

# **most people agree on the healthy key values that they want to live by**

(This article was published as a blog post on 14.12.14 with hyperlinks to all articles mentioned)

*"Wisdom, compassion, and courage are the three universally recognized moral qualities of men."*  
Confucius

I've long been a fan of [Professor Tim Kasser's work](#). He published his fine first book ["The high price of materialism"](#) back in 2002 - see [this good 5 minute YouTube video](#) to get a sense of his message. Tim continues to contribute importantly to the research literature - for example his 2014 paper ["Changes in materialism, changes in psychological well-being: Evidence from three longitudinal studies and an intervention experiment"](#) with its abstract reading *"Few studies have examined how changes in materialism relate to changes in well-being; fewer have experimentally manipulated materialism to change well-being. Studies 1, 2, and 3 examined how changes in materialistic aspirations related to changes in well-being, using varying time frames (12 years, 2 years, and 6 months), samples (US young adults and Icelandic adults), and measures of materialism and well-being. Across all three studies, results supported the hypothesis that people's well-being improves as they place relatively less importance on materialistic goals and values, whereas orienting toward materialistic goals relatively more is associated with decreases in well-being over time. Study 2 additionally demonstrated that this association was mediated by changes in psychological need satisfaction. A fourth, experimental study showed that highly materialistic US adolescents who received an intervention that decreased materialism also experienced increases in self-esteem over the next several months, relative to a control group. Thus, well-being changes as people change their relative focus on materialistic goals."*

This research is highly relevant for individuals' health & well-being. As a doctor & psychotherapist working with individuals is my main focus. I'm interested though in how we can push to make urgently needed changes at organizational and national levels too. Climate change and other crises highlight the crucial importance of these wider issues. Tim, a professor of psychology, has a page on his website [simply headed "Activism"](#), where he writes *"Over the last several years I have worked especially closely with three activist groups whose goals overlap substantially with the ideas expressed in my scholarship. I'm on the board/steering committee of the [Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood](#) and the [Center for a New American Dream](#). I've also worked extensively with [the UK group Common Cause](#) to apply psychological research on values to increase the effectiveness of the campaigns and communications of civil society organizations."* I followed the link to ["Common Cause"](#) who write *"Common Cause is a network of people working to help rebalance cultural values to create a more equitable, sustainable and democratic society."* As they say *"What's not to like?!"* ... so I have subscribed to their helpful e-newsletter and last month went along to a workshop they were advertising on ["A whole-hearted approach to change."](#)

The workshop was excellent, fun, stimulating & motivating. It has nudged me once more to look at personal opportunities to volunteer; in my case in the area of how mental health is approached here in Scotland. But another bonus from the workshop was that it introduced me to the work of [Professor Shalom Schwartz](#). His career goes [way back to the 1960's](#) and has focused on *"Studies of the nature of basic human values and their role as determinants of attitudes and behavior and in the use of values to study cultural similarities and differences. Specific applications at the individual level in the areas of political attitudes and voting, gender, religion, ethnicity, prosocial behavior, and refining a theory of basic values. Specific applications at the cultural level in how cultural values relate to and reciprocally influence economic [Cont.]"*

*development, democratization, income and gender inequality, public policies and investment, managers' behavior and attitudes, international investment and trade.*" The "Whole-hearted approach to change" workshop presenters said something that I was quietly riveted by - the message was *"Don't feel you have to try instilling healthy altruistic values in people. There's a very strong chance that they already have these values. Our mission is more to encourage people to link to the positive pro-social values that they already believe in."* Being the "doubting Thomas" I am, I immediately asked for back-up to this challenging and rather wonderful statement - and I was directed to Shalom Schwartz's research.

So back in 2001, Schwartz & Bardi published ["Value hierarchies across cultures: Taking a similarities perspective"](#) in the Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, with its abstract reading *"Beyond the striking differences in the value priorities of groups is a surprisingly widespread consensus regarding the hierarchical order of values. Average value hierarchies of representative and near representative samples from 13 nations exhibit a similar pattern that replicates with school teachers in 56 nations and college students in 54 nations. Benevolence, self-direction, and universalism values are consistently most important; power, tradition, and stimulation values are least important; and security, conformity, achievement, and hedonism are in between. Value hierarchies of 83% of samples correlate at least .80 with this pan-cultural hierarchy."* In the 2011 publication ["The Structural Organization of Human Values-Evidence from Three Rounds of the European Social Survey \(ESS\)"](#) the research was extended to *"71 representative national samples from 32 countries"*. The 2012 paper ["An overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values. Online readings in psychology and culture"](#) (downloadable in free full text) comments in its abstract *"This article presents an overview of the Schwartz theory of basic human values. It discusses the nature of values and spells out the features that are common to all values and what distinguishes one value from another. The theory identifies ten basic personal values that are recognized across cultures and explains where they come from. At the heart of the theory is the idea that values form a circular structure that reflects the motivations each value expresses. This circular structure, that captures the conflicts and compatibility among the ten values, is apparently culturally universal. The article elucidates the psychological principles that give rise to it. Next, it presents the two major methods developed to measure the basic values, the Schwartz Value Survey and the Portrait Values Questionnaire. Findings from 82 countries, based on these and other methods, provide evidence for the validity of the theory across cultures. The findings reveal substantial differences in the value priorities of individuals. Surprisingly, however, the average value priorities of most societal groups exhibit a similar hierarchical order whose existence the article explains."* Fascinating! The 2014 paper ["A hierarchical structure of basic human values in a third-order confirmatory factor analysis"](#) gives a great up-to-date diagram of where Schwartz's model now stands and I use the [first two pages of this paper](#) as a useful introductory handout.

Yup ... it does look that, across the nations, most people probably do agree to a surprisingly large extent on the healthy, self-directing, altruistic values that they want to live by ... *"Benevolence, self-direction, and universalism values are consistently most important"*. This makes me smile and feel at least a little hope in these critical times for our species.

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