

Life With Others: A Longitudinal Comparison of University Students' Attitudes from 1990 and 2009

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The Longitudinal Aspect of the Study

Postmodernism is a theoretical approach that is hard to define because it spans several disciplines and has multiple definitions. Most of the writing on postmodernism occurred during the decade of the 1990s although the concept really began to surface in the academic literature in the mid 1980s (from: "Rethinking the "L" Word in Higher Education".... . (No year of publication provided). The theory is discussed primarily in the fields of art, music, communications, technology, literature, and philosophy. However, for the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the sociological aspects of postmodern theory.

Before proceeding with this research it must be noted that most of the research on postmodernism occurred in the 1990s. Therefore, over 80 percent of the articles used for this research are from the 1990s. Next, there are many forms of postmodernism. There are many versions of the theory such as Deconstructive Postmodernism, Putative Postmodernism and many other forms. As previously mentioned, this paper will include a more sociological form of Postmodernism.

During the years of 1991/2 and 2008/9, college students from diverse backgrounds, races and ethnicities, from the United States and abroad, were administered surveys that had the purpose of investigating student mindsets. These included demographic questions and a grouping of attitudinal research questions toward specific social situations. The questionnaire was closed-ended and was given to the student with a series of statements or questions approximately one sentence long. Then, the students were asked to respond with Likert scale responses of: Strongly Agree, mildly agree, undecided, mildly disagree, or strongly disagree.

From the entire set of questions, the authors chose to address just the questions that focus on the postmodern attitudes that in this paper are entitled, "Life With Others." There are four questions that measure this construct. They include: "*My ideas are as good as those of an authority,*" "*All limits on personal choices of action are outmoded and unjust,*" "*A person 65 years of age is middle-aged,*" and "*All institutions should be governed democratically, even teams and families.*" Our goal is to take a postmodernist approach in explaining the differences in college students' responses to these four questions asked in the years 1991/2 and 2008/9.

During the 1990-1991 school year, approximately 2,200 college students in the United States and abroad answered the questions. During the 2008-2009 school year, approximately 2,300 students domestically and abroad responded.

The purpose of this research is twofold. Firstly, we want to compare college students' responses to the same questions in 1990 and 2008, since there has been a lot of social and political change during that time. Secondly, we want to examine how a postmodern theoretical approach from the discipline of

sociology may explain any differences in responses that occurred during the research timeframe. Therefore, since this study examines groups of people, with the unit of analysis being college students, we would like to see if the social change, political change, policy changes, and the emergence of some social movements during the decade of the 1990s may have dramatically changed student's attitudes toward certain social scenarios posited in the survey.

The postmodern theory from sociology is used because of its emergence during the decade of the 1990s. Additionally, after reading through the sociological literature, we believe sociology's version of postmodernism is the most reasonable approach to examining the four sociological questions we will be addressing. Perhaps an attempt at describing postmodern theory from a sociological perspective will lend insight as to why and how college students' attitudes changed during the period of interest.

Sociology and Postmodernist Theory

Explaining postmodern theory is not an easy undertaking. There are various definitions of it within disciplines and across disciplines. Postmodernism is, basically, a rejection of the modernist worldview. It "emphasizes subjective and local experiences, history, context, fluidity and change. Some of the main concepts in postmodernism are local conditions, subjective experience, ambiguity, and power."¹ Postmodern Theorists deconstruct modernist, positivist approaches to science in which universal truths are sought, they believe there is no such thing as an objective vantage point and our ideas about "how things are" are the only thing we understand.

Postmodern theory, according to Jarvis (1998), "is not complacent. It includes terms such as disturbance, disruption, reinscription, and the basic idea of "rethinking" knowledge are common themes to its sense of self" (p. 98). According to Rosenau (1992), postmodern theory cuts across several disciplines and takes on many forms. Jarvis (1998) explains that several academic disciplines such as philosophy, politics, music, film, sociology, geography, literary criticism, and international relations all display postmodernist elements. Even within the social sciences there are several ways to conceptualize postmodernism. Postmodernists, Rosenau (1992) posits:

"Define everything as a text, seek to locate meaning rather than to discover it. They avoid judgment, never advocate or reject, but speak rather of being concerned with a topic or interested in something. They offer readings not: observations, interpretations, or findings. They "muse" about one thing or another" (p. 8).

When Rosenau discusses words such as "discourse" she is referring to any type of work that is written or spoken and generates dialogue with people. Rosenau (1992) is quick to point out that:

"Post-modernists rearrange the whole social science enterprise. Those of a modern conviction seek to isolate elements, specify relationships, and formulate a synthesis; post-modernists do the opposite. They offer indeterminacy rather than determinism, diversity rather than unity, difference rather than synthesis, complexity rather than simplification. They look to the unique rather than to the general, to intertextual relations rather than causality, and to the unrepeatable rather than the re-occurring, the habitual, or the routine. Within a post-modern perspective social science becomes a more subjective and humble enterprise as truth gives way to tentativeness" (p. 8).

According to Wallace and Wolf (1999) "The most important component of postmodernism is its rejection of this scientific model, of the idea that there can be a single understandable rationality or that reality has a unitary nature that can be definitively observed or understood" (p. 406). In other words, science does not hold all the answers when trying to explain human behavior and group behavior. Additionally, the world, and behavior is not always rational in nature. Furthermore, postmodernism asks the question "How can we determine what rational behavior is?"

One of the defining characteristics of postmodernism is its concern with "discourse" and with "texts" (Wallace and Wolf, 1999). Postmodernists make the language of written texts their primary focus (Wallace & Wolf 1999). Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are perhaps two of the most famous authors of postmodernist theory. They differed in their approaches to studying postmodernism.

Derrida and Foucault

Derrida's major contribution to postmodernism was the term "discourse" (Wallace and Wolf 1999). Derrida, according to Wallace and Wolf (1999) uses the word discourse "To emphasize the primacy of the words we construct together, the concepts they embody, and the rules that form within a group about what appropriate ways of talking about things" (p. 407). Thus, the underlying design of postmodernism is to disturb the substructural basis on which modernist knowledge and "boundaries" are built (Jarvis 1998). Essentially, what postmodernism aims to do with modernization is not only reject the concept itself, but reject its mediums of communication, and reject the idea of rationality, which is a fundamental concept of modernity. Postmodernist further confuse readers and scholars of their work by rejecting positivism; which means they do not have faith in the traditional research process including research methodologies. Postmodernism, according to Jarvis (1998) "can be understood as "political resistance" rather than theoretical innovation, a means of stepping outside the established practices of scholarship and infusing it with critical insight. Postmodernists attack the rigidities of modernist discourse, particularly logic and reason. Additionally, they challenge the power of the hierarchy of modernist theory that presupposes conformity in method, logic, knowledge, and interpretation. Furthermore, its primary objective concerns itself with a form of deconstructive pluralism, deliberately designed to destabilize, or at least to challenge, the system(s) of knowledge premised on Western rationalism and derived from the Enlightenment" (p. 99).

Michel Foucault on the other hand, analyzed subject matter such as institutions within society such as prisons, asylums, and hospitals (Wallace and Wolf 1999). To Foucault, institutions such as prisons exemplify the way the modern world operates (Wallace and Wolf 1999). Foucault views institutions such as asylums as epitomizing a shift in the way power is exercised in a society (Wallace and Wolf 1999 p. 407). His justification for this is that institutions such as asylums, mental hospitals, and prisons enforce discipline, deprive those within of liberty, and exist to serve the interests of those in power (Wallace and Wolf 1999 p. 407). Foucault drew comparisons between these extreme institutions and other major institutions that socialize all of us in any modern society such as the educational system and places of employment.

Foucault focuses on textual analysis. His texts include sources such as books and treatises. According to Wallace and Wolf (1999) "The particular way in which we see and comprehend the world is to be found in texts. It is this comprehension of the world that defines an age and governs the ways in which power is exercised" (p. 408).

Postmodernism and Social Movements

According to Handler (1992), "The origins of the new social movements are said to arise from the student movement of the 1960s" (p. 719). Some of the social movements that postmodern theory has attempted to explain include: the environmental movement, the feminist movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the antinuclear movement, and peace groups. These movements are central to the change that has affected nearly all industrial democracies in the world (Handler 1992).

The aforementioned social movements advocate a new form of citizen politics based on direct involvement, participatory decision making, decentralized structures, and opposition to bureaucracy (Handler, 1992). They advocate the following: more attention to quality of life issues, cultural issues and more decision making in one's life. They appeal to value and issue-based groups rather than group-based or interest group issues.

Postmodernism and Research Methodology

According to Smith (1995), there are two aspects to the postmodern argument. First, there is a rejection of orderliness or standardization in research. Second, there is an anti-objective, anti-quantitative, and anti-empiricist viewpoint. He further posits "In contrast to conventional social scientists, who seek to isolate, specify relationships, and formulate a synthesis, postmodernists offer indeterminism rather than determinism, diversity rather than unity, difference rather than synthesis, complexity rather than simplification" (p. 58). Smith continues: "They look to the unique rather than the general, to inter-textual relations rather than causality, and to the unrepeatable rather than the re-occurring, the habitual, or the routine" (p. 58).

Essentially, what postmodernists are saying is that is impossible for a researcher to validate any interpretation of his or her research on his or her own. In other words, there is no right or wrong way to go about generalizing one's findings with one's research. Postmodernists would posit that there are multiple ways of interpreting a researcher's data. In fact, having multiple researchers examining one's research may actually be preferable because as postmodernists claim, "none of the interpretations are right or wrong and all are equally plausible." In other words, there is more depth of understanding of a text (or research) when multiple researchers examine another researcher's work.

Postmodern theory can be used to examine the social world from multiple perspectives (Agger 1991). In terms of its usefulness in education and research, the postmodern theory can be quite liberating. According to Milliken (2004) "postmodern discourse is one of liberating education from the vestiges of a Nineteenth-Century mass disciplinarian ethos and from the reproduction of class and cultural identities. Such liberation can lead to greater community control that would benefit from differentiation and increased flexibility" (p. 11). In other words, educators for K-12 and higher education, will have greater flexibility in how they can teach in the classroom. They will have more access to various technologies and they will be able to be more creative in the way they teach their students. Furthermore, they can teach things that are more culturally relevant to the students in their communities. Postmodernists don't believe in a "one size fits all" model when it comes to teaching students at any level. They believe each community has its own educational needs and that the citizenry of those communities should have the autonomy to decide what is best for their people in terms of education.

For the purposes of our paper, that means examining the social interactions of college students of different social class, race, gender, income level, occupation, background and other social variables. Since we will be examining only 4,500 college students, we will take care to avoid the grand mistake that postmodernists despise, which is to try to generalize the findings in our research to all college students in our country or abroad. In other words, we will not extrapolate our findings. First, the potential violation of a grand narrative will be avoided in our research because the data that has been collected comes from all over the world. Second, it will be avoided because there is a tremendous amount of variation in the racial groups in our study; there is variation in the geographical location of the college students within this country and abroad; some of the students are at two-year colleges, others at four-year colleges; and there is variation among the majors of the students. Therefore, it is unlikely that our findings will support any "one size fits all" generalization.

Sample Frame

The 1991/2 sample included 2,562 students from seven countries: United States, including Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, and four universities from Texas; Australia, Canada, and Gaza Strip, and two universities each from Chile, Korea, Wales.

The 2008/9 sample included 2,539 students from six countries: United States, including Colorado, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and two universities from California; Canada, Finland, Korea, Mexico, and the Philippines.

Findings

First, Chart 1 shows the responses to the question: My ideas are as good as those of an authority.

(See Chart 1)

Analysis of Cross-tabulations from the 1990/1 and 2008/9 Samples

(1) By Major Field of Study

In the 1990/1 Sample, students in Medicine/Health, and Science/Math agreed least and disagreed most.

All other majors strongly agree. Humanities agreed least with only 40.58%, while Social Science agreed most with 88.16%.

In the 2008/9 sample, the mathematically inclined majors of Science/Math and Engineering/Computer Science agree the most with 77.21% and 77.17% respectively. However, all majors agree in a range of 70% to 77%. The major that disagrees most is fine arts at 11.29%.

(2) By Race

In the 1990/1 sample, Black and Hispanics are on an extremely high agree level with 91.31% and Asians are at the opposite agree level with only 30.31%. Over 50% of Asians disagree, 51.52%, as compared to 14.9% for Caucasians and only 3.56% for Hispanics.

In the 2008/9 sample, Black and Hispanics are still the highest agree groups with about 74.4% each, and Asians are still at the opposite, agreeing the least at 64.82%. Asians still disagree the most at 12.25 %, which is about twice the rate of all other race groupings.

(3) By Religion

In the 1990/1 sample, Christians, Other, and Atheists agree at 79.0%, 78.69%, and 76.93% respectively.

In the 2008/9 sample, Christians, Other, and Atheists agree at 71.30%, 74.74%, and 84.47% respectively.

Discussion of “My ideas are as good as those of an authority”

As can be observed in Chart 1, over the last two decades there has been a massive shift toward agreeing with this question. Of the 2008/9 sample almost 75% agree and only 8% disagree. This shift is postmodern with its impulse towards the individual.

Interestingly, the mathematically oriented majors of science, engineering and math agreed the least in 1991/2 sample, but that has reversed in the new sample with science engineering and math agreeing the most! In 1991/2, Humanities agreed the least, now Fine Arts disagrees the most. But, overall, all contemporary students have embraced the assumption that informs this question as compared to their peers of two decades ago.

Does Sociological Postmodern Theory Describe The Data From Chart 1: “My ideas are as good as those of an authority?” In a word, Yes! This drastic shift in the response from college students between 1992 to 2009 could be explained by the following tenets of postmodern sociological theory:

- a. The impulse toward the individual.
- b. More access to technology and more creative technology.
- c. A more local and subjective experience.
- d. Examination of the world from multiple perspectives.

Second, Chart 2 shows the responses to the question: All limits on personal choice of action are outmoded and unjust.

(See Chart 2)

Analysis of Cross-tabulations from the 1990/1 and 2008/9 Samples

(1) By Major Field of Study

In the 1990/1 sample, Humanities agrees most with 43% and Social Science least with 19%. The highest disagree level is fine arts at 55%

In the 2008/9 sample, Engineering has the highest agree rate at 29% and Education has the lowest at 16%. Fine arts still has a high disagree percent at 36%.

(2) By Race

In the 1990/1 sample, Asians agree most with 58% and Caucasians disagree most with 47%.

In the 2008/9 sample, Asians still agree most with 28% and Caucasians disagree most with 35%.

Discussion of, “All limits on personal choice of action are outmoded and unjust”

\ As seen in Chart 2, over the last two decades there has been a shift toward the undecided response. The big shift, from 1991/2 to 2008/9 is that the contemporary students have moved to almost 50% “undecided.” This can be seen as a postmodern shift towards ambiguity. Asians continue to agree most with this question and whites remain the group that disagrees most. But both groups have moved toward “undecided.”

Does Sociological Postmodern Theory Describe The Data From Chart 2: “All limits on personal choice of action are outmoded and unjust?” Again, the answer is Yes! Between 1992 & 2009, there has been a surge in the “undecided” response. The big shift, from 1992 to 2009, is that students have moved to almost 50% “undecided” which could be construed as a postmodern shift toward ambiguity. The following tenets of the postmodern theory apply:

- a. Indeterminism rather than determinism; and ambiguity, complexity rather than simplicity.
- b. Also postmodern theory in sociology advocates for multiple interpretations and various ways of looking at situations and that a “one size fits all” model does not work, as it does with modernity and positivism (science).

Chart 3 shows the responses to the statement: A Person 65 years of age is middle-aged.

(See Chart 3)

Analysis of Cross-tabulations from the 1990/1 and 2008/9 Samples

(1) By Major Field of Study

In the 1990/1 sample, Fine Arts has the highest agree level with 61%, and correspondingly, the lowest disagree level with 23%. On the opposite side is Science/Math, with the lowest agree level of 28% and the highest disagree level of 50%.

In the 2008/9 sample, Medicine has the highest agree level with 43% and almost the lowest disagree level at 47%. Engineering has the lowest agree level of 23% and social, science and math have the highest disagree level of 61%

(2) By Race

In the 1990/1 sample, Hispanics agreed most with 58% and also had the highest disagree level with 24%.

In the 2008/9 sample, however, Hispanics agree most with 50%, but now the Hispanics have the lowest disagree level at 25%.

Discussion of “A Person 65 years of age is middle-aged”

Chart 3 may simply reflect a return to wisdom. In the 1990’s, it was fashionable to say such things as, “60 is the new 50,” and “50 is the new 40.” As we moved into 2009, it could be that simple logic has overwhelmed the ludicrousness of the concept of “a 65 year old person being middle-aged.” The “identity principle” of logic (this is this) may have resurfaced, wherein $60 = 60$ and $50 = 50$. This is seen not be a postmodern or modern leaning, but just an inclination toward elementary logic.

Does Sociological Postmodern Theory Describe The Data From Chart 3? This time the answer is no.

- a. The data tend to indicate that both in 1992 and 2009 there weren’t enough changes in the responses to the questions to support a statement that postmodernist theory explains this statement.
- b. This question is a “political correct” position that was popular in the early 1990’s. Political correctness is still with us, however PC has lost much of its force due to its inbuilt irrationality, thereby the 2009 move away from agreement with this question.

Chart 4 illustrates the responses to the statement: All institutions should be governed democratically, even teams and families.

(See Chart 4)

Analysis of Cross-tabulations from the 1990/1 and 2008/9 Samples

(1) By Major Field of Study

In the 1990/1 sample, Fine Arts agreed most often with 65%, but Business follows closely at 64%. The lowest disagree by far is Business with only 18%.

In the 2008/9 sample, Social Science agrees the most often with 40%. The lowest disagree is education with 32%.

(2) By Race

In the 1990/1 sample, Hispanics agree the most with 74% and disagree the least with 12%.

In the 2008/9 sample, Asians agree the most with 63% and disagree the least with 19%.

Discussion of ‘All institutions should be governed democratically, even teams and families’

Chart 4 is similar to Chart 1 in that it indicates a formidable shift toward postmodern ideation. Of the 2009 sample almost 40% disagree. This shift is postmodern in impulse with its move away from the modern (Enlightenment) value of democracy. Two decades ago, students agreed with this “democratic”

statement at a two to one ratio. Contemporary students have reversed that ratio with a strong bias away from this statement.

Does Sociological Postmodern Theory Describe The Data From Chart 4: “All institutions should be governed democratically, even teams and families?” Again, the answer is yes.

a. This chart shows a formidable shift toward postmodern ideation in 2009. This shift is postmodern in impulse with its move away from the modern (Enlightenment) value of democracy.

b. Two decades ago students agreed with this democratic statement at a ratio of 2:1. Contemporary students have **reversed** that ratio with a strong bias away from this statement.

c. Postmodern theory fits because it may explain students attitudes from a more local, micro-sociological issue where students domestically and abroad believe that individuals should “govern” their own teams and families as they see fit and according to their own immediate needs.

d. Postmodern sociological theory challenges conformity, logic, and Western rationalism, and focuses on the subjective nature of the individual’s needs.

e. This could also be explained by college students’ exposure to social movements, social changes, and political changes during the decade of the 1990s such as: the environmental movement, the feminist movement, gay and lesbian movement, and various peace groups that have been successful by being sovereign entities.

Conclusion

It is clear that student attitudes have changed over the past twenty years. In certain key areas, notably in their attitude toward universal democratization, the shifts have been significant. There have also been shifts within racial and professional groupings that are as large as the overall movements. Although the existence of these shifts is unquestionable, their causes are much more difficult to determine.

We have posited the influence of post modernism as one possible reason for the shifts, but there are many other possibilities. The nineties saw the end of the Soviet Empire and a wave of hope and optimism about the future of democracy. The inevitable disappointment of some of the more extravagant dreams of a future under democracy may explain some of the shift in attitudes on proposition four. In the nineties the baby boomers were reaching middle age, and were still busily engaged in denying that reality. Now, in their late fifties and early sixties, they have accepted the inevitable and may have passed that acceptance to their children. This could explain some of the movement on proposition three. Technology may also have played a role. The rise of the internet and the attendant exponential increase in the availability of information both empowers the individual to know more, and places those in power under a relentless microscope. This may explain the rise in self confidence evident in responses to proposition one.

Nevertheless, we cannot help but be impressed with the explanatory power of the post modern position on a majority of these issues. The correspondence of post modernist positions and shifts in student attitudes can hardly be entirely coincidental. The timing of the shifts is also significant, occurring as they do shortly after the peak of post modernist influence in academia. Therefore, we tentatively conclude that post modern theory has indeed made its way outside academia, and now plays an important role in forming the attitudes and opinions of the leaders and decision makers of tomorrow.

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Tables

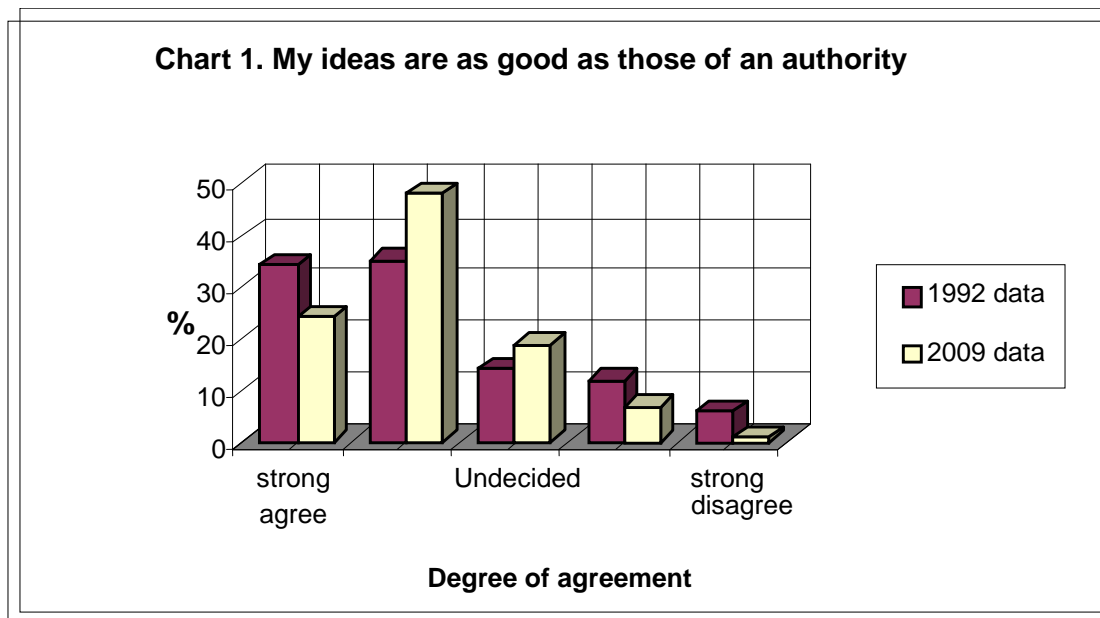


Chart 2. All limits on personal choices of action are outmoded and unjust

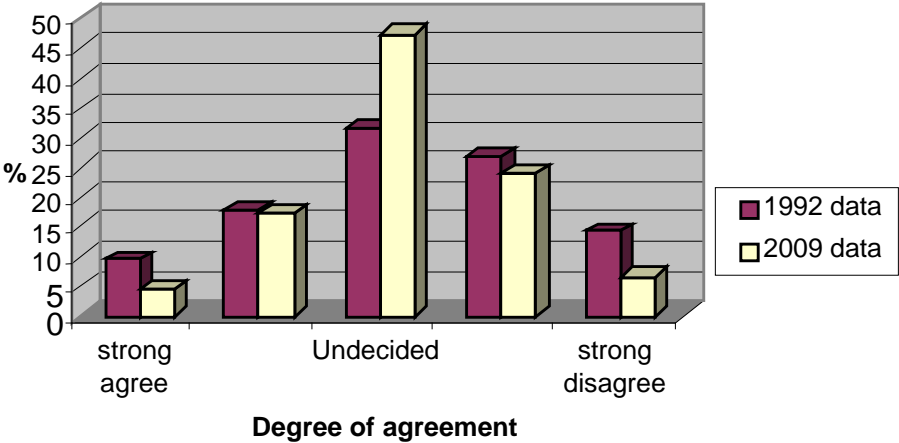


Chart 3. A person 65 years of age is middle aged

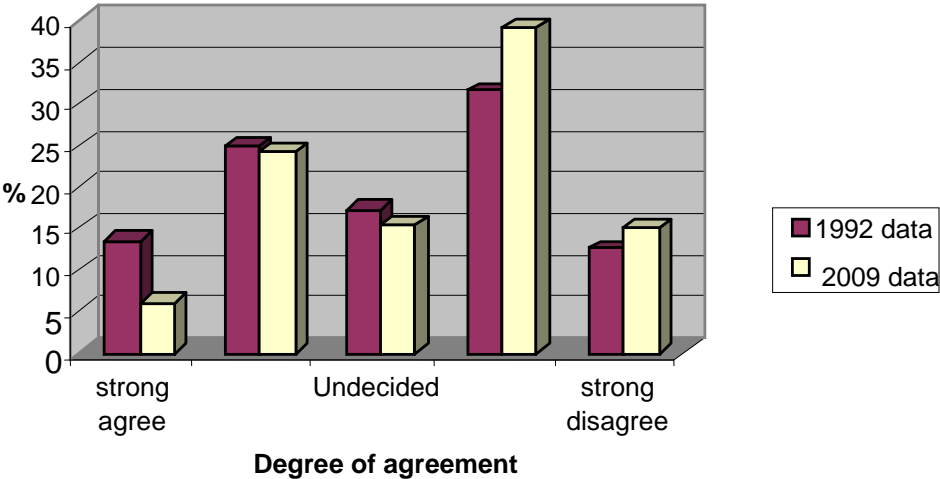


Chart 4. All institutions should be governed democratically, even teams and families

