Stability and change of basic personal values in early adulthood: An 8-year longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

We examined four types of stability and change in values during young adulthood. 270 respondents (aged 20–28, 54% female) completed the Portrait Values Questionnaire at three time points, separated by 4 years. Rank-order stability coefficients of the 10 values averaged 0.69 (T1-T2) and 0.77 (T2-T3). The mean importance of conservation, self-transcendence, and power values increased over time, the mean importance of achievement values decreased, and openness to change values remained stable. For 75% of respondents, the correlations of the within-person value hierarchies exceeded 0.45 from T1 to T2 and 0.61 from T2 to T3. Correlations among individual change scores for the 10 values formed coherent patterns of value change that mirror the circular structure of Schwartz's theory.

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1. Introduction

Basic personal values are abstract beliefs about desirable, trans-situational goals that serve as guiding principles in people's lives (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). Values presumably underlie attitudes and behavior and are central to individuals' self-concepts. A key assumption shared by value theorists is that values exhibit substantial stability across situations and over time (e.g., Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Inglehart, 1977; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). Nonetheless, these and other theorists expect value priorities to undergo some change across the life span through adaptation to significant experiences and changing circumstances (Bardi & Goodwin, 2011; Schwartz & Bardi, 1997). Several empirical studies support this expectation (e.g., Bardi, Lee, Hofmann-Towfigh, & Soutar, 2009; Daniel, Fortuna, Thrun, Cioban, & Knafo, 2013; Lönnqvist, Jasinskaja-Lahti, & Verkasalo, 2011; Verkasalo, Goodwin, & Bezmenova, 2006).

The need to adapt may arise from unanticipated events (e.g., environmental catastrophes), optional planned changes (e.g., immigration), or normative, age-related tasks (e.g., beginning school or retirement). The present study investigates change in values associated with normative changes during young adulthood. This is a particularly dynamic and challenging stage of life, when people encounter major life transitions and significant new social roles. These often include leaving formal schooling and one's family of origin, marriage, parenthood, entering the job market, etc. (Havighurst, 1972). We chose to study stability and change in the ten values in Schwartz's (1992) model of basic personal values due to their comprehensiveness and wide use.

We examine four aspects of stability and change in our longitudinal values data. Each aspect provides unique information. We first assess rank-order stability. This refers to the extent to which the individual differences within a sample in the importance of a value remain constant over time (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). The correlation between a value at two points in time measures the rank-order stability of that value in a population.

Next, we assess *mean-level change* in a value over time in a population (Bardi & Goodwin, 2011). This captures the average change in value importance among group members (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006).

Third, we assess *stability and change within individuals' value hierarchies*. This is an ipsative form of stability (De Fruyt et al., 2006). It refers to change in the relative importance of the ten values within each person, that is, the consistency of each person's value profile. The correlation between a person's value hierarchy at two points in time captures this type of stability.

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Finally we assess *patterns of intra-individual value change*. Do they exhibit the dynamic patterns that fit the motivational circle of values in the Schwartz (1992) theory? In other words, do people who experience a change in a given value (e.g., increasing benevolence) experience similar changes in values that are adjacent in the circle (e.g., increasing universalism) and opposite changes in conflicting values (e.g., decreasing achievement and power)?

The first three issues we address concern the degree of stability and change in values over time. The fourth concerns *how* values change. It provides insights into the mechanisms of change.

1.1. Content and structure of 10 basic values

Schwartz (1992) presented a model that identifies ten motivationally distinct basic values: *Universalism* (understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature), *Benevolence* (preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact), *Tradition* (respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide the self), *Conformity* (restraint of actions likely to upset or harm others and violate social norms or expectations), *Security* (safety, harmony, and stability of society and of self), *Power* (social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources), *Achievement* (personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards), *Hedonism* (pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself), *Stimulation* (excitement, novelty, and challenge in life), *Self-direction* (independence of thought and action).

The theory posits that these ten values form a circular continuum that reflects the compatibilities and conflicts among the motivational goals they express. The ten values can be grouped into four broad sets that form two bipolar dimensions of conflicting values: self-transcendence values (universalism and benevolence) versus self-enhancement values (power and achievement), and conservation values (security, conformity and tradition) versus openness to change values (self-direction, stimulation and hedonism). Support for the circular order of the ten values has emerged in samples from over 70 countries (Schwartz, 2006).

1.2. Past research on value stability and change in the 10 basic values

Schwartz (2005) reported the first study of relations of the ten values to age. He studied representative samples (aged 16–100) in 20 countries from the 2002–2003 round of the European Social Survey (ESS). Age correlated positively with conservation and self-transcendence values and negatively with openness to change and self-enhancement values. Correlations with age followed the motivational circle. They declined in both directions from most positive for tradition to most negative for stimulation. These findings revealed clear age-related differences in value priorities. However, the cross-sectional nature of the data precludes separating cohort from life cycle effects. Moreover, correlations do not capture possible non-linear change such as progressive decreases in the rate of change over time before reaching a plateau. Several later studies have applied a longitudinal design to examine aspects of stability and change in the ten basic values. We briefly summarize their findings.

1.2.1. Rank-order stability

This is the most frequently studied form of value stability, measured by the correlation between values across two points in time. Studies that measured the ten values with the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) have revealed substantial rank-order stability in various samples. For example, in a German student sample ($N = 157$), stability coefficients over six weeks averaged 0.73

($SD = 0.06$), ranging from 0.62 (benevolence) to 0.82 (achievement) (Schwartz, 2005). In an Italian adult sample (N = 1003), stability coefficients over two months averaged 0.83 ($SD = 0.04$), ranging from 0.75 (benevolence) to 0.87 (tradition) (Vecchione, Caprara, Dentale, & Schwartz, 2013). Stability was also high in studies over longer periods of time. Stability coefficients over two years in a representative sample of French adults ($N = 870$), averaged 0.60 ($SD = 0.06$), ranging from 0.50 (benevolence) to 0.66 (tradition) (Schwartz, 2005). In a sample of German students between 11 and 21 years old ($N = 719$) who completed the PVQ at the beginning of the school year and 10 months later, stability coefficients averaged 0.78 ($SD = 0.03$), ranging from 0.72 (self-direction) to 0.82 (conformity) (Hofmann-Towfigh, 2007). These coefficients are comparable to those reported in the literature for the Five Factor personality traits (Big Five) over similar time intervals (e.g., Robins, Fraley, Roberts, & Trzesniewski, 2001; Vaidya, Gray, Haig, Mroczek, & Watson, 2008).

Although there is a paucity of data on value stability at earlier ages, there is some recent evidence for stability among children. In a sample of Italian sixth-grade students ($N = 310$), Vecchione, Döring, Marsicano, Alessandri, and Bardi (in press) measured the four higher order values with the PVQ at three time points. Stability coefficients over six months averaged 0.51 ($SD = 0.08$), ranging from 0.43 (conservation) to 0.61 (self-enhancement).[1]

1.2.2. Mean-level change

Few attempts have been made to investigate change in the mean importance of the ten Schwartz values in groups over time. Using the PVQ, Hofmann-Towfigh (2007) reported that the importance of power and achievement values increased over 10 months in a sample of German high school students ($N = 719$) and the importance of benevolence and universalism values decreased. Although these changes were statistically significant, their size was small.

Bardi et al. (2009) examined mean-level change in four two-wave studies. In one study, using the PVQ, the importance of benevolence and universalism values decreased over nine months in a sample of 15-year old German students ($N = 811$) and the importance of power, achievement, and self-direction values increased. In a second study, using the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS), the importance of benevolence decreased over one year in a sample of UK university students ($N = 110$) and the importance of power decreased. In a third study, using the SVS, the importance of both universalism and power values increased among first year university students ($N = 110$) from the beginning of their studies to three months later, perhaps reflecting their experience of transition to college (see Bardi et al., 2009). In a fourth study, using the Schwartz Value Best-Worst Survey (SVBWS, Lee, Soutar, & Louviere, 2008), only hedonism values changed, increasing over two years in a sample of Australian adults ($N = 135$, aged 18–67).

1.2.3. Stability vs. change in within-person value hierarchies

The relative importance of the ten values within persons, their value profile, is the basis for the trade-off between more and less important values that determines how each person's values influence perceptions, attitudes, and behavior (Bardi & Goodwin, 2011; Schwartz, 1994, 1996). Despite the centrality of this idea to value theory, there is a paucity of studies on stability and change in within-person value hierarchies. To date, only one study, Sundberg (in press), has addressed this issue. That study compared the value hierarchies of Swedish soldiers ($N = 320$) before and after a six-month military assignment in Afghanistan. Stability was quite high: Pearson correlations between value hierarchies at Time

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[1] We computed the stability coefficients based on data provided by the authors.