



Final Course Paper

Are we the 'blank' generation?

Questioning the dichotomous materialist/postmaterialist value shift in
the post-World War II generations

Amit Shrestha

Political Sociology and Cultural Analysis

Development Studies

Department of Government

Uppsala University

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Introduction

One of the most crucial and recurrent debates among the scholars of political science has been the postmaterialist hypothesis conceptualized by Ronald Inglehart. Inglehart's thesis proposes that economic and technological development after World War II has led to a shift in values in the advanced industrial societies. Such a generational metamorphosis is characterized by a value shift from "overwhelming emphasis on material well-being and physical security toward greater emphasis on the quality of life" (Inglehart 1987, p.3). As a consequence, younger generations tend to be more postmaterialist compared to their preceding generations. This tendency has been demonstrated consistently since the early 1970s using the dichotomous materialist/postmaterialist dimension. Inglehart (1997) argues that progressive change in values towards postmaterialism will construct societies where postmaterialist values become dominant.

In this paper, I will question the construction of materialist/postmaterialist dimension by exploring few of the critiques of postmaterialist hypothesis. First, I will argue that Inglehart's dichotomy is too narrow to account the heterogeneous orientation of people's values. In line with this, I will also test the generalizability and validity of the hypothesis. Second, I will argue that Inglehart's ranking approach forces respondents to limit themselves within the chosen dimensions. This implies that one can either be materialist or postmaterialist, but not both or neither. In response to that, I contend that a rating approach provides flexibility to respondents to measure the importance of individual value orientation, and thus better represent the cultural shift of values. In concluding remarks, I will maintain that younger generations are equally materialistic, if not less, as their preceding generations. However, the fulfillment of basic needs, material abundance, and physical-social security have facilitated postindustrial societies to be less concerned about materialist values, and opened up possibilities to embrace postmaterialist values such as freedom, self-actualization, and equality alike. To reach to this conclusion, I will start with an overview of Inglehart's thesis, followed by his critics. Then, I will present a brief account of the reconstruction of materialist/postmaterialist dichotomy. Before the conclusion, I will reassess the actual value shift and priorities of post-World War II generations, and dig deeper into the validity of Inglehart's postmaterialist thesis.

An Overview of Inglehart's Postmaterialist Thesis

For over 30 years, Inglehart and his cohorts have researched on value change along materialist/postmaterialist dimension, and showed that succeeding younger generations have a tendency to prioritize postmaterialist values over materialist values. This value shift is claimed to account for changes in socio-cultural and political sphere of post-World War II societies. Inglehart termed this phenomenon as "Silent Revolution", which is a gradual change of values from materialist to postmaterialist, from emphasizing on physical subsistence and security values towards greater emphasis on self-actualization and quality of life values (Inglehart 1987; Knutsen 1990; Brooks & Manza 1994; De Graaf & Evans 1996). Inglehart argues that 'childhood socialization' and changing political and economic environments influence the formation and expression of different value priorities (Tranter & Western 2003). A general propensity of 'pre-industrial' societies to industrialize encourages materialist values to be dominant. In similar fashion, the change from 'industrial' to 'postindustrial' societies creates alternative values that are dominantly postmaterialist. Inglehart elaborates on two basic hypotheses to explain this value shift that was apparent in his empirical study of postindustrial societies. I will shortly discuss them below.

First, the scarcity hypothesis holds that socio-economic environment determines an individual's value orientations. So, an individual places greatest intuitive priorities on those things that are scarce, but imperative for sustenance. When these basic physical and economic securities are achieved, lower priorities are assigned to values reflecting these needs and greater priorities to higher needs (Knutsen 1989). Hence, applying this hypothesis and drawing on the fact that there had been considerable economic growth and social security after World War II, younger generations have gained more utility by satisfying higher needs, and thus led to a value shift toward postmaterialist values (De Graaf & Evans 1996; Warwick 1998). Second, the socialization hypothesis maintains that an individual's value orientations is influenced by the conditions that was prevalent during one's pre-adult years. This hypothesis is based on an assumption that intrinsic human values tend to form roots before the time an individual reaches adulthood (Knutsen 1990). An individual, grown up under conditions of material insecurity, will relatively emphasize materialist values than compared to one grown up in material security. The relationship between socioeconomic environment and individual value priorities involves a substantial time-lag. The results of economic and political improvements will thus be delayed, and a gradual process of generational replacement will occur in which postmaterialist values

will become more dominant segment of the population in postindustrial societies (Brooks & Manza 1994).

Inglehart emphasizes on the relative importance of both hypotheses and the assumption of increasing material security to be the theoretical framework behind the “silent revolution” or his postmaterialist thesis. The two hypotheses relate to Abraham Maslow’s theory of a need hierarchy underlying human motivational values. According to Maslow, the values which reflect sustenance and physical safety needs are considered materialist values while those reflecting the needs of self-actualization are termed as postmaterialist values (Knutsen 1990). Deriving from his two hypotheses, Inglehart’s thesis refers distinctively to both individual (needs and values) and socio-economic factors. The postmaterialist thesis, thus, proposes the cultural value transition from ‘old politics’ of economic growth, national order and security, and conventional lifestyles to ‘new politics’ of freedom, self-expression, environmental protection, social equality and active political participation (Flanagan & Lee 2003). In the following section, I will explore on few of the prominent critiques of Inglehart’s postmaterialist thesis.

Critiques of Inglehart’s Postmaterialist Thesis

Though Inglehart originally based his postmaterialist thesis on Maslow’s theory of progressive need hierarchy, recently he has come to adopt a new theory “Diminishing Marginal Utility (DMU) of economic determinism”. This theory proposes that “economic factors play a decisive role under conditions of economic scarcity; but as scarcity diminishes, other factors shape society to an increasing degree” (Inglehart & Flanagan 1987, 1289; Flanagan & Lee 2003, 250). This theory has been taken up as an issue by Flanagan in his characterization of value change in postindustrial societies. He suggests that there are two distinct dimensions of value change taking place, one ‘materialist-nonmaterialist’ value dimension, and another more independent ‘authoritarian-libertarian’ value dimension symbolized by the “new left” and “new right”. For instance, Flanagan maintains that though the “new left” are more liberal than the “new right”, there is no differentiation that suggests which of the ideologies are more or less materialist or non-materialist (Steel et al. 1992, 63). I will not further describe the emergence of the “new politics”, but suffice to say that Inglehart has obscured these distinctive dimensions of value orientation by merging indicators of both dimensions into one single measure.

One of the most critical assessments made of Inglehart's thesis is his use of measurement units for materialist/postmaterialist value orientation. In the first wave of World Values Survey (WVS), Inglehart employed four item values index - maintaining order, fighting rising prices, protecting freedom of speech, and having more say in government. Of these four indicators, only one - fighting rising prices - relates to materialist dimension, while the rest are prominently postmaterialistic. These indicators, therefore, inappropriately fuse several other value orientations (Steel et al. 1992, 64). For instance, maintaining public order is more conservative than a materialist value. In light to the previous critique, Inglehart's conceptualization not only obscures the emergence of libertarian-authoritarian dimension, but also limits variations in value orientations, as either materialist or postmaterialist. In other words, Inglehart's thesis rules out the possibility or inclusion of people with 'mixed' value orientations.

Another critique attacks the validity of Inglehart's 12-item value index. The 'original' four item index was directly preceded by, and followed by other questions included in the second wave of WVS in 1973. This raises the possibility of 'question order effect', because the 'original' four item values index was placed in second of the three batteries of values responses. The 'question order effect' may seriously distort the estimates of responses from WVS, and may not be comparable to other surveys asked in a different question order (Tranter & Western 2003, 14). Following this line of argument, one may say that the extent of value shift from material to postmaterial value orientation in postindustrial societies may be less affirming than Inglehart asserts.

According to Inglehart's thesis, an individual can not be equally materialistic and postmaterialistic at the same time. Empirically, respondents are imposed to rank choices from the four item or 12 item value index, which strictly confines an individual to either of the two dimensions. I will not elaborate on the 12 items value index here, but enough to say that the theoretical assumption behind the ranking approach is that all values (six materialist and six postmaterialist) are perceived positively by almost all people. Therefore, value priorities can only be discerned when one must choose or rank between the given choices (Reimer 1988). Statistically, it can be argued that ranking approach implies dependency of scores on a variable upon scores of other variables. With such implications, ranking approach is preferential for intraindividual comparisons, while rating approach is more preferable if comparisons are

performed between individuals such as cultural value shift. Theoretically, it can be claimed that people face varied situations with different interests and goals overlapping each other. Ranking approach seems logical to have forced people to choose between choices, so that their true values are revealed. However, in reality, in many decisions, values collide, and hence, have to be reconciled in such a way that all of the values get a share of significance (Reimer 1988). A rating approach constitutes fewer limits on the respondents, and seems theoretically more applicable than ranking approach. Therefore, respondents have greater freedom and possibility to evaluate their value priorities - being materialist and/or postmaterialist and/or mixed or neither of them. Hence, the possibilities are wider and realistically mirror corresponding behaviors of the people.

In similar vein of argument, logical dependence between the response categories can be questioned. Since respondents are forced to choose a “top priority”, it is obvious that one will be classified as ‘postmaterialist’ for choosing a postmaterialist item as a “top priority” (Brooks & Manza 1994). Because of logical dependence, Inglehart’s thesis can not distinguish between ‘pure’ postmaterialist and respondents who cling to both types of values. This also brings up another question whether Inglehart’s “materialists” value the postmaterial values or oppose strongly, or are neutral. The basic assumption underlying Inglehart’s thesis is that materialist and postmaterialist are mutually exclusive, while this may not be the case in reality. In addition to this, there is a possibility of definitional error. Inglehart’s value items can not be considered satisfactory indicators of materialist/postmaterialist priorities (Brooks & Manza 1994). For instance, it is not all clear that “fighting rising prices” is an instrumental measurement for ‘materialist’ values in societies where unemployment is a grave problem. These theoretical and methodological defeats around Inglehart’s thesis raise question of universality and validity of his thesis. Even if Inglehart’s results can not be taken at face value, there are evidences of cultural value shift in postindustrial societies (Rice & Feldman 1997). In this respect, Inglehart’s theoretical postulations may prove to be influential in explaining these changes in values, despite these inherent flaws of his measures. With these critiques discussed, I will now proceed to reconstruct the much contested materialist/postmaterialist dichotomy.

Reconstruction of materialist/postmaterialist dichotomy

According to the theoretical assumptions of Inglehart's thesis, materialism and postmaterialism are two categorically distinct value conceptualizations. When assessing alleged change of values from materialist to postmaterialist, it is imperative to be mindful that we are discussing theoretical constructs. Hence, theoretically, individual's values can be conceptualized and reconstructed differently. There are two principal dimensions that are essential for value construction - entity and validity. Entity refers to possibility of whether values can be separate or part of the system, while validity concerns with whether values are universal or specific. Inglehart's value orientation is a systemic and specific value conceptualization. His thesis shows how materialist values are over taken by postmaterialist values in the younger generations after World War II in postindustrial societies. (Reimer 1988; Knutsen 1990; Warwick 1998)

With this background, it is critical to highlight this 'constructedness' of values and value orientations, because it bears the implication that a construction can always be reconstructed on its theoretical foundation. Flaganan reconstructed the materialist/postmaterialist dimension into a more inclusive materialist/nonmaterialist and libertarian/authoritarian. In so doing, he labels economic items as materialist and libertarian values as postmaterialist (Flaganan 1987). Materialism incorporates both economic materialist values and authoritarian values, while postmaterialism encompasses nonmaterial values such as environmental protection and libertarian values related to equal participation and human rights (Knutsen 1990). Flaganan asserts that the change of values in the libertarian/authoritarian dimension is of greater significance than materialist/nonmaterialist. His empirical findings show that the value shift by generational replacement occurs prominently only along libertarian/authoritarian dimension, and this dimension is more crucial in reflecting changes in political behavior and attitudes (Flaganan 1987). Reimer performed another reconstruction following Flaganan's reconstruction of materialist/postmaterialist dimension. Reimer denoted these dimensions as materialist/nonmaterialist and postmaterialist/non-postmaterialist. Critics of Inglehart's thesis strongly come to consensus that people may emphasize both materialist and postmaterialist values. Flaganan argues that economic materialist values are independent of one's association to libertarian/authoritarian dimension. However, it is important to keep the value conceptualizations as open as possible. After a brief reconstruction background, in the following section, I will discuss the actual applicability of Inglehart's thesis in our societies.

Postmaterialistic Generation or the 'Blank' Generation

With background on materialist/postmaterialist dichotomy and its critiques, I have, so far, discussed and partly agreed with the cultural value shift from materialism to postmaterialism in postindustrial societies. Rather impressively, the postmaterialist thesis empirically claims that under economic growth and political stability, succeeding generations constitute higher proportion of postmaterialists than the preceding generations. However, to take those results at the face value may be a miscalculation of the extent of value shift opposed to the actual change. As discussed earlier by Inglehart's critics and reconstructions performed by other scholars, it is wise to be cautious when generalizing the applicability of such findings. So, reconsidering inherent flaws of Inglehart's thesis and the possibilities offered by his critics, is it logical to assert that younger generations are more or less materialistic than their preceding generations? In the following texts, I will attempt to expand on this confusion, either to conform to Inglehart's thesis or detach from the notion of being postmaterialist.

First, methodologically, it is of dire implications to transform intraindividual measures to interindividual measures, and use the results to formulate a hypothesis as that of Inglehart's. Strictly speaking, it must be considered invalid until other surveys are done to take an unbiased undistorted look at the hypothesis. How are we to assess our changes in values then? Is the hypothesis of postmaterialist value rational and universal? Placing the hypothesis in a historically specific setting of post-World War II, from 1980s onwards, the thesis concerns a generation frequently described in terms of the 'no future-generation', the 'blank generation' or the 'crisis generation' (Reimer 1988, 350). The possible explanation why this generation is termed as 'blank' generation is because of the intermediacy of pre and post-World War II generations. This generation was faced with the material abundance never experienced by pre-World War II generations, and yet the societies had not reached an absolute postindustrial state of affluence and prosperity. This transitional phase was reflected in the ephemeral attributes of the 80s generation (Warwick 1998). These possibilities to mount on material security and also embrace postmaterial values at the same time define a peculiar post-World War II generation. Then, can we call this generation of 1980s postmaterialist, according to Inglehart's postmaterialist thesis? Or can there be other possible explanations that more or less fruitfully correspond to that specific generation?

The post-World War II generations are described more succinctly by Thomas Ziehe (1986) by proposing three cultural tendencies relating to young people (Reimer 1988). First, the immense growth in “reflexivity” brings knowledge and experience to young people through media as a secondary experience. Because of this specific characteristic of young generations, young people know too much and their expectations of what could be accomplished is heightened, to extents that are often unattainable. With this, there is an underlying assumption of material abundance, and so, young people are more concerned about converting their ‘secondary’ experiences to personal first-hand experiences. This gives an impression that young people are more postmaterialist than older generations. However, how concrete is this impression is a matter of debate that I shall not discuss here. It is suffice to say that “reflexivity” is an inducer of the impression of young postmaterialist, but not an accurate representation. (Reimer 1988)

Second, technological and economic development gave way to increase in “makeability” that includes images, lifestyles and communication abilities (Reimer 1988). Younger generations have the opportunity to adopt a consumer lifestyle to display their individuality and sense of belongings, instead of unquestionably following a traditional lifestyle. The consumer culture encourages individuals to individualize oneself as distinct being with specific clothes, practices, experiences, appearances and bodily dispositions. Material abundance also provides individuals with wider variety of choices, and freedom to choose a lifestyle or not. Thus, material abundance and physical security is taken for-granted and/or of less importance by young people. Does that allow us to generalize that younger generations are less materialistic than the preceding generations who did not have such abundant materials to exercise their freedom of choice? Or better, can we say that the denominator of material and physical security underlies both younger and older generations? However, younger generations have taken the comfort to explore their higher needs while older generations spent their life cycle in building material denominator that is a ‘given’ for younger generations. This finds little ground to claim that older generations did not want to embrace postmaterialist values, or completely opposed such values. Though it is not empirically supported, but commonly understood by Maslow’s theory of need hierarchy that basic survival needs are primary to human beings. Given the material abundance and security, any older generation would equally take efforts to exercise their postmaterialist values, I suppose. Because older generations spent all of their energies in building material security for survival does not imply that they were less postmaterialist.

Thirdly, there is an increasing trend of “individualization” which implies that decisions are taken on an individual basis for all possible infinite directions that the new socio-economic environment offers (Reimer 1988). Personal background and conventionality do not ‘compass’ an individual’s journey of possibilities. In individualized societies, individual distrust traditional values and seek for new forms of belief that responds to current issues, hence forming associations that correlate to strengthening one’s individualism. Again, material security is a ‘given’ to some extent, social relations and associations add greater significance to one’s being. Therefore, this would support postmaterialist hypothesis. Nonetheless, the popular culture of individualism among the young generations also veils another submerged discourse about how a successful and happy life should be like, with economic and environmental security. This narcissistic culture of individuality and immediacy are the two distinct characteristics of younger generations that differ from older generations. All of these three arguments may not find support on empirical grounds, but from theoretical perspective, these are instrumental in understanding younger generations’ values and value orientations.

In relation to above argument, we can assert that young people’s values are as diverse as the consumer culture that shapes such values. So, materialist/postmaterialist dichotomy may be too narrow to accommodate such heterogeneous assortment of values. Secondly, the individuality and immediacy attributes of younger generations may hypothesize that neither materialist nor postmaterialist values are immediately important to young people. This is because value items such as “maintaining public order” and “fighting rising prices” neither concern individuality nor is immediate (Reimer 1988). I will illustrate this with an example from Inglehart’s findings. Age is an important variable in constructing Inglehart’s thesis. As Inglehart claims changes in values occur between different age cohorts. After examination of Inglehart’s original findings in relationship to age, Reimer finds out that younger people are less interested in all of the goals. All items concerning societal goals ten years ahead were perceived to be of less importance by young people. This implies that younger people are not more postmaterialistic than older people, rather young people are less interested in goals with no immediate relevance. (Reimer 1988; Knutsen 1990). With these arguments, I will summon up the common themes of the paper in the following concluding remarks.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have questioned the validity of Inglehart's materialist/postmaterialist dichotomy that has been unchanged for over the past 30 years. Though there had been contested debates over the applicability of Inglehart's postmaterialist thesis, strong empirical studies conducted by Inglehart and his associates defend the merits of his thesis. However, the critiques surrounding his thesis are equally convincing, and to some extent, demands for evolution of the theory, or even reconstruction as proposed by Flanagan and Reimer. According to Inglehart, generational change of values are evident among the succeeding generations in postindustrial societies because of material and physical security. As such, young people are becoming more concerned with higher needs of self-actualization as proposed by Maslow, and thus can be termed as postmaterialist. Inglehart based his theory on two basic hypothesis - scarcity hypothesis and socialization theory, however, he had been criticized for being rigid in the construction of materialist/postmaterialist dichotomy. Many other scholars have criticized his theory theoretically and methodologically as discussed earlier.

Through the last section, an apparent implication that emerged, contrary to Inglehart's thesis, is that younger generations' values tend to deviate in a multitude of different personal and societal dimensions rather than confining to a narrow materialist/postmaterialist chasm. This phenomenon may be considered as a generational attribute of "postmodern structures of feelings" as Reimer calls it, because these feelings are too heterogeneous to be incorporated in two mutually exclusive dimensions as Inglehart did. As discussed in the previous section, post-World War II generations are not more postmaterialistic or less materialistic, but rather its the conditions that determined their priorities in comparison to preceding generations. An older generation can not be regarded as materialistic if they had the need to meet their survival demands at first. Looking ahead, it is imperative to take into account the plurality and ambiguity of people's value orientations if we are to account a more realistic portrayal of the value shift between generations. Perhaps then, the 'blank' generation may not be as confusing and dispirited as it sounds. In these times of diversity and ambiguity, it is rather reasonable to think that 'blank' meant freedom to fill in as one wished, choosing from a varied assortment of values. As if it is to say, it is your generation, you decide. So then, are we really the 'blank' generation?

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