Children's fears and future prospects

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Abstract : This paper outlines the findings of a consumer survey conducted in 1996 and 2001 by the University of Bonn, Germany, across 15 European countries. The survey involved a sample of 3,300 respondents in 1996 and around 11,000 respondents in 2001, throughout all 15 EU countries. Children and adolescents, between the ages of 10 and 17, were surveyed about their consumption habits and their attitudes towards the environment. The paper outlines the key findings on "Children's fears and future prospects".

Children are exposed to a great mass of information, not only derived from the media but also from what they experience directly in their everyday-life. Some of this information translates into worries that adopt a clearer (more realistic) form when children become adolescents, as they might be easily involved in those events, and the understanding of the processes that may cause or continue them is deeper.

Today's children and adolescents are under more pressure, since the social/political/economical spectrum is constantly changing. Change produces anxiety, fear of what will result from these transformations, as it implies that the social order will be reorganized.

This paper reports on a long term comparative study among children and adolescents throughout the European Union, analyzed by country, age group and gender. It draws different preoccupations of young generations and consequent future expectations.

It concludes by considering the influence of social and political organizations, as well as the family, on children and adolescents, as these might help to sustain a positive attitude towards various future events.

Key Words : Fears, environmental damage, pollution, future expectations, environmentally-conscious behaviour

I. Introduction

Many people share an interest in children's fears and wonder how adolescents see their future role in society. This is evident from the amount of coverage given by the media to surveys and studies on the subject. Politicians also seem more than keen to find out how optimistic adolescents feel about their future. This is because aspirations are not just plucked out of thin air, with no bearing on future trends and events. They are concrete expectations. They will have a tangible influence on our future. As early as 1981, the Shell Youth Report identified a correlation between adolescent's picture of what the future holds and the way they lead their lives, their blueprint for living, what they enjoy doing and their long term orientation in life (Deutsche Shell 2002).

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Empirical social studies always struggle to provide an accurate and realistic picture of the sample they are studying. The usual method is to include as many people as possible in the sample and keep data pure so that results are "representative".

Another way to solve the problem is to take measurements on a multi-country basis, even if few people choose this alternative (for expense reasons). Ideally countries should be similar to one another to allow comparisons to be made between socio-cultural and economic factors. The survey outlined in this paper involved 15 EU countries, providing a broad overview of key cognitive and emotive attitudinal patterns among adolescents. Given the on-going high level of significant economic and social turmoil, it can provide important pointers on issues and questions that occupy young people - as well as indicate the shape of things to come.

II. Repeat of a European study

In 2001, the Department of Economic Sociology at the University of Bonn repeated a 1996 quantitative survey among children and adolescents across Europe. Both surveys looked at consumer behaviour and environmental attitudes. The study from 2001 involved a total of around 11,000 questionnaires. One of the issues examined by the survey was "fears and future prospects". As well as highlighting differences and similarities between 15 countries, this European study may provide useful insights into the importance attached to people's fears. Interestingly, some cultures display more anxiety than others. One of the first to conclude this was *Emile Durkheim* in 1897, who believed the level of anxiety harboured by people varies from country to country. This hypothesis was also corroborated by *Hofstede* in his cultural study (cf. Hofstede 1993, p. 134 ff).

As this is a long term study (the same survey was carried out in 1996), we have the opportunity to compare developments over a five year period.

III. Methods

1. Research format

This study is based on a quantitative survey conducted throughout the European Union. The overall aim of the study was to confirm a number of contextual and individual hypotheses. It was therefore carried out on a multi-level as well as an individual basis.

Data used to analyse findings comes from a long-term survey. To gather data, trend models were applied involving two measurements with a five year gap in between. The same variables were used on both occasions, with different respondents. In addition, as the age of respondents ranged from 10 to 17, both samples were based on a cohort design, using age cohorts from 1979 to 1986 (1996) and 1984 to 1991 (2001).

Data from the survey is thus almost exclusively time series data. This is because measurements were made using identical variables to those used 5 years earlier only with a different sample of respondents (cf Diekmann 1996, p 266 ff).

2. Sample recruitment

The overall sample population included all 10 to 17 year-old children and adolescents in full-time education. This sample population encompassed all 15 countries of the European Union.

As a basis for the study, we wrote to the same schools we addressed in the 1996 European survey. We then added addresses provided by diplomatic agencies, UNESCO, consumer bodies and some from internet sources. With the exception of Luxembourg and Portugal, we wrote to between 50 and 100 schools in almost every country, with a representative spread across each region.

One of the key issues in conducting studies is how representative the sample will be. This generally depends on how successfully a random sample or quota sample manages to reflect numbers in the overall population. As the main aim of this study was to confirm the hypothesis that different phenomena were linked, there was no point in taking a so-called representative sample. Our most important task in carrying out the survey was therefore to make sure that the data we gathered was sufficiently robust (cf also Diekmann 1995, p 368 ff).

3. Design of survey materials

The study was conducted on the basis of a standardised questionnaire designed to look like a brochure. The questionnaire contained 26 closed questions translated into each native language. It was kept relatively short to avoid respondent fatigue and enable children and adolescents to complete the survey in the course of one lesson so as not to take up too much teaching time. The highly standardised approach to questioning was adopted for two reasons: first, we had to minimise inaccuracies caused by language differences - all too common with open questions. Second, we felt respondents would fake fewer answers if the survey was carried out in a classroom by a fieldworker rather than outside school in an interview situation. Last, this survey method was attractive for cost reasons.

Given that the sample population encompassed a broad range of different education levels and cultures, we deliberately formulated the questions in simple, clear language.

Ⅳ. Results and Discussion

1. Ranking of fears

Linguists like to make a semantic distinction between being "scared" and having a "fear" of something. Being scared of or by something is more concrete, whereas fear (or anxiety or angst) tends to be generalised. In conducting this pan-European study we had to decide which definition to use so as to avoid colloquial connotations and overcome the difficulty posed by different languages (not all languages in the EU make the distinction between fear and being scared). We decided to label the phenomenon "fear". Children and adolescents had to rank their own fears with respect to seven different items. The fear items ranged from personal fears to fears of a political or social nature:

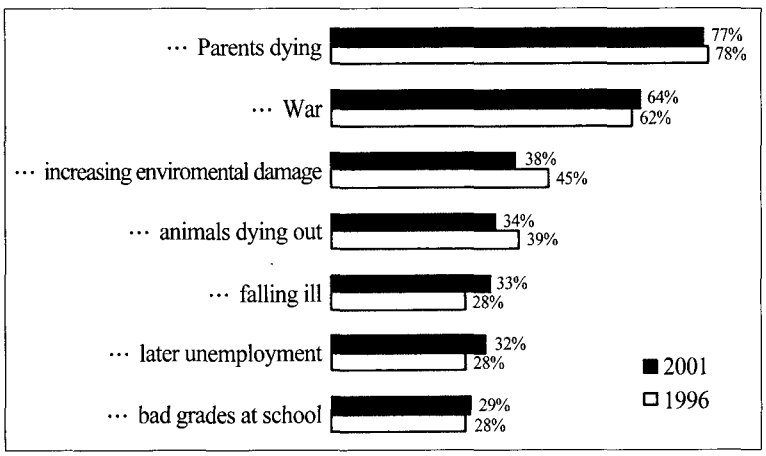
Personal	FEARS	Political-social
Death of a parent		War
Bad health		Increasing pollution
Bad grades at school		Animal extinction
		Unemployment

<Figure 1>

We selected scores for fairly realistic personal fears, such as the death of a parent, in order to have a benchmark for other factors such as pollution. Unfortunately, earlier studies (e.g. a study carried out by *R+V Versicherung* [the insurance provider]) sometimes overlooked this, perhaps over-inflating scores for pollution. An earlier psychological study found that from around the age of 10, children become particularly sensitive to animal extinction and suffer human plight less gladly, so we decided to complement "fear of rising environmental damage" with an item to do with "fear of animals dying out" (cf Szagun 1992).

<Figure 2> shows the average European ranking of fears. There is still a very clear tendency to put fear of losing a parent in first place. This was to be expected as at this age parents are usually the main reference person in a child's life. The latest 2001 *R+V study*, "*Children's fears*", included a similar item ("a fear that something really awful might happen to someone in your family"). This, too, received high scores. The only item to receive a higher score was fear of a sexual attack ("How anxious are you that there are more and more criminals doing nasty things to children"). One major cause for the importance attached to sex crime could be the amount of public attention it has attracted in recent years.

Second place on the European ranking went to children's fear of war. A study on enemies in general and their fear of atomic threats also showed these can feature prominently in their



<Figure 2> Fear of continuing environmental destruction

fears. Quite feasibly then, fear of war is so significant to children because it is part and parcel of their omnipresent worries on global destruction. Events in past years, such as the war in former Yugoslavia, the terrorist attacks of September 11th in the USA, and the ensuing war in Afghanistan, as well as stories from their grandparents' generation on the horrors of the Second World War, all contribute to this subliminal yet significant fear of war. The terrorist attacks of September 11th occurred in the middle of the survey period. It was interesting to take a first look at results at that time: immediately after the attack, fear of war hit a temporary high of 69 percent. It then went down within a matter of weeks, almost returning to the same level as before. By the time the United States finally embarked upon its war in Afghanistan the key part of the survey had already been completed, so it is not possible to draw conclusions on whether fear of war rose again at that point. There are marked differences between these results and the 2001 R+V Study. Fear of war became less significant: it slipped in the ranking of children's threats from third place in 1999 to sixth in 2001 (cf R+V-Infocenter 2001). These differences to the R+V Study on children's fears in 2001 are probably due to the younger sample. Respondents in the R+V Study were aged 8 to 14 whereas the EU study surveyed 10 to 17-year-olds. The current Trendletter 2004 from TNS Infratest, shows that currently the fear of terrorist attacks has again reached an important high among the German population - similar to the fear experienced in 2001 days after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, However, it should be considered that the difference between "Fear of war" and "Fear of Terrorism" is significant (cf. TNS Infratest, April 2004/II, Page.1). The current developments should be considered in the next follow-up study "Young consumers in Europe", and the formulation "Fear of war" substituted for the current, more up-to-date "Fear of Terrorist attacks".

In the EU study environmental fears follow close on the heels of the top two fears, ranking third and fourth. There has been a sharp fall in fears on this issue since 1996, in stark contrast to all other fears which have remained more or less stable. The Shell study from 2002, carried out in collaboration with TNS Infratest Social Research, analyzed among others the importance of environmental-conscious behaviour. These results correspond absolutely to those from the European study: the importance of environmental-conscious behaviour lies clearly behind the importance of "diligence and ambition", and quest for security. This may be due to the fact that in the current and future social situations adolescents will have to face increasing demands on efficiency and, at the same time, expose themselves to increasing risks (cf. 14. Shell Jugendstudie, 2002). In the R+V Study however, it was found that children are more fearful of environmental pollution. Again this was quite probably due to the somewhat younger sample. The EU Study showed a statistically higher sensitivity to environmental issues in the younger age group of 10 to 13-year-olds. There is widespread proof in the scientific literature that environmental awareness concerns are also dictated by emotional factors. But it seems there are variations in the extent to which fear/anxiety, anger and indignation occupy the emotions felt towards environmental concern (cf Szagun et al

1994, p 25ff). Most psychological and developmental studies to date have focused on how intensely children fear environmental pollution and its effects, making it possible to prove that children are worried about continuing environmental destruction. Some authors even suspect that children's worries about the environment have become a source of long term stress (cf Petri et al 1986; Unterbruner 1991).

However, as the TNS Trendletter from April 2004 shows, the fear of pollution in Germany is again playing an important role (cf. TNS Infratest Trendletter April 2004/II, S. 1). Presumably, children and young people are being influenced by this, and the fear of environmental damage has likewise risen within this population group.

Ranked five to seven were children's fears of becoming ill, unemployment later on in life and bad grades at school. The first two have risen sharply since 1996. Looking specifically at the data from Germany, it is interesting to see that the sharpest rise has been in "fear of unemployment". This has to have been caused by the amount of coverage given to the issue in politics and the media.

As the Shell - Study of Youth 2002 could verify, adolescents are conscious of the risk of unemployment due to the strong migration flow coming from poor countries, or from possible job losses, due to the transfer of production to countries with lower wages (cf. 14. Shell - Study of Youth, 2002). A great social opportunity to be prepared for this growing development and its resulting risks would be to achieve a better educational level.

As in 2001, *R+V Versicherung* carries out frequent studies on both children's fears and adult fears in Germany. There are a number of significant differences between the rankings of fears: adults are more anxious about the rising cost of living, the possibility of having to go into care at an old age and becoming ill. In this study, fear of unemployment does not feature until fifth place, one position after fear of worsening economy. Fears for the environment are relatively low down the list, in fifteenth place.

We have to ask ourselves why children are so worried about pollution when parents, who play a key role in their up-bringing, place much less emphasis on it. Psychological studies also observed that children and adolescents take a highly ethical stance on the environmental. A number of studies have been carried out into their "compassion for nature" and "caring for the ecology". They discovered that these factors play a central role in children's lives. Adults contrast to children in that they possess the cognitive tools to process things rationally or suppress them. This allows them to distance themselves from their fears. Children have yet to learn how to deal with fears, making them much more sensitive to potential threats. Failure to take children's fears seriously or to make knowledgeable suggestions may have the result of aggravating them. However, children's somewhat more ethical stance on the environment does seem to be closely related to the meaning psychologists give to the word "fear" (or "angst"). Children questioned more closely on their worst problems focus less on the environment (cf R+V-Infocenter 2001).

When we look at the picture across all 15 countries, we find significant differences. On

average, children across all 15 countries attach the same importance to both major fears ("fear of parents dying" and "fear of war") but they feel differently about environmental concerns. The findings of a psychological study carried out in 1994 - that children's fears focus on animals in particular (being harmed by pollution) - could not be fully confirmed in our study (cf Szagun et al 1994). There were not enough consistencies in the data to show that some countries placed global pollution high in the ranking and animal extinction lower, or vice versa. What we did find again though, is that children in the Netherlands are less worried about environmental damage compared to children in the rest of the EU. This trend is confirmed later when we look at the strength of environmental fears.

There are also some marked differences from country to country in fears about unemployment later in life. Countries where it features most prominently are Luxembourg, Germany, Italy, France and Greece. With the exception of Luxembourg, this closely reflects the actual situation in each country: Italy has the second highest rate of unemployment in Europe, Finland and France are third and Germany fourth. Unemployment among adults under the age of 25 is highest in Italy, followed by Spain, Finland, France and Belgium. The degree of coverage given to the subject in the media and the extent to which people talk about the issue has an influence on how much children in these countries worry about being unemployed (cf Federal Statistical Office 2001).

What is surprising about the findings is that Spanish children ranked their fear of unemployment later in life last but one. Even though the number of unemployed has fallen drastically since 1996, Spain still has the highest unemployment figures throughout the EU: 14 percent of adults and more than a quarter of all young adults under the age of 25 are without work. It seems that the children in the survey have come to accept the situation and see it as quite normal. One reason may be that people do not consider unemployment such a strong social threat when so many are affected - there is strength in solidarity in such a situation. (As the economic situation in Spain has improved remarkably since 1996, and in fact this effort has been recognized by the EU, the people might feel more optimistic, some hoping and others believing that this is a continuous trend).

Regarding gender differences, our own findings confirm the 1996 conclusions. On average, European girls are more worried than boys about war, becoming ill and losing a parent. Boys are more worried about doing badly at school and becoming unemployed later in life. The latter can probably be explained by the messages boys are still exposed to about the role of men in supporting the family.

When we look at age differences, younger children (10 to 13-year-olds) are more worried about their parents dying, pollution and war. As they become older they worry more about becoming ill and being unemployed themselves.

2. Strength of environmental fears

The 2001 survey found that environmental fears are now only of average importance compared to 1996. Whereas nearly three quarters of all children

surveyed in 1996 were extremely or very worried about the rising level of pollution, in 2001 it had gone down to just two thirds. There are tremendous differences across all 15 EU countries however. In the Netherlands barely one in three children is "somewhat" worried, or "not at all" worried about increasing environmental damage. We can only guess at the reasons why the Netherlands stands out in this way: the media tends to give less coverage to pollution and sometimes even trivialises it. The Dutch are fairly ardent followers of conventional production techniques, particularly with respect to farming.

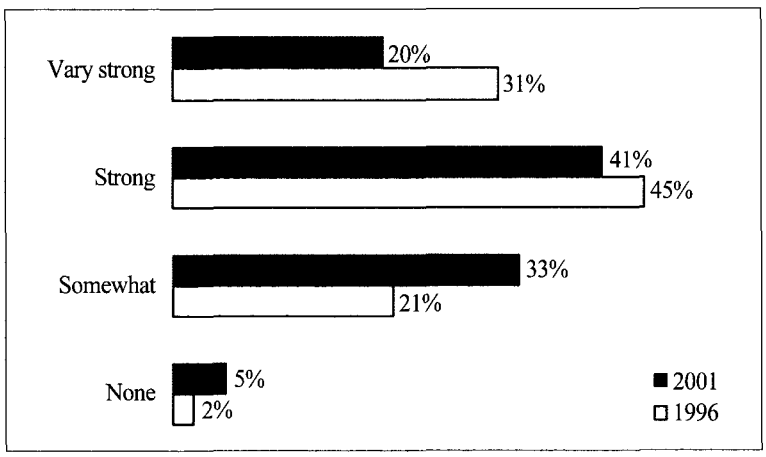
The fear of pollution is strongest in southern European countries, especially Portugal and Greece, but also Spain and Italy. This may be because large areas of these countries border the sea. Perhaps children here learn more about serious environmental incidents affecting coastal areas, making them more sensitive to the debate over pollution. Another reason may be that nature conservation is significant for income from tourism: ecological disasters have a direct influence on income and consequently a more tangible impact on people.

When we examined gender differences across the whole EU sample, we found statistical differences between girls and boys. On average, female respondents are more anxious about the continuing level of pollution than male respondents. There were also significant age differences: 10 to 13-year-olds are more worried than the older age group of 14 to 17-year-olds.

3. How they see the future

If we look at the numbers in <Figure 3> one of the first things we notice is that most children and adolescents surveyed believe that chemicals and technology will continue to destroy the environment. This is only a continuation of trends, as the picture was the same for respondents in the 1996 study. The 2000 Shell Report had slightly lower agreement scores for this statement. Overall, people have become more optimistic.

When we compare age groups, it is noticeable



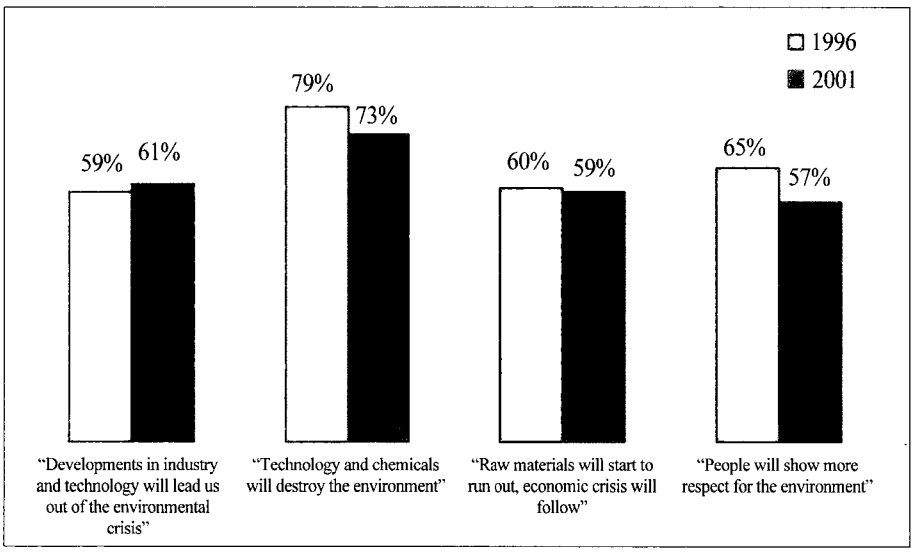
<Figure 3> Fear of rising environmental damage

that younger children (10 to 13-year-olds) are more optimistic than the older groups (14 to 17-year-olds).

The difference between girls' future perspectives and boys' was statistically significant. Girls are much more pessimistic about the future when it comes to destruction of the environment through chemicals and technology. Boys are more optimistic and think that developments made in industry and technology will bring us through the crisis.

Further, 61% of German children agree with the statement that there will be economic crisis and famine in the future as natural resources run out. Already in 1997, the Shell Youth Report came to the same conclusion; 73% of respondents agreed with the statement. However, if we look back over time we find overall that people have become more optimistic about this statement than they were in 1981. In 1981, 80% of Shell Report respondents agreed with the statements; only 73% agreed with it in 1997. Respondents in the EU study were even more up-beat: on average, only 59% of children and adolescents surveyed throughout Europe thought that scarce raw materials would lead to economic crisis and famine. Looking at different EU countries, we find that Portugal, Germany, Austria and Greece are most pessimistic about future prospects (as they were in 1996). This tendency for people to become more optimistic about the statement over the years may be because people are more likely to associate economic crisis and poverty with unemployment than overexploitation of natural resources.

Two statements were phrased more positively: "Developments in industry and technology will lead us through the environmental crisis" and "people will behave more responsibly towards the environment". The Italians, Finns and Danes were most optimistic about the first statement: around



<Figure 4> Future expectations

two thirds of respondents agreed. The percentage was lower in all other EU countries. In some cases only half of the respondents agreed (Greece and Luxembourg). There were also significant differences between the sexes and age groups. Boys were more optimistic than girls and the younger age group (10 to 13-year-olds) were more optimistic than the older children (14 to 17-year-olds).

In the 2000 Shell report only two out of the original four questions could be compared over time. The first statement ("people will manage to solve the problems with the environment") tallied in general with the statements made by the two items named above from the EU study. The findings of the Shell report also matched exactly the results for Germany in the EU study.

German children in the 2001 EU study were more pessimistic about the second positively phrased statement ("more and more people will respect the environment") than respondents in 1996. In 1996, an average of 65% of respondents agreed with the statement, in 2001 it was only 57%. The Scandinavians, French and the Spanish were much more optimistic than the Germans however: more than two thirds of children and adolescents surveyed in these countries believe that people are paying more and more attention to the environment. The burning question has to be: what makes respondents believe this? It could be that respondents think first about what they personally do in their own environment then conclude that this is the same for others. If so, children in these countries must be taking good care of the environment.

V. Conclusion

If we look at the overall picture, the data shows a distinct dearth of patterns. We cannot be sure whether the children and adolescents surveyed in the study were more pessimistic or optimistic about the future. This might be because there are many marked differences between the sexes and countries. But if we look at the average European response for adolescents to the statement "Technology and chemicals will destroy the environment", it had the highest level of agreement by far: 73% percent. There is a clear tendency for children to put fears for the environment near the top of the list. This suggests that children and young people in the EU tend to feel pessimistic about the future. In addition children and adolescents' political and social fears, such as fear of war, unemployment and rising environmental damage, rank prominently throughout the EU. A European study into generation differences carried out by the Hanns Seidel Foundation at about the same time as the EU study also concluded that people have become more pessimistic - throughout all age groups.

One of the effects of this prevailing angst-ridden and pessimistic mood hanging over today's children and adolescents (incidentally - the Shell report came to the same conclusion in 1997) could be seen in the rising level of youth crime: maybe young people do not gain enough attention from politicians and society, so they turn to crime instead. They also tend to be critical of their parents for providing a poor role model on environmentally-conscious behaviour. It is therefore important for adults to look after the

environment and preserve it for following generations. If the young generation can learn to trust politicians and society again and not feel that their fears and aspirations are going unheard, it could have a beneficial effect on their prevailing attitudes.

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Received October 15, 2004
Accepted December 10, 2004