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What Is Values Work? A Review of Values Work in Organisations

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Research on Values Work: An Introduction

Research on *values work* can be seen as a new trajectory within the domain of research on values in organisations. There is a growing body of knowledge that has identified relationships between shared values and organisational performance on the one hand and societal values and organisational behaviour on the other (Agle & Caldwell, 1999). However, it is argued that we need to go beyond studies of organisational behaviour and decision-making to understand values as modes of behaviour, or as values-in-use, in organisational practice (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998).

Responding to the call, Gehman, Trevino, and Garud (2013) proposed a *practice perspective* to values in organisations, which focuses on the processes whereby values emerge in work performances. The practice perspective is different from a cognitive and a cultural approach to studying

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values. The *cognitive perspective* on values studies offers nuanced vocabularies for describing values in abstract terms—a repertoire of discrete values and typologies of workplace values (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983; Rohan, 2000; Schwartz, 1992). A *cultural* perspective on values focuses on the manifestation of values in various artefacts, rituals and symbols through the roles of entrepreneurs and executives and the organising of values through the use of language (Harrison & Beyer, 1984; Martin, 1992; Schein, 2010). The *practice* perspective draws attention to the practices in which the values are performed (Gehman et al., 2013, p. 86). It is broadly consistent with the ‘practice turn’ (Schatzki, 2001) in organisations. Values are to be found in practice (Dewey, 1939) and pursued as ends in themselves. As such, Gehman et al. (2013, p. 84) define *values practices* in organisations as ‘sayings and doings in organizations that articulate and accomplish what is normatively right and wrong, good or bad, for its own sake’.

A Literature Review of Values Work in Organisations

To identify studies that broaden the emerging concepts of values work in organisations, I reviewed the available studies on the subject and their contributions. A computer-based literature search was conducted in international research databases such as ABI/Inform and Business Source Complete (BSC). The databases covered a broad range of recent articles published in the disciplines of economy, organisations and leadership. Keywords such as ‘values work’ and ‘organization’ were searched for in titles, abstracts and article keywords in papers published during the last ten years—from 2008 to 2018. I chose a time frame of 10 years to include articles published before Gehman et al.’s (2013) notions of values work.

An initial search produced a relatively large number of articles: 30 published articles in ABI/Inform and 83 in BSC. To narrow down the number, a few inclusion criteria were imposed. Studies were chosen only if (1) they were empirical works that researched *values work* as a phenomenon within organisations, (2) they identified structures, processes

or mechanisms of values work in organisations, and (3) they were published in either a Scandinavian language or English. Articles on ‘work values’ that emphasised the development of individual values on joining an organisation or on entering an occupation (Connor & Becker, 1994) were excluded from the study. Other excluded works were empirical studies that focused on economic and strategic approaches, such as sustainability strategy and value congruence as well as those based on psychological research and management, such as work-life balance and workplace commitment. A manual search was also performed on all the selected articles to identify additional references.

Of the published articles selected from the literature review (Hart, 2018), six empirical articles were considered relevant to this review, and all the six were empirical studies that focused primarily on values work as performed in organisations. Three articles used the term ‘values work’ or referred to Gehman et al.’s study of values work in organisations (Perkmann & Spicer, 2014; Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015; Wright, Zammuto, & Liesch, 2017). One article did not mention the term ‘values work’, but it was cited in one of the review articles and was a distinct study on values in a crisis situation within an organisation (Gutierrez, Howard-Grenville, & Scully, 2010). One article was included because it was based on empirical studies of values work in extant literature and discussed values as part of the dynamic nature of organisations (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013). Table 3.1 presents the titles, research questions, methods and findings of the six selected studies.

The six empirical studies were analysed for the following: definition of values and values work, the institutional context of values work, the institutional processes and outcome of values work. Additionally, they were compared to two Norwegian studies on values in faith-based institutions (Aadland & Skjørshammer, 2012; Askeland, 2014). The Norwegian papers did not appear in the online literature search. However, they constitute unique empirical studies on values in organisations, especially in the context of faith-based institutions. Through an action research process, Aadland and Skjørshammer (2012) identified values reflections as enhancing values practices and change. The process of critical value reflection was considered a viable strategy to promote ethical reflection, increase moral sensitivity and raise awareness of values-in-use among staff

Table 3.1 Empirical articles relevant to the literature review

Authors' last names and article title	Research question	Methods	Findings and contributions
Gehman, J. Treviño, L. K. Garud, R. 2013 Values work: A process of the emergence and performance of organizational values practices USA	How do values practices emerge and how are they performed?	A ten-year study of the development of an honour code in a business school Archival sources; ethnographic observation; stakeholder interviews Combining practice perspective and actor-network theory	Defining values practices as sayings and doings in organisations that articulate and accomplish what is normatively right and wrong, good or bad, for its own sake Values work deals with a set of concerns, tying local concerns to action networks, performing values practices, leading to circulating values discourses
Vaccaro, A. Palazzo, G. 2015 Values against violence: Institutional change in societies dominated by organized crime Italy	How can institutional change succeed in a social context that is dominated by organised crime?	Eight-year study of a Sicilian anti-mafia initiative and a grass-roots movement: Addiopizzo (2004–2012) Utilising publicly available sources such as news articles; internal documents; interviews within Addiopizzo's network and with officials and experts; direct observation Combining institutional theory, stability and change literature	Going beyond the observation of values practice to show how change agents are using values strategically to transform the highly resistant setting of paying <i>pizzo</i> Identifying five micro-processes that leverage values in interaction with stakeholders: hooking, anchoring, activating, securing and uniting

Authors' last names and article title	Research question	Methods	Findings and contributions
Bourne, H. Jenkins, M. 2013 Organizational values: A dynamic perspective UK	What distinct forms of organisational values could there be and what are the relations between them?	Empirical studies in extant literature Propositions set out from institutional, organisational and managerial sources Contributing to the field of organisational values	Developing a framework that shows the interrelationships between forms of values, highlighting the dynamic nature of organisational values Defining four distinct forms of organisational values: espoused, aspirational and shared, and aspirational and showing how they reveal the dynamic nature of organisational values Identifying organisational values as aids to select organisational forms in resonance with the general purpose of the organisation, providing a yardstick and an engine for judging the compatibility of alternative organisational forms
Perkman, M. Spicer, A. 2015 How emerging organizations take form: The role of imprinting and values in organizational bricolage UK	How emerging organisations are selecting forms in a context where multiple forms are available and how they are shaping the organisation	A six-year inductive and empirical study of the construction of a web-based company offering open publishing Gathering and reading of historical material and exchanges from two media online message boards	

(continued)

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Authors' last names and article title	Research question	Methods	Findings and contributions
Wright, A. L. Zammuto, R. F. Liesch, P. W. 2017 Maintaining the values of a profession: Institutional work and moral emotions in the emergency department <i>Australia</i>	How specialist actors engage in institutional work and maintain their professional values when they interact with each other and balance demands from the public healthcare system	Contributing to the field of institutional complexity, process studies, organisational values A three-year study of specialists in emergency medicine in a public hospital Observation; interviews; archival data Contributing to institutional work, values and moral emotions	Organisational 'bricolage' is suggested as shaping organisational forms in the environment of multiple choices. Forms are aligned with organisational values, and values act as a focusing device shaping organisational structure Values identified as a source of conflict and a motive for professional action inside organisations Two micro-processes maintain professional values: (1) when value interpretations are misaligned between different specialists, transitory moral emotions motivate institutional maintenance, and (2) when practice is misaligned with values, moral emotions are enduring and shared and mobilise collective maintenance

Authors' last names and article title	Research question	Methods	Findings and contributions
Gutierrez, B. Howard-Grenville, J. Scully, M. A. 2010 The faithful rise up: Split identification and an unlikely change effort USA	How can identification trigger and shape change effort?	A three-year study of the emergence of unlikely activism from committed members of the Catholic Church Interviews; readings of newspaper articles; archival sources Contributing to identification theory and organisational change	Organisational practices are adapted or changed The crafting of 'split identification' is identified as allowing members to identify with the normative aspects of an institution. Despite values such as loyalty being challenged, voices are expressed in a crisis to bring about change 'Split identification' attempts to repair the split by seeking change and by responding to realign with valued norms

and leaders. By shadowing leaders, Askeland (2014) noted that leaders initiate values processes in faith-based organisations and thus become agents for the institutionalisation of organisational values. Leaders contribute to identity and values formation through information and relational work.

Several other studies could have been included in this literature review. For instance, the study on eight Norwegian organisations that examined the relative influence of values on core organisational functions came close to investigating values work as institutional work in organisations (Aadland, 2010). However, the study did not identify values work and the practice of values, *per se*. Zilber (2009) adopted a narrative approach to exploring how forms of institutional work can translate meta-narratives into organisations and the lives of individuals. Identifying process as symbolic institutional maintenance, Zilber (2009) highlighted how stories represent values and meaning. The study used a rape crisis centre in Israel as a case organisation and examined institutional maintenance as narrative acts but did not specifically identify values work.

Another work that could have been included is by Kraatz (2009), which revisits Selznick's (1957/1983) perspectives. Kraatz portrayed a leader as both the 'agent of institutionalism' and the defender and steward of the organisation, which is a living social entity. Values work executed by a leader can have implications for organisational legitimacy, governance and change. However, in this chapter, I am investigating how values work becomes a distributed activity within the whole organisation rather than who is doing values work and how it becomes the responsibility of leaders.

A recent article discusses how values practices are performed collectively through the practice of grass-roots exchange networks in crisis-stricken Greece (Daskalaki, Fotaki, & Sotiropoulou, 2018). The study builds on Gehman et al.'s concept of value practices and explores the value systems of different networks and how they reconfigure economic values. However, the study describes economic actions and solidarity at a macro-level instead of identifying structures of values work within organisations. Hence, it was not included in the review.

Defining Values Work

How do the six studies identify the concept of values work? Gehman et al. (2013) were the first to introduce the concept of *values work* as ongoing performances situated in everyday practice and manifested it in emerging and performed value practices. Vaccaro and Palazzo (2015) go beyond this description of values work and highlight how the performative power of values could contribute to the construction of the described reality. Building on Schwartz (1996, p. 2), they defined values as ‘desirable, trans-situational goals’ and interpreted them as motivational factors and guiding principles in people’s lives, which could challenge and change highly resistant institutions. Hence, the values work studies hold a *performative view* of values in organisations (Gehman et al., 2013) stating that values are found in evolving practices (Dewey, 1939).

Gehman et al.’s (2013) perceptions of values work and practices are building on practice theory, which suggest that people’s practices direct their right or wrong behaviour. Their definition of values practices—‘sayings and doings in organizations that articulate and accomplish what is normatively right or wrong, good or bad, for its own sake’—is influenced by Schatzki’s definition (2012, p. 14) of practice as an ‘open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings’. The studies leaning on practice theory seems to lack an important dimension of values as ideals or as ‘desirable modes’. The word ‘desirable’ (which is different from ‘desired’ [Parsons, 1968]) mentioned in classic definitions of values by for instance Kluckhohn (1951) and Van Deth and Scarbrough (1998) draws attention to what is wanted or sought as an attractive, useful or necessary course of action, as standards for actions. It also lends values a normative direction (Scott, 2014), indicating a close relationship between morality and work of the ‘common good’ (Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013). To orient values practices towards standards for behaviour and the capacity to imagine alternative possibilities for future actions, I therefore expand Gehman et al.’s definition of values to the sayings and doings in organisations that articulate and accomplish *the desirables* in relevance to right and wrong action and behaviour.

The Institutional Context of Studies on Values Work

Regarding the institutional context of values work studies, values work has been either studied in highly institutionalised organisations, recognised as *social systems* (Aldrich, 1992) or in groups described as *associations* or *grass-roots organisations*, characterised by ‘participation in collective political activities open to everyone’ (Togeb, 1993). Associated organisations are established with a clear agenda: micro-processes of values work help promote a political mission and encourage the common good. For example, the grass-roots movement of Addiopizzo promoted values in a context where institutions were highly resistant to change, by working against the *pizzo* or protection money, in a mafia setting (Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015). Another grass-roots organisation encouraged uniting against child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church (Gutierrez et al., 2010). A third study investigated an innovation that allowed anyone to author news on a newly established web-based platform (Perkmann & Spicer, 2014).

Organisations that function as open social systems frequently develop strong normative and cognitive belief systems as part of the rules, norms and ideologies of the wider society. The formal structures of these organisations can reflect rationalised myths (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and may contain weakly connected elements that make them loosely coupled systems (Meyer & Scott, 1992). Researchers of institutionalism in Scandinavia have, through case studies, investigated the dynamic aspect of ideas circulating within institutions. ‘Translation’ tends to occur where ideas are co-constructed in ways that change the meaning and content of the ideas circulating in a field (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008).

Studies on values in open systems have investigated how integrity is reinforced through the practice of an honour code (Gehman et al., 2013). Professionals maintain their values despite changing their organisational practice (Wright et al., 2017), and this awareness of moral values shapes the organisation’s identity (Aadland & Skjørshammer, 2012).

Studies have identified not-for-profit organisations as being highly sensitive to institutional influence (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008). However, more studies should investigate how circulating ideas, when translated, can be reframed in terms of the ideology of the recipient organisation.

Values Work in Investigating Institutional Processes

While the concepts of values work are highly influenced by practice theory, the studies in this review are also informed by a strong-process orientation (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Ven, 2013; Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). In process studies, attention is focused on how and why things emerge, develop, grow or terminate over time in organisations (Langley et al., 2013). Process studies aim to unpack events to help understand complex activities and transactions that take place in organisations and contribute to their constitution (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). Processes not only point inwards to activities within the organisation but also reflect the responses and pressures from the outside.

Process studies offer a relevant perspective to investigate values in an organisation, especially to examine how values emerge and are performed at different times. The process perspective investigates values as changing or as maintained along with the mechanisms influencing these processes. When investigating values work, Gehman et al. (2013) identified a process: values emerge out of ‘pockets of concern’, tying local concerns into an action network. People at different organisational levels were performing actual values practice, circulating values dialogues to foster development and institutionalisation (VanderPal & Ko, 2014). This process was also reported in a study by Vaccaro and Palazzo (2015) where the actor, Addiopizzo, organised resistance to the payment of *pizzo* by putting up posters all over Palermo, containing a short message: ‘A society that pays the *pizzo* is a society without dignity’. Addiopizzo’s process work reinterpreted institutions that paid *pizzo* and meaning of dignity in the fight against institutions highly resistant to change.

Reviews mostly describe strong processes in organisations (Langley & Tsoukas, 2017); however, a question worth asking is whether reviews provide an understanding of values work as part of the institutionalising processes at organisations. The role of values, as included in ongoing institutionalisation processes, and how values influence actions, agency and institutions have not been thoroughly described in any of the review articles.

Values Work Enhancing Normative Dimensions of Work

The analysis of the review studies shows that even though values work rests upon a normative pillar that introduces prescriptions and valuation dimensions into social life (Scott, 2014), this seems to be an under-examined theme. Gehman et al.'s (2013) notion of values practices as 'right and wrong practice' suggests that a close relationship with morality is desired in working for the 'common good', though this is not elaborated in the text. Phillips and Lawrence (2012) identified 15 different forms of institutional work, none of which are described as involving moral or ethical work. Wright et al. (2017) noted that moral emotions arise from situations of value conflicts in interactions between organisational members, but they only considered emotions as mobilised by problems and not as part of moral reflection. Aadland and Skjørshammer (2012) are rather alone in highlighting that work on values can introduce an ethical sensitivity but do not mention the mechanisms directing this work.

Outcomes of Studies on Values Work

The outcome of studies on values work can be separated into two. First, these studies contribute to the identification of the values process itself: How it emerges, changes and shapes activities. Second, values work in several studies is connected to the formation of an organisational identity.

In the studies by Gehman et al. (2013), Vaccaro and Pallazzo (2015), and Perkman and Spicer (2014), values facilitate a process of searching for hidden meanings and mechanisms that constitute value practices (Gehman et al., 2013). Vaccaro and Palazzo (2015) identified how values can be used strategically to highlight normative tension and drive change. Change agents in institutional change processes use the performative power of values work to change institutions that are highly resistant to change. Perkmann and Spicer (2014) showed how values work is part of an organisational bricolage. The symbolic material (values) is vital to structuring particular organisations. Additionally, values practices are identified to mobilise organisational practices, re-articulate social relations and promote sustainable living (Daskalaki et al., 2018).

The contributions of values work towards identity formation are especially evident in the studies conducted in churches or faith-based organisations. Values are invoked politically to restore values in a crisis (Gutierrez et al., 2010). For instance, crafting a ‘split identification’ was a values work mechanism for repairing the identity of the church dealing with the accusations of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests. Awareness of organisational values and mutual work and self-reflection influence the identity formation of a faith-based institution (Aadland & Skjørshammer, 2012). Leaders play a special role in cementing the ideological profile of faith-based institutions (Askeland, 2014).

As a spin-off of the mentioned values work studies, is a growing body of research investigating the effects of value practices and how they are encouraged in organisations (Daskalaki et al., 2018). Although these studies explore different directions, two broad themes can be identified. Some have started to use the term ‘values practices’, by extending the performative understanding to different arrangements for social change and maintenance. For instance, values practices are interpreted as restoring human values in times of crisis, leading to sustainable living conditions (Daskalaki et al., 2018). They are also highlighted in understanding the tensions between public organisations and the management (Chanut, Chomienne, & Desmarais, 2015) and in the protection of an organisational identity (Desai, 2017).

The second theme involves investigating how human and individual values are relevant to organisational practice. For instance, studies have

examined the influence of counter-ideal values (Van Quaquebeke, Graf, Kerschreiter, Schuh, & van Dick, 2014), the relationship between organisational humanity values and commitment (Husted, 2018), and how social entrepreneurship can mitigate value concessions (Mitzinneck & Besharov, 2018).

Based on the analysis of the review studies, a notable aspect in the studies is the notion that no study to date has investigated how values animate the 'value-spheres' of institutional logics and the practice of social order. Drawing on Weber (1946/2012), Friedland explains that institutional logics are composed of a multiplicity of 'value spheres'. Confirming the 'validity of such values' is a 'matter of faith', which individuals seek and for which they claim to be instruments. Each value sphere is teleologically consistent in exercising 'power over man' (Friedland, 2013a, p. 28). According to Friedland, Weber sees all value rationalities as religious: on the one hand, one seeks to possess the divine in the moment, and on the other, one is an instrument of the divine, acknowledging God's creation and participating in the perfection (Friedland, 2013b, pp. 18–19).

Within each order, there are sets of expectations for both the individual and the organisation (Friedland & Alford, 1991). When expressed, these distinct practices manifest the material substance of the logics, organising them in time and space and giving them meaning. For example, the material practice of the value sphere of compassion can be expressed through rites of care that alleviate people's suffering, which gives the logic instrumental and ritual content. Integral to the production of institutional logics is a valuation of a judgement on what to do. Thus, institutional logics have a normative dimension in that they are organised around actionable goods that are of value to the world (Friedland, 2017, p. 12).

Over the last decade, the literature on institutional logics has broadened the understanding of the institutional processes of organisations (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Studies have emphasised the coexistence and mingling of logics (Purdy & Gray, 2009; Reay & Hinings, 2009) and the effect of shifts in the dominant logics (Lounsbury & Boxenbaum, 2013). Mainly identified at

the societal level, institutional logics can also be found within organisations where they are used to legitimise the institutions' language and practice (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Zilber, 2017). Recently, there has been a call to investigate institutional logics from the bottom-up, in order to add micro-aspects to the study of institutional logics (Zilber, 2017). However, to understand how institutional logics construct, shape and modify activities over time, more research is needed on how values work is a part of the internal practice of logic.

Future Research on Values Work

The six articles on values work and the more recent stream of values practice studies indicate a renewed interest in values and values work in organisational research. All the studies in this literature review are informed by a process perspective. They are focused on matters within organisations and consider values as distributed activities, embedded in practice and constantly evolving. In the context of institutional work, scholars note that values play a role in the interaction between actions and institutions and in the social order that influences activities. However, what remains unclear is whether the current studies on values work are trying to integrate perspectives on how values contribute to constructing people's understanding of reality. A central question is how institutional complexity triggers values work.

More research is needed on the role of values in institutionalisation processes. How do values influence actions, agency and institutions? For instance, scholars should analyse the link between institutional work and institutional leadership in order to understand how fundamental values become institutionalised through work. More information is needed on which rules to follow, which authorities to obey and which strategies leaders should adopt to reconcile conflicting tendencies in organisations and to negotiate leadership in for instance multicultural workplaces. It would also be interesting to explore how managers go beyond core values and value codes to facilitate processes that tie in purpose, values and the character of the organisation.

Future research should also investigate values work in organisations and how it shapes individual behaviour in everyday life, especially in volunteering activities, in establishing different values in public governance and in developing reflexivity and values consciousness. Additionally, studies should explore core values and how managers negotiate them within the context of a thriving and distinct organisational values discourse. Finally, researchers should attempt to understand how institutional logics construct, shape and modify activities over time by examining how values work may be part of the internal practice of logic.

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