Kevin Skelly

Living Two Lives: The 80s versus the Digital Age

Introduction:

Are young adults in the modern age living drastically different lives compared to 40 years ago?

This report aims to examine the relationship and differences in the demographic characteristics

and lifestyles of young adults (ages 20-30) in 1980 and 2010 to determine how young adults in

America have changed in the last 30 years. This data comes from 398 responses to the General

Social Survey (GSS), specifically the 1980 and 2010 responses from adults in their 20s. The 15

features represent answers to demographic and subjective questions (happiness, religion, hours

worked, etc.). In this report, I will employ descriptive statistics and hypothesis testing to examine

differences between these two cohorts as a way to generalize how life has changed for young

adults in the last 30 years.

Methods:

Variables in the analysis performed all represent questions asked in the GSS. Ratio-level

dependent variables include hours worked per week (hours), annual income adjusted for 1986

currency (INCOME86), respondent's highest education completed (educ), parental education

(mapaeduc), siblings (siblings), hours of television watched per week (tvhours), and children

(children). Additional categorical/ordinal dependent variables include subjective class

identification (class), happiness (happy), living situation (FAMILY16), marital status (marital),

political views (polviews), belief in the afterlife (postlife), and subjective location type

(PLACE16). Analysis was performed by differentiating within the group feature; a binary

variable denoted 0 if the response was recorded in 1980 and 0 if recorded in 2010.

To assess differences between the 1980 and 2010 cohorts, I conduct the following descriptive analyses. First I computed summary statistics and measures of association for familial backgrounds such as living situation and sibling count. I completed the same process to analyze differences in demographic characteristics for the two groups. Finally, hypothesis testing using chi-squared test and t-test was completed to examine if significant differences were present between the 1980 and 2010 cohorts for political views, happiness, post-life beliefs, work hours, and TV hours.

Results:

Both descriptive and hypothesis analyses yielded mixed results in this study. When examining familial and childhood backgrounds of the 1980 and 2010 cohorts, I found that in both 1980 and 2010, the most frequently occurring living situation at age 16 was living with both biological parents, as well as the most frequent class being reported as living in a small city. On the other hand, siblings decreased from a mean of 3.68 to a mean of 2.93 with both mode and median also showing decreases in 2010. Parental education increased from a mean of 11.68 to a mean of 12.94, indicating that parents were now more likely to finish high school on average. Cramer's V also revealed a moderate correlation (24%) between group and family, meaning living situation shows a moderate change between 1980 and 2010. While there isn't a great way to quantify this change, figure 1 shows how the frequencies between 1980 and 2010 differ.

Figure 1: Comparison of Frequencies for FAMILY16 responses between 1980 and 2010 cohorts
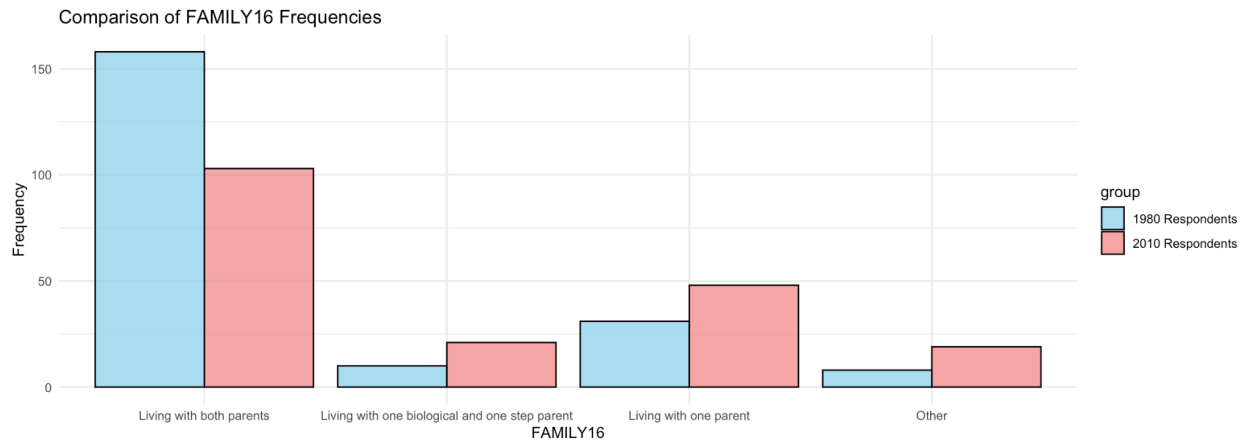
When examining demographic characteristics between the 1980 and 2010 cohorts, summary statistics revealed little difference between the two. The class variable revealed exactly similar modes between 1980 and 2010, as did the education variable (both mode 12). Notably, however, the mode's frequency for 2010 was only 47 (compared to 102 for 1980), and the median was 14. Additionally, the marital observation revealed that the mode for 1980 was married, whereas the mode for 2010 was never married, along with a moderate (0.28) correlation between group and marriage. Finally, the mean income in 1980 was higher, at $14,955 than in 2010 ($12,322), adjusted for inflation. Correlation studies on the relationship between education and children found a relationship of -0.25 in 1980 and -0.41 in 2010.

Hypothesis testing was unsuccessful in revealing a difference between the two cohorts. Chi-squared tests revealed no significant difference between 1980 groups and 2010 groups for political views, happiness, and post-life beliefs. Additionally, t-tests revealed no significant difference between the two for work hours and TV hours. Table 1 stores the p-values for these tests.

Table 1: P-values and conclusions from hypothesis testing between cohorts and given variables

	P-Value	Conclusion
Political Views	0.8	Accept null hypothesis
Happiness	0.76	Accept null hypothesis
Post-Life Beliefs	0.26	Accept null hypothesis
Work Hours	0.54	Accept null hypothesis
TV Hours	0.32	Accept null hypothesis

Conclusion:

As evidenced by the results of this study, the differences between the 1980 cohort and the 2010 cohort were much less striking than one may expect. That being said, there are many valuable conclusions to draw from this data. Firstly is the relationship between education and children. Despite less notable correlations, and hypothesis tests revealing no significant difference between the lifestyles of the two cohorts, 2010 young adults have a 16% stronger correlation. This means that over thirty years, the negative relationship between education and children nearly doubled. What could be causing this? Presumably, decreasing satisfaction with the world due to political strife and climate change could be leading those who are more educated to feel more weary about having children.

An increasing median parental education indicates a progressively educated society, despite an unchanging mode. This is further evidenced by a significantly lower mode and higher median in education in the 2010 studies. The data seems to indicate that more young adults are studying beyond high school.

Finally, the correlation between group and marriage, paired with the modes, clearly indicates that more young people are staying single throughout their 20s in the modern age. This

could be linked to an increasingly isolated society or a movement away from early marriage in the 21st century.

Beyond this, most of the data shows that young adults are strikingly similar in their lifestyles across 30 years. While this may surprise some, it is clear that young people are working similar hours, about the same in happiness, bringing in similar incomes, and even watching the same amount of TV. With an increase in technology and the dawn of the post-COVID world, it is safe to say that these numbers have seen drastic changes in the past 15 years, perhaps even more than they have in the 30 years between the two groups examined.