



Empirical research

Challenge, focus, inspiration and support: Processes of values clarification and congruence[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Explicit attention to clarifying and behaving congruently with values has important psychological and social implications. Research on the structure of values and on the relationship between values and well-being is well developed, but less is known about how to help people to articulate, change, or enact values. The current study investigated how 16 working adults undertook the processes of articulating or changing a value and increasing values-congruent behavior. Participants were interviewed approximately three months after participating in a five-session values clarification and congruence workshop. A qualitative method, Thematic Analysis, indicated that participants were generally motivated to work on values because of life challenges. To enact behavioral changes related to values, participants needed to bring focused attention to the process at both cognitive and behavioral levels. Those participants who changed were often inspired by their value and drew on the support of others. Implications related to interventions for values development and directions for research on values clarification and congruence are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Values are an important source of human motivation (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). Psychological research has focused extensively on understanding how values relate to one another, on their development (Schwartz, 1992; 1994; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004) and on the relationship between living according to values and positive outcomes (e.g., Ciarrochi, Fisher, & Lane, 2010; Levin, Hildebrandt, & Hayes, 2012; Lundgren, Dahl, & Hayes, 2008; McCracken & Yang, 2006). In addition, sociologists have extensively studied the impact of values on issues such as economic development, democratic institutions, gender equality, and effective government (World Values Survey, n.d.). Understanding how people come to clarify their values and how they increase values-consistent actions is less well-researched. The current study investigated the processes of articulating or changing values and increasing value-congruent behavior.

1.1. What are values?

Psychologists have defined values in many ways (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Rohan, 2000). Early work by Rokeach (1973) made the distinction between terminal values, what we hope to achieve (e.g., a comfortable life, a world at peace) and instrumental values, the way we go about achieving what we want (e.g., ambition, self-control). Schwartz (1992) extended the work of Rokeach and developed an extensively researched classification system in which values are arrayed in a circumplex with two axes: openness to change versus conservation, and self-transcendence versus self-enhancement. His theory emphasizes values as beliefs that are associated with desirable goals and that motivate action across different situations (Schwartz, 1994). Values are also central in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), an empirically supported treatment that helps clients to accept difficult psychological experiences and commit to living a life congruent with deeply held personal values (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda & Lillis, 2006). In the ACT approach, values are understood as freely chosen, verbally constructed, and related to evolving patterns of activity (Wilson & DuFrene, 2009). The association of values with attendant methods or goals, and the idea of values as motivation for action are common across Schwartz and in ACT and guided the current study.

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1.2. Do values change?

Values have usually been understood as stable characteristics that cross life domains (Schwartz et al., 2012). However, values can change in response to contextual changes. Longitudinal studies have suggested that the more aspects of a life situation that change, the more that values need to adapt over time, a process called values socialization. Values socialization can occur as values can change in the transition to adulthood (Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2001), during schooling (Krishnan, 2007), or when people immigrate to a new culture and their values alter to fit a much-changed context (Bardi, Buchanan, Goodwin, Slabu & Robinson, 2014). Other kinds of values changes can occur in response to traumatic events. Trauma can shatter an individual's worldview, and can result resulting in growth as sufferers construct new life priorities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The process of values change, however, has been little studied and needs greater elaboration by scholars (Schwartz et al., 2012). Of particular salience to the current research is the question of how adults adapt their values in day-to-day situations.

1.3. How do values influence action?

Values relate to actions when they are activated and when they are relevant to the situation (Verplanken & Holland, 2002). Values that are more important will be more accessible and therefore more easily activated (Bardi, 2000). When they become activated, values are infused with feeling (Schwartz et al., 2012). However, activation may or may not involve conscious awareness of a value (Schwartz, 2010). Some situations such as life transitions (Bardi et al., 2014) or psychotherapy (Hayes et al., 2006) can increase the awareness and activation of values. Conflict can also bring a value to awareness, for example deciding to quit a job that demands values-inconsistent behavior (Brown, 1995) will tend to activate the value that is being violated.

Although people who find values important and enact them experience positive changes in well-being over time (Williams et al., 2014), research has focused more on the importance that people ascribe to values and less on how much they act in accordance with them (Sheldon & Krieger, 2014). Some research has indicated that personality may influence values-behavior congruence. For example, neuroticism has been associated with higher pressure to hold values but less success at achieving value-related actions (Veage, Cirraroichi, & Heaven, 2011). But endorsing a value does not reliably predict behavior that is congruent with it (see Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004 for a review). Research on goal-setting and on maintaining motivation for goal-directed behavior can help to explain the gap between values and behavior.

Setting goals is an interim step in increasing values-consistent behavior. A substantial body of research (see Locke & Latham, 2002 for a review) indicates that goals improve performance by directing attention, by increasing effort, by improving persistence, and by activating task-relevant knowledge and strategies. Researchers who have investigated goal-setting along with values exploration have found that the combination of goal-setting and values training significantly improved student academic performance (Chase et al., 2013).

Even when goals are set, low confidence in the ability to achieve a goal interferes with motivation and can result in avoidance and lower performance (Lee, Sheldon, & Turban, 2003). According to Self-Determination Theory, the level of motivation to act on a goal ranges from a motivated to extrinsic to intrinsic (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is enhanced with the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (volition or free will), competence (feeling effective in the ability to control outcomes), and relatedness (feeling attached to and accepted by

significant others) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Attention to issues of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in pursuing values-related goals should improve intrinsic motivation and goal attainment.

Lack of progress toward values-related goals may also be addressed with attention to self-compassion. Neff (2003) has operationally defined self-compassion as having three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-compassion operationalized with these three aspects can improve goal achievement by protecting against the negative affect that is demotivating when there is a lack of goal progress (Hope, Koestner, & Milyavskaya, 2014). Recently, attention to core values has been integrated into a program of Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC), developed by Neff and Germer (2013). MSC is expected to help individuals recover when they are not living congruently with core values (Neff & Germer 2013). Mindfulness on its own has also been related to increased awareness of values and value-relevant behavior (Guadagno, 2012).

Finally, self-control may be implicated in values-congruent actions. Research indicates that depleted self-control or willpower can lead to less prosocial behavior, even when there is commitment to prosocial values (Osgood & Muraven, 2015). However, self-control is expensive to use. It draws heavily on glucose reserves in the body and can be depleted; it can also be strengthened through use (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011). Because self-control has a physiological element, the body may be a way to activate self-control resources.

Research on the process of how values clarity and values-congruent action can be increased is needed. The current study began with a workshop on values clarification and values-congruent behavior developed from an ACT-based understanding of values and values commitment. Participants were helped to articulate values, set values-congruent goals and to understand the role of self-determination, self-compassion and self-control in motivating values-congruent actions. Follow-up interviews with workshop participants were conducted to collect data on the question, "How can we help healthy working adults to undertake the processes of articulating or changing their values and increasing behavior that is values-congruent?" A qualitative data analytic strategy is appropriate for this type of question as qualitative methods are particularly suited to studying and understanding processes (Ponterotto, 2010) such as the development values clarity and values-congruent behaviors. Qualitative methods allow researchers to describe and interpret participant experiences within a specific context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Ponterotto, 2005) such as a workshop, in order to cultivate a deep understanding of phenomena (Morrow, 2007).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were faculty and staff at a large metropolitan university who were recruited through a human resources online newsletter. Some participants had previously attended an introductory talk on wellness and values and had indicated an interest in being contacted about future talks on values. Of 32 attendees at the initial workshop, 16 (14 women and 2 men) agreed to take part in the interviews and 10 responded to a demographic questionnaire. Participants were adults aged 20–59 ($M=43.5$, $SD=12.5$) who were working at the university where the investigation took place. Ethnically, participants identified as White/Caucasian, one identified as Chinese, and one as mixed race. Five participants attended all workshop sessions, six participants attended four sessions, four participants attended three sessions, and one came to one session.

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