

Values – Truth

SOCIAL values, such as freedom, equality, and power, are often used as key premises for debate. For example, one individual may oppose abortion because it threatens the 'sanctity of life', whereas another person may favour the provision of abortion because it promotes 'freedom'. Such conflicts arise in a variety of important social issues (e.g. criminal punishment, education, equality rights, health care, immigration, religious freedoms, and war). In the passionate debates on these issues, it is evident that people have strong feelings about the values that support their positions, and that these values predict a wide variety of their attitudes and behaviour (Kristiansen & Hotte, 1996; Rokeach, 1973).

But research has only recently begun to explore the rational, cognitive foundations of values. Perhaps psychologists have been deterred by social scientists' complex arguments about the rational merits of different values (e.g. Fish, 1999; Frondizi, 1971; Rescher, 1993). In my view, however, these nebulous discussions do not undermine the value of empirically studying people's actual reasoning about values, and the research described in this article is based on the idea that people's subjective beliefs about the merits of values *can* be examined. Moreover, the present research illustrates how these subjective beliefs have important psychological and social consequences, regardless of the beliefs' sustainability from logical analysis.

The 'values-as-truisms' hypothesis

This research began with a simple, albeit somewhat controversial, hypothesis – that values function as truisms, which are widely shared and rarely questioned, and therefore lack support from reasoned argument. In other words, although value-relevant issues are frequently debated in society, values *themselves* are widely shared and rarely questioned. For example, the media has presented debate over whether positive discrimination programmes are a good means to attain equality. But it has not (to my knowledge)



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portrayed conflict over whether the value of equality is actually important. In general, because values are rarely debated, people might agree strongly with them while failing to build arguments supporting them.

There are both theoretical and practical reasons to test this hypothesis. From a theoretical perspective, it is possible to find statements in the literature that support and oppose the hypothesis that few reasons lie behind our values. On the one hand, people should form and store arguments in support of their values because people tend to exert a lot of cognitive effort to assess the validity of their positions on any issue that is important to them (see Chaiken *et al.*, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). On the other hand, people might adopt values as a means of complying with social norms or as a means of increasing their identification with important others (see Kelman, 1974); and neither of these processes would require any thought about the merits of the values.

From an applied perspective, if it were discovered that values function as truisms, it would be important to discover the effects that occur when values are made non-truistic through the provision of arguments for the values. Would people then be more likely to behave in a manner that supports their values? For example, people might be more likely to donate to a charity if they can access reasons supporting the value of helpfulness.

Testing the hypothesis

Given these reasons for testing whether values function like truisms, my colleagues and I have sought to test whether values possess the high agreement and lack of cognitive support intrinsic to truisms (Bernard *et al.*, 2002; Maio & Olson,

1998). Our examinations of agreement with values was straightforward. In general, the level of agreement with a belief can be assessed by simply asking people to rate the extent to which they agree with the belief. Maio and Olson (1998) used this technique to test whether people's agreement with values is comparable to that observed for previously studied medical health truisms, such as 'Penicillin has been a boon to mankind' (McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961). In addition to rating their agreement with four such medical truisms, participants rated their agreement with four statements about values: 'it is important to be helpful', 'honesty is

and meaning

important', 'it is important to be forgiving' and 'it is important to treat others equally'. As expected, the results indicated very high agreement with the values and the medical truisms. In fact, participants indicated significantly higher agreement with the values than with the medical truisms.

Our empirical examination of the cognitive support for values has been more complex. Our principal approach has been based on findings that people who have been asked to analyse their reasons for their attitudes toward an object (e.g. a painting), tend to change their attitudes after they have been asked to analyse their reasons (Wilson, Dunn *et al.*, 1989). For example, you may like a painting more or less after being asked reasons why you like it. Importantly, this effect of analysing reasons occurs only when people lack knowledge about the attitude object and not when people possess a lot of knowledge about the attitude object (e.g. Wilson, Kraft *et al.*, 1989). According to Wilson, Kraft *et*

al. (1989), individuals who lack knowledge about an attitude object must construct a variable assortment of reasons that are easy to verbalise, and these new reasons cause people to report new attitudes. In contrast, individuals who possess a lot of knowledge about an attitude object access reasons that are representative of their original attitudes, which do not cause people to change their attitude.

Similarly, if people lack cognitive support for values, analysing reasons for the values should force people to indicate a random set of novel reasons, which should cause people's endorsement of the values to change. Based on this reasoning, we conducted a series of experiments. Some participants were asked to analyse their reasons for considering several values (e.g. equality, forgiving) to be important or unimportant, whereas other participants were simply asked to analyse their reasons for liking or disliking different beverages. Before and after this manipulation all participants in both conditions were asked to rate the importance of each of the values that were analysed by some of the participants, and several values that they had not analysed.

The first interesting result from these procedures was that, on average, participants were able to list only two reasons supporting each value, whereas they listed an average of five reasons for liking or disliking each beverage. Put simply, participants could list more than twice as many reasons for liking or disliking Coca-Cola as for considering a value, such as helpfulness, to be important. Perhaps we are used to considering our taste more seriously than our values.

More importantly, however, participants who analysed their reasons for the target values changed their endorsement of these values by significantly greater amounts than participants in the control condition, who had analysed only their reasons for liking or disliking beverages. In contrast, as expected, participants who analysed their reasons for the values did not change their ratings for the non-targeted values significantly more than participants in the

control condition. Overall, then, analysing reasons for values caused them to change – providing support for the hypothesis that values lack cognitive support.

Several additional results supported this conclusion. First, change occurred in both directions – analysing reasons for the values could make them become either more important or less important. Second, the effect of analysing reasons was eliminated when participants were given an opportunity to read, rate and discuss reasons for their values a week before they completed the analysing reasons manipulation. Third, these effects have been obtained for a huge variety of values that have been the focus of extensive cross-cultural research (Inglehart, 1997; Schwartz, 1992, 1996), including values that promote the welfare of others (e.g. forgiving, helpfulness, protecting the environment), protecting the status quo (e.g. family security, obedience), promoting personal ambitions (e.g. achievement, power) and pursuing personal interests in novel directions (e.g. freedom, creativity). Finally, across all of these experiments, the effects of analysing reasons have not been moderated by many individual-difference variables that are relevant to values, including self-monitoring (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986), private and public self-consciousness (Scheier & Carver, 1985), moral absolutism and idealism (Forsyth, 1980), religiosity (Batson *et al.*, 1993), right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1988) and dogmatism (Rokeach, 1960). Hence, the results are remarkably consistent across experiments, values, and participants.

Are truisms 'paper tigers'?

The importance of these findings rests partly on the notion that it makes a difference whether people can access reasons supporting their values. When we began testing the values-as-truisms hypothesis, we suspected that the cognitive support for values does make a difference, because truisms in general are like paper tigers: they look tough but are easily crumpled (McGuire, 1964). In fact, this

paper-tiger phenomenon is particularly relevant to the values context, because classic research has indicated that attacks against values produce radical psychological changes, even though the attacks are rare (Schein, 1956).

An interesting issue is whether these radical changes are inevitable. McGuire (1964) used a biological analogy to describe different ways in which truisms can be made more resistant to attack. One approach involves making the truisms stronger by providing more information to support them. McGuire likened this approach to the effect of providing a person with vitamins before they are attacked by a virus. A second approach involves making the truisms more resistant by exposing people to attacking arguments and encouraging refutation of the arguments. McGuire likened this approach to immunotherapy, which exposes people to a weakened version of a pernicious virus before actual exposure to the virus. Can people be 'inoculated' against attacks on their values?

To begin addressing this issue, we conducted a simple experiment that exposed participants to an essay attacking the value of equality. This essay argued that equality is an unattainable ideal: people are not actually equal, and real-world applications of the value lead to incorrect decisions (e.g. hiring a weaker applicant for a post). Prior to reading this message participants (a) listed arguments attacking equality and relevant counterarguments (refutational condition); or (b) listed arguments supporting equality (supportive condition); or (c) were not asked to generate any arguments. After reading the persuasive attack against equality, participants rated their agreement with equality, their attitudes towards a variety of issues pertaining to equality (e.g. positive discrimination), and the importance of five values that are relevant to equality (e.g. forgiveness, helpfulness; see Schwartz, 1992, for an explication of the relation between these values).

We expected that, consistent with earlier research (McGuire, 1964), both the refutational and supportive defences would confer resistance to value change. As expected, a planned contrast revealed that, after the attack, participants in the refutational and supportive conditions considered equality to be more important than did participants in the control condition. Participants in the refutational and supportive conditions did not significantly differ.

In fact, the impact of the refutational defence was replicated in a subsequent experiment that presented it several days before the persuasive attack (Bernard *et al.*, 2002). This replication was successful even though the refutational defence in this experiment merely required reading arguments for and against equality. In addition, across both experiments, a parallel, but non-significant, pattern was found when we examined attitudes towards



the equality-relevant issues and values: participants were more favourable toward the egalitarian policies and considered the relevant values to be more important after the essay attacking equality than did participants in the control condition. Thus, the defence yielded effects beyond the target value.

What about behaviour?

The resistance-to-attack data are merely small steps towards showing that there are practical effects of making values non-truistic. A second step involves showing that values have a greater influence on subsequent behaviour after they have been made non-truistic.

This issue is important because classic research has shown many instances in which people's behaviour contradicts cherished social values. For example, despite the importance of equality to most people, Tajfel (1970) found that people would discriminate in favour of their own group even when there is no practical incentive to do so and no real group ties. Similarly, Darley and Batson (1973) showed how seminarians would practically hurdle an ailing bystander while on their way to give a talk about, of all things, a Biblical parable about the importance of helping others.

To begin to assess the ramifications of the values as truisms hypothesis for pro-

value behaviour, we conducted two other simple experiments (Maio *et al.*, 2001). The first experiment contained three conditions. In the 'reasons-salient' condition, participants were given 20 minutes to write reasons that could be used to support or oppose the importance of treating others equally. In the 'equality salient' condition, participants were asked to solve seven anagrams, which were related to the theme of equality: balance, equality, even, fair, identical, parallel, and same. After both the reasons-salient and equality-salient conditions, participants were asked to rate the importance of equality to them. In the control condition, participants went directly to the measure of egalitarian behaviour, which was presented as the 'second study' in the reasons-salient and equality-salient conditions.

The measure of egalitarian behaviour was a replication of Tajfel's (1970) minimal group paradigm. Participants were randomly assigned to either a 'red group' or a 'blue group' and were asked to allocate points to members of both groups before beginning a '20 questions' game, using a variety of decision-making matrices that tapped the extent to which participants were motivated to allocate points equally rather than favour their own group. Results indicated a significant effect of the manipulation.

As expected, the tendency to allocate points equally was higher for participants in the reasons-salient condition than for participants in the equality-salient or control conditions. The tendency to allocate points equally was not different in the priming versus control condition. Thus, participants for whom pro-equality reasons were made salient were more likely to allocate points equally than were participants for whom these reasons were not made salient.

Importantly, this effect did not occur simply because the salient reasons condition caused people to rate equality as more important – ratings of the importance of equality were not significantly different between the reasons-salient and equality-salient condition. And this effect did not occur simply because the salient reasons condition made the value of equality itself more accessible from memory; presumably, both the reasons-salient and equality-salient condition primed this value, but only the reasons-salient condition caused more egalitarian behaviour. In fact, a subsequent experiment confirmed that the value of equality was made more accessible in both conditions,

using a response latency measure of value accessibility (see Maio *et al.*, 2001). That is, participants in the reasons-salient and equality salient conditions responded to an item requesting their rating of the importance of equality significantly more quickly than did participants in the control condition. Thus, the salience of the reasons themselves must have caused the increase in egalitarian behaviour.

This effect has been replicated using another value and a different manipulation (Maio *et al.*, 2001). Participants in this experiment were asked to list reasons regarding the value of helpfulness, or they were asked to rate their feelings about this value. Next, a confederate asked participants whether they could volunteer for an additional experiment, and how long they could volunteer for. As expected, significantly more time was offered by participants in the reasons-salient condition than by participants in the helpfulness-salient condition.

In considering the implications of these experiments, it is important to note that the method for inducing cognitive support was not heavy-handed. People are asked to critically analyse reasons for and against

the values – they are not told to consider the value as being important. Thus, the procedure is more about getting people to explore their own motives, which may make it more palatable than values-education programmes that attempt to dictate values to people.

Conclusion

Ongoing research is examining additional participant samples, such as parishioners and criminal offenders. In some samples, we should find exceptions to the values-as-truisms hypothesis. For example, religious ministers may often think a great deal about the value of a spiritual life and develop arguments supporting this value. Ministers may develop support for the value precisely because they often witness people whose faith in a spiritual life is less than their own. In general, people who engage in active advocacy to promote a particular value (e.g. environmentalists, libertarians) may develop a great deal of reasoned argument in support for the value in order to combat the perceived opposition or apathy around them.

We are also examining the effects of cognitive support for values on a variety

of variables, including effects on the irrational defence of value-relevant attitudes, interconnections between values in memory, effects on behaviour in groups, and subjective well-being. Regardless of what such research reveals, all of the studies above illustrate why it is important to study people's cognitive support for their values, and not just the values themselves. The research provides evidence that if values are strong, central concepts it is not because people develop many reasons for possessing them.

What makes values so special? Perhaps they carry import precisely because they are truistic. In other words, the significance of values is attributable to the strong social consensus supporting them. As a result of this consensus, values become empowered by a strong sense of emotional conviction. This emotional conviction may be primarily responsible for the impact of values on a variety of psychological phenomena, making it vital that research continues to explore this issue.

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