

A CROSS-CULTURAL INVESTIGATION OF FOSTER'S IMAGE OF LIMITED GOOD ¹

Henry B. Hammer, III ²

University of Houston

U. S. A.

ABSTRACT. A questionnaire was constructed which was designed to test Foster's concept of the Image of Limited Good. Students in two sixth grade classrooms in each of two cultures, Mexican and American, were given the questionnaire. The Mexican sample scored higher than the American sample (.01), supporting Foster's concept. A measure of willingness to admit nonconformity was also obtained. The main effect of culture membership upon the measure did not attain significance.

RESUMEN. Se construyó un cuestionario destinado a comprobar el concepto de Foster sobre la Imagen del Bien Limitado. Se aplicó el cuestionario a dos clases del sexto grado en dos grupos culturales, Mexicanos y Norteamericanos. El grupo de Mexicanos obtuvo puntajes mas altos que el de Norteamericanos (.01) comprobando así el concepto de Foster. Se obtuvo también una medida de la disposición a admitir la no-conformidad. No se obtuvieron efectos significativos como resultado de las diferencias culturales en lo relativo a esta medición.

George M. Foster (1967), a cultural anthropologist, investigated a small peasant town in central Mexico named Tzintzuntzan. From his observations, he abstracted a pattern of behaviors from which he hypothesized a cognitive orientation held by the villagers with regard to the world. He called this cognitive world view the "Image of Limited Good." He wrote:

By *Image of Limited Good* I mean that behavior . . . is patterned in such fashion as to suggest that Tzintzuntzeños see their social, economic, and natural universes — their total environment — as one in which almost all desired things in life such as land, other forms of wealth, health, friendship, love, manliness, honor, respect, power, influence, security, and safety exist in absolute quantities insufficient to fill even the minimal needs of the villagers. Not only do "good things" exist in strictly limited quantities, but in addition there is no way directly within the Tzintzuntzeño's power to increase the available supplies (Foster, 1967, pp. 123-124).

The people who were believed to hold the orientation were described as regarding their own locality as a closed system, that the local availability of desirable objects and relationships was limited by the natural and social resources of the nearby area.

The primary corollary of the Image of Limited Good is implied by that which is stated above. The corollary states: "If Good exists in finite quantities, and if the system is closed, it follows that an individual or a family can improve its position only at the expense of others" (Foster, 1967, p. 124).

Kaplan and Saler (1966), in reply to an earlier explanation of the Image of Limited Good (Foster, 1965), criticized the formulation on several grounds, two of which seem particularly relevant to the present study. The first of these is that Foster implied that the world view of Limited Good is peculiar to peasant societies. Kaplan and Saler (1966) contended that it would be difficult to imagine a society in which attributes such as friendship, love, honor, and health are viewed as unlimited and indefinitely expandable. The present author concurred with their argument, and moreover, reasoned that attributes of wealth are also not viewed as unlimited and infinitely expandable by other societies. Thus, it was assumed in the present study that the Image of Limited Good is held to various degrees by various societies and the hypothesis tested was that the world view is held to a greater extent in the Mexican culture (as a representative of society which has recently emerged from peasantry) than in the United States' culture (as a representative of society which is further removed from peasantry). A similar previous study (Evans, 1969) produced a questionnaire which asked only whether or not attitudes pertinent to the Image of Limited Good were held by respondents. The approach was of an all-or-none variety, and did not ascertain the degree to which the Ss may have held the attitude. No differences were found between the Mexican and the Mexican-American samples, and there was a tendency to answer in the direction opposite from the one which would have supported the Image of Limited Good. Thus, a questionnaire was constructed for the present study which permitted an estimate of the degree to which various pertinent attitudes were held by the respondents.

The second criticism by Kaplan and Saler (1966) to be considered here is that Foster's reasoning was circular, that the data he used to support his hypothesis was the same data he used to generate that hypothesis. Thus, the requirement of independent validation was not met.

The present study was designed to independently confirm or disconfirm the orientation in the following areas: (a) Wealth, i.e., the extent to which the Ss regarded objects of economic worth, such as crops and money, as existing in limited, non-expandable quantities. (b) Social Good, i.e., the extent to which valued social relationships, such as friendship and love, were viewed as limited and non-expandable. (c) Health, i.e., the extent to which health was viewed as an expendable, but non-expandable entity.

The areas of interest listed above focused upon the extent of limitation of Good in an absolute way, i.e., the Image of Limited Good was implied, but the corollary was not. The following areas of study focused upon the corollary: (d) Wealth Corollary, i.e., the extent to which one individual's improvement in economic gain implied economic disadvantage to others. (e) Social Corollary, i.e., the extent to which establishment of any form of positive regard for one person implied the reduction of positive regard for another.

The corollary was not investigated with regard to health. Foster observed that one person's health was not necessarily dependent upon another's worsening health (1967, p. 129). Also the sexual aspect of manliness was not investigated due to the young age of the Ss.

The derivation of data from a self-report attitude questionnaire involved both potential advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side was that attitudes provide a closer link to a cognitive world view than does observed behavior, and thus the inferences to be derived from attitudes span a smaller logical gap. On the negative side was the constellation of theoretical issues concerning self-reports based on introspection, e.g., lack of objectivity and social desirability bias. The present study was based upon responses to the content of the questionnaire as opposed to the responses being regarded only as "behavior," the meaning of which must be established through correlations with other behavior (see Cattell, 1964). Thus, it was desirable to reduce the influence of motivated distortion upon the individual's responses to as great a degree as possible. Foster suggested that social norms exert a powerful influence upon peasant behavior and, further, that minor falsehoods are told without compunction whenever a pragmatic purpose would be served (1967, pp. 96-109). As an approach to meeting the problem of bias due to social desirability, the Ss were asked to respond to each item in two ways: (a) As they personally believed, and (b) As they felt most other people believed. It was assumed that this technique would have the effect of reducing somewhat the social desirability influence on their personal responses because they were given a chance to display that they had knowledge of the socially respectable responses. In other words, they were granted "additional permission" to be different from most other people.

There was a bonus in the above described technique, namely, the scale also contained a measure of the extent to which the Ss were willing to admit to being different from most other people. Based upon Foster's (1967, pp. 96-100) description of the pressure for conformity in the peasant community, it was predicted that the Mexican sample would describe itself as less different from most others than would the United States sample.

Hypotheses. (a) The Mexican sample will indicate attitudes consistent with a world view of Limited Good to a greater extent than will the American sample. (b) The Mexican sample will indicate less difference between their own attitudes and those of "most other people" than will the American sample.

METHOD

Stimuli. The questionnaire contained 32 items, two of which served as validity items. Each item consisted of an opinion attributed to one of many different persons identified only by first names. The items were answered by indicating the degree to which the respondent agreed or disagreed with the opinions expressed in the items. Following each item were the following two questions: "What do you think?" and "What do most other people think?" Each question could be answered by circling one of four responses: Agree, Mildly Agree, Mildly Disagree, or Disagree. One-half of the 30 functional items on the questionnaire were worded such that an agreeing response would imply operation of the Image of Limited Good. These items were scored such that a response of "Disagree" equalled one, "Mildly Disagree" equalled two, "Mildly Agree" equalled three, and "Agree" equalled four. The other half were worded such that a disagreeing response would imply operation of the Image of Limited Good. The latter class of items were scored in a reverse way such that "Disagree" equalled four, etc. Thus, test-taking sets to agree with everything or to disagree with everything would tend to be neutralized.

The questionnaire contained six items for each of the five categories: Wealth, Social, Health, Wealth Corollary, and Social Corollary. One example of each of the five categories follows, the first of which appears in the form used in the questionnaire.

1. Example of Wealth item:

John is a farmer who cannot grow enough food. He says this is because there is not enough land.

What do you think?

Agree Mildly Agree Mildly Disagree Disagree

What do most others think?

Agree Mildly Agree Mildly Disagree Disagree

2. Example of Social item: Phillip told his brother that even though people say that they are his friend they are still thinking mostly of themselves.

3. Example of Health item: Ruben believes that each person is born with only so much energy and vitality and that when a person uses it all up, he cannot get any more, so he dies.

4. Example of Wealth Corollary item: Adolph became very rich. His old friends remarked that this meant that there would be less money for others to have.
5. Example of Social Corollary item: Michael believes that when a mother has a new baby, the older children will then get less love from the mother.

The two validity items were as follows: (a) Martin told his friends that it only rains at night, never in the daytime at his house. (b) Jacob says that even though there are other ways to use money, people often use it to buy clothing. A response of "Agree" or "Mildly Agree" to the former item resulted in the discarding of the questionnaire. In the case of the latter item, it was originally planned to discard all questionnaires with a response of "Disagree" or "Mildly Disagree." However, it was later discovered that varying interpretation of the word "often" and a possible cultural difference in the extent to which clothing is made at home rather than purchased could have the effect of reducing the effectiveness of the item. Thus, only the questionnaires in which the response, "Disagree" was selected were discarded. An "Incorrect" response on either validity item resulted in discarding the questionnaire.

The instructions urged frankness and independent work, and emphasized that the S's own responses could be either similar or dissimilar to the way in which he believed most other people would respond.

Subjects. The samples selected from the Mexican and the United States cultures consisted of intact six grade classrooms from schools in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, and Houston, Texas. The Monterrey school was operated by large industry specifically for the children of factory workers, and thus the Ss were assumed to have been socialized in a blue collar socioeconomic level. The Houston school was a public school administered by an independent school district in the northern section of Houston. The socioeconomic background of the Ss was more diverse than that of the Mexican group, but the school was located in a neighborhood which was of preponderantly middle- and lower-middle class socioeconomic level. It was assumed that the socioeconomic statuses were constant across cultures with regard to relative position within the culture.

The Monterrey Ss, 44 boys and 36 girls, represented a full range of ability levels. The sexes were physically separated; the girls' class was in one building and the boys' class in another.

The Houston Ss, 17 boys and 27 girls, were somewhat more homogenous with regard to academic achievement; the selected classrooms contained students of a broad middle range of ability, and the classrooms were sex-

ually integrated. There were no Negroes or children with a Spanish surname in the sample.

A higher proportion of the Monterrey group was eliminated by their responses to the validity items than was the case for the Houston group. Of the 44 Mexican boys, 15 were eliminated, and 10 of the 36 Mexican girls were eliminated. Of the 44 American Ss, 6 were eliminated, all of whom were girls. It was assumed that the largest proportion of the difference in the number of eliminated Ss was due to (a) the relative heterogeneity of ability levels represented in the Mexican sample and (b) any cultural tendency to pragmatically distort responses (an interesting variable, but not of central concern in the present study).

Procedure. A pool of items was composed and submitted to two independent judges, both of whom were quite familiar with the concept of Limited Good. Items which they agreed implied presence or absence of the world view of Limited Good were used unchanged. Revisions they suggested for some items were adopted and items were omitted which they did not believe to have possibilities for revision.

The questionnaire was translated into Spanish. The Spanish version was then translated back into English by a second translator. The minor differences between the two versions were then corrected by a third translator. The Spanish version of the questionnaire was administered to the Monterrey Ss by local translators. The English version was administered to the Houston Ss by counselors employed by the school. The investigator was present in the classroom during all administrations, but did not actively engage in the administrations.

The completed questionnaires were examined and those with "incorrectly" answered validity items were discarded. Also to be discarded were questionnaires in which more than one question in each item category were omitted. However, none had to be eliminated for this reason. Scoring consisted of computing separate means for each of the five item categories for each S. These means were called the Category Scores. They served to control the effect of missing scores from the scattering of unanswered items. Also, they permitted easier comparison among the various attitude categories. The five Category Scores were summed up for each S to obtain the overall Attitude Scores, which served as the basic measure for analysis of variance. The analysis was a two-factor design (see Winer, 1962, pp. 233-238) in which the effects of culture and sex were tested. The measure of the extent of difference which an S was willing to admit between himself and most other people with regard to world view was obtained by computing the mean absolute difference between scores which represented his own views and those he attributed to most other people

for all functional items. The measure was termed the Nonconformity Score and it had a possible range from a low of 0.00 to a high of 3.00. A two-factor analysis of variance was run on this measure also.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the means and the analysis of variance of the overall Attitude Scores of the Mexican and the American samples, each further divided by sex. The possible range of attitude scores was from 5.00 to 20.00, which represented a continuum of attitudes ranging from lesser to greater adherence to views consistent with the Image of Limited Good, respectively.

TABLE 1

Limited Good Attitude Scores

Means			
Group	Boys	Girls	Boys & Girls
Mexican	11.380	11.158	11.274
American	10.064	10.781	10.461
Mexican & American	10.893	10.989	

Analysis of Variance			
Source	df	MS	F
Culture	1	14.871	12.6561**
Sex	1	0.211	0.1795
Culture X Sex	1	5.328	4.5344*
Within Cells	89	1.175	

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Ss in the Mexican sample scored higher on the attitudes than the American sample at the .01 level. Whereas no main effect due to sex was found, there was a significant interaction (.05) between culture and sex such that Mexican boys scored highest and American boys scored lowest of the four subgroups. None of the scores reached the midpoint of the range, 12.50, suggesting an overall disagreement to some extent with the Image of

HAMMER

Limited Good in its absolute sense. However, Hypothesis I was supported, since the Mexican sample displayed a greater tendency toward the Limited Good model relative to the American sample.

Examination of the means of Category Scores in Table 2 reveals that the means of the Mexican sample are higher than the means of the American sample in all categories except in the case of Wealth Corollary. The means of the two cultures did not overlap whatever in three of the five categories, but overlapped slightly in the remaining two. No specific hypotheses were made with regard to the specific attitude categories, and thus no tests of differences were computed on this data.

TABLE 2

Means of Category Scores

Group	Categories				
	Wealth	Social	Health	Wealth Corollary	Social Corollary
Mexican Boys	2.379	2.050	2.583	2.246	2.112
Mexican Girls	2.393	2.125	2.630	2.267	1.742
American Boys	2.380	1.967	1.840	2.252	1.625
American Girls	2.355	2.033	2.308	2.331	1.736

Table 3 summarizes the means and analysis of variance of the measures of admitted difference between the Ss and most other people, i.e., non-conformity. No difference was found between the samples from the two cultures, and thus Hypothesis II was not supported. There was, however, a significant difference (.05) between the reports by the sexes such that boys reported smaller differences than girls. Examination of the means reveals that the difference was due in part to a relatively large nonconformity reported by American girls. The interaction did not attain significance.

DISCUSSION

Hypothesis I was supported; the Mexican sample scored higher on the Attitude scale than the American sample, and thus Foster's model was given independent support. The present study assumed a continuum of world view attitudes which ranged from a view of Unlimited to a view of Limited Good. However, an argument could be constructed, based upon

the response choices of the questionnaire, that the Mexican sample did not agree with the Limited Good model more, but instead disagreed with it less than the American sample. The contention is certainly true, but it does not constitute criticism of the conclusion unless the continuum assumption is discarded. However, even cogent refutation of the present results cannot necessarily disconfirm Foster's model. The present study did not use Mexican peasant children as subjects, but instead children who were being reared in a growing industrial city. Foster (1967, p. 123) suggested that societies begin to lose the world view of Limited Good as the society moves away from peasantry, and therefore people in newly industrialized countries should show more of the view than people of established industrial countries. Thus, the present results conform to the expectations derived from Foster's model. A third sample obtained from a Mexican village would have provided a critical test of Foster's notion of progressive abandonment of the Image of Limited Good, corresponding to extent and recency of industrialization.

No hypotheses were made concerning the effects of sex. The Culture X Sex interaction stimulates *ex post facto* speculation. One might expect that a possible reason for the relatively large difference between Mexican and

TABLE 3

nonconformity Scores

Means			
Group	Boys	Girls	Boys & Girls
Mexican	.758	.783	.770
American	.676	1.122	.917
Mexican & American	.727	.934	

Analysis of Variance

Source	df	MS	F
Culture	1	.472	2.098
Sex	1	.962	4.276*
Culture X Sex	1	.873	3.880
Within Cells	86	.225	

Note.--Three Ss, two Mexican and one American, did not indicate the way in which they believed most other people would respond to the items. 263

*p < .05

American boys would be due to a differential view of career opportunities, which would be related to views of Wealth. However, inspection of Table 2 reveals that the two largest categorical differences between the boys from the two cultures were in Health views and Social Corollary views. Thus, more support was found for the differences in responding to the questionnaire being due to cultural factors rather than differing levels of economic worth.

Hypothesis II was not supported; the Mexican Nonconformity score was not significantly lower than the corresponding American score. Despite lack of relevant, formal hypotheses, it should be mentioned that the higher Nonconformity score for girls was surprising. It suggests that girls feel less threatened by notions of nonconformity than do boys despite their more conservative, less extreme views of the world. Perhaps the conforming behavior adhered to by girls within the two cultures is more superficial and less indicative of true attitudes than is the case for boys. Such speculations may be clarified only by further research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cattell, R. B. What is "objective personality tests"? In Barnette, W. L. (Ed.) *Readings in Psychological Tests and Measurements*. Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1964.
- Evans, W. F. An attempted validation of Foster's Image of the Limited Good. Unpublished Manuscript. University of Houston, 1969.
- Foster, G. M. Peasant society and the Image of Limited Good. *American Anthropologist*, 1965, 67, 293-315.
- Foster, G. M. *Tzintzuntzan*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1967.
- Kaplan, D. & Saler, B. Foster's "Image of Limited Good": An example of anthropological explanation. *American Anthropologist*, 1966, 68, 202-205.
- Winer, B. J. *Statistical Principles in Experimental Design*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Presented at the 1971 Convention of The Southwestern Psychological Association in the Symposium, Cross-cultural research: Mexico and the United States, Dale L. Johnson, University of Houston, Chairman.

² The author is indebted to Dr. Mario V. Villanueva, Clinica Vidriera, Monterrey, and the students and faculty of La Escuela Isidrio Carza Garcia without whose cooperation and assistance this study would not have been possible, and to Dale L. Johnson and Wilson F. Evans, University of Houston, for their thoughts and assistance which greatly aided the conduct of the study.