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# Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's Values Orientation Theory

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# Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's Values Orientation Theory

## Abstract

People's attitudes are based on the relatively few, stable values they hold. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) Values Orientation Theory proposes that all human societies must answer a limited number of universal problems, that the value-based solutions are limited in number and universally known, but that different cultures have different preferences among them. Suggested questions include humans' relations with time, nature and each other, as well as basic human motives and the nature of human nature. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck suggested alternate answers to all five, developed culture-specific measures of each, and described the value orientation profiles of five SW USA cultural groups. Their theory has since been tested in many other cultures, and used to help negotiating ethnic groups understand one another, and to examine the inter-generational value changes caused by migration. Other theories of universal values (Rokeach, Hofstede, Schwartz) have produced value concepts sufficiently similar to suggest that a truly universal set of human values does exist and that cross-cultural psychologists are close to discovering what they are.

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## INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural psychology has two broad aims: to understand the differences between human beings who come from different cultural backgrounds, and to understand the similarities between all human beings. The similarities may be sought at all levels – from the physiological (our eyes are able to perceive colour) through the cognitive (we are also able to perceive perspective, or relative distance), to the personal (we can be both happy and sad, gentle or aggressive) to the social (we all relate to our parents and siblings), to the cultural (we all share cultural norms with others of the same cultural background).

These cultural norms can take a variety of forms. They may be quite concrete and specific, like the type of clothing we find acceptable on a given occasion, or extremely complex and abstract, as are our religious beliefs. An important type of norm is the concept we have of ourselves in relation to other objects and people. These may range from our belief about the nature of human nature (Wrightsmann, 1992), to the opinions we hold (our political opinions, for instance) to the attitudes we have toward a variety of concepts which we hold. Attitudes have long been studied by psychologists – especially social psychologists. For the first half of the twentieth century, it was believed that if we could measure them accurately, they would enable us to predict human behaviour. And predicting behaviour is what all psychology is about.

However, as we became more psychometrically sophisticated, and able to measure attitudes accurately with instruments such as the Likert summated ratings scale, we learned that attitudes are much more complex than we had realised, and that they have to be measured very carefully, and a number of other factors such as context and strength taken into account before any accuracy of prediction could be claimed. Moreover we all have so many attitudes, they change so readily, and they vary so much over time and situation, that any one attitude can predict only a relatively small amount of behaviour. Social psychologists therefore started looking for more fundamental, slower changing concept which might give more reliable behavioural prediction. One such concept is the **values** which a person holds. Values are seen as being relatively few in number. Perhaps the best-known student of values is Rokeach (1979), who suggests that there are at most 36 values held by human beings. Moreover they are considered to be widely, and perhaps universally held. Concepts such as honesty and courage, peace and wisdom, are recognised in all human cultures. On the other hand, Hofstede (1980, 2001), in a huge world-wide study, has been able to find no more than five which are universally held.

Nevertheless the idea that there are basic human values, and that they are measurable, has been exciting psychologists to investigate them for many years, from Allport, Vernon and Lindzey in 1931 to the present day. It has been widely accepted that uncovering those values, and devising means of measuring them, would facilitate valuable insight into the similarities and differences between human beings from differing cultural backgrounds.

One theory of basic human values which has been very influential is that of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961). Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck set out to operationalise a theoretical approach to the values concept developed by Florence's

husband, Clyde Kluckhohn (1949, 1952). He argued that humans share biological traits and characteristics which form the basis for the development of culture, and that people typically feel their own cultural beliefs and practices are normal and natural, and those of others are strange, or even inferior or abnormal. He defined a value as: "A conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action." (Kluckhohn, 1951, p 395).

Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck (1961) developed a theory which put these principles into action. They started with three basic assumptions:

- "There is a limited number of common human problems for which all peoples must at all times find some solution".
- "While there is variability in solutions of all the problems, it is neither limitless nor random but is definitely variable within a range of possible solutions".
- "All alternatives of all solutions are present in all societies at all times but are differentially preferred".

They suggested that the solutions for these problems preferred by a given society reflects that society's values. Consequently, measurement of the preferred solutions would indicate the values espoused by that society. They suggested five basic types of problem to be solved by every society:

- On what aspect of time should we primarily focus – past, present or future?
- What is the relationship between Humanity and its natural environment – mastery, submission or harmony?
- How should individuals relate with others – hierarchically (which they called "Lineal"), as equals ("Collateral"), or according to their individual merit?
- What is the prime motivation for behaviour – to express one's self ("Being"), to grow ("Being-in-becoming"), or to achieve?
- What is the nature of human nature – good, bad ("Evil") or a mixture?

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) also suggested a sixth value dimension of Space (Here, There, or Far Away) but did not explore it further. They then spelled out the possible answers to each of the questions, arguing that the preferred answer in any society reflects the basic **orientation** of the society to that aspect of its environment. The orientations to each question are shown in Table 1.

In proposing orientations to the Nature of Human nature question, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck suggested that there are two dimensions involved – good, bad or mixed, and that of mutability, or whether we are born the way we are and cannot change, or can learn to change (in either direction). Moreover they suggested that "mixed" may mean either both good and bad, or neutral. Taking all these considerations into account simultaneously gives us the possible orientations shown in Table 2.

Table 1.  
Four basic questions and the value orientations reflected in their answers.

| <b>Question</b>                  | <b>Orientation</b>       | <b>Description</b>  |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Time                             | Past                     | We focus on the past (the time before now), and on preserving and maintaining traditional teachings and beliefs.                |
|                                  | Present                  | We focus on the present (what is now), and on accommodating changes in beliefs and traditions.                                  |
|                                  | Future                   | We focus on the future (the time to come), planning ahead, and seeking new ways to replace the old.                             |
| Humanity and Natural Environment | Mastery                  | We can and should exercise total control over the forces of, and in, nature and the super-natural                               |
|                                  | Harmonious               | We can and should exercise partial but not total control by living in a balance with the natural forces                         |
|                                  | Submissive               | We cannot and should not exercise control over natural forces but, rather, are subject to the higher power of these forces.     |
| Relating to other people         | Hierarchical ("Lineal")  | Emphasis on hierarchical principles and deferring to higher authority or authorities within the group                           |
|                                  | As equals ("Collateral") | Emphasis on consensus within the extended group of equals   |
|                                  | Individualistic          | Emphasis on the individual or individual families within the group who make decisions independently from others                 |
| Motive for behaving              | Being                    | Our motivation is internal, emphasising activity valued by our self but not necessarily by others in the group                  |
|                                  | Being-in-becoming        | Motivation is to develop and grow in abilities which are valued by us, although not necessarily by others                       |
|                                  | Achievement ("Doing")    | Our motivation is external to us, emphasising activity that is both valued by ourselves and is approved by others in our group. |

Having set out their theory, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) then proposed a means of measuring the orientations it produced. They suggested intensive interviewing be used, with a series of probing questions exploring each of the value dimensions with the interviewee. However they also recognised that many people find it difficult to think in the abstract, so suggested that real-life situations be outlined which involved the particular value being investigated. This led to the moral dilemma approach used by Kohlberg in his

studies of morality a decade later. Moreover Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) also stressed that the real-life situations used must be appropriate to the culture of the people being studied. This was an early attempt to provide a solution to the emic-etic dilemma outlined by Berry (1969) some years later, and appears similar to the solution to the dilemma proposed by Segall et al. in the 1990s.

Table 2  
Orientations possible in answering the question on the Nature of Human Nature.

| Question               | Orientation       | Description  |
|------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Nature of Human Nature | evil/mutable      | Born evil, but can learn to be good. However danger of regression always present.            |
|                        | evil/immutable    | Born evil and incapable of being changed. Therefore requires salvation by an external force. |
|                        | mixture/mutable   | Has both good and bad traits, but can learn to be either better or worse.                    |
|                        | mixture/immutable | Has both good and bad traits, and their profile cannot be changed                            |
|                        | neutral/mutable   | Born neither good nor bad, but can learn both good and bad traits                            |
|                        | neutral/immutable | Born neither good nor bad, and this profile cannot be changed                                |
|                        | good/mutable      | Basically good, but subject to corruption  |
|                        | good/immutable    | Basically good, and will always remain so.   |

To test their theory out, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) interviewed members of five different cultural groups in the South-West USA. These included itinerant Navaho, Mexican-Americans, Texan homesteaders, Mormon villagers, and Zuni pueblo dwellers. In doing so, however, they did not attempt to develop measures of the Nature of Human Nature orientations, finding them too complex. For the remaining four dimensions, however they were able to develop real-life situations relevant to all five cultural groups, and questions to probe the value orientations used by members of those cultures in dealing with the situations involved. They were then able to draw value profiles of each group, showing the ways in which they differed from each other, and the ways in which they were similar. All of this work was published in their 1961 book, and immediately made a strong impact on cross-cultural psychologists.

Since then other theorists have also developed theories of universal values – notably Rokeach (1979), Hofstede (1980, 2001) and Schwartz (1992). However the theory developed by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) remains widely used and has sparked a

good deal of research – as any good theory should. A conference of users of the theory in 1998 (Russo, 2000), for instance, attracted over 400 delegates.

### **Applications of the Theory**

Nevertheless the question remains: what use is such a theory? The work of Russo (1992; Russo, Hill et al., 1984) clearly demonstrates a very practical employment of a theory of universal human values. Russo has worked for a Native American tribe, the Lummi of Washington state, for more than two decades, using the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck theory to help them bring themselves to an ever higher standard of living. The Lummi have their own reserve territory on the Western coast near the Canadian border. There they pursue their traditional industry of deep sea fishing, as well as more recent trades such as liquor retailing. Their success in these and other enterprises depends on their being able to relate successfully to the predominantly white American majority population surrounding them. The majority population forms the bulk of potential customers for their products, and at the same time is the prime source of food, clothing and manufactured goods. Moreover its members control such vital necessities as access to power, water and timber. Members of the cultural majority must also be negotiated with concerning issues such as taxes and transport.

The Lummi have therefore realised that it is vitally important that they understand the cultural mores of the majority if they are to interact successfully with them. Issues such as the assumed basic motives for behaviour, the importance or otherwise of tradition, relationships between older and younger generations, accepted modes of decision-making, etc have to be understood before harmonious and successful discussion can take place. Toward this end Russo has developed measures to assess the preferred value orientations of the majority, and of the Lummi themselves. Differences and similarities have been clearly demarcated, and each party to potential negotiations made aware of them.

Thus when Lummi leaders go to discuss trade, taxes, utilities or transport with local business people and officials, they are aware of the world views of those with whom they are discussing, and of the similarities and differences between themselves and their neighbours. Such foreknowledge has resulted in a successful and harmonious relationship between the two cultural groups for many years. This testifies to both the importance of understanding each others' values, and the efficacy of the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck theory in doing so.

Another way in which the theory has been used is to examine changes in cultural mores over time. An example of this were the studies undertaken by Hills (1977, 1980) and Lane (1976) of changes in the disparity in values between young people and their parents as a result of migration. Using the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck theory, they developed a fixed-alternative, 25-item questionnaire to assess respondents' value orientations in the five question areas (see Table 3). Having tested the questionnaire for reliability and face validity, they had it translated and back-translated into several appropriate languages. It was then tape-recorded in each of these languages, as read by a

native speaker of each language. The tape recording was then used as the prime instrument in orally administering the questionnaire. Using this technique they administered it to young people, both male and female, aged between 16 and 18, and to their parents, both mother and father. Samples were taken from some of the cultures from which large numbers of people migrated from the South Pacific to New Zealand in the 1960s and 70s – Samoa, Fiji and the Cook Islands. Moreover samples within each of those countries were taken not just from the main towns, but from selected remote back-country villages as well. Comparison groups of both Maori and Pakeha (white) New Zealanders were also obtained. Data was analysed in terms of the inter-generational disparity in values demonstrated by each group.

Table 3

Examples of items measuring Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck value orientations

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*I will ask you 25 questions. There are three possible answers to each questions. Please listen carefully to each question and then each of the three suggested answers to that question. I can play them again if you would like to listen to them again. We do not want your name.*

*There are no right or wrong answers to these questions – we want to know you you feel about them. Take as much time as you need to answer them.*

**Here is the first one.**

When our group sends a delegate to a meeting I think it best -

- a) to let everyone discuss it until everyone agrees on the person
- b) to let the important leaders decide. They have more experience than us
- c) for a vote to be taken and the one with the most votes goes even if some people disagree

**Relational**

*Collateral*

*Lineal*

*Individualistic*

*Now please tell me the answer which comes closest to the way you feel.*

*Now tell me the answer which is your second choice.*

**Thanks. Here's the next one...**

When I get sick I believe

- a) doctors will be able to find a way to cure it
- b) I should live properly so I don't get sick
- c) I cannot do much about it and just have to accept it

**Humanity & Nature**

*Mastery*

*Harmony*

*Subjugation*

**Here's the third...**

Most people when they can do something wrong and get away with it will -

- a) usually do it
- b) sometimes do it
- c) hardly ever do it

**Human Nature**

**Evil**

*Mixture*

*Good*

**The fourth question is...**

When I send money for use overseas I think it should be spent to -

- a) make a better life for the future
- b) make a better life now
- c) keep the old ways and customs alive

**Time**

*Future*

*Present*

*Past*

---



It had been hypothesised that intergenerational values disparity would be greatest among the migrant families, whose teenagers had grown up in New Zealand, and whose parents in their homeland. On the other hand it was expected that differences between the generations would be least in the remote rural villages. In fact the opposite was found. The greatest intergenerational value disparities were found in the remote villages, significantly greater than those found in the Pacific towns, which in turn were greater than the disparities found in the migrant families in New Zealand. Next came the Maori New Zealanders, with the least disparity of all being between the young Pakeha New Zealanders and their parents.

In discussing these findings with South Pacific academics it became clear that a contributing variable which had not been taken into account was that of modern education and communication. Young people in the Pacific were listening to radios, reading newspapers and magazines, and, most importantly, going to schools whose teachers, even though of their own race and culture, had been trained in modern training colleges and universities. Consequently these young people were rapidly becoming acculturated to the Western Euro-American culture, whereas their parents remained more traditional and were only slowly changing. This disparity in what could be called globalization of culture was less apparent in the South Pacific towns and least in the towns and cities of the host country, New Zealand.

This study thus provided insights into the processes of culture change, the consequences of migration, and some of the factors influencing relationships between teenagers and their parents. Using the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck theory and applying it in a practical study made these increased insights possible.

### **Developments of the Theory**

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck themselves suggested that their theory was not complete. Moreover they did not provide measures for all the orientations they did propose. They therefore left ample opportunity for further development of their theory. An illustration of this is the author's work in New Zealand (Hills, 1998). As has been shown above, we developed a clear, straightforward means of assessing orientations – for the Nature of Human Nature as well as for the other four value areas proposed by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck. However, more recently we have also looked at other basic questions for which also all societies must provide answers. These answers are limited in number, and all alternatives are known to all societies. However they differ in the ranking they give each alternative. Examples include the allocation of space, the nature of work, the relationship between the genders, and the relationship between individual and state. Listed below are some alternative answers to these questions, and items illustrating how the rankings given to the alternative orientations can be assessed (see Table 4).

A questionnaire using these questions and others like them has been tested in a small pilot study and the results so far are encouraging. However it has yet to be used in a full-scale study. There are no doubt other great questions for which all societies must find preferred answers. The meaning of life and death, and the nature of the supernatural and

humanity's relationship to it, are two which come to mind. This is further illustration of the potential richness of the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck theory.

Table 4

Proposed further basic values questions and alternative answers to them

---

**Space**

*Should space belong to individuals, to groups (especially the family) or to everybody?*

It is most important that society guarantee

- |  |                           |
|--|---------------------------|
| a) The right of each citizen to have a place they can call their own                   | <i>Individuals</i>        |
| b) Each family a home of their own   | <i>Families or groups</i> |
| c) The public areas and spaces, available to all, but owned by no one person or group. | <i>Everybody</i>          |

**Work**

*What should be the basic motivation for work? To make a contribution to society, to have a sense of personal achievement, or to attain financial security?*

When deciding what courses to take, a university student should give top priority to courses which teach:

- |  |                           |
|--|---------------------------|
| a) How to make a contribution to society                     | <i>Contribution</i>       |
| b) Subjects which are exciting or fulfilling                 | <i>Achievement</i>        |
| c) Subjects which will ensure a good salary after graduating | <i>Financial security</i> |

**Gender**

*How should society distribute roles, power and responsibility between the genders?*

The right and responsibility to make decisions which affect the whole community should usually be given to

- |                               |               |
|-------------------------------|---------------|
| a) Men                        | <i>Male</i>   |
| b) Women                      | <i>Female</i> |
| c) Both men and women equally | <i>Both</i>   |

**The state-individual relationship**

*Should precedent right and responsibility be accorded the nation or the individual?*

When deciding how an important issue like ensuring that its members have the best health possible, it is best if a society ensures that

- |  |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| a) Each person takes full financial responsibility for their own health care with no subsidy from the state. | <i>Individual</i> |
| b) Free and full health care is provided for all citizens by the government                                  | <i>Nation</i>     |
| c) The individual and the government each pays a reasonable proportion of health care costs                  | <i>Both</i>       |
-

It has shortcomings, of course. As it deals with values, rather than attitudes, it is general rather than specific, and so can only be used to examine general trends in behaviour, and not used to predict specific behaviours in any one situation. Moreover most behaviour is multiply determined, and so the theory may be termed simplistic, in that it attempts to explain one dimension at a time. Its use of rankings and preferences makes it difficult to analyse statistically. Despite these faults it is a bold and elegant attempt to express something common to all humanity – the values on which so much of society is based, and from which our attitudes, cognition, emotions and behaviours evolve.

Moreover, it is not the only theory of values proposed by psychologists. As mentioned above, Rokeach (1979) put forward a theory and an instrument reflecting it (The Rokeach Study of Values) which has been widely used and has proved useful in many different types of study. Hofstede (1980, 2001) surveyed values in over 100 different countries and came up with five basic value dimensions: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism, Masculinity/Femininity and Short-term vs Long-term Orientation. His work too has sparked a great deal of further research and is the most studied values theory currently in use. Yet another influential values theory has been that of Schwartz (1992). From studies of values held in over 50 countries, he proposes 10 which manifest universally in individuals (Achievement, Benevolence, Conformity, Hedonism, Power, Security, Self-direction, Stimulation, Tradition, Universalism) and seven which appear across cultures (Affective Autonomy, Conservatism, Egalitarian Commitment, Harmony, Hierarchy, Intellectual Autonomy and Mastery). Some similarities between the Hofstede and Schwartz theories can be detected, and Smith and Bond (1998) suggest that as they overlap almost completely although they were derived using different methods, we are close to reaching a universally applicable theory of values.

It is clear from this that the interest in values measurement across cultures which was initiated by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck continues to accelerate. We can use values both to study change and variation within a culture, and differences and similarities between cultures. Although the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck theory was derived half-way through last century it has generated much further research, which has in turn generated new theories. Though their work our understanding of ourselves as human beings has been increased.

### **Conclusion**

The psychological study of values worthwhile for several reasons. Using the values concept, the researcher can aim to cover the whole of life-space, not just the positive and the negative, as with attitudes. Values are central to human thought, emotions and behaviour. They are cross-culturally relevant and valid, and finally, values allow both between-group and within-group comparisons. If we accept that values are important for the psychologist to understand, then the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck theory of values orientations is a useful and valid framework within which to study them.

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### **About the Author**

Michael Hills is a New Zealander teaching Social, Cross-cultural and Disability Psychology at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. His master's degree examined the development of ethnic awareness and attitudes in White and Maori children, and his PhD at the Australian National University, Canberra, focussed on second-generation migrant teenagers and their parents. Since then he has researched and taught about the relations between majority and minority ethnic groups, focussing particularly on the indigenous Maori and immigrant Polynesian minorities and their relations with the White majority in New Zealand. In recent years he has broadened this interest in disadvantaged minority groups to research the psychology of living and coping with disabilities, especially epilepsy. Currently he is developing Quality of Life measures both for New Zealanders in general, and those with disabilities in particular, as well as researching culturally appropriate ways to provide education and support to Maori living and coping with epilepsy.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Define a value. Explain how a value affects human behavior.
2. What are the most important values you hold? Can you rank them?
3. Where do you think your values came from?
4. How do the values you hold compare with those of others? Your friends? Your family? Most other people in your community?
5. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck suggested five universal questions which all human societies must be able to answer. They suggested a sixth, and this article suggests three more. Can you think of any others? What might be some of the possible answers to them?
6. Most psychological research has relied on questionnaires to study people's values. What other methods of measuring values might be feasible?
7. What do you see as the relationship between values and attitudes? Beliefs? Opinions? Morality?
8. This article has reported two ways in which value measurement has been practically useful. Can you think of other situations in which understanding and measuring people's values might be useful?

**Related Websites**

<http://www.valuescenter.org/home.html>