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Historical changes in American self-interest: State of the Union addresses 1790 to 2012 ☆

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ABSTRACT

Many psychological theories of morality suggest that satisfying our own self-interest motives and desires at the expense of others is the default condition in early childhood development, but that humans eventually learn to behave selflessly in the interest of others. Recent research examining societal increases in traits related to self-interest (e.g., narcissism) in the US finds increases in such traits over the past 30 years. The current study examined changes in self-interest from 1790 through 2012 using presidential State of the Union addresses. Self-interest (relative to interest in others) was low during the 19th century but rose after the turn of the 20th century.

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1. Introduction

Many psychological theories of morality suggest that satisfying our own self-interested motives and desires at the expense of others is the default condition in early childhood development, but that we can learn to behave selflessly in the interest of others as we grow into adulthood. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins suggests in his book *The Selfish Gene* that we are all "born selfish" and so we must learn to become altruistic (Dawkins, 1976). In Kohlberg's (1985) stages of moral development, individuals begin with an orientation towards self-interest, but eventually understand broader social contracts. Yet, self-interest still motivates much of adult cognition and behavior, at least within Western cultural contexts (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Thus, changes in self-interest over time are important to document.

The current study examines change in indicators of self-interest in American society from 1790 through 2012. A number of studies have found increases in self-related traits and concepts in the US since the late 1960s. For example, positive self-evaluation statements increased among college students from 1966 to 2009 (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2011). Researchers have also tracked changes in other personality traits and constructs, discovering recent increases in narcissism (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008), self-esteem (Gentile, Twenge, & Campbell, 2010), agentic traits (Twenge, 1997), and simultaneous decreases in empathy (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011).This suggests that self-interest might be increasing over time among Americans.[1]

Such patterns can also be measured at the broader cultural level—in the products that a given culture creates and consumes (e.g., songs, newspapers, books, speeches; Lamoreaux & Morling, 2012; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). It is important to study trends in cultural products that reflect societal-level preoccupation with self-interest rather than merely examining changes at the individual-level. Cultural products are more appropriate for studying

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[1] The claim that traits related to self-interest (e.g., narcissism) may be rising has roused considerable academic debate, with some researchers arguing that they have remained stagnant over time (e.g., Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). These concerns have been addressed elsewhere, for example, by showing that their samples consist solely or primarily of students from UC Davis, who score unusually low on narcissism. When campus is controlled, or data are examined within campus, narcissism levels indeed show significant increases over time (e.g., Twenge & Foster, 2010). Thus, the current paper rests on the assumption that the overarching evidence currently favors an increase.

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societal norms and beliefs given the limitations of self-reported personality measures, in terms of both measurement and predictive ability (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Schwarz, 1999). Thus, cultural-level indicators may help to reveal societal norms and beliefs that self-reported personality measures cannot. Individual-level measures also fail to capture how cultural products—the things and artifacts that a culture produces—can enhance our understanding of culture and cultural change (Snibbe & Markus, 2005). Moreover, examining changes in cultural products enables researchers to use a broader scope in assessing psychological change over time.

Studies assessing changes in cultural products related to self-interest have found similar patterns as individual-level studies. For example, in a study of 15 million books published between 1900 and 2000, Konrath and Anderson (2011) discovered an increase in the number of books mentioning the word "self-esteem" across the century. There have also been increases at the broader cultural-level in references to the self and in individualistic phrases, in both books (from 1960 to 2008; Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012a) and popular songs (from 1980 to 2007; DeWall, Pond, Campbell, & Twenge, 2011). There is also evidence for an increase in individualistic phrases ("all about me") in books from 1960 to 2008 (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012b).

Despite such consistent increases in self-references in cultural products, the evidence is much less clear for how *other-oriented* references have changed over time. Additionally, due to ambiguity in researchers' definition of "others," other-oriented references often confound self-interest and other-interest, making it unclear if changes over time are attributable to an increase in self-interest or other-interest. For example, some studies treat the word "we" as strictly other-oriented, when by definition "we" represents the interests of both "me" and "you" together. There is a difference, for example, in saying "We won the game," which implies some personal responsibility and credit, compared to "They lost the game," which implies no personal responsibility (Cialdini et al., 1976).

Regardless of this inaccurate operationalization of other-orientation, the results with respect to "we" are inconsistent. In some studies, first-person plural references (e.g., "we") *decreased* over time (DeWall et al., 2011; Twenge et al., 2012a), whereas in another study, communal phrases (e.g., "all in this together") *increased* in books from 1960 to 2008 (see Study 2; Twenge et al., 2012b). The patterns of change in pure other-interest (i.e. no self-involvement), as operationalized by second- (e.g., "you"), and third-person references (e.g., "he;" "they"), are also inconsistent. One study reports decreases in *all* third-person pronouns (Twenge et al., 2012a), another study reports only decreases in *some* third-person pronouns ("he", "himself"), but not others ("she", "herself"; Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012c), and another study finds *no changes* at all (DeWall et al., 2011).

Very few studies examine changes in other types of extreme other-interest in cultural products (e.g. second-person pronouns such as "you," and mentions of family and friends). The rare studies that have examined changes in second-person pronouns demonstrate patterns in opposite directions, depending on how they are analyzed (see Twenge et al., 2012a). When second-person plural pronouns are analyzed separately, they increase over time. However, when these pronouns are lumped with second-person singular pronouns in regression models, second-person pronouns now *decrease* over time. Mentions of family and friends have also been lumped into one category of "social" references (DeWall et al., 2011), which again obscures the conclusions that can be drawn about changes in self versus other-interest over time. Family members are more closely tied to self-interest than friends are, given their genetic overlap with the self, and their potential to increase reproductive success (Hamilton, 1964). In other words, self-interest is therefore a matter of degree, and not binary.

Taken together, there is evidence for an increase in self-interest words and phrases, but the patterns with respect to other-interest needs additional research. Moreover, all individual-level (i.e. trait-based) studies have examined changes beginning no earlier than the 1960s, since many personality scales were not developed until then. Yet, it is unclear why researchers examining cultural-level indicators of self-interest have limited their investigation to such narrow time periods and criteria, given the longer-term availability of cultural-level data. In addition, many of the individual-level studies rely on self-report data, which, while revealing some useful information about people's conscious thoughts, suffer from social desirability biases (Schwarz, 1999) and other interpretation issues. Another limitation in meta-analyses of trait-level characteristics (e.g., Twenge & Foster, 2010) is an overreliance on college student samples, which do not necessarily reflect the broader American population.

1.1. The current study

In the current study, we replicate and extend prior research examining changes in self-interest and other-interest over time. Although some of this work uses meta-analyses to examine individual-level personality changes (Twenge et al., 2008), other work focuses on cultural products like songs and phrases in books (DeWall et al., 2011; Konrath & Anderson, 2011). Psychological research on songs and books are important, but both tend to suffer from publication delays, making it unclear whether the finished product represents the year of publication or release. Moreover, to date, these analyses have confounded self-interest with other-interest in their choices of relevant terms (e.g. pronouns). Finally, most examinations of secular trends in self-interest have limited their scope to the time period after 1960 (Gentile et al., 2010; Twenge et al., 2012b), which makes it difficult to know if self-interest has been rising for longer historical periods or if there are instead recurring cyclical changes over time within US culture.

The current study addresses some of these research gaps by using presidential State of the Union speeches to gauge cultural-level self-interest. We define self-interest in the current study as the preoccupation with one's own interests and circumstances and a relative indifference to the interests of others. In other words, high self-interest occurs when an individual's interests are prioritized over the interests of others. The State of the Union address is an annual speech given by the President of the United States that outlines the current status and priorities of the country for the upcoming year. These speeches often propose legislation and goals that change the course of the nation dramatically. They arguably serve the function of a societal thermometer of US culture at any given time and outline the focus of the country in the immediate future. State of the Union addresses are intended to represent American culture quite broadly and also allow us to extend the time period for which we can examine temporal changes in self-interest to a full 222 years (1790–2012), which is the longest period to date.

One limitation of previous research is that temporal changes are often presented without a longer-term context. Yet this context is important because it can demonstrate the general trajectory of the culture over time. For example, perhaps the recent increases in self-interest are actually a return to previously-experienced levels of self-interest, rather than continuous increases. In other words, perhaps American society has gone through temporary "epochs" or periods of relatively high and low self-interest, where self-interest wanes and oscillates at different time points.

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