

A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF SIXTH-GRADERS' NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS: MIDDLE-CLASS VERSUS MENNONITE AND AMISH YOUTH

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The New Year's resolutions of middle-class sixth-graders were compared with those of Mennonite and Amish sixth-graders. The Mennonite and Amish youngsters generally resolved to try harder at various things, whereas middle-class youngsters focused on the outcome of their efforts, resolving to do better. The resolutions of middle-class youth were also notably more dynamic and imaginative than those of the Amish and Mennonites. In addition, certain sex differences were found in both cultures. Girls consistently wrote longer resolutions and more of them. Girls also wrote more about home responsibilities and personal health habits, whereas boys wrote more about religious responsibilities and sports and hobbies. All of these sex differences, however, were more pronounced among the Amish and Mennonite youth.

Children's New Year's resolutions provide a unique profile of their concerns and self-image. These resolutions show how a child feels he is measuring up to the standards set for him by parents, teachers and peers. In the present study, the New Year's resolutions of middle-class sixth-graders were compared with those of Amish and Mennonite sixth-graders. The middle-class subjects attended an elementary school in a suburb of Washington, D.C.; the other subjects attended two special schools in Southern Maryland. One of these schools was exclusively for Amish children and the other was for both Amish and Mennonites.

The Amish/Mennonite culture was studied because it is one of the most distinctive in America. Mennonites are a Protestant sect with some similarities to both Baptists and Quakers. They regard themselves as a fellowship of disciples committed to purity and discipline. The Mennonites refuse to take oaths, bear arms or fill civic or state offices.

The Amish are a conservative order of Mennonites. They maintain strict obedience to the Bible and preserve the social and religious customs of the 17th century. They are known for their unusual dress. Men wear broad-brimmed black hats, beards, and simple, home-made clothes. Women wear plain bonnets and large, full, long dresses with capes and shawls. They worship in private homes and drive horse-and-buggies instead of automobiles. But perhaps most significant of

all is their refusal to use electricity, which means that they have no telephone, electric lights, etc., and are not bombarded by mass media such as TV and radio.

Conversations with the staff of the two schools verified that the Amish and Mennonite subjects in this research lead lives that conform to the above profile. The children are from a small, cohesive and highly religious farming community. Everyone attends church regularly and youngsters help with the chores after school. To accommodate this routine, the teachers give homework only occasionally. Few if any of the youngsters have TVs in their home, hence they are relatively isolated from the mass media which contribute so much to the sophistication of mainstream American youth. This somber, hard-working farm life is clearly different from the life-style of middle-class suburbia.

METHOD AND RESULTS

The youngsters in this research were asked in their sixth-grade classes to write New Year's resolutions on a piece of paper. The teachers then collected their papers for the present analysis. The New Year's resolutions were divided into the following six categories and analyzed for cross-cultural and sex differences.

- (1) Religious Responsibilities
e.g., "Go to church more often", "Read the Bible more often".
- (2) Home Responsibilities
e.g., "Keep my room clean", "Improve dinner-table manners".
- (3) School Responsibilities
e.g., "Write neater", "Get better grades", "Try harder", "Get work in on time".
- (4) Sports and Hobbies
e.g., "Practice piano", "Improve swimming speed", "Write to pen pals".
- (5) Personal Relations
e.g., "Be nicer to friends (or family members)", "Not fight with siblings", "Be more patient".
- (6) Personal Health Habits and Miscellaneous Self-improvement
e.g., "Be a better citizen", "Not eat so much candy", "Brush teeth more often", "Not bite my nails".

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF THE NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS OF MENNONITE/AMISH BOYS VERSUS GIRLS

	Religious		Responsibilities Home		School		Sports/ Hobbies		Pers. Relationships		Misc. Self- improve- ment*	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Boys	5	21	2	8	4	17	3	12	6	25	4	17
Girls	1	2	12	22	12	22	5	9	11	20	14	25

χ^2 test: $\chi^2 = 11.2$; $p < 0.05$.

*Primarily health habits.

TABLE 2: COMPARISON OF THE NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS OF BOYS VERSUS GIRLS ACROSS CULTURES

	Religious		Responsibilities				Sports/ Hobbies		Pers. Relationships		Misc. Self- improve- ment*	
	No.	%	No.	%	School No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Boys	7	7	14	15	20	21	18	19	24	26	11	12
Girls	2	1	30	21	25	17	19	13	33	23	36	25

χ^2 test: $\chi^2 = 13.8$; $p < 0.025$.

*Primarily health habits.

As might be expected, Amish and Mennonite children showed greater concern over religious responsibilities and less concern over sports and hobbies than did middle-class youngsters. But these and other minor cross-cultural differences were not significant.¹

However, some interesting sex differences were found. In both cultures, boys were more concerned about religion, personal relationships, and sports and hobbies, whereas girls were more concerned about home responsibilities and personal health habits. The only cultural difference in this regard had to do with school-work. Middle-class boys wrote more than girls about school-work, while the reverse was true among the Amish and Mennonites. It is noteworthy that these sex differences did not achieve significance among the middle-class youth,¹ but they did achieve significance among the Amish and Mennonite youth ($p < 0.05$, Table 1). Significance was also achieved with the two cultures pooled ($p < 0.025$, Table 2).

Another interesting finding was that girls consistently listed more resolutions than boys. Amish and Mennonite males wrote an average of 2.18 resolutions, while girls averaged 6.22 (Table 3). The gap was narrower among middle-class subjects, with males and females averaging 4.12 and 6.00 resolutions, respectively (Table 3). Though this sex difference was more pronounced among the Mennonites and Amish, it was highly significant in both cultures ($p < 0.005$).

¹ See NAPS document No. 03036 for 7 pages of the following tables: (a) New Year's resolutions of middle-class children versus Mennonite/Amish children, (b) New Year's resolutions of middle-class boys versus girls, (c) number of resolutions written by Mennonite/Amish boys versus girls including raw data, (d) number of resolutions written by middle-class boys versus girls including raw data, (e) average number of words per New Year's resolution among Mennonite and Amish boys versus girls, and (f) average number of words per New Year's resolution among middle-class boys versus girls. Order from ASIS/NAPS, c/o Microfiche Publications, 440 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10017, U.S.A. Remit with order for each NAPS document number \$3.00 for microfiche or \$5.00 for photocopies. Outside U.S.A. and Canada, postage is \$3.00 for a photocopy or \$1.00 for a fiche. Make checks payable to Microfiche Publications.

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF RESOLUTIONS WRITTEN

	<i>Middle-class</i>		<i>Mennonite/Amish</i>	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Mean	2.18	6.22	4.12	6.00
Standard error	0.964	19.1	1.48	5.28
<i>F</i> -test of homogeneity of variance	$F_{8, 10} = 19.8$ $p < 0.001$		$F_{14, 16} = 3.57$ $p < 0.01$	
<i>t</i> -test of difference between means	$t_{18} = 3.11$ $p < 0.005$		$t_{30} = 2.94$ $p < 0.005$	

(It should be noted that the *F*-test of homogeneity of variance was significant in both of these cases. Although homogeneity of variance is an assumption of the *t*-test, lack of homogeneity does not invalidate the test. It just renders it less powerful, and despite this lack of power the *t*-tests were highly significant.)

Furthermore, the girls in both cultures also wrote *longer* resolutions. (They not only said more, but "took longer to say it".) Mennonite and Amish boys averaged 5.21 words per resolution while girls averaged 6.31.¹ This sex difference was again milder among the middle-class subjects, with males and females averaging 5.68 and 6.31, respectively. This was not, however, statistically significant in either culture.¹

DISCUSSION

In terms of subject matter and verbosity, the sex differences observed here were the same as those found by Zeligs in a previous study of sixth-graders' New Year's resolutions. To explain why girls wrote more than boys, Zeligs said that since girls mature earlier, they may be "more concerned [than boys] about living up to standards set by their cultural environment" (Zeligs, 1964, p. 245). However, the reverse argument could also be made: the girls' maturity and responsibility could logically drive them to meet their culture's standards, which would leave them fewer resolutions to make.

Perhaps, then, an alternative explanation is that girls wrote more, simply because they are more verbal. Numerous other studies have shown that girls are more verbally oriented than boys from a very early age. They start talking earlier (McCarthy, 1953), speak in short sentences earlier (Terman and Tyler, 1954), and remain more fluent throughout the pre-school years (Bardwick, 1971). This sex difference continues to age 16 with girls doing better in grammar, spelling, and word fluency (Maccoby, 1966).

It is extremely interesting that all of the sex differences observed in this study were milder among the middle-class youngsters. This is not, however, surprising. Sex roles are clearly and separately defined among the Amish and Mennonites, but that is less and less true in mainstream America. Many forces have contributed to the current

breakdown of traditional stereotypes. The "Women's Movement" has pushed for legislation extending educational and vocational opportunities to women. They have focused our attention on sex "discrimination" in child-rearing and throughout life. The wisdom of our male stereotype has likewise been questioned; there is a trend to see men as creatures with the same soft feelings usually ascribed to women. In some families, men and women even share equally the responsibilities of earning a living and performing home and child care. These factors probably account for the greater similarity between the sexes among middle-class youth.

Finally, the foregoing analysis of the youngsters' New Year's resolutions obscures two other important cultural differences. These are qualitative matters which are not amenable to statistical analysis. The Amish and Mennonite resolutions were almost always "process-oriented", whereas those written by middle-class youth were primarily "goal oriented". That is, the Mennonite and Amish resolutions referred only to trying harder (e.g., "Do my lessons more carefully", "Work math problems slower", etc.); the goal of their efforts was not mentioned. The *single* exception to this rule was one resolution to "Get my work done in time". Middle-class children, on the other hand, generally focused on the outcome or end-result of their efforts (e.g., "Raise school grades by one step", "Improve swimming time by ten seconds", "Become a Tenderfoot Scout before the end of the year", etc.).

This pattern suggests a fundamental difference in how the two groups of children derive their self-esteem. Apparently Amish and Mennonite youth are esteemed as long as they try hard, but middle-class youth are evaluated mainly on their ultimate performance. School grades are a good example. For the most part, middle-class youngsters are graded according to their achievement (test scores, etc.), with little regard for how hard they studied.

Finally, there was one other striking difference between the cultures. The middle-class resolutions were more exotic and dramatic than those written by the Amish and Mennonites. Middle-class youngsters wrote about activities outside their ordinary experience (i.e., "Take scuba diving lessons", "Climb Mount Katadhidn [*sic*]", "Lead a water pollution fight", "Get the physical fitness award", etc.). Compared to these fanciful wishes, the Amish and Mennonite resolutions were bland and banal; they wrote only about activities in their daily routine.

Bruno Bettelheim made a similar finding when he interviewed Israeli youngsters born and raised on a "kibbutz". A kibbutz is a small, nearly self-sufficient farm community. It is very similar to the Amish and Mennonite communal society in the sense that everyone on the commune leads the same kind of life. There are no social classes, no economic or religious differences, and everyone is in deep philosophical agreement on most issues.

Bettelheim found that kibbutz youngsters were unable to respond to a hypothetical question if doing so would require them to step outside their frame of reference. He postulated that a child in this uni-

form environment does not develop a certain hypothetical way of thinking because he never needs to wonder what his life would be like if he had been "born different". Middle-class children, on the other hand, are surrounded by people of different races, creeds, and economic status, and this heterogeneous milieu forces them to wonder what they would be like if they had been born into different circumstances (Bettelheim, 1969, p. 190). The current research findings support Bettelheim's theory. Middle-class youngsters showed the ability to step outside their frame of reference and imagine a different kind of life; Amish and Mennonite youngsters did not.

It is clear that the study of New Year's resolutions can provide a variety of significant psychological insights. It would be instructive for future studies to compare resolutions of people of different ages, including adults. Additional ethnic groups could also be studied.

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