3.5D: Emerging Values

Values tend to change over time, and the dominant values in a country might shift as that country undergoes economic and social change.

Learning Objectives

• Criticize materialist values for the sake of argument

Key Points

• Millennials and Baby Boomers grew up under different conditions and therefore have different values.
• People who grow up worrying about meeting their basic material needs will tend to have materialist values that emphasize survival and meeting basic needs.
• People who grow up without having to worry about meeting basic material needs will tend to have post-materialist values such as self-expression.

Key Terms

• autonomy: Self-government; freedom to act or function independently.
• values: A collection of guiding principles; what one deems to be correct and desirable in life, especially regarding personal conduct.

Values tend to change over time. The dominant values in a country may shift as that country undergoes economic and social change. Often, such value change can be observed in generational differences. For example, most young adults
today share similar values. They are sometimes referred to as Generation Y or Millennials. This generation was born in the 1980s and 1990s, and raised in a much more technologically advanced environment.

Millennials (Generation Y): This generation was born in the 1980s and 1990s, a time of major technological advancement.

Millennials tend to have different values than the previous generation. Some common, notable tendencies are:

- wanting to “make a difference” or have purpose
- wanting to balance work with the rest of life
- excessive seeking of fun and variety
- questioning authority or refusal to respond to authority without “good reason”
- unlimited ambition coupled with overly demanding, confrontational personality
- lack of commitment in the face of unmet expectations
- extreme sense of loyalty to family, friends, and self

By contrast, their parents or grandparents tend to belong to the Baby Boom generation, born between 1946 and 1964. Baby Boomers did not grow up with the same technologies as today’s youth. Instead, they came of age during the 1960s and 1970s, and their values were often formed in support of or reaction to the political and social issues of the time. Whereas the generation before the Baby Boom was concerned with economic and physical security, Boomers tend to have what are referred to as post-materialist values.
Civil Rights Movement: The right to assembly protects citizens’ rights to gather together to peacefully protest. This right was frequently exercised during the Civil Rights Movement (depicted here).

Post-materialist values emphasize non-material values like freedom and the ability to express oneself. The rising prosperity of the post-WWII years fostered these values by liberating people from the overriding concern for material security. Sociologists explain the rise of post-materialist values in two ways. First, they argue that individuals pursue various goals in order of basic necessity. While people may universally aspire to freedom and autonomy, the most pressing material needs like hunger, thirst, and physical security have to be satisfied first, since they are immediately linked with survival. These materialistic goals will have priority over post-materialist goals like belonging, esteem, and aesthetic and intellectual satisfaction. Once satisfaction has been achieved from these material survival needs, focus will gradually shift to the nonmaterial.

Second, sociologists suggest that people’s basic values are largely fixed when they reach adulthood, and change relatively little thereafter. For example, those who experience economic scarcity in childhood may as adults place a high value on meeting economic needs (such as valuing economic growth above protecting the environment) and on safety needs (such as supporting more authoritarian styles of leadership or exhibiting strong feelings of national pride—e.g., maintaining a strong army or willingness to sacrifice civil liberties for the sake of law and order). On the other hand, those who mainly experienced sustained material affluence during youth might give high priority to values such as individual improvement, personal freedom, citizen input in government decisions, the ideal of a society based on humanism, and maintaining a clean and healthy environment. Because values are set when people are young, value change can be slow. The values we see emerging today may depend on material conditions nearly a generation ago.