

A cultural model of life goals for young men in the Roanoke Valley

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Introduction

Our evolved propensities for certain behaviors that improved reproductive fitness in our hunter-gatherer ancestors are, in modern times, leading to problems in both physical and mental health. When the demands of modern life require us to stray from the hunter-gatherer model, there are repercussions in terms of our well-being (Armelagos 2005). If adolescence evolved as a period during which young humans learn how to be adult members of the community, are today's youth emerging from that period with a sense of what they are supposed to know and do? Are they equipped with the requisite skills and knowledge? Has the cultural model been muddled?

Literature Review

Evolutionary Mis-match:

- Bogin (2010) presents adolescence as an evolved trait that improves reproductive fitness by giving young humans the opportunity to learn necessary skills while still in their parents' care.
- Evidence that the modern lifestyle has deleterious effects on mental health of young people has been offered (Eaton 2010).

Cognitive Anthropology:

- Previous descriptions of culture by observers have been highly susceptible to personal bias. Cognitive anthropology defines social reality by eliciting a consensus about cultural domains from members of the society (Romney et al. 1986).

Research question: Does adolescence still serve the purpose for which it was evolved?

- Are post-adolescents prepared to enter the adult world of work, relationships, and parenting?

This research provides information about the model young men share, in an ordinary American town, for what post-adolescent men should be doing, and the distribution of knowledge about that model.

Methods

- Setting:** Roanoke Valley, Virginia, June-August 2014.
- Design:** Post-test only static group comparison; convenience and snowball sampling
- Population:** Men aged 19-25 years
- Phase 1:** Semi-structured interviews, free-listing on domain of goals and tasks for young adult men.
- Phase 2:** Pile sorting of items from the freelists, surveys to rate the importance of those items and of other statements drawn from interviews.
- Analysis:** cluster analysis, multidimensional scaling, consensus analysis, ANOVA, t-tests, and correlations

Results

Cluster analysis produced a diagram that revealed patterns in how frequently each pilesort items was associated with each other item. Multi-dimensional scaling plotted these relationships onto a graph, in which items that were frequently sorted together appeared in close proximity (Figure 1).

FREELIST ITEMS

Pursue a career
Move out – get your own place
Get a degree
Be responsible
Get a steady job
Don't do drugs
Don't follow the crowd
Get an education
Start a family
Money management
Support your family (wife, kids)
Show maturity
Be independent
Don't do anything illegal
Have a partner or girlfriend
Don't get arrested
Take care of your reputation
Don't have kids until you're ready
Be able to support yourself
Have a sex life
Work
Be respected as a man
Don't get into fights
Get money
Have courage
Find your purpose – a direction
Respect women
Have fun
Stay out of trouble
Find a good job

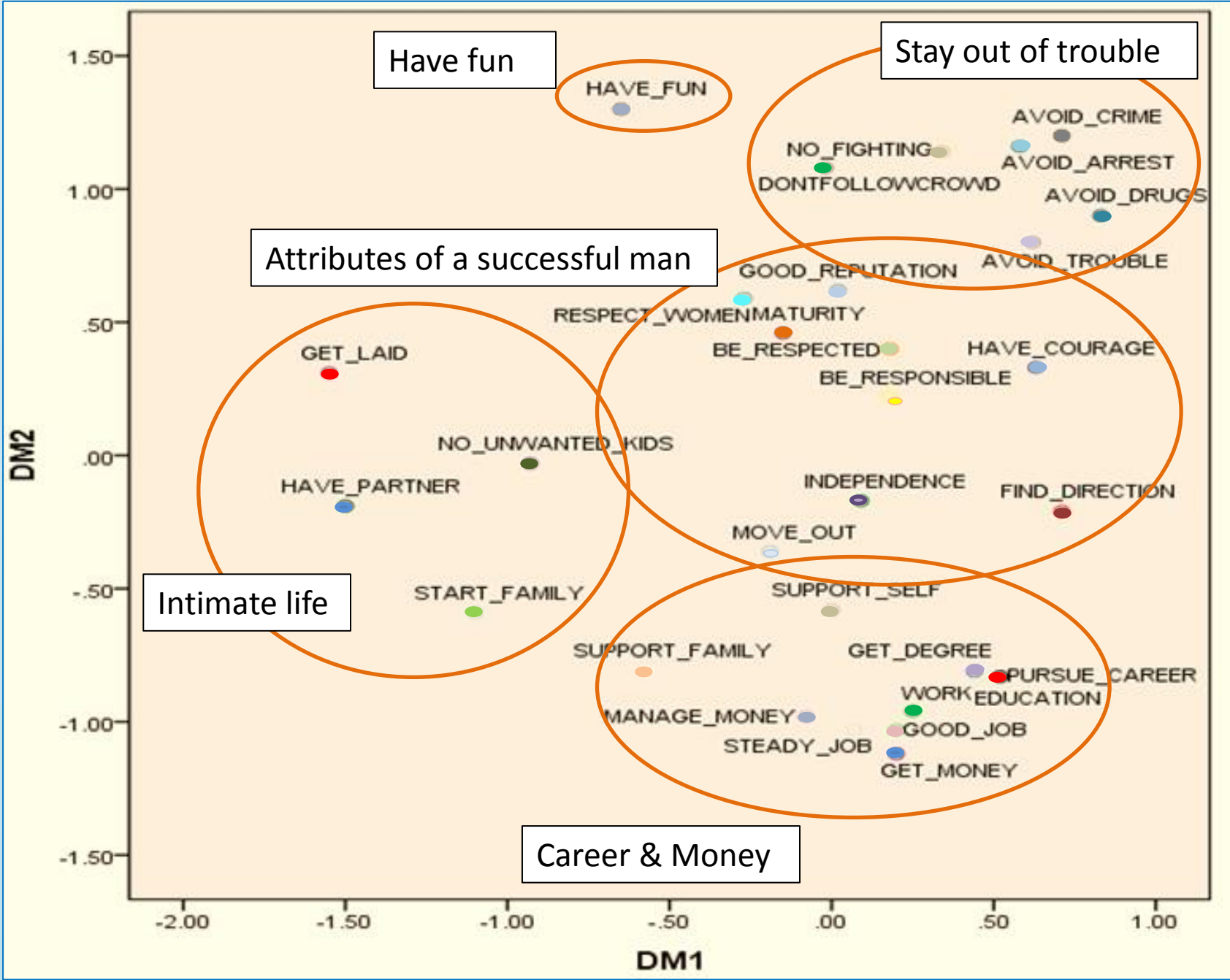


Figure 1. Multi-dimensional map of pile-sort items.

Anthropac software was used to analyze the Likert scale responses from the surveys, and a moderate consensus was shown (ratio = 4.3, mean competence = .494 ± .127). This analysis also produced an "answer key", a list of scores for each survey item, weighted by the responses of those most knowledgeable about the model (Borgatti 1999).

Nine out of seventy statements received an answer key score above 3.5, indicating a strong level of agreement. Six of these are about internal attributes: (1) showing responsibility, (2) respecting women, (3) having courage and believing in oneself, (4) being willing to take initiative, (5) controlling one's impulses, and (6) finding some purpose or direction in life. Two are about the intimate life of family and relationships, particularly about being responsible in planning one's family, and two items other items are very much related to this – supporting your partner and children, and respecting women.

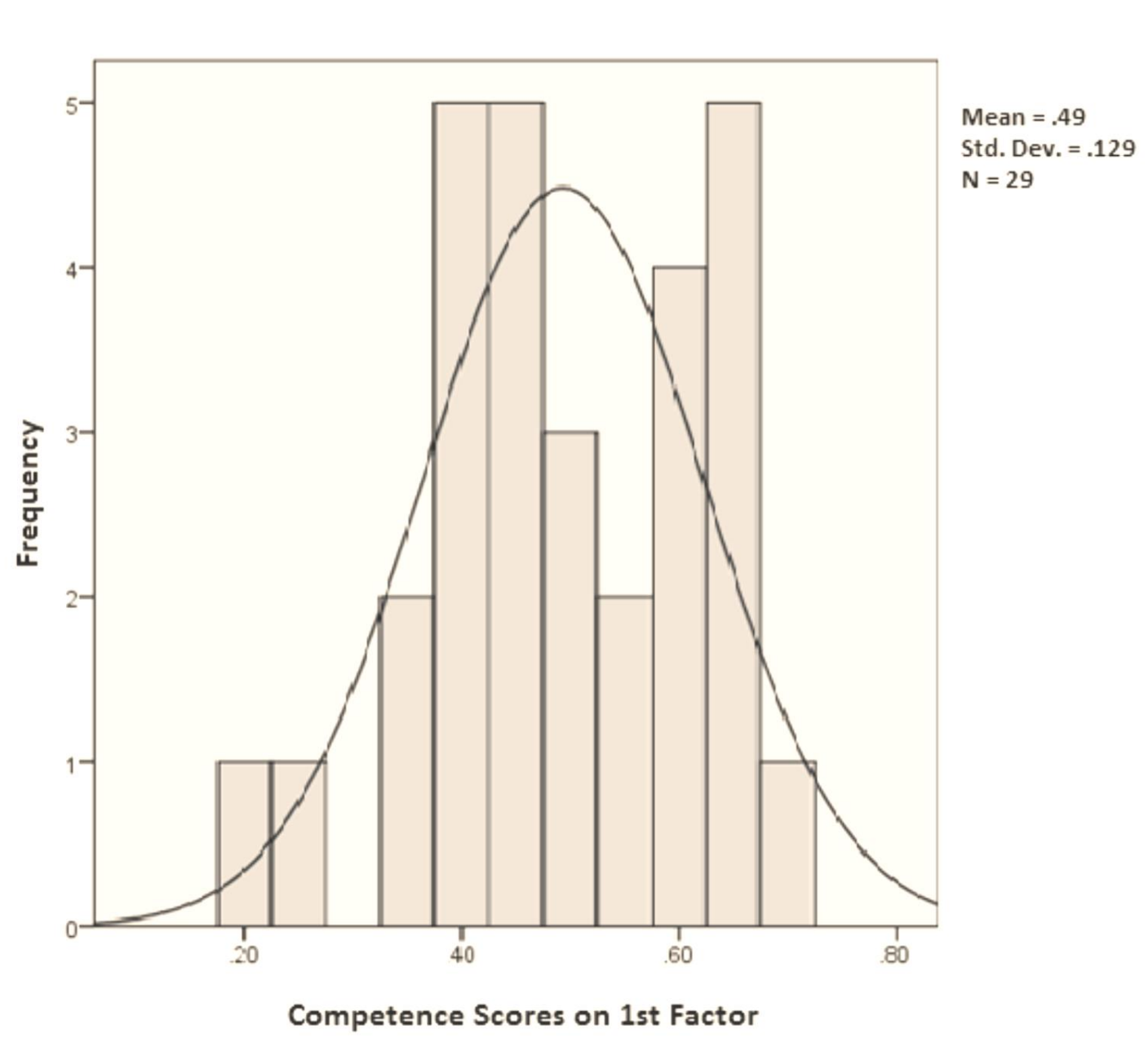


Figure 2. Distribution of Cultural Competence Scores

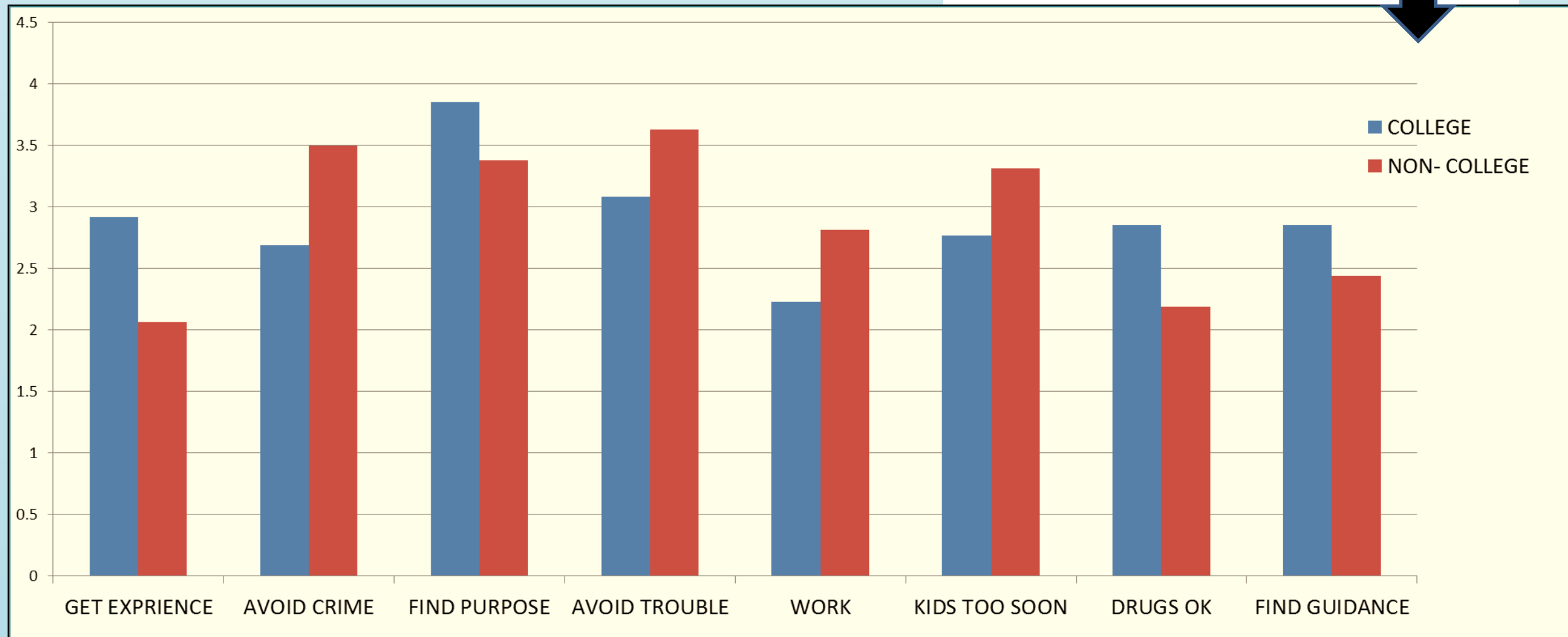


Figure 3. Items with significant difference of mean between college and non-college oriented

Conclusion

The model shared by 19-25 year-old men in the Roanoke Valley regarding appropriate aspirations for this period of their lives includes pursuing an education and career, developing character traits, avoiding the pitfalls of crime and unplanned fatherhood, and enjoying life. Those most competent in the model are non-college-oriented men, while college-oriented men seem to have more concern about knowing where they are going and how to get there, with less concern about getting into trouble. It may be that this variation reflects the greater likelihood that a working-class youth will have opportunities to work alongside his parents and contribute to the family's subsistence during adolescence.

References

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Roanoke River Greenway



Salem Skate Park