



The development of work values during the transition to adulthood: A two-country study



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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the development of work values—the desired characteristics of one's current or future job—during young adulthood. Using two panel studies from Germany ($N = 2506$) and Finland ($N = 1326$), we investigated (a) mean-level and rank-order change and stability in work values across three biennial waves (age 20/21 to age 25/26); and (b) the influence of stable background characteristics as well as of major transitions in family and work roles on inter-individual differences and intra-individual changes in work values. Latent measurement models with three work value dimensions showed good fit in both countries: *extrinsic* (importance of job security and material rewards), *intrinsic* (importance of having an interesting, varied, and valuable job), and *autonomy* (working independently; making one's own decisions). Analyses revealed high mean-level stabilities and moderate to high rank-order consistencies in work values across four years. Intrinsic work values emerged as the most highly endorsed value, and extrinsic work values as the most stable value, in both countries. Individual differences in work values emerged along the lines of sociodemographic background characteristics—especially gender, and to a lesser extent, parental socio-economic status (SES) and school track—whereas work and family transitions played only a limited role in explaining changes in work values across time. We discuss these results against the backdrop of previous research conducted mainly in North America and note some implications for work value research and for career counseling.

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1. Introduction

Work, job, or career values refer to the importance individuals place on different job characteristics and to the kind of rewards they seek to attain in their jobs (Mortimer & Lorence, 1979; Johnson, 2001). Developmental changes in work values, even if small, may have short-term and long-term consequences for individuals' working lives (Johnson & Monserud, 2012). For example, work values predict future vocational attainment and remuneration (Johnson, 2001; Johnson & Mortimer, 2011; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979), career and job choices (Balsamo, Lauriola, & Saggino, 2013; Judge & Bretz, 1992), as well as work engagement, career

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and life satisfaction (Chow, Galambos, & Krahn, 2015; Sortheix, Dietrich, Chow, & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Because work values are antecedents of such important career outcomes, it is important to understand how work values develop during young adulthood.

Young adulthood is a demographically dense period during which individuals make more transitions and decisions than at any other life stage (Elder, 1985; Havighurst, 1948). Transitions into new work and family roles, and the expectations that accompany them, are key drivers of personality development (Hutteman, Hennecke, Orth, Reitz, & Specht, 2014). Although youth and young adulthood are deemed sensitive periods for the formation of work values (Chow, Krahn, & Galambos, 2014; Johnson, 2001), evidence on how transitions during these periods shape work values (e.g., Johnson, 2001; Johnson, 2005) is scarce and subject to limitations that we seek to address in the present study. First, there are still relatively few studies examining—let alone explaining—individual patterns of stability and change in work value development during young adulthood (but see Johnson, 2001, 2002; Johnson & Monserud, 2012). Second, existing longitudinal studies have mostly used U.S. samples born in the 1960s (e.g., Mortimer, Lorence, & Kumka, 1986; Johnson, 2001) and 1970s (e.g., Johnson, 2005); studies using contemporary samples, and samples from outside the Northern American context, are largely lacking.

Here we investigate the development of work values in two recent samples of young adults from Germany and Finland. Our study comprises (1) descriptive analyses, examining indicators of stability and change in work values across four years of young adulthood; and (2) explanatory analyses, examining how stable background characteristics (family SES, gender, and educational track) and major work and family transitions (entering the workforce, marriage and parenthood) relate to work values. With these analyses, we respond to Jin and Rounds' (2012) call for more research on the sources of individual differences in work value development.

1.1. Work values: models and dimensions

Research on work values has employed a plethora of work value models and diverse instruments to assess them. There is no clear consensus as to the number and content of work value dimensions (Johnson, Mortimer, Lee, & Stern, 2007), and few studies have tested the validity and replicability of their instrument's structure across countries. As an exception, Johnson et al. (2007) presented strong theoretical and empirical support for the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic work values across five different U.S. datasets. *Intrinsic work values* refer to the importance individuals place on immaterial rewards associated with specific job tasks, such as interest and learning opportunities. *Extrinsic work values* refer to material or instrumental rewards of a job that are external to the work itself, such as a good salary and job security. The intrinsic–extrinsic distinction is the classic, and still the dominant, distinction in the work values literature and is present in most (but not all; e.g., Porfeli, 2007) categorizations of work values (Johnson et al., 2007).

Other categorizations of work values comprise additional dimensions beyond extrinsic and intrinsic work values. For example, Johnson and Elder (2002) further considered “influence” (henceforth referred to as “autonomy”) work values, i.e., the importance of decision-making power and independence in one's job. Jin and Rounds' (2012) recent meta-analysis additionally identified status (prestige, power, and authority), and social work values (helping society, working with people). Leuty and Hansen (2011) identified six common factors that emerged from three different work value instruments (competence, status, autonomy, organizational culture, work environment and relationships), some of which, however, could be subsumed under the broader extrinsic and intrinsic dimensions.

In the present study, we distinguished between three work values that are recurring themes across several work value models, and that we could recover in both data sources (see Measures): intrinsic and extrinsic work values, representing the dominant distinction in the work literature; and autonomy work values, representing an additional work value that is often viewed as separate from extrinsic and intrinsic work values (Marini, Fan, Finley, & Beutel, 1996; Johnson & Elder, 2002; Johnson, 2002). Considering autonomy along with intrinsic and extrinsic work values seems a particularly worthwhile addition in light of evidence pointing to self-determination and freedom of choice as increasingly important values in industrialized societies, including in the occupational context (see Lechner, Obschonka, & Silbereisen, 2016).

1.2. The development of work values in young adulthood

What do we know about the development of work values? A recent meta-analysis of 22 original longitudinal studies examining changes in work values from youth into adulthood (Jin & Rounds, 2012) found that intrinsic work values increased during the college years (age 18–22) and then decreased. Extrinsic work values followed a U-shaped trend, decreasing during the college years and increasing again in young adulthood (22–26 years). In the mid-to-late twenties, only extrinsic values showed an increase in importance, while all other values decreased. A caveat in interpreting these trends is that a substantial share of the original studies included in the meta-analysis was based on small and non-representative samples. Other recent studies found small mean-level declines in the importance of extrinsic work values and a (statistically non-significant) decline in intrinsic work values in young adults in the US (18–32 years; Johnson & Monserud, 2012); as well as a decline in extrinsic work values for age 18–20 years and an increase in extrinsic and intrinsic work values for age 20–25 in young Canadians (Chow et al., 2014). Autonomy (or influence) work values were the only work value with an upward mean-level trend from high school up to eight years after in Johnson and Elder's (2002) study. Thus, findings on mean-level trends are mixed, but young adulthood seems to be a time during which intrinsic and extrinsic work values show only limited mean-level change.

In addition to mean-level changes, rank-order consistencies are another common way of looking at change, indicating the stability of individual differences over time. Longitudinal studies in the US found rank-order consistencies (Pearson's r) of 0.48 for

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