



Stability and change in work values: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies[☆]

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ABSTRACT

A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies was conducted to investigate stability and change in work values across the life span. Both rank-order stability and mean-level change were investigated using an integrative classification for intrinsic, extrinsic, social and status work values (Ross, Schwartz, & Surkis, 1999). Results of rank-order stability indicated that work values were stable individual differences ($\rho = .62$). The stability level was lowest during college years (18–22 years old) and highest after entering the workforce (22 years old and later). Work values were more stable than personality traits across all age categories, whereas not as stable as vocational interests during college years and adulthood. Baby Boomers were found to possess a higher level of rank-order stability as compared to Generation X. Mean-level results showed that during college years (18–22 years old), the population as a whole attached more importance to intrinsic values while deemphasizing all the remaining values; during the initial entry of the workforce (22–26 years old), only extrinsic values showed an increase in importance while all the other values decreased; later on after adulthood years (26 years and after), besides the continuous increase of extrinsic values, there was also a dramatic increase in status values. Theoretical and practical implications were discussed.

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Values are widely viewed as critical to the selection of, and subsequent satisfaction with, life roles (Dawis, 1991). Given the fact that work plays a fundamental role in human life by providing opportunities to satisfy different needs and goals, work values have been argued to be “salient, basic, and influential” (Ester, Braun, & Mohler, 2006, p.92), occupy a central position in the overall pattern of values, and share significant relationship with other personal values (Ros, Schwartz, & Surkiss, 1999). For more than 70 years, researchers have provided evidence supporting the importance of work values in the prediction of a wide variety of work-related outcomes, including vocational aspirations and career choice (Judge & Bretz, 1992; Super, 1970), job satisfaction and tenure (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Locke, 1976) and other decision-making processes (Ravlin & Meglino, 1987; Rounds & Armstrong, 2005). Furthermore, value congruence between employees and organizations (Chatman, 1989; Ostroff & Judge, 2007) is related to positive outcomes in the workplace (e.g., Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003).

The varied uses of work values in research and practice generally assume that values are relatively stable. Nevertheless, researchers have taken different positions on the stability of values. For example, Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Alexrad, and Herma (1951) stated that values undergo several changes before finally stabilizing during late adolescence. In comparison, Brim and Kagan (1980)

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have taken the position that values remain open to change throughout the life course. There has yet to be an integrated review of work value stability and change across the life span. The purpose of the present study is to investigate when work values become stable and how they change before becoming stable by conducting a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies of work values.

Studies of work value stability and change use two complementary methods: rank-order stability and mean-level change. Rank-order stability refers to the relative placement of individuals within a group over time (De Fruyt et al., 2006), and is usually operationalized as a test–retest correlation. Mean-level change refers to whether there is an increase or decrease on certain work value dimensions over time. Both rank-order stability and mean-level change have been demonstrated to provide unique information in understanding stability and change (De Fruyt et al., 2006). In the present study, we quantify the relative magnitude and direction of work value change from both perspectives. Since there are a variety of structures and measures, it can be difficult to compare values across studies. Next, we review several conceptual frameworks to integrate work value measures.

1. Work value classifications

Over the past several decades, values have been broadly studied by a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, political science and psychology. Within the realm of psychology, Allport pioneered the study of values and defined value as “a belief upon which a man acts by preferences” (Allport, 1961, p. 454). Along with other colleagues, he developed the Allport–Vernon Study of Values (Allport & Vernon, 1931). Another pioneer, Rokeach (1973) has made contributions in advancing the investigation of the nature of human values and value systems. According to Rokeach, a value is an “enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end state of existence” (Rokeach, 1973, p.5). Rokeach (1973) differentiated values into instrumental values (e.g., ambitious, independent) and terminal values (e.g., a comfortable life, social recognition). Schwartz (1992, 1994) provides the most comprehensive and up-to-date summary of the structure of values. Schwartz’s (1992) circumplex model categorized ten motivational types of values, specifying the dynamic relations among those values in an integrated manner. Schwartz’s structure has been supported in samples from different cultures (Schwartz, 2005) and across different occupations (Koivula & Verkasalo, 2006).

The transcendental nature of values allows them to be applied to various domains of human life, with those values pertinent to one’s working life referred to as work values (Lyons, Higgins, & Duxbury, 2010). Work values can be defined as the relative importance individuals place on various aspects of work including desirable work settings and work-related outcomes (Dose, 1997; Ros et al., 1999). Dawis and Lofquist (1984) were among the first in extending the study of values to the work settings. In the theory of work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), they defined work values as “second-order needs.” They proposed six value dimensions that are organized into three sources of work environment reinforcers: Self (achievement and autonomy), Social (altruism and status) and Environment (safety and comfort). Self-determination theory (SDT) makes a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic work values (Kasser, 2002; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic values are more directly related to the fulfilling of inherent psychological needs such as autonomy and competence, while extrinsic values tapping at material aspects of work, such as pay, benefits, and job security.

Despite the many different labels, measures, and typologies, at least four fundamental types of work values have been consistently identified. For example, Harding and Hiksloops (1995) provided a categorization of work values according to the functions work fulfills including: (a) Personal meaning: work provides a source for ability utilization, self development and actualization; (b) Exchange: people work in return for security, money and other forms of compensation; (c) Social contact: people establish different relationships with others in their workplace; and (d) Status: certain level of work offers prestige, power and authority. Based on the structural model of Elizur and colleagues (e.g., Elizur, 1984; Sagie & Elizur, 1996), Lyons et al. (2010) provided an updated typology that contains similar aspects labeled: Cognitive, Instrumental, Social/Altruistic and Prestige values. Ros et al. (1999) claimed that work values could be organized corresponding to Schwartz’s (1992) four higher order dimensions of universal values: Intrinsic, or self-actualization values (including values such as personal growth, autonomy, interest, creativity, challenge, and intellectual stimulation etc.); Extrinsic, or security/material values (mostly related to the work aspects such as pay, security and work environment); Social, or relational values (relational component includes interacting with people, humanity component includes altruistic or contribution to society); and Status, or power values (including prestige, authority, influence etc.). We adopt a similar four-factor structure to organize work values into Intrinsic, Extrinsic, Social and Status categories.

2. Stability and change of work values

In general, studies of value continuity and change are modeled according to two approaches: rank-order stability and mean-level change. These approaches correspond to Katzell’s (1964) characteristics of the valuing process: hierarchy of values, which refers to the order and relative importance individuals place on different values, and magnitude of values, which deals with the question of the level of values that needs to be attained to satisfy that value. Rank-order stability refers to the relative standing or ordering of individuals’ value preferences across time, and is usually indexed by rank-order stability coefficient (i.e., test–retest correlations). Mean-level change refers to the mean importance of a value. The mean-level increase or decrease indicates whether the sample as a whole shifts up or down on a value measure over time, and is often measured by mean differences (De Fruyt et al., 2006). The existence of rank-order stability does not rule out the possibility of mean-level change, in fact, both methods offer a different lens to understand value stability and change.

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