



The academic attitudes of American teenagers, 1990–2002: Cohort and gender effects on math achievement[☆]

Susan A. Dumais^{*}

Department of Sociology, Louisiana State University, 126 Stubbs Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 2 June 2009

Keywords:

Generations
Achievement
Adolescent culture

ABSTRACT

Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 and the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, I compare the academic attitudes of high school students from Generation X and the Millennial Generation. I then analyze the effects these attitudes have on mathematics achievement test scores. Compared to the earlier group, students in the later cohort were less likely to indicate academic reasons for attending school and largely perceived their friends as being less engaged academically. Students in both cohorts whose friends held academic values experienced an increase in math scores. The more students in the earlier cohort disagreed that they came to school for academic reasons, the more their math scores decreased; this relationship did not appear for the later cohort. Females in each cohort showed stronger academic attitudes than males; additionally, believing that popularity was important was associated with lower test scores for females, but not males, in the Millennial cohort.

© 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

“Consequently, our society has within its midst a set of small teen-age societies, which focus teen-age interests and attitudes on things far removed from adult responsibilities, and which may develop standards that lead away from those goals established by the larger society.” (Coleman, 1961:9)

In 1961, James Coleman’s *The Adolescent Society* described the adolescent subculture as one where peer acceptance was critical. Coleman found that students held largely non-academic values; for example, a higher percentage of males wanted to be remembered as a “star athlete” than as a “brilliant student,” while females hoped to be thought of as attractive or as a leader in student activities. Coleman argued that teenagers’ focus on non-academic values might draw their attention away from academic achievement.

Today, youth culture is as present as ever, and generates highly profitable markets in music, fashion, and television programs. At the same time, more high school students than ever expect to attain at least a bachelor’s degree, indicating that youth culture and academic goals are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, academic goals may not necessarily be the primary focus of some of today’s undergraduates; college may provide a venue for pursuing non-academic goals such as competitive sports. Moreover, gender roles have changed considerably since the early 1960s, with females today surpassing males in college enrollment. The attitudes possessed by modern adolescents may vary a great deal from Coleman’s adolescent society of the 1960s, and their effects on educational outcomes may vary, as well.

[☆] I am grateful for the comments of Stephen L. Morgan, Susan Gardner, Roland Mitchell, and Mariano Sana.

^{*} Fax: +1 225 578 5102.

E-mail address: dumais@lsu.edu

In this paper, I examine the one aspect of the adolescent cultures of the early 1990s and early 2000s, noting teenagers' attitudes about school and their perceptions of their friends' academic values. I explore whether and how the relationship between adolescent culture and academic success has changed. Society has changed dramatically since the publication of Coleman's book, and adolescents' attitudes have changed even in the last several years; for example, the percentage of high school sophomores expecting a bachelor's degree or more rose from 60 percent in 1990 to 79 percent in 2002 (Cahalan et al., 2006). Indeed, changes in the adolescent subculture have become so rapid that different types of teaching styles are advised for those students from Generation X (birth years 1961–1981) and those from the Millennial Generation (birth years 1982–2000) (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Wilson, 2004). In addition to comparing these two cohorts, I examine male–female differences within each cohort, assessing whether the gender variations from Coleman's time have disappeared, and whether new differences have emerged. This paper thus contributes both to the literature on the effects of students' attitudes and engagement on school success, and to the literature on male–female differences in educational settings.

In the next section, I summarize past research on the adolescent subculture in general, and then discuss gender differences in the adolescent subculture. This is followed by a brief review of literature on the effects of students' attitudes on achievement. I then describe past research on generations and the characterizations of the two most recent youth cohorts, Generation X and the Millennials, before presenting the analyses.

2. Background

2.1. Adolescent subculture

Coleman's *Adolescent Society* was based on research conducted in ten schools in Northern Illinois in 1957–58. His surveys asked students how they spent their free time, what it took to become part of the school's leading crowd, and other questions about the lives of adolescents. Coleman found that across all schools, students were less interested in scholastic matters than they were in being popular (in the case of girls) or known for their athletic prowess (in the case of boys). Only a minority of students said that good grades or intelligence were what it took to get into the leading crowd. Coleman speculated that the lack of an academic orientation among teenagers conflicted with the academic purpose of the high school.

Although Coleman was alarmed at the lack of academic orientation among the adolescents he studied, it is not surprising that few students in Coleman's study wanted to be remembered as brilliant students. As Schneider (2000) noted, the majority of students in Coleman's study would not be pursuing postsecondary education. Females in particular would most likely be getting married after high school, and popularity might have been a better strategy for approaching the marriage market than academics.

Since the publication of Coleman's study, some researchers have argued that it is possible to be part of the academic culture and the adolescent culture at the same time. Eckert's (1989) qualitative study, for example, found that the students who were part of the leading crowd were highly integrated into the school, participated heavily in extracurricular activities, and had close relationships with teachers and staff. The increasing importance of extracurricular activities for college admissions has perhaps changed students' motivation for getting involved in these activities from merely social to both social and academic.

Nevertheless, Coleman's study has been replicated many times in the past several decades, and some of the findings about non-academic values persist. Goodlad (1984) found that "friends" and "sports" were the top two answers given by students for the one best thing about school; "nothing" (8 percent) was a more common answer than "classes I'm taking" (7 percent) and "teachers" (3 percent). More recently, Brown and Theobald (1998) found that students were most likely to say that their peers were the best thing about being in school; the second most common answer was academics. Teenagers today thus appear to be as peer-oriented as their 1960s counterparts. One major shift that has taken place since Coleman's study, however, is the position that females hold in society.

2.2. Gender and adolescent culture

Over the past several decades, females have outpaced males in educational expectations, college attendance, and both high school and college graduation rates (Freeman, 2004). In 2002, 41 percent of female high school sophomores, but only 33 percent of males, spent more than 10 h on homework each week, and 54 percent of females but only 48 percent of males were in the college preparatory or academic track at their high school (Cahalan et al., 2006).

Several replications of Coleman's study have shown adolescent culture has changed for females since the 1960s. Sui-tor and Reavis (1995) compared data from 1978–1982 and 1989–1990, examining college students' reports on pathways to prestige in high school. For both time periods, the most frequent answer students gave for male pathways to prestige was participation in sports. For females, the most common answer changed from "physical attractiveness" in the 1978–82 period to "grades/intelligence" in the 1988–89 period. Holland and Andre (1999) found that the high school males in their study most wanted to be remembered as a star athlete (42 percent, followed by 21 percent for most popular), while female students preferred the role of brilliant student (32 percent, followed by 27 percent for leader in activities).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/956078>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/956078>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)