

## The Personal Values of University Students in South Africa

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### Abstract

*The failure of ethical standards amongst managers is one of the causes of fraud, corruption, corporate scandals and business failures. Values are a powerful force behind the behavioural responses of individuals. The objective of the study was to investigate the personal values of university students in South Africa. Universities have an important role to play in solving the ethical problems that currently affect the business environment. Data was collected through the use of self-administered questionnaire in a survey. The study used the Schwartz Portrait Value Questionnaire. The results indicated that achievement is the most significant value. The next four most important values are self-direction, benevolence, security and universalism. In addition, there is a relatively high score for conformity value. This suggests that students will behave properly and will avoid doing wrong things.*

**Keywords:** personal values, university, students, South Africa

### 1. Introduction

Bučar and Drnovšek (2004) remark that in today's uncertain business environment shaken by a myriad of corporate scandals there is the need to re-evaluate the role of business ethics in the entrepreneurial process. According to Polder (2011), nowadays, the need for proper ethical behaviour within organisations has become crucial to avoid possible lawsuits. The public scandals of corporate malfeasance and misleading practices, have affected the public perception of many organizations such as Enron, Arthur Andersen, WorldCom. Armstrong and Francis (2008) point out that many companies have collapsed in recent memory because of dubious accounting practices and a failure of ethical standards.

The Open Democracy Advice Centre (2013) submits that corruption and fraud cost South Africans in excess of R100-billion each year. The audit firm BDO report (2010) notes that South Africa boasts the world's second highest incidence of corporate fraud and corruption. Global Financial Integrity (2010) calculates that R185-billion of money has illegally left South African shores since 1994. Transparency International (2014) ranks South Africa in the 72nd position out of 175 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) with a score of 42 out of 100 in 2013. This suggests a high level of corruption in South Africa.

Baird and Zelin (2006) opine that many factors can affect an individual's ethical choices. Individuals' values drive them to act ethically or unethically in pursuit of their goals. Nonis and Swift (2001) note that values are a powerful force behind the behavioural responses of individuals. Lan et al. (2005) remark that way individuals behave is shaped by their personal values. The likelihood that individuals will behave unethically depends to some extent on the personal values motivating them to evaluate their actions. Personal values are at the core of an individual's personality and influence the individual's behaviour and characteristics such as attitude, evaluation, judgments, decisions, commitment, and satisfaction.

Ho et al. (2006) argue that universities have an important role to play in solving the ethical problems that currently pervade the business environment. University business students are likely to rise to positions where they will be involved in business decisions that have significant ethical aspects. University students are the business leaders and entrepreneurs of tomorrow. University students need to define their ethical stance as business persons of the future (Sedmak & Nastav, 2010). Therefore, it is significant to understand the personal values of university students. Understanding students' values is of significance to administrators, educators and businesses (Alleyne et al. 2013).

### 2. The Objectives of the Study

Ethical issues are very significant in South Africa. Personal values influence the behaviour and decision-making of individuals. The objective of the study is to investigate the personal values of university students in South Africa.

### 3. Literature Review

Rokeach (1973) describes human values as "core conceptions of the desirable within every individual and society". Schwartz (2012) points out that values are important for explaining social and personal organization and change. Values are significant in characterising cultural groups, societies, and individuals, tracing change over time and explaining the motivational bases of attitudes and behaviour. According to Schwartz (1992, 1994, 2006), values are "affect laden beliefs that refer to a person's desirable goals and guide the selection or evaluation of actions, policies, people and events and "desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serves as guiding principles in people's lives" Values express motivational goals.

The value theory by Schwartz (1992, 2006) specifies six main features of values. (1) Values are beliefs linked inextricably to affect; (2) Values refer to desirable goals that motivate action; (3) Values transcend specific actions and situations; (4) Values serve as standards or criteria; (5) Values are ordered by importance relative to one another; and (6) The relative importance of multiple values guides action. Schwartz (2012) remarks that these are the characteristics of all values. In addition, the value theory describes ten broad values based on the motivations that influence each one of them. These ten values are likely to be universal because they are grounded in one or more of three general requirements of human existence. These are (1) needs of individuals as biological beings (2) fundamentals of coordinated social interaction and (3) welfare and survival needs of groups. Each of the ten basic values can be characterised by describing its central motivational goal: (1) Self-direction: this is defined by independent thought and action. (2) Stimulation. Defined by excitement, novelty, and challenge in life (3) Hedonism: defined by pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself. (4) Achievement: defined by personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards. (5) Power: defined by social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources (6) Security: defined by safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of self. (7) Conformity: defined by restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms. (8) Tradition: defined by respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that one's culture or religion provides. (9) Benevolence: defined by preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact (10) Universalism: defined by understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature.

Lan et al. (2009) examine the personal values and value types of Chinese accounting practitioners and students. The study used the values survey questionnaire developed and validated by Schwartz (1992). 454 accounting practitioners and 126 graduate accounting students participated in the study. The results indicate that health, family security, self-respect, and honouring of parents and elders are the top four values for both accounting practitioners and accounting students. These values are not ranked in the same order by the two sets of respondents. In addition, social power, an exciting life, devout, and accepting my portion in life are the lowest rated four values for the accounting practitioners while devout, an exciting life, detachment, and accepting my portion in life form the bottom four values for the accounting students.

Alleyne et al. (2013) investigate the influence of personal values on students' ethical behaviours. The study examined the effect of gender and academic major on personal values and ethical behaviours of undergraduate students. The findings show that females have higher personal values and are more ethical than males. Non-accounting students have higher personal values but lower ethical behaviours than non-accounting students. Nonis and Swift (2001) examine the relationship between personal value profiles which is a combination of value decisions and ethical decision-making. The results show that value profiles impact on the likelihood of an individual making an unethical business decision. This suggests that personal values can impact on the ethical perception and decision of students and individuals. Durvasula et al. (2011) investigate how personal values operate in the evaluation of higher education services. There is a high level competition by universities for students and universities have to differentiate their service offerings. Marketing has now become very important to universities. Personal values offer a more profound understanding of how customers judge the quality and desirability of an educational institution's services. The results reveal that personal values have an impact on satisfaction and behavioural outcomes of loyalty such as repurchase intention and recommendation such as favourable word of mouth.

Personal values can influence the career choice and learning approaches of university students. Anana and Nique (2010) investigate the personal values in different academic areas to identify relations that may be of interest to university managers using a sample of university students in Brazil. Values were measured using the Rokeach values survey. The results indicate that students majoring in some careers are more inclined to be classified through their values than others. Most careers can be characterised by the values students consider important or unimportant. Kaygin and Gulluce (2013) examine the relationship between career choice and individual values by university students in Turkey. The results

indicate that there is a significant relationship between career choice and individual values. The most important value is achievement and the least important value is positivism. Tarabashkina and Lietz (2011) examine how personal values influence students' learning approaches and students' achievement. The study used the Portrait Value Questionnaire, the Study Process Questionnaire and the Student Background Questionnaire. The findings show that specific combinations of values are related to each learning approach. The deep and achieving learning approaches are associated with higher achievement. Students that display the characteristics of the surface learning approach have lower academic performance. Two values namely hedonism and achievement show significant relationship with the achieving approach. Students that identify strongly with the achievement value also show high levels of strategies and motivation that characterise achieving approach to learning. On the other hand, hedonism has a negative effect on the achieving learning approach. This implies that students who value fun and are less likely to follow achieving learning approach. Nedelko et al. (2013) find a significant positive relationship between personal values and students' readiness to use information and communication technology.

Personal values also affect work choice and performance. Finegan (1994) examines the impact of personal values on individuals' judgment of the morality of some workplace behaviours. University undergraduates were asked to rank order separately Rokeach's instrumental and terminal values in terms of their importance as the guiding principles in their lives. Four scenarios each of which described ethically questionable behaviour that can be encountered in business were developed and the students were asked to rate whether or not the behaviour of the person described in the scenario was ethical. People with different value hierarchies perceived the targeted behaviours differently. Connor and Becker (2003) investigate the effect of public managers' personal values on their decision-making styles using the Rokeach Value Survey and the Rowe Decision Style Inventory. The results show that there is relationship between managers' personal values and their decision-making styles. Out of Rokeach's 14 clusters of values, 12 are significantly related to particular decision-making styles. Fritzsche and Oz (2007) investigate the relationship between personal values and the ethical dimension of decision-making. The findings indicate a significant positive relationship between altruistic values and ethical decision-making. In addition, the results indicate a significant negative relationship between self-enhancement values and ethical decision-making. Singh et al. (2011) analyse the relationship between value preference and people's expectations from the workplace. The study proposes that value preferences will have a significant impact on the meaning of workplace and values preferences are likely to differ across national culture. The study focused on MBA and non-MBA graduates and Indian and non-Indian graduates. The results indicate a significant positive relationship between value preference and the choice of preferred workplace. Values related to personal growth, self-fulfilment, and community development impact on work-life balance. The results suggest that knowledge about the values of potential employees can be used to ensure that the organisation recruits employees whose perceptions match the psychological environment existing in the company. In addition, organisations can use such information on personal values to design work environments in such a way that they meet the expectations of new workers.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

The study used the quantitative research method with a descriptive research design. Data was collected through the use of self-administered questionnaire in a survey. The participants in the study were final year undergraduate business management students of one of the universities located in the Limpopo province of South Africa. The population of students was 249. The questionnaire was distributed in class with the assistance of the lecturer. Convenience sampling method was used. Participation was voluntary and the participants were assured of confidentiality. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part focused on the demographic variables and the second part examined the personal values of students. Chen and Flesischmann (2012) point out that researchers have developed various methods to measure value. Two of the most commonly used methods are the Schwartz Personal Values Scale (SVS) and Schwartz Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ). The study used the Schwartz Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ) to measure the personal values of university students. Schwartz had earlier developed the Schwartz Personal Values Scale (SVS) to measure personal values. One of the differences between the two scales is that the PVQ is intended to be more concrete than the SVS but also measure the same 10-value constructs. Schwartz et al. (2001) point out that the PVQ measures values indirectly while the SVS elicits direct, self-conscious reports of values. The PVQ obtains judgments of the similarity of another person to oneself while the SVS asks for the ratings of the importance of values as guiding principles in one's life. Thus, the respondents' judgment task is quite different. The stimuli in the PVQ are persons, portrayed in terms of their goals, aspirations, and wishes; the stimuli in the SVS are abstract, context-free values. Schwartz (1992) identifies 10 types of value namely power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity and security. These types of value can be arranged in a two dimensional circular structure representing the

dynamic relationships between the values depending on their compatibility and conflicts between their respective motivational goals. The PVQ is made up of forty questions. The distribution of the questions is as follows. Conformity: 7,16,28,36; Tradition: 9,20,25,38; Benevolence: 12,18,27,33; Universalism: 3,8,19,23,29,40; Self-Direction: 1,11,22,34; Stimulation: 6,15,30; Hedonism: 10,26,37; Achievement: 4,13,24,32; Power: 2,17,39; Security: 5,14,21,31,35. The study used two versions of the PVQ as suggested by Schwartz. One version was used for male respondents and the other version was used for female respondents. The male version used "he/his" and female version "she/her". Respondents' personal values are inferred from their self-reported similarity to people who are described in terms of particular values. Six point Likert scale ranging from "6 Very much like me", "5 like me", "4 Somewhat like me", "3 A little like me", "2 not like me" and "1 not like me at all". The Cronbach's alpha was used to measure reliability. Nunnally (1978) recommended a rule of thumb of 0.7 as the minimum acceptable coefficient. Descriptive statistics was used for data analysis.

## 5. Results and Discussions

One hundred and twenty two students participated in the survey made up of sixty six female respondents and fifty six male respondents.

Students' perception of personal values

**Table 1:** students' perception of personal values

	Portrait value questionnaire items	Mean	Standard deviation
<b>A</b>	<b>Conformity</b>		
7	He believes that people should do what they're told. He thinks people should follow rules at all times, even when no-one is watching.	4.20	1.519
16	It is important to him always to behave properly. He wants to avoid doing anything people would say is wrong.	4.78	1.295
28	He believes he should always show respect to his parents and to older people. It is important to him to be obedient.	5.36	0.937
36	It is important to him to be polite to other people all the time. He tries never to disturb or irritate others.	5.11	1.151
	Mean and standard deviation of conformity	4.86	0.912
	Cronbach's alpha	0.72	
<b>B</b>	<b>Tradition</b>		
9	He thinks it's important not to ask for more than what you have. He believes that people should be satisfied with what they have.	4.69	1.391
20	Religious belief is important to him. He tries hard to do what his religion requires.	4.87	1.387
25	He thinks it is best to do things in traditional ways. It is important to him to keep up the customs he has learned.	4.34	1.481
38	It is important to him to be humble and modest. He tries not to draw attention to himself.	5.03	1.060
	Mean and standard deviation of tradition	4.73	0.968
	Cronbach's alpha	0.78	
<b>C</b>	<b>Benevolence</b>		
12	It's very important to him to help the people around him. He wants to care for their well-being.	5.30	0.888
18	It is important to him to be loyal to his friends. He wants to devote himself to people close to him.	4.95	1.134
27	It is important to him to respond to the needs of others. He tries to support those he knows.	4.89	1.043
33	Forgiving people who have hurt him is important to him. He tries to see what is good in them and not to hold a grudge.	5.08	1.168
	Mean and standard deviation of benevolence	5.06	0.898
	Cronbach's alpha	0.70	
<b>D</b>	<b>Universalism</b>		
3	He thinks it is important that every person in the world be treated equally. He believes everyone should have equal opportunities in life.	5.54	0.817
8	It is important to him to listen to people who are different from him. Even when he disagrees with them, he still wants to understand them	4.84	1.242
19	He strongly believes that people should care for nature. Looking after the environment is important to him.	4.88	1.224
23	He believes all the worlds' people should live in harmony. Promoting peace among all groups in the world is important to him.	5.17	0.951
29	He wants everyone to be treated justly, even people he doesn't know. It is important to him to protect the weak in society.	4.93	1.104
40	It is important to him to adapt to nature and to fit into it. He believes that people should not change nature.	4.78	1.288
	Mean and standard deviation of universalism	5.02	0.878
	Cronbach's alpha	0.71	
<b>E</b>	<b>Self-direction</b>		
1	Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to him. He likes to do things in his own original way.	5.11	0.902
11	It is important to him to make his own decisions about what he does. He likes to be free to plan and to choose his activities for himself.	5.16	0.991
22	He thinks it's important to be interested in things. He likes to be curious and to try to understand all sorts of things	4.84	1.101
34	It is important to him to be independent. He likes to rely on himself.	5.26	0.921
	Mean and standard deviation of self-direction	5.09	0.814
	Cronbach's alpha	0.77	

<b>F</b>	<b>Stimulation</b>		
6	He thinks it is important to do lots of different things in life. He always looks for new things to try	4.95	1.059
15	He likes to take risks. He is always looking for adventures.	4.70	1.259
30	He likes surprises. It is important to him to have an exciting life.	4.50	1.330
	Mean and standard deviation of stimulation	4.72	0.801
	Cronbach's alpha	0.79	
<b>G</b>	<b>Hedonism</b>		
10	He seeks every chance he can to have fun. It is important to him to do things that give him pleasure.	4.52	1.336
26	Enjoying life's pleasures is important to him. He likes to 'spoil' himself	4.56	1.443
37	He really wants to enjoy life. Having a good time is very important to him.	4.98	1.045
	Mean and standard deviation of hedonism	4.69	1.011
	Cronbach's alpha	0.76	
<b>H</b>	<b>Achievement</b>		
4	It's very important to him to show his abilities. He wants people to admire what he does.	4.98	1.060
13	Being very successful is important to him. He likes to impress other people.	5.48	1.427
24	He thinks it is important to be ambitious. He wants to show how capable he is.	5.45	1.034
32	Getting ahead in life is important to him. He strives to do better than others.	5.42	0.978
	Mean and standard deviation of achievement	5.33	1.001
	Cronbach's alpha	0.77	
<b>I</b>	<b>Power</b>		
2	It is important to him to be rich. He wants to have a lot of money and expensive things.	4.60	1.424
17	It is important to him to be in charge and tell others what to do. He wants people to do what he says.	3.94	1.386
39	He always wants to be the one who makes the decisions. He likes to be the leader.	4.81	1.255
	Mean and standard deviation of power	4.45	0.979
	Cronbach's alpha	0.72	
<b>J</b>	<b>Security</b>		
5	It is important to him to live in secure surroundings. He avoids anything that might endanger his safety.	5.30	1.044
14	It is very important to him that his country be safe. He thinks the state must be on watch against threats from within and without	4.93	1.183
21	It is important to him that things be organized and clean. He really does not like things to be a mess.	5.01	1.216
31	He tries hard to avoid getting sick. Staying healthy is very important to him.	5.09	1.125
35	Having a stable government is important to him. He is concerned that the social order be protected.	4.94	1.051
	Mean and standard deviation of security	5.05	1.021
	Cronbach's alpha	0.70	

Table 1 shows the combined personal values for both male and female respondents. The results show that achievement value has the highest mean of 5.33. Achievement focuses on being ambitious, successful and getting ahead in life. Schwartz (2012) in the explanation of the theoretical model of relations among ten motivational types of value points out that achievement belongs to the self-enhancement values group. Achievement values give emphasis to the demonstration of competence in terms of the prevailing cultural standards in order to obtain social approval. The next four most important values are self-direction with a mean of 5.52, benevolence with a mean of 5.06, security with a mean of 5.05 and universalism with a mean of 5.02 respectively. Self-direction puts emphasis on creativity, direction and independence. Benevolence focuses on care, loyalty and forgiveness while security puts emphasis on safety. Schwartz (2012) remarks that benevolence values originate from the basic requirement for smooth group functioning and the need for affiliation. Benevolence values focus on voluntary concern for the welfare of other people. Security is defined by safety, harmony and the stability of society and of relationships. The five personal values with the lowest means are power with a mean of 4.45, hedonism with a mean of 4.62, stimulation with a mean of 4.72, tradition with a mean of 4.73 and conformity with a mean of 4.86. Schwartz (2012) notes that power values focus on the need of individuals for dominance and control. Hedonism originates from the needs of individuals and the pleasure associate with satisfying the needs. Stimulation is defined by excitement, novelty and challenge in life. Tradition focuses on the acceptance of customs, culture, respect and commitment while conformity is defined by restraints of actions, inclinations and impulses likely to upset or harm other people. The relatively high score for conformity value suggests that students will behave properly and will avoid doing wrong things. This may lead to a good ethical behaviour. Nonis and Swift (2001) note that values affect the behavioural responses of individuals. Lan et al. (2005) point out that the likelihood that individuals will behave unethical depends to some extent on the personal values motivating them to evaluate their actions. The results of this study are consistent with some of the findings of Lan et al. (2009) which revealed that health, family security, self-respect, and honouring of parents and elders are the top four values for both accounting practitioners and accounting students. In addition, social power, an exciting life, devout, and accepting my portion in life are the lowest rated four values for the accounting practitioners while devout, an exciting life, detachment, and accepting my portion in life form the bottom four values for the accounting students. Kaygin and Gulluce (2013) in a study of the individual values of university

students in Turkey also find the most important value is achievement.

## 6. Conclusions

Individuals' personal values drive them to act ethically or unethically in the pursuit of their goals. Values are a powerful force behind the behavioural responses of individuals. The objective of the study is to investigate the personal values of university students in South Africa. The study used the Schwartz Portrait Value Questionnaire to measure the personal values of university students. The results indicate that achievement is the most significant value. There is also a relatively high score for conformity value. This suggests that students will behave properly and will avoid doing wrong things. The study was conducted at only one university. Thus, caution must be exercised in interpreting the findings and making generalisations.

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