Self-Transcendence and Group Influence

Abstract

Building on the work of Charles Taylor, Hans Joas, and Shalom Schwartz, this paper offer a synthetic model of how individual values would be changed through participation in a group. The argument is made that a more robust conceptualization of the self is needed for research on value change to advance, and then offers preliminary understandings of how self-transcendence provides an entry point to explaining when and how value commitments shift for adults. Three concepts of self-transcendence are identified from prior work, thereby clarifying a vague and oft-referenced concept, and are applied to provide an explanation of how group-level values interact with individual-level values. A full conceptual model, which integrates variation in individual self-conceptions, group values, and a value change mechanism is presented, as is a method for empirical investigation of the theory.
Introduction

Values have been identified as being highly stable across the life course of adults, and yet, they are also being targeted for change by political campaigns, religious texts, organizations and in interpersonal arguments of all kinds (Alwin, et al., 1991). Values were long present as a key concept in social theory and social psychology, fell out of scholarly popularity, and have displayed a recent resurgence as a major topic of social inquiry (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). In spite of the widespread integration of values into social research programs, explanations of value changes remain underdeveloped. By drawing upon scholars across diverse fields, including sociology, social psychology, philosophy, and theology, this paper presents a theoretical model of how an individual would have his or her values changed through participation in the community based on changes in his or her conceptions of self (Callero, 2003; James, 1982; Joas, 2000; Mead, 1913; C. Taylor, 1989).

By connecting concepts of self, values, and moral communities, this paper focuses on the mechanisms through which participation in a community might influence values, and presents a more nuanced view than those previously offered of group influence on individual values. The model offered here helps to explain both value change in adults and the disconnect between individual behavior and organizational ideals (Chaves, 2010). A robust view of the self helps to explain why individuals do not act according to the attitudes and beliefs they assert in
surveys and interviews, otherwise known as the incongruency gap (Kennedy, Beckley, MacFarlane, & Nadeau, 2009). Self-transcendence is more fully explored, and is identified as having three major usages in social theory, as an experience, as a value orientation, and as a group-level value structure. By linking fundamental value commitments, or hypergoods, to conceptions of the good and experiences of self-transcendence for a theory of value change in the group context, I provide a theoretically integrated research approach for understanding value adoption and value changes across social levels.

In this article I propose a theory of how individual value commitments can be changed through group participation by using theories of the self as developed by Charles Taylor (1989) and elaborated by Hans Joas (2000). The explicit goal is to articulate an empirically verifiable mechanism of value change that accounts for individual agency, group influence, and which links together the material and symbolic components of value commitments people are negotiating while participating in moral communities (Lichterman, 2012). The theoretical model grew out of research on value changes in a religious setting, an acutely moral community setting, but is not particular to religious settings. I draw briefly upon Durkheim’s understanding of the religious community, by noting how he provides a mechanism for understanding how one’s conscience may be shifted. That is, clarifying how an experience or experiences of self-transcendence, where the individual externalizes the pressures of group participation into an experience of
Self-Transcendence and Group Influence

radical self-objectivity and thereby is reminded of his most fundamental moral commitments (Durkheim, 1995), sets the stage for identifying a possible change in values. The experience of one’s own conscience through identification with a group then through a nuanced usage of the concept of self-transcendence, in turn, shapes personal values.

The paper is structured with a review of both values research and of how the self has been conceptualized in relation to values. In the latter, the work of Charles Taylor is introduced, specifically his articulations of the self in relation to his concept of the hypergood. Hypergood is then used to illuminate ideas of self-transcendence as used by Durkheim, Shalom Schwartz, and Hans Joas. Finally, the paper concludes with a section synthesizing interpretations of these theorists to present a model of group influence on individual value change.

Overview of Values Research

The primary orienting definition in sociological research on values was offered by Kluckhohn (Kluckhohn, 1951:395), who viewed values as “a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual, or characteristic, or group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action.” This definition held sway through the early 1970s, when criticisms and Rokeach’s (1968) definition presented a contrasting perspective on the constitutive nature of values by offering a defined universe of value categories and types, rather than conceptualizing values as broadly as
Klockhohn. Schwartz and Bilsky (1990: 882) identify five features common to most definitions of values: “values are (a) concepts or beliefs, (b) about desirable end states or behaviors, (c) that transcend specific situations, (d) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (e) are ordered by relative importance” (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990). This definition of values accurately identifies the key elements of definitions across academic disciplines and delineates them from the related concepts of attitudes, beliefs and norms. Values are distinct from attitudes and beliefs, as being more constitutive of the individuals’ self-identity, and therefore less easily changed than attitudes and beliefs, which fluctuate across social settings. Attitudes are evaluations of an object, favorable or unfavorable (Eagly & Chaiken, 2005). Beliefs are concepts that produce states of expectancy about objects, physical or social in nature (Alwin, 2001). It is also useful to distinguish values from traits, which are dispositions rather than goals (Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, & Knafo, 2002), and norms, which are based upon social context (Marini, 2000).

One aspect of values research that the Schwartz and Bilsky definition, as well as subsequent articulations, leaves unstated is how group participation relates to and conditions value adoption and change (D. M. Black, 2011; Connor & Becker, 1979; Schwartz, 2006). The call for incorporating the influence of group participation into research on individual values is widespread among values researchers (Alwin & Krosnick, 1985; Dietz, Fitzgerald, & Shwom, 2005; Hitlin
Self-Transcendence and Group Influence

& Piliavin, 2004). However, the processes by which participating in a group would shape one’s basic values, or conscience, remains under-conceptualized. Specifically, there is a recognition that the power of influence varies within the social situations across individuals. Group influences are not homogenous and any theory linking individual values to group influence must be able to account for intergroup variation, as well as variation across individuals. Within research focused on moral communities, and in particular religious ones, there is a consistent recognition that more empirical and theoretical research is needed to understand the link between group participation and individually held value constructs (Lemert, 1999; Edgell, 2012).

With this gap between individual and group value concepts in mind, I use the definition of values provided by Hitlin and Piliavin (2004: 375), to begin to make more explicit the linkages between individual value and the social organizations with which they identify and in which they participate. They suggest that an “individual’s values frame the appropriate means and ends for social action, provide motivational impetus for such actions and are vital for self-definition ”(Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). By incorporating and developing a more robust theory of self-definition into value creation and change, they open the door to focus theory upon how the value frame interacts with the values of the community field in which the individual participates and how the interaction of these value constructs functions in the coordination and negotiation of social
Self-Transcendence and Group Influence

action. Hitlin’s (Hitlin, 2003, 2011; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004) research corpus on the relationships between self, values, and social group participation marks an important development in further articulating both how values relate to action and where values originate. Most significantly, Hitlin has been able to expand upon the models of values by incorporating the question of morals, and how the individual goes about defining himself or herself in relation to the moral. This movement presents a yet-to-be developed theory for how values, group participation, and morals might interact. I further develop this aspect of social theory by using the work of moral philosopher Charles Taylor to supplement the work done by social theorists and social psychologists on the topic of how the moral, or in Taylor’s parlance the good, influences the possibility of group participation generating value change in an adult (Taylor, 1989; Hitlin, 2011).

Values and the Self

The basic research questions that remain foundational in values research were first identified by Shils and Parsons (1951). Spates (1983) expresses these basic questions within values research: How do values influence behavior? How do we explain the ways that values relate to and differ from similar concepts such as attitudes, beliefs, norms and mores? What influence does participation in social groups have on value execution and value adherence? Waves of values research review articles continue to assert that these basic mechanisms are not fully understood (Spates, 1983; Hechter, Nadel, & Michod, 1993; Hitlin & Piliavin,
As overviewed above, I think significant progress has been made in determining reasonable explanations for the first two of these, but that the weakest area in sociological theory is found when we look to answer the last question, about the cross-scale effects of group participation on individuals’ value and potential value change. Fundamentally, we need a theoretical model of how the history of an individual would interact with the social field of the community when the organization is working to generate possible changes in values. Even this goal is limited, as it sets aside the interaction effects of participation in multiple group settings where an individual is having her value structures potentially shaped and influenced in ways that might not be mutually reinforcing.

In order to understand the influence that participation in social groups has on individual value commitments, we must first understand how values fit into individual identity. The linkage between values and the self is essential to address the questions identified by Spates, because theories of changes in adult value structures, where self-conception will be challenged by changes in underlying values, lacks a strong conceptualization within the social sciences (Hitlin, 2011; Schwartz, 2011). Inherent in the question of value change is a concept of the self as a unified actor in the social world (Giddens, 1991; Lemert, 1999). A strategy for understanding value change then is to investigate the process of self-definition in relation to participation in a moral community and the negotiation individuals must undertake as they synthesize the moral instructions and expectations of
multiple communities. I present here a fundamental conceptualization of a theory of self-transcendence as a model of how value change happens that can be empirically investigated. As both Mead and James theorize, there is an internal conversation taking place between, in Mead’s terminology, the *I* that functions as the subject, and the *me* that is viewed as a social object. Through a back and forth between these aspects, the individual works out his or her self-conception. The self, then, is distinct from the notion of person, which is the label others have given to an individual (Cahill, 1998; Christman, 2009; Goffman, 1959), as the self is the internal definition each individual carries of himself or herself that is contingent, flexible and undergoing revision.

Values are seen as foundational to the individual and offer a core locus in the person for the development of commitments that can in turn define his or her conception of self (D. M. Black, 2011; Lyndon, 1996; Rokeach, 1979). Theories of agency assert that selves are in process of being developed within the contexts of action, wherein agency is operative in various permutations based on internal and external influences. It is asserted that the individual has a range of selection power within a given social setting (Sewell, 1992). In doing so, the expression of agency theory proffers support for a dual-task experience for any self in situations of public negotiation of action, in that a self experiences both structures and opportunities for agency. We can think of the self as existing as a historically conditioned entity in the most abstract sense (C. Taylor, 1989), as an identity
enacted in response to the clues given by the social context (Goffman, 1959), as a false concept created by social forces in a controlling and limiting manner (Schrag, 1997), as a goal (Kohlberg, 1981), and as distinct from ideas of person, individual and agent. My usage in this piece will see the self as the entity that an individual projects to others while interacting in public settings.

The recognition that values, traits, attitudes, norms and beliefs interact within the individual in a complex matrix that resists elucidation and clear separation is common throughout values research literature. In this light, I think a perspective that draws a distinction between common values and essential values is helpful. Charles Taylor’s key insight in Sources of the Self (1989) is his claim that concepts of the self derive, for the individual, from concepts of the good, or common values. This view requires agreeing to the idea that individuals hold concepts of the good and that these concepts in some fashion, be it limited or grand, drive the ways that an individual conceives of his or her self and that this self-conception in turn relates to the ways that individuals function as agents in given social contexts. Most significantly, it provides a foothold for sociologists investigating the process of value change because we can ask people about their ideas of the good more readily than we can ask them about their self conceptions. I would add, the definitions of the good held by an individual shift across social settings, in turn helping one to understand how the self shifts across social settings.
Self-Transcendence and Group Influence

By essential values I am referring to, in the language of Taylor, a hypergood (Taylor, 1989). Hypergoods are commitments, or essential values, one holds that fundamentally constitute the self and that when shifted or changed result in a basic shift of one’s perception of one’s self.

In the first section of Sources, Taylor (1989) explains that he is presenting a view of the self that is both aware of the historical era in which he is writing and one that can be useful for moral philosophy in a more abstract sense. The basic position is that “we have a sense of who we are through our sense of where we stand to the good” (Taylor 1989: 105). Individuals, he argues, necessarily have foundational outlooks or frames with which they both evaluate claims about the good and incorporate the claims with which they agree into views of themselves. As mentioned earlier, goods vary in import, and Taylor develops a hierarchy of goods in which those that constitute the generation of selves are understood to be hypergoods. Hypergoods are beliefs that generate obligations for which we cannot fully express a set of compelling reasons for holding. An error, Taylor states, is to then interpret this inability to explain certain beliefs as a signal of either the inadequacy of the hypergoods concept or as a strategy to allude to naturalistic models of moral thinking.

The naturalistic models he is referencing are those that assert that morals and ideals are not things unto themselves but are instead epiphenomena of a biologically determined necessity for human success, a necessity like group
Self-Transcendence and Group Influence

cohesion. In Taylor’s usage, hypergoods operate at the most basic and
dfundamental levels of the individual who seeks to both be a self and to live in a
social world where he can make qualitative distinctions between goals and ends.
The commitment to hypergoods is constitutive of the self. This commitment, in
turn, frames the moral ideals and goals held by the individual. I extend his theory
to say that the values an individual has frame the ends with which these goals can
be sought and that this influences the possibility of value change through group
participation. Inclusion of hypergoods in theories of value change allows the
researcher a method for integrating the internal metrics by which individuals
evaluate new value constructs.

I propose that attitudinal changes will occur when newly presented attitude
objects are aligned with the hypergood commitment, the commitment which
forms the self, and that value changes will occur when the hypergood itself shifts,
thereby creating a scenario where the individual must develop new sets of values.
Further, I argue that the hypergoods held by various individuals relate to the
meaning they ascribe to participation in a given community. This theoretical
move allows a more precise metric for identifying how variation of influence on
individuals within a social collective can take place. These formative
commitments to hypergoods shape the self, and in times of value change,
individuals begin to experience a change in the hypergood to which he or she
ascribes. There is, then, within the organizational setting a negotiation taking
place between the hypergood presented by the organization and those of the individual participants. Group influence on value change is dependent on the interaction of individual and organizational hypergoods. The hypergood, in contrast to simply the good, is fundamental to self-identity and it determines the field of organizations and activities in which an individual will participate. How that individual presents herself within those public spaces then varies by her identification of a good.

It is important to emphasize that individual value change is not something that occurs in isolation. Value distinctions enacted by individuals occur within the boundaries of social group identification. The degree to which one identifies with the group serves to both constrain the realm of available value choices, and to provide support for and exposure to new models of value implementation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is commonly held that values exist hierarchically because there are times of decision where individual values conflict. The logic is that an appeal to a higher value offers a given individual the ability to reconcile the internal contradiction and existential discomfort generated by this conflict. This perspective is criticized heavily by Alwin and Krosnick (1985) on measurement grounds rather than on theoretical grounds. It does, however, continue to exert significant theoretical influence on values research even though it may not be the most useful metaphor.
Instead of viewing hypergoods at the top of the value pyramid, these concepts should be seen as building blocks. This metaphor is preferable as it depicts the risk and difficulty of changing values, as well as conveying a sense that in many ways, foundational commitments to the hypergood dictate which possible value edifices can be constructed. Other language that has been used for the concept of foundational values generating conceptual limits for the individual is that of moral boundaries (Lichterman, 1995). Boundaries provide a metaphor for the limits within which value commitments, attitude changes and norm adherence can take place. Either term is acceptable for expressing the same concept, that individuals contain limits to their moral imaginations and that these limits pre-determine the range of possible value changes wrought through group influence.

Acceptance of the insertion of a hypergood commitment into the sociological delineations of values, attitudes, and behaviors offers additional theoretical contributions to our understanding of value change via group participation. Specifically, if the hypergood is being adjusted or changed, we also need a theory of when this might happen or how it might happen. The next portion of this paper identifies the concept of self-transcendence as a possible explanation for when hypergoods may be open to negotiation in the self. I identify two usages of self-transcendence in the values literature, from Shalom Schwartz and Hans Joas, and offer an additional usage of the term. By linking together self-
Self-Transcendence and Group Influence

transcendence with the idea of the hypergood from Taylor, I offer a theoretical model of value change in adults through group participation which allows for intergroup variation and presents opportunities for further investigation.

Values and Self-Transcendence

Self-transcendence has played a key role in theories of values research, specifically through the work of Schwartz and Joas. For Schwartz, the self is the locus of tendencies toward self-transcendence, which come from a compilation of traits such as openness, universalism, and willingness to change. These traits do not inform us about the way in which self-transcendence may function within a community but instead provide descriptive labels about tendencies of individuals.

In contrast, the Durkheimian tradition, within which I situate Joas, posits that self-transcendence can also be both a type of experience, one that can either be experienced through ecstatic moments or one that is slow in building, and a group pressure. With these three distinctions in mind, I provide a brief overview of how self-transcendence has been used by both Schwartz and Joas and then articulate a theory of how an individual may have his or her value orientation, or conscience, changed or disrupted.
Self-Transcendence and Group Influence

Figure 1: Schwartz Value Wheel

(Schwartz, 2006)

The values wheel in Figure 1 visually depicts how specific values are in potential conflict with those based on opposite types of goals. It is with a contrasting nature of value orientations that Schwartz (2006) posits the self-transcendence versus self-enhancement axis. To make Schwartz’s use of self-transcendence clear, it is important to note that he understands these motivational value expressions to be expressions of how universal human problems must be solved. For Schwartz, benevolence and universalism are strategies for coordinating social interaction, for promoting the survival of social groups and for acquiring goods to sate biological needs. So, too are achievement and power. These two sets of goals are opposed, however, because one cannot preference universalism and power as simultaneous methods for meeting basic human needs because the strategies of social coordination each value structure calls for will conflict. Values for Schwartz, then, are reflections of the orientation one uses to garner access to basic human needs, which engender different effective strategies to achieving the goal of coordinated action. This offers a highly rationalistic and naturalistic model of value orientation, and one that stands in contrast to that offered by Taylor and that is further developed by Joas.
Hans Joas (2000), develops his theory of self-transcendence in *The Genesis of Values*, and applies self-transcendence as a trait to help explain the generation of values. This relationship is distinctive from the way that Schwartz (1995) and Stern (1993) apply self-transcendence as a constellation of values, spoken about as an orientation. I supplement my analysis of the Joas text with his later work, a collection of essays, entitled *Do We Need Religion?: On Experiences of Self-Transcendence* (Joas, 2001). Here he engages with an explanation on the genesis of values, a different project than Schwartz, who identifies the genesis of values out of the need to coordinate social action. Joas builds upon Taylor, seeing the value of values as constitutive of a self, not as a means to the ends of social action.

Joas asserts that the concept of the right is a concept that occurs within action contexts, that conceptions of self are not fixed but rather in process, and that emotions, sentiments, inclinations and moral feelings exist prior to explanation and articulation. Joas’s (2000: 1) maxim that “values arise in experiences of self-formation and self-transcendence” is stated multiple times throughout the *Genesis of Values*, but oddly he does not offer an explicit definition of self-transcendence. Rather, he cobbles together the insights of Nietzsche, William James, Durkheim, Simmel, Scheler, Parsons, Dewey and Taylor, to the end of supporting the claim with which he launches the book. One
must look elsewhere, to his essay *Do We Need Religion?* to find a definition. Here, Joas (2000: 7) states that experiences of self-transcendence are:

experiences in which a person transcends herself, but not, at least not immediately, in the sense of moral achievements but rather of being pulled beyond the boundaries of one’s self, being captivated by something outside of myself, a relaxation of or liberation from one’s fixation on oneself. It is a definition similar to that of Simmel, which Joas (2000: 77) quotes in *Genesis*, stating that:

self-transcendence is manifested as the unified act of constructing and breaking through its barriers, its Other; it is manifested as the character of its absoluteness – which makes life’s dismantling of itself into independent and opposing entities perfectly conceivable.

In both definitions, self-transcendence is a term used to describe the experience of something rather than *the* something. This distinction is intentional, as Joas is careful in both works not to conflate religion with self-transcendence, a distinction I too support.

Self-transcendence as conceptualized by Joas is the experiential moment prior to analytical reflection. We can see this in his use of the term *captivated* and in his insistence on the value of emotions and sentiments in the process of moral deliberation. The two types of self-transcendence experiences are those that pull the individual toward a higher level of social cohesion and those that pull the individual toward a higher level of individual moral distinction. These distinctions are generated in part by the social context in which the self-transcending experience occurs. The musical concert, for example, is organized in a way so that
individual wants are subsumed to the collective experience. A church service, in which the theological principles are connected toward an individual being able to access or be influenced by the deity, may support a more individualized self-transcendence, one in which a person may then begin to incorporate his or her moral insights to the rest of the religious body.

Building on Joas’ observation that self-transcendence is an experience that is relational to a social or symbolic group or other, I propose a third idea of self-transcendence - self-transcendence as a moral instruction inherent in the group. Groups and organizations hold within them value commitments. When these commitments are around the concept of self-transcendence, the group will be more actively pursuing the creation of value changes in participants. For these changes to happen, as articulated earlier, an individual would need to experience changes to his hypergood commitments. Changes in an individual’s commitment to hypergoods may come about through experiences of self-transcendence, and the possibility for hypergood shifts is heightened when these experiences come about through the encounter an individual has with the self-transcendent values of a group. The influence of group participation on values will be connected to interactions between the individual and the moral ideals of the community. This notion of self-transcendence, that it can be conceived of a both an individual and group value structure and experience, expands upon the work of both Schwartz and Joas, and allows for variation across types of groups and types of individuals.
I have identified three different conceptions of self-transcendence throughout this section, and I highlight them at the conclusion to make it clear how these differ. First, Schwartz uses self-transcendence to describe a value orientation that seeks to solve social dilemmas by appealing to the ideals of universalism and benevolence. Second, Joas uses self-transcendence to describe an experiential moment that is generative of new values. He allows for this experience to be either due to long-term involvement with a setting or with an ecstatic encounter, but the basic definition of viewing self-transcendence as experiential rather than descriptive is the key aspect of his usage that I identify and use as contrast with Schwartz. Basically, Joas presents a how and Schwartz offers the why of individual value change, while Durkheim provides some explanation of how group participation influences the process.

I offer a conception of self-transcendence within the Durkheimian tradition, which posits the idea of group identification, which subsumes or overwhelms the individual, as an expression of self-transcendence. By linking these usages together, I present a model of how group participation would generate possible value changes.

*Theory of Group Participation and Value Change*

By recognizing that self-transcendence can properly be spoken of as both a momentary experience, à la Joas, and as a basic orientation, à la Schwartz, a theory of the power of influence in the moral community begins to emerge. The
higher-order theoretical conception of self-transcendence, when applied to the various literatures on values and group participation, both illuminates the inconclusive findings of social scientists and permits us to connect the different intellectual strands theorizing about the relationship between the two. It does so by providing a new theoretical model of why participation in a social setting that has been defined as a moral community by its members would be distinctively powerful for the generation of values.

Inner commitments that operate in conflict, harmony and hierarchical relation with one’s values drive how it is that an individual responds to, and potentially transcends, the aspects of identity received (Hitlin, 2011). These received identities are granted in part by the social situations in which one is found (Goffman, 1959). There are also times when the self is transcended because of the concert of activity, symbols, people and biological modifiers and experiences. In this event, or series of events, that are realized only through narrative in re-telling, the self is changed because her ideas of the good have been changed. These will be formative of a new version of a self when changes in the good lead to the identification of new hypergoods for the individual. There is no guarantee that an experience of transcendence, where the individual self will be affected and shifted, will orient one toward a good that can be seen as a good from the outside. For example, accounts of initiation into cults, gangs and war groups reflect a similar set of experiences (Juergensmeyer, 2003). What is of
significance here, regardless of the circumstance, is that the individual view of the
good has shifted in a way which reorients her view of her self, thereby providing
the conceptual link that is needed when exploring how and if participation in a
moral community impacts an individual’s value commitments.

For an experience of self-transcendence to transition into an articulation of
personally held values, the person must be able to reflect upon the experience she
had that generated an unarticulated change in her personal constitution
(Christman, 2009; Lyndon, 1996; Stern, et al., 1999). She is, therefore, both
conceiving of herself as a self that can have experiences, even foundational
experiences, without them occurring in her rational faculties, and also conceiving
of herself as a self that can in turn explain those experiences. As noted in the
previous paragraph, in the most dramatic contexts, the individual may find herself
caught up in the power generated by the symbolic and that this experience of
being caught up may fundamentally alter her perception of herself. Another
possibility is that long-term participation in a group where ideals are proffered
around self-giving, care for others and altruism could generate a gradual shift in
the ways a person views her self in relation to the group. This type of self-
transcendence, one that is gradual and harder to see can be explored by examining
the relationship between identity, group participation, value adoption, and the self.

Self-transcendence happens more often in social settings where there are
individuals within the social group actively working to generate a symbolic realm
that solicits self-giving commitments from members of the group. The mechanism of group participation that may extend an individual outside of herself, as identified by Durkheim and extended by work in symbolic interactionism theory, provides a link between the individual and the social, thereby offering a possible solution to a significant question in the field of values on the nature of how the group socializes individuals. The expression of individual self-transcendence in the social context of an organization can both generate tensions within the organization and further opportunities for other members to enact the same new moral insight. It is this dialectic between the individual and the collective that is hinted at by Joas, and explicitly identified by James Beckford (2003), Anthony Giddens (1991) and Charles Taylor (1989) as being a key element to further illuminating the manner in which self-identity is generated and maintained in the contemporary West, where values and identities are open for negotiation (Beckford, 2003; Giddens, 1991; C. Taylor, 1989). If it is correct that group settings can in fact function as moral communities that are both presenting moral goods that focus on self-transcendence and creating opportunities for individuals to experience self-transcendence, then it may be the case that this is how they influence value adoption.

When an individual identifies with the organization in which he participates, he opens his self to be changed or influenced by the symbolic field of the organization, which is inherently oriented toward the preservation of the
organization over and above the preservation of an individual’s identity. This can happen in a church, a business, or a non-profit, but it may happen most explicitly in an organization where there are individuals who are creating a symbolic realm with which the participants identify. If this symbolic realm posits a set of ideals around altruism, or self-transcendence, it is more likely members of the group will have their consciences changed toward that value orientation, once they identify with the group. In this way, the group begins to offer instructions on how the individual should value goods in the world and should therefore be understood as a moral community (Christman, 2009). What this means is that participation in the community is explicitly driven by the belief that instruction or experiences relating to moral instruction take place.

Individuals will vary in how much they take it upon themselves to police the public sphere of the moral community as self-appointed arbiters of truth in ways that align with their given understanding of the purpose, or the goods, of the collective setting. This view stands in slight contrast to research that has placed this power largely in the hands of the formal leadership (Wuthnow, 2002). The power that individual group members hold in the social group allows them to articulate their particular moral and ethical visions differently. I hypothesize that the population of participants that interact with the moral setting in active, assertive ways will be different from those who are attending because they see the group setting as a location for experiences of self-transcendence. In this way I am
appropriating and extending Schwartz’s value wheel orientation contrasts to argue that these different value orientations will structure the types of experiences individuals have in groups.

The moral community, to have the possibility of shaping an individual’s moral orientation, has to be defined as such by both the leaders of the group and by the participants. It is logical to assume some participants in a church, as an example, would be attending but not experiencing the congregation as a moral community. It is this relationship that clarifies the connections between the self, valuation, and group participation. If individuals are participating in a moral community for practical or social reasons, where they then are operating in a social group where individuals in positions of power are presenting models of self-giving that the self-preservation of the organization requires, then these models will not affect and fundamentally alter the conscience of individuals attending for social reasons. Change comes about only for group participants who identify the group as being a moral community and who are in turn willing to accept moral instruction and reflect on upon internal experiences of identity and value changes.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to present a theoretical model for how group participation can influence changes in individually held values. Each self holds hypergood commitments that are the conceptual foundation upon which he
Self-Transcendence and Group Influence

builds a self edifice. This self contains a bounded moral universe, in which his range of possible organizational affiliations are set. Within each organizational affiliation, there is an interaction between his organizational identification strength and the moralness of the community. Specifically, the strength with which the organization is offering moral precepts around self-giving and an organizationally supporting communitarian value structure will influence how individuals participate in the organization and the possibility for experiences of self-transcendence. The individuals within the organization vary in how strongly they identify with these organizational values, which in turn influences the identity or self that they enact within the group, further influencing the group social space. In situations where the organizational identification is high, and where the organization is offering self-transcendent experiences which are followed by opportunities for self-reflection and analysis, the likelihood of value changes is higher due to the potential for shifts in the individual’s hypergood commitments. With this process in mind, subsequent research can undertake in-depth interviews with individuals about both their identification with an organization and their hypergood commitments. This would build upon work I, and others, have undertaken within a range of social contexts, where interviews and structural models help to illuminate past conversion experiences and times when organizational affiliation shifted one’s values. By developing models of how these two factors interact with the value climate of the organization, we can
then reasonably predict which individuals are more likely to have their values changed through participation in the group. In addition, we are also able to understand and identify those individuals who will not adhere to the moral instructions within the organization, thereby enabling insight into the incongruency gap. Finally, by adding the concept of the hypergood and a more refined usage of the term self-transcendence to the corpus on values research, I have provided a model for how value change occurs in individuals.
Self-Transcendence and Group Influence

References


Self-Transcendence and Group Influence


Self-Transcendence and Group Influence


Self-Transcendence and Group Influence

Figure 1: Schwartz Value Wheel