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Materialism, Subjective Happiness and Epistemic Beliefs of Students of Economics in Hamburg, Graz and Bangkok: A Cross Cultural Study and Discussion Regarding Economics Education

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Personal attitudes towards owning, well-being and knowing seem central to understanding economic ideologies and the way people engage in educational propositions. For example: Is there a bias in choosing study paths according to personal attitudes on materialism? Do students of economics and business tend to be more materialistic (and probably less happy) than other students? Also, especially concerning educational studies: Do students' epistemic beliefs correlate noticeably with their choice of study programs?

For a better understanding of students and the development of quality economics education, we partake in an international survey (Sabri et al. 2016) combining established scales of materialism (Richins 2004; Richins/Dawson 1992; Müller et al. 2013), happiness (Lyubomirsky/Lepper 1999) and epistemic beliefs (Paechter et al. 2013; Schraw et al. 2002). This paper compares results from different study groups of the involved universities, discussing general trends and cultural differences with special regard to current problems of economics education and implications for its future course.

Materialismus, Glück und epistemische Überzeugungen von Studierenden der Wirtschaftswissenschaften in Hamburg, Graz und Bangkok: Eine interkulturelle Erhebung und Diskussion vor dem Hintergrund Ökonomischer Bildung

Persönliche Einstellungen und Überzeugungen zu Besitz, Wohlbefinden und Wissenserwerb scheinen zentral, wenn es um das Verständnis ökonomischer Ideologien und die Wahrnehmung von Bildungsangeboten geht. Zum Beispiel: Wie wirken sich die persönlichen Überzeugungen zu Materialismus auf die Wahl eines Studiengangs aus? Neigen Studierende wirtschaftswissenschaftlicher Studiengänge dazu, materialistischer (und möglicherweise unglücklicher) zu sein als andere Studierende? Und insbesondere mit Blick auf pädagogische Studiengänge: Gibt es Zusammenhänge zwischen den epistemischen Überzeugungen der Studierenden und der Studienwahl?

Zum besseren Verständnis der Studierenden und zur Entwicklung qualitativer ökonomischer Hochschullehre beteiligen wir uns an einer internationalen Erhebung (Sabri et al. 2016), in der etablierte Skalen zu Materialismus (Richins 2004; Richins/Dawson 1992; Müller et al. 2013), Glück (Lyubomirsky/Lepper 1999) und epistemischen Überzeugungen (Paechter et al. 2013; Schraw et al. 2002) kombiniert werden. Dieser Beitrag vergleicht die Ergebnisse aus verschiedenen Studierendengruppen der beteiligten Universitäten. Wir diskutieren gemeinsame Trends und kulturelle Unterschiede vor dem Hintergrund aktueller Herausforderungen Ökonomischer Bildung, sowie Implikationen für deren künftige Ausrichtung.

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Materialism, Subjective Happiness and Epistemic Beliefs of Students of Economics in Hamburg, Graz and Bangkok: A Cross Cultural Study and Discussion Regarding Economics Education

1 Putting the materialist Economics curriculum to the test

Materialism has been discussed by thinkers and educators for ages. Greek philosopher Pythagoras, for example, has been said to deeply despise materialism and demanded his candidates to let go of all personal possessions before attending his school (Kilbourne et al. 2005, 625). Materialism is widely understood as a negative term, related to greed, superficiality, or low spiritual values (Lipovčan et al. 2015). In both western and eastern ethical and religious traditions, greed and riches are frowned upon: Jesus blesses the poor, Buddha's teachings aim at transcending attachments. Mainstream Economics, however, seems to teach the opposite in its standard textbooks: With a given budget constraint, all people ("as consumers") are expected to maximize their "utility". In pragmatic terms, this simplistically translates to 'buy stuff' they think will make them happier. (Hill/Myatt 2010, 74ff) Accordingly, from a producer perspective, companies willing to sell their products need to use marketing tools in order to establish "materialistic image[s] of success to which everyone might aspire" (Goodwin et al. 2010, 47) – in other words, marketing should be the definite art of persuading people into amassing objects. Ads and commercials need to make potential consumers believe that they would be happier, better people when owning a certain brand product – in this sense, marketing is also an art of making people feel deprived first and promise a remedy second. In consequence, deprivation fuels educational aspirations and job markets. As expressed by the song "Fitter Happier" by Radiohead (1997), today's model citizen fits this machinery as "calm, fitter, healthier and more productive // A pig in a cage on antibiotics" – modern economic systems depend on manageable consumption.

Speaking about status and educational aspirations: Industrialization turned the wealthy capitalist, the *owner per se*, into the leading personae of economics and business studies. Owning seems to be deeply ingrained into Economics, even into the way it has developed as an academic discipline. As Chernomas/Hudson phrase it in *The Profit Doctrine*, "the contest of economic ideas" itself has turned to "survival of the richest" during the 20th century (Chernomas/Hudson 2017, 12), with the textbook being the keystone of the academic industry. Notice here that a textbook is *a commodity, a material object* to be purchased by students.

On the other hand, economic and environmental crises have proven again and again that growth imperatives need to be overcome. It is no secret that those materialist dreams

promised by advertising industries are “moving targets” (Goodwin et al. 2010, 47) – there’s always more to achieve and to own, compelling people around the world into competitive races for education, jobs, incomes and eventually consumer goods and equity. Even those who supposedly ‘have it all’ need to progress even further, in order to secure their head start against the aspiring competing masses below. Americans use the idiom ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ to describe this attitude of ‘the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence’ in psychosocial competition. Envy, doubt and self-depreciation emerge. During the race, people rarely take time for contemplating what they *really* need, what would actually be *sufficient* for them to be happy.

This state, of course, does not put intellectuals at ease. Sustainability, sufficiency, minimalism and post-growth philosophies and theories emerge as counterstrikes. Branches of critical and progressive economics have existed all along (such as freudo-marxist traditions especially in Germany) and were steadily re-discovered and developed (i. e. by Nobel Prize laureates Elinor Ostrom and Joseph Stiglitz). The importance of critical approaches to Mainstream Economics for humanistic development can hardly be underestimated. However, students of Economics around the world still seem to be bound to the authority of the neoliberal textbook approach and its archaic materialist school of thought, represented by best-sellers like Mankiw and Samuelson. Meanwhile, opposing theorists like Marx, Ostrom and Stiglitz play a marginal role in most higher education syllabi, if they are not treated as evil communist artifacts at all.

In this sense, *curriculum decisions are always based on value systems*. Whose values, then, should be taken into account when developing curricula and syllabi for Economics education? Of course, the follow-the-leading-textbooks-agenda is *one* suitable way. It is an especially economic way, too, since it requires little curriculum development and pedagogical ingenuity by lecturers. On the other hand, if pedagogics and education is understood as *siding with the youth for their good future*¹, teaching Economics would demand a close look on the value systems, attitudes and aspirations of students, the cultural traditions and economic systems they come from and eventually the potential of broadening their perspectives towards a collectively *peaceful, reasonable and fulfilling* future. While neoliberal mainstream Economics tends to stress the *rational* and the *competitive*, those three educative criteria seem to be its blind spots. Their endorsement then demands the development of critical literacy (as, for example, lined out by van Sluys et al. 2006 and applied to vocational education and training [VET] by Thoma/Ostendorf 2018) as well as critical curriculum (re-)design.

These are the backdrop thoughts and intentions for a study we carried out with students from University of Hamburg, University of Graz and Chulalongkorn University Bangkok. Since personal attitudes towards materialism, happiness and education seem central to understanding economic ideologies and the way people engage in educational propositions, we surveyed different study groups of the involved universities, discussing general trends and cultural differences. The theoretical framework and study design of this survey is introduced in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 presents selected results and hypotheses, with special regard to

¹ our translation of „wenn Pädagogik Parteinahme für die gute Zukunft der Jugend ist“, Blankertz 1966, 75

current problems of economics education and implications for its future course. Chapter 4 shows an example for applying such research in classroom discussions and captures student voices on the topic. Chapter 5 concludes with final thoughts.

As you might have noticed by now, this is not meant to be a classical empirical research paper. We rather want to address this *bwp@* issue's topic by drawing attention to a specific set of problems and questions arising from our research. But far from being a trojan caricature of empirical research, we do not oppose statistics here. We rather embrace data based research as a means of critical thinking, when done consequently and with rigor. According to a rationalist paradigm, empirical data can hardly ever give definite answers, especially in the complex territories of social sciences. We can, however, use data in order to

- explore our areas of practice,
- test our hypotheses and prejudices, and
- decide on directions of impact.

2 Theory and methods

For a better understanding of students and the development of quality economics education, we partake in an international survey (Sabri et al. 2016) combining established scales of materialism (Richins 2004; Richins/Dawson 1992; Müller et al. 2013), happiness (Lyubomirsky/Lepper 1999) and epistemic beliefs (Paechter et al. 2013; Schraw et al. 2002). The respective scales have been elaborated and it is not the major aim of our research to re-assess or develop the instruments themselves. We rather aim for group explorations and comparative data in order to generate hypotheses for economics education and classroom activities, as stated above.

2.1 Our premises

The selection of these scales is motivated by three of our core assumptions about economics education, which emerged from our previous work:

- We assume *materialism* to be a core issue of today's economic challenges, both regarding the lower end of people suffering from having not enough and the upper end of systematic waste in late capitalism;
- we assume *subjective happiness* to be the ultimate purpose of individual and collective economic endeavors, thus employing a humanistic, *reasonable* category above the ubiquitous, mathematically *rational* concept 'utility'. In line with that, *value* is not understood as a measure for *extractions from society*, but for *contributions to society*;
- we assume *knowledge* and *learning* to be individual goals of both instrumental and intrinsic value – instrumental for the acquisition of qualifications and material ends, intrinsic for individual development as a factor for subjective happiness and the enterprise of "cultivating humanity" (Nussbaum 2003) (or, according to German philosophical

tradition, *Bildung*). This surpasses the idea of mere *education* and emphatically attacks its commodified understanding in the context of human capital theory (Bowles/Gintis 1976).

Accordingly, the three measures chosen for our investigation aim to operationalize attitudes and beliefs towards these three core concepts.

2.2 Conceptual models behind the chosen measures

The *Material Value Scale (MVS)*, to begin with, originated from consumer research (Richins/Dawson 1992). It identifies three factors of materialism (all citations from Richins/Dawson 1992, 304):

- *Possession-defined Success* describes the materialists' "tend[ency] to judge their own and others' success by the number and quality of possessions accumulated", coining materialism as *evaluative*.
- *Acquisition Centrality* describes the notion that "materialists place possessions and their acquisition at the center of their lives" and stress its priority in both conscious decision-making and unconscious behavior, coining materialism as *directive*.
- *Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness* argues that "one of the reasons that possessions and their acquisition are so central to materialists is that they view these as essential to their satisfaction and well-being in life", coining materialism as *instrumental*.

While later developments argue in favor of a shorter scale and compressed factors (Richins 2004), we follow Sabri et al. (2016) in employing the initial longer measure for its wider exploratory potential. It is worth mentioning here that *Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness* does not measure the actual happiness of respondents. It is, however, a concept for the extent to which respondents *believe* that acquisition leads to happiness. This can be understood as a generalized expectation.

In order to assess subjective happiness, we also follow Sabri et al. (2016) in employing the *Global Subjective Happiness Score (GSHS)* developed by Lyubomirsky/Lepper (1999). It follows the simple but comprehensible notion that happiness is a subjective and relative evaluation: People who *consider* themselves happy, actually *are* happy. Also, people who *consider* themselves more or less happy *than others in relation* would not say so if their actual feelings would not support it.

Finally, we add a new third measure to those proposed by Sabri et al. (2016) in order to assess knowledge and learning, the *Epistemic Belief Inventory (EBI)* (Schraw et al. 2002) and its German counterpart, the *Oldenburg Epistemic Beliefs Questionnaire (OLEQ)* (Paechter et al. 2013). We follow a four factor model evaluated by Paechter et al. (2013):

- "The *structure* of knowledge ranges from the absolute belief that knowledge has a simple structure and is comprised of isolated individual building blocks, all the way to a differentiated belief that knowledge is complex and interrelated.

- The *speed* of the learning process ranges from the absolute view that ‘learning is a process that occurs either ad hoc or not at all’ to the differentiated view that ‘learning is a gradual process.’
- The ability to learn (*control*) is understood as a continuum between ‘the ability to learn is fixed at birth’ to ‘the ability to learn is acquired through experience.’
- The *source* of knowledge ranges from the absolute view that there is an omniscient authority who imparts knowledge, to a differentiated position that knowledge is obtained through subjective and objective experiences.” (descriptions cited from Rebmann et al., 4f.)

Table 1: Measures, factors, sample alphas, and example items, own depiction

Measure (attitudes towards...)	Factor	Cronbach's Alpha	Example Item
Material Values Scale (MVS) Richins 2004; Richins/Dawson 1992; Müller et al. 2013 [16-33]	Success How much do possessions tell about success in life?	.703	The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life. [19]
	Centrality To which extent do possessions lend meaning to life?	.714	The things I own aren't all that important to me. [24, inverted]
	Happiness How strong is the satisfaction provided by possessions?	.771	I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things. [32]
Global Subjective Happiness Score (GSHS) Lyubomirsky/Lepper 1999 [46-49]		.832	In general, I consider myself a very happy person. [46]
Oldenburg Epistemic Beliefs Questionnaire (OLEQ) / Epistemic Belief Inventory (EBI) Paechter et al. 2013; Schraw et al. 2002 [a-t]	Structure Is knowledge a set of simple independent building blocks or a rather complex and interrelated system?	.562	Instructors should focus on facts instead of theories. [h, inverted]
	Speed Does learning occur ad hoc or as a gradual process?	.767	If you haven't understood a chapter the first time through, going back over it won't help. [o, inverted]
	Control Is the ability to learn fixed or can 'learning be learned'?	.604	Smart people are born that way. [p, inverted]
	Source Is true knowledge imparted by authorities only or is it derived by subjective experience?	.592	Most things in textbooks are trustworthy. [a, inverted]

Table 1 offers an overview of the three measures, their factors, respective Cronbach's alpha values as a consistency measure for our total sample and example items for illustration. In addition, the appendix offers a full list of all English and German items, including the socio-demographic prelude and surplus questions as well as the respective answer types. Numbers and letters in [brackets] in table 1 refer to the item position in the appendix.

2.3 Sample and procedure

The total sample for this paper is shown in table 2. The mentioned subgroups are described further in chapter 3.

Table 2: **Total sample and group data** (own depiction)

		male		female		age	
		abs	rel	abs	rel	mn	sd
sample total	517	180	35%	317	61%	23	5,6
Hamburg Education/Teacher Training (without vocational)	99	12	12%	87	88%	22	4,6
Hamburg Vocational Education/Business Studies	94	36	38%	58	62%	28	5,1
Hamburg Socioeconomics	178	74	42%	104	58%	23	5,5
Hamburg Economics	91	52	57%	39	43%	22	6,5
Graz Vocational Education/Business Studies	15	2	13%	13	87%	26	4,3
Bangkok Economics	40	15	38%	25	63%	20	0,8

Key: abs = absolute, rel = relative, mn = mean, sd = standard deviation

For this paper's cultural hypothesis (see below), the groups were also adjusted for region of birth/origin, because especially the Bangkok survey had a high percentage of international visiting students. All surveys were carried out with undergraduate students in summer term lectures/seminars in 2017 and 2018 at the respective universities. Students were asked to participate anonymously and voluntarily in a pen-and-paper version. Data was then digitalized by a student assistants group² and analyzed by us using Excel's Analysis ToolPak Add-In and SPSS where needed. Another sample of 248 Austrian students from different study paths has been surveyed online by Karner (2018) for MVS and GSHS only, in line with our cooperators Sabri et al. We refer to those results in chapter 3, but since they do not cover the OLEQ/EBI, we do not include them in the total sample here.

In most groups, the procedure and results were later discussed in class. An example of such a classroom discussion is shown in chapter 4. Depending on the target group and seminar context, guiding questions and hypotheses were formulated. Chapter 3 gives an insight into selected hypotheses and results leading there.

² We like to thank Tim Thrun, Liv Leber, Julian Albers, Max Behrent and Laura Brosius for their support.

3 Discussion of selected hypotheses and results

The data collected on students' attitudes towards owning, well-being and knowing can be assessed for a multitude of research questions. In this paper, we select a few general hypotheses which we believe are worth discussing in the context of economics education.

When assessing a multi-measure survey, a starting point would be testing the broad hypothesis

H₀: There are no significant relationships between the individual measures and their factors for the surveyed sample.

In order to tackle this, Pearson correlations were calculated. Table 3 shows the correlations of the factors as described in the previous chapter. Since the MVS and OLEQ/EBI do not suggest averaged scores, the respective factors are treated discretely.

Table 3: **Pearson correlations of the measures and respective factors for the total sample** (own depiction)

		MVS-S.	-C.	-H.	GHS	EBI-St.	-Co.	-So.	-Sp.
MVS	Success								
	Centrality	.499							
	Happiness	.520	0.336						
GSHS		-.172	-.046	-.319					
OLEQ/EBI	Structure	-.171	-.066	-.100	.003				
	Control	-.283	-.034	-.231	.115	.148			
	Source	-.149	-.067	-.041	.037	.066	.301		
	Speed	-.251	-.145	-.184	.132	.167	.311	.115	

no relationship ($r < 0.1$)
weak relationship ($r > 0.1$), all $p < 0.05$
moderate relationship ($r > 0.3$), all $p < 0.001$
strong relationship ($r > 0.5$), all $p < 0.001$

effect evaluation according to Cohen (1988)

According to this, the first hypothesis must be rejected: There are significant relationships between some individual factors. However, inner-measure correlations, like those between the respective factors of the MVS, are not surprising. They merely confirm previous test developments, reflect alpha values and the conceptual model's premise that these factors indeed play a common role in measuring materialism. Same is true for the OLEQ/EBI, whereas the factor 'Structure' seems to be rather odd to the measure. This confirms important debates about an empirically reliable concept of epistemic beliefs, as discussed by the authors mentioned above. Much more interesting in our context, though, are cross measure relationships, of which only one could be found: a moderate negative relationship between the individual's belief that "acquisition is essential to satisfaction and well-being" and the actually stated subjective happiness. This means that those respondents who expect that

owning would make (them) happy consider themselves to be actually *less happy*. Since these are the values for the whole sample, this correlation is general and surpasses socio-demographic factors such as study groups, income, gender and age. Thus, it does not seem to matter how much the respondents *actually* own – the mere belief in acquisition as pursuit of happiness alone goes together *negatively* with happiness in our total sample. The 2017 study by Karner (2018) confirmed this for 248 Austrian students with a comparable total Pearson correlation of $-.356$.

We are alarmed by such findings and draw the following conclusion for economics education: If the belief in acquisition as pursuit of happiness *per se* leaves people unhappy, educators should be exceedingly careful with the materialist dogmatisms and rhetoric pitfalls of economic theories such as consumer theory, property rights and growth imperatives. Economics must not be taught as detached from the supposedly ‘philosophical’ and ‘psychological’ challenge of defining individual happiness and well-being. In general, the role of attitudes and attitudinal changes in economics and business education should be addressed *directly*. If education is understood to empower individuals, it is crucial to guide learners in reflecting on the ideological scopes of economic theories that have the potential of making people *sad*, as the data suggests.

This leads to the question: Is there a connection between the level of exposure to economic theories/economic thinking and materialist attitudes? For our sample, the testable hypothesis to falsify would be:

H₀: There are no significant differences in the surveyed attitudes between the respondents from different study paths.

As table 2 shows, we grouped universities and study paths. To adjust for cultural factors, we only test the Hamburg groups here:

- The group of general Education/Teacher Training students can be assumed to have the lowest exposure to economic training.
- Teachers with a Vocational Education specialization in Business form a second group. They are exposed to a considerable amount of Economics education, making up 25% - 50% of their academic credits at University of Hamburg.
- Third are Socioeconomics students. They study different branches of economic subdisciplines with rather sociopolitical intentions, such as cultural management, sustainability management, NGOs and business ethics.
- On the high end of the spectrum are classic Economics students, with the highest assumed exposure to neoliberal mainstream theories since it is the core of the discipline.

For these, we calculated the group means of the measure factors and adjusted them to a 5-point Likert logic, with 1 being the highest disagreement and 5 being the highest agreement, as shown in diagram 1:

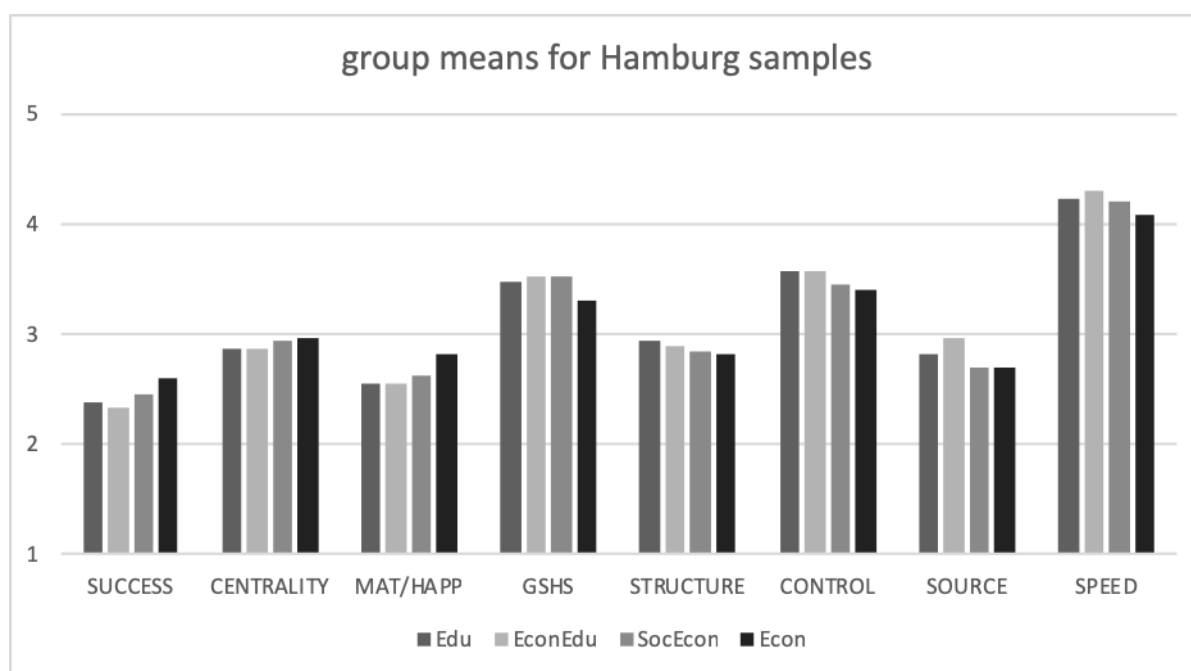


Diagram 1: Group means for Hamburg samples (own depiction)

As the diagram illustrates, group differences are not big. However, a general trend in favor of our grouping assumptions can be observed: The materialism factors are rising slightly with the expected exposure to economic theories. Also, the most materialist group of classic Economics students is also the one with the lowest average happiness. For epistemic beliefs, the trends are also reaffirming: With Education students on the left end and Economics students on the right end of the spectrum, the constructivist differentiation of attitudes tends to be high to low in analogy from left to right. An eye-catching exception is the factor *source* in within the group of vocational/economics teachers: they show the highest average for believing that the authority of knowledge rather lies within subjective experience. We suggest following explanation: Vocational teachers in Hamburg usually have apprenticeship and work experience, as reflected in the higher mean age of these students. Work experience increases the appreciation of practical or tacit knowledge and supports a positive attitude towards individual, informal ways of solving work-related problems.

Although enticing for discussion, group differences were not statistically significant with this four-category grouping. However, significant differences *could* be calculated³ for a two-category solution, combining our first two groups into “Education” and the latter two into “Economics”. This again reflects the findings of Karner (limit to group differences in MVS and GSHS factors). Karner, however, decided to group Vocational Education with *Economics*, not with *Education*. This was partly due to a lack in sample size, thus a rather technical decision. It can be justified by the higher exposure to domain specific Economics courses in the Austrian system, though. In the end, it leaves us with the question of how to classify Vocational Education: Does it lean more towards the Teachers side or more to the Economists side? How to position such a course of study? If Economics Education is right in the middle of Economics and Education, what is its genuine identity? In the light of this issue

³ $p < .05$ using ANOVA

of bwp@ and our discussion so far, we see this as an important area of practice. Economics Education has a high impact on economization processes, which again affect education on a general level. Thus, vocational and Economics teachers and lecturers, both in upper secondary and on higher education level, are at the crucial intersection of two of our most significant social systems. Another strong limitation of our survey supports this: We surveyed students in early phases of their studies (undergraduate semesters 2 and 4 in the Hamburg sample) and cannot offer longitudinal data yet. Thus, we cannot conclude that the different study paths changed their attitudes in a cause-and-effect sense. Rather than that, longitudinal studies like that of Friedrich (2015) suggest that there *are* differences between study paths, but they do not seem to change much over time. Thus, students of Economics might have been rather materialistic *before* they took up their studies: Certain attitudes and moral beliefs are factors of (self-)selection. To the extent that educators aim at developing attitudes, however, results like those of Friedrich suggest that studies do not (yet) have a relevant impact – which implies that there is still a lot to do in order to challenge the pre-conceptions and pre-judices of students in these areas.

If there is correlation between certain attitudes and study paths, but little evidence for causality from longitudinal studies, the question remains: What are determining factors of the attitudes we survey? Since we partake in an international project, we assume that attitudes are heavily informed by cultural factors. Within the data surveyed, it is not possible to investigate a comprehensive model of the concept of *culture*, of course. However, a hypothesis worth testing would be:

H₀: There are no significant differences in the surveyed attitudes between the respondents from different locations and birth countries.

By adjusting for locality and country of birth, we assessed the data for regionality as an approximation to cultural differences. For that, we compared group means of the Austrian and German Vocational Teacher students as well as for the German and Thai Economics students.

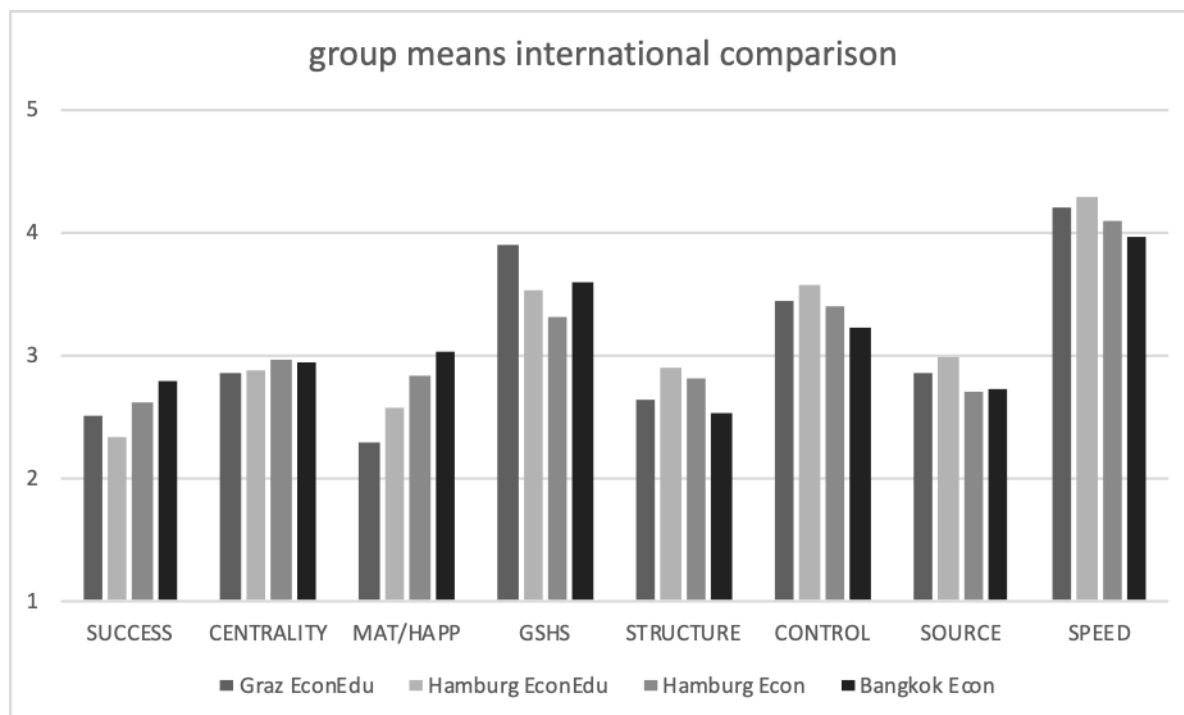


Diagram 2: Group means for international comparison (own depiction)

Diagram 2 shows the group differences. Especially those for Materialism/Happiness and the GSHS are eye-catching and statistically significant⁴. Vocational Teacher students from Graz in Austria show the lowest belief in acquisition as pursuit of happiness, significantly lower than their German counterparts. Since we already discussed differences in study paths, it is not surprising that both Economics students' groups from Hamburg and Bangkok have higher averages. However, Thai students being the leaders in the materialism measure by far strikes us as a sign for the rapid economization processes and cultural changes that the Thai megacity has undergone in recent decades. Moreover, the Thai sample breaks the trend of the correlation between the 'pursuit of happiness' factor and subjective well-being: While being below the average of the full sample, Thai respondents state a much higher happiness average than their German counterpart. This leads us to a closer investigation of the Bangkok-specific factor correlations, as depicted in table 4.

Table 4 shows that, for the Bangkok subsample, the correlation between 'materialism as pursuit of happiness' and well-being is still negative, but weaker than the total sample's average. On the other hand, the Bangkok sample shows some interesting specific correlations between materialism and epistemic beliefs: The belief that materialism is a sign of success in life correlates strongly and negatively with the belief that the ability to learn can be developed. The moderate negative relation between the factors 'Success' and 'Source' also stresses that materialist status consciousness goes well with the notion that knowledge is objective and centered in certain authorities of knowledge.

⁴ $p < .05$ using ANOVA

Table 4: **Pearson correlations of the measures and respective factors for the Bangkok subsample** (own depiction)

		<i>MVS-S.</i>	<i>-C.</i>	<i>-H.</i>	<i>GHS</i>	<i>EBI-St.</i>	<i>-Co.</i>	<i>-So.</i>	<i>-Sp.</i>
MVS	Success								
	Centrality	.427							
	Happiness	.373	.277						
GSHS		-.085	.190	-.234					
OLEQ/EBI	Structure	-.044	-.016	.148	.071				
	Control	-.537	-.151	-.139	.087	.154			
	Source	-.424	.052	.014	.103	.254	.503		
	Speed	-.293	-.260	-.100	.170	.293	.477	.334	

no relationship ($r < 0.1$)
weak relationship ($r > 0.1$), all $p < 0.05$
moderate relationship ($r > 0.3$), all $p < 0.001$
strong relationship ($r > 0.5$), all $p < 0.001$

effect evaluation according to Cohen (1988)

There is much room for the discussion of cultural factors here. Our short interpretation of the data would conclude that there is some truth in calling Thailand the ‘land of smiles’, but at least for our Bangkok students’ sample, this smile seems somewhat fatalist. The data suggests comparably strong materialist attitudes and comparably low belief in self-empowered learning, while the connection with subjective happiness is not as strong as the total samples average. Bangkok students can be interpreted to see higher levels of determination around them: Some have and succeed, some know, some are able to learn – but it is set for those who are blessed with it and technically unavailable for others. This goes well with notions of high social class awareness, authoritarianism and conformist orientations. Another hint on this is the minimal standard deviation of age in the Bangkok sample as shown in table 2: While there is a mean age span of +/- 5.6 years for the whole sample, the Bangkok group seems to follow a very common biographical route. It is important to mention that Chulalongkorn University is among the most well-respected universities in Thailand and attracts students from a certain sociodemographic. It would be important for further studies to control for different kinds of universities in matters of their recognition and student clientele. While University of Hamburg and Chulalongkorn University have much in common structurally (age, size, diversity of faculties), studying has a totally different impact in Thailand. A student at Hamburg University might give an acceptable rough estimate for a young German adult’s attitudes, while we would not at all consider a student of Chulalongkorn University as representative for Thai youths’ attitudes in general. Challenging this assumption leads to our intent to develop a Thai language version of the survey and take it to rural high schools for more insights: This group would better represent Thai youth; before the status-dependent (and as such status-*changing*) transition to university separates the commons and the elites. But this is a research matter surpassing our focus on Economics education in this paper.

This chapter was meant as a problem-centered glimpse at data based research. Hopefully, it generated more questions than were answered. As stated in the beginning of the paper, we gather data in order to engage in discussion with students about their attitudes, value systems and the impacts of Economics education. Only in challenging pre-conceptions and pre-judices can Economics be taught as an emancipating discipline. Especially the Bangkok sample shows that materialist concepts can be embedded in a broader fatalistic, status-oriented mindset. It is not, as we assume, a goal of (Economics) education to establish either *one certain 'right' mindset* or another in students, as some standard economics textbooks explicitly claim. Such a single-mindset idea would mark Economics as a *doctrine*, not a *discipline*. It is, however, crucial for educators to support students in challenging and developing their conceptions and attitudes. A dynamic stance toward our own attitudes enables us to develop informed and differentiated perspectives, aiming for peaceful, reasonable and fulfilling states. In this respect, the following chapter presents an example of applying research questions in a teaching situation.

4 Applying attitudinal research in a classroom discussion

After collecting data from three seminar classes at Chulalongkorn University, Benton and Casper went into classroom discussions with two of the surveyed classes, one titled 'Development Economics', the other 'Urban Economics'. As the titles suggest, some interjecting themes of these classes are social welfare functions, community planning processes, and externalities. While there are standard textbook approaches to such economic planning problems, a discussion of shared values and conflicts of interests seemed more fit to approach them in an educative way. As we stated in the introduction, we believe that assessing data can be useful to *explore areas of practice, test hypotheses and prejudices*, and *decide on directions of impact*. So, we confronted the students with some results from the survey. They were asked to interpret the data and diagrams and come up with hypotheses for discussion. Aiming at value systems via reviewing attitudes, we also added some guiding questions regarding the measures:

- *Those attitudes towards Materialism, Happiness and Knowledge: Are they fixed or do they change during your life? What or who influences these (your) attitudes and how might they be change?*
- *Should attitudes be changed? Why?*
- *What is your expectation towards Economics education, considering what we just talked about?*

Within full disclosure of our research interest and their voluntary participation, the students' contributions were recorded and transcribed. Many contributions were specific to the respective class topics. In both discussions, however, the concepts materialism, happiness and knowledge were addressed and linked to potentials of Economics education in line with the arguments of this paper, as the following quotes illustrate (own emphases and omissions):

*“Maybe it’s the experience you have and once you gain something like some sort of material, and drive a car, it will **shift a goal** and I don’t think it makes me happy of course, maybe it’s nice to look at, but then you want something else. It’s also like reaching a goal and then knowing what’s the next thing that’s going to make you happy. It comes also with maturing and it comes also with experience I think. You can’t know if you like something if you don’t have it.”*

*“I think that the institution or the society is what influences our attitude and how we think [...] For example, **if you grew up in a very poor country, then your attitude towards social conditions is going to be very, very different than those who grow up in a very, very rich country.** And also social events, like, in Thailand, 10 years ago there was a demonstration between the rich [... referring to the reds/yellows protests ...] and this event truly completely changed how I viewed Thai politics and the economic situation at that time. Public institutions and also social conditions are what affect the way you think.”*

*“[Economics education should be] yeah for planning our own lives like... you see changes in policies and then think like okay when this event happens, then for sure the next event will be this and this...and so you can plan a little bit more. And also, like understand certain things. **I think that also brings happiness: like to understand things.**”*

*“For me I think one of the most important things is knowledge. If I am going to class, I really want to get something new, what we already said, and yeah **change my mind, my attitude** about a special topic for example.”*

*“Maybe [apply Economics knowledge in] corporate worlds? Cause many [...] end up doing business studies afterwards. And I think most of them think about it. So maybe if we think about the economic implications of actual [...] As in like game theory - it’s really fun but **it’s not like there are actual ‘you play I play’ situations.**”*

These examples illustrate many arguments we lined out so far from a student perspective. To round off this chapter, we want to reproduce one more remarkable student contribution: It marks *materialism as a driving force of arguable commodification*. Thus, the student eventually links economization and Economics education, pinpointing the theme of this issue of bwp@:

“I only hope that the study of Economics in the future takes into account more factors. Because if you consider, the market mechanism has been used to solve many problems in our daily lives. For example, if you go to an amusement park, if you don’t want to wait in line too long, you can just buy some other fast pass. If you want to produce more as a firm, then there is a pollution right for you to purchase. If we try to commodify everything in our life, then on the one hand it means, if we have money, then we can buy those particular goods, but as the market mechanism craves into almost every aspect of our lives, things that should have been outside of the market have been moved here, for example education, health care system – these two things

for example should not have been commodified at all. Because if we live in a society that money can buy anything, then what about those who don't have money at all? This is one thing that I believe, the study of Economics should be more concerned about - adding moral factors as well."

5 Final thoughts

In this paper, we investigated several students' attitudes towards materialism, happiness and knowledge. We used data to question pre-concepts important for Economics education and heard students about their expectations. In line with our starting point arguments, students wish for a more pragmatic, critical, multi-perspective education – an education that challenges attitudes and assumptions. We see this demand arising from both students and educators – this issue of *bwp@* is another sign of problem awareness and the will to understand and improve. By contributing an international paper, we hope to emphasize the global, systematic scope of this phenomenon. So the question remains: What keeps educators from developing relevant Economics courses? Why is the stick-to-the-textbook-approach still prevailing, against vast critique and better knowledge?

We argue that this can neither be understood nor changed without assessing the institutional constraints Economics education faces on several levels of education systems. Future research would have to dig deeper into questions like: What are the incentives to teaching a certain practice? How do teaching and research agendas interact – or maybe cannibalize? How and by whom is Economics literature canonized and immunized, including textbooks, journals and publication rankings? How can the economization of education be assessed? How can upper secondary and higher education facilities promote an educational vision, against the growing aspirations of *business-school-as-business-model*? With our twofold identities as educators and researchers, we believe that this line of critical, self-reflexive study will become even more crucial in our near future. Economics as a discipline is indispensable to the world we live in. It is a powerful tool to understand, shape and change the world. But as with any tool, Economics can be used in both productive and destructive ways.

The quality of Economics education begins with our base assumptions and our shared values – which we have to reassess again and again, with every voice that enters the discussion. To end with a quote of Wenger (2008, 9):

"The farther you aim, the more an initial error matters. As we become more ambitious in attempts to organize our lives and our environment, the implications of our perspectives, theories, and beliefs extend further. As we take more responsibility for our future on larger and larger scales, it becomes more imperative that we reflect on the perspectives that inform our enterprises. A key implication of our attempts to organize learning is that we must become reflective with regard to our own discourses of learning and to their effects on the ways we design for learning."

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Appendix: List of survey items, own depiction

#	English	German	Type
1	Please indicate your gender:	Welches Geschlecht haben Sie?	single select
2	Please indicate your age (in years).	Wie alt sind Sie?	open numeric
3	Please check the highest level of education that you have completed.	Welches ist der höchste Bildungsabschluss, den Sie erreicht haben?	single select
4	What is your current job/employment status?	Was ist Ihr derzeitiger Beschäftigungsstatus?	
5	In case you did an apprenticeship before studying, which craft/job did you learn?	Sofern Sie vor Ihrem Studium eine Ausbildung abgeschlossen haben: Welchen Beruf haben Sie erlernt?	open text
6	In case of an apprenticeship: How many years did you work in that job afterwards?	Wie lange haben Sie nach dem Abschluss der Ausbildung in diesem Beruf gearbeitet?	open numeric
7	What is your Country of Birth (where you were born)?	Was ist Ihr Geburtsland (wo wurden Sie geboren)?	open text
8	In what country do you currently live?	In welchem Land wohnen Sie derzeit?	
9	What is your study programme/major?	Welches Studium haben Sie belegt?	
10	What is your study programme/minor?	Welchen Studiengang/welches Unterrichtsfach haben Sie im Nebenfach belegt?	
11	What is your approximate monthly	Wie hoch ist Ihr Einkommen, das Sie derzeit monatlich zur	open

	income/earnings/allowance?	Verfügung haben (inkl. Sozialleistungen, Studienbeihilfen und anderen Zahlungen, netto = frei verfügbares Einkommen)?	numeric
12	(omitted from international survey)		
13	I don't pay much attention to the material objects other people own.	Ich beachte materielle Dinge anderer Leute kaum.	5 point Likert
14	My overall physical health is good.	Meine allgemeine körperliche Gesundheit ist gut.	
15	I have enough resources and/or income to meet my needs.	Ich habe genügend Vermögen und Einkommen, um meine Bedürfnisse zu erfüllen.	
16	I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes.	Ich bewundere Menschen, die teure Häuser, Autos und Kleider besitzen.	
17	Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions.	Der Erwerb materieller Güter ist eines der wichtigsten Ziele im Leben.	
18	I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success.	Ich lege wenig Wert darauf, wie viele Dinge manche Menschen als Zeichen ihres Erfolgs besitzen.	
19	The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.	Die Dinge in meinem Besitz sagen viel darüber aus, wie erfolgreich ich bin.	
20	I like to own things that impress people.	Ich besitze gerne Dinge, mit denen ich andere beeindrucken kann.	
21	I don't pay much attention to the material objects other people own.	Ich beachte die materiellen Dinge, die anderen gehören, kaum.	
22	I usually buy only the things I need.	Normalerweise kaufe ich nur die Dinge, die ich brauche.	
23	I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned.	Ich versuche, mir das Leben einfach zu machen, was Besitz angeht.	
24	The things I own aren't all that important to me.	Die Dinge, die ich besitze, sind für mich nicht so wichtig.	
25	I enjoy spending money on things that aren't practical.	Ich gebe gerne Geld für Dinge aus, die nicht nützlich sind.	
26	Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.	Etwas zu kaufen, macht mir große Freude.	
27	I like a lot of luxury in my life.	Ich mag viel Luxus in meinem Leben.	
28	I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know.	Auf materielle Dinge lege ich weniger Wert, als die meisten Menschen, die ich kenne.	
29	I have all the things I really need to enjoy life.	Ich habe eigentlich alles, was ich brauche, um das Leben zu genießen.	
30	My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.	Mein Leben wäre besser, wenn ich bestimmte Dinge besitzen würde, die ich noch nicht habe.	
31	I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things.	Wenn ich bessere Dinge hätte, wäre ich auch nicht glücklicher.	
32	I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.	Ich wäre glücklicher, wenn ich mir mehr Dinge leisten könnte.	
33	It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I'd like.	Manchmal ärgert es mich ziemlich, dass ich mir nicht alles kaufen kann, was ich gerne haben möchte.	
34	In the space below, please describe the three things you value the most in life:	Beschreiben Sie im unteren Kästchen die drei Dinge, die Ihnen im Leben am wertvollsten sind.	open text
35	In the space below, please describe what it is that really matters to you in your current life situation and in the future.	Beschreiben Sie im unteren Kästchen, was für Sie in Ihrem jetzigen Leben und in der Zukunft wirklich zählt:	
36	I enjoy competing against the clock.	Ich stehe gerne unter Zeitdruck.	5 point Likert
37	I often end up speaking/thinking about the future.	Ich spreche gerne über die Zukunft oder denke über die Zukunft nach.	
38	I enjoy trying to solve problems some people would consider impossible.	Ich versuche gerne Probleme zu lösen, die andere für unlösbar halten.	
39	Successful completion is the primary goal of any endeavor.	Der erfolgreiche Abschluss ist das wichtigste Ziel jeder Aktivität.	
40	When I take up a problem I do not rest until I succeed.	Wenn ich mich mit einem Problem befasse, tue ich das solange, bis ich es erfolgreich gelöst habe.	
41	I frequently find myself doing something now in preparation for the future.	Immer wieder beobachte ich mich, dass ich etwas tue, das mich für die Zukunft vorbereitet.	
42	I dislike leaving a task incomplete.	Ich mag es nicht, eine Aufgabe unerledigt zu lassen.	

43	I am not as much bothered about the present as I am about the future.	Ich Sorge mich weniger um die Gegenwart als um die Zukunft.	7 point semantic differential
44	I like to work for a company that pays well rather than work for one that pays less but gives greater freedom.	Lieber arbeite ich für ein Unternehmen, das ein gutes Gehalt bezahlt als für ein Unternehmen, das weniger bezahlt, aber mehr Freiheiten gibt.	
45	I feel that I can succeed at almost anything I try.	Ich habe das Gefühl, dass ich fast alles schaffe, was ich versuche.	
46	In general, I consider myself: not a very happy person / ... / a very happy person	Meistens betrachte ich mich selbst als... keinen glücklichen Menschen / ... / sehr glücklichen Menschen	
47	Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself: less happy / ... / more happy	Verglichen mit meinen Freundinnen und Freunden betrachte ich mich als... weniger glücklich / ... / viel glücklicher	
48	Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you? not at all / ... / a great deal	Manche Menschen sind oft sehr glücklich. Sie freuen sich am Leben, egal was passiert, und machen aus allem das Beste. Wie sehr trifft das auch auf Sie zu? überhaupt nicht / ... / sehr zutreffend	
49	Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you? not at all / ... / a great deal	Manche Menschen sind nicht so glücklich. Obwohl sie nicht deprimiert sind, sehen sie nicht so glücklich aus, wie sie sein könnten. Wie sehr trifft das auch für Sie zu? überhaupt nicht / ... / sehr zutreffend	5 point Likert
a	Most things in textbooks are trustworthy.	Das meiste, was in Fachbüchern steht, kann man glauben.	
b	People's intellectual potential is fixed at birth.	Das geistige Potential eines Menschen ist von Geburt an festgelegt.	
c	Usually you can rely on the knowledge of instructors.	Das Wissen von Lehrenden kann in der Regel übernommen werden.	
d	Really smart students don't have to work as hard to do well in their course.	Wirklich clevere Lernende müssen nicht allzu hart arbeiten, um im Studium gut zu sein.	
e	Even if you learn slowly, you can understand the essence of a topic.	Auch wer langsam lernt, kann ein Thema durchdringen.	
f	Too many theories just complicate things.	Zu viele Theorien verkomplizieren Dinge nur.	
g	The best ideas are often the most simple.	Die besten Ideen sind meist die einfachsten.	
h	Instructors should focus on facts instead of theories.	Lehrende sollten sich auf einzelne Fakten konzentrieren anstatt auf komplexe Theorien.	
i	How well you do at university depends on how smart you are.	Wie gut man im Studium ist, hängt davon ab, wie clever man ist.	
j	If you don't learn something quickly, you won't ever learn it.	Wenn man ein Thema nicht sofort versteht, wird man es wahrscheinlich nie verstehen.	
k	The ability to learn is a skill that can be developed.	Die Fähigkeit zu lernen kann entwickelt werden.	
l	Things are simpler than most professors would have you believe.	Dinge sind einfacher, als die meisten Lehrenden einen glauben lassen.	
m	If two people are arguing about something, at least one of them must be wrong.	Wenn zwei Personen unterschiedliche Ansichten vertreten, muss zumindest eine falsch liegen.	
n	I would feel uncomfortable if I rely on only one source of information when preparing a presentation.	Wenn ich mich auf eine Präsentation vorbereite, verlasse ich mich nur ungern auf eine einzige Wissensquelle.	
o	If you haven't understood a chapter the first time through, going back over it won't help.	Wenn man ein Thema beim ersten Durchgehen nicht verstanden hat, wird auch nochmaliges Durcharbeiten nicht viel helfen.	
p	Smart people are born that way.	Clevere Menschen werden so geboren.	
q	When someone in authority tells me what to do, I usually do it.	Wenn eine Autoritätsperson mir sagt, was ich zu tun habe, dann halte ich mich für gewöhnlich daran.	
r	You learn things better when you can relate them to your own experiences.	Sachverhalte können besser gelernt werden, wenn man sie auf eigene Erfahrungen bezieht.	
s	Working on a problem with no quick solution is a waste of time.	Es ist Zeitverschwendung, an Problemen ohne schnelle Lösung zu arbeiten.	
t	If two people are arguing about something, one of them quickly agrees with the other.	Wenn zwei Personen über etwas diskutieren, dann wird eine Person schnell die Meinung der anderen übernehmen.	

Zitieren dieses Beitrages

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