Why society needs a more scientific understanding of human values

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

When we talk about "human values" we tend to mean important abstract ideals. Things like freedom, equality, security, tradition and peace.

Politicians mention values all the time, while all kinds of organisations claim to put "key values" at the heart of whatever business they are in.

This makes perfect sense, as values *are* relevant to everything we do. They help us to choose careers, romantic partners, homes, consumer products and the broader ideologies by which we live.

But public debate often focuses on perceived threats to different values – while rarely recognising the problem of really understanding the values themselves.

What does it mean, for example, for terrorism to threaten the value of "freedom", but for national defence measures to promote the value of "security"? What does it mean for war to threaten "peace", but promote "democracy"? What does it mean for Arctic oil exploration to threaten the "environment", but promote "wealth".

All of these values are familiar. But they are symbolic placeholders for more concrete ideas and assumptions, which people are often unable or unwilling to articulate.

Another complication comes from people interpreting values in different ways. We can never know precisely what people mean by different values they say they hold. For instance, we might agree with a friend that "equality" is very important, but we may have different ideas about what equality means in real life situations.

We may be imagining the same ideal at an abstract level (equality of opportunity as opposed to outcomes, for example), but our interpretation of the ideal's application will vary.

Consider the recent firestorm over the prevalence of sexual harassment in Hollywood (and society generally). Some people see the allegations against people like Harvey Weinstein as indicative of widespread gender inequality. Others see them as claims of an individual's predatory behaviour. The first interpretation focuses on equality, whereas the

second focuses on individual misconduct.

Because values are a [difficult thing to study](#) – you can't look at them under a microscope – my research takes an empirical approach to addressing this issue, looking instead at what people actually think and do. In this way we can infer the presence of values from people's judgements and behaviours.

One important factor that determines whether people act on their values is whether they have recently been thinking about them. Someone who has spent time thinking about protection of the environment is more likely to recycle a waste sheet of paper than someone who has been [preoccupied with saving money](#).

The time spent thinking about protection of the environment acts as a reminder that this value is important, which makes people mindful of it during their next opportunity to act accordingly.

Being aware of a value is not enough, however. A person also has to decide that the value fits the situation. In wealthy industrialised nations, recycling is a common example of pro-environmental behaviour. But other actions are at least as good for the environment, yet not often thought about.

A valuable vision

For example, we can help the environment substantially through avoiding air travel and through veganism. But these are not things that spring to mind when people are asked to list [environmentally friendly behaviors](#).

This matters because a great deal depends on the concrete examples we use for values. In our research, we refer to the concrete examples as

"value instantiations". People are more likely to exhibit a value in their judgements of a situation and in their behaviour if they have recently been thinking of common, typical concrete examples of a value rather than of rare, but equally valid ones.

Common examples "fit" a particular value more obviously and specifically, and can act as stronger reminders of the value than rare examples. As we have seen, recycling is an easy and obvious fit for protecting the environment, whereas becoming a vegan might be thought of as a more obvious fit for other values, such as health or the treatment of animals. Its role in environmentalism gets blurred.

This kind of blurring comes from a disconnect between the abstract meaning of values and the varied ways in which people apply them. In working to tackle environmental and social problems, we overlook the links between values and value instantiations at our own peril.

Improving our understanding of the links will help us to better understand the role of values in our psychology and social lives – and where they fit into human character, morality, and culture.

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