


2009

# What Qualities Do Parents Value in Their Children ? : a Revision of Earlier Findings

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## Recommended Citation

Lantagne, Caitlin, "What Qualities Do Parents Value in Their Children ? : a Revision of Earlier Findings" (2009). *Honors Projects Overview*. 25.

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WHAT QUALITIES DO PARENTS VALUE  
IN THEIR CHILDREN? A REVISION  
OF EARLIER FINDINGS

By

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An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Honors

in

The Department of Sociology

The School of Arts and Sciences

Rhode Island College

2009

# **What Qualities Do Parents Value in Their Children? A Revision of Earlier Findings**

## **Abstract**

In this paper I examine what qualities parents have valued in their children since 1986. When I looked at research that has been done during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I found that there had been trends away from valuing obedience in children and toward valuing autonomy, but that no one had examined whether these trends had continued over the last twenty years. I used General Social Survey data to determine whether these trends still obtained, controlling for other variables (such as social class, religion, race, sex, and age) that had been found to be associated with what qualities parents value in their children. I found that autonomy was no longer increasingly valued by parents in their children during period from 1986 to 2006, and that the trend away from valuing obedience had also slowed dramatically. Other determining factors, like social class and religion, however, continue to shape whether parents will value obedience and autonomy in their children.

## **Introduction**

From a child's perspective, parents seem to know it all. No matter what the situation may be, your parents, or anyone that is influencing the way you are being brought up, seem to always know the right answer. They always seem to lead you in what they perceive as the right direction and often want the best for you. All parents have traits which they wish to pass down to their children. Whether it's attending church each week, or going to college, most parents want the best for their child, perhaps even better than what they had.

When I started this study I wanted to see if all parents want the same things for their children; if in fact they all find the same traits desirable in their children. Does every parent want to see the same things in their child, and, if not, in what ways do they differ? I feel that it is important to see the trends of parents' desires for their children because parents theoretically have a huge impact on the way their children turn out. Cooley (1964 [2002]) surely had parents in mind when he used the phrase the "looking-glass self." How we see ourselves depends on how we think others see us, including parents. Parents affect the way we see ourselves from an early age. By using the looking-glass provided by our parents, we see ourselves the way we think our parents see us, since they are the people we most often socialize with. Mead (1962 [1934]) explains that the key to developing the self is learning to take the role of the other, especially parents. He believes that the self develops only as the person interacts with others, parents usually being the first people children interact with. He explains

that as infants we can only imitate others, usually parents since we have limited social experience. As we grow and are able to use language and other symbols we start to play and take on the roles of significant others, mainly parents. By playing these roles, the child imagines the world from their parents' point of view. This theoretical role of parents, clear in sociological theory, finds its counterpart in psychological theory as well. When Freud (Macionis, 2005) talks of the id of his three part model of personality, which also includes the ego and superego, he has the parents in mind. He explains that the id represents the human being's basic drives which almost always demand immediate satisfaction. The id is present at birth and it makes the newborn demand attention, which the parents must give. Erikson (1963) talks about dependable caregivers for children, which include parents. These caregivers give the child a sense of trust and security, or not. As the child grows older, the sense of security from the caregiver prompts the child to explore his or her environment. When Chodorow talks about femininity and masculinity developed by children, she involves parents, particularly mothers, in the discussion (Cahill, 2007). She explains that each child develops masculine or feminine characteristics due to the fact that women are primarily responsible for child care. Mothers feel close to their infants but they identify more closely with their daughters, due to the fact that they are the same sex. They encourage their sons to develop a separate identity from them at an early age. Gilligan (Gilligan, 1990) focused on gender and how it is guided by social behavior. The social behavior that we first encounter is our relationship with our parents. In that sense Gilligan is saying that our gender behavior is

guided by our parents. Parents have a huge impact on socialization. The social class of the family plays a role in determining which qualities the parents will value most. Kohn (Kohn, 1977) states that people of lower social standing usually have limited education and perform routine, supervised jobs. They believe their children will hold these same jobs so they encourage obedience. On the other hand, parents who have more schooling and have jobs that usually involve imagination and creativity will try to encourage these traits in their children. Middle-class parents usually provide leisure activities, such as sports and travel. Kohn finds that these activities represent important cultural capital that will advance learning in these children and give them confidence that they will succeed later in life.

I began my exploration into which qualities parents most value in their children. The first few studies I read by Alwin (Alwin, 1988 & 1989) found that parents, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, desired obedient children almost more than anything else. This could have reflected the fact that white collar jobs were relatively few in number in the United States, still awaiting the increase which was, until recently, almost continual during the twentieth century (e.g., Macionis, 2007: 290). Alwin focused his studies on different people, such as different social classes, different races, and different religions. He found what parents desired most greatly from their child differed from group to group but that, over time, the desire for obedient children declined during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Alwin also seemed to find that parents wanted more autonomy, self-thinking, from their child, as the century progressed. In the first section of the paper I will look at

other people's work in this area and see what they have found. I will divide this discussion into sections each of which will include different variables that have been found to play a role in what parents want in their children. I will then go on to tell you about my methodology and how I have measured each of several variables necessary for this study. I will then tell you the results of my study. In my discussion I will talk about my findings and offer a theoretical perspective on my findings.

### **Time Period & Attitudes towards Obedience & Autonomy**

In an (1988) article "From Obedience to Autonomy: Changes in Traits Desired in Children, 1924-1978," Duane F. Alwin compares, among other things, the findings of the Lynd Middletown study (Lynd, 1929) to a 1978 replication of the study by Caplow et al. (1982). Alwin investigates the changes in responses to the Lynd's questions over this time period. In 1929 Lynds asked a sample of Muncie women residents (N=141) to rate the characteristics presented to them according to their importance in training their children. They also asked the women to rate the characteristics in terms of how they think their mothers would have rated them some thirty years earlier. In 1978 Caplow, Bahr, and Chadwick asked another sample of Muncie women (N=333) similar questions, including the supposed ratings of their mothers. Some of these results were reported by Caplow and Chadwick (1979:382-383), but the data had not been systematically analyzed as indicators of social change.

Between the years 1924-1978 Alwin finds substantial change in parental values among members of both business and working classes. Strict obedience and loyalty to church were traits that were of the highest of importance in Lynds' 1924 sample. The percentage saying obedience is the most desirable characteristic shifted from 45% in 1924 to 22% in 1978. The percentage showing loyalty to church as being the most desirable characteristic declined from 50% in 1924 to 22% in 1978. In 1978 Alwin found that the most important traits desired were independence and tolerance. The percentage saying independence is the most desired trait rose from 25% in 1924 to 76% in 1978. The percentage favoring tolerance also rose from 6% in 1924 to 47% in 1978. Alwin concluded from these findings that there had been a shift from parents valuing obedience in their children to a valuing of autonomy.

The fact that Middleton women in 1924 had believed that their mothers were even more obedience-oriented, and less independence-oriented, than they themselves were suggested to Alwin that the shift from an obedience to an authority orientation may have begun even before the 1920s.

Alwin felt that there were some general plausible reasons for these changes. Among them was the changing process towards modernization within technology and social organization. The growth of organizational roles requires more education. This contributes to the need for more independence and autonomy. Alwin seems to hark back to Whyte's (Whyte, 1956) observations about the rise of the "organization man" in this speculation. The previous need



for obedience is no longer pressing because it will not play a helpful role in learning new technology.

The surveys done between the two sets of Middletown women indicated substantial change in parental values over the fifty years studied. Alwin found that these changes are in the general direction of emphasizing less obedience to the family and church and encouraging greater individual independence and responsibility.

In a 1989 article, "Changes in Qualities Valued in Children in the United States, 1964-1984," Duane F. Alwin looked at changes that had occurred over the previous two decades in parental assessments of qualities valued in children. He did so by examining data of eight National Opinion Research Center (NORC) surveys. Alwin found that since 1964 there seemed to have been still greater preference for autonomy and lesser preferences for conformity in children. He offered many different reasons for this change, one of them again being compositional changes in society. This refers to changes in the distribution of educational and occupational positions, again favoring white-collar work.

Alwin suggests that over the past several decades the relationship between parents and children changed dramatically. He believes that parents began showing more affection and greater attention to their children. Children were gradually seen as valuable resources to be cherished rather than just being left to develop on their own. The eight NORC surveys analyzed in this article show evidence of parents desiring more autonomy characteristics in their children and fewer obedience characteristics.

Based on Alwin's articles and the logic of his explanation I expected to find:

1. As time has gone on since the 1980's, there will have been continued declines in parental preferences for obedience in their children.
2. As time has gone on since the 1980's, there will have been continued increase in parental preference for autonomy in their children.

### **Social Class**

In Melvin Kohn's 1976 article, "Social Class and Parental Values: Another Confirmation of the Relationship," Kohn, like Alwin, compares the Lynds 1929 Middletown study to later data: this time from the 1973 NORC study (Kohn, 1969). In the 1973 study Kohn looked at both fathers and mothers. Kohn found that there was a correlation between social class and parental desired characteristics of children. For instance he found that in both studies the higher the social class the more likely the parents were to value things such as responsibility or good sense and sound judgment, things related to autonomy, rather than being obedient to parents or being honest, things related to obedience. He also found that the lower the social class the more interested parents were to value good manners and being neat and clean, obedience-based characteristics, rather than having self-control or being considerate of others, autonomy-based characteristics.

Based on Kohn's study, and subsequent work, I expect to find that:

3. The higher the social class the less likely parents are to value obedience in their children and the more likely they are to value autonomy or self-direction.

## **Age**

In Alwin's 1989 article that we looked at earlier, he focuses in on cohorts in respect to change attitudes towards desirable characteristics in children. He finds that, within cohorts, there are considerable changes between 1964 and the mid-1970's and less obvious change occurring into the 1980's. Alwin finds considerable variation by cohort with regard to whether people value obedience or autonomy. He finds that older cohorts, in general, have valued obedience more than younger people.

Based on these findings, I hypothesize that:

4. The older people are, the more likely they are to value obedience in their children no matter the time period.

## **Religion**

In Alwin's 1989 article he looks at religion's role when it comes to parental preferences. When he looked at cohorts he found that "change was occurring more strongly into the 1980s among the cohorts born in 1930-1939 and 1940-1949 especially among those persons of Catholic origins" (Alwin, 1989: 224). If you were to look at the cohort differences in the indicator "obeys parents well" you would find a difference in the intercohort patterns for Catholics and Protestants. This evidence suggests that the youngest cohorts of Catholics have

less preference for obedience than is true of members of cohorts born earlier. It also suggests that the youngest cohorts of Protestants prefer obedience more than young Catholics.

In a 2005 article, “Who Values the Obedient Child Now? The Religious Factor in Adult Values for Children, 1986-2002,” Starks and Robinson analyzed General Social Survey (GSS) from 1986 to 2002. They looked at whether Evangelical Protestants were more likely to value obedience in children over autonomy, and whether Catholics have become less likely to do so. They didn’t find any change among Catholics but they did find “a shift toward increasing valuation of obedience over autonomy among Evangelicals who attend church frequently” (Starks & Robinson, 2005: 344). They found that Catholics are no longer moving in the direction of greater valuation of autonomy. With Catholics, and all Americans, they found that older and younger cohorts scored lower on autonomy than the cohorts in the 1950s. For Evangelical Protestants they found that the valuation of autonomy increased dramatically in 2002. Using multivariate regression, and controlling for socio-demographic variables, they found that, “Evangelical Protestants and members of Black Protestant denominations are less likely to value autonomy in children than are Catholics, Mainline protestants, and people with no religious affiliation” (Starks Robinson, 2005: 356).

In this article they looked at things such as fundamentalism and church attendance, finding that both were positively associated with wanting children to be obedient and negatively associated with wanting children to be autonomous. Based on what I’ve read I hypothesize that:

5. People who are religious fundamentalists are more likely than others to value obedience and less likely to value autonomy.
6. People who attend church more frequently are more likely than others to value obedience and less likely to value autonomy.

## **Methodology**

This research uses data from General Social Survey (GSS) that was conducted by the National Opinion Research Center annually after 1972 except for the years 1979, 1981, and 1992, until 1994. Since 1994 the surveys have been conducted every other year. The GSS covers areas such as religion, family relations, and socioeconomic status. I focus in this paper on the changes toward parental attitudes in children between 1986 and 2006, effectively updating Alwin's (1989) study that had examined change between 1964 and 1984.

## **Measuring Parental Attitudes**

Every year since 1972 the GSS has asked respondents to rank the five desirable qualities of children. These qualities are: to think for oneself, obey parents, work hard, help others, and to be well liked or popular. I've used the rankings given to the qualities of obedience and thinking for oneself as my main dependent variables in this study. Because I am using ranking, the lower the score in a variable, say obedience, the more highly obedience is valued.

## **Independent Variables**

The independent variables I used in this study are: year, age of respondent, respondent's sex, race, whether s/he is self-employed or works for someone, highest level of education of respondent, frequency of church attendance, degree of religious fundamentalism, and occupational prestige.

## **Gender**

Starks and Robinson (2005) found that women are more likely than men to value autonomy in children and less likely to value obedience. The GSS survey asked respondents to declare their sex by saying they were a male (coded 1) or a female (coded 2). I used this in my research to see if what Starks and Robinson found is still true today.

## **Year**

I measured Time Period in terms of the year in which the survey was taken. The years were 1986-2006. Alwin brings us up to the year 1984 in his 1989 study. I wanted to see if the trends he identified persisted after 1986. The years 1986 to 1991 are all included. There was GSS in 1993 and there have been ones in even numbered years since 1994.

## **Age**

The age of respondents was measured from 18-89 in each GSS survey. Alwin found that a preference for obedience increased with age and a preference for autonomy decreased with age.

## **Social Class**

For social class I focused on the respondent's occupational prestige and education. Occupational prestige was measured in terms of a ranking from 17-86, with higher ranks indicating occupations with more prestige, at least as perceived by U. S. respondents in 1980. The highest year of school completed ranged from 0 to 20 years. To obtain a measure of social class, I multiplied the years a person had been in school by 4 then added the product to the prestige score associated with his or her occupation.

## **Fundamentalist**

I looked at the rankings of how fundamentalist or liberal the respondent's religion is. Respondents classify themselves as fundamentalist (coded 1), moderate (coded 2), or liberal (coded 3). I expected from Alwin's (1989) study and the Starks and Robinson (2005) study that self-classified liberals would be less likely to value obedience and more likely to value autonomy than self-classified fundamentalists.

## **Religious Attendance**

The respondents were asked how often they attended religious services. The answers were coded according to this ranking: 0= never, 1= less than once a year, 2= once a year, 3= several times a year, 4= once a month, 5= 2-3 times a month, 6= nearly every week, 7= every week, 8= more than once a week. Based on Alwin's (1989) and Starks & Robinson's (2005) studies, I expected church attendance to be positively associated with valuing obedience in children and negatively associated with valuing autonomy.

## **Race**

Starks and Robinson (2005) found that African Americans were more likely than others to value obedience and less likely to value autonomy. So I have included a dichotomous variable for race where 1= African Americans 0= other.

## **Working for Self**

Starks and Robinson (2005) looked at a Kohn and Schooler (1969, *American Sociological Review*, 34: 659-78) study which looked at social class and parental values for children. They found that parents with high educations and jobs that require self-directed work valued autonomy in children more than other parents. Parents with less education and jobs that require strict conformity valued conformity more and autonomy less. Starks and Robinson found that self-employment had no effect on values for children, but I decided to investigate the association between self-employment and the wish that children be obedient or



autonomous with a new set of data. The GSS asked respondents whether they worked for themselves (coded 1) or worked for someone else (coded 2).

## Results

I have used the aforementioned variables to see if the trends by Alwin and others have continued through 2006. Table 1 indicates there continued to be decrease over time in the value of “obedience” between 1986 and 2006. With the value of obedience having an average ranking of 2.94 among respondents in 1986 and an average ranking of 3.19 in 2006, this trend has continued over time.

For the variable “thinking for oneself” the change has not been significant. Where it does exist, I find evidence that the trend towards autonomy has actually reversed itself. In 1986, for instance, the value of “thinking for oneself” received an average ranking of 2.01, while in 2006, it received an average ranking of 2.12. In other words, the degree to which parents valued “thinking for oneself” declined a little, though not significantly, for GSS respondents over the time period of the study. It is a non-significant reversal.

(Table 1 about here)

Table 2 shows the correlation of my two preference variables and the independent variables of concern. It shows that the valuing of “obedience” in children is modestly associated with social class, religion fundamentalism, church attendance, race and age of the respondent. Year of survey ( $r = .05$ ), gender ( $r = .02$ ), and working for oneself ( $r = -.02$ ) are very weakly associated with valuing

“obedience.” To break down the analysis a little more: as the age of the respondent goes up so does their likelihood of valuing “obedience” ( $r = -.14$ ). Women are slightly less likely than men to value “obedience” ( $r = .02$ ). African Americans are more likely to value “obedience” than others ( $r = -.18$ ). The more a person attends church the more likely they will be to value “obedience” ( $r = -.14$ ). The more liberal the person’s religious beliefs, the less likely they are to value “obedience” ( $r = .20$ ). The higher the social class, the less likely respondents are to value “obedience” ( $r = .27$ ). If the person works for themselves, s/he is actually a little more likely to value “obedience” than others ( $r = -.02$ ).

(Table 2 about here)

Table 2 shows that the valuing of “thinking for oneself” is modestly associated with gender ( $r = -.10$ ), race ( $r = .08$ ), fundamentalism ( $r = -.13$ ), and social class ( $r = -.26$ ). Year of survey ( $r = .01$ ), age of respondent ( $r = .05$ ), working for self ( $r = .00$ ), and church attendance ( $r = .06$ ) are very weakly associated with valuing “thinking for oneself.” To break down the analysis more: the more liberal the respondent’s religious beliefs, the more likely she/he is to value “thinking for oneself” ( $r = -.13$ ). Females value “thinking for oneself” more than males ( $r = -.10$ ). The higher the social class, the more likely a respondent is to value “thinking for oneself” ( $r = -.26$ ). African Americans are less likely to value “thinking for oneself” than people of other races ( $r = .08$ ). As the age of the respondent goes up, s/he is less likely to value “thinking for oneself” than other people ( $r = .05$ ). If the respondent doesn’t attend church often, she or he is slightly

more likely to value “thinking for oneself” than others ( $r = .06$ ). It doesn’t matter if the person is self-employed or works for someone else; there is no correlation between being self-employed and valuing “thinking for oneself” in ones children ( $r = .00$ ).

In Table 3 I look, through multiple regression analysis, at the association between valuing “obedience” and “thinking for oneself” in one’s children, on the one hand, and each independent variable, when all other independent variables are controlled for. Let’s look at the beta values in that table. The betas give us an indication of the correlation between my main two dependent variables and each independent variable when all other independent variables are held constant.

When I looked at “age”, and controlled all other variables, I found that age is significantly related to “obedience” (Beta=  $-.10$ ). As a person’s age goes up, his or her likelihood of valuing “obedience” goes up. For this reason, I would suspect that as age goes up, respondents would be less likely to value “thinking for oneself.” I found this to be true, but “age” does not have a significant relationship to “thinking for oneself” (Beta=  $.02$ ). When I focused on “gender” and controlled all other independent variables, I found that if you were a woman you were still more likely to value “obedience” (Beta= $.05$ ) than a man. I also found that women are more likely to value “thinking for oneself” than men (Beta=  $-.12$ ). When I looked at “race” I found that it is significantly related to “obedience.” African Americans are more likely to value obedience (Beta=  $-.11$ ) than other people. I found no association between “race” and “thinking for oneself” (Beta=

.02). When I focused on the independent variable religious “fundamentalism,” I found that the more religiously liberal you are, the less likely you are to value “obedience” (Beta= .09). I also found that the more liberal you are, the more likely you are to value “thinking for oneself” (Beta= -.06). When focusing on “church attendance,” I found that the more you attend church, the more likely you are to value obedience (Beta= .08). The more you attend church, the less likely you are to value “thinking for oneself” (Beta= -.18). There is a significant relationship between “social class” and “obedience” and “thinking for oneself.” The higher your social class, the less likely you are not to value obedience (Beta= -.25) and the more likely you are to value “thinking for oneself” (Beta= .22). There is no significant relationship with either dependent variable and “working for self.” With “obedience,” the Beta is -.00 and, with “thinking for oneself,” the Beta is -.06.

(Table 3 about here)

## **Discussion**

The twenty year period between 1986 and 2006 apparently entailed a very modest continuation of the century-long trend towards a decreased valuing of children’s obedience in American parents and a discontinuation of the trend towards the valuing of children’s autonomy. Why might this be? Well it might be due to the fact that there were competing values against which the GSS respondents ranked “obedience” and “thinking for oneself,” values whose ranking may have changed dramatically. You may recall that “obedience” and “thinking

for oneself” were ranked against three other values. These were: working hard, helping others, and being popular. One or more of these competing values may have changed its (their) rank(s) so much that it or they may overwhelm, indeed dictate, what’s been going on in the values of “obedience” and “thinking for oneself.” In fact of these alternative values being popular has become less popular to respondents. The other two, working hard and helping others, have become more popular.

(Table 4 about here)

From Table 4 we can see that “working hard” moved up in the rankings dramatically from 2.72 in 1986 to 2.39 in 2006. If “working hard” hadn’t dramatically changed, then the values of either “obedience” or “thinking for oneself,” particularly the latter, might have had more chance to move up in rank. There are reasons why the respondents were more prone to choose “working hard” than, say, “thinking for oneself.” Perhaps it could be due to the fact that the average person’s “real” wage in the economy hasn’t improved much since the 80’s, making the parents themselves work harder and longer hours. Bernstein and Mishel (Bernstein, Mishel, 2007) found that wage growth has been very unequal. Higher-wage workers have gained the most ground. Since 2000 the median wage has gone up 3% overall and hasn’t grown since 2003 at all. The higher wage group wages went up 9%, making the wide gap. There has been a downturn for middle and low-wage workers in their “real” wage. GSS respondents are more likely to be part of the middle- and low-wage group than in

the higher-wage group and they undoubtedly believe that in order to survive they must work hard, sometimes working more than one job to get by. This quality, working hard, is likely to be a valued one to them due to the circumstances that they find themselves in. Working hard is a value that, at this point, they may feel is important for their children to have.

It is harder to say why the value of “helping others” has become slightly more popular, but it has. Its average ranking, as Table 4 shows, has moved from 2.73 in 1986 to 2.56 in 2006. People do seem to be reaching out to others more often than before, however, and charities say their needs are increasing. Connie Cone Sexton (The Arizona Republic, 2005) tells of how services for charities are soaring due to the fact that more people are losing their jobs and homes. The organization, “Season for Sharing’s,” requests for funds are up nearly \$500,000, a 9.4 percent increase from 2007. The amount of food requests they are unable to fill is up to 60 percent. Donors from last year are now looking for donations themselves. The need for helping others is increasing, which may be the reason why parents feel this is a valuable quality for their children to have. The economy is worse than it was when they were growing up. The average respondent realizes this and may feel that people need to help others and receive help from others in order to survive the declining economy.

## **Conclusion**

From Alwin (1988) we learn that the most important traits parents desired in 1978 were independence and tolerance. Alwin found that between 1924 and

1978 there was a trend away from valuing obedience in children among American parents and that parents were now valuing autonomy much more. Alwin (1989) examined these trends using data from 1964 to 1984 and found that there was even more support for their presence. Based on these articles I hypothesized that since the 1980s there will have been continued declines in parental preferences for obedience in their children and there will have been continued increases in parental preferences for autonomy in their children. I have found, in fact, that there seems to be an ending to the major trends that Alwin had found. I found that “obedience” did indeed continue to decrease in popularity over time but that this trend had slowed considerably in recent decades. The trend towards valuing “thinking for oneself” has actually reversed itself and the value has become slightly less popular over time.

Kohn (1976) found a correlation between social class and parental desired characteristics of children. Through his studies he showed that the higher the social class, the more likely the parents were to value autonomy over obedience. I hypothesized that the higher the social class of the respondent the less likely they would value obedience and the more likely they would be to value autonomy. My findings confirm this hypothesis. My findings suggest strong support for the view that people who enjoy higher social status value “obedience” less in their children, than people in lower class, no matter the time period, and value “thinking for oneself” more. This is true as a zero-order correlation and when several other variables associated with parental attitudes are controlled. My findings accord with consistent findings in the literature that higher social

class standing is associated with a greater sense of personal agency, a sense that one no doubt is eager to pass on to one's children (e.g., Gilbert, 1997; Gilbert 2000; Henslin, 2001; Kahl and Gilbert, 1993; Mills, 1956).

Alwin (1989) finds that older cohorts, in general, have valued "obedience" more than younger people. I hypothesized that the older people are the more likely they would be to value obedience no matter the time period. My findings support the view that as the age of the respondent goes up so does their likelihood of valuing "obedience," and the less likely they will be to value "thinking for oneself." I also found that as a person's age goes up their likelihood of valuing "obedience" goes up even when several other variables associated with parental attitudes are controlled. For this reason I guessed that as their age goes up they would be less likely to value "thinking for oneself." I found this to be true, even though the relationship between age and valuing "thinking for oneself" is not a significant one.

Starks and Robinson (2005) and Alwin (1989) found different patterns for parental values for Catholics and Protestants. Starks and Robinson found that for Protestants the value of autonomy increased dramatically in 2002 and that Catholics are no longer moving in the direction of greater valuation of autonomy. I hypothesized that people who were religious fundamentalists would be more likely to value obedience and less likely to value autonomy and that people who are more likely to attend church would be more likely to value obedience and less likely to value autonomy. My findings suggest that this is true. The more liberal a person's religious beliefs, the less likely they are to value "obedience" and the



more likely they would be to value “thinking for oneself.” I also found that the more a person attends church, the more likely they will be to value “obedience” and that if the respondent doesn’t attend church often they are more likely to value “thinking for oneself.” My findings affirm the possibility that conservative religious beliefs may be associated with an acceptance of what life brings, a view that is not inconsistent with Marx’s contention that religion (at least its most conservative versions) can be an “opiate of the masses” (Marx, 1959 [1843]).

Starks and Robinson (2005) found that women are more likely than men to value autonomy in their children. I found that women are slightly less likely than men to value “obedience” and more likely to value “thinking for oneself.” When other variables related with parental values are controlled, I found that women are more likely than men to value “obedience” and more likely to value “thinking for oneself” (Beta= -.12). Starks and Robinson (2005) also found that African Americans were more likely than others to value obedience. My findings agree with this also, showing that African Americans are less likely to value “thinking for oneself” than other groups. I found “race” to be significantly related to “obedience,” that African Americans are more likely to value “obedience.” I found no association between “race” and “thinking for oneself,” perhaps suggesting that there has been a transformation in African American attitudes towards their children that involves a belief that their children can enjoy the kinds of self-directed lives that others in America believe their children can have.

Starks and Robinson (2005) reported that Kohn and Schooler (1969) found that parents with less education and jobs that require conformity valued

autonomy less and obedience more and that parents with high education and self-directed jobs valued autonomy in children more than obedience. My findings suggest that if people work for themselves, in a more self-directed job, then they are more likely to value “obedience” and there is no correlation when it comes to “thinking for oneself.” This finding contradicts the findings of Kohn and Schooler. When other variables associated with parental attitudes were controlled, there was no relationship found with either dependent variable and “working for self.” It is possible, of course, that working for oneself these days no longer means that one is leading the life of a relatively autonomous entrepreneur, but that, more and more, it means living the life of someone who contracts work from those who essentially defines ones direction.

There may be reasons as to why the major trends towards valuing autonomy and away from valuing obedience in children have ceased, assuming that these trends haven’t been obscured by the increased valuing of “hard work,” a possibility addressed in the discussion section above. It could be due in part to the changing nature of the American economy. Alwin found that autonomy is more valued in a more post-industrial society and obedience is less valued in jobs in post-industrial society, a society filled with high-paying white-collared jobs. Perhaps the economy is no longer turning into the kind conceptualized as post-industrial by Alwin. Perhaps the rising unemployment rate, as well as increasing dependence in low-paying service jobs (think Walmart), is forcing people to think largely in terms of simply finding jobs and keeping them. Since there aren’t many jobs available, people accept whatever jobs they get offered, even if they may

not enjoy them. People who are in these types of situations may believe that working hard is a more important value to instill in their children than autonomy, at least for now. Joseph Verrengia (2005) wrote an article in the Boston Globe where he talks about a study done at UCLA. They focused on 32 Los Angeles families to see how families are acting in working America. They found that parents and children are living apart at least five days a week. The biggest change in family dynamics is the fact that mothers are now working outside the home. The fact that both parents are now working may be another reason why “working hard” is a popular variable. Adler and Adler (2005) have found that due to more women in the working force more children are being placed in afterschool activities, which are usually adult-organized activities. These activities steer children to adult pre-set goals, valuing obedience, discipline, and seriousness. These after school activities are robbing children of play that is done for fun rather than instrumental purposes. This may be another reason why “working hard” seems like it should be valued. Children are learning about adult activities earlier in age, and are beginning to become aware of hard work, rather than fun work.

Liberation movements may have played a role in the trends’ end as well. It is possible that the force of the women’s and civil rights movements through the time of Alwin’s studies in the late 1980s compelled all people to want greater autonomy, less adherence to tradition, in their children. By the early 1990s, however, as Susan Faludi (1991) has observed, many people felt that legal rights had effectively been won by various minority groups, even to the

extent that many women felt there was no longer a need for an Equal Rights Amendment. It is possible that such a feeling, that equal rights have already been won, breeds a sense of complacency and leads people to want things other than autonomy for their children. Perhaps this is even why people put a higher priority on their children working hard than they have before—that, given that equality has already been achieved, they've reverted to the deeply-embedded American value of getting ahead.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A substantial limitation of my study is that even my fullest regression models explain only 13% of the variance in people's desire for "obedience" in their children and 9% of the variance in people's desire that their children think for themselves. In other words, even though variables like social class and religiosity do explain some variance in these desirable qualities in children, they don't begin to explain all of the variance in such qualities. One can easily imagine that certain variables, unmeasured in surveys like the General Social Survey--like respondents' own early socialization experiences, may well affect such attitudes. One can also imagine that certain variables that are measured—like the age of the children in question—affect them as well. But the inclusion of such variables will have to wait for a future day.

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**Table 1. Average Rankings of Obedience and Thinking for Oneself year 1986-2006.**

	<b>Obedience</b>	<b>Thinking for Oneself</b>
<b>1986</b>	<b>2.94</b>	<b>2.01</b>
<b>1987</b>	<b>3.03</b>	<b>2.05</b>
<b>1988</b>	<b>3.05</b>	<b>2.09</b>



1989	3.15	2.00
1990	3.18	2.04
1991	3.15	2.07
1993	3.13	2.05
1994	3.16	1.99
1996	3.15	2.06
1998	3.17	2.06
2000	3.11	2.08
2002	3.30	2.07
2004	3.30	2.14
2006	3.19	2.12
Significant	P < .001	P > .05
of differences		
by year		

**Table 2. Correlations of the Value of “Obedience” and “Thinking for Oneself” With Major Independent Variables**

Independent Variables	Obedience	Thinking for Oneself
Year	.05	.01
Age	-.14	.05

<b>Gender*</b>	<b>.02</b>	<b>-.10</b>
<b>Race**</b>	<b>-.18</b>	<b>.08</b>
<b>Working for Self***</b>	<b>-.02</b>	<b>.00</b>
<b>Fundamentalism****</b>	<b>.20</b>	<b>-.13</b>
<b>Church Attendance</b>	<b>-.14</b>	<b>.06</b>
<b>Social Class</b>	<b>.27</b>	<b>-.26</b>

**Table 3. Regression of the Values of “Obedience” and “Thinking for Oneself” On Major Independent Variables  
(Betas)**

<b><i>Independent Variables</i></b>	<b>Obedience</b>	<b>Thinking for Oneself</b>
<b>Year of Survey</b>	<b>.02</b>	<b>.02</b>

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\* Gender: Male=1 Female=2

\*\* Race: 0=others 1=African Americans

\*\*\* Working for Self: 1=Work for self 2=Work for someone else

\*\*\*\* Fundamentalism: 1=Fundamentalist; 2=Moderate; 3=Liberal

<b>Age</b>	<b>-.10<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>.02</b>
<b>Gender</b>	<b>.05<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>-.12<sup>†</sup></b>
<b>Race</b>	<b>-.11<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>.02</b>
<b>Working for Self</b>	<b>-.02</b>	<b>-.00</b>
<b>Fundamentalism</b>	<b>.09<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>-.06<sup>†</sup></b>
<b>Church Attendance</b>	<b>-.12<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>.08<sup>†</sup></b>
<b>Social Class</b>	<b>.22<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>-.25<sup>†</sup></b>

**N= 4,860**

**N=4,860**

**R-Squared= .13**

**R-Squared= .0**

**Table 4. Variables that Changed Dramatically Based on the Means**

<b>Year</b>	<b>To Work Hard</b>	<b>To Help Others</b>	<b>To Be Well Liked or Popular</b>
<b>1986</b>	<b>2.72</b>	<b>2.73</b>	<b>4.60</b>

<sup>†</sup> Indicates significance

Notes: Same as in Table 2 for variable descriptions

<b>1987</b>	<b>2.64</b>	<b>2.76</b>	<b>4.52</b>
<b>1988</b>	<b>2.62</b>	<b>2.71</b>	<b>4.53</b>
<b>1989</b>	<b>2.57</b>	<b>2.69</b>	<b>4.58</b>
<b>1990</b>	<b>2.52</b>	<b>2.68</b>	<b>4.59</b>
<b>1991</b>	<b>2.53</b>	<b>2.65</b>	<b>4.61</b>
<b>1993</b>	<b>2.52</b>	<b>2.69</b>	<b>4.62</b>
<b>1994</b>	<b>2.44</b>	<b>2.72</b>	<b>4.68</b>
<b>1996</b>	<b>2.43</b>	<b>2.68</b>	<b>4.67</b>
<b>1998</b>	<b>2.43</b>	<b>2.67</b>	<b>4.67</b>
<b>2000</b>	<b>2.47</b>	<b>2.65</b>	<b>4.69</b>
<b>2002</b>	<b>2.34</b>	<b>2.61</b>	<b>4.69</b>
<b>2004</b>	<b>2.37</b>	<b>2.52</b>	<b>4.67</b>
<b>2006</b>	<b>2.39</b>	<b>2.56</b>	<b>4.74</b>

**N=17,771**

**N=17,788**

**N=17,771**