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## Reflections on Western values in South Africa

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Reflections on Western Values in South Africa:  
Contextualising Local Beliefs.

**Werner Soontiens**  
&  
**Carolyn Dickie**

**Curtin Business School**  
**Curtin University of Technology**  
**Perth, Western Australia**  
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## **Author Information:**

### **PROFILES**

(1) **Dr Werner Soontiens** is the Acting-Head of the CBS School of Management; with a background in economics, his lecturing and research interests in global business and international management include the topics of cultural values and organisational ethics in Africa and South-East Asia.

(2) **Dr Carolyn Dickie** lectures in the School of Management in Curtin Business School in Perth, Western Australia; she specialises in teaching and research in management, ethics, cross-cultural communication and human resource management in Australia and South-East Asia.

### **CONTACT DETAILS**

#### **(1) Dr Werner Soontiens**

School of Management  
Curtin Business School  
GPO Box U 1987  
PERTH 6845  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Telephone: +61 8 9266 7716  
Fax: +61 8 9266 7897  
Mobile:  
Email: [Werner.Soontiens@cbs.curtin.edu.au](mailto:Werner.Soontiens@cbs.curtin.edu.au)

#### **(2) Dr Carolyn Dickie**

Lecturer in Human Resource Management  
School of Management  
Curtin Business School  
GPO Box U 1987  
PERTH 6845  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Telephone: +61 8 9266 1367  
Fax: +61 8 9266 7897  
Mobile: +61 409 344 872  
Email: [Carolyn.Dickie@cbs.curtin.edu.au](mailto:Carolyn.Dickie@cbs.curtin.edu.au)

## **Reflections on Western Values in South Africa: Contextualising Local Beliefs.**

### **Abstract:**

Recognition of the world as a 'global village' in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a political urgency to accomplish a socio-economic transformation in South Africa, resulted in a strong push towards Western values being promoted in individuals to achieve institutional flexibility and congruity. Because South Africa has a prolonged history of overseas people settling in the region, together with ethnic diversity and conflicts, the relevancy of Western values in the traditional or culturally diverse South African environment may be as contentious as their acceptance and implementation. Consequently, the current paper is used to make a preliminary examination of the notion and nature of Western values within a South African framework. Findings suggest that social and community values, as well as environmental values, are deemed to be less important to South Africans than are family life values or job and workplace values. However, although lifestyle values are indicated to be most important, this cluster has a low reliability compared with the high reliability associated with environment values.

## **Reflections on Western Values in South Africa: Contextualising Local Beliefs.**

### **Introduction**

South Africa was recognised as going through a period of intense and accelerating change at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Corder 1993); one which not only created considerable anxiety as people's way of life was being threatened and altered, but one that suggested recent value shifts in South African society were likely to continue into the new millennium. Consequently, as the system of racial separation in the guise of policies and practices of apartheid came to an end during the final decade of last century, world-wide attention turned to the process by those who would be informed about one of the most important global-justice issues at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Armstrong 2001).

Given the history of conflict and diversity in South Africa it may be inappropriate to talk about a uniform or common national culture in the South African context, where the concept of ethnicity is more relevant. However, it has been argued that, "given the oppressive nature of the *apartheid* era, it is possible that the values that underlie culture have adapted to be in consonance with behaviour, albeit forced behaviour" (Thomas and Bendixen 2000: 508). The discontinuity of concepts is a reminder that "all of us are foreigners, almost everywhere" – proclaimed by an African panellist as a rebuke to those who think that it is only other people that are foreigners and only students from elsewhere can be described as 'international' (Lancaster 2004).

South Africa's people and cultures are diverse; there are 11 official languages and it would be difficult to identify a single South African culture. However, since the country became a genuine democracy in the 1990s there has been a clear encouragement of 'Africanness' by Thabo Mbeki and the African Renaissance Project. Similarly, there is the formation of a Natives Club, a black think-tank that brings together African intellectuals to promote African values and perspectives (Nyanto 2006) and a determination to build a country on Afro-centric rather than Euro-centric principles (West 2006).

## **South African Convergence/Divergence**

The colonial occupation of Africa has created infrastructure and systems based on a Western mindset; one requiring adaptation to traditional African values and society. UNESCO (1997) undertook a conference that established the view that management practices in Africa are built on Western theories and models; a situation highlighting the need for African managers to identify common cultural values that could be integrated with management models and practice. However, the use of Western value frameworks in business is criticised because it:

- assumes convergence of African values, and
- lacks relevancy and appropriateness in the African value framework.

Subsequently, Booysen (2000) concedes that the face of South African leadership is becoming increasingly more diverse and inclusive, which turns up the heat on attempts to identify appropriate management values and practices.

In a research project undertaken among university students, Van Der Walt (1997) found that African students appreciated the Western notion of time; this was interpreted as a change in values, and a convergence between the traditionally opposing values spheres. On the other hand, Western students rejected any notion of traditional religion and regarded supernatural occurrences as superstition without validation, thereby exhibiting a strong divergence from African values. From a bi-cultural (African-Anglo) perspective, it is important to acknowledge that economic development is linked closely to some Western values and behaviour; these include attitude towards time, future orientation and a high level of personal responsibility and accountability. The traditional Japanese society exemplifies these 'Western' characteristics but, similar to 'African' values, is also characterised by a strong communal society with high levels of group interaction and adherence; thus, in their approach, work is valued not only as a contractual relationship but a real, long-term commitment to developing a new community. Such a commitment is characterised by self-sacrifice and responsibility (Mbigi & Maree 1995).

Given the confusing state of the application of Western values in South Africa and the need to clarify existing African values, the current study was undertaken to identify local beliefs and related values/behaviours to provide a preliminary understanding of groups of values important to South Africans.

## **Background on Values**

Values that have become social norms have two features described as the complementary end-means dimensions of value: they

- involve a collective, shared evaluation of what behaviour ought to be, and
- translate into sanctions to induce a particular behaviour (White 1998).

Kempton et al. (1995) argue that the cultural framework shapes the issues people see as important; also it affects the way they act on issues. In early work by Rokeach (1973), described by Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002), values were considered to be a centrally held, enduring belief that guides actions and judgment across specific situations and beyond immediate goals. Similarly, Jehn et al. (1997) define values as the individual's fundamental beliefs regarding the desirability of behavioural choices. The broader approach of Thomson et al. (1999) confirms values as implicated beliefs, discourses and identities, while simultaneously representing a given worth in particular communities or economies.

The importance of values is reflected in the ways they interact and influence social organizations, behaviour and market outcomes (Anderson 2000). Values play a crucial role in everyday life in society; they facilitate choices, motivate ideas and guide behaviour (Oppenhuisen & Sikkel 2002). From a social normative perspective, values give rise to purposeful or 'rational' behaviour. Thus, Hosmer (1987) is emphatic that values define priorities that are critical for the resolution of ethical dilemmas, and Smola and Sutton (2002) indicate that they define what people believe to be right or wrong.

According to Lindbeck (1997) values emerge as a result of spontaneous social interaction between individuals in groups; they are used as norms to express social identity and, therefore, serve as measures against which behaviour is assessed. In constituting and reflecting expected behaviour, values are used to enforce sanctions such as blame and praise, social inclusion and exclusion (Anderson 2000). Similarly, Thomson et al. (1999) note that the values of young people are implicated deeply in processes of inclusion and exclusion. People assess themselves in relation to others through shared experiences; actions which underscore the importance of group affiliations and values as a socially embedded reality (Marske 1996). Thus, though values can be lived collectively and reflect the range of human experiences, they are not simply a reflection of behaviour nor solely dependent upon deeply held collective beliefs. For Anderson (2000), the puzzle is not about why people adhere to values, but how the values become normative in the first

place. Thus, the duality of human nature is bound in the tension between individuality and social interaction.

### **Values; Relationships, Groups and Organisations**

People are born into existing norms and patterns of conduct of the society and culture within which they live. Evolving from the encompassing environment, values are socially transmitted from generation to generation and reinforced by social sanctions. Ultimately, the social knowledge becomes part of one's world view and ideology, and one's individual values are established. Robbins et al. (1999) noted that values are rarely questioned within the society, and it is assumed that everyone else shares similar values; i.e., for each person, their values come to be considered as self-evident truths. Consequently, the implication is that multicultural groups involving cross cultural interaction are charged with overcoming assumptions, norms and behaviours derived from different value systems. The challenge is that the evolution and acceptance of norms in society are associated closely with care and respect about opinions of others concerning how one ought to behave (Anderson 2000). The identity of most people is constituted by their membership as collective agents in social groups. Although youth in society approve of consumer differences such as tastes in food and clothing, they disapprove of being different by behaving rudely or using foul language (Thomson et al. 1999). Also, social groups are highly dynamic; therefore, value determination is subject to cultural evolution and its impact on social outcomes. Group dynamics, based on the theory of conventions, implies that if all but one person adheres to a value, the remaining person will tend also to adhere to the value (Anderson 2000).

Smola and Sutton (2002) argue that the subject of values and value differences is important in today's work and organisational environments where managers respond to the changing values of their employees and individual value systems are likely to affect organisational values. Young people form the workforce of the future, and their attitudes, behaviours and work values will be shaped and influenced by their cultural background, and also their work group experiences. Early work experiences and home circumstances shape future workers (Loughlin and Barling (2001); yet for ages, older employees have complained about the work ethics and values of younger generations. The result is that researchers support the notion that a single widely held belief about work, such as the universal work ethic, is no longer viable; thus, studying values and beliefs, and comparing their relative importance, provides a mode for discerning actual similarities and differences among groups and cultures (Elsayed-Elkhoully and Buda 1997).

From an organisational perspective, values represent a fundamental starting point for the theory of motivation. Fehr and Gächter (in Anderson 2000) are described as finding that, although motivation in a work environment is strongly driven by self-interest, underlying group interaction, approval and cooperation is determined by group values. Similarly, Hardin (in Anderson 2000) claims that, in an organisational environment, operating values and rules lead to general conformity based on the high social cost of deviating.

### **Western Values – Divergence/Convergence**

It is arguable that the single most recognised, publicised, promoted and important work value is the 'protestant work ethic'. Essentially reflecting 'Western' work values, the concept was established by Max Weber in 1904 and encompasses values of hard work, thrift, discipline, industry and independence. Although not necessarily consciously promoted, historically the ethic has been associated with economic progress and growth. Tardiff (2002) argues that relationships among societies and cultures are subject to market rules, and 'values' are exported via various media channels. Initially, Europe (the 'West') exported its values by means of exploration and colonisation of the rest of the world; in recent years, occupation has been replaced by an exporting of values by communication and information technology. The accessibility and development of technology has contributed to unprecedented exposure to Western values in the rest of the world. The consequent influence leading to individuals and societies increasingly becoming westernised; either they gradually accept western values or even replace their traditional values with those from the west.

The process of gradually moving towards uniform values is labelled 'convergence'; it reflects the degree to which all members of a group agree on values about behaviour, group processes and intra-group relationships (Jehn et al. 1997). Although value convergence and the acceptance of specific group values reduce the likelihood of conflict, potential liabilities include complacency, stagnation and groupthink. On a global scale, the convergence argument hinges on the dynamic nature of cultures and the increased modernisation of societies. Yang (1998) found that modernisation and an increase in wealth established a high degree of agreement on the characteristics and values of a modern person, irrespective of their culture. Similarly, Smith and Bond (1999) established that in developing countries the argument for convergence often is popularised among youth.

The value similarity among group members influences the amount of conflict within the group. Since values determine behaviour, groups with uniform values are more likely to agree on goals and tasks thereby reducing conflict (Jehn et al. 1997). This suggests the possibility of tension occurring in groups with a high level of dissimilarity among group members. According to McPherson and Smith-Lovin (1987) people project a higher level of trustworthiness in, and find it easier to communicate with, people who share the same values. In addition, people feel more confident in such an environment that behaviour and expectations are going to be similar, and easier, with which to work.

However, the unique origins and complexities of cultures are likely to push cultural development in unpredictable and different directions, thereby making convergence towards common values unlikely. In a globalised environment different ethnic and cultural groups need to work towards sustaining their values (Dahl 1996). Because it is believed that ethical behaviour enhances success in the long run (Abratt et al. 1992) and multinational companies must have a sense of integrity (Koehn 2005), leaders in developing countries increasingly take a stance to distinguish themselves from the West, and assert their cultural uniqueness and values (Smith and Bond 1999). In particular, the intention is to avoid value dissimilarity in terms of differences in work ethic, work values and motivations when approaching tasks; e.g., Jehn et al. (1997) found that differences in values contribute to conflict in groups and often lead to negative repercussions on the group performance. Individual dissimilarity, or divergence, impacts on individual involvement in conflict and is related strongly to group conflict (Pelled et al. 2001). Value diversity occurs when members of a group differ in terms of what they think, and the purpose and goal of the group. In most cases, value diversity increases task, process and relational conflict (Jehn et al. 1999). Group diversity refers to the amount of heterogeneity within a group or unit on certain characteristics, including value differences; from an individual perspective, divergence represents the relative difference between an individual and other team members.

## **Methodology**

The research instrument used in the current study was derived from Sauer et al. (1995). The questionnaire was developed to ascertain the different values associated with the concepts of family life, lifestyle, social and community, job and work, and environmental issues. As a preliminary study, the instrument was administered to 187 South African respondents.

Although there are a number of sources in which a society's values can be found, they are all likely to be labelled as somewhat unrealistic or biased; therefore, it is considered that some caution be taken with results. Oppenhuisen and Sikkell (2002) postulate the use of original data as the best source from which to analyse and interpret values. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions representing five value dimensions. Statements were made in respect of values, and respondents rated the statements on a six-point Likert scale, giving it a somewhat forced nature whilst avoiding the unsatisfactory nature of 'neutral/average' scores (Crask et al. 1995). Further, the data was analysed to report on mean scores, while the calculation of Cronbach's alpha is deemed suitable for multi-item scales using interval measurements; the alpha score reflects the internal consistency that measures the degree to which instrument items are homogeneous, and reflect the same underlying construct (Cooper and Emory 1995). Alpha coefficients range from zero to one, with a score of 0.6 or less generally indicating an unsatisfactory internal consistency.

## **Data**

### *1. Demographics*

Data collection targeted 187 students enrolled in a commerce degree in an established tertiary institution in South Africa; respondents consisted of two-thirds female and one-third male. The age composition was between 18 and 24 years, with the exception of 17 students older than 24. All students had African backgrounds and were assumed to be representative of South African youths.

### *2. Social & Community*

Although the social and community value is a complex concept with many definitions, Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) introduced the dimensions of a belief in providing inputs and ideas on important issues and a willingness to contribute to the betterment of the community as key components of valuing a community. Thomson et al. (1999) argues that 'Western' values are subject to progressive decline in the role of tradition in society and the subsequent formation of new values. The disintegration of the moral fabric of society has caused substantial damage to the values and integrity of the individual (Tayyab and Tariq 2001).

Table 1 indicates relatively low values attached by respondents to social and community values. The highest value in the cluster is the possibility to influence public affairs, indicating perhaps the relative importance of South Africa having a democratic and accessible governing environment. Global peace and an effort to eliminate hunger and diseases attracted the lowest scores among all 25 values on the questionnaire.

**Table 1: South African Social & Community Values**

<b>Value Dimensions</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>Var.</b>	<b>Corr.</b>	<b>Cron. A</b>
Global peace	3.40	2.57	0.408	0.708
Possibilities to influence public affairs	3.71	2.37	0.449	0.695
A concern for general human welfare	3.50	2.48	0.507	0.676
Effort of society to eliminate hunger & disease	3.47	1.96	0.672	0.596
Personal participation in organising activities	3.57	2.36	0.418	0.709
<b>CLUSTER</b>	<b>3.53</b>			<b>0.727</b>

The relative large variation and correlation indicate that respondents differed substantially in how important these values were to them. The cluster has a high reliability as reflected in the Cronbach alpha of close to 0.7 for four items.

### *3. Lifestyle*

Marske (1996) points to the demise of Western culture and subsequent decline of values which translates to a rise in crime, violence, a loss of moral civility and increasing greed, selfishness and a diminution of the common good. Western society increasingly experiences an emphasis on material values (Burroughs & Rindfleisch 2002), together with more of the so-called work-life balance which means more leisure and less work. The internal conflict is that an excessive focus on materialism is considered to contribute to the breakdown of civic responsibility and, thus, good society. In this environment, value or worth reflects the commercial and financial value attributed to a material product, and the enhancement of one's well-being through association with the product.

**Table 2: South African Lifestyle Values**

<b>Value Dimensions</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>Var.</b>	<b>Corr.</b>	<b>Cron. A</b>
An easy, quiet life	4.18	1.03	0.013	0.491
An exciting life full of adventure	4.01	1.01	0.145	0.352
Enough time for hobbies and interests	4.08	0.92	0.338	0.198

An interesting, full life	3.96	0.99	0.318	0.231
Being helpful to others	4.05	1.01	0.199	0.308
CLUSTER	4.05			0.370

The lifestyle values reported in Table 2 reflect on the importance of balancing personal and work demands. The cluster attracted the highest mean scores indicating the importance to the respondents. Achieving an easy, quiet life was deemed important, as well as maintaining time for hobbies and interests. All except one item scored higher than four on the mean score, while the variances and correlations were among the lowest of all values measured. A major limitation in this cluster is the doubt cast over its reliability as indicated by the low Cronbach alpha across the five dimensions.

#### 4. Family Life

Family values represent the importance of developing and maintaining relationships with one's immediate family, and its being the source of purpose and meaning in one's life (Favor 1981). Strong family values are argued to reflect the importance of children and married relationships (Burroughs & Rindfleisch 2002). Thomson et al. (1999) conclude that young people associate the family value with being in a unique relationship, differentiated from any other relationship on the basis of honour, trust and respect.

**Table 3: South African Family Life Values**

<b>Value Dimensions</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>Var.</b>	<b>Corr.</b>	<b>Cron. A</b>
Deep love with a partner	3.96	1.50	0.322	0.396
Basic material security	4.07	1.46	0.292	0.412
A happy family life	3.84	1.73	0.284	0.439
A high standard of living	4.01	1.56	0.233	0.451
The bringing up of children	4.13	1.22	0.251	0.465
CLUSTER	4.00			0.487

The value of family life reported in Table 3 was reasonably high, with three aspects in the cluster scoring a mean value higher than four. The raising of children was deemed most important followed by the value of a basic material security. Variances on the values were reasonable but, again, the Cronbach alpha was too low to ensure reliability.

### 5. Job and Work

Work values are related to beliefs, attitudes, preferences and interests at work; conceptually, they are different from other job-related constructs (Tayyab & Tariq 2001). Kanungo (as reported in Burroughs & Rindfleisch 2002) defines work values as the extent to which one's work or career is placed at the centre of their life. The intrinsic nature of work values result in a direct effect on work performance, motivation and commitment. Smola and Sutton (2002) confirm that work values are enhanced further by a move away from company loyalty towards association of self-worth in one's job. Understanding generational differences may become a critical tool for managers seeking higher productivity, innovation and corporate citizenship.

**Table 4: South African Job & Work Values**

<b>Value Dimensions</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>Var.</b>	<b>Corr.</b>	<b>Cron. A</b>
An interesting, attractive job	3.88	1.69	0.538	0.599
A steady source of plenty of money	4.01	1.82	0.328	0.688
Improved physical working environment	4.04	1.61	0.524	0.600
Good relations with fellow workers	3.95	1.96	0.352	0.673
Job acknowledged as having social value	4.07	1.57	0.490	0.617
CLUSTER	3.99			0.688

The job and work cluster in Table 4 seemingly is as important as the lifestyle cluster. The items in the group clustered relatively tightly with most items having a mean score of about four. The acceptable reliability of scores, as shown by the Cronbach alpha values of 5.99 and 6.00 or more, also indicate a reasonably small variance with all items being below 2.00. Consequently, one can have confidence in the job and work cluster indicating important values with acceptable reliability of interdependence among the dimensions.

### 6. Environment

Environmental values, as with most others, involve trade-offs based on causal linkages; choices influencing complexity, uncertainty and stakeholder views must be made to reflect a larger value or belief system (Fryxell & Low 2003). In the late 1990s, environmental beliefs and values evolved rapidly among 'Western' society (Kempton et al. 1995). Furthermore, beliefs and values influence preferences for or against environmental policies. On a global scale, the inability of a few countries to implement and/or enforce environmental regulations reduces environmental standards to the lowest common denominator (Gleeson & Low 2001).

The environmental values cluster represented in Table 5 is the tightest cluster of all and has the highest Cronbach alpha scores. Although environmental values are slightly more important than the social and community values, the mean of all scores is below 3.65. The cluster does have a relative small variance and correlation of the individual dimensions.

**Table 5: South African Environmental Values**

<b>Value Dimensions</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>Var.</b>	<b>Corr.</b>	<b>Cron. A</b>
Conserve vital functions of nature	3.53	1.98	0.553	0.760
Know facts about environment	3.60	2.02	0.494	0.779
Help aesthetic impact of nature	3.63	1.94	0.641	0.734
Be active in improving environment	3.59	1.74	0.674	0.719
Positive impact of environment on health	3.51	2.01	0.511	0.774
<b>CLUSTER</b>	<b>3.57</b>			<b>0.793</b>

### **Conclusion**

The findings of research in the early 1990s indicated that the ethical beliefs of South African and Australian marketing managers were very similar despite the existence of different socio-cultural and political factors (Abratt et al. 1992). However, the last fifteen years have seen substantial changes in the delivery of Western values to South Africans via media communications and technology advances. Simultaneously, there have been unprecedented changes to the political, economic and social structures within the country. Thus, while it is not unreasonable to consider that African values of young people would be influenced by their increased exposure to ‘Western’ values, at the same time, the quest for a new national identity relevant to all South Africans has resulted in underlying traditional South African values and culture being promoted with pride and vigour. It is hard to determine the precise nature of the relative merits of African and Western values as being practised in a society that is expanding the capacities of its people so dynamically.

The current research findings, which identified some disagreement due to the low reliability of data on the values of lifestyle and family life values, could well be the result of the conflicting importance of individualism and materialism in the western mindset and the sense of communality (ubuntu) and relationship in the South African mindset. In these clusters, the focus on items such as the raising of children and an easy, quiet life are most important. The remaining three clusters had a higher reliability; the important job and work cluster indicate a high degree of

social value associated with the job. Results of the social and community cluster indicate that caring does not go beyond the local community and that the environment is valued for its beauty and aesthetic nature.

Although data indicate a mix between Western and South African values reported by South African youth, it would be necessary to further differentiate the effects of values in different regions and peoples within the country to ascertain whether or not there is a substantial convergence with Western values. Irrespective of the changing nature of values in the various sub-cultures, it is evident that South Africans now have the choice to ascertain alternative values that are nationally relevant and globally reconcilable.

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