How approach and avoidance constructs of personality and trait emotional intelligence predict core human values

Vidya S. Athota [a,*], Peter J. O'Connor [b]

[a] School of Arts & Sciences, The University of Notre Dame Australia, New South Wales 2007, Australia
[b] School of Management, Queensland University of Technology, Queensland 4000, Australia

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we focus specifically on explaining variation in core human values, and suggest that individual differences in values can be partially explained by personality traits and the perceived ability to manage emotions in the self and others (i.e. trait emotional intelligence). A sample of 209 university students was used to test hypotheses regarding several proposed direct and indirect relationships between personality traits, trait emotional intelligence and values. Consistent with the hypotheses, Harm Avoidance and Novelty Seeking were found to directly predict Hedonism, Conformity, and Stimulation. Harm Avoidance was also found to indirectly predict these values through the mediating effects of key subscales of trait emotional intelligence. Novelty Seeking was not found to be an indirect predictor of values. Results have implications for our understanding of the relationship between personality, trait emotional intelligence and values, and suggest a common basis in terms of approach and avoidance pathways.

1. Introduction

Values have traditionally been defined as stable beliefs or "trans-situational goals" stemming from internal attributions of right and wrong. Schwartz (1992) argues that values have important implications for behavior, such that major values serve as "guiding principles in the life of a person" (p. 21). It is no surprise therefore that researchers have typically used values to help explain external criteria on varied indices, including "motivation to lead" (Chan & Drasgow, 2001), self absorption (Holian, 2006), and positive social interaction (Caprara, Vecchione, & Schwartz, 2009). Indeed, the majority of research incorporating values has tended to focus on their *consequences* rather than their potential determinants. As a result we know very little about how individual differences in other constructs might influence values, and why individuals differ on specific values. In this paper we focus on correlates and possible determinants of values, and argue that a greater focus on understanding values has implications for our understanding of human behavior in general.

There are numerous ways of defining and operationalizing values in the literature. In this paper we adopt the framework of values used by Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, 1990). This model has been influential (the initial two papers have been collectively cited over 3000 times) and has good psychometric support; indeed Schwartz's proposed psychometric structure of values has been largely replicated over several cultures (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990). Furthermore,

Schwartz's model has a strong theoretical basis (see below) with a strong focus on individual differences in motivation. Since motivation largely underpins the personality theories also discussed below it makes sense to focus on Schwartz's model when attempting to model the potential personality predictors of values.

According to Schwartz (1992) there are 10 basic human values (e.g. Power, Achievement, Hedonism) which differ in terms of their central motivational goal (e.g., Openness to Change, Self Enhancement). Schwartz argued that these 10 basic values could be organized within a "circular structure" based on the similarity of their underlying motivational goals. For example, Self-direction and Stimulation both relate to openness to change and are therefore physically close in Schwartz's circular model. Similarly, Conformity, Tradition, and Security relate to conservation and are therefore also physically close in Schwartz's circular model (see Schwartz, 1992, for a full description of values and their position in the model). Overall, therefore, values theoretically reflect individual differences in underlying, motivational goals.

We suggest that our understanding of values can be enhanced by considering the motivational underpinnings of human behavior *in general*. Similar to values, stable individual differences in general human behavior (i.e., personality) are partially the result of individual differences in underlying motivational systems. Specifically, individual differences in approach motivation have been linked to 'approach' type personality traits (e.g. Extraversion, Novelty Seeking) and individual differences in avoidance motivation have been linked to 'avoidance' type personality traits (e.g. Neuroticism, Harm Avoidance) (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). However despite this theoretical overlap, the motivational basis of personality has yet to be applied to the study of values.

* Corresponding author at: School of Arts & Sciences, The University of Notre Dame Australia, PO Box 944 Broadway, NSW 2007, Australia.
E-mail address: sagar.athota@nd.edu.au (V.S. Athota).

In the current study, we investigate whether approach (Novelty Seeking) and avoidance (Harm Avoidance) personality traits predict several core human values, both directly and indirectly, through the mediating effects of selected subscales of trait emotional intelligence (trait EI). We argue that a research focus on understanding the personality and trait EI basis of values is warranted as it can help us understand why people differ on a range of values. We focus specifically on the values of Hedonism, Stimulation, and Conformity,[1] as these values stem from motivational goals largely consistent with those underlying approach and avoidance personality traits (see Table 1 for full definitions of these values). Indeed, Hedonism and Stimulation tend to promote approach or reward seeking behavior (Leigh, 1999), such as pleasure and self-indulgence, whereas Conformity tends to promote controlled behavior, such as loyalty, self-discipline (Schwartz, 2006), and obedience to social norms (Lonnqvist, Walkowitz, Wachardt, Lindeman, & Verkasalo, 2009). Additionally, these values have been linked to several important outcomes; for example research has found a relationships between Hedonism and white-collar crime (Blickle, Schlegel, Fassbender, & Klein, 2006), Stimulation and alcohol use (Schwartz et al., 2001), and Conformity and student burnout (Jia, Rowlinson, Kvan, Lingard, & Yip, 2009).

1.1. Approach, avoidance and emotional intelligence

Most personality taxonomies include traits reflecting "approach" and "avoidance" pathways (see Elliot & Thrash, 2002). Elliot and Thrash (2002, 2010) and Gunderson (2010) have suggested that the foundations of personality are associated with approach and avoidance motivation, reflecting heritable biological mechanisms. Such traits are regarded as distal predictors of behavior (Elliot & Thrash, 2002), as they are closely related to biological processes and thought to be associated with systems that developed early in mammalian evolutionary history (Cloninger, Svrakic, & Przybeck, 1993). Consistent with Elliot and Thrash (2002), we argue that more proximal influences on behavior likely stem from distal approach and avoidant motivation, and include more cognitive and purposeful elements such as trait EI and values.

In this research we operationalize approach and avoidance traits as Novelty Seeking and Harm Avoidance as defined by Cloninger et al. (1993). Research indicates that these dimensions are largely biologically based and linked to known neurological correlates of approach (dopaminergic) and avoidance (serotonergic) pathways (Peirson et al., 1999; Schinka, Letsch, & Crawford, 2002; Suhara et al., 2001). Novelty Seeking is defined as stable, individual differences in behavior characterized by the tendency to seek out exciting and potentially rewarding situations. Harm Avoidance, on the other hand, is defined as stable individual differences in behavior characterized by the tendency to avoid punishment, pain, and non-reward (Cloninger et al., 1993). Novelty Seeking and Harm Avoidance load highly on scales designed to measure dimensions from Gray's (1982, 1987) model (Zelenski & Larsen, 1999). Therefore, in our models we include Harm Avoidance and Novelty Seeking as direct and indirect predictors of individual differences in values.

We also include subscales of trait EI as direct predictors of values. Trait EI can be defined as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions "located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies" (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007, p. 287) and is measured with self-report questionnaires. It is regarded as independent from traits measured by popular personality taxonomies, but correlated with such traits (McCrae, 2000; Van Der Zee, Thijs, & Schakel, 2002). In contrast to approach

Table 1
Definitions of values Hedonism, Stimulation and Conformity in terms of their core motivational goals.
From Schwartz (2006).

Value	Definition
Hedonism	Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself
Stimulation	Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life
Conformity	Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms

and avoidance traits, we suggest that subscales of trait EI more likely represent proximal and direct predictors of values, as trait EI theoretically reflects experiential-based cognitions based on self-regulatory processes (see Athota, O'Connor, & Jackson, 2010; Jackson, 2009; Pizarro & Salovey, 2002) rather than biologically-based constructs. We therefore model approach and avoidance personality traits as direct and indirect predictors of values, mediated by selected subscales of trait EI.

In this study we utilize two of the four subscales of trait EI from Schutte et al.'s (1998) measure. We focus specifically on Managing Own and Managing Others' Emotions, as scores on these facets are theoretically most relevant to the prediction of Hedonism, Stimulation, and Conformity (see the Development of hypotheses section below). Importantly, research has repeatedly demonstrated the multi-dimensional nature of Schutte's EI scale (e.g. O'Connor & Athota, 2013) and considering that our hypotheses relate to specific facets of trait EI there was no need to focus on overall trait EI in this study. Consistent with previous literature (e.g. O'Connor & Athota, 2013), the subscales we utilize in this study can be defined as: the perceived ability to manage emotions in the self (Managing Own Emotions) and others (Managing Others' Emotions) generally with the view toward improving such emotions.

1.2. Development of hypotheses

We present six novel hypotheses proposing mechanisms regarding how the approach and avoidance personality traits of Harm Avoidance and Novelty Seeking influence the two subscales of trait EI (Managing Own Emotions and Managing Others' Emotions) in the prediction of three of Schwartz's values (Hedonism, Stimulation, and Conformity). The hypotheses stem from the general conceptual and empirical overlap between personality, EI, and values such that the energizing personality traits of Novelty Seeking and Harm Avoidance are seen as temperament and distal whereas the emotional regulation traits are seen as proximal (as outlined above). In this section we justify the proposed relationships between these specific dimensions of personality, trait EI, and values. Since no research has been conducted on Novelty Seeking and Harm Avoidance in the context of values, these hypotheses are based on logical and conceptual links between constructs, and the previously discussed assumption that personality and trait EI represent distal and proximal predictors of values. Effectively, Managing Own Emotions and Managing Others' Emotions are thought of as partial re-expressions of the more biologically-based approach and avoidance mechanisms associated with Novelty Seeking and Harm Avoidance.

First, we argue that Harm Avoidance will negatively predict both Managing Others and Managing Own Emotions. This is because social and emotional competencies (like all competencies) are largely the result of learning (see for example Groves, McEnrue, & Shen, 2008) and Harm Avoidant individuals are simply exposed to fewer experiential learning situations than individuals low in Harm Avoidance (Forsyth, Parker, & Finlay, 2003; Stewart, Zvolensky, & Eifert, 2002). Specifically we suggest that Harm Avoidant individuals, who tend to fear rejection in social situations, are likely to avoid such situations and consequently are unlikely to master a range of competencies related to effectively

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[1] Note that Conformity and Tradition are generally represented together on Schwartz' circular model, as these values share a common motivational goal (see Schwartz, 2006). In this study, we chose to focus on Conformity rather than Tradition, as Conformity relates to subordination to people rather than objects and therefore better reflects the motivational goal of avoidance-type personality traits.