

The importance of value attitudes in solving intercultural conflicts

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Abstract

The contemporary world is complicated and we face many difficult problems that sometimes can turn into conflicts that have to be resolved. As S. L. Dolan (2011) claims, these problems are: environmental pollution, human alienation, unemployment, crimes, drug addiction, disintegration of the family, mistreatment of the elderly, unequal distribution of wealth, food, educational opportunities, and many more. These challenges cause chaos and disturb the established sense of values across cultures. Some Lithuanian researchers (Aramavičiūtė, 2005) also maintain a view that such chaos has a major influence on people's psychological condition as they lose the sense and meaning of life, which has a negative impact on their intra- and inter-relations. Documents from the EU also highlight the need for educational institutions to promote social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, diversity and equality. The development of personal and social skills and respect for human dignity and shared values are considered to be essential for the resolution of intercultural problems.

The article is based on the research into the cognitive-notional component of value attitudes among students of management and foreign languages. The criteria were the acknowledgement of the importance of values and the depth of understanding of the meaning of values. The conclusion is that students have to be prepared to understand the world, its cultural variety and values, think critically, and make a stand against injustice. Only then can there be hope for life without prejudice, violence and contempt. Educational institutions have a huge and indispensable responsibility in this respect (Popovici, 2006).

Key words: value attitudes, acknowledgment of the importance, depth of understanding, moral values, intercultural competence

Introduction

Intercultural communication in our contemporary globalised world takes place in all walks of life: political, economic, social and educational. Sometimes this communication might become complicated. Difficult intercultural problems may occur that can develop into disputes and conflicts. Understanding the behaviour of the representatives of other cultures, anticipating the points at which communication may break down and knowing how to deal with emerging problems represent vital skills that we all need in order to communicate successfully in different intercultural contexts. J. W. Neuliep (2006) suggests that in order to make intercultural communication more effective, one has to have intercultural competence, which enables a person to predict beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviour of others and interact with people from other cultures more successfully. Therefore, institutions of education, as the EU documents highlight, have to take up the responsibility to develop intercultural competence among learners and to promote social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, diversity and equality.

Obviously, when we communicate between different cultures, values become especially significant. Values, as B. Tomalin and M. Nicks (2007) suggest, constitute the so-called “psyche of a country”: They determine expectations people might have about one another as well as their behaviour. In other words, recognizing and responding to values is vital to building the cultural chemistry of relations.

However, the reality is that sometimes values might be in conflict and intercultural communicators must decide whether or not to adapt to other culture’s values. This can be a difficult process that will very much depend on the context and the situation. As some philosophers (Wick, Freeman, Werhane, Martin, 2010) state, both relativistic and ethnocentric stances eliminate the need for moral reflection and discussion about one’s values and may create problems in further relationships. The same authors suggest that the way out might be universal values or universal moral principles that cut across different cultures and upon which most people can at least agree, such as *fairness, justice, helping others in distress*, etc.

While solving problems that emerge in intercultural relationships, we have to evaluate a situation and make a judgment with respect to the social and personal consequences of potential behaviour, as well as acknowledge or reject the arguments for or against a problem with an orientation on values, as the criteria of evaluation. Therefore, the need to understand the meaning of values, focusing not only on one’s personal but other people’s needs and interests and the possible consequences of the actions are of paramount importance. Thus, **the object** of the research is understanding of importance and meaning of values.

The **aim of this article** is to present the results of research into the cognitive-notional and behavioural components of value attitudes among students of management and foreign languages. In order to achieve the aim the following **objectives** were set:

- 1) to reveal the acknowledgement of the importance of values among students of management and foreign languages;
- 2) to determine the depth of understanding of the meaning of values among students of management and foreign languages.

Methodological background of the research

The research was based on an analysis of the phenomenon of value attitudes. Psychological literature presents theoretical and empirical research into attitudes, which prove that attitudes can predict, determine and modify a person’s behaviour, and control his/her cognitive and emotional processes. The *one-component* attitude model consists of an affect towards, or evaluation of, the object, which

does not necessarily have an effect on a person's behaviour (Stahlberg, Frey, 1988). The *two-component* attitude model is an integral unity of cognitive and affective components, inseparable from one's behaviour and having a consistent influence upon it, thus providing the greatest possibility to infer and understand people's behaviour (Lind (1996, 2004). The *three-component* attitude model comprises interconnected cognitive, affective and behavioural components; an analysis of the content of these components allows for better prediction of an attitude influence upon one's behaviour (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). Thus, the attitude is defined as *the unity of relatively enduring, persisting, positive or negative evaluations, emotional experiences, predispositions and behavioural tendencies towards socially significant objects*.

Lithuanian scientists of education (Aramavičiūtė, 2005; Bitinas, 2000; Jovaiša, 2007) investigate attitudes mainly following the attitude theory developed by D. Uznadzė (1966) and his school's representatives, according to which an attitude object is an interrelation between a particular need and the situation that can satisfy that need. The majority of authors support D. Uznadzė's view that value orientations expressing the motivational content of a personality are considered to be one's main attitude. Within the system of value orientations, moral values are regarded to be especially significant, laying the foundation for value attitudes.

The choice and acknowledgement of moral values, as V. Aramavičiūtė (2005) suggests, depends on traditions, attitudes and context that prevail where any individual resides. On the one hand, values influence attitudes, but on the other, attitudes determine the choice of values and certain behavioural tendencies. S. L. Dolan considers values to be:

Strategic lessons learned and maintained. These lessons teach us that one way of acting is better than its opposite if we are to achieve our desired outcome(s)—that is, our values and value systems guide our behaviour toward that which we think will turn out well for us. Thus, to the extent that they constitute deliberate or preferentially strategic choices, in the medium to long term, for certain ways of behaving and against others, toward the survival or good life of a particular system, values form the nucleus, the DNA, of human liberty." (Dolan, 2011, p. 87)

Obviously, there are many classifications of values; philosophers still cannot agree upon the hierarchy of values and controversial discussions among scientists (philosophers, psychologists, scientists of education) are ongoing. T. H. McLaughlin (1997), for example, claims that most of the discussions in contemporary democratic societies evolve around the choice of moral values. Being a representative of a liberal educational trend, he suggests that there should be *societal values*, which, due to their inevitably fundamental nature, should be obligatory to all the members of the society and *personal values* that could be chosen by everyone freely.

Whatever numerous and complicated classifications of values might be, there has been a trend to give priority to moral values: *solidarity, peacefulness, respect and love*, which usually manifest themselves in relationships with oneself, others and the world at large. Therefore, the research aims to identify which moral values the respondents acknowledge to be the most important and how they understand their meaning. The choice of these moral values was based on philosophers' (Halder, 2005; Hildebrand, 1950; Williams, 2002; Žemaitis, 1977) and scientists' of education (Aramavičiūtė, 2005; Bitinas, 2000; Elliott, 2004; Jovaiša, 2003; Huitt, 2004; Martišauskienė, 2004) viewpoints.

To investigate the *cognitive-notional* level of value attitudes the *inventory of moral values* was used; this inventory helped researchers in their attempt to elucidate the respondents' level of acknowledgment of the importance of moral values. The inventory contained eight moral values: *responsibility, respect, tolerance, sensitivity, fairness, altruism, openness, and self-respect*. The respondents' understanding of the significance of three moral values (*responsibility, openness and altruism*) was assessed as well.

Research methods

Theoretical: Analysis, comparison, evaluation of psychological, philosophical, pedagogical literature, on the basis of which a theoretical-empirical model of moral attitudes and the research instrument were created.

Empirical: A student survey was carried out that aimed at finding out about the respondents' acknowledgment of the importance of moral values and to determine the depth of their understanding of the meaning of values. The research instrument was an original *questionnaire* that was developed on the basis of the theoretical-empirical model of moral attitudes and the inventory of eight moral values (*responsibility, respect, tolerance, sensitivity, fairness, altruism, openness and self-respect*), the latter being defined according to V. Aramavičiūtė's (2004) research methodology. Evaluation criteria: *the acknowledgment of the importance of moral values, the depth of understanding of the significance of moral values*. The respondents were asked to prioritize values according to their importance on a five-point scale, as well as to substantiate the personal and social meaning of moral values by answering open questions.

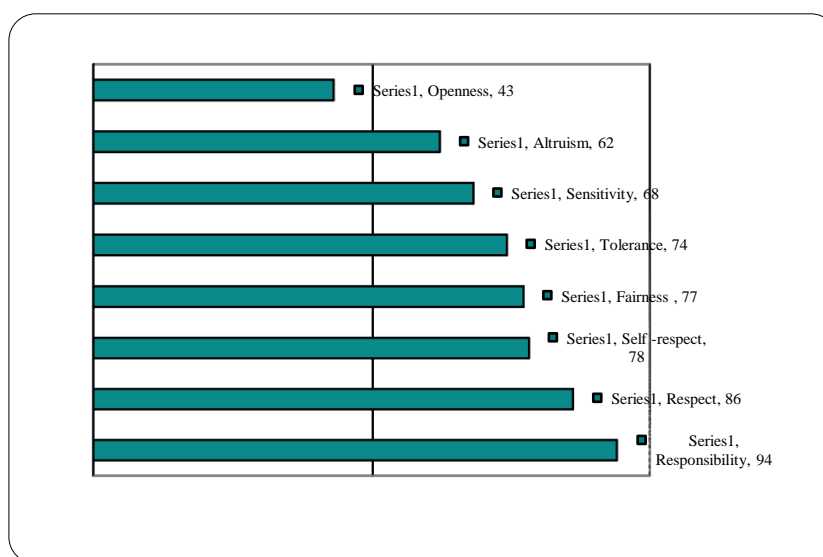
Statistical: Statistical research methods: descriptive statistics (absolute and percentage frequency, mean, Chi square criterion. The research data was processed using 12th version of the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

The research sample was 134 students (42 male, 92 female) of management and foreign languages at Vilnius University. The research was carried out in 2013.

Research results

Cognitive-notional level of value attitudes: the acknowledgment of the importance of moral values. In the process of the analysis of the cognitive-notional level of value attitudes, an attempt was made to determine the level of *the acknowledgment of the importance of moral values* by the students of management and foreign languages (English, Spanish, French and Russian). The *acknowledgment of the importance of moral values* was considered to be *the evaluation criteria*. The respondents were asked to evaluate moral values on a five-point scale. If they thought that a moral value was very important, that was considered to be a *very high* acknowledgment of a moral value; if a moral value was considered to be important, that signified a *high* acknowledgment; if the respondents thought that a moral value was only partly important, then the acknowledgment of the importance of it was considered to be *average*; if the respondents found it difficult to determine what the value meant to them, then its importance was *low*; and if the respondents thought that the value was insignificant, then its importance was considered to be *very low*. This helped to determine which moral values were considered to be of the highest priority to the respondents, which were of average importance and which they considered to be least significant. The following research results were obtained on moral values that the respondents rated as *very high* or *high* (Fig. 1):

Figure 1. The acknowledgment of the importance of moral values by the students of management and foreign languages.

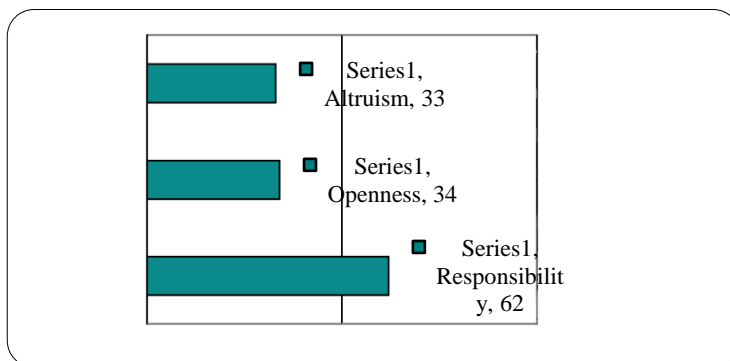


The majority of respondents (94%) considered *responsibility* to be the highest priority. The second most-important moral value appeared to be *respect* (86%). Third place was shared by the values of *self-respect* and *fairness* (78% and 77% respectively). The value of *tolerance* was also valued quite highly by the research participants (74%). Although *sensitivity* and *altruism* were considered to be important by far more than half of the respondents, they still appeared at the low end of the scale of the importance of moral values (68% and 62% respectively), while *openness* seemed to be least valued, as less than a half of the research participants (43%) acknowledged it to be important. Thus it could be claimed that the acknowledgement of moral values by the students of management and foreign languages is very high and high. This is undoubtedly a very positive phenomenon as values such as responsibility, respect and faithfulness are core moral values; and, as the philosopher D. Hildebrand (1950) claims, they lay a solid foundation for any person's life. Similarly, American researcher T. Lickona (1991) suggests that respect and self-respect are the main moral values.

Cognitive-notional level of value attitudes: the depth of understanding of the importance of moral values. During the research, an attempt was made to reveal how the respondents could interpret the meaning of moral values that they considered to be more or less important. As the Lithuanian scientist V. Aramavičiūtė (2005) suggests, deep understanding of the notion of moral values can alleviate their realisation in real-life situations; in other words, values can turn into the domineering driving force, motivating and directing a certain behaviour in a person. In the process of analysing the cognitive level of value attitudes from this perspective, the *depth of understanding of the meaning* of values was considered to be the evaluation criteria. If the respondent, while defining the meaning of one or the other value, focused not only on his/her own needs and moral well-being that were dependent on a particular value, but on the other person's as well, the understanding of that value was considered to be *very deep*; if a person's interpretation of the value's meaning concentrated only on his/her needs and his/her well-being that were dependent on the realisation of a particular value, and this helped him/her turn into a more mature person, then the understanding of its meaning was considered to be *deep*; if a person concentrated only on his/her hedonistic and egoistic needs, then the meaning was considered to be *not very deep*; if a person only stated the importance of the value, but failed to explain its social and personal meaning, then it was considered to be *lacking depth or shallow or superficial* understanding of a moral value; if the interpretation was erroneous or a person could not describe what the value meant for him/her, the respondent's understanding was considered *very shallow* or even *erroneous*.

The research aimed to determine the students' understanding of the meaning of values of *responsibility*, *openness* and *altruism*. Therefore, they were asked to provide arguments as to why they prioritised these values in one way or another. Having analysed their answers to these open questions according to the abovementioned criteria, the following results were obtained, as presented in Figure 2 below (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. The depth of understanding of the significance of moral values by the students of management and foreign languages.



Evidently the students demonstrated the best understanding of the value of *responsibility*, which the majority of them considered to be the most important value. More than half of the respondents revealed deep or very deep understandings of responsibility, whereas deep or very deep understandings of the meaning of *altruism* and *openness* were presented by only one third of respondents.

Among the answers provided by the students, very mature and very positive interpretations and deep understandings of the importance of moral values could be found: *<when you act responsibly, you can be trusted, and the feeling of trust grows in the society and that improves our relations>*, *<having lost one's belief in the goodness of others, it could be impossible to live in our society>*, *<giving is one of the most honourable values that nurtures one's sensitivity and honesty, which in turn helps live in our society>*, *<it is very important to do good things wholeheartedly and sincerely, it should be done without seeking any profit or benefit for oneself, otherwise it is meaningless>*, *<if we do not seek any material benefit by helping others, then we become more morally mature people>*, *<it is very important to take care of others, otherwise we lose our humanity>*, *<by giving more to others, business gains a more "human face">*.

However, the following extracts from the students' answers reveal a greater focus on their own well-being rather than on that of others: *<people are mostly selfish, you should be able to differentiate that>*, *<we are all selfish and we first of all take care of the well-being of our families and only then we can take care of others>*, *<taking care of others is complete nonsense>*, *<some people only pretend to be good – you cannot trust them completely>*, *<you cannot take care of others if you want to gain benefit for yourself>*, *<one's well-being is in the first place, you can only give advice to others, but not take care of them>*, *<believing in others can be harmful to oneself>*.

Conclusion

The results of the research show that the students of management and foreign languages demonstrated to have a mature cognitive-meaningful level of value attitudes. The most important values for them were *responsibility and respect*, while the values of *self-respect, fairness and tolerance* were considered to be important. Therefore, the conclusion can be made that the students will acknowledge

these values later on in their professional careers. However, values such as *altruism* and *openness*, which are of great relevance for socially responsible business and sustainable development, avoidance of conflicts, peaceful co-existence of different people within one culture and in contacts with representatives of other cultures, were considered to be the least significant. It should also be mentioned that these results are similar to other research carried out in Lithuania with senior schoolchildren, where *responsibility* was considered to be the most important value by more than half, but less than half took the same view of *altruism* (Aramavičiūtė, 2005). Another study by D. Verbylaitė (2005) with future religion teachers also showed a similar priority of values: *respect* - most important (more than half), followed by *sensitivity* and *responsibility* (more than a third).

Although the respondents showed a very high acknowledgment of the importance of moral values, the understanding of the meaningfulness of these moral values was not very deep. Just over half of the respondents demonstrated a depth of understanding of the personal and social meaning of *responsibility*, whereas *altruism* and *openness* were perceived deeply by only one third of the respondents. Given these research results, we may conclude that the cognitive-meaningful level of value attitudes among the students of management and foreign languages is not very mature. Therefore, educational institutions have a huge and indispensable responsibility to nurture students' value attitudes and strengthen their capacity to interact with different people and develop their readiness to care more about others – all of which are critical to their personal, social and professional lives, as well as to maintaining much more effective intercultural relationships in an increasingly diverse educational environment.

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