



Propriety of the Erich Fromm Document Center. For personal use only. Citation or publication of material prohibited without express written permission of the copyright holder.

Eigentum des Erich Fromm Dokumentationszentrums. Nutzung nur für persönliche Zwecke. Veröffentlichungen – auch von Teilen – bedürfen der schriftlichen Erlaubnis des Rechteinhabers.

The Lifestyle and Value-Orientation of German Youth Today

Martina Becker

Paper presented at the International Conference “Quo vadis iuvenis? Erich Fromm and Beyond: Life styles, values and ‘character’ of the European youth” at Bologna on October 3-5, 2003. First published in *Fromm Forum* (English version) 8 / 2004, Tuebingen (Selbstverlag) 2004, pp. 7-13.

Copyright © 2004 and 2011 by Dr. Martina Becker. - Translated into English by James Furner.

1. Introduction

One often hears today’s youth referred to as a ‘fun’ or ‘switched-off’ generation. It is also said that they are unmotivated, apolitical, do not want to take on responsibilities, have little ambition and are only interested in leisure and consumption. Such descriptions naturally arouse a legitimate fear concerning the future of our society. The question is how our society can survive in view of young people’s behavior. Some fear a decline in basic values. One feels called to do something, to exert an educational influence in order to prevent the worst.

These critical statements are somewhat relativised, however, when one considers that similarly critical and pessimistic things were said of young people in earlier times.

Socrates (470-399 bc.) speaks of the youth of his time thus: „Our youth love luxury, are bad mannered, make fun of authority and have no respect at all for their elders. Our children are tyrants, they do not stand up before adults, they contradict their parents, they are impossible.“

Hesiod, too, speaks of youth (around 720 bc., a few hundred years before Socrates): „I no longer have any hope in the future of our land when today’s youth one day form the men of tomorrow. Our youth are unbearable, irresponsible and terrible to look at.“

Hearing this, one gets the impression that it is an old tradition for older generations to view young people pessimistically and full of worry. It also seems that the older generation has always feared that youth provide poor prospects

for meeting future challenges.

The questions that arise in relation to today’s youth are: what are the prejudices that the older generation has probably always had of youth and what are the facts? What empirical findings are there concerning the behaviour, attitudes and values of today’s youth?

In order to investigate these questions and to replace the confusion between prejudice and reality with clarity, in what follows I would like to introduce the findings of a number of studies of young people in Germany. These studies asked young people about their interests, values and attitudes.

First, I would like to mention briefly the studies which my lecture will take into account and thereby illustrate the general situation of today’s youth. I shall then give an account of young people’s lifestyle and the world in which they live, in particular the areas of family, school, interests, political activity and view of the future. I will then give a report on the empirical findings concerning young people’s value-orientations. The questions to be investigated here are: What is important for young people? Do young people show definite value types? Can one record trends in the development of values?

2. Empirical studies consulted

My presentation is based mainly on the „14th Shell youth study 2002“. 2,500 young people between 12 and 25 years old took part in the standard questionnaire and 20 were interviewed (see Deutsche Shell [DS], 2002). The second



study that I will refer to is the „IG-Metal youth study“ carried out between 1999-2002. The study focused on 1,000 young workers between 16-27 years old (see IG-Metall [IGM], 2002). The third study that I have taken into account is the „generations study“ of the Hans-Seidel foundation. This study investigated whether there are differences in the interests, values and attitudes of the younger and older generations. 2,000 interviews were carried out; the participants represent a cross-section of the German population over 16 years old. (see Hans-Seidel Stiftung [HSS], 2003)

3. The general situation of today's youth

When one looks at the current situation of youth today, empirical studies provide the following picture: Owing to the relatively early age at which sexual maturity is reached the phase of youth begins relatively early. At the same time, this phase ends relatively late, determined by the long period of training and the long, continual process of detaching oneself from the parental home. Growing unemployment provides young people with added difficulties in untying themselves from their parental home. Beginning a family of one's own is in any case delayed. The relatively long-lasting phase of youth is connected to the relatively large measure of freedom and alternatives. This freedom of choice means that young people are both forced to reach decisions for themselves and in such decisions to be their own guide. An outward outlook is, owing to the variety of social values, very hard to maintain. Furthermore, young people have to endure a future which is both privately and professionally uncertain and open. Both a high level of self-organization as well as the ability to constantly keep a look on their environment are necessary if chances for personal development are to emerge. One can describe this as the necessity of a constant 'monitoring of one's environment', the ability, then, to keep one's composure and then at the right moment to take the chances on offer. (see DS, 2002)

4. The lifestyle and world of young people

Family and school

Most young people move out of their parental home relatively late. The majority of young people between 12 and 25 still live with their parents. In general, there are strong ties to the family of origin. A separation from one's family of origin is not looked upon as a pre-condition for one's own independence. 90% of young people describe the relation with their parents as good, irrespective of their gender or type of schooling. Almost 70% would educate their children exactly or similarly to the way in which they were educated. At any rate, 70% say that one needs a family to be happy, with somewhat more young women agreeing than young men. Marriage is, however, nothing natural. Around half are undecided on the question, with no difference between young men and young women. The majority – two-thirds – would like to have their own children, but not now, only later. A third is undecided whilst only 5% do not want any children. Young women wish for children more often than young men. (see DS, 2002)

The school represents an important socializing authority where preliminary decisions affecting future opportunities and professional choice are made. (At this point I would like to mention briefly that the German school system is divided into 3 parts. The *Hauptschule* runs until the 9th school year; the *Realschule* provides an education between *Hauptschule* and *Gymnasium* and runs until the 10th school year; and the *Gymnasium* runs until the 13th school year. In addition there are different ways in which one can voluntarily decide to continue one's schooling to a higher level.)

In general, the social inequalities in school attendance seem to be growing larger. Young people with poorer social origins are more likely to go to the *Haupt-schule* and are more likely to be unemployed. More than half of pupils at a *Gymnasium* come from either the upper class or upper-middle class. This holds for Germany despite there are no school fees to pay.

Young people are prepared to make additional efforts in order to obtain a demanding school qualification, even when it provides no guarantee of a future or a definite social position. Only a third of young people like going to



school. Three quarters, however, enjoy their training or university study. Almost a third of young people have a job in addition to their schooling or profession. Contrary to fears, young people with an additional job are not overly endangered in their performance. The high level of additional work shows that young people are very achievement motivated and that one cannot speak of a generation of lazy shirkers. (see DS, 2002)

In general, work is more important for young people than leisure, just as they make no strong separation between work and leisure. For some the reason for this is that they find their work very interesting; for others, it is that the demands are so high that they must also devote themselves to their work in their leisure time. (see IGM, 2002)

Interests and relationships

When one asks young people what they consider 'in' or 'out' one comes up with the following results: Three quarters consider 'in': looking good, a career, technology, loyalty, wearing branded clothing. Slightly fewer than two thirds consider 'in': taking on responsibility, studying, Europe, belief, becoming independent. Large majorities considered 'out': marriage, shares, health food shops, citizens' action groups, getting involved in politics, drugs. There were few differences across gender: technology is more important for young men, loyalty more for young women.

The behavior of young people in their leisure time varies strongly according to their type of school, social background and gender. Here it is particularly apparent that one cannot speak of youth in general. More than two thirds of young people state that they are currently in a fixed relationship. It is astonishing that young women of all ages claim more often to be in a fixed relationship. One reason for this can be that it is more frequent for young women to have an older male partner. However, it may also be the case that there is a difference between young men and young women in whether they consider themselves a partner in a steady relationship or not. (see DS, 2002)

Political activity

Hardly any young people stated that they take

an interest in politics. One third to one fifth of young people take absolutely no interest in politics whilst young women are less interested than young men. Even when young people become socially active in organisations, associations or initiatives they do not like to describe this as political. 'Politics' has, for them, rather unpleasant associations. Political activity is, as a whole, seen rather as unimportant. Young men are more likely to become active in institutionalized politics, through parties, associations and organizations. Young women are more likely to be found in initiatives and informal groups aiming to shape their immediate surroundings. Motivation for social activity comes less from a sense of responsibility or obligation and more from the wish to expand one's own competence and to make new contacts. (see DS, 2002)

As a whole one is astonished to find that young people are often badly informed about current political affairs. (see IGM, 2002)

Perspectives for the future

When one asks young people about their perspectives for the future, a large difference emerges between their personal future and that of society. More than half have an optimistic estimation of their personal future. In this case there is no difference between young men and women. The future of society was more likely to be viewed with pessimism. The higher the level of education qualification aspired to, the more optimistic was the perspective for the future. Young people who are socially well-integrated and have a good relation with their parents and peer-groups were more likely to be optimistic. The pessimistic perspective on the future of society is new when compared to earlier studies. In 2000 almost two thirds still looked optimistically at the future of society. In 2002 the result was quite different; now 65% view the future with pessimism. (see DS, 2002)

Despite the optimism in relation to their personal future, young people do not dare to offer a prognosis of their own future. They reckon with the unforeseeable and breaks in their own biography, but no linear development, neither in their private nor professional life. They view their future as uncertain, although they do not find this unsettling. They



remain optimistic. As a whole, young people are, however, less orientated on the future and more on the present. (see IGM, 2002)

5. Current value-orientations and changes in values

Values can be seen as what is important in life, what one strives for in life, what individuals find valuable in life. The striving for self-realization in the 1960's led to the fear of a long-term lack of social order. Self-realization was assumed to be opposed to self-control and self-discipline. One feared a drop in the will to achieve and to observe the rules of society. During the 1980's and 1990's the model of individual freedom of choice gained acceptance. At the same time, a danger was seen in a possible over-stretching of the individual.

If young people of the sixties and seventies protested against restricted voting options, the situation of today's youth is exactly the reverse. Freedom and participation are taken for granted. Owing to the variety of voting options and the uncertain social situation striving for security is seen as particularly important. Aside from the striving for security a further important trend among young people is one of pragmatism. Young people want to tackle practical problems connected with their personal chances, challenges and development. In this they show a pronounced will to achieve. Social problems on a wider scale or ecological problems are less central for young people. Achievement, security, power and influence are particularly important. Self-development and self-control are valued together rather than opposed. Contrary to earlier fears, a constant change in values towards that of a post-material self-realisation has, therefore, not occurred. Young people react to new social demands with a renewed effort to achieve and a pragmatic stance. This is combined with a positive stance towards their personal future. The ideologically-based pessimism of earlier generations is now passé. The new generation is non-ideological. Young women are particularly ambitious and willing to take on responsibility, although they retain their feminine aspects and are more emotional, tolerant and ready to help

than young men. Marriage and feminine values are not seen as opposed to a career and professional success. (see DS, 2002)

Values of young people – what do they find important?

When one asks the question, what is important for today's youth? it turns out that friendships and relationships are important for almost all young people. (A scale of 1-7 was used, where 1 indicates unimportant and 7 indicates extremely important). Important value is given to friendships, relationships, family life, self-responsibility and having wide contact with other people. In these basic values the desire for an independent life is expressed. The second most important set of values are those of creativity, rules, order, independence and security. It may be seen here that self-development and self-control are seen as equally important rather than incompatible. The third most important set of values, valued by 70% as important, are those of being hard-working and ambitious, including one's feelings in taking decisions, enjoying life, being health conscious, tolerance, a high standard of living, self-achievement and being socially active. Considering feelings when taking decisions presents a further new trend. Values more likely to be seen as unimportant are power and influence, belief in God, being proud of one's own history, political activity, tradition and conformity. (see DS, 2002)

Value types

The Shell study distinguishes 4 value types, or rather 4 types of young people, each with a different way of dealing with social challenges, a different way of behaving and a different set of values.

On one side of the value spectrum are the *pragmatic idealists*. On the other side of the spectrum are the *robust materialists*. In between one finds the *cautiously inconspicuous* and the *self-confident doers*. The 4 types are equally represented amongst young people, in percentage terms representing around 25% each. (More exactly, the idealists and the inconspicuous 25% each; the doers 26% and the materialists 24%).

The *pragmatic idealists* are more likely to be on the side of social success. Their characteristic



values are social activity, creativity and tolerance. Just as important for them are respect for law and order, security and hard-work. They are critical of both the robust materialists and of hedonism. The ability to achieve is not so important for them. They are more likely to be women (60%) and come more often from the oldest age-group between 22-25. Noteworthy is the rise in the proportion of representatives as one moves from *Hauptschule* pupils to students. They often come from a parental home with high educational qualifications.

Robust materialists represent the counter-pole to the pragmatic idealists. Hedonism and materialism play a central role for them. Social activity and tolerance are not so important for them, nor respect for law and order. They are more often found amongst young men and in the younger age-group between 12-14. They are also more often found in schools aimed at lower qualifications, in unfavorable social situations and are increasingly unemployed or unhappy with their work.

The third group are the *cautiously inconspicuous*. In many areas of life they are unable to say what they really want or show a particular strength of will. They want to enjoy their life, but they do not overexert themselves for it. They are less commonly socially disadvantaged, but more likely to be passive hangers-on and often poorly socially-integrated. Their share decreases with age. They are represented equally amongst all types of school and are more often young men (54%) than young women (45%). They are also increasingly unemployed or unhappy with their work. They often come from a middling social background, just like the fourth group, the self-confident doers.

The zeitgeist is best expressed in the fourth group, that of the self-confident doers. They seem to overcome the gulf between idealism and materialism. They find social activity important but also a high standard of living. They stress both tolerance and the ability to achieve. Despite their tolerance they keep their own interests constantly in mind. They feel elite in their performance but remain interested in enjoying life, the fruits of their own labour. It is particularly noteworthy that they see no contradiction between hard work, ambition and self-control

on the one hand and creativity and fantasy on the other. They are represented equally amongst young men and young women. The type of the self-confident doer predominates at the *Gymnasium*. Representatives of this type most usually come from a middling social background but have the aspiration to make the best that is possible from their situation. (see DS, 2002)

Comparisons with the population as a whole and between generations

When one compares young people with the population as a whole, it is noteworthy that there is only a small difference between them in respect to the values of hard-work and ambition. Private well-being and independence are equally important for both groups. With values connected with self-realization and self-control there are differences. A normative orientation is seen by young people as less important. They are more likely to stress personal development and the realization of needs. Creativity and enjoying life are more important for them than for the population as a whole. Respect for law and order, striving for security, health awareness, environmental awareness, religion and tradition are more valued by the population as a whole. Tradition and religion are markedly more important for non-native than native young people. 61% of non-native young people find them important, compared to 43% of native young people living in the former West German states and 14% of native young people living in the newly-formed states.

A comparison of young and old (where 'young' describes people aged 16-34 and 'old' people of 60 and over) reveals that directing one's life according to firm principles and convictions is equally important for both young and old. Also equally important are contact with and trust of others, security, well-being, having one's own aesthetics, responsibility and doing one's duty. There are differences in the areas of self-realization, taking pleasure in life, independence, performance and increasing prosperity. For young people they are particularly important, but for old people they are more likely to be unimportant. For old people morals, privacy – in other words, a peaceful private life – and religious belief are more important. Above all,



young people reject religion as practiced by the church, whilst almost half of old people state that religion plays a major role for them. 51% of young people agreed with the statement 'religion yes, church no' compared with only 38% of old people. There is a clear difference in the stances of the young and old generations towards work and their profession. Young people show less aspiration for a career than old people do, and are more likely to be interested in having a secure position with fixed hours and free-time. Old people want a well-esteemed position with responsibility and good pay. Both groups are agreed who should communicate values. Both groups take the view that this should take place predominantly within the parental home, followed by the school. The media, political parties, politicians and universities are seen as less important by both groups. Only 10% see the church as playing a role in setting values. Both groups are agreed that the church should retain its marginal role in setting values, even if it is of more importance for old people than for young people. (see HSS, 2003)

Trends in the development of values

When one compares the empirical results of the 2002 Shell youth study with that of 1987/8, a change in priorities may be established. Priorities have moved clearly in the direction of performance and success. The Shell study speaks of a real 'change of mentality' away from the primacy of the ecological and towards primacy of the economic. Hard work and ambition are the greatest gainers in the value scale. The above-mentioned trend towards pragmatism can be seen as the most essential. It means that overcoming specific, personal problems are prominent and of greater importance for young people than wider social problems. Aside from pragmatism, a further important trend can be observed in the evaluation of feelings when taking a decision. This can be found irrespective of gender. A third important trend is the trend towards hedonism. Consumption and enjoying life have become more important. A further emerging trend is an

advancing secularisation. The decades-long conflict between the values of self-realisation and self-control is, for most young people, difficult to comprehend. The conflict in the values of young people is much more centred on the question of whether one is ready to engage in activity for others or whether one's own interests are completely prominent. The socially better-placed and more educated young people tended towards being active for others, whilst the socially less well-placed tended to put their own interests to the fore. (see DS, 2002)

Concluding remarks

When one returns to summarize the empirical results, one may conclude that the stereotypical description of today's youth as a 'fun' generation is not completely justified. Young people are largely prepared to work hard and show ambition. In this, their attitude towards life is predominantly pragmatic and orientated on security. They show a high degree of will to achieve and readiness for action as well as the will to tackle practical problems in a non-ideological way. The values of self-realization and self-control are not opposed to each other. For young people self-realization *and* self-control are important, just like performance and ambition *and* fun and enjoying life.

Bibliography

- Deutsche Shell (Hrsg.). (2002). Jugend 2002- Zwischen pragmatischem Idealismus und robustem Materialismus. Frankfurt: Fischer-Verlag.
- Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung (Hrsg.). (2003). Generationenstudie 2002- Werte, gesellschaftliches Engagement und Bereitschaft zum Umbruch im Spannungsfeld der Generationen. Sonderausgabe Politische Studien.
- IG Metall (Hrsg.). (2002). Held, J., Bibouche, S. -IG Metall Jugendstudie- Lebenseinstellungen junger Arbeitnehmerinnen und Arbeitnehmer. Neue Orientierungen und Engagementformen. Marburg: Schüren Presseverlag.