

The "New Values" and Consumer Behaviour.  
Some Empirical Findings From Austria

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Lorenz Lassnigg

## The "New Values" and Consumer Behaviour – Some Empirical Findings From Austria

### Abstract

The study examines the relationship between individual attitudes on a "materialism – postmaterialism" scale and the consumption level of the household in which the interviewed individuals live. The study was based on oral interviews of a representative sample of Austrians. It provides cross-sectional data, and hence can indicate differences in values, but not really value changes.

The results achieved at the total aggregate level were very plausible: The "postmaterialists" have a higher standard of living than the "materialists," although their attitudes tend to have the effect of lowering the level of consumption.

When dividing the total sample into subgroups it appears, however, that the results are not very clear-cut: The interrelationship between attitudes and consumer behaviour is far more complex than the model assumptions could account for.

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## Introduction

This paper deals with the question as to whether relationships can be established between value orientations and the consumption standard of households in Austria. It is based on a cross-sectional empirical study. Hence, it can give insights about differences in consumer behaviour and how these are linked to different values, but not really about value changes.

Although such relationships are rarely discussed explicitly, discussions of "changing values" are still rooted in implicit assumptions and expectations about the links between values and the "working society," "achieving society," or "consumer society." On closer scrutiny, however, these assumptions and expectations prove to be contradictory and ambivalent.

On the one hand, it is assumed that the new values tend to be appreciated by those segments of the population who have satisfied their principal material needs, who enjoy a relatively high income and, consequently, a high level of consumption. On this basis, these people will turn towards "postmaterialistic" needs. In Austria, this view is mainly taken by those political forces of the social democratic and trade union movements who are strongly oriented towards industrial growth and raising the standard of living in the traditional sense: The new values as represented by the attitude of the privileged middle classes, of those "who can afford it."

On the other hand, the new values are being related to the new social movements, on the assumption that these attitudes tend to coincide with decreasing consumer needs or at least with attitudes critical of consumption. For instance, one study comparing the new social movements internationally states "a distinct relationship, frequently confirmed empirically, between the spreading of 'postmaterialistic' value patterns and a greater sensitivity for issues raised by the new social movements" (Brand, 1985, p. 329).

In discussions about changes in the value orientation in Western societies, however, reference is seldom made to empirical investigations of the actual behaviour of people. It sometimes appears as if value changes serve as a type of "deus ex machina" explanation of facts that cannot be explained otherwise, or as a kind of substitute for explanations one does not want to accept. This may be illustrated by the attempts to

consider changing value orientations as the cause of inflation (cf., e.g., Steinmann, Büscher, & Pfister, 1984).

Recently, it has become popular to stress that attitudes of individual consumers have a considerable influence on their behaviour – not least because of the poorness of predictions based on aggregate consumption functions. In the conclusion to his well-known comparative study of the USA and the Federal Republic of Germany, Burkhard Strümpel states that "attitudes, expectations, and motifs" are "not only arabesques of economic dynamics" and that "changes of mood in the consumers have resulted in decreasing demand, particularly with respect to housing, cars, mobile and other durable consumer goods, thus aggravating an economic crisis" (Strümpel, 1977, p. 86; cf., also Katona, Strümpel, & Zahn, 1971).

An extensive investigation of the structure of consumption in Austria yielded findings which to a surprising extent deviate from similar studies in other countries. They can be explained neither by differences in the level of development (measured by the per capita national product) nor by differences in affluence. Hence the authors of the study suggested that more detailed analyses of the "relationship between consumers' moods and the spending behaviour of Austrians" was necessary (Wüger, 1985, p. 717). On the one hand, differences were found in saving behaviour. When, in recent times, the rates of saving increased and the rate of consumption decreased in other countries, the rate of saving decreased in Austria, while the rate of consumption increased. On the other hand, considerable differences were found in the structure of consumption compared to the FRG, the USA, and Belgium: "The fact that in an international comparison Austrians spend relatively much on food and luxuries, clothes, and shoes, and on transportation and communication, but less on education, entertainment, and recreation, does not depend so much on the income situation as on preferences, the prevailing relative price levels, etc." (Wüger, 1985, p. 715).

## **The Investigation**

The analysis to be presented here is based on a random sample ( $N = 1478$ ) of oral standardized interviews carried out by an opinion polling institute in the summer of 1985 (Balog, Cyba, & Lassnigg, 1985, 1988). The "new

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values" are represented by the variable "Materialism – Postmaterialism" according to the well-known formulation of Inglehart (1977, pp. 27-53, 1979).

The MAT-POST-variable was constructed as follows. From a list of eight items the respondents had to choose those three items that they favoured as the most desirable and place them in order of preference. Four items were defined as indicators of materialism:

- Maintaining a high rate of economic growth
- Making sure that the country has strong defense forces
- Maintaining order in the nation
- Fighting rising prices.

The other four items indicated "postmaterialistic" values:

- Seeing to it that the people have more of a say in how things get decided at work and in their local communities
- Trying to make the country's cities and countryside more beautiful
- Giving the people more of a say in important government decisions
- Protecting the freedom of speech.

The respondents were classified as "materialists" if they placed MAT-items in the first three places and as "postmaterialists" if there were POST-items in the first three places. The remaining respondents formed a mixed "middle group" without a pronounced orientation on the MAT-POST-variable.

Although the materialism – postmaterialism dimension has been criticized in many ways, and is indeed to be viewed critically, it was chosen because of its clear, widely known definition, and because it is sufficiently suitable for preparing items for the purpose at hand (regarding criticisms, see Herz, 1987).

An "inventory concept" was the starting point for the operationalization of consumption, i.e., a count was made of durable consumer goods possessed and the frequency of the consumption of goods or services was noted. A monetary assessment of the value of goods, as performed by Schmolders and Biervert (1972), was not made: It would have been very difficult to carry out for services and non-durables. The elements of the consumption indices are presented in Table 1. As a

result of several conversions, three metric variables were defined in order to measure the different aspects of consumption.

**Table 1: Elements of Consumption**

A: Consumer durables <sup>1</sup>		% available in:			
		Total sample	MAT	0	POST
"Standard goods":	telephone	84.5	81.5	84.9	86.7
	vacuum cleaner	91.7	91.7	91.7	90.7
	washing machine	92.5	94.0	92.3	92.0
	refrigerator	96.9	95.8	96.6	98.7
	gas or electric cooker	94.4	92.3	94.5	98.7
"Luxury goods":	stereo	38.7	26.2	39.4	57.3
	dishwasher	22.6	16.7	23.5	24.0
	video recorder	10.0	7.1	11.1	2.7
	personal computer	3.8	1.2	4.2	4.0
	microwave cooker	2.6	1.8	2.6	4.0

B: Consumer goods and services <sup>2</sup>									
		% regular consumption				% no consumption			
	Total sample	MAT	0	POST	Total sample	MAT	0	POST	
sweets	10.0	9.2	10.3	8.0	15.9	21.5	15.2	12.0	
alcohol	15.3	9.8	16.2	16.0	12.8	17.7	12.1	10.7	
hairdresser	23.1	23.0	23.4	20.0	9.2	13.0	7.7	20.0	
restaurants	7.2	3.7	7.8	8.0	27.1	29.2	27.7	14.7	
laundry	7.9	5.0	8.3	9.3	34.8	37.5	33.8	41.3	
holidays/travel	12.4	9.3	12.2	21.3	35.3	47.8	34.7	16.0	
tobacco	24.3	17.7	25.1	29.3	*	*	*	*	
shoes	7.1	4.3	7.0	14.7	*	*	*	*	
fruit/vegetables	*	*	*	*	1.0	1.2	1.1	0.0	

C: Indicators	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
1. Total index (Possession and Expenditure) <sup>3</sup>	0.61	3.68	-11.00	+11.00
2. Possession of consumer durables	0.77	2.01	-5.00	+5.00
3. Expenditure on consumer goods and services	-0.18	2.44	-8.00	+9.00

1. Possession: Sum of "standard goods" + the squared sum of "luxury goods" (limited to a maximum of 3). The distribution was then curtailed (the maximum value was set to 10), and the mean adjusted to zero.
2. Expenditure: "regular consumption" = +1, "never consumed" = -1, \* = not evaluated; index = sum of these values.
3. Total consumption = sum of Possession + Expenditure.

**1. Possession of consumer durables ("Possession").**

According to the extent to which the goods were available in the population, a list of durables was divided into two sections: one referring to "standard goods" (telephone, vacuum cleaner, washing machine, refrigerator, gas or electric cooker) and one referring to "luxury goods" (stereo equipment, dishwasher, video recorder, personal computer, microwave cooker). All standard goods were given a value of 1 and summed; luxury goods were summed in the same way (although limited to a maximum of 3) and the sum squared. "Possession" is the sum of these two measures (after curtailment and mean adjustment, cf. Note to Table 1).

**2. Expenditure on consumption goods and services ("Expenditure").** From a list of non-durable consumer goods and services an index was constructed according to the regularity of consumption in the households. "Regular" consumption was given the value +1, "never" consumed -1, and the index is the sum of these values. (The list encompassed sweets, alcohol, hairdresser, restaurants, laundry, holidays/travels, tobacco, shoes, fruit/vegetables).

**3. Total index ("Possession" and "Expenditure").** The partial indices for the possession of consumer durables and for expenditures on non-durable goods and services were added to form the total index of household consumption.

In order to investigate the stability of the results, not only the total sample but also three groups were analyzed:

- Housewives
- Heads of households
- Paid employees living in their own households.

The rationale behind this grouping was the assumption that the groups would differ with respect to the process of generating as well as that of spending the household income. If similar results were to be obtained for all three subgroups, this would constitute a strong confirmation of the importance of the MAT-POST-variable.

Tables 2-4 contain information about the random sample and the subsamples. The entire sample displayed characteristic differences with respect to age, which do not appear within the subgroups.



Table 2: Distribution of Sample With Respect to the Materialism – Postmaterialism Scale

	MAT	0	POST	N (=100%)		
Total	14.2	79.5	6.3	1187		
Adolescents (pupils, students)	11.9	74.3	13.8	109		
Housewives	16.2	77.8	6.0	167	$\chi^2$	= 24.38
Total number of employees	12.1	80.8	7.1	603	$df$	= 6;
Retired persons	17.9	79.9	2.3	308	$p$	= .0004
Head of household	14.6	80.5	4.9	575	$\chi^2$	= 4.01
Other household members	13.7	78.6	7.7	612	$df$	= 2;
					$p$	= .1349
15-19 years	9.2	79.8	11.0	109		
20-29 years	5.6	81.7	12.7	197		
30-39 years	9.2	81.0	9.8	184	$\chi^2$	= 61.18
40-49 years	16.9	77.9	5.2	172	$df$	= 10;
50-59 years	19.4	78.2	2.4	211	$p$	= .0000
60 years and older	19.1	79.0	1.9	314		
Total number of paid employees <sup>1</sup>	10.1	82.2	7.7	454		
Unskilled manual employees	11.5	80.5	8.0	87	$\chi^2$	= 6.48
Skilled manual employees	12.5	84.1	3.4	88	$df$	= 6;
Non-manual employees (low level)	12.0	79.7	8.3	133	$p$	= .3715
Non-manual employees (medium and high level)	6.2	84.2	9.6	146		

1) All paid employees, including those not living in a household of their own (e.g., in the parents' household). "Paid employees" are the total number of employees minus the self-employed.

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**Table 3: Materialism – Postmaterialism According to Age Groups and Subsamples**

Age group	Total	House- wives	Heads of households	Wage earners, living in their own households
% Materialists				
15-19	9.2	-	-	12.9
20-29	5.6	0.0	2.2	5.0
30-39	9.2	5.6	9.9	6.7
40-49	16.9	24.2	14.4	14.3
50-59	19.4	20.9	16.7	17.1
60 and older	19.1	22.2	17.8	12.5
Total	14.2	16.2	14.6	10.3
% Postmaterialists				
15-19	11.0	-	-	6.5
20-29	12.7	21.1	13.0	9.2
30-39	9.8	11.1	11.1	11.5
40-49	5.2	3.0	5.2	5.1
50-59	2.4	0.0	2.5	3.9
60 and older	1.9	2.8	2.2	0.0
Total	6.3	6.0	4.9	7.6

**Table 4: Household Income per Capita (in Austrian Schillings)**

MAT	6,177	5,074	6,457	6,954
O	6,625	5,594	6,915	7,423
POST	7,383	4,200	8,926	8,212
Total	6,611	5,424	6,946	7,435
One-way analysis of variance				
F	4.3294	2.1806	6.5196	1.6899
p	.0134	.1163	.0016	.1858
Bartlett-Box homogeneity of variances				
F	2.006	3.439	2.995	1.068
p	.135	.032	.050	.344

## Results for the Total Population

Table 5 relates differences in consumption levels in the total sample to attitudes as measured by the materialism – postmaterialism variable. The differences between the groups with different attitudes are statistically significant, and it can be seen that with respect to all three dimensions of consumption, the "materialists" consume least and the "postmaterialists" most. Table 4, however, makes it clear that in all subsamples except housewives, the "materialists" have the lowest current (weighted) household income per capita, and "postmaterialists" the highest. Therefore it appears to be necessary to control for the influence of income.

Table 5: Mean Consumption Values for the Materialism – Postmaterialism Categories

	Total consumption		Possession		Expenditure	
	Mean	(N)	Mean	(N)	Mean	(N)
MAT	-.65	(158)	.27	(168)	-.93	(158)
O	.76	(904)	.84	(944)	-.10	(904)
POST	1.41	(75)	.96	(75)	.45	(75)
Total	.61	(1137)	.77	(1187)	-.18	(1137)
<b>Analysis of variance</b>						
<i>F</i>	12.0589		6.2160		10.6007	
<i>p</i>	.0000		.0021		.0000	
<b>Bartlett-Box homogeneity of variances</b>						
<i>F</i>	1.327		6.489		.933	
<i>p</i>	.266		.002		.394	

To this end, an analysis of covariance was carried out based on the assumption that the attitude variable exerts its influence – if at all – as an intervening variable. Therefore a model was set up which made it possible to estimate the amount of consumption for any given level of income. Income, age, and family status were used as covariates. Family

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**Table 6: Analysis of Covariance: Controlling the Effects of Age, Income, and Family Status on Consumption**

Variable	Total consumption		Possession		Expenditure	
	F	p	F	p	F	p
Age	129.4	.000	100.5	.000	68.9	.000
Income	194.5	.000	135.4	.000	117.6	.000
Family status	9.7	.000	8.7	.000	6.2	.000
MAT-POST	5.3	.005	3.0	.048	4.9	.008
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.245		.188		.161	
MCA	Deviation Eta		Deviation Eta		Deviation Eta	
<b>Unadjusted</b>		.15		.10		.14
MAT	-1.32		-.51		-.81	
0	.15		.07		.08	
POST	.91		.24		.68	
<b>Adjusted</b>		.09		.07		.09
MAT	-.80		-.26		-.54	
0	.14		.07		.08	
POST	-.08		-.28		.21	

status included: single persons without children, couples without children, single persons or couples with children.

The model assumptions, however, were only partly fulfilled: The homogeneity of variances is obviously violated with regard to age, and the homogeneity of regressions seems not to be given. As shown in Table 6, the model explains approximately 20% of the variance and results in significant, though weak effects for the MAT-POST-variable.

When one considers the total consumption level, the results indicate that the standard of living of the "postmaterialists" would be substantially higher if they had a different attitude: The adjusted value for the consumption level is still higher than that of the materialists, but slightly below the middle group level.

The two consumption components behave differently: As a consequence of controlling the covariates, the possession of durable consumer goods is reduced for the "postmaterialists," but not the consumption of non-durables and services.

According to this outcome, both views presented in the introduction seem to be correct: In absolute terms, the postmaterialists enjoy a higher material standard of living than the other two groups, but in relation to their consuming power, on average they spend less than would be expected. In the main, they refrain from purchasing goods produced by the industrial system that is under criticism from the new social movements.

## Results for the Subpopulations and General Discussion

When the data are examined with respect to the various subsamples (Table 7), it becomes evident that for the paid employees there exists no statistically significant relationship at all between the materialism – postmaterialism variable and level of consumption. In fact, the effects become insignificant for all subgroups as soon as the background variables are controlled for (Table 8).

Table 7: Results for the Subsamples: Analysis of Variance for the MAT-POST Categories

Subpopulations	Total consumption		Possession		Expenditure	
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Housewives	4.2371	.0161	3.4598	.0338	2.8091	.0633
Heads of households	3.9131	.0205	1.5626	.2105	5.5871	.0040
Paid employees with their own households	.9536	.3851	.5943	.5524	1.9737	.1402

One possible explanation of this result is of a statistical nature. It could be that the effects investigated are typically small, and would be evident only in larger samples. But there are arguments that suggest a substantial interpretation.

Firstly, the results can be taken to indicate that the influence of attitude variables on economic matters is of little importance.

Secondly, our results can be used by those who doubt the validity of the materialism – postmaterialism variable.

**Table 8: Analysis of Covariance: Significance of MAT-POST in the Subsamples (Controlled for Background Variables)**

Subpopulations	Total consumption		Possession		Expenditure	
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Housewives <sup>1</sup>	2.303	.103	2.348	.099	1.415	.246
Heads of households <sup>2</sup>	1.069	.344	1.565	.210	1.678	.188
Paid employees with their own households <sup>3</sup>	.210	.811	.278	.757	.171	.843

1) Controlled for age and income.

2) Controlled for age, income, and family status.

3) Controlled for age, income, professional position, and number of paid employees in the household.

Thirdly, I would like to point out the problem implicitly contained in most evaluations of the influence of individual attitudes on consumers' behaviour in general. Consumption was registered at the level of households, which may well be a reasonable method; however, normative attitudes concern individuals. Therefore there are actually two aggregation problems which distort the relationship between individual attitudes and household consumption: (a) In what way do individual members of a household influence decisions about the level of consumption? (b) To what extent are households homogeneous with respect to their normative attitudes?

On the basis of these considerations, the differing results could also originate from the phenomenon of "truncation of variance" in the subgroups, which was brought forward in connection with estimations of subgroup wage functions, based on human capital theory (cf. Cain, 1976, p. 1246). In this case, lack of homogeneity of variances would be given a substantive interpretation and the actual interaction of household members would have to be examined. Such considerations suggest that the extent of the influence of value orientations on the consumption behaviour of households will depend on the actual homogeneity of households. Another investigation could start from this point.

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