

Full Length Research Paper

South African values: A reflection on its 'Western' base

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The historical socio-political development of South Africa renders a unique environment in respect of the influence of 'Western' cultural values impacting on 'African' values. This paper sets out to reflect on the values held by African youth based on a pre-existing 'Western' scale. In the first instance the nature of values is considered with a particular focus on group and organisational interaction. This is followed by the consideration of 'African' realities and their impact on trends towards convergence and divergence of values. The third part of the paper reflects on data collected from 182 young Africans by considering the nature and validity of value clusters. Overall the data provide mixed results in that clusters show different levels of cohesiveness (reliability) and importance. The most cohesive 'environment' cluster is deemed least important while the least reliable clusters of 'family life' and 'lifestyle' are deemed significantly more important. Although more reliable as clusters, the 'job and work' and 'social and community' clusters are deemed more important.

Key words: Culture, values, westernisation

INTRODUCTION

The heightened awareness and appreciation of differences in values and cultures from a personal and organisational perspective has rendered an increased attention to their influence. Since the late 20th century the world has experienced an increasing exposure to 'foreign' cultures characterised in particular by the promotion of 'Western' values. The collapse of the 'Communist' system in Eastern Europe has left 'Western' values without a counterpart. The acceptance, implementation or indeed relevancy of these values in a culturally dissimilar or diverse environment remains questionable. As a background, the nature and role of values in groups and organisations is briefly described. This is followed by arguments in the African context that would support or reject the relevancy of embracing 'Western' values. The paper reports on data collected from 182 African youth respondents which are clustered and valued. Findings include the most important cluster (lifestyle) to be not reliable while the least important cluster (environment) has the highest reliability. The other three clusters (social and community, family life and job and work) have mixed

results in reliability and importance.

Problem statement

The notion of values in cultural context implies ambiguous and culturally loaded interpretations. The domination and exposure to western values through media and other avenues further clutters the understanding of values. Western values in a traditionally non-western society have led to an equal amount of acceptance and adamant rejection and contributed to the questioning of relevance of traditional 'anglo' values in a cross cultural context. This matter is particularly unclear when considering aspects of lifestyle, family life, social interaction, and the value of work and environmental matters as pillars of societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nature and role of values

Overall values reflect and represent social norms in a society and can be characterised by two notions. The first notion hinges on the interaction between values and behaviour in social organisations (Anderson, 2000).

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According to Oppenhuisen and Sikkel (2002) everyday life in any community or society is directed by the interpretation of values that guide behaviour, motivate ideas and facilitate choices. Values furthermore form the foundations of 'rational' behaviour in a society by setting social norms (Lindbeck, 1997). In addition, values are argued to represent what people believe to be right or wrong (Smola and Sutton, 2002) while also defining guidelines for the resolution of ethical dilemmas (Hosmer, 1987).

The second notion is the reinforcement of a particular behaviour or value through a collective and shared evaluation of what the behaviour ought to be and subsequent sanctions for non compliance (White, 1998). Lindbeck (1997) argues that spontaneous social interaction between individuals in groups contribute to the emergence of values. The importance of particular behaviour and the appropriate actions and reactions are shaped and influenced by the cultural framework of a society (Kempton, et al., 1995). According to Rokeach (Borroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002) actions and judgement are guided across circumstances with a long term perspective while centrally being held by values and translating into an enduring belief. Jehn et al. (1997) hold the view that values reflect the desirability of behaviour underpinned by the fundamental beliefs of an individual. Similarly, Thomson et al. (1999) argues values to represent the given worth in a community topped up with implicated behaviour, identities and beliefs.

The social identity of a society and subsequent assessment measures of behaviour are based on values and norm. Values furthermore form the base of social inclusion and exclusion, blame and praise and expected behaviour (Anderson, 2000). According to Thomson et al. (1999) the notion of social acceptability strongly contributes to acceptance of values amongst younger people. This underscores not only the socially embedded nature of values but also the importance of group affiliations that contribute to shared experiences and the perspective of assessment in relation to others (Marske, 1996). Notwithstanding the reflective and collective nature of values, they constitute more than a reflection of behaviour and deeply held collective beliefs. Anderson (2000) ponders the puzzling question as how values become normative in a society rather than why people adhere to them.

Groups, organisations and values

The established society and culture determine patterns of conduct and norms to which people are subjected. Apart being reinforced by social sanctions, values are transmitted across generations though social interaction. This knowledge ultimately shapes a person's individual values and worldview. Within a society values are seldom questioned the overall assumption is that everyone shares similar values (Robbins et al., 1999). According to

Anderson (2000), opinions of others in society about appropriate behaviour are closely associated with the development, evolution and acceptance of norms. In a multicultural environment this translates in a need to overcome cross cultural behaviour, assumptions and norms. Overall collective agents and membership of social groups form the cornerstones of most people's identities. Youth in particular disapproves being different in terms of unacceptable behaviour while approving of differences in tastes and consumption (Thomson et al., 1999). Since social groups are highly dynamic, cultural evolution impacts on social outcomes, which in turn determines values. The theory of conventions implies that minority groups will adhere to a given value if the vast majority of a group adheres to the value (Anderson, 2000).

The subject of values and value differences is important in today's work and organisational environment. While managers respond to the changing values of their employees, individual value systems affect organisational values (Smola and Sutton, 2002). The next generation of employees requires from management a relevant and up to date awareness of values held by that group. While young people form the workforce of the future their work values, attitude and behaviour is shaped and influenced by their cultural background and experiences. According to Loughlin and Barling (2001) early workplace experience and home circumstances further shape these future workers.

Traditionally older employees complain about the work ethics and values of younger generations. Although sanctions or other forms of negative motivations generally fail to supply a fundamental reason to comply with social norms, the approval or disapproval of other people does constitute a strong motivator in a group context. Hardin (Anderson, 2000) proposes the active and positive recognition of participant contributions towards constituting a coherent group as a crucial aspect of advancing organisational goals. It furthermore reflects people's identities being constituted by their participation in social groups or collective agents. In this sense motivation towards normativity is explained by group identification (Anderson, 2000). The impact of individual values on the organisation and organisation values furthermore determines the actual notion of group performance and membership.

An important differentiation between national culture and values and organisational culture and values is that people are immersed in their national values. The involvement in national culture and values is unconditional while the involvement in, and membership of the organisational culture and values is mutual and conditional (Thomas, 2002). In an organisational framework values function as a fundamental starting point for the social motivational theories. Although motivation in a work environment is found to be largely driven by self-interest, group values are found to be the driving force for approval, cooperation and overall group interaction

(Anderson, 2000). The high social cost of deviation in an organisational environment contributes to general conformity to operating rules and values (Anderson, 2000).

Change and rankings of values

Although influenced by local trends of convergence or divergence a number of other variables like societal development and time also contribute to changes in values. Oppenhuisen and Sikkel (2002) argue that values tend to change slowly over time while recognising a high level of stability amongst values in time. In addition most values are argued to co-vary with age which explains the change in behaviour over time. According to Kubler (2001) the current generation of young people is more conscious and accepting of changes and embraces a change in values and behaviour more easily than previous generations. This is partly attributed to the exposure to and imitation of actions and opinions of widely promoted role models (Young, 1998). Underlying trends of acceptance are also influenced by particular spheres of interaction like television, music, sports and movies. Although age and maturity are associated with value change, Smola and Sutton (2002) believe that life events and socialization of times have a more prominent influence.

Values and beliefs are argued to coexist in a complex interconnected and hierarchical structure rather than as separated and unconnected elements (Vinson et al., 1977). Rational individuals are involved in a constant struggle to align and prioritise their various life values (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002). In addition Raaza (n.d.) advocates that individuals will be able to resolve differences in respect of higher and lower values through a philosophical reflection on values and subsequently allow an individual value hierarchy to emerge. This stance is questioned by Kahle et al. (1986) who argue that the development of a reliable value system reflects the tension of an unending struggle between individual values.

Convergence and divergence to western values

The concept 'protestant work ethic', essentially reflecting 'Western' work values, is arguably the single most important, publicised and promoted work on values. The concept encompasses values of hard work, thrift, discipline, industry and independence. It was religiously inspired and based on the notion that these attributes were necessary for salvation and pleasing to God (Steiner and Steiner, 2000). Historically economic progress and material development have often been associated and attributed to these work values. In addition there seems to be a strong positive relationship between the protestant work ethic and organisational behaviour while the motivational levels of people with a high protestant ethics

were also found to be significantly higher than those with a lower ethic (Ryan, 2002).

In an increasing globalized environment it is important for a culture, society and country to see its values and views of the world respected, shared and accepted by others. Tardiff (2002) argues that relationships between cultures and societies are subject to market rules translating in 'values' being promoted and exported via various media channels. It can be argued that exploration and colonisation of the rest of the world since the 17th century included the exporting of 'Western' values. While this initially manifested in the form of trade, it soon turned into occupation and in recent years has translated in a communication and information technology exercise. An unprecedented exposure to Western values in the rest of the world has been facilitated by the ease of accessibility, predominantly through technological development in recent decades. Both television and the internet play a crucial role in broadcasting and thus exposing and promoting values. The increased exposure to the Western culture and values is often argued to lead to individuals and societies increasingly becoming westernised and either gradually accepting western values or even replacing their traditional values with those from the West.

Value convergence is the process of gradually moving towards uniform values and reflects the degree to which all members of a group agree on values about group processes, behaviour and intra-group relationships (Jehn et al., 1997). Although value convergence and the acceptance of specific group values arguably reduce potential conflict, potential liabilities include groupthink, complacency and stagnation. From a global perspective, the convergence argument hinges on the increased modernisation of societies and the dynamic nature of cultures. Thomas (2002) argues that ideological and value differences will cease to exist due to increased exposure among societies and individuals. Yang (1998) established that modernisation established a high degree of agreement on the characteristics and values of a modern person, irrespective of culture. This is supported by the argument that an increase in wealth leads to increased value similarity.

Generally, the argument for convergence in developing countries is often popularised amongst youth (Smith and Bond, 1999). This is traditionally labelled the bandwagon concept which embodies the acceptance of a specific behaviour by a critical number translating into increased social pressure to abide by that value (Kubler, 2001). The dynamics of group conflict is influenced by the value similarity among group members. According to Jehn et al. (1997), as values determine behaviour, groups with uniform values are more likely to experience reduced conflict and agree on tasks and goals. This implies the likely presence of tension in groups with a high level of dissimilarity amongst group members. Likewise, groups with members sharing the same values are likely to com-

municate easier and better and project a higher level of trustworthiness (McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1987). In this environment people feel more confident that behaviour and expectations are going to be similar and thus easier to work in.

Convergence towards common values is however undermined by the unique origins and complexities of cultures, likely to allow cultural development to move in unpredictable and different directions thus establishing divergence (Smith and Bond, 1999). From an individual perspective divergence represents the relative difference between an individual and other team members (Hobman et al. 2003). Since there is a significant amount of tension between local and global values Gleeson and Low (2001) argues that the claim for cosmopolitan values, based on intergenerational citizenship and a sense of common responsibility is likely to be unsubstantiated. Dahl (1996) supports the view in that in a globalised environment different cultural and ethnic groups need to work towards sustaining their values. Leadership in developing countries increasingly assert their cultural uniqueness and thus values by actively taking a stance to distinguish themselves from the West (Smith and Bond, 1999). There is an increasing urge for groups to come to appreciate their own differences and embrace value dissimilarity instead of being divided by fear and prejudice. Value dissimilarity in particular refers to differences in motivation, work ethic and work values when approaching tasks (Hobman et al., 2003).

The current internationalisation environment that actively promotes diversity and the appreciation of different value systems has traces of oversimplification as it negates or ignores potential inherent problems. Value diversity occurs when members of a group differ in terms of what they think and thus the purpose and goal of the group. Differences in values tend to contribute to conflict in groups and can lead to negative repercussion on the group performance (Jehn et al., 1997). Pelled., et al (2001) established a strong impact by individual dissimilarity or divergence on individual involvement in conflict and a subsequent strong relation to group conflict. In addition, Jehn et al. (1999) established that in most cases value diversity increases relationship, process and task conflict.

Convergence and divergence in Africa

African values and society over the last few decades have been required to adapt to aspects of Western values, particularly in environments of colonial occupation which developed systems and infrastructure. UNESCO (1997) determined that Western theories and models form indeed the foundation of African management practices. In order to increase acceptance and relevance of these practices there is a need to identify common cultural values with African managers. Criticism on the use of a Western value framework is based on its questioned

appropriateness and relevance to African culture as well as the assumed convergence of African value frameworks. Appropriate management practices and values have increasingly become a topic of concern, particularly against the backdrop of an increasing diversity and inclusiveness in South African leadership (Booyesen, 2000).

Young African students are argued to act divergent and convergent simultaneously. From a divergence perspective African youth are comfortable with the co-occurrence of supernatural occurrences and traditional religion without validation, deemed superstitious in a Western value system. At the same time, these students appreciate and embrace the Western notion of time rejecting the traditional African value sphere (Van Der Walt, 1996).

Another aspect that impact significantly on convergence trends is the association of economic prosperity and development to Western values. Central in this notion are attitudes towards accountability, personal responsibility, time and future orientation. A blend of the Western-African values is possible as reflected in traditional Japanese society which embraces the core western values but simultaneously subscribes to high levels of group interaction and adherence and a strong communal society. In this environment work is a commitment of responsibility and self sacrifice while also reflecting a commitment to a new community (Mbigi and Maree, 1995). The rest of this paper reflects on data collection and data reflecting the importance of Western value clusters amongst African youth in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

As part of a wider international study on the value dimensions of youth in various East Asian countries data were collected from 187 African business students in South Africa. The instrument used in the study was initially developed by Sauer and Andrews in 1986 to gauge the attitudes of students towards their socio-economic and environmental environment. By clustering the data Sauer et al. (1994) derived five value clusters for Western youth. The clusters established and thus assessed in this paper are the concepts lifestyle, family life, social and community, environmental and job and work issues.

Notwithstanding the volume of data available, most secondary sources reflecting society values are criticised to be unrealistic or biased. The preferred source to analyse, interpret and report values remains the collection of data as primary source (Oppenhuisen and Sikkel, 2002). The questionnaire reflects five value dimensions, each measured by five questions for a total of 25 questions. Each question was put in such a way that respondents had to indicate the importance and thus inherent value of each topic.

Respondents were requested to rate various statements in respect of values on a 6 point Likert scale (ranging from not important to crucial) thus establishing a forced nature of responses (Crask et al., 1995). For the purpose of this paper data were reported in the form of a calculated means for responses. The inclusion of the Cronbach alpha is based on its suitability to multi-item scales at the interval of measurement. Cooper and Emory (1995) argue that it facilitates a measure of internal consistency by indicating the homogeneous nature and similarity in underlying construct (or lack thereof) of measurement items. The coefficients range between 0 and 1 where unsatisfactory internal consistency

Table 1. Lifestyle values.

Lifestyle values	Means	Var	Corr	Cron A
An easy, quiet life	4.18	1.03	0.013	0.491
An exciting life full of adventure	4.01	1.01	0.145	0.352
Enough time for hobbies and interests	4.08	0.92	0.338	0.198
An interesting, full life	3.96	0.99	0.318	0.231
Being helpful to others	4.05	1.01	0.199	0.308
Cluster	4.05			0.370

is generally indicated by a Cronbach alpha value less than 0.6.

Shortcomings

The single largest shortcoming of the paper is likely to be associated with the questionnaire. The European nature of the initial development and testing of the questionnaire could be argued to contribute to be inappropriate in a different cultural and value context. As values are often inherently associated with phrases and loaded terminology. By misreading or misunderstanding language and terminology used in the questionnaire respondents could easily arrive at different interpretations. In addition, it is recognised that the translation of values in another language is extremely difficult (Oppenhuisen and Sikkel, 2002). This was dealt with by explaining the questionnaire and purpose of research in person during the data collection exercise. From an analytical perspective the findings indicate an element of unsatisfactory internal consistency and thus questionable reliability. The discussion of values as if representative of a total country's population is also questionable as different value systems are likely to be operational amongst one country. Given this the study could at best be seen as exploratory in nature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographics

Data were collected from 187 African students studying commerce at an established tertiary institution in South Africa. The majority of respondents (91%) were between 18 and 24 years old, thus deemed to be representative of African youth. Further demographics indicate that one third of the respondents were male and two thirds female.

Lifestyle

Although there is an increased awareness and importance associated with collective values such as work-life balance, Western society is still strongly driven by an emphasis on material values (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002). This excessive focus has not only blurred the differentiation between materialism and values but is also argued to translate in, or at least contribute to, the breakdown of civic responsibility. The subsequent demise of the common good and rise in selfishness, violence, crime and loss of moral civil behaviour indeed points at changing values (Marske, 1996). This set of values reflects the measurement of well-being through the asso-

ciation with a product or the financial or commercial value attributed to something. The five value statements included in the lifestyle cluster are reflected in Table 1.

The lifestyle values reflect the respondent's assessment of the importance of work-life balance and the positive associations to activities. Since this cluster attracted the highest mean score it seems to be an issue of high importance amongst respondents. Achieving an easy, quiet life was deemed most important with a means score of 4.05. All items in the cluster, except one, scored higher than 4.00 on the mean score while the variance and correlation were the lowest amongst all values measured. The reliability of the data in this cluster is highly questionable as none of the items show an acceptable Cronbach alpha value.

Family life

According to Faver (1981) family values represent a source of meaning and purpose in a person's life as it reflects the importance of establishing and maintaining relations within an immediate family. Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) argue that a central part of this value is argued to be embedded in married relationships and the importance of children. The younger generation differentiates the family relationship from others by characteristics of honour, trust and respect, further labelling it a unique relationship (Thomson et al., 1999). According to Smola and Sutton (2002) conservative attitudes, strongly supporting family values are argued to be a core underlying characteristic of individuals pursuing a more balanced lifestyle. The different family value related statements are presented in Table 2. The individual values of family life statements reported in Table 2 are reasonably high with three aspects in the cluster resulting in a means value higher than 4.00 and a cluster means value of 4.00. Respondents indicate that the bringing up of children is most important in this cluster while a happy family life is least important. The reliability of the clustering is questionable as reflected in the Cronbach alpha of the cluster and all individual elements being lower than 0.6.

Social and community

Notwithstanding the complexity of social and community

Table 2. Family life values

Family life values	Means	Var	Corr	Cron A
Deep love with a partner	3.96	1.50	0.322	0.396
Basic material security	4.07	1.46	0.292	0.412
A happy family life	3.84	1.73	0.284	0.439
A high standard of living	4.01	1.56	0.233	0.451
The bringing up children	4.13	1.22	0.251	0.465
Cluster	4.00			0.487

Table 3. Social and community values.

Social and community values	Means	Var	Corr	Cron A
Global peace	3.40	2.57	0.408	0.708
Possibilities to influence public affairs	3.71	2.37	0.449	0.695
A concern for general human welfare	3.50	2.48	0.507	0.676
An effort of society to eliminate hunger and diseases	3.47	1.96	0.672	0.596
Participation in organizing activities of children and youth	3.57	2.36	0.418	0.709
Cluster	3.53			0.727

values Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) suggest two key components of community values; a willingness to contribute to the betterment of the community and a belief in providing ideas and inputs on important issues. According to Tayyab and Tariq (2001) the moral fabric of western values has been under attack and subsequently undermines the integrity and values of individuals. From a social and community value perspective the progressive decline of tradition in western society contributes to the formation of 'new' and more liberal 'western' values (Thomson et al., 1999). The various social and community value statements rated by respondents are summarized in Table 3.

Compared to the lifestyle and family life values, the value of social and community aspects as reflected in Table 3 is relatively low. The relative importance of a democratic and accessible governing environment is reflected in the highest value amongst this cluster is the possibility to influence public affairs. More generic and macro aspects like global peace and efforts to eliminate hunger and diseases are deemed considerably less important, attracting the lowest value amongst all 25 values in all clusters. Respondents differed significantly in how important these different values were to them as reflected in the relatively large variation and correlation. Contrary to the lifestyle and family life values the different items under the social and community values cluster well, reflecting a high reliability in an overall Cronbach alpha of higher than 0.7.

Environment

Kempton et al. (1995) determined that in the late 1900's environmental values and beliefs evolved rapidly amongst 'Western' society. This in turn impacted significantly on the development of environmental policies and

attitudes. Like all other values, environmental values involve tradeoffs established through causal linkages. According to Fryxell and Lo (2003), the establishment of a larger belief or value system reflects choices based on stakeholder views, complexity and uncertainty. From a global perspective it is argued that the lowest common denominator for environmental standards is unfortunately determined and reduced by the inability of a few countries to implement and enforce basic environmental regulations (Gleeson and Low, 2001).

Data on the environmental values presented in Table 4 shows these variables form a tight cluster, as reflected by relatively high Cronbach alpha values. The cluster means value of 3.57 places environmental values as slightly less important as social and community values discussed above. Both the correlation and variation of individual values are relatively small contributing to a relatively tight clustering of the variables.

Job and work

Work values are defined by Kanungo (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002) as the extent to which work or career is placed centrally in one's life. Tayyab and Tariq (2001) add that work values are work related preferences, interests, attitudes and beliefs which are conceptually different from other work related constructs. While it is recognised that the meaning of work has changed as societies developed over time, it is argued that motivation, commitment and work performance are directly affected by the intrinsic nature of work values. According to Smola and Sutton (2002) work values are increasingly influenced by individual association with a job rather than company loyalty and are furthermore affected by ethical issues, corporate culture and the impact of human resource initiatives.

Table 4. Environment values.

Environment values	Means	Var	Corr	Cron A
Society efforts to conserve the vital functions of nature	3.52	1.98	0.553	0.760
Knowledge about the factual state of the environment	3.60	2.02	0.494	0.779
The aesthetic impact of nature	3.63	1.94	0.641	0.734
Active participation in improving the environment	3.59	1.74	0.674	0.719
A positive impact of the environment on health	3.51	2.01	0.511	0.774
Cluster	3.57			0.793

Table 5. Job and work values.

Job and work values	Means	Var	Corr	Cron A
An interesting, attractive job	3.88	1.69	0.538	0.599
A steady source of plenty of money	4.01	1.82	0.328	0.688
An improvement of the physical working environment	4.04	1.61	0.524	0.600
Good relations with fellow workers	3.95	1.96	0.352	0.673
A job acknowledged as having social value	4.07	1.57	0.490	0.617
Cluster	4.00			0.688

The job and work data captured in Table 5 indicate a relatively tight cluster of variables as reflected in Cronbach alpha values of 0.600. A relatively small variance reiterates the similarity of the values if the individual items. In addition the job and work values attain a relatively high mean score of 4.00 confirming a seemingly higher importance than environment, social and community values.

Conclusion

Given the active promotion and high exposure to 'Western' values across the world there is little doubt that African youth will be exposed to and influenced by these values. Simultaneously there is a strong drive in traditional communities to acknowledge and value traditional values and embrace them with enthusiasm and pride. Data in this paper delivers mixed results in terms of the convergence to and importance of 'Western values' by African youth. One obvious shortcoming is the lack of reliability of data, particularly in the case of lifestyle and family values. This is likely to be associated in a sense with the conflicting values of individualism and materialism promoted by the "western" value system compared to the strong communalist and relationship mindset of the African value system. Although questionable in reliability these clusters identify a focus on an easy quit life and the bringing up of children as most important. Clusters with a defensible reliability indicate that social value associated with a work is important, as is the caring of closeby communities and the beauty and aesthetic value of nature. Data does not clearly support the acceptance or rejection of 'Western' values by African youth, pointing at a further need to differentiate between regions and cultural groups and associations in South Africa. Due to the somewhat contradictory nature of the findings the

study turns out to be exploratory in nature and confirms the ambiguous nature of considering western value terminology in a non-western cultural context.

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