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Parental Worldview and Children

Contributors: Bethany Van Brunt & Brian Van Brunt

Edited by: Fathali M. Moghaddam

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—Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

—José Martí

—Victarion Greyjoy, in *A Feast for Crows*, by George R. R. Martin

Political worldview is influenced by an assortment of factors, including peers, family, religious affiliation, culture and ethnicity, local environment, community, and one's underlying sense of purpose and meaning in the world. In addition to individual issues, such as attitudes toward gender identity, minimum wage, capital punishment, abortion, the right to bear arms, and environmental protections, it is reasonable to see primary family interactions as being central in shaping individuals' political and cultural worldview. This entry explores the relationship between the worldview of parents and how this can impact the development of the perspectives and ideologies of their children.

Worldview and Cultural Outlook

The concept of worldview can be understood as the way in which individuals perceive their environment through their unique set of senses, observations, and perspectives. This framework then allows individuals to process and interpret new information and incorporate this first-hand material into their view of the world. It is a process primarily informed by experiences that individuals acquire throughout their development. In early childhood, as children begin to experience the world, they form a perspective unique to their upbringing. As their circle of influence expands, so does their perspective and worldview. The environments through which they are exposed to new experiences includes their peer group, primary family, and educators in a school setting; religious or spiritual groups such churches or synagogues; popular media; and their surrounding neighborhood, town, city, county, country, and continent. These interactions and experiences combine to shape individuals' thoughts on philosophy and what it means to live a good life.

The first and most pervasive influence on children is their parents. As such, parents often strive to instill in their children a compliance with their own worldview. Young children tend to parrot their parents' views and, as long as they are living with their parents, will most often share their parents' political stances. However, as they leave the nest and come into contact with people and ideas outside of their parents' influence, young adults develop their own opinions and beliefs based on new experiences and interactions. Parents may continue to attempt to influence their children to maintain a viewpoint that is in agreement with their own, but given the myriad influences in the lives of young adults, there is as much chance that they will reject those teachings as accept them.

Parents of millennials in 2016 may have strong feelings related to the fall of the Soviet Union, struggles by world economies such as Japan in the early 1990s, and the supremacy of the United States in the Gulf War as evidence of U.S. capitalism's success. Calls to make the United States "great again" and for country to return to its past success are often a clarion appeal in the political landscape of 2016. Millennials, in turn, may remember all too well the near collapse of the banking system in the United States in 2007–2008 surrounding subprime lending and deceptive mortgage practices. These young adults may feel the need for the country to move forward, rejecting what they see as previous failed policies. In both cases, the worldview of the parents as well as the worldview of the millennial children are informed by their experiences and subscribe to certain premises that make finding a common ground

difficult to discover.

Parents in this scenario might chide, “You don’t know enough history to know about what this country once had the potential to become.” Meanwhile, the millennial might retort, “I’ve been making critically informed decisions for years about which smart phone company to use. You know what I learned? That the desire of companies to sell you on their products is more important to them than telling the truth. The whole banking structure almost collapsed when I was in my sophomore year of high school. I don’t have a lot of faith in the system.”

To this end, worldview is influenced by firsthand experience as well as the environment within which both parents and children exist. Once a premise or belief becomes hardened and fixed, it is difficult to shift to a new perspective. The flexibility of talking, exploring concepts, discussing politics, and finding a common ground often gives way to talking points, sound bites, and in the United States, the continued development of an intensely bifurcated two-party political system. Many cultures have a deep sense of tradition that requires younger generations to follow suit. However, in each of these cases, as outside influences come to bear and the world is opened up to young adults, parents’ roles are diminished and other forces exert greater influence, leading to the formation of opinions and ideologies based on those influences.

Parental Pressure for Compliance to an Existing Worldview

When individuals hold a strong ideology such as a religious or political view, there is a reasonable human desire to enlist others into viewing the world from this same perspective. This process reinforces their belief. As more followers join, there is a reinforcement of believers’ existing way of seeing the world from a particular religious or political viewpoint, which becomes shaped and encouraged. Parents may wish to count their children among these followers.

In addition, there is a safety in the known. As parents begin to help their children interact with the world outside the safety of the primary support group, they search for ways to create stability, predictability, and safety. By encouraging children to buy into their own worldview and perspectives, parents gain reassurance that their children will then act in a way that is in line with their expectations, behave in a known way, and live a happy—or at least similarly moral—life.

There is also awareness by many parents that the behavior of their children is learned. This is supported by scientific studies such as Albert Bandura’s work at Stanford University in 1961, dubbed the Bobo Doll Experiment. The study demonstrated that social behaviors such as aggression can be acquired by observation and imitation. This idea is also taught in many religious texts, including the Bible, as in Proverbs 22:6, which states, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” Even Aristotle shared his thoughts on the influence that parents and educators have on the young in his text, *Nicomachean Ethics*, stating, “In educating the young, we steer them by the rudders of pleasure and pain.” Parents use this knowledge to instruct their children in the way they wish them to behave and the worldview they wish them to maintain.

For those familiar with child and young adult development theory as explored by Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, Carol Gilligan, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Arthur Chickering, we understand that over time and as the brain of the child develops, there is an increased desire for differentiation from the primary support group—for self-exploration. Once children begin on the path to

adulthood in their teenage years, it is expected that their increasing desire for independence and differentiation will come crashing head-on with the parents' desire for control.

To further complicate matters, there is the looming pressure of the offspring leaving the house. After spending a considerable amount of time and energy raising, educating, and protecting their children, parents have a vested interest in ensuring their safe launch into the world. This can become a less stressful transition when the offspring share their parents' worldview, thereby creating a sense of safety and consistency in their behavior. In this scenario, parents are also challenged to redefine the meaning of their own lives as their parenting responsibilities develop, shift, and mature throughout their children's late teens and early 20s.

Whether informed by liberal or conservative ideologies, parents influence and exert pressure on their children's development of worldview. Imagine the following messages and dinner table conversations and how these messages might influence the political ideology of developing children:

- "We won't go to vacation in North Carolina this year because of the state's transphobic bathroom policy."
- "Those on welfare need to stop leaning so much on the government and start to work for a living to solve their own problems."
- "Just because Daddy makes more money than other people doesn't mean he works harder than other people who make less money."
- "We won't shop at that chain store, because as a company, it creates unsafe spaces in its bathrooms, where predators can assault our daughters."
- "By providing affordable health care to everyone, we create a stronger society. If we can afford to spend trillions on nuclear weapons and new jet fighters, we should spend the same on health care and to end poverty."
- "The reason our economy is so weak is because liberals refuse to instill solid conservative beliefs in their children. Children need to be told 'no,' to have limits, and go to church. Everyone can't win. Equal opportunity does not guarantee equal outcomes. Everyone doesn't get prizes."

Willingness to Encourage Exploration and Diversity

While cultural influences and larger religious beliefs certainly influence individuals' sense of politics and worldview, there is an inherent good in fostering the dual concepts of critical thinking and autonomy when it comes to the personalization and adoption of a particular worldview, whether political or otherwise. Philosophy itself can be defined as a love of knowledge and wisdom. As there is no ideal political worldview, many would argue that the teaching of children to explore, assess, and critically review religion, philosophy, and politics would be the highest aspiration. However, others may suggest that by raising children consistently under a religious or political system throughout their formative years, they are providing the children with a foundation on which to make sound choices and life decisions, providing them with a better opportunity to buy into and live their parents' version of a "good life."

So then, must parents struggle with the question of whether there is some intrinsic good in pursuing knowledge and wisdom as the goals to have a good life? Philosophers and politicians have long argued the merits of a good life. Is the ascetic sacrifice of free will and worldly pleasures for a reward in the life to come after death the pursuit of a good life? Is

happiness and satiating desires found in the concepts of capitalism or hedonistic pursuits a good life? Is fostering a more altruistic approach, such as those found in the tenets of socialism or religious traditions that focus on serving others rather than self a better goal (given that capitalism *can* be altruistic and socialism *can* enrich those in power while limiting resources to the multitudes)? Both have their virtues and vices. Each of these perspectives has some arguable merit.

Parents may have very specific viewpoints on these questions and will often attempt to pass those on to their children. However, many find that instilling the love of knowledge, philosophy, and politics is a nobler goal than indoctrinating children into a fixed way of looking at the world. While some choose to attempt to indoctrinate their children with their own philosophies, many attempt to raise individuals who can make their own choices based on their experiences rather than by following expectations set forth by parents, society, church, school, or the dominant beliefs common to a certain geographic location.

It may appear reasonable for parents to say something such as, "I don't send or take my child to church; I want them to decide about religion on their own when they are older." Yet the problem here is they are sending the message that church and religion are not important to them. It may be that parents can't help but "indoctrinate" their children just by the fact that they live together and children observe their parents' behavior and attitudes for good or ill.

Some question whether independent thought should be seen as the pinnacle of self-actualization. Do we aim for the ability to draw from past experience and tradition all the while forging a more personal outlook that draws from independent choice regarding how to live a good and meaningful life? Culture and religious ideologies and beliefs need to be considered here as well. Eastern Hindu cultures that are steeped in the caste system of India may have a drastically different understanding of political good than, say, a blue-collar worker from Indiana. Following in the established path of elders and religious leaders in the Mormon church may be seen as more essential than the desire for autonomy and independence when forming political opinions. The Amish rite of passage *Rumspringa* splits the difference between forced capitulation to an existing system and encouraging independence and exploration. When Amish teens are 14 or 15 years old, they are given an opportunity to experience the world before committing to the community's values, politics, and philosophies.

While many parents wish to indoctrinate their children with a specific ideology, this is rarely possible in our open society. Teaching an awareness of tradition and history, but ultimately allowing children the freedom to make their own choices is perhaps an important goal. Parents can and should encourage their children to understand their cultural, political, and religious identities. Many cultures value these traditions very deeply and take a vested interest in the younger generations' learning and following them and can help shape the direction that children take when determining their own viewpoints. This process begins to be accomplished with open communication.

Open Communication and Political Discourse

Perhaps the greatest influence that parents can have on the development of their children's worldview is in the type of communication fostered in the family setting. There are two main categories of family communication. Families can be authoritarian and require obedience and deference to the parents, or they can allow free and open discussion and questioning of rules and practices. Families with open communication that welcomes differing viewpoints and ideas tend to produce children that grow up to be more politically engaged. This effect can go

both ways. Children who take part in political discourse at school and talk about it at home can influence their parents to become more politically aware and active. In homes where politics is not discussed, children are more likely to be apathetic and even unaware of their parents' viewpoints.

The more that politics is discussed in the home, the more likely that children will continue to discuss it as teens and adults in other settings. This exposes them to new ideas and can lead them to either reaffirm their parents' beliefs or change their stance on political issues. This can, however, be a source of anxiety in children and young adults. When there is no clear direction from parents for which viewpoint is preferred, the number of options can become paralyzing for some. Parents need to watch for this and guide children, who will ultimately come to their own conclusions.

For some parents, this kind of open communication can be difficult in that the mere act of sharing and teaching their own worldview can open their children to embracing the opposite. Many children feel a need to step away from their parents' ideologies and strike out on their own. However, since parents have no guarantee of compliance, the goal of political awareness and participation is best accomplished through this communication.

Practical Examples

In the final calculation, the relationship between the worldview of parents and their children is a varietal and complicated thought experiment. Imagine the following scenarios:

- A parent demands strict compliance with a conservative Christian fundamentalist religious and political worldview in order for the child to obtain salvation. This compliance overrides all other developmental concerns that the child, teenager, or young adult may express. Obedience and tradition are valued more than independence or critical thought. In this scenario, it would be easy to paint a picture of a child following the politics, traditions, and worldview of the parent without question. And yet, it would be equally reasonable to imagine rebellion on the part of the child.
- It could be argued that most people raised in the United States have been exposed to—some may say brainwashed by—a consumer capitalistic culture that primarily values financial achievement and success over living an easy life, having a low-paying but personally rewarding career, or material asceticism. Parents may pressure their children to attend certain schools or study certain subjects with the goal of finding a good job rather than following a dream career path.
- For many, religion and politics become interchangeable. Particularly on the religious right in America, there is a distinct pressure not only to practice religion in a certain way, but to vote for certain political candidates as well. Parents then exert similar pressure on their children. Parents may pressure children to vote a certain way or support a candidate based not only on their political beliefs, but also on religious ideology. In these cases, pressures increase and include religious communities, neighborhoods, and towns as well as extended circles.

Where the Path Leads

In the end, the political worldview between children and their parents is a multifaceted concept that is affected by peers, religious beliefs, societal pressure, and the media. Open communication, active political discourse, and openness to a variety of ideas influence

children most. Parents' specific political beliefs may not be held by their children, but their general communication style and level of political discourse have a great influence on their lives.

Parents are faced with the task of determining their priorities in shaping their children's worldview. They can choose to foster openness and exploration, supporting the choices of their children, even if they are not in line with their own viewpoints. Conversely, they can choose to attempt to maintain a firm line and teach their children only their own worldview and expect that their children will develop the same beliefs. However, with either approach, the children will have other influences and will likely choose their own path.

See also [Framing Effects](#); [Political Discourse](#); [Political Plasticity](#); [Values and Politics](#)

Bethany Van Brunt Brian Van Brunt

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Further Readings

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