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"UNDERSTANDING HUMAN VALUES IS A NEVER-ENDING PROCESS": CHALLENGES IN VALUES MEASUREMENT

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ABSTRACT

The general aim of the present research project was to reflect on the measurement of values in the field of psychosocial sciences. According to Schwartz's Theory, values are defined as desirable and trans-situational goals that serve as guiding principles in people's life to select modes, means, and actions. They have been mainly investigated using self-report instruments to gather quantitative data. However, respondents' answers on these measures may be influenced by different response biases, such as for example socially desirable responding, or may depend on respondents' tendency to introspection. This is mainly because values are by definition what is desirable, and they are abstract concepts.

Based on this Chapters 1 and 2 theoretically and empirically deal with the available self-report measures of values and with the possible biases which are likely to influence respondents' answers. Chapters 3 to 6 consider instead a recent trend in the field of values measurement, which is the possibility of studying values adopting and implicit social cognition perspective, that is using indirect measures to gain knowledge on the topic. Two indirect measures aimed at measuring values, namely the Values Implicit Association Test and the Values Lexical Decision Task, are here developed and considered in terms of their relations with self-report measures of values and with behavioural outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

"*Personal values are the dominating force in life,*
and all of a person's activity is directed toward the realization of his values.
And so the focus for understanding is the other's value orientation—
or, we might say, his philosophy of life" (Allport, 1961, p. 543).

The interest in understanding values in the past century was widespread in different fields of science, from economy to sociology, from anthropology to psychology. This interest dominated my education as well during my University years, and then naturally become the central focus of my Ph.D. thesis.

But why and how the ones interested in studying the topic of human values are so many? Scholars can emphasize how values have been found to drive people's study choices and careers, their ideologies and orientations, political attitudes and voting behaviour, their prosocial behaviour or prejudiced reactions, and much more (see Maio, 2017 for an extensive review on this topic), thus making the comprehension of values a challenge that deserves to be faced. This is highly related to the abstract nature of this concept, that makes values potentially able to predict several kinds of variables.

Since values play such a fundamental role in driving people's attitudes, ideologies and behaviours, it becomes extremely relevant the way these are measured. Self-report measures to gather quantitative data in social psychology are extremely popular and widely used because of several reasons: generally speaking, they are practical and low-cost measures, and, when measuring values, they are able to capture subjective motivational goals (Roccas, Sagiv, & Navon, 2017). At the same time, recent trends in research are highlighting the possibility to use different methods of assessment

to measure values, to find an additional instrument to complete the toolbox of researchers interested in understanding values.

The current Ph.D. thesis tries to make the point on the topic of values measurement in social psychology. The story I will do my best to tell starts from the available self-report methods of measurement based on Schwartz's Theory of Human values (1992), considers the possible biases of these measures, and tries to contribute in a theoretical and empirical way to the recently very vivid debate on the possibility of using indirect measures aimed at measuring personal values.

The thesis is therefore organized as it follows. In **Chapter 1**, I have provided keys to the reading to clarify the construct investigated in the following chapters. Based on Schwartz's Theory of Human Values (1992), which is the theoretical framework and the common thread of this entire work, values are defined as desirable and trans-situational goals that serve as guiding principles in people's life to select modes, means, and actions. The theoretical framework (and how we got there) is presented in this Chapter, together with the available instruments to measure values and the possible shortcomings embedded in quantitative self-report instruments of values commonly used in social psychology. In **Chapter 2** this topic is empirically analysed; specifically, attention is focused on two biases which have been often theoretically claimed to influence self-report measures of values, but more rarely actually investigated. Indeed, I chose to consider the role of socially desirable responding, the tendency to respond in a way that is believed to help in gaining approval from others or avoiding their disapproval (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Paulhus, 2002) and introspection, namely the tendency to spend time thinking about one's own attitudes and personality characteristics (Hofmann et al., 2005). The study, which relies on cross-sectional data (N=231) obtained using a self-report questionnaire, explores the relations between the values measures and the two biases, and provides a contribution to understand how they play a role when the aim is to consider the existing relations between values and an outcome variable.

In **Chapter 3** I moved away from the limitations of self-report measures towards those "measurement approaches beyond self-reports" (Ortner & van der Vijer, 2015, p. 4). Among these, I focused on indirect measures, which aim at inferring participants' underlying implicit attitudes on a specific topic by considering their performance on an experimental paradigm, without therefore revealing them the real topic under investigation (Gawronski, 2009). It seems clear from the definition provided how these measures might be considered good candidates to face both the above-mentioned biases. In this Chapter is therefore presented a brief overview of the main features which characterize indirect measures. I am aware that the literature on this topic has extensively increased in the past thirty years, and therefore this review is far from fully tap all the features of indirect measures, but it is simply focused on the main aim: providing a theoretical background for the development of an indirect measure of values. Indirect measures may be useful tools to be added to the battery of the available direct methods used to assess this construct and a great knowledge may be gained by studying this construct from an implicit social cognition perspective (Dentale, Vecchione, Gebauer, & Barbaranelli, 2017).

In **Chapter 4** I reviewed the first attempts in measuring values using indirect measures, which date back to almost twelve years ago. I immediately fled the scene to the two proposals in this direction, accompanied by their theoretical framework and their step-by-step development. In this Chapter are therefore explained the thoughts behind the development of the Values Implicit Association Test, aimed at measuring the importance associated to the values of power over universalism and of achievement over benevolence, and of the Values Lexical Decision Task, which measures instead the extent to which the four higher order value dimensions (openness to change, conservation, self-enhancement, and self-transcendence) are associated to the self. More interestingly, in this Chapter I tried to emphasize the reasons why we were confident, among the many possible alternative indirect measures, these would have been good ones taking into account the nature of the construct under investigation.

In **Chapter 5** both instruments (the VIAT and the VLDT) are empirically investigated; a study carried out in Laboratory setting is here presented (N=8 in the pilot study; N=73 in the main study). Specifically, a preliminary, explorative research which considers the reliability and the relations with direct measures of values of the new instruments in a sample of Italian respondents is the focus of the Chapter. Moreover, the role of socially desirable responding, which is commonly thought to inflate more self-reported answers rather than those indirectly measured, is here in depth analysed.

Chapter 6 deals instead with the extent to which the indirect measures of value proposed are related to behavioural outcomes. According to the available literature on this topic, indirect measures seem to interestingly predict behaviour. This is even more important because of the topic considered, namely values, which have been interestingly found to predict attitudes, orientations and behaviours. The preliminary and explorative study here presented (N=48) investigate the role of VIATs in predicting prosociality, over and above the self-report instruments of values.

All in all, each Chapter of this work tries to reflect using a theoretical and empirical perspective on the topic of value measurement in social psychology. Chapters 1 and 2 make an effort to straighten up the available knowledge dealing with value theories and methods of measurement, thus empirically reflecting on the conceptual meaning of the biases which may influence the available self-report instruments. Chapter 3 to 6 consider instead, both from a theoretical and preliminary empirical point of view, the possibility of using indirect measures to measure personal values. In line with the idea that "values are abstract ideals that are best understood concretely" (Maio, 2017, p. VIII), concreteness towards a better comprehension of the already available and the future directions of value measurement seems to be a challenging - but deserving great attention - goal.