Core Values: Importance and Assessment

Jamie McCreary, Ph.D., and Harold Stanislaw, Ph.D.

Technical brief 2022-01, issued March 11, 2022

A basic tenet of psychology is that people possess a distinct set of core values—personal judgments about what is important in life-- that define who they are. Core values are learned early in life, primarily from the family, but may be modified and supplemented through contact with media, peer interactions, and other childhood experiences. School activities generally reflect societal values, so that older children may come to agree on what is important in life, while at the same time maintaining a list of priorities all their own. Of course, values are continually reviewed and updated, so that adults typically endorse values developed in other contexts as well.

Importance of Values

Values guide decisions about appropriate and desirable behaviors. Faced with a choice between studying for an important test alone or with friends, a person who values teamwork would be more likely to choose the group approach. By the same token, someone who values innovation would search for opportunities to express that value, choosing whatever situation allows for a new and different approach.

Values also provide a filter through which reality is viewed, influencing the way events are perceived and one's emotional reactions to them. Someone who values teamwork probably sees a variety of team situations in a positive light and enjoys collaborating with others. Similarly, a person who values innovation likely has ambivalent or negative feelings about tasks that require set principles to solve a problem and avoids such assignments when possible.

Core values are linked to psychological well-being in several ways. Whatever one's values, focusing on them reduces arousal and negativity, leading to less rumination after failure and better performance in a variety of potentially threatening situations. Setting goals that are consistent with one's values is highly motivating, and people experience greater psychological well-being when they attain goals that are aligned with their personal values. This effect is evident across a variety of cultures, suggesting that living one's values is universally important.

Assessing Values

Clarifying values helps people gain a sense of direction and make successful life choices. Psychologists, who have been measuring values for nearly 100 years, typically ask people to rate or rank potential values in terms of personal relevance or to identify their most and least

---

Department of Psychology and Child Development

inspiring values. Sometimes this task is followed by group discussion during which people share and defend their choices. The quality of the assessment process relies heavily on the comprehensiveness of the list of values people are asked to consider, and the person's ability to keep all these values in mind at the same time. Presenting a wider array of choices may overwhelm people and the process of sorting through the list can be time consuming.

A different approach to identifying values was pioneered by Seity Health for use in mobile and desktop apps (https://www.seityhealth.com/). Seity's approach is called called *HIP*, which stands for *hierarchical ipsatization procedure*. HIP rapidly identifies the four values that individuals find most inspiring and motivating. A key feature of HIP is that it presents 80 values grouped into 20 categories. Users first choose the four categories that motivate and inspire them most. These contain a total 16 separate values, which are then prioritized to result in a final selection of four "core" values. HIP can be completed in 5-7 minutes and is highly efficient, requiring users to evaluate only 36 items (20 categories and 16 values), even though they are effectively choosing among 80 values. HIP is also transparent and helps users engage in self-reflection. A recent study of adults found that 88% felt the four values they selected using HIP inspired and motivated them more than any other values they could think of. Collectively, these findings provide strong evidence that HIP is a user-friendly tool that can rapidly identify core values in adults.