

The Ambiguous Nature of Values in the Research: Definitions and Measurement

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Since the early days of psychological research, values have been considered as a key aspect of mental health and wellness. Values congruence has been proposed as a route to decreased stress (Creswell et al., 2005), decreased experience of pain (Branstetter-Rost, Cushing, & Douleh, 2009), and better grades (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006), among a wide range of other positive outcomes. As early as 1964, Rogers argued that a discrepancy between personal values, or stated preferences, and action is the foundation of psychological struggles. Values have been discussed in the psychological literature in a myriad of ways, with humanistic, behavioural, and existential manifestations. Despite the long standing tenure of the values construct, there is little consensus as to the meaning of the term *values*. It has been defined as a set of interests (Allport, Vernon, & Lindzey, 1960); a set of domains that guide behaviours and goals (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987); or the results of socialization which determine behavioural patterns in social scenarios (Brewster-Smith, 1969). Today, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) researchers define values as “verbally construed global desired life consequences” (p. 206, Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). Unlike many previous definitions, this one defines values as a two fold construct, which encompasses not just ideas, but also the chosen actions by which individuals can live out these ideas. Rather than assuming values are externally prescribed, ACT researchers believe that values are consciously chosen and intrinsically derived. The lack of consensus pertaining to this construct has resulted in values research becoming less and less interpretable. Consistent with the multitude of interpretations, there are many measures- qualitative and quantitative - that have been used in a variety research settings to explore values. Due to the lack of clarity around the term *values*, it is unlikely that these measures are assessing the same construct. This presentation will review the wide range of meanings attached to the term “values” in the psychological literature. We will explore the range of domains in which values have been discussed and analyze links between the different measures. In this presentation, we will focus on the conceptualization of values through an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) framework. We will highlight the measures of values developed through this theoretical orientation and the research that has made this treatment an empirically supported modality. We will also introduce a method under development that will standardize the format and content of study participants’ definitions of values. The clinical and research applicability of the measure will be reviewed.