Types of Personal Values in the Continuum of Unrealisability–Realisability of their Meaning

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Abstract

The transformation of the meaning of values depending on the subjective evaluation of their attainability is a relevant problem due to the important role of feedback in the individual regulation of one's life. The goal of this article is to describe the laws of human comprehension in regard to the level of realisation of desirable values, which was indicated through the comparison of the importance of values and the subjective assessment of their attainability. The leading method of research in this sphere is the analysis of correlative structures of specific parameters, such as importance, attainability, and the discrepancy between them. The material is comprised of data from 80 male and 90 female subjects aged 22 to 40. Polar tendencies of alignment and misalignment of the studied parameters were identified, which together constitute the continuum of unrealisability-realisability of values. In accordance with their location in this continuum, we identified and described meaning types of values, and their dependence on age and gender were discovered. Materials from the article may be used in studies of the regulation of human life and psychological counselling.

Keywords: values, personal value-meaning systems, unrealisability-realisability of values, importance of values, attainability of values

1. Introduction

1.1 Relevance of the Subject

Personality formation occurs through the appropriation of cultural values and historical experiences through the life activity of the community to which an individual belongs. These values are interiorized and integrated into the structure of one's personality in the form of personal values, setting the main guidelines for an individual's life activity and playing a main role in its regulation.

Predominantly the following, *content based sides* of value-meaning regulation are investigated in psychology: the hierarchy of values and valuable orientations (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1994), structure and content of values (Cieciuch & Schwartz, 2012; Cieciuch et al., 2014), the correlation of values with the meaning of life (Dezutter et al., 2014), mental states (Prokhorov, 2009), health and well-being (Brassai et al., 2011; Maercker et al., 2015).

The *dynamic sides* of personal value functioning are investigated to a lesser degree. These dynamic sides reflect the patterns of an individual's tension patterns. These tension patterns arise upon the correlation of an individual's personal existential expectations to their actual living situation, and the level of personal importance of the specific value to the perceived feasibility of its realisation. An important element in the process of regulation, utilising the implementation of feedback, is the subjective evaluation of the level of realisation of one's personal values, the comprehension of the divergence of desirable and possible.

In psychology, views on the issues in this area are quite diverse and contradictory. Psychoanalysts describe the defense mechanism of rationalisation, which is used to prevent frustration (Freud, 1989). An individual reduces their need to satisfy a desire ("I did not really want that anyways"), or the attractiveness of the object ("It isn't so great").

According to the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Gawronski, 2012), there is an aspiration to achieve coherence of cognitive representations of the outside world and oneself; when there is a contradiction there is a motivation to their coordination.

In cognitive theories on motivation, relevant issues are discussed in terms of "expectation–value" (Heckhausen, 1980). Atkinson (1966) believes that an individual's motivation to achieve is determined by the importance of a specific result for the subject and its subjective reachability. The interaction of these parameters leads to the selection of behavior. Therefore, many studies are focused on identifying parameters on which the subject's expectations depend. However, they are focused on motivation in a particular experimental situation. Similar questions regarding personal values as regulators of an individual's life in general in the long-term are almost unexplored.

1.2 Problem Statement

In his theory of overcoming, Shakurov (2003) explains that the barrier between a desired value and its realisation in the life of the subject creates the actual value. Said barriers should not be too high, in which case the values are meaningless, nor should these barriers be absent or the value stops being valuable thus losing its property.

Fantalova (2001) interprets the correlation between specific values and their attainability in a different way. She found that the values have different degrees and directions of divergence between the parameters of their importance (I) and accessibility (A), and introduced the psychometric index (I–A). When the object is of great importance, but the subject considers it to be unattainable (I>A), it is defined as an internal conflict. The opposite condition (I<A) is indicated as an internal vacuum. The optimal situation is one where there is little difference between the degrees and directions of divergence, and their complete conjunction is indicated as a state of harmony.

To resolve the contradiction between these opposing positions and clarify the meaning of this controversy, the divergence of importance and accessibility of values were empirically compared with an individual's satisfaction and comprehension of life (Salikhova, 2015). It was found that said contradiction is not related to these parameters. But it can give these values both additional meaning potential and reflect the presence of internal conflict or personal neutrality. This suggests that the process of comprehending these internal gaps between value and accessibility is *multidirectional*.

The subjective comprehension of the existence of the gap between the importance of said values and their accessibility does not disclose the nature of the interaction of these parameters as a whole. Numerous scientific data and observations of everyday life indicate that these parameters may be in a relationship of mutual influence. One can lower their assessment of the importance of a value if they estimate a low level of attainability, on the contrary, one can start to have a higher evaluation of a value that they have lost, if it is unattainable.

1.3 Objective of the Research

We believe that parameters of the importance and attainability of values, and the discrepancy between them may be interconnected in a variety of ways. The goal of this study is to provide empirical evidence for this hypothesis.

A correlation between parameters can serve as an indicator of their interdependence.

2. Methods

2.1 Data Collection Methods

In order to collect empirical data, the Rokeach (1973) technique, modified by Fantalova (2001) was used. In pairs, subjects compared twelve terminal values by criteria of their importance and attainability. The list included the following values: an active lifestyle, health (both physical and mental), an interesting job, beauty in nature and art, love (both sensual and spiritual closeness to a partner), wealth (absence of financial constraints), close friendship, self-confidence (absence of inner conflicts and doubts), cognition (including ability to expand knowledge and attain new experiences), freedom (independence of mind and actions), happy family life, creativity. Each group of subjects was given the list of values in their native languages.

The following criteria were defined in each group: 1) importance (I) as the number of cases when the value was chosen as a more important one in a pair; 2) attainability (A) as the number of cases when the value was chosen as more attainable in a pair; 3) the difference of importance and attainability (I-A).

The correlation between importance and attainability (RI) and the correlation between the parameters of importance and the difference between importance and attainability (UI) were calculated for each value.

2.2 Description of the Survey Sample

The current research has surveyed 180 subjects aged 22 to 40, among them: women, aged 22-30 (n=55); women, aged 31-40 (n=45); men, aged 22-30 (n=35); men, aged 31-40 (n=45).

2.3 Methods of Data Processing

The data was processed by applying descriptive statistics procedures, correlation analysis based on Pearson's formula.

The data was analyzed in age and gender-related groups.

3. Results

3.1 Results of the Correlation Analysis of all the Values in the Men's Groups

The distribution of all measured variables in the sample was close to normal; it allowed the application of correlation analysis using Pearson's formula.

Correlations between importance and attainability (RI) and correlation between the parameters of importance and the difference between importance and attainability (UI) of each value among men aged 22-30 and men aged 31-40 are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations between importance, attainability and the difference between importance and attainability of all values among men

Values	men aged 22-30 (n=35)		men aged 31-40 (n=45)	
	RI	UI	RI	UI
An active lifestyle	**0.35***	0.15	0.07	**0.57****
Health	-0.35	**0.72****	0.25	**0.58****
Interesting job	0.18	0.25	0.24	**0.55****
Beauty in nature and art	**0.47***	-0.08	0.26	0.22
Love	0.17	**0.55****	**0.44***	**0.35***
Wealth	0.12	**0.64****	**0.42***	0.23
Close friendship	**0.55****	0.01	**0.67****	0.14
Self-confidence	**0.41***	**0.68****	0.13	**0.42***
Cognition	**0.46****	**0.53****	**0.41**	**0.43***
Freedom	**0.83*****	0.33	0.27	**0.56****
Happy family life	-0.10	**0.68****	**0.38***	0.06
Creativity	**0.59****	**0.35***	**0.61****	0.22

Asterisks indicate values that have reached statistical significance at the p-level p<0.05 (*), p<0.01 (**), p<0.001 (***)

3.2 Results of the Correlation Analysis of all of the Values in the Women's Groups

Correlations between importance and attainability (RI) and correlations between the parameters of importance and the difference between importance and attainability (UI) of each value among women aged 22-30 and women aged 31-40 are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlations between importance, attainability and the difference between importance and attainability of all values among women

Values	women aged 22-30 (n=55)		women aged 31-40 year old (n=45)	
	RI	UI	RI	UI
An active lifestyle	0.37*	0.46**	0.21	0.40*
Health	0.10	0.54**	0.04	0.60**
An interesting job	0.24	0.46**	0.04	0.57**
Beauty in nature and art	0.31*	0.41**	0.30*	0.18
Love	0.36*	0.20	0.48**	0.03
Wealth	0.42*	0.44**	-0.13	0.66**
Close friendship	0.45*	0.48**	0.50**	0.45**
Self-confidence	-0.08	0.69***	-0.10	0.70***
Cognition	0.25*	0.48**	0.43*	0.39*
Freedom	0.22	0.54**	0.24	0.46**
Happy family life	0.02	0.49**	-0.01	0.53**
Creativity	0.51*	0.22	0.73***	0.38*

Asterisks indicate values that have reached statistical significance at the p-level p<0.05 (*), p<0.01 (**), p<0.001 (***)

4. Discussions

4.1 Discussion of the Correlations between Importance and Attainability and Correlation between the Parameters of Importance and the Difference between Importance and Attainability of all Values

The results show that the hypothesis is confirmed. Correlative structures of investigated parameters vary in different values. Different combinations of relationships of importance and accessibility (I–A) and importance with divergence (I–A) that is I*(I–A) were found.

Variations in each of these relationships can be in one of three states: reliable direct connection, reliable reverse connection, connection is absent. All possible combinations of correlative structures are shown in the Table 3.

Table 3. Meaning types of values depending on the configuration of the correlative structures

Significant interaction of importance (I) and attainability (A) values	Significant interaction of importance (I) and attainability (I–A) values	Meaning type of value
straight	missing	free-implemented
straight	straight	barrier-implemented
missing	straight	barrier
reverse	straight	barrier-problem

missing	missing	neutral
straight	reverse	*surplus-implemented*
missing	reverse	*surplus*
reverse	reverse	theoretically impossible
reverse	missing	theoretically impossible

Legend: types theoretically possible, but not found in the empirical material are in italic.

Meaningful interpretations of these results depicting correlative structures allow for the allocation of *polar tendencies* to arise during the correlation of the degree of importance of a value and the evaluation of its attainability.

The first trend describes *the alignment* of important measures of value and their attainability. The distance between them is reduced either by external actions directed towards the achievement of a value, or by internal, compensatory actions, leading to a decrease in the importance of a value because of its inaccessibility. According to this trend, an individual realises and attains the things that they can in life, comes to terms with what they have, and decreases the value of the things that are not attainable ("A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush"). The direct connection between importance and attainability of a value is its empirical indicator.

The second trend describes *the polarization* or *misalignment* of a value's importance and its attainability. The improvement of one of these parameters is correlated with a decrease of the other. Therefore, what is attainable goes unappreciated, and what is unattainable seems to be more valuable, as illustrated in a well-known proverb "We do not care for what we have, but when we lose it, we cry", "The best place to be is somewhere else". This type of relationship reflects R. H. Shakurov's conception (2003). The fact that there is a *barrier* in the way of the realisation of a value increases its importance. The backwards connection between the perceived importance and attainability of a value is its empirical indicator.

Besides the direct and reverse correlations of importance and attainability of values we revealed that there is a direct correlation of importance (I) and difference (I–A). They also tend to misalign in a less pronounced way. These interrelations become particularly informative when the correlation between importance and attainability is close to zero. In this section they allow for more variations of the ratios of trends of *misalignment* and *discrepancy*.

Trends of *alignment and discrepancy* of the importance and attainability of values define the continuum of *unrealisability-realisability of personal values*. Operational indicators of this continuum are 1) *the realisability index* as a correlation between importance and attainability (RI); 2) *the unrelisability index as a* correlation between importance and the difference between importance and attainability (UI). They determine the location of value this continuum.

In the theoretical interpretation of these trends, the idea of meaning function of K. Lewin's barrier (1935), as well as ideas of the concept of meaning as boundary formation in which consciousness and being, ideal and real, existential life values and existential possibilities of their implementation converge (Leontiev, 2003) are used as a basis for further analysis. Additionally, we rely on the idea of the transformation of the meaning of values in a stressful situation, such as the loss of life (Schaefer, 1992; Tedeschi, et al. 1998). Accordingly, it can be stated that the observed trends express additional meanings of value. This occurrence is the result of the internal processing of perceived differences between the importance and attainability of personal values. As a result, values acquire a particular connotation in the human mind.

Various combinations of aligning (realisable) and misaligning (unrealisable) trends become the basis of the allocation of *meaning types* of values.

4.2 Meaning Types of Values in the Continuum of Unrealisability-Realisability of Their Meaning

Let us describe types of meaning values derived from a combination of dedicated criteria (Table 3).

1) *Free-implemented type*. In this case, the higher is the importance of a value, the more an individual *realises* it, and, therefore, estimates its attainability to be higher. If the importance of a value is not very high, then the individual does not put forth the necessary activity towards its implementation and evaluates it as unattainable. Still there is no link between parameter (I) and the divergence (I–A). This type includes the meaning values of:

an interesting job (men aged 22-30), and beauty in nature and art (men aged 31-40).

2) *Barrier-implemented type*. In this case, an increase in the importance of a value is due to both an increase in its attainability, and the difference of (I–A). The assessment of the value's *attainability* increases, but when the level of importance grows faster than the level of attainability the divergence also increases (I–A). This is what creates a *barrier* value. This meaning type includes the values of self-confidence, cognition, creativity (men aged 22-30), love, cognition (men aged 31-40, active lifestyle, beauty in nature and art, wealth, close friendship, cognition (women aged 22-30), close friendship, cognition, creativity (women aged 31-40).

3) *Barrier type*. Herein the importance of a value is not related to its attainability, thus there is a direct correlation of values and the divergence (I–A). Hence, the more important the value, the greater the discrepancy. If the importance of a value is not high then the discrepancy measure (I–A) is lowered. This meaning type includes the values of: love, wealth, happy family life (men aged 22-30), active lifestyle, health, an interesting job, self-confidence, freedom (men aged 31-40), health, an interesting job, self-confidence, freedom, happy family life (women aged 22-30), active lifestyle, health, an interesting job, wealth, self-confidence, freedom, happy family life (women aged 31-40).

4) *Barrier-problem type*. In this case, feedback of value importance and attainability, reduces the implementation of a value and enhances its importance. More so, the values that could be implemented depreciate. As with the previous two types, there is a direct correlation between divergence and importance (I–A). This suggests that the meaning of the value's *barrier* is enhanced to the point of becoming problematic. The only value that applies to this meaning type is health (men aged 22-30).

5) *Neutral type*. In this case, there is no correlation among the studied parameters. The importance of a value, its attainability and the level of divergence vary independently of each other, different combinations are possible between them. In this case, a value does not get an extra connotation, the content of which is defined by the continuum of unrealisability-realisability. This type includes the values of: an interesting job (men aged 22-30), and beauty in nature and art (men aged 31-40).

6) *Surplus-implemented type*. The direct correlation between importance and attainability is combined with the reverse correlation between the value's importance and divergence (I–A). The more important a value is, and the more an individual *realises,* it the higher they evaluate its attainability. However, when the level of attainability grows faster than the level of importance, the correlation I* (I–A) is negative. The level of realisation of a value does not correspond to its importance, it is redundant. This type has not yet been detected empirically, its possibility is assumed on the basis of nominated criteria.

7) *Surplus type*. Importance and attainability vary independently from each other, there is no link between them. However, there is a reverse link of importance and value divergence (I–A). This means more rapid growth of importance over attainability. The extent of a value's implementation is redundant in relation to its importance, but to a lesser extent than in the previous type. This type is also not yet discovered empirically.

> The last two groups of correlations are: correlative reverse combinations of the importance and accessibility of values with combinations of importance and divergence (I–A) or with the reverse correlation between them. The reverse correlation of the importance and accessibility of a value indicates the strong expression of the discrepancy trend. In this case, the correlation between value importance and divergence (I–A), that detect weak expression of this trend, can only be accurate and direct. The presence of reverse correlations is impossible. Therefore, these combinations are possible only as combinatorial options, but are not meaningful.

The existence of different types of meaning values reveals how differently they are included in the structure of the value-meaning sphere of an individual. In some contexts meaning type reveals perception of the world as full of obstacles and unattainable values, in the context of others, it reveals full freedom of an individual to implement his own intentions.

The presence of different correlative structures of the investigated parameters confirms the hypothesis about the non-random nature of their interrelation. Also, some of them directly correspond to the functioning of individual defense mechanisms. For example, the effect of the defense mechanism of rationalization, where the value of the unattainable object is reduced, coincides with the free-implemented meaning type, where the parameters of importance and attainability are also changed accordingly.

It was discovered that the attribution of a value to a specific meaning type is not rigid and constant. It varies depending on an individual's age and gender. Therefore, we should consider the meaning type as a functional and dynamic characteristic of values.

4.3 Discussion of Future Directions of Research

The data that was obtained is limited by the selection of people who participated in the study, and not all possible combinations of links were found using the empirical data. Increasing the diversity of the selection can resolve this issue.

One longitudinal research possibility is to observe the changes of the meaning type of values at different times of an individual's life, depending on the socio–psychological and other characteristics, as well as in different situations in life.

The proposed typology does not depend on the content of personal values. Besides age and gender, individual styles of meaning processing of the divergence of the importance and attainability of a value, then we can raise the question of its sustainability. If it is sustainable, this style can turn into the personal characteristics of an individual.

5. Conclusions

1) Subjective perception of the importance of a value, the assessment of its attainability, and the divergence of these parameters interact with each other in a variety of ways, resulting in a variation of correlative structures among them. These reflect the nature of the subjective internal processing of the discrepancy of a value's importance, and its attainability that sets the *meaning type* of the value.

2) When correlating the degree of the importance of a value and the evaluation of its attainability there are two *polar tendencies*: a) realisability of values as the coordination of the importance and attainability of values; b) unrealisability as a discrepancy between the importance and attainability of values. Together, they define the content of the continuum of the unrealisability-realisability of value meaning.

3) Empirically the meaning types of values: free-implemented, barrier, barrier-implemented, barrier-problematic, and neutral were revealed.

4) It was discovered that the meaning type of a value depends on the age and gender of the person.

Acknowledgments

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