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A closer look at personal values and delinquency

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ABSTRACT

The paper takes a closer look at the relations of personal values and delinquency in two representative German surveys. A new definition for value items is proposed and used to cull 30 items that measure eleven basic values. It is shown that the structure of the values and their items in multi-dimensional scaling and in unfolding, respectively, suggest an underlying continuous value scale where the values are but verbal markers for different segments of the circle. This value circle is shared by almost all persons, and different persons differ only in terms of how they prioritize the various values. Centering or not centering the ratings leads to virtually the same value circles. The value circle allows predicting a sine-like pattern of correlations of values with attitudes on delinquency, self-reported delinquent behavior, and the perceived risks of delinquency. The best predictors are hedonism and stimulation (for positive relations towards delinquency) and tradition, conformity, and peace of mind (for negative relations).

1. Introduction

Delinquency is an issue of great social importance. Many theories exist that utilize personal and societal values to explain what makes delinquent behavior attractive. A traditional assumption is that individuals engage in delinquent behavior simply because they are conforming to the deviant norms and values of a delinquent subculture. A more modern view is that delinquent individuals hold conventional values too, not just "subterranean" values such as a taste for aggression or searching for "kicks" which, moreover, are in fact also commonly held by conventional society (Burfeind & Bartusch, 2015; Matza & Sykes, 2010). Delinquents differ from non-delinquents only in the way they express, prioritize, and possibly also structure these values. Recent research has linked this theorizing to psychological research on the types and the structure of personal values (Bilsky & Hermann, 2016; Feldman, Chao, Farh, & Bardi, 2015). It could be shown that persons striving for stimulation and hedonism are more positive towards delinquency, and those emphasizing tradition and conformity more negative. According to Schwartz (1992), these values constitute the end points of a scale of higher-order values termed openness to change vs. conservation. The values of Schwartz's second scale of higher-order values (self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence) are less or not at all correlated with delinquency.

These results lead to various issues that deserve more attention if one aims at formally deriving predictions on delinquency from a value model. First of all, a sharper definition of values is desirable to reliably construct or cull value items. Most value researchers agree that "values are (a) concepts or beliefs, (b) about desirable end states or behaviors, (c) that transcend specific situations, (d) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (e) are ordered by relative importance" (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, p. 551). Although such lists of characteristics are useful, they do not really define values. Indeed, they may even be obstacles for value research. For example, "transcending specific situations" is not a defining characteristic of values but a hypothesis about an empirical lawfulness of values.

Streamlining nominal definitions of values cannot ultimately avoid the problem that all such definitions contain notions of desirable end states or goals (Scholl-Schaaf, 1975). Based on Borg and Shye (1995), Guttman (1982), and Levy and Guttman (1981), we therefore propose a value definition in terms of value items as follows:

> "An item belongs to the universe of value items if and only if person *p* assesses a certain situation/behavior as {not important … very important} that it {does; does not} exist for an {unspecified; instrumental *i*; terminal *t*} purpose of the social reference group {person *p* him-/herself; person *x*; group *G*; company *C*; …}".

Value items, so defined, are not attitude items. The reason is not because values are "more stable" or "less specific", but because they are

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assessed differently, i.e. in terms of their judged importance for some purpose, and not in terms of how negative or positive one feels about some object.[1] Hence, one may conclude, for example, that "having a lot of power" is important for one's well-being, but one may not feel positive about it.

Using this mapping sentence definition of values[2] shows that the "individual reflexive values" (IRV) scale used in the Bilsky and Hermann (2016) studies contains more value items than those captured by Schwartz's (1992) ten basic values. These items focus on "peace of mind" by using the items "having a good conscience", "having a good family life", and "inner peace and harmony". Moreover, some IRV items do not pass the value-item filter such as, for example, "let emotions impact one's decisions". Hence, using the mapping sentence definition of value items allows us to cull a different and well-defined set of personal value items from the IRV.

One should also take a closer look at the structure of the IRV items that measure the values. The typical way to do this is using multi-dimensional scaling (MDS) to represent the inter-correlations among the value items by distances among points that exhibit these items in a geometric (usually: 2-dimensional) space (Borg, Dobewall, & Aavik, 2016; Schwartz, 1992). The MDS configuration can then be studied for substantively meaningful patterns (Mair, Borg, & Rusch, 2016). What one typically finds in value research is that the MDS configuration can be partitioned like a cake into wedges that each contains value items measuring a particular value only. Moreover, the wedges of this cake-like structure ("circumplex" of regions) are ordered in the same way across different studies (see, for example, Schwartz, 1992). Yet, one also finds that the center of the circumplex is essentially empty (Borg et al., 2016). Statistically, items in the center of a circumplex are highly inter-correlated. Substantively, they are highly similar to each other, difficult to distinguish, and without a specific focus (like "g" in intelligence; Guttman & Levy, 1991) or "washed out" (Shye, Elizur, & Hofman, 1994; Guttman & Levy, 1991). However, items that would measure "general" values are hard to conceive and such notions are certainly not addressed by scales on personal values (Hermann, 2003; Schwartz, Lehmann, & Roccas, 1999; Schwartz, Sagiv, & Boehnke, 2000). Classifying given value items or constructing value items in terms of basic values is also difficult, because values such as power or tradition are fuzzy and multi-faceted. Hence, one should expect that the items that underlie value indexes lead to relatively wide regions in MDS space rather than to compact clusters. The basic values, then, can be expected to be just verbal markers for certain neighborhoods on a circular continuum of values—similar to the color circle where colors like "red" or "blue" are but names for segments of a spectrum of colors with gradual transitions. Different persons and cultures have many or few color names for particular segments of the color. Similarly, the value circle also shows smaller and wider gaps which could be filled with additional value types such as the "peace of mind" value discussed above.

The value circle is important for deriving predictions, because if it holds, then the various values on it should form sine-like relations to delinquency variables: If value X is most positively correlated with some delinquency measure Z, then moving in one direction along the circle to neighbors of X should lead to increasingly smaller, zero, and negative correlations until one reaches the value opposite of X; when moving on, the correlations should grow again monotonically.

Taking into account how many context variables can moderate the value-delinquency relations, one can also predict that the amplitudes of these sine trends should be largest when values are correlated with attitudes towards delinquency, medium in case values are correlated with the subjective likelihood of own delinquent actions or the perceived risk of delinquency, and smallest in case of past delinquent behavior.

Testing the circular structure of the basic values can be enhanced further by using recent developments in MDS such as significance tests, Stress-per-point measures, and confidence regions for the points (Jacoby & Armstrong, 2014; Mair et al., 2016). Most important, however, is the question whether the value circle also holds within individuals, not just for correlations across individuals. Borg, Bardi and Schwartz (2017) have proposed that the observed person-by-item ratings can all be mapped directly into a geometric model. No correlations across individuals are needed. Rather, in their unfolding model, persons and values are both represented by points located in space such that the distances among person points and value points optimally correspond to the observed ratings (Borg & Groenen, 2005; Borg, Groenen, & Mair, in press). That is, we have a data matrix of order $n_p \times n_v$ (were p denotes persons and v denotes values), with one row of n_v "dissimilarities" (i.e., reversed importance ratings, δ_{ij}) for each of the n_p persons. In our case, $n_v = 11$ for each person, because we have eleven basic values. We aim to optimally represent each dissimilarity score δ_{ij} by the distance d_{ij} between a point for person i and a point for value j in an m-dimensional configuration. The configuration we seek should minimize

$$\sigma = \sum_{i=1}^{n_p} \sum_{j=1}^{n_v} \left(b \cdot \delta_{ij} - d_{ij}\right)^2, \tag{1}$$

with $b>0$ an arbitrary overall scaling constant. To make σ in (Eq. 1) comparable over different data sets and over different configurations, it is normalized to

$$\text{Stress} = \sqrt{\sigma / \sum d_{ij}^2}. \tag{2}$$

Given a common unfolding solution, or subgroup-specific unfolding solutions, we then turn to the question whether the various delinquency measures can be linked to the person points in unfolding space. We ask, in particular, whether persons that differ in their orientations towards delinquency can be separated in unfolding space. The hypothesis is that persons with a positive attitude towards delinquency are closer to hedonism and stimulation, and non-delinquent persons closer to conformity and tradition.

Another issue that deserves closer attention is whether certain forms of pre-processing the value ratings impact the findings. The ratings collected with value items are typically not used directly in subsequent analyses. Rather, they are first centered, person by person. Schwartz (2003, chap. 7, p. 275) argues that it is "critical to correct for individual differences in use of the response scale. It is the tradeoffs between relevant values that influence behavior and attitudes, so it is the relative importance of the ten values to an individual that should be measured". On the other hand, Schwartz (2009) recommends using uncorrected raw scores of value items or indexes when running an MDS on the inter-correlations of variables, while

[1] The range of attitude items can be specified as "very negative to very positive towards some object" (Guttman, 1982, p. 337). This allows not only cognitive, but also affective and behavioral components. Today, however, most researchers would restrict attitudes to emotions (see Albaracin, Zanna, Johnson, & Kumkale, 2005), following Eagly and Chaiken's (1993) definition: "Attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (p. 1).

[2] Note that our definition does not use the notion "desirable" in the domain of the items. It therefore also covers counter-ideal or negative values (Aavik & Allik, 2006; van Quaquebeke, Graf, Kerschreiter, Schuh, & van Dick, 2014). It also captures virtues (Mehozay & Factor, 2017; Stavrova, Schlösser, & Fetchenhauer, 2013; van Oudenhoven, de Raad, Helbig, & van der Linden, 2015) as special cases of values if one sets the reference group facet to "Country X", for example.