

ALLPORT-VERNON-LINDZEY STUDY OF VALUES (SOV)

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Personality Psychology, Social Psychology, Psychometrics

1. Core Definition and Purpose

The **Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values (SOV)** is a seminal psychometric instrument designed to measure the relative prominence of six basic motivational interests or values in an individual's personality. Developed by Gordon W. Allport, Philip L. Vernon, and Gardner Lindzey, the SOV is a self-report inventory that aims to quantify an individual's value system by assessing their preferences across various situations related to the six predefined value domains. It is characterized as an ipsative measure, meaning the results reveal the comparative significance of these six values *within* the individual's profile, rather than their absolute strength compared to the general population.

The primary utility of the SOV lies in its capacity to project a two-part character analysis, providing insight into the deeply held convictions that guide behavioral choices, vocational pursuits, and life philosophies. Unlike tests that measure behavioral traits or clinical symptoms, the SOV delves into the motivational core, revealing what an individual deems important or worthwhile. This focus on underlying values makes it a powerful tool for understanding personal decision-making, interpersonal conflicts, and career satisfaction, reflecting the enduring belief that human action is intrinsically linked to cherished standards.

Since its introduction, the SOV has undergone several revisions (notably Form B and Form R) but remains rooted in its original theoretical framework. It stands as a historical cornerstone in the field of personality assessment, serving as a precursor to many modern instruments that attempt to categorize human motivation and character structure. The test's longevity attests to the robustness of its underlying structure and its ability to capture meaningful differences in personal orientation, distinguishing between individuals whose lives are primarily driven by, for example, intellectual inquiry versus social contribution.

2. Historical Context and Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical precursor to the SOV is the work of the German philosopher and psychologist, Eduard Spranger (1882-1963), specifically his 1928 publication, *Types of Men* (*Lebensformen*). Spranger posited that personality could be structurally understood by examining the dominant values that provide meaning and direction to an individual's life. He proposed six fundamental life philosophies or ideal types toward which human personalities tend to gravitate, thereby establishing a framework for classifying character based on motivational priorities.

Allport, Vernon, and Lindzey adopted and operationalized Spranger's framework, translating these

philosophical ideal types into a measurable psychological inventory. They recognized the need for a standardized tool to empirically test Spranger's typology, moving the concept from philosophical speculation into the realm of quantitative psychological research. This translation process involved defining each value type clearly and constructing items that reflected common daily choices and preferences aligned with those values. The goal was to create a reliable method for measuring the relative intensity of these six fundamental standards within any given person.

The development of the SOV occurred during a critical period in American psychology when researchers were attempting to move beyond purely behavioral observations toward understanding internal, cognitive, and motivational structures. The collaboration between Allport (a major figure in trait theory), Vernon (a specialist in individual differences), and Lindzey ensured that the instrument possessed both strong theoretical grounding and sophisticated psychometric design. The resulting instrument formalized the idea that human character is not merely a collection of isolated traits, but an integrated system organized around dominant values, marking a significant advancement in the assessment of stable personality characteristics.

3. The Six Fundamental Value Standards

The core of the Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values is the measurement of the comparative significance of six fundamental value standards, derived directly from Spranger's typologies. These six values represent different spheres of life motivation and are measured relative to one another within the individual's profile:

Theoretical: This value orientation emphasizes the discovery of truth, intellectual curiosity, and a systematic approach to knowledge. Individuals scoring high on the Theoretical scale prioritize rationality, empirical observation, and the pursuit of general principles. Their primary interest lies in observation, reasoning, and the search for objective understanding, often manifesting in scientific or philosophical vocations.

Economic: The Economic value focuses on utility, practicality, and efficiency. Individuals driven by this value are interested in what is useful, tangible, and profitable. They prioritize the accumulation of wealth, resources, and material success, viewing the world primarily through a cost-benefit analysis. This motivation extends beyond financial gain to include the efficient management of time and effort.

Aesthetic: The Aesthetic value places primary emphasis on form, harmony, beauty, and symmetry. Those high in Aesthetic orientation value experience for its intrinsic pleasure, whether in art, nature, or the elegant structure of life itself. They prioritize quality of experience and self-expression over material gain or objective truth, often displaying sensitivity and appreciation for the artistic elements of existence.

Social: The Social value is altruistic and humanitarian, centered on the love of people, compassion, and concern for the welfare of others. Individuals prioritizing the Social value find their greatest satisfaction in selfless service, philanthropy, and nurturing relationships. This value is typically defined by empathy and a commitment to helping others, often contrasting sharply with political or economic motivations.

Political: Despite its name, the Political value does not necessarily relate to partisan politics, but rather to power, influence, and leadership. High Political scores reflect a strong desire for dominance, control, and personal influence over others. These individuals seek authority, prestige, and the ability to organize and direct groups, valuing competition and mastery over their environment.

Religious: The Religious value is the highest unity of experience, seeking to relate the individual to the cosmos. This value emphasizes spiritual meaning, mystical experience, and a search for purpose in the universe. It may manifest as devotion to traditional religion or a deep, unifying philosophy of life, prioritizing internal transcendence and ultimate meaning over temporary worldly concerns.

4. Structure and Administration of the SOV

The SOV is typically administered as a paper-and-pencil or digital inventory, consisting of two main parts designed to elicit genuine comparative preferences from the respondent. The careful structure of the test ensures that the resulting profile is an accurate reflection of relative value prioritization, forcing the participant to make difficult choices between equally desirable, yet fundamentally distinct, motivations.

Part I of the SOV presents 30 items, each containing two statements representing different value orientations. The respondent must distribute points between the two choices (e.g., assigning 3 points to the preferred statement and 0 to the less preferred, or 2 points to one and 1 to the other). This forced-choice format is crucial because it prevents the respondent from simply agreeing with all positive statements, a common limitation in non-ipsative personality tests. By requiring trade-offs, Part I effectively measures the *intensity* of preference between competing values.

Part II consists of 15 items, where the respondent is presented with four possible courses of action or attitudes, corresponding to four different value areas. The participant is asked to rank these four options in order of personal preference, from 4 (most preferred) down to 1 (least preferred). The combination of these two sections yields a comprehensive set of choices and rankings, allowing for a highly refined calculation of the individual's score across the six domains. The final score for each of the six values is then adjusted to a standard based on the normative group, allowing the user to plot a personal profile illustrating their dominant and subordinate values.

5. Applications in Research and Practice

The Study of Values has enjoyed broad application across academic research, vocational counseling, and organizational psychology for decades. Its capacity to classify individuals based on motivational sets makes it invaluable for predicting suitability and satisfaction in specific roles or environments.

In vocational guidance, the SOV helps individuals understand which career paths align best with their core motivations. For example, an individual scoring high on the Theoretical and Economic values might thrive in fields requiring objective analysis and efficient resource management (e.g., engineering or finance), while someone high on Social and Religious values might find fulfillment in non-profit work or ministry. Research has consistently demonstrated correlations between dominant SOV scores and chosen occupational fields, supporting its use in counseling settings. Furthermore, as noted in general research applications, the SOV serves as a strong preliminary screening tool, allowing researchers to ensure a thorough review of participant characteristics, particularly where underlying motivation might affect experimental outcomes.

In educational and organizational research, the SOV has been used to study group dynamics, leadership styles, and cultural differences. Studies comparing students in different majors (e.g., humanities vs. sciences) often reveal distinct value profiles. Similarly, within organizations, understanding the dominant values of management versus labor, or different functional departments, can provide insight into potential conflicts or areas of consensus. The instrument has proven particularly useful in cross-cultural psychology, where researchers have utilized the SOV to explore how societal norms influence the prioritization of these six universal human drives.

6. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its historical significance and continued use, the Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values faces several important criticisms, many of which relate to its methodological approach and historical context.

One primary methodological limitation is its ipsative nature. Because the SOV measures the *relative* strength of one value against the others within the same person, the scores are interdependent. A high score on the Theoretical scale must necessarily result in lower scores on one or more of the other five scales. This interdependence means the scores cannot be treated as independent variables, limiting the use of certain traditional inferential statistics (such as comparing a single value score across different groups in an absolute sense). It also means that the test cannot determine if a person is highly motivated *in general*; it only reveals *how* that motivation is allocated among the six values.

Furthermore, contemporary critics often point to the theoretical foundation itself. Spranger's

typology, while historically influential, is highly specific and does not easily map onto or correlate with modern, empirically derived personality models like the Big Five (OCEAN). The rigid categorization into six types may overlook nuances in human motivation that are better captured by continuous, orthogonal trait dimensions. Early versions of the test also faced scrutiny regarding potential cultural and gender biases, as the original normative data and item language sometimes reflected mid-20th-century cultural norms, although later revisions have attempted to address these issues.

7. Further Reading

[Study of Values \(SOV\) - General Overview](#)

[Gordon W. Allport: Biography and Contributions](#)

[Eduard Spranger and Types of Men](#)

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