

Value

Authored by
mohammad looti

October 8, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Value*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from
<https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=36276>

Value

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Philosophy, Sociology, Economics

1. Core Definition

In the realm of psychology and social sciences, the term **Value** refers to the relative importance, significance, or worth that an individual assigns to an item, concept, principle, idea, or person within their lived experience. Values function fundamentally as cognitive representations of desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance, which serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity. They transcend specific actions and situations, influencing selection or evaluation of actions, policies, people, and events.

A critical aspect of the psychological definition of value is its inherent subjectivity and motivational force. Unlike objective facts or quantifiable metrics, a person's value system is deeply intertwined with their identity and emotional framework. For example, as the source material illustrates, an individual may place immense sentimental **value** on a seemingly mundane childhood object, such as a worn toy or a faded photograph, due to the powerful memories, associations, or emotional bonds it evokes. This intrinsic, emotional valuation is entirely unique to the individual and often defies external, objective assessment of worth, contrasting sharply with purely economic valuations based on utility or market price.

Furthermore, values are often conceptualized as hierarchically organized. While individuals possess a multitude of values, not all carry equal weight. When faced with choices or dilemmas, individuals rely on their established value hierarchy to determine the appropriate course of action, prioritizing the values they deem most essential in that specific context. This prioritization system makes values vital predictors of behavior, attitudes, and moral judgments, providing a stable, yet adaptable, framework for navigating complex social and personal environments.

2. Subjectivity and Individual Differences

The intense subjectivity of values ensures that every individual possesses a unique value system, even within the same culture or social group. These differences arise from a complex interplay of personal history, lived experiences, inherited temperaments, and reflective self-assessment. A value that serves as a core guiding principle for one person--such as **achievement** or **power**--might be relegated to a minor concern for another who prioritizes **benevolence** or **universalism**. This variation accounts for substantial differences in life goals, relationship choices, career paths, and political orientations.

Individual differences in value systems are not merely random preferences; they represent deeply held commitments that structure perception. Values act as perceptual filters, dictating which

information is attended to, how events are interpreted, and which outcomes are deemed desirable or acceptable. This filtering mechanism explains why individuals exposed to the exact same stimulus--whether a piece of art, a political speech, or a moral transgression--can arrive at radically different judgments and emotional responses, based on which underlying values are activated or violated.

The persistence of these subjective commitments provides stability to the self. Values serve as crucial anchors for identity, allowing individuals to maintain a sense of coherence and purpose across different roles and life stages. When an individual feels compelled to act in a way that violates their core values, this often results in severe psychological dissonance, distress, or moral injury, underscoring the deep psychological importance of aligning behavior with one's subjective valuation framework.

3. Value Theory

The study of **Value Theory** (or Axiology) is an expansive interdisciplinary field, primarily rooted in philosophy, ethics, and psychology, dedicated to understanding the nature, origin, categorization, and consequences of values. Philosophical value theory often explores meta-ethical questions, such as whether values are objective (existing independently of human desire) or subjective (created by human interest and evaluation), and how moral obligation relates to inherent goods.

Within psychology, influential Value Theories provide empirical frameworks for classifying and measuring human values. One of the most prominent is Milton Rokeach's distinction between **Terminal Values** (desirable end-states of existence, like peace or happiness) and **Instrumental Values** (desirable modes of conduct, like honesty or ambition). This theory laid the groundwork for understanding values as motivators distinct from attitudes, which are focused on specific objects or situations.

Perhaps the most robust psychological model is the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values, developed by Shalom Schwartz. This theory posits that there are ten universally recognized, motivationally distinct basic values derived from three universal human requirements: biological needs, requirements for coordinated social interaction, and needs for group functioning and survival. These ten values--including Self-Direction, Stimulation, Hedonism, Achievement, Power, Security, Conformity, Tradition, Benevolence, and Universalism--are arranged in a circumplex structure, demonstrating dynamic relations of compatibility and conflict, offering a comprehensive, cross-cultural model for understanding the structure of human moral and motivational priorities.

4. Typologies of Value

To manage the complexity of human valuation, theorists have developed several core typologies to categorize values based on their source, object, and function. One fundamental distinction is that

between **Intrinsic Values** and **Extrinsic Values**. Intrinsic values are things valued purely for their own sake, irrespective of external consequences or benefits derived from them (e.g., valuing love, beauty, or wisdom as inherent goods). Extrinsic values, conversely, are valued as a means to achieve some other, more desirable end (e.g., valuing money because it allows one to purchase security or power).

The Rokeach Value Survey formalized another crucial dichotomy: **Terminal Values** versus **Instrumental Values**. Terminal values represent ultimate, desired end-goals of existence, providing the individual with a sense of purpose and direction (e.g., A Comfortable Life, Freedom, World Peace). Instrumental values describe preferred modes of behavior that facilitate the attainment of terminal goals (e.g., Being Honest, Being Ambitious, Being Responsible). This framework highlights that conflicts often arise not just in defining end goals, but in determining the acceptable methods used to reach them.

A further categorization, particularly relevant in ethical discussions, distinguishes between **Moral Values** and **Competence Values**. Moral values (e.g., justice, forgiveness, honesty) are concerned with the welfare of others and typically involve self-denial and altruism, generating feelings of guilt or righteousness based on adherence. Competence values (e.g., capable, ambitious, intellectual) are focused on personal or social mastery, leading to feelings of pride or shame based on success or failure. These typologies aid researchers in isolating specific behavioral influences and understanding the motivational structure underlying different types of decision-making.

5. Psychological Functions of Value

Values fulfill several indispensable psychological functions that contribute to individual well-being, coherence, and successful social integration. First and foremost, values serve a fundamental **Motivational Function**. Because values represent desired goals, they activate specific needs and direct the allocation of cognitive and energetic resources. They provide the "why" behind behavior, guiding actions toward fulfillment of deeply held priorities, whether that priority is self-enhancement or self-transcendence.

Secondly, values serve an essential **Regulatory and Standard-Setting Function**. They operate as criteria or standards against which individuals evaluate themselves, others, and circumstances. This function is vital for decision-making; when faced with multiple alternatives, the choice that best aligns with the individual's highest-ranking values is typically selected. They also provide the basis for justification, allowing people to rationalize their past behaviors and judge the appropriateness of others' conduct, thereby maintaining social order and predictability.

Finally, values are integral to the formation of **Personal and Social Identity**. The set of values an individual champions defines their moral compass and differentiates them from others. Expressing and upholding one's values, particularly in public or stressful situations, reinforces self-concept and

fosters a sense of authenticity. At the group level, shared values form the basis of collective identity, binding members together and establishing norms that distinguish the in-group from the out-group, thereby fulfilling a crucial social cohesion function.

6. Value Acquisition and Development

The establishment of an individual's value system is a dynamic, lifelong process heavily influenced by socialization, developmental stage, and continuous reflection. During early childhood, **value acquisition** begins primarily through modeling and identification, wherein children internalize the explicit and implicit values demonstrated by their primary caregivers and immediate family environment. If parents consistently prioritize **achievement** and **hard work**, these values are likely to be adopted as instrumental means by the child.

As individuals transition into adolescence, the process becomes more complex, moving beyond simple imitation to active reflection and critical appraisal. Peer groups, educational institutions, and media exert powerful influences, often introducing values that conflict with those learned in the home environment. Adolescence is typically the period where individuals begin to crystallize their own coherent value system, deciding which inherited values to retain, modify, or reject, often driven by a need for autonomy and self-definition.

In adulthood, value systems generally stabilize but remain open to modification in response to significant life events, such as career changes, major personal crises, or cross-cultural experiences. While core values are resistant to sudden change, the prioritization or weighting of certain values--for instance, a shift from prioritizing **stimulation** in youth to **security** in later years--reflects adaptation to changing life circumstances and responsibilities. The ultimate stability of values ensures that personality remains relatively consistent over time.

7. Societal and Cultural Influence on Value Systems

While values are personally held, they are profoundly shaped and constrained by the prevailing socio-cultural environment. Cultures provide the raw material--the shared narratives, institutional structures, and moral frameworks--from which individuals construct their personal value hierarchies. Sociologists and cross-cultural psychologists, such as Geert Hofstede, have demonstrated that large-scale cultural dimensions are essentially reflections of shared collective values. For instance, cultures high on **individualism** tend to encourage and reinforce personal achievement and self-direction among their members, while collectivist cultures place higher value on conformity, tradition, and benevolence toward in-group members.

Societal institutions--including religious organizations, political systems, and education bodies--play a deliberate role in the transmission and reinforcement of desired values, ensuring social reproduction and stability. Education systems, for instance, often explicitly teach values related to

civic duty, respect for authority, and diligence, which are instrumental for maintaining the economic and political order. When an individual's personal value system clashes dramatically with the dominant societal values (e.g., prioritizing freedom in a highly authoritarian state), this can lead to intense conflict, alienation, or social deviance.

The dynamic relationship between individual and cultural values is cyclical: culture shapes the individual's values, yet shifts in individual value priorities--often catalyzed by demographic changes, technological advancements, or global events--can, over time, lead to broader societal value change. This mechanism underscores how evolving priorities regarding issues like environmental preservation or social justice can gradually transform entire cultural landscapes.

8. Further Reading

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Value Theory](#)

[Schwartz Theory of Basic Values \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Rokeach Value Survey \(Wikipedia\)](#)