

No Values – New Values? Youth and Postmaterialism¹

Bo Reimer, University of Gothenburg

This article deals with the postmaterialist hypothesis, originally formulated by Ronald Inglehart. The hypothesis, stating that new generations in Western societies are moving more and more towards postmaterialist value orientations, is questioned on the grounds that the materialist/postmaterialist dichotomy may be too rigid to capture the complexity of people's value orientations, and that the value conceptualization may hold a rather limited relevance for young people in present-day Western societies. A reconstruction of the materialist/postmaterialist value conceptualization is carried out, and empirical results from two Swedish national studies, supporting the author's questioning of the original hypothesis, are presented.

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and I can take it or leave it each time
I belong to the generation
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Richard Hell 1976

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In this article, I will take issue with the universality and inevitability of the postmaterialist hypothesis as it is outlined above. This will be carried out in two steps. First, I will argue that the actual *construction* of the materialist/postmaterialist dichotomy may be too rigid to capture the com-

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In this article, I will take issue with the universality and inevitability of the postmaterialist hypothesis as it is outlined above. This will be carried out in two steps. First, I will argue that the actual *construction* of the materialist/postmaterialist dichotomy may be too rigid to capture the com-

plexity of people's value orientations. Second, I will argue that for young people the *relevance* of the materialist/postmaterialist value conceptualization – in comparison with other value conceptualizations – may be rather small.

Empirical results from two Swedish national studies will be presented. The meaning of the results will be discussed primarily in conjunction with the ideas of the German socialization theorist Thomas Ziehe (Ziehe & Stubenrauch 1982; Ziehe 1986).

Constructing Postmaterialism

For almost twenty years, the postmaterialist hypothesis has occupied a place high on the political science research agenda. As of now, studies exploring the hypothesis have been conducted in 26 nations (Inglehart 1987, 1296). The results, however, have often been contested – on both theoretical and methodological grounds (Marsh 1975; Flanagan 1982, 1987; van Deth 1983; Böltken & Jagodzinski 1985).

This is not the place to summarize the different debates. Suffice it to say here that, despite various critiques, both the theoretical basis for the postmaterialist hypothesis, a combination of socialization theory and a Maslovian needs hierarchy theory, and the actual materialist/postmaterialist value conceptualization, have on the whole remained unchanged.²

The initial point to be made here concerns the value conceptualization. When discussing the proposed value change from materialist to postmaterialist values in Western societies, it should be remembered that what we are discussing are *theoretical constructs*. Values – due to theoretical perspective – may be conceptualized and constructed *differently* – more or less fruitfully. There is no pre-given reality to uncover out there.

In the construction of values and value orientations by different researchers, two dimensions may be discerned (cf. Reimer & Rosengren forthcoming). They concern the entity (whether values are separate entities or belong together in systems) and the validity (whether values are universal or historically specific) of the value conceptualization. Inglehart's materialist and postmaterialist value orientations are examples of a systemic and historically specific conceptualization. The theory concerns how one dominant value orientation – materialist – is superseded by another – postmaterialist – at a specific juncture – the late twentieth century – in the history of Western societies.

It seems important in this context to initially emphasize this 'constructedness' of values and value orientations, the implication being that a construction always may be *reconstructed* – taken apart and used differently.

Flanagan has performed such a reconstruction of the materialist/post-materialist value conceptualization. He argues that, instead of one materialist/postmaterialist dimension, a more fruitful construction involves *two* dimensions, one materialist/nonmaterialist, and one libertarian/authoritarian. In so doing, he restricts materialist values to economic concerns. The other materialist value items used by Inglehart he labels authoritarian. Libertarian values correspond to postmaterialist values (Flanagan 1987, 1304).

My reconstruction of the materialist/postmaterialist value conceptualization differs, as will be shown, from Flanagan's conceptualization, but they are not inherently incompatible. I will return to this at a later stage in this article. First, however, we have to look at the Inglehartian value construction.

The 'culture' of postmaterialism is an internalized culture, where differences in values can be reduced to two types of value orientations, or one dimension. One cannot, according to the theory, be equally materialistic and postmaterialistic at one point in time. Empirically, this is imposed upon respondents through a ranking approach. Normally, twelve value items concerning societal goals for the next ten years – six materialist, six postmaterialist – are included in large-scale surveys.

The theoretical argument behind this approach is that all values are perceived positively by almost all people. Only when you must choose between, for example, freedom of speech and fighting rising prices, may value priorities and value orientations be discerned.

The use of a ranking approach over an approach where all value items are rated separately may be questioned on both statistical and theoretical grounds, however.

Statistically, there seems to be a consensus that measures where a score on one variable is dependent on scores on other variables – such as ranking – should be restricted to intraindividual comparisons. If the object of interest is comparison *between* individuals, normative measures – such as rating – should be used (Cattell 1944; cf. Knapp 1964; Hicks 1970; Reimer 1985).

Theoretically, at first sight it would seem reasonable to accept the charge that people, when forced to choose between different options, reveal their true values. However, the forced choice situation is normally not the one at hand. In reality, people face situations where different interests and goals are present and those values invoked will have to be reconciled one way or another. As Elisabeth Simpson puts it

In many decisions . . . value conflicts are reconciled in such a way that no one value is either complete winner or complete loser and most competitors get a share of the prize (quoted in Knutsen 1981, 13).

A ranking approach to values forces respondents to reply in ways that

Materialist	Postmaterialist	
	No	Yes
No		
Yes		

Fig. 1. Materialist and Postmaterialist Value Orientations.

may rather badly mirror corresponding behavior in daily life. A rating approach, on the other hand, puts fewer constraints on the respondents and may therefore be a theoretically more attractive approach. In this specific context, a rating approach opens up the possibilities for respondents to be *both* materialist *and* postmaterialist – or *neither one nor* the other. Instead of an a priori treatment of these mixed responses as confused or problematic, it seems more reasonable to include them in a typology over possible materialist and postmaterialist value orientations. The four possible combinations are visualized in Figure 1.

The typology in Figure 1 reconstructs the materialist and postmaterialist value orientations as two dimensions instead of just the one. This treatment of the value orientations is less rigid than the original. The implications of this reconstruction will be followed through in relation to Swedish data.

Postmaterialism and Youth

The postmaterialist hypothesis, based on scarcity and socialization hypotheses as it is, claims that, under 'normal' economic conditions, every new generation will contain a higher proportion of postmaterialists than the generation preceding it. On the whole, the data collected over the last fifteen years in surveys across Western societies support this claim rather impressively (Inglehart 1985).

If, however, we are to take seriously the claim by Hicks (1970) that results obtained by transforming intraindividual measures to interindividual measures must be considered invalid until new tests have been made, and then take a fresh, unbiased look at the hypothesis, what are we to expect? Is the notion of value change reasonable?

Situating the hypothesis in a historically specific setting, the 1980s, the question concerns whether young people to a greater extent than older people may be considered postmaterialist. It concerns a generation described in terms of the 'no future-generation', the 'blank generation'

or the 'crisis generation' (Bjurström 1984). Is this generation post-materialist?³

Thomas Ziehe (1986) has described three cultural tendencies influencing young people in present-day society. First, a growth in *reflexivity*. Contrary to previous generations, a characteristic of this generation is that, instead of lack of knowledge of what is happening in contemporary society, young people know *too much*. Knowledge and experience reach young people through the media as a secondary experience. Expectations of what could be accomplished are raised to a level that for most young people is unattainable, creating anguish.

Secondly, there is an increase in what Ziehe calls *makeability*, including images, life styles and communication abilities. These areas no longer are as pre-determined. As Mike Featherstone argues:

Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle (1987, 59).

Thirdly, in a similar vein and most importantly, there is an increasing *individualization*: Social background and traditional ways of living no longer provide the same help in guiding the creation of one's reality. Decisions have to be made on an individual basis. All in all, the possible directions to take are almost infinite, but the journey will have to be taken based on a cultural classification of oneself – made by oneself.

In a period when cultural possibilities collide with the socio-economic realities, where distrust may be found toward earlier solutions, new formations, such as environmental parties or anti-nuclear movements, may offer an alternative. This would fit the postmaterialist theory. But, as Ziehe argues, that may not be enough. There seems to be a discourse outside the former, a discourse concerning *life itself*, and what a successful, happy life style would be like – including or excluding solutions to economic and environmental problems. This culture could be called narcissistic; a culture or life style where individual values and immediate solutions become important. Together, these two characteristics of *individuality* and *immediacy* comprise a major distinction between young and old people.⁴

The theoretical arguments by Ziehe, as they very briefly have been sketched here, were not originally intended for empirical verification. Nevertheless, they may be used to gain an understanding of young people's values and feelings, and subsequently lead us toward some tentative hypotheses before turning to empirical data.

First, it may be hypothesized, following Ziehe, that young people's values, shaped in a contradictory consumer society, are diverse, maybe too diverse to fit an either/or distinction (materialist or postmaterialist values),

Table 1. The Postmaterialist/Materialist Value Dimension. Swedish National Election Study 1985 (percent).

	Materialists	Post-materialists	Mixed group	N
TOTAL	25	16	58	1,161
GENDER				
Male	24	14	61	616
Female	26	19	55	545
AGE				
18-30	19	19	62	287
31-50	23	20	57	468
51-80	32	11	57	406
EDUCATION				
Low	34	8	58	524
Medium	23	17	60	435
High	9	37	54	197
OCCUPATIONAL CLASS				
Manual workers	32	10	58	513
Office workers	19	22	59	466
Farmers	30	12	58	40
Employers	21	21	58	95
PARTY				
Communist Party	16	30	54	57
Social Democrats	30	15	55	474
Agrarian Party	30	12	57	129
Liberal Party	20	22	58	167
Conservative Party	21	12	67	228

leading us to prefer the least rigid value construction possible (using the rating technique rather than the ranking technique).

Second, the characteristics of individuality and immediacy lead us to hypothesize that, in relation to older generations, *neither* the materialist *nor* the postmaterialist value orientations (concerning societal goals ten years ahead) are immediately relevant to younger generations.

Materialist and Postmaterialist Values

In the Swedish national election study of 1985, the short, original four-item materialism/postmaterialism question battery was included (Inglehart 1977).⁵ Out of four goals, each respondent had to choose the most important and the second most important goal for the country for the next ten years. Two of the goals were materialist, two were postmaterialist (cf. Table 1).

Table 2. The Postmaterialist/Materialist Factors. Swedish National Study 1986 (Factor Loadings¹ and Product Moment Correlations).

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Progress toward a less impersonal, more humane society	0.71	0.17
Progress toward a society where ideas are more important than money	0.71	-0.08
Trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful	0.61	0.11
Seeing that the people have more say in how things get decided at work and in their communities	0.61	-0.01
Protecting freedom of speech	0.61	0.27
Giving the people more say in important government decisions	0.60	0.06
Fighting rising prices	0.55	0.47
Maintain a stable economy	0.43	0.59
The fight against crime	0.32	0.65
Maintaining order in the nation	0.29	0.72
Maintaining a high rate of economic growth	-0.07	0.67
Making sure that this country has strong defense forces	-0.23	0.62
<i>Correlations</i>		
Gender ²	0.21*	-0.05
Age ³	0.07*	0.23*
Education	-0.09*	-0.20*
Occupational Class	-0.16*	0.00
Party ⁴	-0.22*	0.16*
<i>Variance explained</i>	27%	20%

N 1583

1. Principal Component Analysis, Rotation = Varimax.
 2. A positive correlation on gender means high female values.
 3. Age = 15-75.
 4. Party is dichotomized between socialist and nonsocialist parties.
- * Significant at the 0.01 level.

Taken at face value, it would seem that roughly 15 percent of the Swedish population between eighteen and eighty years of age may be considered postmaterialists, whereas 25 percent may be considered materialists. About 60 percent belong to a mixed group. There is a high proportion of postmaterialists among younger people, among people with a high level of education and among females. Communist voters tend to put higher priority on postmaterialist values than people who vote for other parties.

In a comparative perspective, these results fit rather nicely into an overall pattern for Western European countries (cf. Inglehart 1984, 1985; Dalton 1981; Lafferty & Knutsen 1985).

The results may be problematized a bit further, however. As already noted, the ranking approach employed restricts the possible ways of orienting oneself to the different goals or values. The alternative approach, while still using the Inglehart value items, is to let respondents rate the items

Table 3. The Postmaterialist/Materialist Value Items. Swedish National Study 1986 (Percent and Product Moment Correlations).

	Age						r
	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-75	
Maintaining a high rate of economic growth	19	19	17	26	35	43	0.14*
Making sure that this country has strong military forces	16	10	6	13	20	27	0.15*
Seeing that the people have more say in how things get decided at work and in their communities	27	30	26	32	36	33	-0.03
Trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful	48	56	52	52	58	62	0.03
Maintaining order in the nation	48	52	50	63	75	82	0.20*
Giving the people more say in important government decisions	29	26	30	34	39	42	0.08*
Fighting rising prices	37	49	50	61	68	74	0.19*
Protecting freedom of speech	63	60	65	64	71	69	0.03
Maintain a stable economy	47	57	52	65	65	75	0.11*
Progress toward a less impersonal, more humane society	46	55	61	68	74	74	0.16*
The fight against crime	65	69	66	77	86	92	0.17*
Progress toward a society where ideas are more important than money	42	44	42	49	53	54	0.08*
N	161	277	246	277	217	325	1,503

1. Percentage of respondents considering each goal (on a seven point scale) to be 'very important'.

* Significant at the 0.01 level.

separately. This has been carried out in another national Swedish survey. On a seven point scale, respondents rated those twelve value items normally included in the Inglehart value battery. Through exploratory factor analysis, two factors were found in the responses (cf. Table 2).⁶

The first factor, the clearest pattern in responses and 'explaining' 27 percent of the total variance, may be interpreted as a postmaterialist factor. The six postmaterialist items load higher on this factor than the materialist items, although all items tend to fall in one straight line. (There is no natural cut-off point between any item.) The second factor may be interpreted as a materialist factor. All six materialist items show substantially higher loadings on this factor than is shown by the postmaterialist items. The postmaterialist factor correlates the highest with choice of party (socialist)

and with gender (female), whereas the materialist factor shows the highest correlations with age (older people) and education (lower levels of education).

The background variable with the greatest importance for a hypothesis of value change is age. Value change, if it occurs, should do so between different age cohorts. We do not have time series data available here, which of course is a restriction. But if we disentangle Inglehart's original, separate items from the underlying factors, and look at their relationship to age, we find a rather interesting pattern (cf. Table 3).

The results in Table 3 seem to imply that it is *not* the case that younger people are more postmaterialistic than older people; rather, it is the case that younger people are less interested in *all of the goals*. Nine out of twelve items are significantly – and positively – correlated with age. The table shows us *what is not important* for young people rather than what is important. All items concern societal goals ten years ahead. Such goals, as hypothesized, may not be perceived to be immediately relevant by new generations growing up.

Table 4. The Rokeach Value Survey. Swedish National Study 1986 (Percent¹ and Product Moment Correlations).

	Age						r
	15–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–75	
A comfortable life	68	73	54	56	39	47	-0.21*
Family security	73	75	80	80	70	75	-0.04
Freedom	83	82	77	70	76	77	-0.06
Salvation	8	6	8	6	6	12	0.22*
Inner harmony	41	45	49	51	57	56	0.10*
Equality	47	39	38	37	37	43	-0.01
Wisdom	41	45	38	47	48	56	0.06
Love	78	83	76	74	66	58	-0.22*
Happiness	81	79	66	65	56	59	-0.21*
Pleasure	58	70	48	42	34	27	-0.35*
True friendship	82	88	77	76	74	72	-0.14*
Self-respect	40	50	51	54	55	54	0.05
A sense of accomplishment	40	38	32	31	30	31	-0.09*
Social recognition	14	16	16	19	20	25	0.07*
An exciting life	46	32	17	16	13	13	-0.30*
A world of beauty	55	52	44	39	46	50	-0.04
National security	66	63	62	73	77	81	0.14*
A world at peace	90	89	90	92	93	93	0.04
N	167	282	248	280	221	330	1,528

1. Percentage of respondents considering each goal (on a five point scale) to 'very important'.

* Significant at the 0.01 level.

What values *are* relevant for young people, then? True, one could argue that Table 3 only shows that in surveys young people tend to find *everything* less relevant than older people, in a sense an effect of the questionnaire. This is not the case, however. In the same survey, we included the multi-dimensional set of values compiled by Milton Rokeach (1973, 1979). The relationship between age and these values is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 quite clearly shows that young people do consider some values to be more important than do old people. This is true especially for the values 'pleasure', 'an exciting life', 'a comfortable life', 'love' and 'happiness'. It seems as if the Rokeach value set, including individual values, captures young people's values better than the Inglehart value battery.

Postmaterialist or Nonmaterialist Values?

The reconstruction of the materialist/postmaterialist value conceptualization presented here is by no means unique. Earlier in this article, a mention was made of the reconstruction carried out by Flanagan (1982, 1987). Comparing these two reconstructions, they both, taking as their point of departure the materialist/postmaterialist value orientations, dissolve the original dimension into two dimensions. Flanagan reconstructs the materialist/postmaterialist dimension as one materialist/non-materialist dimension and one libertarian/authoritarian dimension, whereas my two dimensions, for lack of better terms, may be denoted materialist/non-materialist and postmaterialist/non-postmaterialist dimensions. Are these reconstructions antagonistic?

There seems to be agreement on the point that people may emphasize both materialist and postmaterialist values. Flanagan reaches this point by restricting materialist values to economic matters, and arguing that these matters are independent of one's position on a libertarian/authoritarian scale. Libertarian and authoritarian values, on the other hand, make up a 'pure' dimension. In my discussion, I have emphasized the possible articulation of different – in the eyes of the researcher maybe even contradictory – values, trying to keep the value conceptualizations as 'open' as possible. There may be reasons to be suspicious of pre-determined, 'pure' dimensions. On the other hand, such a theorizing should not be dogmatic.

Here the matter will have to rest with this. The data used are in themselves not particularly suited to Flanagan's hypothesis, and even though this matter cannot be solved at the empirical level, appropriate data can at least, when theoretically justified, be used to strengthen one's argument. This possibility does not exist here. (The factor analyses carried out would seem to suggest one materialist and one postmaterialist factor rather than Flanagan's materialist, libertarian and authoritarian factors. This is due

more to the shortcomings of the items for the construction of Flanagan's dimensions than to anything else, however.) Suffice it to say for now that the possibility remains for a more penetrating comparison.

Conclusions

In this article, I have placed the postmaterialist/materialist value battery in a Swedish context. Empirically, it may initially be argued that this replication of earlier studies conducted in other West European countries demonstrates the merits of the question battery – and the strength of the hypothesis. 'Reading' the matter more closely, things seem a bit more complicated.

When discussing the postmaterialist hypothesis, the question of generational change is of primary importance. Objective societal changing conditions, such as an overall rise in levels of education and safer environments, will, according to the hypothesis, automatically lead young people towards one specific value orientation. The value transformation may temporarily be delayed, but in the long run the process cannot be stopped.

One problem with such a statement is that it leans towards a both ahistorical and deterministic portrayal of youth. Objective societal conditions *impose* meaning on young people. These conditions must, however, be seen only as parts of a framework, inside which young people make sense of their reality – in a way that is not pre-determined. Other, historically specific, factors of importance, altering the meaning of these objective conditions, must also be taken into account.

Following this, the results in this article, more than anything else, seem to imply that, instead of treading the rather straight postmaterialist path, young people seem to move in a multitude of different, personal directions. This movement may be regarded as a characteristic of what I prefer to call 'postmodern structures of feelings'; feelings too diverse to be contained inside a materialist/postmaterialist value construction (Reimer, forthcoming).

Looking ahead, it seems that a further analysis into the questions raised here must take into account the plurality and ambiguity of – especially young – people's value orientations. It has to analyze how objective conditions are incorporated as mental structures, and then acted out, almost paradoxically, as something both unique and shared.

What may we then finally hope to find? Perhaps that the blank generation may turn out to be not so blank after all. In this age of ambiguity, it seems only logical to realize that punk poet Richard Hell, when coining the phrase the 'blank generation', never intended it to mean confused, dispirited, etc.

He meant 'blank', as in 'Fill in whatever you want. It is your generation. You decide'.

NOTES

1. Parts of this paper were originally presented in the Politics and Culture workshops at the ECPR Conference in Amsterdam 1987.
2. The introduction of the concept of 'the diminishing marginal utility of economic determinism' in 1987 (Inglehart 1987, 1289) may, however, as Flanagan (1987) argues, represent a significant shift in theoretical positioning.
3. Although the empirical material used in this article only covers Sweden, the discussion of the 'crisis' generation concerns, in principle, all Western societies.
4. The portrayal of young people as narcissistic is not intended as a necessarily negative portrayal. Ziehe's use of the concept is far removed from the use in the American tradition associated with Christopher Lasch.
5. Personal interviews and simple random sampling. Response rate 78 percent (Holmberg et al. 1988).
6. The survey was conducted as part of the 'Internalized Culture' program (Rosengren 1985, 1986; Reimer 1988; Reimer & Rosengren forthcoming; Rosengren & Reimer forthcoming). Mail questionnaires and simple random sampling were used. Response rate 68 percent (Holmberg & Weibull 1987).

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