Positive Psychology: Agency & the History of Human Progress

COVID-19 | Women’s Literature | African American Progress

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Background

Defining Agency in the Context of Human Progress: “Agency” is composed of the conceptual triad of efficacy, optimism, and imagination. All three of these concepts must be activated and visibly active for agency to occur. Based on how active these observed agentic tendencies are, we can then determine whether a studied subset experiences progress or stagnation.

Our Research into COVID-19: I analyzed the pattern and trends of word usage within the categories of agency, efficacy, imagination, and optimism. More specifically, I compared the surrounding months (between January 2020 and April 2022) of March 2020 (peak of COVID-19 outbreak).

Our Research into Women’s Literature: I conducted an exploratory analysis into whether agency is expressed through female literature. Though our team does not have a definitive hypothesis established, some topics we are interested in exploring include: deciding factors on the popularity of books; how agency comes into word usage changes over time; shifts in genres and contextual causes; the switch from male to female dominance in literature - both in sales and popularity.

Our Research into African American Progress: I explored changes in significant markers for human progress including the following: education, income, population, healthcare, and voting.

Methodology

COVID-19 Results

COVID-19 Data:

Agency Words: 35.92% displayed a notable increase

Efficacy Words: 34.21% displayed a notable increase

Imagination Words: 16.10% displayed a notable increase

Women’s Literature Results

Women’s Literature Data:

Percent of Agentic Words in Each Year for Men

Percent of Agentic Words in Each Year for Women

Women’s Literature Discussion

Women’s Literature Data: This list is not only the most diverse but also the most prominent. However, I was able to find a few notable trends in the data. This has resulted in the following inferences:

• Female use of agentic words increased and decreased in an oscillating pattern around every 10 years
• Agentic word usage peaked for women in the early 2020s while for men they peaked in the late 1970s

Through my construction of the book list, I noticed several patterns:

• Women increased in popularity concurrently with the rise of sales in Young Author (YA) and fantasy novels in the early 2000s - this remains in effect
• The genre of domestic fiction rose dramatically after “Fascinating Womanhood” by Helen Andelin was published in 1965; however, the genre itself shifted dramatically depending on the time period in which it was written
• Men dominating the market with science fiction during the early second half of the 20th century and then switched to horror in the latter half of the century

• Authors that remained on the charts for the longest time often had to define the genre itself (Isaac Asimov, Stephen King, Robert Jordan, Beverly Cleary, J.K. Rowling)

Caveats to Our Data:

Although lexicon analysis provides our team with meaningful exploratory insights, review of other data (i.e., news articles, data on women’s organizations and leadership) might enrich our view and provide a more comprehensive view of women’s agency over time.

Moving Forward:

This fall, I will work on completing our list of books so that we can have enough data as possible to run with our programs. Before all the data is acquired, we will finalize hypotheses to test and examine.

African American Progress Discussion

Preliminary Data Findings:

Though I have yet to run formal tests on the collected data, I have already begun to make a few inferences:

• Significant increase in progress began in the 1960s, with the introduction of the Civil Rights Act of 1960 (in all the categories)
• Testing rates and graduation rates improved dramatically up until the early 2000s, when they suddenly began to decline
• COVID-19 pandemic affected African American males the most out of any other race/gender – both in terms of unemployment rates and decreasing life expectancy rates

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