

## CONFLICT AND CHANGE ACROSS GENERATIONS

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### Summary

There are several social science analyses that can be made across long time spans. First, technological advances change how people organize themselves and this has trickle-down effects on all sorts of social behaviors, but it has been most difficult to predict the social changes arising from technological changes although more systematic analyses should be able to do this. Second, there are longer term changes in social behaviors that can be measured through demographic information, through the analysis of colonialism and its effects, through the analysis of how different economic systems, especially capitalism, change our social relationships, and through the intense urbanization and institutionalization that goes with organizing and running large cities. Examples are given of all these. In terms of research it has been difficult to tease out the effects of each of them since they have usually occurred together. Finally, future planning is considered in terms of the language it uses and the social pressures on the very abstract nature of that language.

### 1. Introduction

Our analysis tools for social science have so far kept us within a short time frame and not said much about changes over generations. Things do not stay the same, however, and many changes occur slowly over long time spans. This means, at the most fundamental level of social science analysis tools, that resources and populations change and hence everything else that follows from these also changes.

Some changes occur directly through social conflict, with concerted efforts by members of different communities to effect change (see Social Change, Conflict and Conflict Resolution). The present chapter is more concerned with gradual changes that often happen without anyone putting in an effort; or when, as sometimes happens, people really want to change one thing and not know that other changes are also going to occur as trickle-down effects that were not predicted and were perhaps even unwanted.

When looking at conflict across generations, particularly with respect to the environment, several possibilities for analysis emerge. We can examine differences in how the political and institutional forms of conflict change, how views and behavior change between generations, we can examine changes in technologies and social organizations over historical time periods, and we can look at social dilemmas over time and the question of programming sustainability.

## 2. Technological Changes over Generations

There is much written about the major technological changes that have occurred, especially in the last hundred years (see *Appropriate chapters elsewhere in EOLSS*). It has been difficult for people to think about and analyze technological changes because the impact, especially the social impact, has often taken many years or decades to become observable—or even noticeable. This is very apparent with the trickle-down effects on social behavior and social relationships. It was many years before the effects of television, both good and bad, were noticed. The impact of the Internet on social relationships has certainly been noticed earlier than was the case for television, but we still do not know the ultimate impact it will have on how societies are organized—both for good and for bad. For example, it could be that people become more isolated from one another and spend vast amounts of time doing what they have to do to get their resources in front of a computer screen. On the other hand, it could be that getting resources could become easier and people therefore have more time to spend with those around them instead of working in an office from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. every day of the week. We do not yet know what the effects of the Internet will be and it could end up meaning either more or less time for developing our social relationships.

In making analyses of social situations involving new technologies we must be careful to learn from some analyses mentioned earlier. First, the strategies and motives of social behavior and conflict that have been presented in these chapters have always included both good and bad, and what is good for one group and bad for another. That is, stories about new technologies that are one-sided are typically not going to be true. It is not the case that the Internet is going to be the way to save the world through globally-linked cooperation—an option extremely unlikely from everything we have analyzed about conflict but promoted by Internet scientists and some New Age-influenced persons (see *Structural Sources of Conflict*). Nor is the Internet going to be one-sidedly bad for all people and bring total destruction on the world—again we have seen counter strategies appearing for every bad strategy one side has put forward.

What this really means is that social science analyses need to be carried out hand-in-hand with analyses by “hard” scientists, to explore *systematically* the strategies to which new technologies might be put, and how these might be expanded if the context

changes, how made more useful (and with respect to whom?), what may be learned from them, and how they may be countered if deemed necessary by the community. Such analyses will not tell us the best thing to do but bring forward the strategies that are likely to occur anyway, and options to increase those strategies or counter them if that is possible and necessary.

The second thing we can learn when making analyses of social situations involving new technologies is how the *talk* about technologies is just that—talk (see *The Language of Conflict*). We learned in this previous section that such talk will be part of someone's strategies and can be made into urban legends and rumors, can be used to justify research budgets, or can be used to make a fabulously scandalous story to shock or horrify people for attention or can be made into a moralistic story to make a young person choose a particular career path. Whichever, none of these assumes that the truth of the matter is being told.

This means that for the social science analyst, when hearing and listening to stories about new technologies and what they can/might do, these stories always need to be listened to or read in the context of analyzing language use, not taken at face value (see *The Language of Conflict*). This includes stories from “hard” scientists as well as daytime shows on television.

An interesting anecdote in this regard was a recent television item that criticized medical researchers for putting early results of tests onto the media and then future tests showing either contradictory results or neutral results. So, for example, we hear a media story on how coffee is bad for you and then one the next night on how coffee is good for you. One night we hear a story about new tests on a drug that “promises” to lead to a cancer cure, but three years later, strangely, nothing more has been heard. Some of this occurs because the results of a single piece of research are blown out of proportion before a replication is carried out elsewhere, and partly because the medical researchers have simplified what they are saying and made the little tiny piece of the puzzle they are looking at sound like the whole picture. When the research is put back into context the effects they found might be overshadowed by other things.

What is perhaps most instructive about this example, for the present analyses, is that the media report did not implicate the media itself in any of this. There were hints that researchers rushed into press because they wanted more research funding, but the role of the media in sensationalizing and distorting a story was not raised—even though the story itself was about the problems of distorting and sensationalizing!

As discussed earlier, much of our talk about new medical discoveries and new technological breakthroughs is done in the context of conversations that function just to keep people in social relationships (see *The Language of Conflict*), not conversations that try to establish competing theories (“The Internet *will too* lead to the breakdown of the family unit as we currently know it; you are wrong!”), or to convince someone to do something (such as talking about the benefits to persuade you to go and buy a computer). This means that all of the properties of the story will be formed from properties of talking to others and either keeping their attention or getting them to like you. This is how the biases and distortions creep in, and this is no different from the

media, which has the prime function, not of giving truth, but of keeping people watching so that advertisers will pay for their resources. They, too, aim to make you like watching their television station and keep attending, while the advertisers aim to get you to do things (buy their products). So who looks after the truth content of what is said?

**Analysis Lens:** There are at least two ways that social scientists can help with analyses of new technologies. First, by analyzing the probable and actual effects of new technologies across the broad spectrum of social behavior, and second, by putting the stories built around new technologies into a stringent analysis and dividing out the fact from the fictionalization for social drama.

### 3. Social Changes over Generations

When analyzing the changes in social behavior and society over generations, there are even more ways to proceed. We will look at just some of the areas that are relevant by following through the chapters in this section including demographic changes, changes through colonialism, changes through capitalism, and changes through urbanization. The warning is the same as the one in the previous section—do not expect simple, one-sided outcomes and strategies. Each of these has at least a few good features amongst the bad.

#### 3.1. Demographic and Societal Changes

Demographers are often the best people to consult for making analyses of how things change. They usually work with large, population-based data sets, but you will also find smaller studies and studies that reflect on small groups and even individuals.

As an example, demographers have found that in most westernized countries the population rate is falling, and in some the rate of falling is falling. This could be related to public awareness of overcrowding and a western moral superiority, but demographers go further. Their analyses also show that the age of having babies is rising in western countries, and has been for some time. One trickle-down effect of this is that when a woman has children later in life, there is less time (on average) to have as many children as if she had started early in life. It is quite comfortable (so to speak!) to have six children if a woman begins with her first at the age of 18, even if they are three to four years apart. If she begins at the age of 32, however, then six children can be problematic even if she were to want that many. So the logic of this is that the birth rate should indeed be falling as more of the population start having children later in life.

This clearly begs the question of why women (and presumably their partners) are having babies later in life. Here is where the big data sets become murkier and more detailed analyses are carried out by demographers, sociologists, policy analysts, geographers and others. Some possible reasons could be: people are living longer and so can plan ahead with a longer time-frame; people now have more freedom to choose; people have more contraceptive options now and can delay pregnancy more easily and reliably; fewer people are Roman Catholics or otherwise prohibited from using most contraceptives; dual income families are more common (but why is that?) and so babies are delayed so that a woman's career is not upset as much; it is so much more expensive to raise children and so people have fewer; fathers are so much more unreliable now and women

take less risk by having fewer children; there are so many interesting toys, inventions and tourist places that people want to experience when young and so delay births; or it is too expensive nowadays to build houses big enough for more than one or two children. These are just some of the many possibilities.

While a falling birth rate is, on the face of it, good news for the environment and resource sustainability, these different reasons for falling birth rates have different implications for the environment and its management. If the reason is specifically a western event, something specific to western societies, then there is not necessarily going to be a reduction elsewhere in the world in parallel where environmental problems are more severe. If the reason is due to couples wanting to spend more time doing things and making money, then this could have deleterious effects on the environment since rich, young western people will be using up more of the world's resources than the average world citizen during this period.

**Analysis Lens:** We have only briefly looked at one example of analyzing a social change over generations but the idea should be clear. The research literature is full of such analyses for all the major social trends and for the social effects of technological trends. The bigger pictures painted by demography are extremely important but pull us away from specific views and anecdotes about small groups and individuals. Getting to the reasons for those changes, however, is the work of many types of social scientists.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Bernard Guerin** is Professor in psychology at the University of South Australia. Before this he studied at the University of Adelaide, took a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of Brisbane, and taught at James Cook University in Townsville, Australia. His interests span the entire realm of social science, and he has been concerned for some years about the superficial barriers erected between the "different" social sciences. He has finished two new books: one on integrating the social sciences and one on practical interventions to change the behavior of both individuals and communities, again incorporating all social science approaches. He has published over 45 peer-reviewed papers, and has presented this integrative material on invited visits to Japan, Mexico, Brazil, Hungary, Sardinia, and across the United States. His two earlier books are *Social Facilitation* (CUP) and *Analyzing Social Behavior: Behavior Analysis and the Social Sciences* (Context Press).