

Will the economic crisis lead to major societal changes?

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Why are former business executives and attorneys volunteering more time to help their communities? Why do the children of immigrants assume values very different from those of their parents? Why has the size of Japanese families declined substantially? A new theory of social change and development by UCLA distinguished professor of psychology Patricia Greenfield answers these and other questions and offers insights into the future.

A large number of immigrants came to Southern California in the 1980s and '90s from agricultural communities in Mexico and Asia, where they lived in poor, homogenous, rural villages made up of extended families and people who knew one another well, Greenfield said. In Southern California, they found culturally heterogeneous cities full of strangers and nuclear-family households. They were transplanted from environments in which a large part of learning takes place within the family to environments where most learning occurs in school.

The children of these immigrants, some of whom later became Greenfield's students, were thus exposed to two sets of values — those of their parents and those of their teachers — resulting in a move away from their parents' values and toward their teachers' values, which are more individualistic, Greenfield said.

Greenfield's theory, the first predictive theory in cultural psychology, explains these shifts in values and behaviors in terms of adaptation to these two very different types of environments.

"A number of students have said, 'Now I understand why I had fights with my parents; I understand my parents' point of view and the way they were brought up. I grew up here and developed a different value system, and we were in conflict,'" Greenfield said. "The children want to choose their own friends and go out with their friends — peer influence versus family influence.

"The immigrant students say, 'You've explained my life. Now I understand my mother much better. One Korean student said, 'I also understand my mother doesn't have the tools to understand me the way I can understand her.'"

Greenfield is working with immigrant adolescents and their parents to help parents understand the value system their children are exposed to in school and society "that is telling them to be independent and speak up, versus their parents, who are telling them to be interdependent with the family and to be respectful." And she is helping the adolescents see these two ways of being raised.

Greenfield's theory is based on concepts developed by the 19th-century German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, who distinguished between two social systems: *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. (Greenfield still uses Tönnies' German words because they have a more specific connotation than their English translations).

Gemeinschaft ("community") refers to a small, rural, low-technology, face-to-face community that is relatively poor and based on informal education at home. *Gesellschaft* ("society") refers to a large, urban, heterogeneous, high-technology society that relies on electronic communication and formal, school-based education.

Greenfield's major theoretical contribution is to apply these concepts to construct a theory of social change and human development.

The world has been moving in a *Gesellschaft* direction, Greenfield says, with immigrants generally moving from poorer rural areas to richer urban cities.

One of Greenfield's additions to the theory is the idea that a *Gemeinschaft* society can become more *Gesellschaft* over time; there is no end-point. Cities in the U.S., she said, have become more *Gesellschaft* — more urbanized, richer and more high-tech.

Greenfield's theory predicts that the [immigrants](#) to Southern California would bring child-rearing values more adapted to a *Gemeinschaft* world into a *Gesellschaft* society. This sets the stage for conflicting socialization and developmental priorities between Los Angeles teachers and Latino immigrant parents. The same dynamic often applies to other immigrant groups, she said.

"We predicted, and found, an intergenerational difference," said Greenfield, director of the Children's Digital Media Center, Los Angeles. "Across generations, children's developmental trajectory is going in the direction of values adaptive in a *Gesellschaft* world."

Japan, Greenfield noted, has changed dramatically from its rural, agrarian roots before World War II; Japan's young people have become more individualistic as the country has become richer, more urban and more high-tech, with an increase in formal education and more Japanese women pursuing careers.

"It's a worldwide trend," she said. "The world has been moving in the *Gesellschaft* direction.

"Japan, for instance, was transformed after World War II from a primarily agricultural society through massive industrialization and urbanization; that's a basic *Gemeinschaft*-to-*Gesellschaft* shift. The wife

and mother's role changed in adaptation to the new conditions. Women in Japan marry later and have children later, or not at all. As women get more education, they want careers. Japanese mothers have become more ambivalent toward parenting and have more frustration in not being able to pursue personal achievement in a chosen career; they have a sense that the social value of child-rearing is declining, that mothers get less respect as mothers.

"These sociodemographic changes altered the child's learning environment," Greenfield said. "Family size decreased from approximately five children per family in the 1920s to 1.46 per family in 1993. When family size decreases, each child gets more individual attention. In large families, one sibling takes care of another sibling — a collectivistic approach that decreases when families are smaller. More focus on the child is an adaptation to a Gesellschaft environment. School becomes more important in a Gesellschaft environment. The isolation of a nuclear family from the extended family increases; the family unit is smaller. The collective nature of the family declines."

As new generations of young adults are raised under these child-centered conditions, women's roles are determined much more by choice than ascribed by birth as daughter, wife and mother, Greenfield said. The tension between the old and new values produces conflict.

"Personal pleasure and women's personal achievement often replace social responsibility as values," she said. "However, change does not happen easily; conflict can arise between generations and between the way things used to be done and the new conditions. That happened in the United States from the 1950s to the 1980s, and one result has been a tremendous decline in respect for the role of mother."

However, the current worldwide financial crisis may reverse — at least temporarily — the direction of modern societies.

"In the United States and in other parts of the world, we are now moving in the other direction," Greenfield said. "I see signs of people becoming more community-minded as people are getting poorer. For example, former executives who are out of work are doing much more volunteering for nonprofit organizations, moving toward a focus on the common good. Lawyers and bankers are becoming teachers.

"I see this shift even in the election of Barack Obama at a time when we were all becoming poorer; he talks about community, and was a community organizer. There are already signs of more volunteering for community service projects, more time spent with family, more cooperation within families and less concern with material goods. Sharing with the extended family is central in a *Gemeinschaft* environment. If economic conditions continue to get more severe, I think we'll have more of a communitarian value system. However, these changes will only slightly reverse hundreds of years of movement in the other direction; we're still going to be relatively *Gesellschaft* in our psychological adaptations."

She predicts that more young people will be focused on helping their families and the community, especially as they get poorer.

Greenfield's theory was published in the March issue of *Developmental Psychology*, a journal of the American Psychological Association.

"My theory has to do with the idea that there are behavioral and socialization adaptations to a *Gemeinschaft* environment and to a *Gesellschaft* environment — and different adaptations, different behaviors and socialization are adapted to thrive and survive in each environment," Greenfield said. "These environments are made up of variables — such as urbanization, technology, formal education — and as these variables move in the *Gesellschaft* direction, behaviors, socialization and goals for development also move toward those that are

more adapted to the Gesellschaft environment. If, as now, you have movement of the environment in the other direction, then my theory predicts movement of behavior, socialization, developmental goals in the other direction.

"As your environment changes, for example, by becoming poorer, then your value system will also shift. However, it takes a couple of generations to produce a dramatic change in society.

"We have become more Gesellschaft — more urbanized, richer, more high-tech, more formal education — over time. That long-term trend has been temporarily reversed, at least in the variables of wealth and commerce. I believe that people are beginning to adapt to that social change by socializing an altered course of human development."

Source: University of California - Los Angeles

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