Postmodern Openings

MODERN AND POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL VALUES

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Abstract

The present article proposes a review of the most influential theoretical approaches on values, showing their contribution to contouring a postmodern perspective on social values. We oriented towards Schwartz's approach, Inglehart's theory of modernization and postmodernization and Hofstede with the five dimensions of culture.

Keywords: *social values, postmodern values, material values, post-materialism, postmodernism.*

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Introduction

From sociological perspective values represent not only explicit conceptions about which is desirable (Kluckhohn, 1962: 395), but supraindividual, socialized preferences, promoted and transferred by means of social mechanisms (Vlasceanu, 1998: 650). Social values refer less to what is and more to how it should be in a society, they "are accepted as thruthful opinions and criteria set for what is expected by a society" (Türkkahraman, 2014: 634).

Hofstede and the dimensions of culture

Well-known for his effort to study values specific to different cultures comparatively (especially thanks to the research conducted through interviewing IBM employees in different countries) Hofstede considers four fundamental social problems which mark value cultural dimensions (Smith, Schwartz, 1996: 96):

- Social inequality, involving relations with authority;
- The relationship between individual and group;
- Concepts of femininity and masculinity, the social implications of the feminine or the masculine gender;
- The insecurity which includes the control of aggressiveness, as well as the expression of emotions.

Values, as base indicators of a culture, can be analyzed in any society, claims Hofstede, from the perspective of five cultural dimensions.

Power distance, as the first value dimension, refers to "the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 2012: 68).

The roots of this dimension can be observed in the family environment. In countries with low power distance, for instance, children are mostly treated as equals by their parents from the moment when they can act, they are encouraged to act independently, and the behaviour towards others doesn't depend on their age or status, as opposed to the societies with high power distance, where the respect for older relatives is maintained in adulthood.

Organizations with high power distance are characterized by the polarity between dependency and counterdependency towards people with authority, in this case both the superiors and the subordinates are

considered unequals, and the hierarchical system is based particularly on this inequality. The leaders are entitled to have privileges, and the relationships between the subordinates and their superiors are initiated by the latter. By contrast, in institutions with low power distance, it is avoided that those in leaderships to be treated differently, the hierarchical pyramids are leveled, the salary differences are low between the top and the bottom of the pyramid.

The second cultural dimension – *individualism vs. collectivism* – makes a distinction between the societies in which the group's interest outweighs the individual's interest and the societies in which the central concern of the individuals is personal interest. Individualism is "characteristic to societies in which the connections between the individuals are weak: it is expected of people to take care of themselves and their immediate family"(Hofstede, 2012: 96) while collectivism is specific to societies in which, at birth, individuals are integrated in powerful, closely united groups, which continue to protect them throughout life in exchange for unconditional loyalty.

The evaluation of this dimension was correlated with the importance given by the interviewed employees to certain work goals. The emphasis on personal time (having a job that allows you to focus more on family and personal life), on freedom (having a greater freedom in choosing the way you want to relate to your job) and challenge (having stimulating activities that can offer the feeling of personal achievement) denote an individualistic perspective. At the opposite pole, the interest in perfecting your skills (having the opportunity to improve your skills through perfecting them), good physical working conditions (adequate work space, lighting, and ventilation), the use of skills (having the possibility to use your skills and capacities at the highest level) are specific to the collectivist orientation.

The *masculinity vs. femininity* dimension, the most controversial of the five dimensions of culture, was mostly correlated to *individualism vs. collectivism*. A society is masculine if the emotional gender roles are clearly distinguished: men need to be authoritarian, rough and focused on material success, while women must be modest, gentle and concerned about quality of life. A society is considered feminine if the emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women must show modesty, gentleness and concern for quality of life (Hofstede, 2012: 141).

Uncertainty avoidance, cultural dimension which is based on a notion taken from the American organizational sociology used by John G. March. It is considered that extreme ambiguity can produce an intolerable anxiety, but the way to treat uncertainty is an integrated part of any institution, regardless of the country. The feelings of uncertainty are acquired and learned, are not only personal, they can also be shared by other members of the same community.

The fifth dimension, correlated with the level of economic growth, is *long-term orientation*, which represents "the cultivation of virtues oriented towards a future reward, especially persistence and temperance" *vs. short-term orientation*. The latter refers to "the cultivation of virtues related to the past and the present, especially the respect for tradition, preservation of one's face, and fulfilling social obligations" (Hofstede, 2012: 231).

Starting from the studies conducted by Inglehart and Misho, Hofstede appealed to the analysis of the data offered by the World Values Survey, following which another cultural dimension was observed – *indulgence vs. Restraint*. Indulgence as "the tendency to allow a relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun", while *restraint* "reflects the conviction that such gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict norms" (Hofstede, 2012: 276) with the specification that the satisfaction of the needs related to indulgence refer to enjoying life and having fun, not to the satisfaction of human desires in general.

The Schwartz culture-level approach

The studies conducted by Schwartz prove an interest which is more oriented towards value inventory than towards offering explanations regarding their emergence and change. For him, "values represent cultural support and can be positioned in a multidimensional space" (Ester, Mohler, Vinken, 2006: 12).

The 10 values discussed by Schwartz are:
- Power – social status, dominating people and resources
- Achievement – personal success in accordance with social standards
- Hedonism and stimulation
- Self-direction – independence of thought and action
- Universalism – understanding, tolerance

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- Benevolence
- Tradition – respect towards culture and religious norms
- Conformity
- Security – safety and stability (Schwartz, Smith, 1996: 86).
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Schwartz's perspective had a significant importance in shaping the empirical research on values. European Social Survey uses a series of items oriented towards measuring the ten central values for the mentioned theory (Davidov, Schmidt, Schwartz, 2008: 420).

The correlation of the dimensions proposed by Schwartz with the post-material values which are specific to Inglehart's approach leads to the positive association of self-transcendence and openness to change with post-materialism, and the negative association in what self-enhancement and conservation are concerned (Wilson, 2005).

Inglehart's theories of modernization and postmodernization

Considered to be the most influential theory of value changes, the one proposed by Ronald Inglehart, key-author in the field of international value study, is based on two major hypotheses:

- *The scarcity hypothesis*, created to explain the proliferation of value orientations towards post-materialism, presumes that individuals' preferences are influenced by the socio-economic environment in which they develop. People have the tendency to give priority to those things which are rare, those who experience a low living standard show interest in material values, while in conditions of prosperity, the main concern is for post-material values (Inglehart, 2000, 2005).
- *The socialization hypothesis*, which shows that the socio-economic environment doesn't have an immediate influence on the preferences expressed by the individual, but, in time, its effects become visible, so that individuals' values come to reflect the material conditions from preadult years (Inglehart, 2005). Thus, we notice a tendency towards the satisfaction of higher needs, in the conditions of economic development and scientific progress. At the same time, the interest in modern and postmodern values emancipates the individuals. Thus, we can say that modernization incubates the secularization of authority, while post-

modernization leads to the emancipation of authority (Voicu, 2007).

The transition from material values to post-material values is just an aspect of the change from modern values to postmodern values, as shown by Inglehart (2000). Real similarities between the post-material theory and the postmodern theory can be noted: both try to explain political changes through the analysis of value changes; both identify the emergence of new values correlated with selves seeking realization, and last but not least, both raise new problems and axes of conflict (Gibbins, Reimer, 1995). Post-material values involve: freedom of speech, participation in political decisions, a more humane society, while postmodern values involve a romantic life, not having to work to be useful to society, lack of interest for material possession, human skills development, expression of individuality, emphasis on environmental protection, and interest for cultural topics even in conditions of opposition to economic interests.

Inglehart's conclusions show that post-material values are correlated with prosperity, while the economic decline has the opposite effect. On a large scale, cross-national cultural variation is associated with the level of economic growth and cultural heritage (2000a, 2000b).

Conclusion

The mentioned theories have influenced empirical studies on values worldwide and have led to a postmodern perspective on social values. Although it is possible that materialist values have an influenced on people's lower satisfaction in life, postmodernization does not certainly boost people's life quality, but this hypothesis requires more empirical analysis.

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Biodata

Nicoleta UNGUREANU is a PhD student in Sociology of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University from Iasi (Romania). In the past she has obtained a Master's Degree in Social Management and Community Development (also of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University from Iasi). In present is engaged in researching on social values in interfaith community space and she is looking forward to gaining more experience as well as publishing more papers that focus the issue of Romanian social values.