

THE ROLE OF PEOPLE'S PERSONAL VALUES IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract- People's personal values in organisations are a phenomenon that have captured the interest of academic researchers in organisational and business studies, psychologists, practitioners, and social scientists. Despite this consideration, there continues to be a noticeable lack of agreement on what values are, how values are perceived in the workplace and, more importantly, what the actual roles of people's personal values are in the ways they think, feel, and act in the workplace. Hence, this paper explores how people's personal values are perceived, and defined. It proposes that by simultaneously considering all different roles of people's personal value models proposed by the author, values scholars can advance a more comprehensive and integrative understanding of the values phenomenon. Focusing on the constructed meanings that have been gathered from the participants' stories and experiences, 14 narrative interviews have been conducted at senior and junior levels in two different organisations. Findings revealed that narrators placed high importance on their personal values at their workplace. The results found that there are robust links between people's personal values and the ways they think, feel, and act. Findings from the stories reflected how people's personal values drive, inspire, and lead them in making their decisions, building their perceptions, and shaping their attitudes and behaviour. Thus, the paper contributes to the existing knowledge on the empirical impact of people's personal values on the way they think, feel, and act. This study contributes to the people's values literature, which should be encouraged as one of the theoretical and empirical considerations that needs to be addressed by researchers and authors in the development of an emerging agenda within the study of values.

Index Terms- Personal values, workplace Organisation, Narrative inquiry.

I. INTRODUCTION

Researchers and authors/practitioners have defined and addressed values from different perspectives. Definitions and meanings of values have been taken from different point of views and disciplines such as Psychology, Theology, and Management. Values "occupy a prominent place in the scientific and public discourse at a number of levels" (Meglino and Ravlin, 1998). In this paper, the author questions what are the actual roles of people's personal values in the workplace? How do people perceive their personal values? and; How might personal values influence the way people think, feel and act? The author is not aiming to categorise or classify values, or examine the ranking of values. Also, it is not the aim of this paper to define different types of values; rather, this study explores the nature of values and their role in keeping people more connected to each other and to their work. This paper is based on the following central points:

1. Values are more than ethics, morals, and virtues; they are the foundation in how we think, act, and feel.
2. Values have a vital role in in how we make decisions, choose preferences, build our perceptions, and lead and drive both individuals and groups.
3. Understanding our personal values will increase our awareness of their significant roles in the way we think, feel, and act, and eventually will help us

learn to 'know' and 'lead' ourselves in the workplace.

II. WHAT ARE VALUES?

If ten different people were asked to define 'values' or what they understand by the term, we might have ten different definitions. Moore (1922) admits the difficulties of defining values - or its indefinability - because it is a simple quality like 'green'. Frondizi (1971) agrees with Moore (1922) regarding the difficulties of defining values: however, he disagrees with him as to why it is difficult to define. In contrast, Frondizi (1971) posits that the difficulties of defining values are due to their complexity, he considers values to have a Gestalt quality, which means that values do not just happen; instead, there is a need for them to be represented in some form of cognitive recognition, or via a transporter.. Regardless of the difficulties of defining values, there is a need to have a closer look at the different definitions or meanings conferred on them, starting from the definition offered in the Cambridge Dictionary (Woodford & Jackson, 2003): "The beliefs people have about what is right and wrong and what is most important in life, which control their behaviour". Values are thought to have a considerable effect on the affective and behavioural responses of persons (Locke, 1976; Rokeach, 1973; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). The study of values can be traced back to the lessons from Aristotle, Plato and Socrates, in the formula of virtue morals (Jackson, 1996; O'Hear, 2000; Hosmer, 2003;

Raz, 2003, Hemingway, 2005). Values have been defined as the vision people have in terms of deciding what is good for themselves and their companions; in other words what is good for them in the lives (Rescher, 1969). Therefore, many researchers have linked the perception of values with moral thought, described by Wright (1971, p. 201) as "Beliefs about what is wrong and the values that define the positive goals in life". Then values have been introduced as principles of conduct (Meglino and Ravlin, 1998), shaped as a consequence of reward or punishment, mostly from children's parents (Wright, 1971; Williams, 1979, Hemingway, 2005). In order to make the picture clearer, there is a need to look at other definitions and understanding of values. Fowler (1935) defines values as outcomes of mental development, either from human instinct through usual responses, or from logic in the use of accepted forms. Furthermore, he clarifies that instinct identifies the value of basic things such as food, shelter, drink and other basics of life. However, he emphasises that it does not account for values beyond these basics.

Baker (1999) clarifies that the idea of values appears to cover a collection of phenomena, extending from any kind of an individual's interests, to that which people understand as good or bad. In a wider definition of values, Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, p. 552) define values as a combination of five methods which highlight the most common understanding of values from different researchers: "Values are (a) concepts or beliefs (b) about desirable end states or behaviours (c) that transcend specific situations, (d) guide selection or evaluation of behaviour and events, and (e) are ordered by relative importance". Schwartz (1992; Schwartz & Bilsky 1987) recognises three 'worldwide human requirements' that form the foundation for all values: the necessity for biological survival; the request for social interaction; and social and institutional demands for group wellbeing. It is stated that the differences "in the relative importance placed on these requirements mean they hold potential for conflict within and between individuals and groups" (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013, p.497). Moreover, Ab. Halim (2005 cited in Othman al-Habshi, 2004, p. 96) claims that values are something you have desire for, something you would pursue relentlessly and strive to defend and safeguard. He explains that values come naturally, either by adopting what others have, or what society sustains, or by obligation of the law. Values have been referred to as one of many ways that shape people's behaviour, which shape people behaviour - as Veage, Ciarrochi and Heaven (2011, p. 1180) posit; "Human behaviour is shaped in multiple ways. One way is through the values we hold".

At the organisational level, values are seen as a key component of organisational culture (Schein, 1985; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996; Meglino and Ravlin, 1998), and are repeatedly defined as principles accountable for the successful management of many

organisations (e.g., Mitchell & Oneal, 1994; Meglino and Ravlin, 1998).. Indeed, many empirical researchers have emphasised the need for and advantage of considering personal values at works and to align them with the organisational values in order to keep the spirit of working together high and to be developed inside the organisation (Harrington, Preziosi, & Gooden, 2001; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004; Pfeffer, 2010; Hammoudeh, 2012).

Despite the popularity of values, there is a lack of agreement on the nature of values themselves. Surrounded by other things, values have been seen as goals, personality types, motivations, needs, utilities, attitudes, non-existent mental entities, and interests (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). This absence of agreement (e.g., Kluckhohn, 1951; Rokeach & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Williams, 1979) has produced difficulties in interpreting the consequences of many studies, and has encouraged the demand for larger agreement on how values are defined, perceived, and measured in organisational studies (Connor & Becker, 1975, 1994; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998).

In this paper, I set out to provide some coherence on the subject of values, particularly on people's personal values, by first focusing on the influence of personal values on the way we think, feel and, act, second prospering the people's personal values model, which gathers all the elements and roles of values from wide literature of values studies, and to be categorised and linked with the way we think, feel, and act (see Figure 1); and third, contributing to the existing literature and knowledge of values by conceptualising the data collected from the narrative interviews. Indeed, this study constitutes one of only a few qualitative exploratory research endeavours to adopt a narrative inquiry approach to construct meaning in how values are perceived and defined.

A. How might understanding values make a difference?

Personal values are believed to be located at the level of persons who 'have' or possess their particular values (Schwartz, 1992; Bourne & Jenkins, 2013). Schwartz (2011) states that the first thing drew him to the study of values was the the question: "Do values make a difference? Do values affect what people do, what they believe, what and whom they like?" (Schwartz, 2011, p.309), Likewise the author explores whether personal values affect how people think, what they feel, and how they act. According to Schwartz, hundreds of researchers have conducted thousands of studies of values in order to shed light on: "how and why values differ across individuals and across cultures, and how these differences relate to significant behaviours, attitudes, emotions, policies, and experiences" (Schwartz, 2011, p.310).

Kluckhohn (1951 cited in Meglino & Ravlin, 1998, p. 356) states that any activities that are incompatible with people's personal values are mostly avoided for

the purpose of keeping negative feelings away: "...any actions that are inconsistent with these values will result in feelings of guilt, shame, or self-depreciation... Thus, individuals will exhibit value-related behaviour in private in order to avoid negative internal feelings".

Moreover, the author sees that people attach importance to their values because they are essential parts of the process in the way people perceive things. In other words, individual values are recognised as components in the progression of human mindfulness (Postman, Bruner & McGinnies, 1948; England 1967, Hemingway, 2005) due to their association with social standards and feelings (Jacob, Flink & Shuuchman, 1962). Therefore, Hemingway (2005, p. 13) highlighted that values have a significant role in making decisions: "This highlights the importance of values as an integral facet of human decision-making".

This paper proposes that the way we understand values might play an important role in how we can employ those values in our life and the workplace. Some have argued that values are expressions people show about something specific; for instance, Frondizi (1971) states that when someone gives his opinion on a painting such as 'This is a beautiful painting' he is purely expressing his feelings. On the other hand, Scheler (1954) points out that values and feelings are two separate things, and a value cannot be reduced to the expression of a feeling, since we normally pick up values separately from the feeling we experience, hence our ability to recognise amoral values in our enemy.

B. Personal values, behaviour, and attitude

In this part of our journey in understanding personal values, the author would like to shed light on how personal values might have the ability to alter our behaviour, actions, feelings and - most importantly - our thinking. Baker (1999, p. 11) argues that the values people hold are more or less directing their instinctive behaviour. He states that those steering values are frequently embedded in culture "The changes thus precipitated, bring our discussion of human agency and reflexivity around to the role of the values people hold, in steering their reflexive behaviour. These steering values are often embedded in culture, influencing the actions not only of the recipient of psychological science and its application, but also the practitioner".

On the other hand, values can be seen as an influential factor in forming human attitudes. It is argued that an attitude is a pool of beliefs and values linked together in a certain state, or it is a value which is more important in various circumstances (Rokeach, 1973). There is considerable empirical evidence to show the vital role of values in our consequent behaviour and in formatting our attitudes (e.g., Allport, Vernon & Lindzey, 1960; England, 1967;

Rokeach, 1968; Wright, 1971; Lusk & Oliver, 1974; Fritzsche, 1995; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998; Agle & Caldwell, 1999; Oliver, 1999; Hemingway, 2005).

C. Personal values and our perception

The researcher argues that the role of our personal values might be deeper than an expression or a reflection of our feeling. Indeed, our personal values are an integral facet of our perception because individual values are recognised as components in the progression of human perception (Postman, Bruner & McGinnies, 1948; England, 1967; Hemingway, 2005) due to their association with social standards and feelings (Jacob, Flink & Shuuchman, 1962). This research states that our personal values guide and lead us to what and how should we act and judge based on how we perceive the world around us. Heron (1996) agrees with this approach by arguing that values are the directorial motive of all people's actions. Moreover, this research argues that values as a guiding tool will be the standards against which we make our judgements and to choose what is important to us; and to meet our needs and preferences. This has been supported by Williams (1979, p.16 cited in Hemingway, 2005): "Values have cognitive, affective, or directional aspects... [which when]... fully conceptualized...become criteria for judgment, preference and choice".

Furthermore, Fisher and Lovell (2003, p.113, cited in Hemingway, 2005, p. 14) state that the contribution of our values in our choices and preferences indicate the function of personal values as an investigative device or, for decision-making, "People edit out, or rationalize into significance, that information which inhibits the application of their preferred values". Hence, Hemingway (2005) explains how senior managers were witnessed to be facilitating green stakeholder influence by spreading their "interpretive frames" (cited in Fineman & Clarke, 1996, p. 727).

For the purposes of this research, further exploration of the role of personal values in the way we think, and their contribution in our decisions, will serve the study in developing a deeper understanding of values, and how people's personal values are perceived in the workplace. However, there is a need to mention here that this study is not examining the relations between values and the decision-making process; rather it is reviewing the varying approaches in the literature to what the role of values is in supporting decision-making in the organisation.. This will then enhance the importance of this research in considering values at the workplace to be as a mechanism for leading organisations.

The author posits that people make decisions with consideration of their own values. This has been shown in an empirical piece of research conducted by Hemingway on a comparison of personal values between regular entrepreneurs and other managers. "The importance of the role of personal values in an

individual's decision-making and subsequent behavior was noted" (Hemingway, 2005, p.18). Furthermore, the moral element of decision making has been associated with personal values (Fritzche, 1995), and it has been stated that decisions which are made by managers in organisations are influenced by individual ethics besides the authorised business goals (Wood, 1991; Harris & Crane, 2002; Hemingway & Maclagan, 2004; Hemingway, 2005). In addition, Fritzche (1995, p. 910) clearly states the association between the moral dimension of decisions and people's values - "There appears to be agreement amongst most business ethics scholars that personal values play a role in the ethical dimension of decision making". The author suggests here that more attention needs to be given to the role of people's personal values in the application of how people prefer to connect with each other and to their work and, more importantly, in how the ethical dimensions of people's decision making are influenced by their own values at the workplace.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

The study used narrative inquiry of fourteen participants who work in two different selected organisations in Jordan. Seven participants were chosen from each selected organisation from three different levels as follows: CEO, three senior managers, and three staff. The first organisation was purposefully selected, as it has been consulted by an expert in the study of values. The second organisation was randomly selected. This is an exploratory qualitative research and data were gathered through narrative interviews. The narrative or story-telling method applied in this research enabled the researcher to understand how the participants construct meaning of their lived experiences. The narrative inquiry is chosen because it enables the researcher to capture more details of how people perceive their personal values in the workplace. The story-telling technique facilitates the process of dealing with such a complex subject as 'values'.

This is a qualitative exploratory study, which aims to construct meanings in how personal values play a vital role in the way we think, feel, and act in the workplace. Participants have provided rich data, collected from their stories and experiences. Each participant told seven to 14 stories during the interviews, following which all narratives were transcribed into roughly 130 pages in total. It took considerable time and effort to complete the overall process. Stories gathered were textually analysed to evidence the storyteller's distinctive personal experiences.

The epistemological stance for this study adopts the interpretive approach. From the interpretivist perspective, it has been stated that in order to understand the meanings of events, circumstances and phenomena that need to be interpreted, they need

to first be understood (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This leads the research in the direction of exploring the different interpretations of people's values in the workplace. The ontological stance of this study adopts the subjectivist approach: reality is explored through acquiring an understanding how participants provide details and tell stories in regards to their personal values. Remenyi and colleagues (1998, p. 35) stated that there is a need to study "the details of the situation to understand the reality or perhaps a reality working behind them".

A. Discussion of the role of the personal values model

For the purposes of this paper, it is significant to understand the role of human values in the workplace. Participants were first asked to define their personal values and explain where they believe that their personal values come from. Then narrative questions were asked to encourage participants to tell stories from their experiences of how their personal values influence the way they do things in the workplace. The author claims that personal values have a vital role in the way we think, feel and act. Hence, in this paper, a conceptual framework has been developed to explore the rapport between personal values and the three phases - acting, feeling, thinking (see Figure 1):

Acting: What is the rapport between personal values and formatting our attitudes, driving our behaviour, and shaping our characteristics? Participants place considerable importance on the relation between their personal values and their personalities. Data from the collected stories showed that attitudes, behaviours and characteristics are the results of practicing personal values; for instance, the person will not be described as an honest person unless he/she practices honesty as a value. Then honesty will be reflected in his/her morals, attitudes, behaviours and characteristics.

Thinking: Participants have clearly expressed their agreement with how their personal values contribute to each of the following elements: make their decisions and judgements, select their choices, choose their preferences, build their relationships, establish their connection with others, lead their direction, and create or build their perceptions. Indeed, while participants were telling their stories, they used clear and meaningful words and phrases, which reflect their thoughts and perception in how they conceptualise their personal values. This has been clearly evidenced during the narrative interviews.

Feeling: Narrative interview was an effective tool to explore and investigate how the participants felt when they were asked to tell stories from their experiences on whether their personal values affect the way they feel in the workplace. Narrators highlighted all the

following elements during the narrative interviews: the link between personal values and the way they are inspired, the level and source of their Spirituality, the source of their morals, and ethics, which make them feel comfortable and happy, and the relation between personal values and their souls. Personal values have been considered by participants to be a source of energy which drives and satisfies their spiritual needs.

The author argues that the issue of values needs to be well read and addressed in order to acquire concrete knowledge and awareness that allows one to build theoretical and conceptual frameworks for research. Therefore, it is hoped that the people's

personal values model proposed by the author will help researchers, and scholars in this field to advance from the existing data and literature regarding the phenomenon of values. The people's personal values model was designed to be available for those who are interested in increasing their understanding of how values are perceived, and what their actual roles are. Moreover, for ease of use, the author placed all the findings from the collected data and the literature of the study of values in one place. This should enhance the development of an emerging agenda within the phenomenon of values.

The Role of people's Personal Values Model

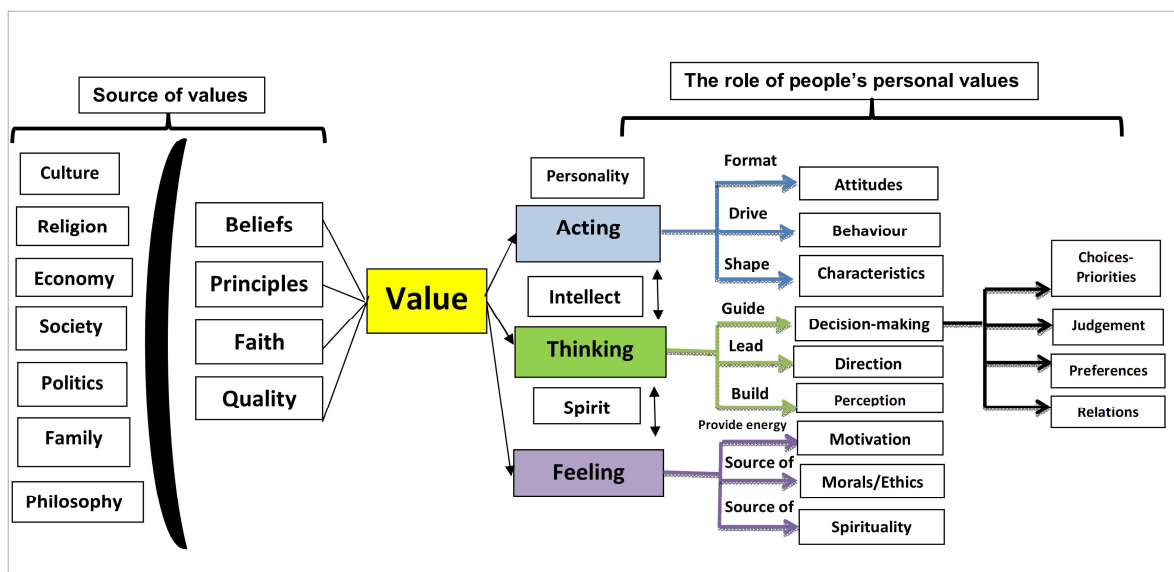


Fig 1: Source: Designed by the author based on the literature and the data collected from narrative interviews.

IV. FINDINGS/RESULTS

Findings revealed that participants placed high importance on their personal values in their workplace. The results found that there are robust links between people's personal values and the way they think, feel, and act. Narrators expressed their thoughts and feelings in an effective and positive way while they were telling stories regarding their personal values.

The results revealed that there is a gap or mismatch between how people perceive their personal values and what their actual roles are. This has been witnessed when participants were asked to define the term 'values' and most defined their personal values as morals, ethics, and virtues that every individual has or holds and acts on accordingly. Despite these definitions of their personal values, it was not clearly evidenced from the participant's stories that there was any direct expression which shows that they become more ethical or hold better morals or virtues by practicing their personal values. In spite of that, on a few occasions it was evidenced that there are indirect ethical or moral implications - these were mentioned by the participants during the narrative interviews. In

addition, religious values were evidenced as the highest values held by the participants when they were telling the stories of how they think, feel, and act in the workplace. This might justify why people firmly linked their personal values with morals and ethics when they defined them.

Findings also showed that personal values can be vital if they are encouraged and inspired by others. Participants stated several times how they were more aware of their personal values when they were reminded of these by the people around them. This has been evidenced in different stories and in different organisations. These results can be useful for those who have interests in doing training in the issue of values.

In addition, there was evidence from the narratives that people's personal values do play a significant role in inspiring, driving, and guiding people in the workplace. Moreover, the results showed that personal values are believed to deter people from doing anything against these personal values. In fact, participants emphasised how their personal values make them feel, and think that they do not want to do or work on something against their principles or own values. Participants repeated on more than one

occasion that their personal values have been the deterrent to not think, behave, or act in a way which they described as “unethical or not good”.

CONCLUSION

This empirical research on the issue of personal values at the workplace shed light on the importance of people’s personal values and their considerable roles in the ways they think, feel, and act in the workplace. The study used narrative inquiry, which was found to be an effective way to construct meaning from the participants’ stories and experiences; therefore the author encourages the researchers and scholars in the field of values to use narrative inquiry as a useful method in searching such a complicated issue such as values. For the ease of use, it is hoped that the people’s personal values model proposed by the author will help those who have interest in doing research on the phenomena of values, and enable them to acquire a clearer picture of how our personal values influence the way we think, feel, and act. Indeed, this study can be considered one of the few qualitative exploratory research endeavours, which adopts the narrative inquiry approach in order to construct meanings of how personal values are perceived, and defined, and, in addition, what their actual roles in the workplace are.

Finally, the author encourages the researchers and scholars in the phenomenon of values to have a closer look at how people’s personal values drive, inspire, and guide people in the workplace. This area calls for more in-depth research, and it can be linked with different fields and various factors in organisational studies such as leadership, management, and motivation. Hence, the door is open for more studies to serve the investigation and exploration of the study of values in the development of an emerging agenda within the phenomenon of values.

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