

VALUES CLARIFICATION

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Educational Psychology, Counseling, Ethics, Moral Development

1. Core Definition and Purpose

Values Clarification (VC) is a foundational methodology, employed extensively in educational, therapeutic, and organizational settings, designed to facilitate an individual's conscious awareness and robust comprehension of their own intrinsic moral standards, ethical priorities, and personal belief systems. This procedure is fundamentally non-prescriptive; its aim is not to instill specific "correct" values but rather to guide individuals through a process of rigorous self-examination to uncover the values they already possess and critically evaluate the relationship between those internal standards and their corresponding actions and life choices. VC advocates for intellectual and ethical autonomy, establishing introspection as the principal mechanism for the accurate identification and internalization of personal principles.

The process, as defined in its psychological application, often involves a structured sequence of exercises utilized to assist an individual in identifying their personal worthiness, assessing the demonstrable effect of their core beliefs on their surrounding environment, and determining their specific and meaningful place in everyday life. This therapeutic function focuses intensely on establishing congruence between feelings, attitudes, and overt behaviors by tracing them back to underlying values. By enhancing self-awareness and reducing internal conflict, **Values Clarification** assists clients in moving beyond mere societal compliance or passively inherited beliefs toward fully integrated, operational values that genuinely guide purposeful and satisfying living.

A critical distinction within this methodology is drawn between simply holding a belief and actively clarifying it into a true value. VC requires the individual to perform cognitive and emotional labor: scrutinizing conflicting priorities, critically assessing the historical origins of their beliefs, and empirically testing the viability of these principles against real-world experiences and observed outcomes. This approach positions values not as static, abstract ideals, but as dynamic motivational filters that profoundly influence decision-making, conflict resolution, and the pursuit of long-term goals. Consequently, VC procedures are integral to the study of psychological development, aiming to foster mature moral reasoning and the construction of an authentic personal identity.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Historical Development

The formalization and popularization of **Values Clarification** occurred primarily in the late 1960s, largely through the seminal work of educational theorists Louis Raths, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney

Simon. Their approach arose from a dissatisfaction with traditional moral education methods prevalent at the time, which often relied on didactic teaching, moralizing, or the direct inculcation of prescribed societal or religious norms. Rath and his colleagues argued that such methods were inadequate, failing to equip individuals with the necessary intellectual tools to handle the moral ambiguity and ethical complexities inherent in a rapidly modernizing, pluralistic society.

The theoretical foundation of VC is deeply rooted in progressive education and humanistic psychology. It draws philosophical strength from the tenets of Carl Rogers, placing paramount importance on the individual's inherent capacity for growth, self-actualization, and autonomous self-direction. VC operates on the fundamental assumption that when individuals are provided with a supportive, non-judgmental structure and the freedom to critically examine their priorities and preferences, they will naturally move toward value systems that promote both personal fulfillment and responsible social engagement. This distinctly individual-centered stance positioned VC in contrast to parallel cognitive developmental theories of morality, such as those proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg, which focused heavily on the structural stages of moral reasoning rather than the subjective content of the values being held.

The central innovation provided by Rath was the introduction of a pragmatic, operational definition for what constitutes a true value. According to this framework, a genuine value is not merely an abstract thought or expressed opinion, but something that must be demonstrated through consistent behavior and satisfy a rigorous process encompassing seven specific sub-processes--grouped under Choosing, Prizing, and Acting. This detailed, three-part operational model transformed the abstract concept of morality into a concrete, actionable pedagogy suitable for group workshops, classroom instruction, and clinical counseling.

3. The Operational Process: Choosing, Prizing, and Acting

The methodology defined by Rath, Harmin, and Simon stipulates that a belief only achieves the status of a fully realized **value** if it successfully undergoes and satisfies the criteria within the three cardinal categories: Choosing, Prizing, and Acting. These categories serve as functional steps for internalizing and demonstrating a value commitment.

The first cluster, **Choosing**, addresses the necessary cognitive and volitional components required for value formation, emphasizing conscious, rational selection. This category requires three specific conditions: 1) The value must be chosen freely, without external coercion, undue pressure, or manipulative influence; 2) The choice must be made from alternatives, meaning the individual must be fully aware that multiple options exist and have considered them deliberately; and 3) The choice must be made after thoughtful consideration of the potential consequences associated with each available alternative. This Choosing segment is essential for ensuring the value is genuinely personally owned and rationally derived, moving the individual beyond mere superficial obedience

or uncritical imitation.

The second category, **Prizing**, incorporates the emotional and affective validation of the chosen principle. Prizing involves two criteria: 4) The chosen value must be prized and cherished, meaning the individual must feel happiness, satisfaction, and internal pride regarding their choice; and 5) The individual must be willing to publicly affirm or assert the value when appropriate, demonstrating conviction in its worth to others. This public affirmation transforms a private preference into a social commitment. The final category, **Acting**, provides the crucial behavioral verification. This involves two final criteria: 6) The value must be acted upon consistently and repeatedly, integrating it into the individual's regular life patterns; and 7) The value must show up as a consistent pattern in life, indicating that it is a central, operational part of one's existence rather than a fleeting, theoretical notion.

4. VC in Psychotherapy and Counseling

In clinical and mental health counseling, **Values Clarification** serves as a critical intervention tool used to address psychological distress stemming from internal conflict, lack of direction, or an existential sense of meaninglessness. Therapists utilize VC techniques specifically to uncover unconscious priorities that may be driving maladaptive or self-sabotaging behaviors, particularly when the client reports incongruence between their stated ideals and their actual life outcomes. The identification of this behavioral-ideological conflict is often the initial step in treating anxiety, depression, and generalized life dissatisfaction.

For clients undergoing major life transitions, vocational crises, or complex identity development, VC provides a structured framework for re-establishing personal worthiness and accurately assessing their impact within their social and professional spheres. By systematically reviewing their commitment across various life domains--such as financial management, spiritual practices, or relationships--clients can determine whether their allocation of time and energy accurately reflects their most deeply held values. Techniques such as creating a personal coat of arms or forced-choice dilemma cards compel the client to prioritize and visualize the consequences of different choices, thereby fostering increased self-agency and purposeful goal setting.

VC is particularly compatible with meaning-centered therapeutic models, such as Logotherapy. While VC does not mandate the discovery of a predetermined meaning in life, it significantly facilitates the essential preliminary step of profound self-discovery required before a client can consciously pursue personal meaning. By ensuring that therapeutic goals align with genuinely internalized values, VC significantly increases client motivation, enhances treatment adherence, and promotes long-term psychological stability rooted in authentic selfhood.

5. Popular Techniques and Practical Exercises

The effective implementation of **Values Clarification** relies on a dynamic and varied repertoire of structured exercises specifically designed to maximize introspection, stimulate critical thinking, and encourage transparent communication without imposing external judgment. These techniques are process-oriented, focusing entirely on the how of awareness rather than dictating the what of the value content.

The Values Sheet: A brief written activity prompted by a controversial topic or an ethical dilemma. The sheet requires individuals to articulate their stance and then answer follow-up questions designed to verify the Raths criteria--e.g., "Did you choose this stance freely?" "How do you feel about this choice?" and "What have you done about this lately?"

Forced Ranking and Continuum Exercises: Participants are presented with a list of desirable but competing core concepts (e.g., integrity, wealth, creativity, security) and are required to rank them in order of personal importance, justifying their prioritization. The Values Continuum exercise physically or conceptually requires participants to place themselves on a spectrum between two extremes (e.g., highly competitive versus highly collaborative), followed by a discussion explaining their specific point on the line.

Value Whips: A rapid-fire verbal exercise where a series of short, controversial, or personal questions are posed to a group, and each member must offer an immediate, brief response. This technique encourages spontaneous expression and reveals initial, gut reactions before overthinking can occur.

Prizing Activities (Affirmation): Structured exercises aimed at reinforcing a client's commitment to their values, such as identifying personal heroes whose actions reflect their own emerging values, or composing a personal credo statement that summarizes their core, non-negotiable beliefs.

These methods collectively ensure that the clarification process is experiential, integrating cognitive understanding with emotional investment and requiring consistent behavioral demonstration, thereby moving beliefs fully into the domain of operational values.

6. Debates and Criticisms of the Methodology

Despite its significant influence and widespread use across education and counseling in the latter half of the 20th century, **Values Clarification** has attracted considerable academic and philosophical criticism. The most prominent debate centers on the charge of ethical relativism.

Critics argue that because VC intentionally adheres to a non-directive stance--eschewing the teaching of specific moral content and treating all value outcomes as equally valid in the procedural sense--it implicitly endorses moral relativism. Opponents contend that by focusing exclusively on the process of choosing, VC fails to establish a shared foundation of ethical standards necessary

for social cohesion, civic responsibility, and the preservation of universal human rights. This criticism is frequently voiced by philosophical camps and religious organizations that prioritize the transmission of traditional, objective, or universal moral truths.

A second set of criticisms focuses on practical limitations and methodological integrity. Some researchers suggest that VC activities may only succeed in eliciting immediate preferences or transient attitudes, failing to tap into the deeply held, stable moral commitments that truly guide long-term behavior. Skeptics also question whether the non-judgmental, non-directive nature of VC is sufficient for individuals facing complex or life-altering moral dilemmas, particularly if those individuals lack the requisite cognitive maturity or moral foundation to navigate sophisticated ethical reasoning without expert guidance. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reporting and group discussion inherent in many VC exercises creates a risk of social desirability bias, where participants articulate values they believe are expected or socially acceptable rather than their genuine, operative priorities.

Further Reading

[Values Clarification \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Louis Rath's \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Carl Rogers \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Ethical Relativism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Logotherapy \(Wikipedia\)](#)