

Unitarian Values are Universal. Spread the Word!

I know there are fewer and fewer mysteries in the world as scientists learn more about the universe, but there are a few in Aotearoa New Zealand that have baffled me until very recently.

Two national elections ago, polls said Kiwis overwhelmingly opposed selling state owned enterprises. They thought public housing and transport should remain publicly owned. They believed potential monopolies like power companies should belong to the nation. They were all built with our taxes. We paid those taxes because we believed it was for the common good. Then inexplicably they voted overwhelmingly for a political party that made no bones about their intention to sell those assets if elected. When they followed through on that promise in spite of protests, they paid no political price. I was mystified.

Advance three years. Awareness of growing income and wealth inequality had gone mainstream thanks to the #Occupy movement. Kiwis were overwhelmingly appalled by child poverty figures. But they then, once again, voted for the party whose policies promoted inequality and led to the consequence of one-third of our children condemned to live in poverty and with few opportunities to escape it. “Fair go” has long been a Kiwi value, but it was conveniently forgotten at the ballot box. Why?

Another two years later to today, a significant majority of New Zealanders oppose the TPPA and yet the government and multinationals are eager to implement it. Child poverty has become normalised. Housing costs have gone through the roof thanks to government indifference, ideology and the policies they have implemented. And yet, that government still remains strong enough in the polls that if the next election were held today they would remain in power. I am flummoxed. Or at least, I was until recently.

A couple of weeks ago I had an opportunity to represent the Living Wage Movement at a New Zealand Council of Trade Unions’ conference for labour organisers. I wasn’t sure how much of the programme would be all that pertinent to me, but at least I’d get to see Rachel, the CTU’s vice president, in action and spend sometime with her over those three days.

It turns out unions and Unitarians have a lot in common. They both want a more just world. They both care deeply about the powerless and marginalised and are committed to changing the oppressive societal structures that keep them at the bottom of the heap. They both are committed to democratic ideals and the importance of community. They both believe in upholding the common good. And they both know it begins with building relationships and making alliances with others who share at least some of their ideals to achieve common goals.

So, it turns out that there were a number of keynote speakers and workshops that I found helpful and insightful. One in particular I found especially enlightening and helpful in explaining the mysterious incongruence between Kiwis’ values and how they vote. It was by Mark Chenery, co-founder of Common Cause Australia, a non-profit that aims to strengthen values important to both unions and Unitarians.

Understanding some of what he had to share about values and their impact on our behaviour is helpful as we seek to fulfil our mission to transform New Zealand into a more just, compassionate and sustainable country.

Common Cause begins with this question: How do we go about finding solutions to the most important problems facing us--widespread and persistent poverty, climate change, isolation and loneliness, human rights abuses, inequality, biodiversity loss?

The power of protest and popular struggles has been proven effective time and again, in countering vested interests, and in bringing about new political and social structures. But what are the values that either promote or inhibit these movements? What values help create today's social norms and institutions, and what, in turn, shapes these values?

To begin to answer these questions we need to understand the importance of our values. Not surprisingly, a wide range of influences affects our actions and thoughts. Past experience, cultural and social norms, and the money at our disposal are some of the most important. Connected to all of these, to some extent, are our values—which represent a strong guiding force, shaping our attitudes and behaviour over the course of our lives. Our values have been shown to influence our political persuasions; our willingness to participate in political action; our career choices; our ecological footprints; the amount of resources we use, and for what purpose; and our feelings of personal wellbeing.

Social and environmental concern and action, it turns out, are based on more than simply access to the facts. Giving the facts won't win the argument or change behaviour. It is our values that motivate us to change.

Following decades of research and hundreds of cross-cultural studies, psychologists have identified a number of consistently occurring human values. After testing this many times and across many countries and cultures, they have identified 59 repeatedly occurring values.

(Appendix 1)

Rather than occurring randomly, these values are related to each other. Some are unlikely to be prioritised strongly at the same time by the same individual; others are often prioritised strongly at the same time. The researchers mapped this relationship according to these associations. The closer any one value is to another, the more likely both will be of similar importance to the same person. By contrast, the further a value is from another, the less likely both will be seen as similarly important. This does not mean that people will not value both cleanliness and freedom, for example—rather, they will in general tend to prioritise one over the other. Values can thus be said to have neighbours and opposites. Based on these patterns of association—as well as their broad similarities—they were then classified into ten groups of values:

Universalism, which includes valuing understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature;

Benevolence, which includes valuing preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact;

Tradition, which includes valuing respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide the self;

Conformity, which includes valuing restraint of action, inclinations and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms;

Security, which includes valuing safety, harmony and stability of society, of relationships and of self;

Power, which includes valuing social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources;

Achievement, which includes valuing personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards;

Hedonism, which includes valuing pleasure and sensual gratification for oneself;

Stimulation, which includes valuing excitement, novelty and challenge in life, and self-determination, which includes valuing independent thought and action—choosing, creating and exploring.

The ten groups of values can then be divided along two major axes, as seen in Appendix 2: *Self-enhancement* (based on the pursuit of personal status and success) as opposed to *self-transcendence* (concerned with the wellbeing of others) and *openness to change* (centred on independence and readiness for change) as opposed to *conservation* values (not referring to environmental or nature conservation, but to ‘order, self-restriction, preservation of the past and resistance to change’).

Much of the on going research on values simply supports some common-sense, intuitive ideas. Some values or motivations are likely to be associated and others less so. When we are most concerned for others’ welfare, we are not likely to be strongly interested in our own status or financial success (and vice versa). When we are at our most hedonistic or thrill seeking, we are unlikely simultaneously to be strongly motivated by respect for tradition.

Values have some important features that need to be understood.

Values are universal. Values are not character types. All of these values motivate each of us, but to differing degrees.

Values can be temporarily ‘engaged,’ when brought to mind by certain communications or experiences—and this tends to affect our attitudes and behaviours. When reminded of benevolence values, for instance, we are more likely to respond positively to requests for help or donations. Our values not only change at different points in our lives, but also day-to-day.

Values that appear next to each other on the second hand out are more likely to be prioritised to the same extent by a person. Moreover, when one value is temporarily engaged, it tends to ‘bleed over,’ strengthening neighbouring values and associated behaviours. This relationship can produce some surprising results. People reminded of generosity, self-direction and family, for example, have been found to be more likely to support pro-environmental policies than those reminded of financial success and status—without any mention of the environment being made.

Whereas neighbouring values are compatible, values on opposite sides of the second hand out are rarely held strongly by the same person. When one value is temporarily engaged, opposing values and behaviours associated with them tend to be suppressed. As with a see-saw, when one value rises, the other tends to fall. For instance, people

asked to sort words related to achievement values (such as ‘ambition’ and ‘success’) from other words were less likely to volunteer their time to help a researcher (a behaviour associated with benevolence values).

Values aren’t characteristics. Pleasurable activities are not necessarily motivated by hedonism (you can experience pleasure while pursuing any of your values). A powerful social movement may be motivated more by social justice and equality (universalism values) than by power. There is even some evidence that artists motivated by their work—rather than by fame, rewards, or a desire to ‘prove themselves’—ultimately tend to be the most successful. In this and similar cases, achievement as a motivation can hinder achievement as an outcome.

It’s also important to be clear about the definitions of each of these values. Desiring ‘achievement’ in the sense of ‘personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards,’ for instance, is quite different from a desire to ‘achieve’ advances for equality, world peace or environmental protection (all universalism values).

Common Cause sees some of these ten groups of values as extrinsic and others as intrinsic. Extrinsic values are centred on external approval or rewards; intrinsic values on more inherently rewarding pursuits. Intrinsic value groups are universalism, benevolence and self-direction. All of the rest are extrinsic.

Unitarian values are all intrinsic and the ones we promote. Why?

Prioritising intrinsic values such as freedom, creativity and self-respect (self-direction values), or equality and unity with nature (universalism values) is closely related to political engagement, concern about social justice, environmentally friendly behaviours, and lower levels of prejudice. In contrast, placing more importance on extrinsic values is generally associated with higher levels of prejudice; less concern about the environment; weak or absent concern about human rights; more manipulative behaviour and less helpfulness.

What motivates us also seems to affect our levels of wellbeing. Extrinsic values—such as wealth, or preservation of public image—tend to undermine our levels of personal wellbeing. In general, the esteem of others or pursuit of material goods seem to be unreliable sources of satisfaction in life. Other, more inherently rewarding pursuits—such as those found in intrinsic motivations and self-direction values—seem to provide a firmer foundation.

It is common to see people segmented into distinct groups or dichotomies (right/left, for/against, good/bad). The evidence, however, suggests that people are far more complex than this and are unlikely to subscribe purely to one set of values or another. Rather, everyone holds all of the values, and goals, but places more importance on some than others. Each of the values will therefore have an impact on any individual’s behaviour and attitudes at different times.

People who hold tradition values strongly are more likely to observe national holidays and customs. Stronger achievement values are associated with stress-related behaviours (such as taking on too many commitments); stronger hedonism values with over-eating.

It is clear, however, that values are not the sole determinant of our behaviour: in fact,

our actions can at times be fairly divergent from our dominant values. The failure of witnesses to intervene in emergencies— such as an act of violence or an accident—is one example. Equally, though we may hold pro-environmental and pro-social values, we might not always act in ways that would protect either people or the environment (we might not always buy organic or fairtrade produce, for example). A highly intrinsically oriented person may also be motivated at times by extrinsic rewards such as personal recognition.

What explains this gap between values and behaviour? For a value to guide a behaviour or attitude, we must see that value as relevant. We may believe in equality for women, for example, but fail to recognise this value as relevant in our responses towards other groups.

A value must not be in competition with another value that is more strongly held.

Context and social norms are also important. We are far more likely to act in certain ways if those around us are doing the same, or if it is the “expected” behaviour.

Our level of control also matters. There are times when we are powerless to help another person or find that we have to overcome enormous obstacles in order to make the right choices. If our council does not provide facilities for recycling, a decent transport service, or safe roads for cycling, then these green behaviours will be difficult to sustain. Clearly, then, various aspects of our society may constrain people from expressing the intrinsic values they hold.

Education, the media, and social pressures are likely to influence the kinds of values seen as relevant to particular situations—and the normalisation of consumer culture will shape social norms and expected behaviours. Equally, large levels of personal debt will significantly constrain people’s scope for action.

While each of us holds and is influenced by all 59 values, we differ in how strongly we hold each of them. This in turn is related to how our values have been shaped throughout our lives. Over time, repeated engagement of values is likely to strengthen them. Our lives therefore provide continual opportunities for—and constraints on—the pursuit and growth of certain values. In addition, experiences themselves are not value-free. A classroom in which the setting is open and accepting of different viewpoints, students are treated as equals, and independence is encouraged may reinforce intrinsic values. In contrast, one that prioritises unquestioning respect for the teacher’s authority and is heavy on penalties is likely to engage security, tradition and conformity values.

Our experience of various aspects of our society will help strengthen particular values. Community centres and churches, trade unions, libraries, local sports clubs— institutions that we share and recognise as promoting the common good—may increase the importance we place on equality, social justice, or friendship. Forests and parks may promote appreciation for nature and other intrinsic values. Extrinsic and security motivations may be strengthened through competitive work environments; advertising appealing to status; the focus of the media on perceived enemies and national security; and the portrayal of financial success as ‘achievement’ as reflected in rich lists, GDP as the primary indicator of a nation’s success, celebrity and fashion culture.

Our experience of particular institutions and policies (themselves shaped in part by

societal values) can change or reinforce our perceptions of “what is possible, desirable and normal.” Anti-discrimination laws, the right to roam, free museums and superannuation may provide opportunities or constraints that promote intrinsic values.

A great deal of commercial advertising and marketing appears to impact upon societal values by promoting materialism and stimulating the desire for security, conformity or self-enhancement.

Communications, policies and institutions that embody particular values are likely to have the effect of cultivating those values (and discouraging opposing values) and associated behaviours over time. By playing on people’s concern for status and wealth, therefore, we may encourage less environmentally conscious behaviour and lower concern about other people.

What is important to remember is that societal values change. Large-scale, widespread changes in values have been observed across the world at different times, and attributed to different factors. One of many examples is what happened in Britain in the 1940s that allowed for the creation of a welfare state. Britons’ values shifted as a result of the equalising effects of the Second World War—rationing, conscription, the abolition of first class carriages on trains, evacuation, sharing bomb shelters—as well as the subsequent faith in the state’s role in the provision of services and a shared ambition to re-build the post-war world.

Values influence institutions and norms, and vice versa. Therefore, the values we appeal to, the outlets we provide for the expression of different values, and the policies we help bring into being will reinforce certain kinds of values, with important effects on people’s attitudes and behaviours.

It may surprise you to know that by a large margin most Kiwis prioritise intrinsic values. Based on that reality, the present party in power should never have been elected. The problem for us who promote intrinsic values is that our opposition is better at triggering extrinsic values that, according to the seesaw effect, diminish the strength of intrinsic values. They play to our economic and security concerns which overwhelm our fair go values, even amongst those who suffer most in our society, many of whom either did not vote or voted against their own self-interests.

If we are going to influence society’s institutions and norms to be more intrinsic we need to do several things. We must be aware of the values that institutions and policies trigger in us, even those we support. We must communicate and endorse intrinsic values to our family, friends, and neighbours; in our schools, clubs, and workplaces. We have to keep in mind the big picture, our desire to create systemic change for a more just, compassionate and sustainable world. Lastly, we need to recognise we can’t do it alone. We aren’t the only ones that see that intrinsic values need to come to the forefront. We need to cooperate and collaborate with other faith groups, unions, NGOs, environmental groups and political organisations that seek our goals. Because diverse issues are linked by the values that underpin them, we will be continually supporting each other through our efforts.

Let it be so that our Unitarian values, which are fundamentally Kiwi values, may flourish.



