Anthropology and Value

Steinert, S.

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Abstract Anthropological theories of value highlight the cultural processes responsible for value creation, re-creation, and transmission. This chapter provides an overview of the most crucial value theories in anthropology. First, It introduces early anthropological accounts of value, like Kluckhohn's and Strodtbeck's theory of value orientations, which was an attempt to provide a tool for cross-cultural comparison. The chapter also outlines the structuralist approach to value, specifically Dumont's influential account, where values are part of a hierarchical meaning system. The chapter then introduces so-called action-oriented approaches to value (Munn, Turner, Graeber). Action-oriented accounts focus on how humans actively create and reproduce values in a cultural system of meaning into which value actions are embedded. Finally, the chapter also briefly considers anthropological ideas about value change.

Keywords Anthropology • Value • Culture • Value theory • Structuralism

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4.1 Introduction to Anthropology

In the last chapter, we saw that sociologists are interested in how the individual relates to the social world. Some, following Parsons, also stress the role of values in understanding social actions. Besides being linked to the social, values are also an integral aspect of culture. Psychologists, like Hofstede in his influential work on the cultural dimensions of value, and sociologists, like Parsons, who claimed that cultures could be understood and differentiated by their ultimate goals, acknowledge the cultural aspect of value.

The primary goals of anthropology are to understand humans as cultural beings and to illuminate culture's influence on individuals. Therefore, if we want to understand the cultural aspects of value, we need to turn to anthropology. Anthropological theories of value highlight the cultural processes responsible for value creation, re-creation, and transmission.

In contrast to psychology, where the Schwartz model of value is dominant, anthropology does not have a leading theory of value. Moreover, Ton Otto and Rane Willerslev (2013) organized an international roundtable discussion where participants seemed to agree that there is no contemporary anthropological theory of value. Some participants also questioned whether a unified anthropological theory of value would even be helpful and desirable.[1]

It is possible to discern some significant historical trends in anthropological thinking about value (Otto & Willerslev, 2013, p. 3). For example, in the 1950s, one major theoretical problem for anthropology was how to connect culture to the actions of individuals. A particular concern was to explain an individual's motivation to reproduce a specific social and cultural system. Furthermore, in the 1950s, anthropologists were interested in comparing different value systems, so-called world views, or ideologies, and they developed the theoretical tools to make these comparisons. Structuralism, as a form of cultural anthropology, took hold in

[1] According to Otto and Willerslev, a scholar's stance on whether a unifying anthropological theory of value is desirable depends on whether they think anthropology should be driven by theory or ethnography.

the 1960s. Around the same time, structural-functionalist ideas gained popularity and influenced anthropological accounts of value.

By the early 1980s, structuralism fell out of favor, and anthropologists wanted to cast aside structuralism's static conception of value. Instead, anthropologists developed an interest in how values are linked to human agency and how values are created and transmitted in a group through human cultural activity, like rituals or exchanges such as gift-giving. To account for value creation and transmission and to link value to human agency, anthropologists developed so-called action-based accounts of value. In what follows, we will review structuralist ideas about value and action-based approaches in more detail.

4.2 Value in Anthropology

A good entry point into the anthropological theory of value is the work of the American anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn. In the 1950s, Kluckhohn and his collaborators set up a comparative study of value in the Rimrock region of the US. This so-called Harvard Values Project was groundbreaking and one of the earliest anthropological attempts to systematically investigate value. However, despite its scope, the project, and the publications resulting from it, did not significantly influence anthropology at the time (Powers, 2000).

Kluckhohn and his colleagues proposed that values cannot be separated from cultures and groups. They suggest that a "value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action" (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 395). Note that this notion of value includes a normative component. Values are ideas about what people should desire because they are about what is desirable, not what is desired. Please note that values as conceptions of the desirable are not limited to the moral domain. For instance, conceptions of the desirable can be about what is aesthetically or artistically desirable.

Another noteworthy aspect of the value account of Kluckhohn and his colleagues is that it stresses that values can be implicit or explicit. The values people endorse may not be transparent to them, and they may find

it hard to articulate them. Hence, scientists seeking to investigate society's values must often infer value commitments from behavior patterns.

One particularly influential idea from Kluckhohn's value project is the proposal of value orientations. Kluckhohn introduced the idea of value orientation in the 1950s (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 409), later refined and elaborated by his wife, Florence Kluckhohn, and Fred Strodtbeck in their book *Variations in Value Orientations* (Florence Kluckhohn & Fred Strodtbeck, 1961). This book is an early attempt to flesh out a theory of values usable to investigate values across cultures. The underlying assumption is that all societies and cultures have similar concerns because they need to address the same problems. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck proposed that these concerns can be clustered around five topics: (1) human nature: humans are either good, evil, or a mix thereof, (2) the relationship between humans and nature, (3) time: the focus is either on the past, the present, or the future, (4) human activity: this is the question about the primary motivation of action, which may be to express oneself, to grow or to achieve something, (5) social relationships and social organization: this is about how individuals should relate to one another.[2]

Some readers may notice that Kluckhohn's and Strodtbeck's idea of a link between values and existential concerns resonates with some psychological theories of value. For instance, Shalom Schwartz (2015) proposes that values result, among other things, from the needs of humans to coordinate social interaction and facilitate the welfare of the group. Likewise, the functional theory of value (Gouveia et al., 2014) raises similar points about human needs. We will revisit the overlap between psychology and anthropology in the last chapter.

As indicated above, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck propose that cultures may exhibit one of three possible responses in each of the categories of concerns. For instance, one universal problem is how to conceive the relationship between man and nature. Three responses to this problem

[2] Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck introduced space as a sixth category of concern but did not explore it further. The concern of space is either on the here, the there, or the far away. Michael Hills (2002) notes that the theory of value orientation is incomplete, and we could add more categories of concerns. For instance, one could add a cluster of concerns about gender and how roles and power should be distributed among men and women. Another category that could be added concerns the relationship between the state and the individual.

are possible: Humans are subordinate to nature, humans should live in harmony with nature, or humans should dominate nature. As another example, consider the best form of social organization. Again, there are three possible positions: either a hierarchical social organization, or people are recognized as equals with a focus on consensus, or an individualistic organization.

The values of a society, so the idea goes, are reflected in the socially preferred responses to the abovementioned existential problems. Kluckhohn's and Strodtbeck's crucial idea is that the preferred responses betray a group's value orientation. What precisely is a value orientation? Tom Gallagher has provided a concise answer in summarizing the value orientation approach. Value orientation is "[h]ow a group is predisposed to understand, give meaning to, and solve these common problems is an outward manifestation of its innermost values, its window on the world: its value orientation" (Gallagher, 2001, p. 2). Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck give the example of a society with a time orientation focused on the past instead of the present or the future. Because it focuses on the past, this society endorses traditions and highly esteems their elders.

In contrast, a culture with a future orientation will likely put more emphasis on planning for the future. The complete value orientation of a society, according to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, is the totality of the rank orderings of the three alternative solutions for all the existential problems. More concrete cultural elements, like attitudes, norms, and rituals, flow from this value orientation. For instance, norms about how to treat your elders are a concrete cultural form that flows from the value orientation of a group.

Value orientation is supposed to be a useful anthropological tool to compare cultures. Because cultures have different value orientations, they differ in their preferred responses to these problems. This difference in the ranking of responses gives us the means to distinguish between cultures.[3]

[3] Although Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck believed that cultures could be distinguished by their dominant preferences, they acknowledged that there always is a variety of preferences and a diversity of viewpoints within every culture. Also, they seemed to be aware that cultures are not static but in flux. Nevertheless, the idea of value orientation has been criticized for its assumed universalism of values and its reductive idea of orientations. Roy D'Andrade (2008) provides a detailed review and critique.

It is important to stress that a value orientation includes more than just values. Value orientations are a structured and general blend of normative elements (i.e., values in the sense of the desirable) and descriptive assumptions about nature, human's place in nature, human existence, the human-human relationship, and time. Other influential anthropologists concur that we cannot separate values and non-normative descriptive elements. For instance, Louis Dumont argued that values are inseparable from ideas. Talking about a system of values is already an abstraction from total system that combines descriptive and evaluative elements, which Dumont calls a system of 'ideas-and-values'. According to Dumont, speaking about 'value-ideas' would be more precise (Dumont, 2013, p. 297) than speaking of value. We will consider Dumont's structuralist ideas about culture and value below.

We can classify anthropological accounts of value into three categories: structuralist accounts, action-oriented accounts, and accounts that attempt to bridge these structuralist and action-oriented accounts (Sommerschuh & Robbins, 2016). In a nutshell, structuralist accounts propose that values are embedded in mental structures and action-oriented accounts suggest that value must be continually produced by human activity, like rituals or exchanging goods.

There is a split in anthropological theories of value. On the one side are structuralists, like Dumont, who focus on values (in the plural) and how these values are hierarchically arranged. On the other side, there are action-oriented accounts, which are inspired by Karl Marx's idea that there is only one kind of value, which takes various forms. With this split of perspectives in mind, let us first consider structuralist accounts of value.

Structuralist theories of values draw inspiration from structuralism. In anthropology, structuralism is associated with Claude Lévi-Strauss's work in the 1940 and 1950s (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, 1969). Drawing on the idea from linguistics that language can be broken down into smaller components, Lévi-Strauss proposed that culture is the product of permanent mental structures of the human mind. Based on this assumption, he suggested that anthropologists focus on how these mental structures contribute to creating the categories and concepts of a society. Structuralists believe people's underlying mental structures and thought processes are the same across cultures. Nevertheless, cultures differ because, over time,

cultures created different, and often elaborate, systems of classifications to express these deep structures. In other words, although they differ on the surface, cultures are rooted in the same universal mental structures.

According to Levi-Strauss, one crucial mental structure is universal to all cultures, namely the so-called binary opposition (Levi-Strauss, 1955). Binary oppositions are theoretical constructs that oppose one another and can only be defined concerning one another. Examples of binary oppositions are hot and cold, female and male, and culture and nature. This focus on relationships is another crucial tenet of structuralism, besides the proposal that mental structures are universal and fixed. For structuralists, culture is cognitive, and as such, it comprises mental elements and meaningful relations between them. Therefore, we cannot explain elements of cultures in isolation. Structuralists suggest that anthropologists, if they want to understand a culture, should investigate the relationships between the mental elements and how these elements relate to the broader system of meaning.

The French anthropologist Louis Dumont applied structuralist ideas to anthropological thinking about value (Dumont, 1980). He drew inspiration from the classical structuralist position that culture can be understood as binary oppositions of equally important categories, such as hot/cold or male/female. Dumont argued that these opposites are not equal but hierarchically structured. One part of the pair is superior and usually contains the lower, inferior part. For instance, in most cultures, 'man' usually incorporates 'woman'.

We cannot consider opposite categories in isolation, so Dumont. He holds on to the structuralist idea that we must also pay attention to the relationship between parts and wholes. He illustrates this with the example of the left and the right hand. We can only understand why the right side is considered superior when we look at the right and left side's relationship with the whole body. A different relationship, a different constellation of parts and whole, yields other places in the hierarchy (Dumont, 2013, p. 298).

Dumont proposed that cultures are meaning systems, or as he calls it, 'ideologies'. These meaning systems comprise categories and ideas people use to make sense of the world. Dominant values, which are the ideas or

categories on top of the hierarchy, hierarchically order the categories and ideas of the meaning system.

Note that the idea that values are hierarchically structured resonates with ideas from other anthropologists. For instance, recall that Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck acknowledged the hierarchical organization of values in ordering preferable responses to existential concerns. According to Dumont, the position of elements is determined by their relationship to the paramount value. The highest value, the category at the top of the hierarchy, is considered superior. For instance, purity is the paramount category (value) in the Indian caste system. Thus, purity is the 'highest' idea that encompasses 'lower' ideas, like power. This hierarchy affects the social order because the priest is superior to worldly leaders, such as the king.

Dumont puts a twist on the idea of value hierarchies because he suggests that hierarchies are reversible and that multiple orders can exist simultaneously in one culture. Dumont proposes the existence of parallel value domains whose ordering depends on the social domain and "different 'levels' hierarchized together with the corresponding entities" (Dumont, 2013, p. 302).

The Indian caste system illustrates the idea of reversed hierarchies related to social domains. Within the religious realm, the king is lower in the hierarchy than the priest because purity is the principal value in the religious domain. However, the ordering is reversed in the political domain, because the king is superior to the priest here. After all, the principal value in the political domain is power. So, the priest must defer to the king in the political domain.

Critics of structuralist theories argue that these theories neglect people's creative agency in transforming culture and change of social systems. In contrast to structuralist accounts of value, action-oriented approaches shift the focus away from mental structures, systems, wholes, and elements. Instead, action-oriented accounts emphasize human agency and focus on the role of actions for value creation.

David Graeber proposed the most recent anthropological action-oriented account of values. However, before we take a closer look at his account, we will focus on two anthropologists whose work on value has paved the way for Graeber's theory: Nancy Munn and Terence Turner.

In the 1990s, the US American anthropologist Nancy Munn (1992) developed an influential action-oriented account of values, emphasizing the process by which value is created and sustained through human activity. In her study of the people of Gawa, a small island near Papua New Guinea, she shows that fame is the prime value of the Gawans and that fame can be created and destroyed through action. Exchange of goods, for instance, can increase fame, whereas consumption and witchcraft can destroy it. To extend their fame, Gawans must connect themselves to prestigious shells. People can acquire these shells through a chain of exchange, which Munn calls value transformation. Items with low value, like fruits, can be exchanged for items of higher value, like canoes. Ultimately, people can exchange items with a high enough value for precious shells of a low value, which people can then trade for shells of even higher value.

In her fieldwork, Munn also discovered that for the Gawans, certain qualities signify value. For instance, the heaviness of the body indicates negative value because it means that the person has eaten the food instead of exchanging it for something more valuable.

Terence Turner (2008) proposed another theory of value that, like Munn's, concentrates on the role of human practice in value creation. Turner draws on the Marxist idea that value is the outcome of labor. The concept of labor here signifies the creative activity by which humans transform the environment, themselves, and others. Thus, labor includes more than just the material production of items and comprises reproductive labor, such as household work, childcare, or education. The more labor goes into producing something, the higher its value.

Besides the idea that value is the product of labor, Turner brings another Marxian thought to the anthropological thinking about value, namely that value is often represented in some material form. Money is a familiar example here, but the representation can take other material forms, as the shells of the Gawans illustrate. Furthermore, the material representation of value is not limited to objects. For instance, in some rituals, the function performed by someone can indicate their high social position.

The accounts of Turner and Munn, and Marx's labor theory of value, have inspired David Graeber's (2001) action-oriented approach to value.

It is fair to say that his account is one of the most comprehensive anthropological investigations of value to date.

There are three crucial elements in Graeber's account of value. First, Graeber stresses the role of agency in value creation. Human action, particularly labor, is the source of value. Here, Graeber echoes Turner's ideas that labor is more than just the production of commodities. Second, Graeber emphasizes that for actions to be meaningful, they need to be part of a broader social or cultural system of meaning. Graeber suggests that we should think of value "as the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality—even if in many cases the totality in question exists primarily in the actor's imagination." (Graeber, 2001, p. xii). What this reference to imagined social totality means is that value is always social in the sense that "value can only be realized in other people's eyes" (Graeber, 2013, p. 226). Society is the simulated audience "of everyone whose opinion of you matters in some way" (Graeber, 2001, p. 76).

Third, Graeber stresses that when we think about value, we should should pay attention to how people represent value to themselves and others. Value, to Graeber, "…is the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves" (Graeber, 2001, p. 45). These forms of representation, however, should not be confused with what they represent. Value is represented through a medium. For instance, money can represent value, but value can also be represented through heirlooms or, as Munn has shown, through shells that are traded with other people.

Graeber's account is the most recent proposal of an anthropological theory of value, but a central unifying anthropological theory of value is still forthcoming. However, some authors have extended and refined existing accounts. For instance, the Canadian anthropologist Michael Lambek (2013) has recently proposed an account that refines theories that take seriously human agency in value creation. Drawing on Aristotle and Hannah Arendt, Lambek distinguishes between action and work, or doing and making. Doing and action are focused on human relationships, whereas work, or making, focuses on creating things. Like Munn, Turner, and Graeber, Lambek is inspired by Marx's ideas about how objects become valuable. The Marxist view is that acts can congeal into objects because of the labor that went into their production. Sometimes, these

objects become detached from this labor process, for instance, when they circulate through markets and are exchanged with other commodities.

Based on the distinction between work (or making) and doing, Lambek asks whether, in the domain of doing, which concerns human relationships, there are processes of value creation and circulation that are analogous to processes in the realm of work. He answers in the affirmative and proposes that "ethical value is to action (doing something) as material value is to production (making something)" (Lambek, 2013, p. 141). Like labor that congeals in objects, value-creating performative acts, like rituals, can congeal too. Value creation always requires a cultural value system that a group acknowledges. The value system grounds the recognition of value-creating actions, like rituals. In doing, the value of the performative act congeals not in a material object but in the effect the performative act has on the minds of the audience. Because group members will recognize the value-creating performative actions of the ritual, it perpetuates the value system.

However, value can also take an objective form. For instance, the value of ancestors can be attached to or stored in objects, like relics, which can be used in ritualistic actions, which, in turn, affirm the value of the relic. Crucially, the objectified value depends on activities of valuation, which sustain values. As Lambek puts it, "In effect, to have, store, and emit value, the relics must be properly valued. Value, even that congealed as the sanctity of the ancestors, is understood here expressly as a consequence of human acts and attention. Value circulates through human activity and rapidly evaporates in the absence of such activity" (Lambek, 2013, p. 150).

So far, in this chapter, we have focused on the central ideas and strands of anthropological value theory. In the next section, we will consider how anthropologists conceptualize value change.

4.3 Value Change

There has yet to be a full-fledged anthropological account of value change.

However, we can discern glimpses of what an account of value change could look like in anthropologists' treatment of phenomena like cultural

change. Joel Robbins (2007), for instance, proposes that we think about culture in terms of value. Accordingly, we can characterize cultural change in terms of changes in values. Such a change, Robbins argues, can occur when new values are introduced in society or when the hierarchical relations between traditional values are transformed. When confronted with new values, people often try to maintain the significance of old values and are motivated to defend the position of dominant values in the hierarchy. Despite these conservative efforts, sometimes new stable value structures arise in the process of change.[4]

An anthropological theory of value change could draw on the work of Marshall Sahlins, one of the most influential anthropologists of the past five decades.[5] Sahlins put his proposals in terms of culture instead of value. For instance, in his influential book *Culture and Practical Reason* (Sahlins, 2000 [1976], Sahlins argues that culture is a pattern of meaning. Much like Dumont, Sahlins subscribes to the structuralist paradigm that culture depends on an underlying structure of cultural categories. Through the lens of structuralism, Sahlins wants to illuminate cultural change. In Sahlins' model of culture change, there is a process of reproductive transformation of cultural categories. People use existing cultural categories to interpret new social developments. In response to a novel situation, the cultural categories are only partly reproduced because they change meaning. This meaning change leads to a structural change in culture because it also changes the relationship between cultural categories (Sahlins, 1985).

Structuralism could inspire the development of an anthropological theory of value change. However, scholars have often criticized structuralist accounts of value, like Dumont's, for thinking that cultural systems are static and for the alleged inability to explain how cultural systems change. In Dumont's case, however, this criticism seems to be unwarranted because he can be interpreted as a thinker of cultural change (see Robbins & Siikala, 2014). It also seems like structuralist accounts have

[4] The value-based notion of culture is a useful perspective for making sense of cultural changes. It has been applied to cases like the changes of value in a group in Papua New Guinea during conversion to Christianity (Robbins, 2017).

[5] I would like to express my gratitude to Ton Otto, who brought to my attention Sahlins' contribution to anthropology.

the resources to account for value change. Dumont provides the theoretical tools to account for some forms of value change. For instance, Dumont acknowledges that ideas and categories, and their hierarchical relationship, are not static. Put differently, the value rankings can change. Ideas can gain importance and status; when this happens, the new 'high' idea will encompass the 'lower' idea (Dumont, 2013, p. 301).

Unsurprisingly, some authors, like Knut Rio and Olaf Smedal (2008), draw inspiration from Dumont's ideas and propose that value systems are not fixed once and for all but that they need to be reproduced. Similarly, by focusing on the tension between opposing values, Knut Rio (2014) emphasizes that in all societies, the process of valuation and the hierarchization of values is in constant flux. Tensions and conflicts between values are a crucial feature of society and are not limited to periods of cultural change. The value formations that organize society are never entirely stable but are constantly in motion.

4.4 Summary

This chapter provided an overview of essential value theories in anthropology, including early anthropological accounts, like Kluckhohn's and Strodtbeck's theory of value orientations, which was an attempt to provide a tool for cross-cultural comparison. This theory connects values to universal concerns that every society or culture must address. The chapter also outlined the structuralist approach to value, specifically Dumont's influential account, where values are part of a hierarchical meaning system. Furthermore, the chapter introduced so-called action-oriented approaches to value (Munn, Turner, Graeber). Action-oriented accounts focus on agency and how humans actively create and reproduce values within a cultural system of meaning. Finally, the chapter also briefly touched on value change. Although anthropology has the conceptual resources necessary to develop a theory of value change, such a theory is still forthcoming.

Thinking about value and developing a theory of value involves metaphysical assumptions and conceptual distinctions. This means that

accounts of value come with some philosophical baggage. The philosophical inquiry into value will be the subject of the next chapter.

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