
Theoretical and Practical Tools for a Value Discussion - Basics of Value Research

Helkama, Klaus 2015. *Suomalaisten arvot. Mikä meille on oikeasti tärkeää?* Kirjokansi 60. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura. 252 pp. III. ISBN 978-952-222-632-7.

I suppose that every ethnologist identifies his/her studies – both through the perspectives of the research subject and the perspectives of the researcher’s interests – via the presence of values. Sometimes, values resonate rather loudly and can distinctively be perceived, but sometimes they might be hidden, even at a secret level of our subconscious. In any case, values are something that ethnologists can identify during various research processes and are capable of analysing and interpreting chronologically in the past, present and future. Klaus Helkama, a professor in social psychology, has written a comprehensive book about the values of the Finns (*Values of the Finns: What is really important to us?*). The book examines Finnish values, especially at a national level, from the perspectives of political science and social psychology.

The word ‘arvo’ (value) in the Finnish has typically referred to the idea of price value, also nowa-

days in other Finno-Ugrian languages, for example in Vepsian (arv) and Hungarian (ár). In Finnish, however, this word has had the ambiguous meanings of referring to both price and appreciation. Social psychologists understand values as abstractions and as general desirable goals for the actions taken by human beings. Typical values include, for example, freedom, equality and world peace as a desirable situation for the world. Also, such virtues as diligence, politeness and bravery are considered positive values. Values are essentially connected to the choices people make and they always affect the solutions found at personal, political or even business levels. Helkama provides straightforward interpretations of career choices and the values behind them. Humanists and social scientists are, for example, seen as carriers of universalistic values. According to Helkama, humanists appreciate global equity, the beauty of the arts and nature more than people in other fields. Dear fellow humanist – do you recognize yourself in this description?

It seems that generalisations fascinate social scientists. The first part of the book is concerned with our national self-image and the idea of common values. Helkama admits that Finns are not a consistent population, but suggests that at the level of mental images there are some basic shared

values. Such mental images manifest themselves, for example, through art works; in this study, Helkama takes examples from Aleksis Kivi's classic novel *Seitsemän veljestä* (Seven brothers). This is a rather expected and not-surprising approach. More interesting is the section where Helkama begins to process personal values and the relation of values to actual operations. Helkama describes values such as equality, diligence, honesty, education and ambition to defend the nation. But the most interesting phenomena in these sections has to do with his descriptions of the backgrounds of different researchers and their value models in the field of value research. Helkama summarises in a fascinating manner the important research done by famous value researchers, such as Ronald Inglehard, Geert Hofstede, Shalom Schwartz and Helkama himself. At the same time, he talks about the principles of scientific research – how theories and models actually develop over the years.

In this review, I want to focus on the case of Shalom Schwartz, an Israeli American social psychologist who revolutionised the basics of value research by demonstrating that values form a psychological circle, a two-dimensional system with its own strong regularities. Schwartz identified 40 values that have essentially the same meanings in different cultures. Indicators in cross-cultural psychology go through a process of double translation; for example, first an indicator is translated from English to Finnish, and then another translator translates the indicator from Finnish to English – without ever seeing the original text. Then, the final indicator is developed by discussing the problems that arise during this translation process. In fact, the inside cover of the book shows a picture of the value model developed by Schwartz. There are in total ten value types and 40 value sections that help explain the value types. Schwartz's model consists of two principal dimensions: surpassing oneself, i.e. (over-)emphasising oneself, and maintenance, i.e. a readiness for change. Value types and all of the value sections occur inside these particular dimensions. As Helkama admits, this model is quite rough and statistically generalised. But in social sciences, value research is anyway somehow like that — quantitative and statistical. It is also good to remember that how

well a theory works depends always on the research questions and purposes. The value model proposed by Schwartz highlights the big lines of study, and it could be useful also for humanists – at least as a starting point or as an inspirational theory to challenge in your own research.

Klaus Helkama argues that we easily overestimate the value changing process and underestimate the permanence of values. Almost every generation thinks that they are living at a time constituting a true turning point for values, even though the real change in values is usually very slow. The most relevant change in values after the 1970s has to do with the fact that individuality has been strengthened, but after the year 2005 this value has been seemed to become more communal than before. I was especially excited by the knowledge that Schwartz's model can be used also to anticipate changes in values in the future. These changes can be traced from the system of values in Schwartz's model; when one value becomes more important in society, the values near this one particular value in the psychological circle will also be strengthened. For example, if safety becomes more important, then power and uniformity will also be strengthened according to the model. On the other hand, at the same time the importance of the values at the opposite end of the spectrum will decrease. Sometimes there can be pressures from different directions and values will change in different ways, which makes the anticipation processes quite challenging. There might also be changes in how values are distributed and in terms just of what cover. And naturally also the meanings of different values can change over time.

Anyway – it was very exciting to read about the model itself and its applications. Helkama thinks that in the field of value research, the role of ethnologists and researchers in other humanities mainly has to do with providing the historical and cultural interpretations of values. Helkama does not provide many examples from everyday life (with the exception of his own experiences of swimming and swimming pools). In most cases, he writes about experiences drawn from the academic working field and uses survey answers as examples of value choices and changes. Based

on the perspective adopted in this study, I think that ethnologists have many possibilities to contribute to value research – not only in the sense of providing histories, chronologies and cultural meanings, but also at the theoretical level of the value models. How can Schwartz’s model be used and modified in ethnological research? How can central value types be realised (or is it possible at all) in different ethnological cases? A very useful section at the end of the book is the one on lit-

erature tips – there are many current scientific sources available for anyone interested in value theories or specific topics (the national self-image of Finns, individual values, values regarding nature and equality, Finnish work and honour, integrity, ambition to defence, education and wisdom) dealt with in the book.

Maija Mäki
