

# International Social Work

<http://isw.sagepub.com>

---

## Global values shift and social work in America: Making positive change

Emma Gross

*International Social Work* 2006; 49; 719

DOI: 10.1177/0020872806069078

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://isw.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/49/6/719>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



International Association of Schools of Social Work

ICSW

International Council of Social Welfare



International Federation of Social Workers

Additional services and information for *International Social Work* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** <http://isw.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://isw.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** <http://isw.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/49/6/719>

Downloaded from <http://isw.sagepub.com> by Vic Strasburger on July 23, 2009

# Global values shift and social work in America

## Making positive change

● Emma Gross

World Values Survey Data has measured changes in the nature of societal values shift since 1981. Initially conducted in 22 societies, the most recent survey, completed in 2004, was implemented in over 90 countries, which is representative of over 80 percent of the world's population (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). The purpose of these surveys is to measure changes in political, social, and cultural beliefs and to show that these changes are permanent, rather than transitory. The surveys thus are potentially useful for social work practitioners who seek to understand differences across cultures in a society's views about social welfare development and diversity, and who understand that social change is a long-term process (Inglehart and Welzel, 2004).

The methodological rigor of the World Values Surveys has been extensively documented (Inglehart and Abramson, 1999). Given their impressive reliability as well as validity, these data are ideal for developing social work theory that is solidly grounded in scientific research (Inglehart, 1997: 67–107, 108–30). In this article my purpose in discussing the world values survey data will be to provide a broad overview of how values shift is occurring worldwide, to suggest some of the reasons why this shift is occurring as it is, and to show how the USA, instead of leading in the world in progressive social change, has actually regressed in terms of the basic values associated with social work and national progress. Family values

---

**Key words** ● practice ● social welfare policy development ● values shift

---

are a major way in which values shift is discussed and I will refer throughout to the ways in which the backlash associated with contemporary change in American family structures mirrors the regression in American social development generally.

In numerous publications, Inglehart and his associates provide the data which are the basis for this article ([www.wvs.isr.umich.edu](http://www.wvs.isr.umich.edu); [www.worldvaluessurvey.com](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.com)). Initially, their project derived values shift theory from Maslow's hierarchy of human needs theory and Daniel Bell's post-industrial society thesis, and was congruent with Marxist and Weberian theory that socio-economic change follows fairly predictable patterns tied to economic and political, as well as cultural, events (Inglehart, 1997: 7–50). World values studies also suggest that values shift follows Amartya Sen's theses emphasizing that the development of democratic institutions is necessarily linked to advances in the quality of life (tied to democratic development) and to the economic prosperity of a society (Sen, 1999). Importantly, Inglehart's most recent work shows that Samuel Huntington's clash of civilization thesis illustrates yet another major component of values shift theory, that culture itself determines if and when opportunities for progressive development will, or will not, be taken advantage of (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Inglehart and Norris, 2003a). From this complex theoretical base, the World Values Studies have proved that social change is tied to values associated with survival as well as traditional authority and that these trajectories are in turn associated with the establishment of secular-rational values associated with the achievement of subjective well-being in the advanced industrial countries of the world. Social development trajectories originating in the shift away from survival and toward self-expression, and from authoritarian to egalitarian institutions, can be seen to progress along one axis from the point of meeting basic needs (for shelter, food, water) to that of pursuing the higher-level needs associated with education, creativity, experimentation, personal growth and self-actualization. Significantly, values shift also requires changes in traditional notions about authority, from exegetic and directed by designated elites to secular-rational; that is, to decisions based on one's own certainties and choices about what is right and good. Values for personal expression and autonomy, which were pursued in 20th-century policies, from welfare to reproductive freedom, remain a goal in post-modern social development. According to Inglehart and Welzel, we can expect:

Traditional societies [to] emphasize the importance of parent–child ties in traditional families, and deference to authority, along with absolute moral standards, and [to] reject divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. Traditional societies are highly patriotic and nationalistic. In contrast, societies with secular-rational values display the opposite preferences on all of these topics. Societies characterized by survival values emphasize materialist orientations, show relatively low levels of subjective well-being, report relatively poor health, tend to be intolerant of out-groups, such as foreigners, women and homosexuals, rank relatively low on interpersonal trust, and emphasize hard work, rather than imagination or tolerance, as important things to teach a child. By contrast, societies that emphasize self-expression values, display the opposite preferences on all of these topics. (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005: 3)

Other values shift evidence shows that while modernization shifted value orientations from the exegetic, from authority derived via external pronouncement, once economic security (the steady state economy) is achieved values move in the direction of achievement (not ascribed) priorities. Post-modernization thus ultimately enables making decisions that place a high priority on maximizing well-being for the self, the environment and society as a whole. This is why the advanced post-industrial countries are more likely to possess both the resources to combat poverty and a commitment to eliminate poverty, along with a desire to create environmental policy and protect human rights (Lane, 2000; Sachs, 2005; UN Millennium Development Goals, 2003).

It must be stressed, especially in view of the conflation of concepts like ‘secular’ and ‘anti-religious’, that values shift is not inevitably secular in the sense that advanced societies are not religious. Post-industrial societies are also associated with high values for religiosity and spirituality (Inglehart and Norris, 2003b). It must also be stressed that post-modern values and lifestyles are predictably associated with the growth of affluence in a society and the extent to which that affluence is available to individual citizens. Clearly, self-actualizing values are a function of a high level of resource availability rather than of countries where poverty is extensive.

Because values shift is curvilinear, even affluent societies are, however, capable of significant regressions on the scale of social development, a fact which is best illustrated by America’s turn backwards toward 19th-century traditional and survival values, after 1981 (Inglehart, 1997: 38–9, 45–8). In this case, globalization as well as the events of 9/11 conspired to return America to a survivalist orientation: one characterized by the vigorous reaffirmation of traditional nuclear family roles and expectations, anti-homosexuality legislation

and, of course, the reassertion of US military prowess overseas. As it turns out, closer examination reveals real but, to date, unsuccessfully dealt with perceived threats to America's economic viability in the world economy and her imagined moral and political superiority among the nations of the world.

Inglehart's data (Inglehart, 1997: 98) depict the location of the USA and other advanced post-industrial countries in relation to each other and to developing countries. They also show how the USA has slipped in relation to its socio-economic status counterparts in northern and western Europe (Inglehart, 1977, 1990; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Thus, while the latter societies continue to advance towards the establishment of secular-rational and self-expression values as the basis for social change and development, the USA is experiencing regression in its forward motion. This is occurring at the same time that the developing countries continue to engage with the basic survival tasks of development. World values theory also entails understanding that just as agrarianism gave way to industrialization and modernization, these same stages of societal development have been giving way to post-modernism and the hi-touch, hi-tech climates that currently characterize post-industrial countries. For example, the data show how population shifts from agrarian to urban, suburban and ex-urban settings are accompanied by human capital increases reflecting rising levels of education, literacy, numeracy and basic schooling, followed by an increasing availability of and access to higher education. Similarly, in making forward progress, societal workforces shift from extraction and agricultural industries towards manufacturing and processing, followed by the rise of professional and managerial occupations, in the post-industrial phase. Other changes show that status in the post-industrial society shifts from ascribed social roles toward achieved status, as well as towards longevity and the expansion of leisure, and multi-layered forms of government. Progressive values include expanding safety net conceptions of social welfare to social welfare policies and programs based on principles of inclusiveness, universality and civil rights, thus steadily moving towards an enhanced quality of life that is also democratic for most of the society's citizens.

In the example of changes in family composition, post-modern social transformation includes the movement from conventionally defined extended and nuclear families towards the inclusion of diverse non-traditional family forms and greater experimentation with male/female and spousal family roles. Thus the post-modern

family unit prizes companionship, compatibility in interests and life goals, and reciprocity between partners, above family relationships that are externally regulated by consanguinity, legal marriage and social obligations. The research also shows that progression is curvilinear and uneven. Thus, progress is also sometimes accompanied by regression towards traditional values, and the extent of affiliation with these values is importantly related to income, education and secure resources (Inglehart, 1997: 92–7). Thus class, especially higher levels of income and education, is a key indicator to predicting the establishment of self-actualization over survival values. Values research over the last 35 years also shows that, despite setbacks, societies that regress are likely to eventually re-emerge at an even more advanced state than when they entered their regression. America's social welfare policy development illustrates this point in the forward strides made by the New Deal (1930s) and the civil rights era (1960s) after extended periods of backward social development. One can only imagine that the current period of regression may be followed by a far more enlightened period of social progress than has been the case since the 1970s.

For the historical moment, however, the American mass base appears to have turned away from progressive social development. Beginning with the first Reagan administration, and continuing virtually unabated through one Democratic administration (Clinton) between the first Reagan administration and the current Bush administration, public opinion surveys indicate that Americans have voted to reverse past gains in social welfare policy protections, reproductive freedoms, family values, gay and lesbian civil rights, and civil liberties. As well, voting publics have supported evoking outdated manifest destiny doctrines laid down in the 19th and early 20th centuries in an effort to rationalize the forced assimilation of Native American populations in the USA, as well as to expand US imperialism overseas. Contemporary military initiatives in Afghanistan and Iraq are examples of US foreign policy initiatives predicated on the conviction that America is entitled to unilateral actions in the name of religious expansion as well as with regard to the stated objectives of bringing freedom and democracy to the region. These initiatives are also arguably misguided attempts to reassert American influence in the face of globalization, whose dynamics America has not been able to control.

America's shift to the right is thus also reinforced by the systematic erosion of the divisions between church and state that are occurring in the larger society, which is yet another way in which values

shift responds to perceived threat. The regressive re-establishment of religious authority as the basis for political position-taking has resulted in the assertion of an authoritarian national politics as the country flails about coping with its morally and economically lessened authority in the world community. Currently, for example, time and energy are absorbed in fighting internal battles over the teaching of creationism, marriage for homosexuals, sex education of children in schools and the appointment of federal judges, rather than in dealing with the reasons why America is becoming less influential and less competitive on a global scale.

Significantly, mainstream media, pundits and leaders have not done much to address the obvious nature of America's turn to the right. While some lip service is paid to the current erosion in America's moral authority overseas, or to the unilateral and undemocratic imposition of current military occupations, the 30-second soundbites that pass for news in America are mainly directed at maintaining the fiction that America is still the best possible democratic model, suitable for imposition everywhere in the world. Evidence that America's economy is struggling in the global market, or that Americans are reviled by much of the world, or that on socio-economic indicators from infant mortality, social guarantees and literacy, America lags far behind other advanced post-industrial countries, is ignored by the popular media and must be unearthed from non-mainstream publications, media and the internet, to be heard at all. Importantly, Americans who are feeling disenfranchised given the current values climate rely on alternative media and the internet to communicate their views and calls for change using electoral means ([www.moveon.org](http://www.moveon.org)).

Inglehart's data enable an empirical illustration of how America's shift to the right has dominated political decision-making since 1980. The consensus since the Second World War on American values, exemplified as it was in popular culture by the portrayal of happy housewives and perfect families on 1950s television screens, as well as through the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower and the democratizing affluence that accompanied the end of the war, was jolted into an entirely new direction by the countercultural revolution and anti-war cultures of the 1960s, as well as by the success of the women's movement after 1960. The countercultural revolution of the 1960s took America in the direction of post-materialist social development where a high value for expanding and authenticating the social welfare state could be expected, as well, as we shall see,

as engendering a lasting reactionary backlash against the social consequences of post-modernism.

Additional developments, occurring as they did in a climate of opinion influenced by experimentation with anti-pregnancy drugs and contraceptive devices, telecommunications technology, and scientific breakthroughs in medicine and the quality of life, and liberating as they were for much of the population, were sufficiently without precedent, however, that millions of American families were left without basic reference points (a cultural system based on collective agreement about fundamental values) with which to make decisions about how to understand rapidly changing spousal and parental roles. Thus, sizable segments of the population were left without easily graspable values that might take the place of traditional values requiring compliance with authoritative leadership from unelected elites.

The absence of reference points, by which ordinary people might make decisions in which they can have confidence because there is widespread legitimation for them in society, continues to fuel the confusion, ambivalence or outright hostility with which American publics have viewed social change, particularly since the counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s. Since then, while women have experienced greater freedom to choose – in the realms of careers, reproduction or family roles – men have experienced considerable confusion about a world in which women are no longer officially dependent on patriarchal norms. Similarly, children, now freed from concerns about pregnancy, and empowered to make their voices heard, have challenged traditional authority and have behaved in self-determining ways that have little, if anything, to do with parental preferences. Thus, social flux and family change, out of sheer anxiety and panic that the world no longer seems to make sense, have come to be viewed by many sociologists, churches and the public alike as symptoms of decline. The resultant confusion led to the triumph of reactionary political rhetoric and, fueled by the fears of 9/11 and America's loss of competitiveness in the world market, is largely behind the current support of strong (authoritarian) leadership that offers facile answers based on the imagined purity or simplicity of American society 100 years ago. The alternative, to create new social norms (reference points) based on contemporary realities, has, for the moment anyway, been buried under an avalanche of ideological fervor that equates being critical and reflective about social change with anti-Americanism.



America's shift to the right also illustrates how social welfare policy development has regressed in its progress towards inclusiveness, universality and adequacy that characterized its development before 1980. The regression depicted in World Values Studies graphs suggests how social work practice philosophies have paralleled social developments, currently emphasizing individual rather than societal change. Currently, social work practice theory alternates between a focus on political and economic systems change as the bases for social development and a focus on interventions aimed at altering the individual's psycho-social make-up in order to accomplish positive change. American social policy continues to struggle with its built-in cultural disposition to blame the individual victims of adverse circumstances rather than find solutions in the nature of society itself.

The attack on the World Trade Center is a particularly distinctive event in this example of progress and regression because it was the precipitating event for throwing the country into the extreme survival mode from which it has not yet re-emerged. Values shift data since 1980 show how this backlash coincided with the newly established ascendancy of the new right movement in America and therefore with the conservative fundamentalist religious politics that are dominant today and provide a functional ideology for a population that has been literally frightened out of its wits.

Fueled as it is by the reactionary conviction that any threat to the status quo is also a threat to conventional religious beliefs and therefore should be resisted in favor of reaffirming traditional social values, the backlash has had disastrous results for American social welfare development. Since 1980 and the election of Ronald Reagan as president of the USA, the country has seen stalemates, reversals, or the defeat of policies associated with enhancing the case for sexual tolerance, liberal marriage, women's rights, the separation of church and state, opposition to innovation in genetics research and erosion in social welfare anti-poverty measures aimed at helping women who are poor. Additionally, since 9/11, the erosion of civil liberties, tolerance of torture, mistreatment of political prisoners, nationalistic jingoism, and intolerance of anti-governmental position-taking have been added to the list of backward policies currently being supported by voting publics as necessary and patriotic for the preservation and extension of American ideals of freedom. The endorsement of these policies is not only costly in terms of social development; it resets priorities

so that concern for the social welfare of the population drops off the political agenda entirely.

America's regressive values shift is clearly contradictory of the values for self-determination, equality, justice, fairness and non-judgementalism, among other values that are held by social work professionals in the advanced countries of the world. These values are of course exemplified both in the American profession's code of ethics and the curriculum guidelines of its accrediting agency (the Council for Social Work Education). It thus becomes problematic, as those of us who teach are finding out in our classrooms, to encourage cultural competence, the acceptance of diversity, freedom of choice and even critical thinking, when our social institutions are rewarding the unilateral imposition of values on those who we identify as different from ourselves. We find ourselves, usually tacitly, supporting jingoism in our media, supporting political beliefs in the inherent superiority of Judeo-Christian mores and enduring censorship about those issues that raise questions about the course of America's actions overseas, as well as about the attack on basic civil liberties that are legitimated in actions like the Patriot Act.

The obvious question for American social workers, given the intensity and sustained quality of America's shift backwards towards traditionalism and survival behaviors, is to what extent the regression we are experiencing will have irreversible effects. Here is where Inglehart's work is useful for understanding that social development appears to be progressive in the end, regardless of the predictable curvilinearity in values shift. Thus, it is still possible, without being recklessly optimistic, to argue that progress towards the acceptance of companionate family values will continue as long as socio-economic status continues to improve and the cultural effects of regression are not permanent. By the same token, the currently uneven distribution of income and wealth in American society also helps to explain why the country has become increasingly reactionary in its politics and social development. Uneven development illustrates how the movement for gay and lesbian civil rights is able to expand despite political setbacks at the same time that traditional nuclear family values remain a staple of American political campaigns. To reiterate, values shift theory holds that affluent, upwardly mobile citizens are far more likely to value experimentation and human rights values than they are to feel that their needs for safety and security should be paramount. The opposite, of course, is true for their poorer and less mobile cohorts in the

society. Thus, upwardly mobile gays and lesbians are far more active today in pursuit of their political, judicial and social goals than they ever were and continue to be so despite the overwhelming rejection of gay marriage initiatives in all of the 11 states that had these initiatives on their ballots in the last election. Similarly, affluent elites remain visibly supportive of environmental and foreign policy initiatives aimed at preventing global warming or encouraging self-determination.

Finally, although poverty policy is currently predicated on principles that encourage marriage and the birth of fewer children, prohibitions against abortion and laws against same-sex marriage, nevertheless large segments of the population continue to frustrate conservative agendas by experimenting with co-habitation, family role definition and increasing choice in the sexual presentation of the self.

### **Implications for social work intervention**

This look into the psycho-dynamics of contemporary foreign policy – for want of a better term and because the dynamics are prominently fear-driven – contains important insights for social work practitioners who would incorporate overseas criticisms of US policies into culturally competent and relevant perspectives that might be capable of appropriately responding to others' views about what the USA is doing overseas, therefore increasing the effectiveness, genuineness and authenticity of their own contributions to helping others. Psychological influences on social development, like the collective anxiety over survival that many Americans are experiencing today, provide opportunities to make logical connections between the micro- and macro-systemic paradigms of social work practice intervention which seek to articulate linkages between the problems experienced by individuals and families and the institutional and larger system structures of a society.

One way in which micro–macro linkages in social work practice are forged is through the ethical requirement to both teach and practice multiculturalism (Webster, 2002). There are notable differences, however, in our ability to teach cultural competence and diversity today from what obtained 30 years ago when these principles were set forth. The regression in national values has also coincided with cultural predispositions to view change as more negative than positive. The lingering effects of Euro-American cultural traditionalism, the strong Protestant ethos that very narrowly defines sexuality,

sexual behavior, family life and choice, currently exert more influence on social work education than they have since the 1960s. Thus, carrying out course content mandates related to teaching tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality, reproductive choice, gay marriage, assisted suicide or other subjects proscribed by religious doctrine has become problematic for the professoriate and the progressive student body. In addition, students, like many of their professors and community administrators, have become increasingly (predictably) xenophobic, uncritical about the meaning of terrorism and uncritical in their support of American military and religious policies. Campus witch-hunts directed against the liberal professoriate have become commonplace and course evaluations in many cases probably reflect students' displeasure with instructors' opinions that are not supportive of popular political thinking (Hebel, 2004).

In view of these changes in the climate of opinion, teaching social work practice in America today requires confronting deeply held traditional beliefs about the purity of American democratic freedoms and intentions. The task is made especially difficult by the rigor with which current propaganda punishes dissent from party lines, especially with regard to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Asking questions and raising issues about the correctness of America's actions overseas – whether with respect to the Kyoto agreements, involvement with the United Nations, the influence of International Monetary Fund and World Bank policies, military actions, or unbridled economic aggrandizement – are more often than not drowned out by the complicities of an increasingly corporate university, corporate media, and passive legislatures. Thus, American social workers who seek to establish relationships overseas will need to begin by acknowledging American foreign-policy limitations as well as strengths in order to resist the unspoken requirements to make practice approaches conform to the political ideology opposed to social work that is in place in America today. In the end, we will also need to inform ourselves about the nature of globalization and its effects, as well as about the need to resurrect our vigilance with respect to stemming the erosion of democratic principles and practices that has accelerated in America during the last 25 years. We will all need to understand, better than we do now, that social problems experienced locally are very much the function of decisions made in a global village Americans have not yet embraced as their own.

## References

- Hebel, S. (2004) 'Patrolling Professors' Politics: Conservative Activists and Students Press Campaigns Against Perceived Bias on Campuses', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (13 February): A18.
- Inglehart, R. (1990) *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Inglehart, R. (1997) *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Inglehart, R. and P.R. Abramson (1999) 'Measuring Postmaterialism', *American Political Science Review* (September) 93(3): 665–77.
- Inglehart, R. and P. Norris (2003a) 'The True Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Policy* (March/April): 67–74.
- Inglehart, Ronald and P. Norris (2003b) *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World*. Cambridge University Press.
- Inglehart, R. and P. Norris (2004) *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Inglehart, R. and C. Welzel (2004) 'What Insights can Multi-Country Surveys Provide about People and Societies?' *Comparative Politics Newsletter*, APSA (Summer): 1–12.
- Inglehart, R. and C. Welzel (2005) 'Exploring the Unknown: Predicting the Responses of Publics not yet Surveyed', *International Review of Sociology* (January): 1–37.
- Lane, Robert E. (2000) *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sachs, J.D. (2005) *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*. New York: Knopf.
- UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (2003) Available online at: [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/)
- Webster, Y. (2002) 'A Human-centric Alternative to Diversity and Multicultural Education', *Journal of Social Work Education* 38(1) (Winter): 17–36.
- Welzel, C. and R. Inglehart (2005) 'Liberalism, Postmaterialism, and the Growth of Freedom: The Human Development Perspective', *International Review of Sociology* (January): 1–52.

---

**Emma Gross** is Professor, College of Social Work, University of Utah, SLC, UT 84112–0260, USA. [email: [Emma.Gross@socwk.utah.edu](mailto:Emma.Gross@socwk.utah.edu)]

---