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## SOCIAL VALUES AND GOOD LIVING

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### Introduction

The quest to find meaning in life is an integral part of human existence. Efforts to articulate how this is achievable can be traced back to the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> B.C.E., when Homer, Aristotle, Cicero and Virgil inquired about the means and goals of human nature. Informed by the social, political and economic transformations of their time, they proposed that bravery, conformity to the laws of the city, hard work, honesty, nobility, reason, and participation in the public affairs were values that encapsulated the good life. Although the relative importance of these values and their meanings have changed since then, their function to date remains tied to the processes of attainment, preservation or enhancement of living.

### Definition

Social values can be defined as standards, which individuals and social groups employ to define their personal goals and consequently go on to shape the nature and form of social order in a collective—what is acceptable and not acceptable, what ought or not to be, what is desirable or non-desirable (Kluckhohn, 1951).

Social values are the result of explicit or implicit societal and group decisions that can be individually expressed. We think of ourselves in terms of our values (Gecas, 2000; Hitlin, 2003; Joas, 2001; Rokeach, 1973; Smith, 1991), using them as standards to guide impressions of ourselves, others and the world (Park, 2012). The need for self-efficacy and self-worth, in terms of having control over our lives, is underpinned by values and essentially defines our self-concept and our idea of good life (Bandura, 2001; Baumeister, 1991; Gecas, 1989, 2008). Values, through their ego-defensive functions, become protectors of our sense of efficacy.

While values capture different views about what constitutes good living, they are not always put into practice to guide it. Morris (1956) differentiates between *conceived* and *operative* values. The former represent conceptions of the desirable, whilst the latter become guiding principles that actually influence behaviours. Values 'in principle' thus differ from those 'in practice'. While individuals may subscribe to certain values, it may not always be possible to enact them. Such discrepancy can constitute a source of disempowerment and inauthenticity. McLaughlin argues that the difference between the two is an implicit one

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determined by contextual factors (ref). Gecas (2008) further argues that this distinction is an important one to better understand values in variant contexts. For example, when we value honesty how do we apply it in different situations? Does it take the same meaning and function when we apply it to ourselves and/or others and under what circumstances?

## Debates

Numerous studies and instruments have been proposed for the measurement and study of social values. Rokeach (1973) provided us with the first simple instrument, which aimed to capture universal values as guiding principles in people's lives. These are assumed to be ranked hierarchically by individuals and cultures. He distinguished between instrumental (values as means) and terminal (values as ends) values and focused his attention on value relationships. He envisaged them as abstract ideals that are traded-off in particular ways (moral versus competence values, social versus personal values). However, the use of rankings did not allow a good understanding of the interrelationships between values and the concept of prescribed value dilemmas failed to capture how value structures can vary across different situations and cultures.

Similar to Rokeach, Schwartz (1992; 2002) aims at studying value systems values but through a rating system. He develops a list of ten universal values, which are placed in a circumplex depending on how they relate to each other. The closer two values are to each other on the circle the more similar their motivational goals are (self-transcendence versus self-enhancement, and openness to change versus conservation). The circumplex has been validated in numerous cultures. However, doubts have been raised on the circumplex structure and the use of ipsatisation in mapping the distances between the values (ref). In addition, drawing universal boundaries between the different values does not seem to reflect the variation that exists across individuals, groups and cultures.

Scholarly efforts on values have been concerned with questions of taxonomy, comparability and universal validation on an individual and aggregate level. Values are understood abstract concepts isolated from their contexts, parsed into universal typologies and organised around fixed dichotomies. These, however, have failed to pay attention to the dynamic and societal nature of value structures (ref). Values are more than psychological properties that individuals possess and use as explicit guiding principles in their lives. Social values are key components of cultural frameworks that define ways of living and order states that provide the basis on which individuals and groups structure their identities.

Given their existential ontology, values can be paralleled to life trajectories as continuous *processes* of making sense of one's existence, creating meanings that guide living; in effect, values are tied to processes of being and navigating oneself in life and society. Values are held to exist between at least two individuals in relation to a common project that is not static but extends over time and space. The interdependence between conceived and operative values together with the intersubjective, temporal and spatial components are crucial for the concept of value processes as they imply of how values and their meanings are generated, sustained, elaborated and survive after their emergence. The concept of value processes is useful to uncover the psychological, historical, political, social and cultural bases of values and how they tie to people's livelihoods and identities.

## Values Processes & Good Living

Psychological debates on the topic of good life or well-being are mainly rooted in positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Diener, 1995; Seligman, 2002). Taking an Aristotelian view of *eudaimonia*, Seligman (2002) refers to wisdom, courage, love, justice, temperance and transcendence as bringing people closer to happiness. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes the role of 'flow – the experience of enjoying fulfillment when concerns such as food, ego-self and time are ignored- in creating a sense of optimal experience. These theories present a view of good life as the Holy Grail built according to virtues and moral principles. However, almost none of us are capable of putting these principles in practice. Situated livelihood is marked by constant difficulties, tensions, obstacles, and discontents (Van Deurzen, 2009). The way in which people experience, make sense of and deal with dilemmas and difficult situations is not accounted for in these schemes.

Doing good living is a painful and creative process that emphasises engagement in activities as part of everyday experience, mediated by different contexts and histories (Dewey, 1958). Bateson speaks of people's creativity in 'composing life' and conceives of life "as an improvisatory art [...] in which commitments are continually refocused and redefined" (Bateson, 1989:39). Insofar as individuals emerge as contingent agents (Giddens, 1994) , creativity is captured as the process of arranging and re-arranging surrounding structures that lead people to visualise and generate new possibilities, confront obstacles, deal with tensions, see different realities, and manage different roles across different life domains (Mead, 1934).

Doing good living as a creative process involves effects arising from the manipulation of components (i.e. operative/conceived values, time, space, intersubjective) embedded in the valuing process on the (re) organisation of the self-concept. Such effects include solutions to tensions stemming from the dynamics between our understanding of social values and our enacting them in the world in which we exist. Through becoming attentive to the different perspectives and contexts of our experiences – beyond those experiences that seem to us immediate, necessary and useful – we can gain a new dimension in our valuing encounters with others and the world. Understanding how the different components intertwine to carve our sense of self can thus lead from conscious values, as anchored in an automatic and pre-established understanding of ourselves in relation to the world, to self-conscious values that capture our ability to direct ourselves in the world. These capture the ability to direct ourselves through the various value elements to establish and re-establish connections between them that help us achieve a holistic understanding of the complexity of our existence as contingent agents in the world. This distinction is reminiscent of Sartre's distinction between reflective and self-reflective consciousness (Sartre, 1939).

The concept of value processes is useful at illuminating how learning to orient oneself through the elements that compose one's value system can help the individual engage in dialogue with his/her existence, others and the world and integrate these experiences into an image of empowered and authentic self. In this context, good life is not just a goal to be fulfilled where stillness of the psyche and the absence of pain form its basis. Envisaging change, potentials and solutions to tensions is a challenging yet integral part of doing good living, a process that is of course more than just a personal matter.

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