 percent of voters 18-29-years-old and flipped key states to take the presidency (Igielnik, Keeter, & Hartig, 2021). Despite their more liberal perspectives, younger people have also been found to have a more critical and pessimistic outlook on politics and the economy. Researchers have documented a more critical perspective regarding democratic citizenship among young people today (Foa, Klassen, Wenger, Rand & Slade, 2020; Dalton & Welzel, 2014), and recent polling has found that young people think that much in their lives is outside of their control, that they are pessimistic about their own futures and the fate of the country, and they are feeling that the American Dream is out of reach for most young people (Change Research, 2022).

While existing research has done much to uncover emerging trends in the unique outlook of Millennials and GenZ, the systematic study of the generational values that underlie such perspectives has not been explored recently. In this issue brief, we review key findings from a survey administered in 2020 that leverages advances in Cultural Theory to measure differences in generational values. We find that overall, Millennials and Gen Z are more egalitarian, fatalistic, and less individualistic than older generations.

Methods

Survey - We administered a national survey with YouGov in spring 2020 to collect data from a nationally representative sample of adults. The study was designed to oversample young people in the GenZ and Millennial age group (18-39-year-olds) to better facilitate analysis by age or generation. In total, 2,270 participants completed the survey. After enrolling 2,270 participants in the study, the respondents were then matched to a sampling frame



on gender, age, race, and education.

Survey items - To examine generational values, we used survey questions developed by scholars who study Cultural Theory (CT). CT is a theoretical framework to study the shared worldviews, values and beliefs that develop among individuals engaged in specific patterns of social relationships. In other words, CT claims that people engage in different types of social relations and form different cultural biases (values and beliefs) that create a culture, or rather, a ‘cultural solidarity’. CT establishes four main cultural solidarities (or values, as we refer to them) that can typically be found throughout society: hierarchy, individualism, egalitarianism, and fatalism. As noted in Table 1 below, the survey asked 12 questions aimed at identifying these four values. Each of the four values are associated with three questions; each set of questions was used to create an index of the latent values.

Table 1. Cultural Theory survey items

Values	Questions
Egalitarianism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Society works better if power is shared equally • What society needs is a fairness revolution to make the distribution of goods more equal • It is our responsibility to reduce differences in income between the rich and the poor
Individualism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are better off when we compete as individuals • Even the disadvantaged should have to make their own way in the world • Even if some people are at a disadvantage, it is best for society to let people succeed or fail on their own
Hierarchy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Society would be much better off if the people in charge imposed strict and swift punishment on those who break the rules • Society is in trouble because people do not obey those in authority • The best way to get ahead in life is to work hard and do what you are told
Fatalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No matter how hard we try, the course of our lives is largely determined by forces beyond our control • It would be pointless to make serious plans in such an uncertain world • The most important things that take place in life happen by chance

Source: Jenkins-Smith worldview questions as reported in Swedlow et al. (2020)

Defining generations for analysis - This analysis uses the definition of generations provided by the PEW research center (Pew, 2015). Gen Z is defined as those born after 1996 (but who were at least 18 at the time of the study recruitment), Millennials were born between 1981 to 1996, and Gen X members were born 1965 to 1980. Members of the Baby Boomer generation were born 1946 to 1964, whereas members of the Silent generation were born 1928 to 1945 and those from the Greatest generation were born before 1928. In our analysis, we combine Millennials and Gen Z, and also combine members of the Silent and Greatest generation to address smaller sample sizes among the Gen Z and Greatest generations.

Findings

Figure 1 uses the lowess function in Stata to smooth the descriptive trends of the four value types by age. Overall, 30 to 40 year olds reported higher average levels of fatalism and egalitarianism than other age groups, and 18-to-40-year-olds expressed lower levels of individualism than other age groups. Those ages 18-45, on average, expressed higher levels of fatalism than those 45+; in fact, after an initial increase of fatalism between ages 18 to 30, fatalism decreases until 75 years old. Support for egalitarianism also tends to be higher among young adults, peaking at age 30 about .2 standard deviations above the mean (the mean response is centered at zero). Individualism is lowest among 18-year-olds, and steadily increases by age (with the exception of a decrease from ages 55-62). There is no notable pattern of changes in hierarchy by age.

Figure 1

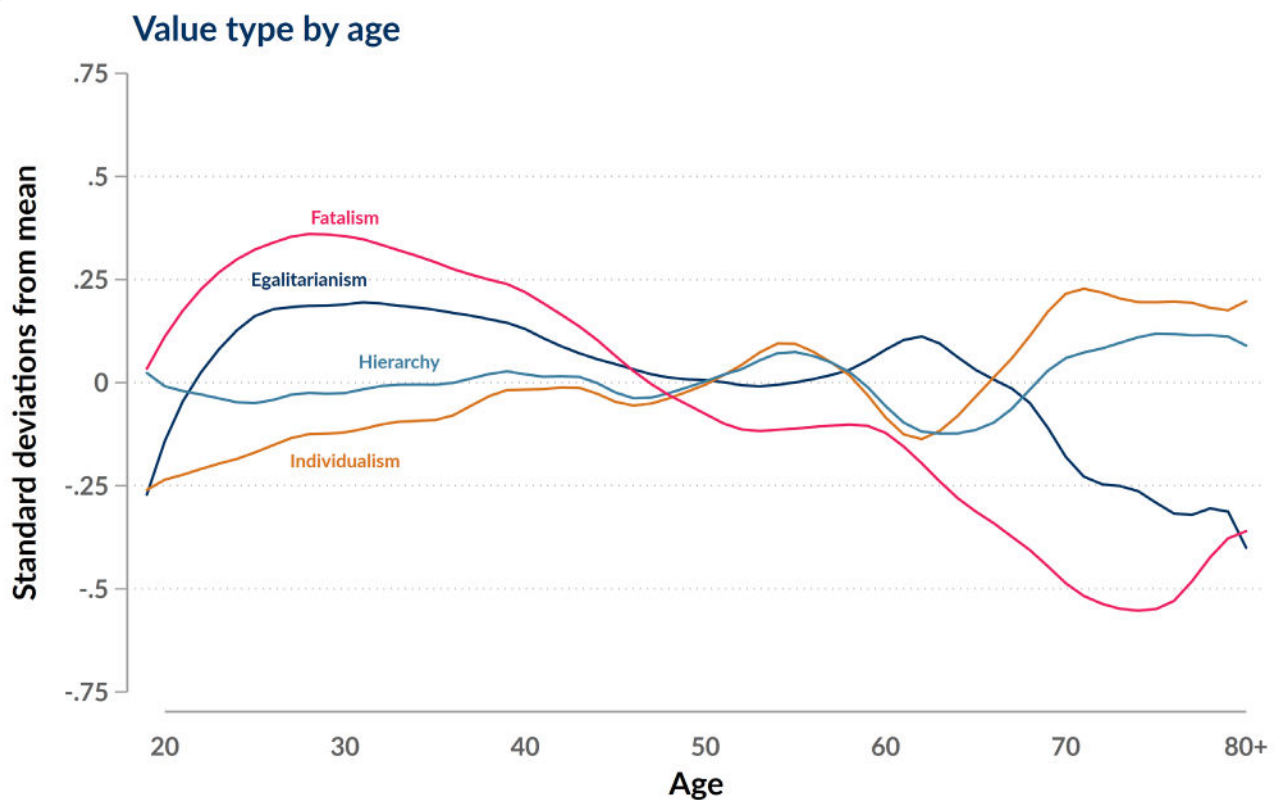
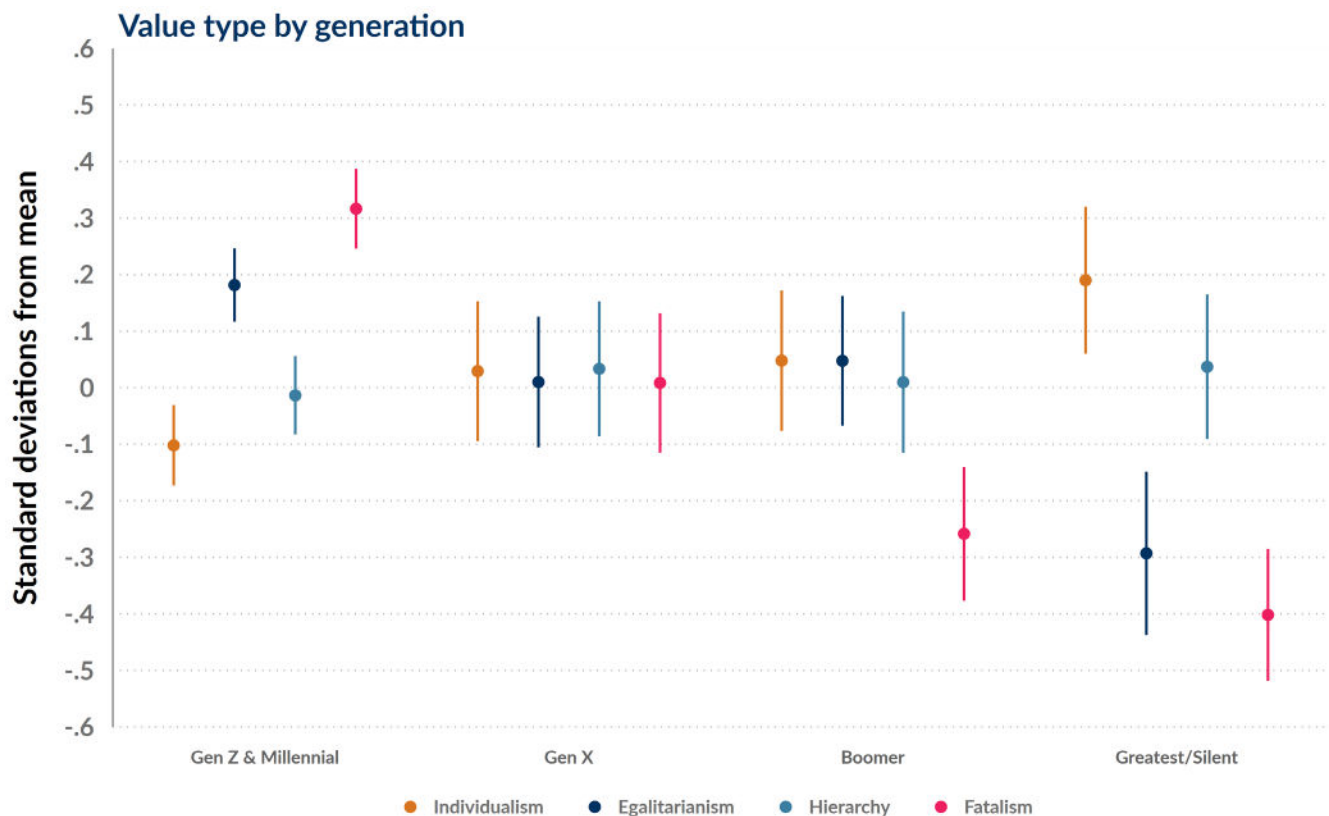


Figure 2 below displays the results from a statistical model that measures the four value types (fatalism, egalitarianism, individualism, and hierarchy) by generation, and controls for differences in income level, education, gender, race, and ideology between generations. The purpose of the figure is to illustrate whether the answers to the values questions varied across different generational cohorts, as measured by our four value indices. As shown, Gen Z and Millennials are on average much more likely to hold fatalistic outlooks than other generations. The Millennial/Gen Z fatalistic outlook is about .32 standard deviations above the mean response in the survey, and the average fatalism score decreases across generations, with the Greatest/Silent generation scoring -.4 standard deviations below the mean. Millennials/Gen Z also show higher average egalitarian responses than other age groups, with their average index score at nearly .2 standard deviations above the mean. Similar to the fatalism pattern, the mean of egalitarianism decreases across generations, with the Greatest/Silent generation expressing egalitarian values at roughly -.3 standard deviations below the mean. The youngest generation also appears to be

less individualistic than older generations, with average responses $-.1$ standard deviations below the mean survey response. Individualism increases for each generation, with the Greatest/Silent generation showing the highest individualistic average at $.2$ standard deviations above the mean. There are no meaningful differences by generation of hierarchy—the index for each generation hovers near the mean.

Figure 2



Conclusion

We find that overall, Millennials and Gen Z are more egalitarian, fatalistic, and less individualistic than older generations. Given recent research findings on the attitudes of younger generations, it is perhaps unsurprising that Millennials/Gen Z are $.18$ and $.32$ standard deviations above the mean of all survey respondents on egalitarianism and fatalism, respectively. What is striking is how starkly the values contrast by generation, with a clear pattern of fatalism and egalitarianism declining across each subsequently older generation, and individualism increasing across each subsequently older generation, signaling that each generation may have a unique cultural imprint that is reflected in their shared values that could indicate an age or cohort effect. Having said this, our research is limited in its ability to claim age, period, or cohort effects (Yang & Land, 2013); however, this is the first attempt to measure generational values using Cultural Theory and the differences by generation are notable. These results have important policy implications. In future publications we will show how young people's values influence their risk perceptions, attitudes toward the social safety net, and their political behavior during the 2020 election.

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