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Shift in Value System – Shift in Psychological Well-Being: *Evidence from an Experimental Coaching Intervention on Understanding the Content and Origin of Personal Values*

Abstract:

Identifying life values and helping clients focus on their values is a commonly used coaching practice. However, several challenges are associated with this approach. We hypothesized that underlying difficulty is the insufficient awareness about two value clusters, core vs. acquired values. Core values are one's inherent values and intrinsic guiding principles, while acquired values are adopted throughout life from various sources. We showed that relative centeredness of acquired values in personal strivings and daily activities may have a causal impact on individual's well-being. In addition, we demonstrated that it is possible to make a coaching intervention to decrease the priority individuals place on acquired values. Encouraging coaching clients to look more closely at inconsistencies within their own value systems, may decrease the relative centeredness of acquired values in their daily efforts and activities, leading to greater well-being that may persist after the coaching intervention had ended.

Background and Objectives:

Previous studies underlined the connection between the continued expression of and engagement with personal values and a sense of well-being.¹ Identifying life values and helping clients focus daily activities around their values is a commonly used coaching practice. However, several challenges to this approach could be encountered. First, growing evidence suggests that people whose system of values is strongly focused on extrinsic goals (e.g. wealth, popularity) have relatively low levels of well-being compared to people oriented toward intrinsic goals (e.g. self-acceptance, contribution).² Second, a recent study showed that there is a gap between what individuals *say* are their top priorities and real messages they *convey*

in their personal strivings and daily life events.³ Third, life values change over time more than people predict, having people make decisions that their future selves regret.⁴ These observations point to the existence of two different sets of life values. We hypothesize that major underlying difference between two value clusters is not only their content, but rather their distinct origin, henceforth, we term value clusters as *core* and *acquired*. Core values are one's inherent values and intrinsic guiding principles, while acquired values are adopted throughout life from various sources (parents/guardians, friends, culture, educational institutions, media/social media, etc.) and serve as socially desirable standards on how to act, what attitude to hold, how to judge or compare with others. We hypothesized that insufficient awareness of two value types may facilitate external sources to push individual's actions toward acquired values. In addition, relative prioritization of acquired values may be associated with costs for psychological well-being. In contrast, deep understanding of core vs. acquired value systems may strengthen core value-based personal decision-making system and lead to increases in one's well-being that may persist after the coaching intervention had ended.

Design and Methods

Over the past decades, relationships between well-being and other motivational variables were frequently studied. This body of empirical research, however, suffers from one basic methodological limitation – most of the data comes from cross-sectional, correlational studies in which participants completed measures of the relevant constructs at only one point in time. For this reason, in present study, we conducted an experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to either a no-treatment control group or to a three-session intervention designed to increase individual's understanding of core vs. acquired value systems. Potential participants were told that the study concerned personal decision-making system, that they would complete four survey packets over the course of two months and that half of the participants would be randomly assigned to attend a three-session workshop and to complete homework assignments between sessions, whereas the other half would receive no intervention.

In total, 20 individuals were assigned to control and 24 individuals to the intervention group. Participant's well-being (SWB) was assessed at four time points; pre-, mid-, immediately and one-month post-intervention, using the 7-point Satisfaction With Life Scale⁵. For intervention group, their guiding principle ranking⁶, personal strivings and daily activities (importance and effort)⁷ and motives behind pursuing each goal or activity (corresponding to either inherent or acquired values)⁸ were assessed. A relative centeredness of acquired values in personal strivings and daily activities was computed. Participants were further presented an overview of research on goals and values and the importance of developing an active values-based system for making decisions. Core vs. acquired values concept was discussed in detail. Each participant received an individual coaching session to validate personal score and explore possibilities. Correlation between SWB and relative

prioritization of acquired values was analyzed. Effect of three-session coaching in domain of core vs. acquired values on SWB was measured.

Findings:

In agreement with previous work, we consistently observed a difference between values people reported as their most important guiding principles and values that are most influential in the domain of their personal efforts and daily actions. The discrepancy between five highest ranked values of two categories corresponded to the higher calculated relative centrality of participant's acquired values in their efforts and activities. Before the intervention, a significantly lower level of SWB was reported by participant's whose relative focus was more toward acquired values. To examine whether the 3-session coaching intervention was successful in shifting daily efforts and actions more toward core values, we compared relative centeredness of acquired values before and after the intervention. Although the difference was not statistically significant, participants assigned to three coaching sessions oriented away from the influence of acquired values, as evident by a decrease in acquired values centrality score, especially in subjects who had high initial score. This result was expected; we predicted that participants who began the study with high relative prioritization of acquired values and who received the intervention would show larger changes over time than would participants who began the study with relatively high acquired values score but who did not receive the intervention. We did not expect the intervention to have notable effect on relative prioritization of acquired values and SWB of participants who begun the study with relatively low acquired values score, as their SWB would presumably already be relatively high and thus quite difficult to increase further with this kind of intervention. In the intervention group, reported SWB slightly dropped after the first session, but significantly increased after completion of the 3-session program. Importantly, it stayed higher one month after the intervention. No significant changes in SWB were reported by the control group during the same time course.

Discussion:

The presented study investigated how relative centeredness of different sets of values – inherent values and core guiding principles vs. values acquired throughout life from various sources – in personal strivings and daily activities is associated with individual's SWB, as well as do experimental interventions, designed to shift relative prioritization of values from more acquired towards more core, lead to changes in SWB. The results are consistent with our hypothesis that relative centeredness of acquired values in personal strivings and daily activities may have a causal impact on individual's subsequent well-being. We also showed that it is possible to intervene so as to decrease the priority individuals place on acquired values.

The majority of individual and group coaching sessions begin with the assessment of clients' values when establishing coaching relationships. A new approach for developing awareness about two value systems may refine the client's view of what is important to them and why. It should result in easier forward movement and tangible personal growth. In addition, it is tempting to speculate that core vs. acquired value systems theory may explain major challenges associated to standard value exercises. Namely, core values could (1) be behind intrinsic goals, (2) represent what people say is most important to them when actively thinking about values and (3) be more stable over time. In contrast, acquired values would (1) correspond to extrinsic goals, (2) influence people's automatic day-to-day actions and (3) be more changeable as a function of time. Although further data are necessary to (dis)prove these claims, encouraging people to look more closely at their own values and especially inconsistencies observed within their own core vs. acquired value systems, may shift the relative centeredness of acquired values in the direction of becoming more internally consistent and more self-aware, eventually leading to higher levels of well-being.

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