

Focus on Youth (2002)

Abstract

Since 1952, the Shell Oil Company has published regular scientific studies on the changing values of young people in Germany. The young people interviewed for this Shell Youth Study (Number 14 from 2002) expressed little trust in politics but a great willingness to work hard on the job. The “zero interest” attitude of earlier generations no longer predominates. The report makes reference to “go-getters and idealists” but notes that there are also young people who feel overwhelmed by life and who respond with either apathy or a dog-eat-dog mentality.

Source

Climbing the Ranks Instead of Dropping out: Young People are Pragmatic and Goal-Oriented in Shaping their Future

The youth of today are pragmatic. They mix what they find appropriate into a cocktail of values: industriousness and power, family and security, creativity and standard of living – everything is possible at the same time. The up-and-coming generation rises to social and personal challenges and wants to solve its own problems. Young people do not put much trust in the ability of politics and political parties to solve problems. These are the conclusions drawn by the 14th Shell Youth Study. The study was drafted by Bielefeld social scientists Professor Klaus Hurrelmann, Ph.D., and Professor Mathias Albert, Ph.D., and a team from the Munich Infratest Social Research Institute. On behalf of the German branch of Shell Corporation, the researchers asked more than 2,500 young people between the ages of twelve and twenty-five about their living situation, their values, and their attitude toward politics.

When compared to previous studies, the 14th Shell Youth Study shows that one trend has grown noticeably stronger: Young people’s general interest in politics is continuing to decline. Only 34 percent of adolescents describe themselves as interested in politics. In 1991, that figure was still 57 percent. Age and level of education play an important role: It is mostly older, well-educated young people who are interested in or active in politics. Younger adolescents, as part of the course of their development to maturity, are (still) primarily concerned with themselves. All in all, only 35 percent said they would definitely vote in elections; another 37 percent would only “probably” do so. The younger the respondent, the lower the willingness to vote in a Bundestag election. “We cannot take it for granted that young people will be interested in elections. We have to spark these young voters’ interest in democracy,” said project leader Klaus Hurrelmann.

Little Confidence in Parties

Although the vast majority of young people consider democracy a good form of governance, as many as 52 percent of respondents in the new federal states [i.e., the former GDR] and 27 percent in the old federal states [i.e., the former FRG] are critical of the democratic process in Germany. This is how youth in the new federal states, especially, express their criticism of living conditions and the lack of personal opportunities. The authors determined that young people have little confidence in political parties and moderate confidence in the federal government, churches, trade unions, and citizens’ initiatives. In contrast, they view nonpartisan state institutions such as the justice system or the police, as well as human rights and environmental groups as especially trustworthy.

What hasn’t changed at first glance is their political self-positioning. In contrast to the general

population, young adults continue to align themselves slightly left of center. They clearly reject political extremism. In the old federal states, in particular, there is an ever greater number of young people (33 percent) who cannot or will not place themselves on the traditional right-left scale. Whereas the majority of respondents are aligned with one of the two large mainstream parties [i.e. the SPD and the CDU], young people's affinity toward the Green Party, so the study suggests, has continually declined as compared to the 1980s and 1990s. Overall, nineteen percent of young people failed to respond to the question of which party could best solve Germany's problems; 37 percent thought that no party had that ability.

Optimism Is the Order of the Day

In the present societal situation, adolescents face higher expectations and higher risks than twenty years ago. This pertains to possible failure in school or their careers, to the labor market situation, but also to their personal security in a world of open borders. Nevertheless, the younger generation is optimistic about their future. "Young people have adjusted their value orientation to these new conditions," explained Hurrelmann.

The study shows that the attitudes of Germany's youth can be traced back to a fundamental shift in values that had already started to become apparent in the 1990s. "The ideologically informed protest- and "zero interest"-attitude of earlier generations, which was, at the time, cultivated mostly by college students and high school graduates, is outdated," says Hurrelmann. On the whole, the mindset of young people has shifted away from being socially critical and toward the center of society.

Climbing the Ranks Instead of Dropping Out

Most young people react to the new social agenda by thinking positively and exhibiting a greater willingness to work hard. "Climbing the ranks instead of dropping out" is their motto for shaping their future. Adolescents develop their own prospects and practice active "environmental monitoring." They attentively examine their social environment for opportunities and risks, wanting to utilize opportunities and minimize risks. Overarching social goals are not central. "The goal instead is to succeed in an achievement-oriented society," says Hurrelmann.

Achievement, security, and influence have become more important to young people. This is confirmed by a comparison with another scientific study on values from the second half of the 1980s: Back then, only 62 percent of adolescents regarded "industriousness and ambition" as important; today, the figure today is already 75 percent. "Seeking security" (rose from 69 to 79 percent) and "power and influence" (from 27 to 36 percent) also place very high in the values ranking in the present study. Commenting on the study's findings, Hurrelmann said, "Young people have cleaned the 'dust' off these 'established bourgeois' principles and are developing a new, unbiased relationship toward them. Security, order, and industriousness are linked in a new synergy with modern values such as creativity, tolerance, and enjoyment."

"Yes" to Career and Family

This shift in values among youth is driven, in particular, by female adolescents. Girls and young women today are more ambitious, but also more self-assured. "Professional success," "starting a business," and "assuming responsibility" are just as important to them as to boys and young men. Around half of all schoolchildren today aspire to complete the university qualification exam [Abitur] or to acquire subject-specific university qualifications. It is striking that more girls than boys hope to acquire higher education. In terms of level of education, girls have even surpassed boys by now.

At the same time, family is considered to be very important. Seventy-five percent of female respondents and 65 percent of male respondents think that they need a family "to be happy." More than two-thirds of

young people want to have their own children in the future. “For most young people today, career and family are no longer mutually exclusive. Instead they are two central objectives of equal importance,” according to Hurrelmann.

Education for Success

The new zeitgeist is embodied especially by those young people who are successful in school, vocational training, and their careers. On the other hand, those with a low level of education feel potentially disadvantaged. Their chances of achieving their career goals are lower, and they are less satisfied with their present living conditions.

Go-getters and Idealists

The study distinguishes between four types of young people who are meeting the new social challenges in different ways:

“self-assured go-getters”

“pragmatic idealists”

“hesitant inconspicuous types”

“robust materialists”

The “self-assured go-getters” are a group of social climbers from the broad middle class and are represented equally among both sexes. They are ambitious and strive for influence and a productive social development. A supportive and demanding upbringing has given them the psychological tools for this. Social engagement is important, but individual achievements clearly take precedence.

The “self-assured go-getters” are joined by another active and optimistic group, namely, the “pragmatic idealists.” They come primarily from the educated upper-middle class, and 60 percent of them are female. They focus more on the idealistic side of life and are involved, for example, in helping others or the environment. Nevertheless, these young people differ from the “post-materialists” of the 1970s and 1980s in that they are more security-conscious and are committed to “law and order” and competition, without the ideological tunnel-vision.

Apathy and Sharp Elbows

The “robust materialists” and the “hesitant inconspicuous types” do not cope as well with the demands of school and work. Therefore, they are increasingly unsure about their personal future. Whereas the inconspicuous types react to their unfavorable situation with resignation and apathy, the “robust materialists,” a predominantly male group, exhibit toughness, at least on the surface. In order to reach their goal, they often resort to using their elbows, and at times they even deliberately violate social norms. Although there are more and more underdogs among the materialists, they tend to look down on socially weaker groups, foreigners, and marginal groups. A small segment shows tendencies toward political extremism.

“The main task of society is to integrate these two groups,” says Hurrelmann. “The inconspicuous types must be drawn out of their passivity and supported.” The materialists with aggressive leanings, he explains, must first be shown limits. “Softer” integration measures, he remarks, are only called for once these young people accept the basic rules of society.

Social Involvement

Despite their minimal interest in politics, many young people are involved in their community. They focus their activities on concrete, practical issues that afford them opportunities and benefit. The focus is on their own, youth-related interests and on meaningful recreational activities. Young people increasingly use the internet to attract attention to their causes and to organize themselves in networks.

Although adolescents are active in helping others or in protecting animals and the environment, they show far less interest in citizens' initiatives, aid organizations such as Greenpeace or Amnesty International, political parties, and trade unions than in clubs, educational institutions, and self-organized groups. Many young people also get involved on an individual basis. Young women are generally more active when it comes to environmental and social issues; whereas young men tend to work more on behalf of improved coexistence, order, and security in their neighborhoods. Thirty-five percent of young people are socially active on a regular basis, 41 percent occasionally, and 24 percent are not socially active at all. Here, too, the higher the education level and social stratum, the more intensive the social engagement. "Alongside schools," Hurrelmann states, "clubs, volunteer fire departments, and emergency services play an important role in integrating disadvantaged youths."

Open to Europe and Globalization

European integration is a reality for young people today and is clearly seen as an opportunity. A relative majority of young people (47 percent) support the idea that the European Union should move toward becoming a unified state in the future. Their attitudes toward the Eastern expansion of the EU are similar. Moreover, in their opinion, Germany should accept its new international responsibilities.

They are also pragmatic and open when it comes to globalization. Opportunities and challenges are assessed realistically; difficulties are not swept under the carpet. When evaluating globalization, ideological positions are outmoded. Young people realize that globalization is also making life more interesting and diverse.

Source: "Aufstieg statt Ausstieg: Jugendliche gestalten ihre Zukunft pragmatisch und zielorientiert", 14th Shell Youth Study (August 2002); <http://www.shell-jugendstudie.de>.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: Focus on Youth (2002), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3815>> [May 14, 2024].