

Values: the dynamic nexus between biology, ecology and culture

Ronald Fischer^{1,2} and Diana Boer³

Values are motivational goals that influence attitudes, behaviors and evaluations. Cross-cultural evidence suggests that values show a systematic structure. Personal and cultural variations in the value structure, value priorities and value links to attitudes, behavior and well-being reflect contextual constraints and affordances in the environment, suggesting that values function as broadly adaptive psychological structures. The internal structure of values (the descriptive value system) becomes more clearly differentiated in more economically developed contexts. Value priorities shift toward more autonomous, self-expressive and individualistic orientations with greater economic resources and less ecological stress. In addition to systematic changes in internal structure, value links to attitudes, behaviors and well-being are influenced by economic, ecological and institutional contexts. Values are more likely to be expressed in attitudes and behavior if individuals have greater access to economic resources, experience less institutional and ecological stress or when the values reinforce culturally normative behavior. Frontiers for further value research include a greater examination of the neural underpinnings of values in specific ecological contexts and across the lifespan; and an examination of how values are behaviorally instantiated in different environments.

Addresses

¹ Centre for Applied Cross-Cultural Research, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

² Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark

³ University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany

Corresponding author: Fischer, Ronald (ronald.fischer@vuw.ac.nz)

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Introduction

Values are motivational goals: abstract and context-independent beliefs about desirable modes of conduct or desirable end states [1*,2–4]. Values are internally structured into a coherent system that helps individuals to navigate their social and natural environment [1*,5]. Given their fundamental motivational characteristic for understanding human behavior, values have been a central

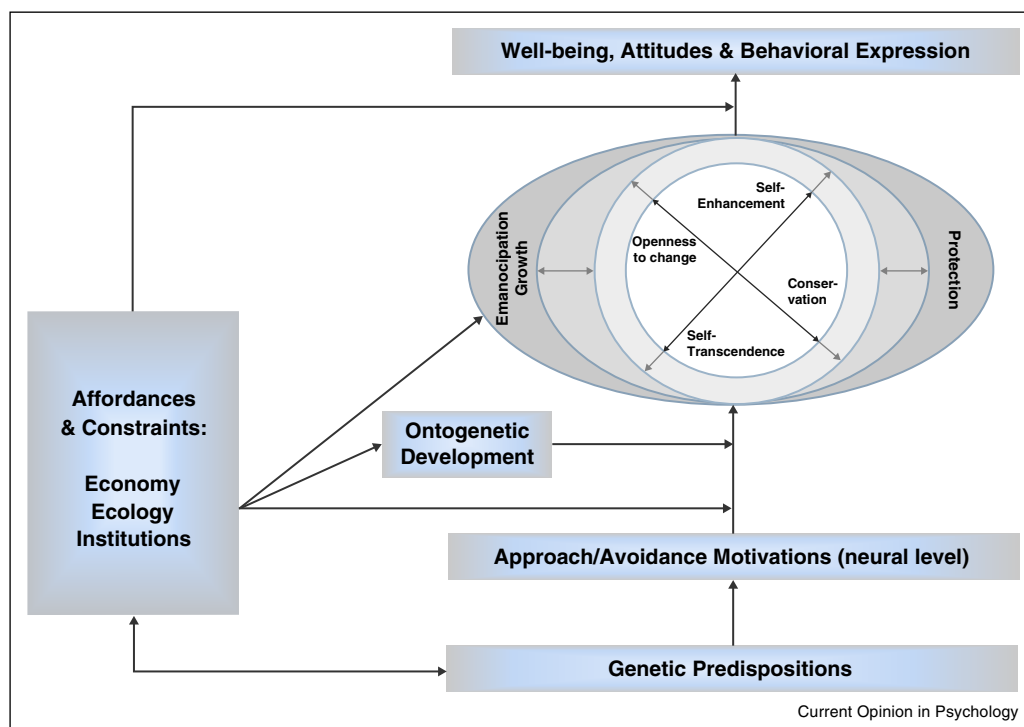
concept in psychology and related social and behavioral science disciplines. This disciplinary multiplicity is mirrored by the different approaches taken and no coherent or unified framework for studying values and their organization, antecedents, covariates and presumed consequences has emerged to date. In cross-cultural psychology, much emphasis has been paid to describing the basic structure and organization of human values across societies (see section The Structure and Variability of Human Values). Developmental psychologists have studied value transmission and how values may change over the life span, whereas sociologists and political scientists have been concerned with the cultural trajectories of change at the societal level (see section Value Development and Change in Individuals and Societies). Attitudinal and behavioral correlates of values and their variability across contexts have also attracted increasing attention by researchers (see section Value Correlates and Value Expressions across Cultures). Across disciplines, there is an emerging consensus that context matters and that cultural, social, ecological and economic variables interact in complex ways with values. [Figure 1](#) presents a simplified framework that brings together these various contributions. We use this framework to review the progress that has been made in the study of values in cultural contexts.

The structure and variability of human values

Schwartz' [3,6] seminal work has culminated in a nearly universal theory of human values that can be organized along two major axes unfolding in a circumplex model of mutual compatibilities and conflicts. Values that are compatible with each other will be located more closely to each other, whereas values that are conflicting in terms of their basic motivational orientation will be located at opposing ends of the two dimensional system. The major axes that organize this space are openness to change versus conservatism values (emphasizing a pursuit of self-directed, autonomous and hedonistic values versus emphasizing values that promote the stability and maintenance of the social and cultural system) and self-transcendence versus self-enhancement values (distinguishing values that emphasize the well-being of close and distant others and the environment versus an exploitation and domination of opportunities, resources and individuals to enhance one's standing and status in the social system). This two dimensional system can be split into (up to 19) finer or (up to 4) broader motivational clusters [6].

These conflicts and compatibilities are shaped by the environmental opportunities and proximal living conditions [7–9]. In economically poorer contexts, individuals

Figure 1



Dynamic impact of environment on value structure, development and expression.

have limited choices and do not clearly differentiate between the motivational orientations inherent in values (the circumplex structure is less likely to replicate). It is only in environmental contexts where people have opportunities for making choices that the clear differentiation of values in terms of their underlying motivational structure emerges.

There has been a historic debate whether this characteristic value structure at the individual level is applicable to cultures or societies given the arguably different function of values for societies. Even though societal values are typically based on aggregated individual level data, Schwartz [10] developed a different theory at the societal level. By contrast, sociologists ([11,12] Welzel) and management researchers [13] preferred to use the same dimensions for individuals and societies. A number of recent studies ([14–16]; see review in [17]) have suggested that individual level structures are replicable at the societal level and that different structures reported in previous research may have been due to methodological limitations [14]. Using a single theoretical organization of values allows for a more coherent and parsimonious study of cultural similarities and differences.

Related to this debate of the structure of values is the question on how large cultural differences in values are.

Values have played a central role in the study of cultural differences since the seminal studies by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck [18] and Hofstede [19]. Yet, a closer examination of major value surveys spanning all inhabited continents suggest that value differences are relatively small [20] and religious and political beliefs may differentiate societies more than basic human values [21]. Variability between individuals is significantly larger than between different cultural systems, suggesting that values capture pan-human universal motivations with only limited variability across modern societies [20]. At the same time, this small variability between societies is not random and appears to follow some coherent trajectories that indicate that value differences are responsive to environmental (and developmental) conditions and therefore represent some functional adaptations (in line with their definition as motivational goals). We next discuss sources of these small, but systematic differences in values.

Value development and change in individuals and societies

There are at least two major philosophical perspectives on cultural differences in values: firstly, a sociological tradition that assumes values are stable meaning systems that are transmitted with high fidelity between generations [10,19,2], and secondly, a functional perspective that

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