

Background

Previous studies underlined the connection between continued engagement with personal values and a sense of well-being.¹ Helping clients identify life values and focus their activities around them is a commonly used coaching practice. However, several challenges to this approach could be encountered. First, growing evidence suggests that people whose system of values is strongly focused on extrinsic goals (e.g. *wealth, popularity*) have relatively low levels of well-being compared to people oriented toward intrinsic goals (e.g. *self-acceptance, contribution*).² Second, a recent study showed that there is a gap between what individuals say are their top priorities and real messages they convey in their personal strivings and daily life events.³ Third, life values change over time more than people predict, having people make decisions that their future selves regret.⁴ These observations point to the more complex structure of individual's value system.

We observed that an important difference between value clusters is not only their content, but also their distinct origin, henceforth, we term value clusters as CORE and ACQUIRED (Figure 1). Core values are one's inherent values and intrinsic guiding principles, while acquired values are adopted throughout life from various sources (*parents/guardians, friends, culture, educational institutions, media/social media, etc.*) and serve as socially desirable standards on how to act, what attitude to hold, how to judge or compare with others.

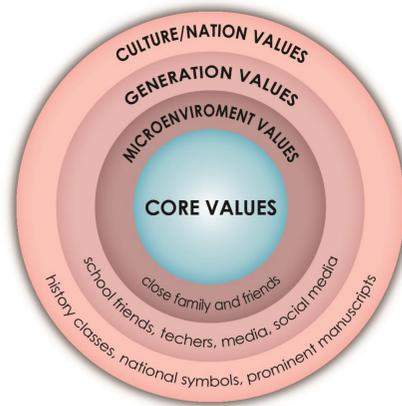


Figure 1. Core vs. acquired values

Hypothesis

- 1) Insufficient awareness of the origin and content of values and the organization of value systems may facilitate external sources to push individual's actions toward acquired values
- 2) Relative prioritization of acquired values in personal strivings and daily activities may be associated with costs for psychological well-being
- 3) In contrast, deep understanding of value systems may strengthen core value-based personal decision making and lead to increases in one's well-being

Participants

- Study participants were 44 volunteers aged 21 or above, not receiving counselling, therapy or medications for stress or anxiety.
- Participants were randomly assigned to either a no-treatment control group (n=20) or to a three-session intervention designed to increase individual's understanding of the value content and origin and the organization of the value system (n=24).
- Intervention group received coaching from the alumni association of the University of California Davis Extension's "Professional Coaching for Life and Work Program".
- Participants were presented an overview of research on goals and values and the importance of developing an active values-based system for making decisions. Core vs. acquired values concept was discussed. Participants received an individual coaching session to validate personal score.

Measures

- **Well-being:** Participant's subjective well-being (SWB) was assessed at four time points; pre-, mid-, immediately and one month post-intervention, using the 7-point Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS).⁵
- **Life values:** Participant's most important life values were assessed using the guiding principle ranking⁶. Values that are most influential in the domain of participant's personal strivings and daily activities were assessed for the importance and effort as previously described.⁷
- **Motives:** Participant's motives behind pursuing each goal or activity – corresponding to either core or acquired values – were evaluated as reported by Sheldon et al.⁸
- **Relative centeredness of acquired values** was computed as the percentage of acquired values in five highest ranked values in the domain of participant's personal strivings and daily activities.
- Correlation between SWB and relative prioritization of acquired values was analyzed.
- Repeated measures ANOVAs were used to assess effects of coaching in domain of core vs. acquired values on SWB over time.

Results

What people say vs. what people do

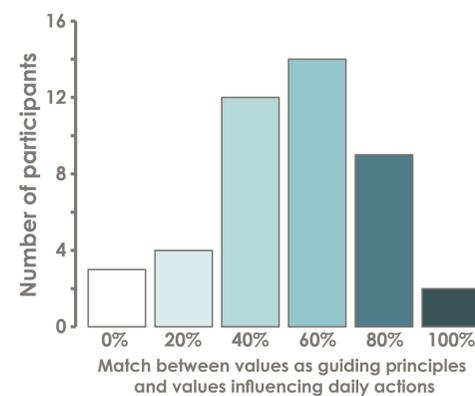


Figure 2. Around 95% of participants reported a difference between their five most important guiding principles and five values that are most influential in their daily efforts and actions.

0% - five most influential values in the domain of daily efforts differed from most important guiding principles
100% - five most influential values fully corresponded to most important guiding principles

SWB and prioritization of acquired values

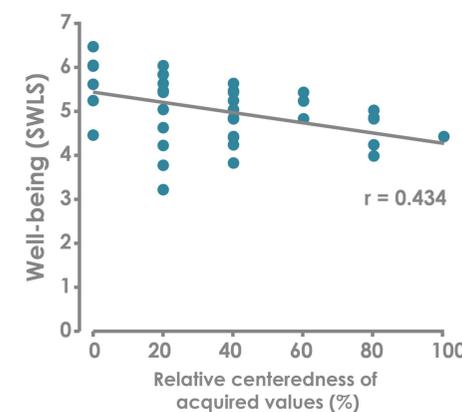


Figure 3. Lower level of SWB was reported by participant's whose relative focus was more toward acquired values

0% - none of five most influential values in the domain of daily efforts was acquired value
100% - five most influential values in the domain of daily efforts were acquired

Effects of 3-session coaching about value systems



Figure 4. Participants assigned to 3 coaching sessions oriented away from acquired values, as evident by a decrease in acquired values centrality score. *P<0.05 vs. baseline.

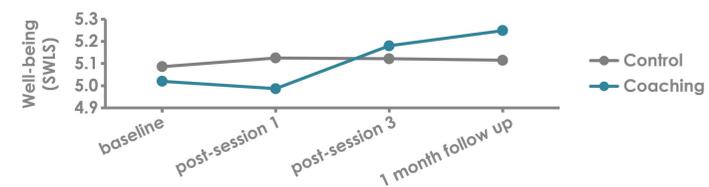


Figure 5. Reported SWB increased after the 3-session program. Importantly, it stayed higher one month after the intervention. No changes were reported by the control group during the same time course.

Conclusion

A new approach for developing awareness about values content and origin and value system organization may refine the client's view of what is important to them and why. Encouraging coaching clients to look more closely at inconsistencies within their own value systems, may decrease the relative centeredness of acquired values in their daily efforts and activities, leading to greater well-being that may persist after the coaching intervention had ended.

References

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