

Historically, Individualism Seen As Tied To Class Changes

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Rising individualism in the U.S. over the last 150 years is tied to changes in social class and a societal shift toward more white-collar jobs, according to new research published in the journal *Psychological Science*

In the first study of its kind, researchers looked at U.S. culture over the past century and a half to determine how and why people became more independent and less reliant on family ties, conformity, and duty.



“We found that changes in the social class structure precede changes in individualism,” said Dr. Igor Grossmann, of the Department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo in Canada and the study’s first author.

“As demands of American society shifted from manual labor to office jobs, Americans gained education and wealth, both of which promote self-direction and ultimately facilitate individualism.”

Grossmann and Dr. Michael Varnum of Arizona State University found that the significant cultural change American society experienced started before the turn of the last century.

They tested six factors commonly thought to influence cultural change toward individualism: urbanization, secularism, socio-economic structure, climatic demands, infectious disease, and disaster.

Then in the context of those factors, they examined the growth of eight indicators associated with cultural individualism, such as presence of individualist words in books, percentage of single-child families, percentage of adults living alone, and divorce rates.

Since preference for uniqueness is also a key factor of individualism, the researchers looked at the prevalence of unique baby names — those not in the top 20 for the time.

“Cultural levels of individualism affect everything from marketing to election outcomes to education — based on whether we tend to prefer unique or common products, politicians who appeal to achievement or to a sense of duty and whether we motivate students through their sense of belonging to the group and family obligation or due to their being special,” said Grossmann.

“Knowing where it is heading and what may determine the change may help in many of these domains to prepare for the future.”

While the research used the United States as a case study, the Canadian culture of individualism is similar,

so it is possible that the pattern of cultural change would be as well.

Source: [University of Waterloo](#)

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