Sociodemographic Differences Within Countries Produce Variable Cultural Values

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Abstract

Values vary more within countries than between countries because cultural values are adapted to sociodemographic conditions. The globalization of capitalism and commerce has increased economic differences between the haves and the have-nots within countries around the world; at the same time, it has decreased differences between countries, as virtually all countries have urbanized, developed communications technologies such as the Internet, and developed their systems of comprehensive formal education. Hence, according to this theoretical framework, one would actually expect increased within-country differences in values and decreased between-country differences in values, relative to earlier periods of history.

Keywords

sociodemographic variability, culture, values, social change, cultural psychology, cross-cultural psychology

In his article, "Rethinking the Concept and Measurement of Societal Culture in Light of Empirical Findings," the distinguished cross-cultural psychologist Shalom Schwartz starts with the observation that "values vary much more within countries than between countries" (p. 2). He goes on to say that this fact "challenges the prevailing conception of culture as shared meaning systems, with high consensus, in which values play a central role." I have a different perspective on this situation. I do not doubt Schwartz's empirical data, but I would draw different conclusions from them.

The reason values vary more within countries than between countries is because cultural values are adapted to sociodemographic conditions (Greenfield, 2009). Because countries invariably have great sociodemographic variability within their borders, they have corresponding variability in cultural values. By putting sociodemographic factors at the top of the causal chain, we have a way of understanding within-group variability in cultural values. We no longer have to assume in cultural and cross-cultural research that all members of a national group or an ethnic group have the same culture. Instead, we can make predictions about cultural values, psychology, and behavioral development based on sociodemographics such as education, urbanization, economic system, and wealth.

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We also can understand—and this is very important—why members of different national or ethnic groups have the same cultural values. According to this theoretical perspective, members of different socioeconomic strata within a country should have different cultural values, while members of the same socioeconomic strata in different countries should have similar values. Combining these two propositions yields the phenomenon that Schwartz is addressing: greater differences in cultural values within nations than between nations. In other words, sociodemographic variability within countries tends to be greater than sociodemographic variation between countries. *However, this state of affairs does not challenge the notion of culture as shared meaning systems. Instead, it implies that people share values with others with similar sociodemographic characteristics, whether they be in the same country or in different countries. They also share values with others who share common histories of sociodemographic continuity and change.*

Increasing Within-Country Variability Over Time

In fact, the globalization of capitalism and commerce has increased economic differences between the haves and the have-nots within countries around the world (Hodgson, 2012). At the same time, it has decreased differences between countries, as virtually all countries have urbanized, developed communications technologies such as the Internet, and developed their systems of comprehensive formal education. Hence, according to this theoretical framework, one would actually expect increased within-country differences in values and decreased between-country differences in values, relative to earlier periods of history. Schwartz does not consider this possibility of historical change in the ratio of within-country and between-country variability in cultural values. However, I believe it likely that the results published by Fischer and Schwartz in 2011 would not have been obtained decades earlier—in other words, that the ratio of within-country variation to between-country variation has increased over time.

Global Historical Trends Toward Greater Individualism: Implications for Within-Country Variability of Values

According to my theoretical perspective (Greenfield, 2009; Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003), communities that are more isolated, rural, poor, subsistence based, and ethnically homogeneous; provide most education at home; and utilize relatively simple technologies (what the German sociologist Tönnies called *Gemeischaft*) have more collectivistic cultural values. In contrast, societies that are more connected to the outside world, urban, rich, commerce-based, and ethically heterogeneous (what Tönnies called *Gesellschaft*) have more individualistic values (Tönnies, 1887/1988). Each of these ecological variables can provide an independent push toward individualism, and the variables also work together synergistically. Much of the world has been moving in the Gesellschaft direction over a period of centuries. Even countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, countries that were among the first to urbanize and to have universal formal education, have more extreme Gesellschaft conditions on these dimensions than they did 200 years ago; and, correspondingly, as my theory predicts, they are more individualistic and less collectivistic in their cultural values than they were in 1800 (Greenfield, 2013).

This historical movement toward more individualistic values has important implications for within-country variability: A component of individualism on the psychological level is individuation. Thus, as the unique individual comes to be increasingly valued, individual differences actually become greater in a Gesellschaft world. Examples of this increase in variability and its connection to individuation can be seen in the growth of variability in children's names in the

United States over more than 100 years (Twenge, Abebe, & Campbell, 2010**)** or the individuation of learning styles in a Maya community in Chiapas, Mexico, as the economy moved from subsistence and agriculture to money and commerce (Greenfield, 2004; Greenfield, Maynard, & Childs, 2003). The same historical movement has, in fact, created the field of psychology, with its focus on individual differences and the individual (rather than the group) as the unit of analysis.

Schwartz rightly puts emphasis on the importance of consensus in cultural meanings in the very definition of culture; yet, it has been known since the 1950s that with social changes—such as increase in the use of mass media in Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries—the importance of social consensus declines and the value of differentiated individual opinions grows (Lerner, 1958). The decline of religiosity as an authoritarian group consensus approach to morality has been well documented. *Thus, degree of cultural consensus is itself influenced by changing social conditions.* And the direction of social change in our globalized world is such that this influence has attenuated cultural consensus. Hence this implies a weakening of societal or national culture as our unit of analysis; this state of affairs undercuts Schwartz' solution to the problem of within-country variability.

Gesellschaft societies are also more complex and heterogeneous than Gemeinschaft communities, including pockets of more Gemeinschaft communities within them—for example, poor people and ethnic enclaves. Hence, as the dominant direction of social change in the world is in the further development of Gesellschaft environments, the sociodemographic variability that spawns individuated values and reduces cultural consensus has been growing. Thus, it is quite possible, and even probable, that, as the global direction of social change has moved in the Gesellschaft direction, the ratio of within-country variation in cultural values to between-country cultural values has increased. This is a possibility that Schwartz does not consider. Yet, I would say that it is no coincidence that the study that discovered that within-country value variability is much greater than between-country variability was published in 2011, whereas the earlier viewpoint that countries are the unit of value consensus was established in 1980 with Hofstede's groundbreaking work.

One reason Schwartz does not consider the possibility of increased within-country variability over time is that his theoretical approach does not leave room for the influence of social change on cultural values. This is yet another advantage of starting the causal chain for cultural values at the sociodemographic level. Sociodemographic change provides a motor for change at the level of cultural values. Without a motor for change, one tends to fall into the assumption that cultures and cultural values are unchanging and forever the same. And yet the more we conduct historical studies, the more we see how sensitive cultures are to the changing sociodemographic conditions of the individual and the society.

An increasing body of literature has detected adaptation of cultural values and value socialization over periods of decades to an increasingly Gesellschaft world—the decreasing economic value of children (Kagitcibasi, 2007), increasing physical separation of mother and baby in Germany (Keller & Lamm, 2005), increasing incidence of narcissistic personality in the United States (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008), a greater value on gender equality in the United States and Mexico (Manago, 2012; Manago & Greenfield, 2011; Twenge, 1997), and greater emphasis on the individualistic value of fame in U.S. media (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011). The take-home message is that, as societies change, cultural values change in response. All these changes in response to global social change are in the direction of developing a greater cultural emphasis on the development and glorification of the independent individual. And greater within-society individuation is one of the products of this cultural emphasis.

In conclusion, Shalom Schwartz and I start with the same fact—that values currently vary more within countries than between countries; however, we end with very different conclusions. The reason for this divergence is that I, unlike Schwartz, have developed a theoretical framework that posits sociodemographic influences on cultural values. This framework leads to a dynamic

rather than static approach to culture. Hence, my approach comprehends and even predicts the influence of sociodemographic shifts taking place around the world on cultural values. And one of the predicted effects is increased individual differences in cultural values within countries, along with decreased between-country differences. Schwartz is motivated to save the concept of national culture for cross-cultural empirical research. In contrast, now that Schwartz has raised this important issue in cross-cultural psychology, I would like to motivate cross-cultural researchers to test my hypothesis: that, in response to globalized social change, national culture has actually diminished over time. Taking account of the historical dimension is the key factor that separates our approaches. I would like to save the idea of "shared" values—values are still shared. However, the sharing unit needs to be more flexible, derived from both empirical research and theoretical considerations; the unit of the group should not be so tethered to the nation-state.

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