



## The stories children's books tell us: Motive-related imagery in children's books and their relation to academic performance and crime rates

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### ABSTRACT

We reasoned that children's books mirror the current motivational orientation (Zeitgeist) of a society. Based on the work of McClelland and other motivational psychologists, we assessed the current motivational orientation via the prevalence of achievement, power, and affiliation imagery in the most popular children's books of federal states in Germany. As expected, the achievement imagery was closely and significantly related to academic performance. Our assumption that power imagery was positively and affiliation imagery negatively related to youth crime (youth suspects) could not be supported. Thus, for the achievement domain, the findings provide strong evidence that children's books tell us an important story worthy of further exploration.

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### 1. Introduction

When the children's book author, Astrid Lindgren, sent her manuscript "Pippi Longstocking" to the publisher in 1944, she felt the need to comment that it may offend readers, and she begged the publisher not to alarm the Swedish youth welfare office. Although the authorities were not contacted, the manuscript was initially rejected. Pippi, with her unconventional and assertive character, was not seen as a story to be told to children at that time. Other children's books have met similar fates, and it seems clear that the content children's books tell us something about the time in which they were popular or unpopular (Hunt, 1996).

Therefore, we view children's books as an indicator of the motivational orientation of a society (Zeitgeist), which should provide us with an understanding of the times. Understanding the times in which children are socialized should additionally allow us to see how society will develop as these children will shape society as grown-ups. Children's books appear to be especially suitable to assess the Zeitgeist because they closely represent what is valued and selected by parents and others to pass onto children. Additionally, children's books may also have an impact on how children see and act in the world as newcomers, and the books they are exposed to are likely to shape children's understanding of the world.

Past research assessed the achievement orientation of a society by counting the prevalence of achievement motive imagery in books. And indeed, the prevalence was related to later social economic development of this society, as presented below. Although fewer studies examining the power and affiliation motive exist, findings also show that the prevalence of this type of imagery is related to the social development of societies.

The early work on achievement motivation revealed a close relationship of the achievement motive (i.e., a habitually strong concern for excellence) with the setting of achievement goals, persistence in achievement tasks, and economic success at the individual level (cf. McClelland, 1985; cf. Brunstein & Heckhausen, 2008). Based on these findings, McClelland and others provided individual training programs to strengthen the achievement motive as a development aid (McClelland & Winter, 1969). The programs showed considerable effects, such as more business activities and a stimulation of the local economy (see Rheinberg & Engeser, 2010). On a higher level, McClelland (1961) outlined the relation between the individual achievement motive and the "protestant ethic" described by the sociologist Max Weber (1905). This ethic is characterized by the principles of discipline, hard work, and a high level of individual responsibility as well as the notion that a high level of economic achievement is a sign of possible salvation. Weber strongly argued and provided empirical evidence that this ethic fostered modern capitalism (e.g., fast rise of capitalism in the United States and the Netherlands; cf. Landes, 1998).

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In order to test the relationship between motivation and economic development on a macroeconomic level, McClelland had to measure the achievement motive of a whole society. As he was unable to rely on opinion polls, he chose an alternative path. On an individual level, the achievement motive was measured with projective tests in which imagery stories written in response to picture stimuli were coded (cf. Pang, 2010). In principle, any textual material can be scored with these coding systems, and McClelland (1961) used the content coding of representative textual materials to measure the motivational orientation of a society.

Empirical results confirm McClelland's expectations. For example, the prevalence of achievement content in children's books from 21 nations in 1925 was found to correlate with economic achievement in 1950 (McClelland, 1961). Furthermore, DeCharms and Moeller (1962) demonstrated a close relationship between achievement imagery and patents issued for the period from 1810 to 1950 in the US. More recently, Engeser, Rheinberg, and Möller (2009) provided evidence that achievement imagery in schoolbooks is related to performance in large-scale assessments. One problem of the interpretation of the results is that the time span between the prevalence of motive imagery and later social development varies considerably, with longer time lag for studies dealing with historically older societies. McClelland (1985, p. 465) argued that, "with increased communication and transportation, motive changes should translate into social changes more rapidly".

High power motivation is associated with better leadership qualities. However, it is also related to aggressive and exploitative behavior (Fodor, 2010; McClelland, 1985). High affiliation motivation is associated with activities to initiate contact with others and with friendly interpersonal manners (if a person does not feel threatened; McClelland, 1985). On a macro-level, power and affiliation imagery predicted whether countries entered into war: If power was considerably higher than affiliation, countries regularly entered into war (Winter, 2000). Affiliation motivation was negatively related to aggression against women and the violation of civil rights (McClelland, 1985).

In the present research, we took children's books from 1996 and 2006 to assess the prevalence of motive imagery for achievement, power, and affiliation for federal state regions within Germany. This motive imagery served as indicators of the motivational orientation for these federal state regions. Academic performance of the federal states regions was selected as a marker for social development for the achievement domain and rate of youth crime for the power and affiliation domain. We included archival data for the academic performance for the 9- to 10-year-old (4th grade) and the 15-year-olds (9th grade) over a time period from 2000 to 2011. Youth crime rates (14- to 18-year-old youth suspects) were taken from 1996 to 2011. Both indicators represent data for a cohort at the given years.

In contrast to the use of more global economic performance measures in former studies, our current measure of academic performance can be closely linked to an age cohort and is nevertheless constitutive for the economic development of a society later on (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2011). The close link to an age cohort also holds true for the youth crime rates. This closer link ensures higher internal validity of the results. It also addresses the problem of former studies where time patterns of the prevalence to subsequent social development varied dependent on the historical context in which the study was conducted. We also want to point out that no other indicators beside academic performance and youth crime were considered. We did this in order to avoid detecting random effects which can occur when many dependent variables are included in analyses and only the significant relationships are selected.

For the data collected, we could test whether the prevalence of the motive imagery preceded or followed the indicators of social

development for an age cohort. We expect that the prevalence of achievement imagery will be related to academic achievement and will precede social development. In other words, the prevalence of the children's books of one cohort is related to the academic performance of this cohort. We expect the same pattern of results for the prevalence of power and affiliations imagery with youth crime rates.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Selection of children's books and federal states

As the best available index of current popularity, we used the sales rankings of the children's books from 1996 and 2006 (GfK Panel Services Deutschland, 2010).<sup>1</sup> For smaller federal states, the databases do not provide sufficiently reliable estimates for less frequently sold books and therefore some states were grouped according to their academic performance on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA; this is described in more detail below). Our analysis included the following seven states or state regions: the single states (1) Bavaria and (2) Baden-Württemberg as top ranking states in academic performance, the (3) mid-western states and (4) northwestern states, which have lower academic rankings, the (5) the eastern states, which generally have low academic rankings, with the exception of (6) Saxony and (7) Thuringia, which are at the top and were, therefore, considered separately. Due to reliability considerations, only the top 5 and 3 best-selling books were included in the analysis for Saxony and Thuringia, respectively. Otherwise, anywhere from 12 to 17 bestselling books were included for each state or state region. In total, we analyzed 57 books for 1996 and 47 books for 2006 (see Details for Children's Books in the Supplementary data available online). The mean recommended reading age ranged from 1 to 12 years with  $M = 5.74$  ( $SD = 2.92$ ) for 1996 and  $M = 7.81$  ( $SD = 3.56$ ) for 2006.

### 2.2. Coding procedure

The children's books were coded using Winter's (1994) *Manual for Scoring Motive Imagery*. The validity of the scoring system has been proven in studies ranging from speeches by political leaders (Winter, 2000), motive-goal congruence and well-being (Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Grässmann, 1998; Hofer & Chasiotis, 2003), to experimental studies (cf. Pang, 2010) and scoring of school books (Engeser et al., 2009). In each book, achievement imagery is scored when a concern with a standard of excellence is expressed, such as doing good, reaching an achievement goal, winning or competing, positive and negative evaluation of success and failure, and other unique accomplishments. Examples are "...she can even ride a figure-of-eight round daddy and mummy on her bike", "great idea" or "nobody could tell a lie better and quicker than him".

Power imagery is scored when a concern with having an impact is expressed, like forceful actions, controlling and regulating, persuading or convincing others, unsolicited helping, concerns for prestige, and influencing the emotions of others. Examples are "... how he might outwit his grandma", "Maya received great acclaim from her people", or "the lion frightened him". Affiliation images are scored when a concern with friendly relationships is expressed, such as the expressions of positive feelings toward other persons, negative feelings about separation and disruption, sympathetic concern, and companionate activities. Examples are "... Kaspar Löffel's best friend in the world", "...and now it was unfortunately time to say farewell", or "like every day, the mouse family had a cozy breakfast in the kitchen".

<sup>1</sup> Despite our strong efforts, publishers were not willing to provide sales data.

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