

Think the 'Me Me Me Generation' is new? Think again: Society began shifting towards individualism more than a CENTURY ago

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- **Individualism is the belief that personal needs are more important than the needs of society as a whole**
- **It is said to have first developed among Baby Boomers, born after WWII**
- **Experts studied baby names and birth rates over the past 150 years**
- **They also studied the changing use of 'individualistic' words in books**
- **Research said individualist behaviours began at the turn of 20th century**
- **And this was blamed on a shift from manual labour to office jobs**

By [Victoria Woollaston for MailOnline](#)

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Selfies and self-indulgent Facebook statuses suggest we are more narcissistic than ever.

But researchers have found we actually started to become increasingly self-centred more than 100 years ago.

By studying unique baby names, birth and divorce rates and the use of words like 'I' and 'me' in books, the experts said individualism began rising at the turn of the 20th century.

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Selfies (Kim Kardashian pictured) and self-indulgent Facebook statuses suggest we are more narcissistic than ever, but researchers said we started becoming increasingly self-centred more than 100 years ago. Individualism is the belief that personal needs are more important than the needs of society as a whole

And this rise is blamed on a shift from manual labour to office jobs as people became wealthier and better educated.

Individualism is the belief that personal needs are more important than the needs of society as a whole. It is said to have first developed among Baby Boomers, born after WWII.

The study covered a 150-year period and was carried out by researchers from the Department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo and Arizona State University.

PLOTTING A RISE IN INDIVIDUALISM

Individualism is the belief that personal needs are more important than the needs of society as a whole.

It is said to have first developed among Baby Boomers, born after WWII.

The researchers examined factors commonly thought to be linked with cultural individualism.

These included the use of so-called individualist words in books, such as 'I' and 'me', during the past 150 years.

They also looked at the percentage of single-child families, how many adults now live alone, divorce rates and the prevalence of unique baby names.

All of these factors, especially uniqueness, are deemed to be key drivers of individualism.

Led by Professor Igor Grossmann, the researchers examined factors commonly linked with cultural individualism.

These included the use of so-called individualist words in books taken from the Google Ngram database.

They studied the percentage of single-child families, how many adults now live alone, and divorce rates using US Census data.

And they looked at the prevalence of unique baby names by studying Social Security Administration data.

All of these factors, especially uniqueness, are deemed to be key drivers of individualism.

The team additionally studied changes in infectious disease and disasters, rates of urbanisation, changes in secularism, and job trends.

'Across many markers of individualism, social class was the only factor that systematically preceded changes in individualism over time, tentatively suggesting a causal relationship between them,' explained Professor Grossmann.

Across all cultural indicators, the researchers found evidence that individualism has been rising steadily for more than a century.

For example, family size has decreased since 1860 and the number of households with multiple generations living under the same roof has declined since the 1880s.



The researchers examined factors commonly linked with cultural individualism including the number of single-child families, and the prevalence of unusual baby names. Uniqueness is deemed to be a key driver of individualism. Gwyneth Paltrow's daughter (left) is called Apple and Kate Winslet (right) called her son Bear

From this research, the experts said individualism has been rising over the past 150 years. Family size has decreased since 1860, for example, and the frequency of individualist words in books has risen. This trend is blamed on a shift from manual labour to office jobs (stock image) at the turn of the 20th century

The frequency of individualist words used in published texts has risen since the 1860s, and the frequency of 'collectivist' words, such as 'we', has declined over the same period.

WHAT CAUSES INDIVIDUALISM?

'As demands of American society shifted from manual labour to office jobs, Americans gained education and wealth, both of which promote self-direction and ultimately facilitate individualism,' said the study's authors.

'The data show that changes in individualism were present way before the Generation X and the Millennium generation, indicating that the magnitude of change in individualism was comparable in the late 19th and early 20th century as it is now.

'This insight puts some of the pop-science claims about current youth in a historical perspective: Yes, current youth are different from older generations, but this seems to be a consistent phenomenon over time.'

The researchers are currently working on expanding this research outside the US.

Plus, the uniqueness of baby names has risen for both boys and girls since the 1880s, with the percentage of children receiving one of the 20 most popular names declining over time.

The prevalence of infectious disease, job trends, and secularism were all linked with individualism over time, but the researchers found that only changes in occupational status appeared to precede these changes.

'We were surprised that only one of the six tested cultural psychological theories was any good for statistically predicting changes in US individualism over time,' said Professor Grossmann.

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Their findings are published in the journal [Psychological Science](#).