

THE STUDENTS' VALUE-BASED CHOICES AND ATTITUDES - A SUPPORT FOR THEIR SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT?

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Abstract

In social sciences, values are used to define individuals, smaller or larger groups and societies. Values directly hint at what we are and they determine our action.

The first part of the paper defines the basic concepts we use in the paper. There is a brief presentation of the polemics regarding the definition of values, norms and attitudes, as well as of the outcome of the research work carried out for identifying the young people's value-based choices in the present Romanian society.

In the second part of the paper we analyze the main data resulted from the social inquiry that we pursued on the basis of the survey that we applied and of the focus-group that we considered. The survey was meant to draw up a hierarchy of the students' values, see "the 21 values list". The focus-group had the role of debating certain preliminary outcomes of the research, and later on, of indicating analysis directions for interpreting the collected data.

The present study is the first stage of a larger research work that aims at identifying the extent to which students are oriented towards values which support social and professional success in the present Romanian society.

Keywords: *values, attitudes, Romanian students, professional involvement.*

Study regarding the attitudes and value-based choices that support the Romanian students' social and professional involvement

In social sciences, values are used to characterize individuals, smaller or larger groups and societies. They directly hint at what we are and they also guide our actions.

The study with the above mentioned title consisted in a social inquiry based on a survey, interpreted by focus-groups students who were meant to bring more depth in analyzing the collected data. One of the methodological elements and maybe the most important one, which gives distinctiveness to this study, is that the students could differentiate between the "appreciated" behavior patterns and the ones that bring "success" in society.

Referring to the polarized axes of the value orientations (Sh. S. Schwartz), and using the results of our research work, we have noticed that the young people's choices reflect, both extensively and intensively, two directions. On one hand, students are especially inclined towards "altruism", manifesting the tendency towards overcoming the limits of individualism by valuing other people and the world in general (friendship, mutual help, civic spirit, care for the environment, love and harmony). On the other hand, we have recorded indicators that describe the young people's availability or openness to change (freedom, independence, interest, mobility, involvement), which are also highly valued.

1. Introduction

1.1. VALUES, NORMS, ATTITUDES

When we refer to values, we think of what is important in our life. A certain value may be important to a person and, at the same time, unimportant to another one. Thus, in social sciences, values are used to define individuals, smaller or larger groups and societies. Values directly hint at what we are and determine "the selection of the ways, means and aims that are specific to an action." (Kluckhohn).

Ever since 1993 studies have been made in Romania which were meant to identify the population's value-based choices. First of all, we would like to refer to the studies pursued by Malina and Bogdan Voicu and by Ipsos Research and Școala de Valori [The School of Values].

The studied quoted in the below footnotes, as many other ones, refer to the polemics generated by the analysis of the following concepts: value, value-based orientation and attitude. One of the causes is represented by the different meanings given to the notion of value in social sciences. In aesthetics and philosophy, the concept of value has a normative connotation; thus, values are criteria according to which one distinguishes between good and bad, ugly and beautiful (Ester, Halman, de Moor, 1994). The normative connotation is also preserved when the term "value" is used in everyday language. The

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concept of “value” makes us think of criteria that help us find a direction and of borders between what is socially allowed or desirable and what is not.

One of the most used definitions in sociology is the one given by Kluckhohn, according to whom value is an explicit or implicit concept, which is distinctive to each individual or group and which reflects what is desirable to be done, thus influencing the selection of means and goals in action.

According to Schwartz, values are beliefs that are indissolubly linked to one's feelings and that reflect what one aims to do. Values go beyond actions and specific situations and, thus, they are different from norms and attitudes.

Values determine the manner in which we select and assess actions, tactics, people and events. People decide what is good and what is right, what is legal and illegal, what is worth being done or what should be avoided while relying on the consequences generated by the values that they praise. Values are organized according to their importance, which is different for every individual. People's values are an ordered system of priorities that characterize themselves as individuals. Do people consider more important their own personal achievements or justice? Do they value more the new or tradition? The hierarchical nature of values distinguishes them from norms and attitudes.

The present study differentiates values and attitudes from a conceptual point of view. Thus, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) define attitude as a learned predisposition to answer as regards a certain object in a consistent, favorable or unfavorable manner. Although attitudes are elements that are subordinated to values within the personality system, a certain attitude is not necessarily linked to a certain value (Rokeach, 1973). For example, a favorable attitude towards gypsies can be linked to the concept of equality or to the feeling of mercy. However, there is a logical relationship between certain values and attitudes because the values from a certain domain are directly linked to the attitudes and behaviors included in that sphere. For example, democratic values explain civic behavior in the best way.

This link between attitudes and values has an increasing importance because values can be conceptualized separately but they cannot be studied separately. Actually, values represent a “latent form of reality”, which lies behind the directly noticeable deeds and which cannot be studied outside direct attitudes or behaviors (Malina and Bogdan Voicu, 2007).

The system of values impregnates the culture of any society. It gives sense to human action and it legitimates norms. Values have an abstract nature, while norms have a concrete nature. One and the same value (politeness) can be expressed through a whole set of norms (such as: handshake, granting priority, etc.).

Norms, alongside with values and closely linked to values, are important elements our society's culture. Human behavior is structured according to a set of rules and conduct norms that prescribe a behavior which is adequately adapted to certain situations. In their turn, attitudes and behaviors typically have implications over values. For example, going to the church could signify the promotion of tradition and conformity to the detriment of hedonism and stimulative values.

1.2. Perspectives on the present perspectives regarding the Romanian young people's value-based choices

Sorin Mitulescu's and Marius Lazar's studies bring into evidence the existence of significantly different value-based choices from one region to another. Thus, it has been found that in Bucharest-Ilfov region and in the western part of the country young people's values are predominantly modern; importance is given to the entourage, friends and the use of spare time. On the other hand, less importance is given to religion, work or family. In the South-East region, value-based choices have a certainly modern dimension but rather by rejecting religion, work and family and their importance, and less by valuing friends and free time.

In Muntenia, the above-quoted authors, value-based choices are rather anti-modern than traditional. The research work pursued by C. Craitoiu takes as a starting point one of the conclusions drawn by Ronald Inglehart and the post-materialist theory, i.e. the “hypothesis of rareness”. According to this theory, the importance that people give to things depends on their social and economic background. Moreover, people tend to grant precedence in their choices to things that are rare (i.e. hard to be obtained). Individuals try to achieve certain goals in a hierarchical order. Even if people can aim at achieving freedom and autonomy, material needs – such as hunger, thirst and physical security – must be satisfied first because they are very pressing and they refer to survival. Inglehart considers that if these primary needs are hard to satisfy, their rareness being predominant, it results that materialist goals will have priority in comparison with post-materialist goals, like belonging to a group, respect, fasting and intellectual satisfaction. However, once survival needs are ensured, attention will be focused on non-material goods.

Considering the economic difficulties that have constantly affected Romanian society, Crăițoiu Constantin presumes that basic needs are pressing for Romanians, while survival-based values are dominant.

“The position that Romania occupies on the cultural map of the world illustrates the opposition of survival-based values and the expression of one's own self; thus, Romania is one of the countries in the

world that appreciate family/security and work-based values to a great extent.

The main value-based choices of Romanians – according to Crăițoiu Constantin – reveal the traditional dimension of Romanian culture. These choices are different from post-modern values that are characteristic to most Western countries. In the hierarchy of the Romanians' values we find: family, work, religion, friendship, free time and politics; what individualizes us at European level is the fact that the religious nature and the process of religious revitalization represent some of the most important values on the continent.”

Contents: are value-based choices and the attitudes of Bucharest students helpful in their social and professional involvement? (empirical research)

2.1. Research theory and method

The research aimed at identifying the students' value-based choices and attitudes, as well as the evaluation of the supportive/non-supportive consequences generated by these values in the students' involvement in the social and professional environment. The research theory and method were applied on a group of 361 students from Bucharest, as well as other 140 students who took part in the focus-groups organized for debating the preliminary outcomes of the research and for a deeper analysis of the collected answers. Within the focus-groups, students tried to argue their choices (answers). The focus-groups were constituted of students from “Nicolae Titulescu” University of Bucharest.

All the four surveys applied in the present study are original: *survey for comparing pairs of values*, *survey for the hierarchy of values*, *short survey for generic values*, *survey for the value-based criteria in the choice of a friend*. One and maybe the most important methodological element, which particularizes this study, is the fact that students could differentiate the “appreciated behavior” patterns and the “social success” patterns. To achieve this goal, subjects were asked to compare and evaluate series of intuitive behavior models (values can be recognized in their own manifestation through attitudes and behavior and also directly).

The theoretical background used for the research instruments and the interpretation of the collected data – which were more extensively used for the first survey – were the paradigms of the theoretical model created by Shalom Schwartz. We have embraced the model of the Israeli psychosociologist because we have appreciated that it is proper and applicable for this study, i.e. because it reveals opposite or converging value-based choices, which might be linked to the entrepreneurial spirit

and the dynamic of values considered to be “values of success”.

Given the complexity of the study, the present paper will make reference and analyze the data collected after applying *the survey for the hierarchy of values*; as regards the analysis of the other data, we are going to publish them in our next scientific study. The above mentioned survey comes up with a list of 21 value-loaded words. The subjects were asked to put in order the items in the list, according to their importance, from 1 (the most important) to 21 (the least important). What is it really important, what does it mostly matter to them?

2.2. THE ANALYSIS OF THE STUDENTS' ANSWERS TO SURVEY No. II :

“Survey for the hierarchy of values (list 1 – 21)”

The importance of business to students

After the statistical processing of the answers given by the interviewed subjects, in conformity with the above graphics, “**business**” occupies an average-peripheral position in the “21 list” comprising the hierarchy of values. In most cases, business occupies the 10-15 positions; the highest position, for boys, is 8 (9.52%), while the highest position for both genders is 13 (8.54%). The outcomes obtained within focus-groups could be explained as follows:

- “Young people are not very much inclined towards assuming risks.”
- “It is preferable to be healthy and live comfortably than having a stressful job.”
- “Young people would rather specialize themselves in a domain and receive a salary instead of developing a business”.
- “In order to have a business, you need experience and you need to know that area of activity well; therefore, what you need first is work in a company/firm.”

The importance of the computer to students

“**The computer**” represents the biggest surprise. As value significance, in “list 21”, “the computer” is valued to a low extent”: about 35% of the students place it on the last position in the list: 16-21; the highest position is 20 (11,7%), without notable differences between genders.

The main explanations given by the focus-groups are the following ones:

“The computer creates the illusion of communication. Actually, the excessive usage of the computer generates difficult interpersonal relationships and it leads to isolation and loneliness”.

“We have unlimited access to the computer and we cannot appreciate it to its fair value; it has become an ordinary thing in our lives”.

“The phone is more used than the computer, it is more practical and it accompanies you everywhere!”

The importance of competence to students (according to their gender)

“**Competence**” is an important value in the young people's choices. Over 50% of their answers place competence on 6-10 positions, the highest percentage being 17.14% for boys, i.e. position 10. For girls, the highest positions are 9 and 10, which represents about 25% of all given answers.

Focus-groups have revealed why this value is so important to young people:

- “Professional competence gives you material, financial and psychological safety.”
- “Competence is necessary for achieving professional goals and your career.”
- “Competence brings respect for your own person, more self-respect and the appreciation of your peers”.

The importance of culture to young people

To the interviewed subjects, “**culture** is also an important value; over 44% place it on positions 6-10 and 26% on positions 1-5. The highest position is 6 (12.03%).

According to focus-groups, culture is appreciated by young people because:

- “It facilitates inter-human relationships, it helps to build a rich vocabulary, it is a source of subjects for dialogue and for interrelations with the others.”
- “Culture helps you feel well when you interrelate with your peers.”
- “When we have a general culture, we are more interested in the others, we can tackle different subjects and we can socialize more easily.”
- “Culture gives us the necessary knowledge that we need for our personal development.”

To the interviewed subjects, “**culture**” is also important since more than 44% place it on positions 6-10 and 26% of them on positions 1-5. The highest rank is 6 (12.03%).

The importance of entertainment to students

“**Entertainment**” is a central value to young people; about 38% of them place it on positions 6-10, the highest position being 8 (10.79%). A significant percentage, above 21 % of the students place it on positions 15-21. They argue their choice stating that:

- “You need money to entertain yourself. Entertainment is not a priority”.
- “Nowadays, we strive to survive, there is not too much time for entertainment.”

The importance of love to students

Of all presented graphics, it is obvious that “**love**” occupies a central position since it is placed on the first three positions in the hierarchy (i.e., 60% as a whole). “**Love**” occupies the highest position of the first 3 ones, respectively 23.25% of the whole recorded percentages. There are no significant differences depending on gender. The value granted

to love, according to the focus-group, is explained as follows:

- “Love gives you the courage to go on and it gives you a feeling of safety.”
- “We need love to compensate all shortcomings and the inherent discontents of life.”
- “We feel indulged by the ones who love us.”
- “It brings you peace and harmony.” “It offers you a feeling of fulfillment.”

The importance of family to students

“**Family**” is the most appreciated of all values by students. It occupies the 1st position in the top of their choices (47.7% - total, 43.3% - for boys, 50% - for girls) and it records the highest percentage of all positions (27.4%).

Positions 1-3 represent about 82% of all the students' choices.

According to the focus-group, family is ranked the first in the young people's lives because:

- “It offers safety, unconditioned love, psychological and material comfort.”
- “In our families we find the ones that brought us in this world and created us”.
- “The family supports you in anything you do, you can count on its help.”
- “The family gives stability in a person's life.”
- “In our families we find our own identity, and it is the first group identity that we get.”

The importance of nature to students

“**Nature**” is a central-peripheral value in the “list 21” of choices; 27% of the interrogated young people place it on 6-10 positions, about 32% of them on 11-15 positions, and 8.92% of them place it on position 10.

The focus group has explained this state of facts in the following way:

- “There is ecological culture in Romania”.
- “Students are too young to think of the future that they are going to leave behind them”.
- “The young people's tendency towards individualism places nature on an unimportant position to them. Young people are more concerned about their own well-being rather than the nature's well-being.”

- “Young people don't know the beauty of nature, the wonderful places that Romania has and that's why they don't value them”.

The importance of honesty to students

Honesty is a very important moral value in the choices made by students and it occupies the first positions in the hierarchy of values, especially positions 3-10; the maximum is located at position 6 (10,9%) of the total.

The high positions occupied by honesty are explained by the focus-group students as follows:

- “Honesty helps you get the respect and the appreciation of the other ones.”
- “In an honest world, you feel yourself safer.”

- "You are content with yourself if you are honest."

- "In life it is important to be honest not only with yourself, but also with the other ones."

- "Honesty is a missing value in Romania and this thing must be modified."

The importance of peace

"Even if we live in **peace**, this value is appreciated by students and it occupies positions comprised between 4-13 (this segment encompasses most of the students); the highest positions are: 5-7.

Most of the interviewed students of the focus-group consider that:

- "Peace is the mother of all values. Its absence endangers all values."

- "Peace is necessary in our life and for the harmony of our lives."

- "The more its vulnerability increases, the more important peace becomes."

The importance of the country

"**The country**" is a peripheral value; less than 6% of the young people place it on the first 5 places, more than 40% place the country on the last positions; the highest recorded percentage is 11.5%, for position 20.

The students in the focus-group have given the following explanations:

- "Young people do not feel themselves stimulated and supported; they do not find a reason to hope in their own country."

- "Patriotism is no longer promoted and broadcast in mass-media."

- "Globalization diminishes the patriotic feeling."

- "Disappointment with one's own country, i.e. with its leaders, the way in which Romania presents itself undermines the patriotic feeling."

- "People are no longer educated in a patriotic manner."

- "From an early age children are encouraged (by parents and school) to think of leaving Romania, going to schools and universities abroad and then work in a foreign country to be able to be a self-made person."

The importance of religion

"**Religion**" does not occupy any of the 10 positions in the hierarchy. About 70% of the young people place it on positions 10-21.

In the focus-group students' opinion, the low positions occupied by religion are mainly due to the following factors:

- "Religion has generated conflicts, wars."

- "Priests are often interested in money and are not models of spirituality."

- "Faith and religion are mistakenly taken to be one and the same thing with the church (the institution)."

- "Religion can be used to manipulate people."

- "Religion is an old practice and is no longer in trend."

- "Young people are disappointed because the church does not get involved enough in settling social problems; hence their distrust in the institution of the church."

- "The present social contexts seem to rather favor a person's materialist, money-oriented lifestyle than spiritual matters."

- "The trend is: ripping off the spiritual dimension of the world."

The importance of health

Health is a top value for young people and it occupies the 2nd position, after family. Positions 1-4 gather a percentage of 70%; the highest recorded percentage is 21.7% for the 2nd position in the hierarchy.

Students in the focus-group appreciate that:

- "Success in life and workforce depend on the degree of health that a person has."

- "In a society where there are many ill persons, we want to be healthy first of all."

- "You need health more than money; an illness costs you money to cure."

- "Fear of an illness, of physical or mental incapacity make you appreciate health so much the more."

The importance of sex

"**Sex**" is a relatively constant and less appreciated value, positions 5 – 20; the highest recorded percentage is for position 21, namely 10.83%. According to students, "sex" is not the most important value in "list 21". Boys place sex on the first 10 positions in the hierarchy, about 45% of them, while girls have the same perception in a lower percentage, about 30%.

The focus-group has given the following explanations:

- "Sex without love is simply a sport-like activity."

- "Sex is a taboo subject to some people."

- "There are many prejudices relating to sex and that's why it is uncomfortable for some people to discuss about this topic."

- "Sex is not unimportant, but there are other priorities in life."

The importance of science

"**Science**" records positions between 9-15, with a maximum for position 10 (9.87%).

Girls, with a higher percentage than boys, place science on the first 10 positions. For the 1-10 positions, 6.67% of the girls place science on position 4 and 9.52% on position 10.

The importance of stars

"**Stars**" (seen as a value) occupy position no. 1 in the top of rejections, about 50% of the interviewed students place them on the last position, 21.

The focus- group students give the following explanations:

- "In mass-media, not real values but rather non-values are promoted".
- "You cannot learn anything from a star because it doesn't inspire you anything."
- "Stars are regarded as valueless."
- "False stars have a negative influence, they put off and mislead young people."

The importance of the car

The importance that students grant to cars ("personal car") – it can seem surprising – is not high; thus, young people place cars on positions 14-20.

Students seem to regard cars as a luxury and not as a necessary object.

The focus-group students have come up with the following explanations:

- "Students have more important needs than a car."
- "The car is too expensive for most students for it requires money that students don't have."
- "Traffic is awful, you can better travel by using means of transport of by walking."

The importance of money

Money is an important value for young people (26.51% place money on 1-5 positions and about 56% of them place money on positions 1-10). Positions 3-4 have recorded interesting results expressed as a percentage.

The focus-group students commented on this outcome as follows:

- "Money satisfies the primary and stringent needs of the man."
- "Without money you cannot do anything."
- "We waste our youth trying to make money."
- "Money gives us power."

The importance of colleagues

"**Colleagues**" occupy a central-peripheral position in the hierarchy of the values grouped in list 1-21, with 50% of the answers being given for positions 11-16; the outcome is interpreted by the focus-group students in the following way:

- "Young people no longer have time to spend with their colleagues."
- "Individualism hinders the development of solid relationships with one's colleagues."
- "Relationships with colleagues are nurtured on Facebook."
- "The feeling that one is part of a community is not so strong any longer; family is an exception."
- "Students do not know each other sufficiently, their attendance in courses and seminars has dropped. Many students have to work to pay their tuition fees."
- "The young people's sociability has also become less stronger. Young people mainly try to fulfill their personal interests."

The importance of school

School is an important value for young people. About 58% of the students place it on positions 1-10; position 4 has gathered most of the answers, representing 11.2% of all the given answers.

The focus-group students have given the following explanations for this outcome:

- "School ensures your professional success."
- "School plays an important role in building and developing one's own personality and character."
- "School helps us communicate better and get to know persons who are the same age as we are and integrate into society."
- "School trains us for a profession, and gives us a certain level of general knowledge."
- "We can build a career thanks to school."

3. Conclusions

A first conclusion we can draw after applying the survey on the hierarchy of values, we are going to present a classification of the first three chosen values, i.e. the values that occupied positions 1 – 5 in "list 21". Thus, 60% - 80% of those interviewed choose family, health and love as the first three main values in the hierarchy of "list 21"; 31.22% of those interviewed place school, health and money on the first three positions in the hierarchy.

Classification	Value	Total	Males	Females
1	Family	47.77%	43.27%	50.00%
	Health	18.53%	17.31%	19.14%
	Love	13.38%	13.38%	13.81%
2	Family	27.39%	30.77%	25.71%
	Love	23.25%	22.12%	23.81%
	Health	21.73%	20.19%	22.49%
3	Love	23.57%	21.15%	24.76%
	Health	18.85%	13.46%	21.53%
	Family	7.01%	6.73%	7.14%
4	School	11.18%	11.54%	11.00%
	Health	10.54%	14.42%	8.61%
	Money	9.50%	7.69%	10.53%
5	Schoola	9.90%	10.58%	9.67%
	Peace	8.92%	10.58%	8.10%
	Honesty	8.65%	8.65%	8.65%

Besides this classification, the analysis of the whole set of collected data reveals that the most important values for young people are:

- family, love, health (the first three positions);
- school (58% place school on position 1-10, with a highest percentage on position 4);
- money (26.51% place money on positions 1-5 and about 56% on positions: 1-10);

- honesty occupies positions 3-10 with significantly high percentages;

- peace has recorded significant percentages especially for positions 4-13, while the highest percentages were recorded for positions 5-7;

- "competence" - over 50% place it on positions 6-10, whereas the highest percentage has been recorded for position 9-10;

- "entertainment" - occupies a relatively central position, about 38% of those interviewed place it on positions 6-10, while 62% of them place it on positions 11-21.

For the interviewed subjects, "nature", "business", "religion", "colleague relationships" are central-peripheral values in "list 21". Thus:

- "nature" (27% of them place it on positions 6-10, about 32% of them place it on positions 11-15), position 10.

- "business" (most of the students place it on positions 10-15; position 8 has recorded the highest score);

- "colleagues" (50% place colleague relationships on positions 11-16);

- "religion" is not one of the 10 values. About 70% of the young people place it on positions 10-21.

The values that occupy the lowest positions in the hierarchy of "list 21" are: stars, sex, country and the car.

"Sex" has recorded low and relatively low values, occupying positions 5-20; the highest percentage has been recorded by position 21 (10.83%).

"The country" is a peripheral value, less than 6% of the students place it on the first 5 positions, more than 40% of them place it on the last positions; the maximum percentage of 11.5% has been recorded by position 20.

"Stars" (as a value significance) occupy position 1 in the top of rejections; about 50% of the interviewed students place it on the last position, 21.

"The car (personal car)" – surprisingly – occupies a peripheral position: 14-20.

Although students regard the car as a luxury rather than necessary object, they appreciate that they have more stringent needs than owning a car, whose maintenance costs a lot of money for a student's budget; on the other hand, traffic in Bucharest is terrible and discouraging.

Gender-based differences recorded in the ranking of the values encompassed by "list 21" were insignificant for most of the items and this is the reason why they were not dealt with in the present research paper.

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