

Using a value debate to improve cooperation towards a just transformation

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1. Introduction

In order to promote a comprehensive transformation, given the current density and quantity of crisis, we need to invest in cooperation because no country or actor can solve complex crisis alone. Knowledge networks are a tool to promote cooperation and therefore a mechanism that deserves closer attention. Radical changes require transformation in multiple dimensions (Schlaile et al., 2017). A comprehensive transformation includes the social, economic and ecological dimensions. We need social justice to promote true wellness in society (Prilleltensky, 2001, p. 750).

Achieving a just transformation is deeply normative, involving conflicting worldviews, contested pathways and different interests (Schlaile et al., 2017). Transformation means changing structures, changing cultures, changing practices. A culture of transformation is constituted by values (Grosse, 2019). These values give meaning to action (Gehman, Trevino, & Garud, 2013). Making values transparent supports mutual understanding of our motivations and also enhances the motivation to act. Values are key components of a transformation culture, provide frames and built collective identities (Grosse, 2019).

Prior research has often neglected the complexity of differing norms and value systems presuming a consensus (Schlaile et al., 2017, p. 4). This lacking understanding and appreciation of differing values and norms, the paper suggests, is one of the reasons why although we know that something ought to happen e.g. to combat climate change, often little action follows. Research and then politics must shift to a paradigm level, which means dealing with basic beliefs and first principles (Schlaile et al., 2017, p. 4). We need to make values explicit and transparent as well as get into a deeper discussion about which values we want and how to live up to them, in order to increase action towards comprehensive transformation.

In management literature there is a consensus that an alignment of values, which often is part of creating a shared vision, is a necessary prerequisite for successful collaboration. At the same time misalignment of values often leads to conflicts. (Blokland & Reniers, 2021) (Alt, Díez-de-Castro, & Lloréns-Montes, 2015) (Abreu, Macedo, & Camarinha-Matos, 2009; Macedo, Abreu, & Camarinha-Matos, 2010) Common values are the foundation of successful cooperation. People will more likely cooperate if they share a set of values. (Council, 2021) One of the reasons for their important role is that, values enable to build trust within relations and therefore, improve dialogue and cooperation. Framing and articulating shared values and also making differing values transparent is useful in

cooperation projects, within networks or other forms of collaboration because it supports managing processes of contestation and resistance. (Henry, Mohan, & Yanacopulos, 2004)

Therefore, this paper aims to show why a value debate in cooperation projects can be used to promote effectiveness towards a sustainable transformation and how to start collectively identifying what are the core values of the cooperation project. This will automatically include aligning the individual values of the involved actors with the overall values of the cooperation setting.

A practical example from a transnational and transdisciplinary Network will illustrate this initiating process and provide concrete recommendations for other networks and collaboration settings. To guarantee sustainability of this process in the form of living up to established values in everyday work then requires continuous efforts and reflection.

2. The benefits of a value discussion for cooperation

To achieve social justice, inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation is crucial. Only if solutions towards a just transformation include all relevant stakeholders across disciplines and across scales, then justice can be achieved. Solutions that are found in multi-actor constellations are more likely to be legitimized and have a higher chance to have impact on the long run. That is why a transdisciplinary and inter- or transnational settings are a necessary condition to jointly define the challenge and find solutions that are legitimated by all affected actors. Especially regarding complex crisis, transdisciplinary cooperation is crucial.

Radical changes require transformation in multiple dimensions, which include the ecological, economic, social but also the normative dimension (Schlaile et al., 2017). Achieving a just transformation is deeply normative. Values do not act only as internalized schemata, but play an important, although often unarticulated, role in action (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004, p. 364) Therefore, actors of cooperation need to make values explicit and visible. This benefits cooperation in various ways and can lead to a greater impact, more effectiveness and more legitimacy.

Values guide our actions. Making values transparent supports mutual understanding of our motivations and also enhances the motivation to act.¹ Values are key components of a transformation culture, provide frames and built collective identities (Grosse, 2019) because values provide orientation how this transformation should look like and motivate to get involved. Different actors have different worldviews and visions of a just transformation. Prior research has often neglected this complexity of differing norms and value systems presuming a consensus (Schlaile et al., 2017, p. 4). This lacking consensus regarding values and norms is one of the reasons why although we know that something ought to happen e.g. to combat climate change, often little action follows. Research and then politics must shift to a paradigm level, which means dealing with basic beliefs and first principles (Schlaile et al., 2017, p. 4). We need to make values explicit and transparent in order to increase action towards comprehensive transformation.

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¹ <https://www.netzwerkknoden.com/mehr-wert-e>

important role is that, values enable to build trust within relations and therefore, improve dialogue and cooperation. Integrating values in settings of cooperation and negotiations in networks strengthens trust in the results and solutions of the projects.

Deepening the understanding of values and provide more insights can help relations in networks or other forms of cooperation to strengthen evidence based approaches to building connections (Council, 2021). Framing and articulating shared values and also making differing values transparent is useful in cooperation projects, within networks or other forms of collaboration because it supports managing processes of contestation and resistance. (Henry, Mohan, & Yanacopulos, 2004) Also if values differ, which is common in cooperation, making them transparent, appreciating the difference and create understanding also helps to improve cooperation. (Council, 2021) Already clarifying the question of shared values of a network strengthens the cooperation as such because members engage in deep discussions on the direction of their project and the how they want to get there.

We need to align the values of research, governance structures with the global common good to increase legitimacy, public understanding and fight distrust in science and political institutions. Only when the public sees and understands what are the guiding values of science, of collaboration projects, cooperation formats, how do they relate to the global common good, how does the overall society benefit from the results, how do they improve my life, only then trust in science, political institutions and solutions they provide can increase. (Novitzky et al., 2020)

A discussion of values allows to build up “right allies”. If actors cooperate with like minded partners, this can increase leverage points and entry points, which then in the long run increases impact. Establishing cultural contracts, which create a foundation of values-based agreements as a way of exploring possibilities for authentic collaboration (Ogden, 2022) contributes in improving modes of cooperation. Values delimit the parameters for behaviours considered acceptable (or just), and they serve to structure our experiences.

According to Schwartz (2004b) values and action are linked through four sequential processes: 1) values must be activated, 2) then values are motivational. They can lead towards prioritizing on action over another. 3) This can lead to the process, influencing values on attention, perception and interpretation within situations. 4) So if values are activated, they can influence the planning of action. Values can motivate behaviour. (Schwartz & Bardi 2003 in (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004, p. 365).

The above highlighted role of values for cooperation, demonstrates the benefits a value debate has for cooperation projects and although discussing values is difficult, emotionally challenging, it is worth the effort. The next section will show on a theoretical basis how values can change.

3. The larger context – how can values change?

Humans are actors within a space of moral values. This space of moral values is pre-determined by the cultural and social and historical context we live in and provides the moral foundation to be later reflected upon by the individual. Charles Taylor argues that humans always interpret the world that surrounds them and attribute sense to the social reality through their subjective horizon of experiences, their values (Taylor, 1985, p. 45). Only through their values humans attribute sense to their actions. Consequently, all

human matters can only be described in the context of such a horizon of senses. These senses are characterized through strong values, meaning that the human being value his/her actions according to principles regarding how “good” or “bad” something is (Breuer, Leusch, & Mersch, 1996, p. 184). Values form an internal moral compass (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004, p. 362). This means human actions can always only be explained in relation to their values. Value play an important role in understanding why and how humans act.

Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, p. 551) summarized five features common to most definitions of values. "According to the literature, 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." 362 (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). Values serve as guiding principles in the life of a person (Schwartz (1994) in: (Prilleltensky, 2001, p. 21).

That means specific values, according to which humans decide what is good or bad, constitute the framework that makes up their identity. The moral space is defined by the frameworks of individual societal members. Through orienting oneself within the collectively defined moral space, one’s individual identity comes into being. Individual and collective value sets, or frameworks constitute and reinforce each other, they are relational.

In this setting Charles Taylor sees space for changing attitudes. He emphasizes the intrinsic human qualities of flexibility and the capacity to adapt over time. He views life as a narration that is constantly told and retold: “(...) our lives move. (...) The issue of our condition can never be exhausted for us by what we are, because we are always also changing and becoming” ((Taylor, 1989), pp. 46-47; emphasis by the author). According to Charles Taylor change is possible through individual interpretations of values.

For Taylor, the individual always reverts to a collective shared horizon established by language, which is an articulation of a collective identity. The social community decides on its basic moral principle and the individual is left to navigate within this common horizon of values. But these values are not fixed. Each individual can influence values through expressions of their own interpretations, which are however reinterpreted on the bases of a collectively shared form of group consensus (Breuer et al., 1996) (Breuer et al. 1996, p. 185).

Taylor (1989, p. 26) defines the frameworks, which constitute human identity as “(...) changeable human interpretations”. Rosa (1998, p. 192) explains Taylor’s position, pointing out that he perceives cultural nets of meaning – how Rosa refers to frameworks – not as rigidly determined, but rather as open for different interpretations and adaptation to changing circumstances. This openness is a result of the tensions between the proclaimed self-image of the cultural communities and their underlying structures. The under-determination of collective value horizons opens space for individual creativity, which takes place as innovative articulations of implicit meanings, as well as the establishment of new values. While macrostructures are culturally given, the microstructure can be individually interpreted (ibid., p. 193). Especially in times of crises, in which the moral landscapes are unsettled, the differences that individual interpretations create have the possibility to reinterpret macrostructures (ibid., p. 193). In this way, micro- and macrostructures constitute, influence and redefine one another.

Therefore, in settings of cooperation it is necessary to make the individual values visible, articulate them and then align them first to a collective set of values representing the vision of the team while also referring to the global good. The described relation between micro- and macro structure, collective values and individual values shows the opportunity to support change. The following section will provide a concrete example how knowledge networks can use this relation in combination with a value debate to strengthen the effectiveness of their cooperation.

4. How can knowledge networks aiming for sustainable transformation use a value debate to strengthen cooperation?

“The way we treat others, we cooperate, we interact with colleagues or network members, report to supervisors, deal with partners reflect our values” (Kraemer Jr, 2011).

After having seen why a value debate is useful, what this paper considers as values and how values can change in theory, this section will highlight how a value debate can be initiated to promote more effectiveness in your collaboration. The example comes from a value alignment process in a transdisciplinary and transnational knowledge network, which is still in process. After initiating a value debate and coming up with a joint set of core values the first step is finished. This builds the framework to inspire action and orient the network’s activities along this framework. Further steps are needed to ensure a regular implementation of the values in working routines and living up to these values in everyday live.

Collectively Clarifying what are the core values of your team:

Discussing core values is a tool to create a joint identification and start aligning individual values with collective values. Usually single values are not aligned with an overall systemic vision (Schlaile et al., 2017, p. 5). But this is what is needed to create a collective identity and therefore increase the effectiveness of cooperation. Making individual values transparent, as well as appreciating differences and negotiate a minimum consensus of collective network values is crucial for this process. The more correspondence of individual values and values lived in a working surrounding, the better collaboration works, the lesser conflicts there are, the more efficient cooperation happens and the more satisfaction there is and the more chance for sustainable collaboration.²

Values-aligned organisations can create more commitment among their members, more individual satisfaction, connection and stronger relationships. “Strong relationships have strongly aligned values because values focus people’s attention, they also lead to the alignment of everyone’s efforts, which in turn strengthens relationships.” (Branson, 2008, p. 381) Through a values alignment members of a collaboration project see more meaning about what they are doing and know what they and their team stands for. Therefore, values have a crucial role in enabling managing change effectively. Because values impact people, their performance and the outcome of their work, value-aligned teams operate at optimum efficiency “Building alignment within an organisational context is about enhancing the group’s capacity to think and act in new synergetic ways, with full coordination and a sense of unity, because each person knows each others’ hearts and minds.” (Branson, 2008, p. 382).

² <https://www.netzwerkknoten.com/mehr-wert-e>

A Practical Example: Hosting and facilitating defining core values

In the following section I describe a practical process of how a network facilitation team can initiate and host a value alignment process within their network which was a result of applying Christopher Branson's (Branson, 2008) concept within a transnational knowledge network. The workshop can be held face-to-face or in presence. The guideline can be used as an inspiration for other networks and should be further adapted to respective contexts and the target group taking part in the workshop.

How to – define the core values of your knowledge Network?

1st round: Brainstorming the core values of the team in a collaborative workshop with all team members with the aim to answer the following questions:

- What are behaviours, feelings, attitudes you want to see in our work?
- What are values that represent our work?
- What are the core values of our work?

A possible format to do this is to ask the team members to silently write down all values that come to their mind when thinking of their work.

From this abundant list the facilitator can cluster and identify the eight most mentioned values. Then these values can be discussed in small groups of 3-4 people in three rounds, each group has a host, who collects the findings and reports to the others what has already been discussed.

In each round you discuss the following questions:

- What does this value mean for you?
- Why do you think is this value important for you in our work? (Relevance)
- Which working routines already reflect this value?
- What is the desired vision we want to achieve in our work with this value?

2nd round: Discussing draft versions of the eight most mentioned values

A core team formulates a draft what each value means for the group of people that have discussed it. Which working routines and formats reflect this specific value, what desired end situation do we want to achieve with this value? This draft is again presented to the whole involved team.

In two rounds the draft is to be discussed:

- How do the definitions of the values resonate in you? Where do you agree/disagree? Do you feel the definitions encompass all necessary parts? If not, what is missing from your perspective?
- What are the elements that should be cut/added? Is a value as such missing from your perspective? If yes, which one?

At the end a final version of the core values can be written. The first major step is finished. Now the team has to establish mechanisms and instruments to assure that these values are lived in their everyday practices!

5. Summery

In order to achieve a just social, ecological and economic transformation, which we need to tackle the complex crises our planet and society faces, more effective and efficient forms of cooperation are needed. Transnational and transdisciplinary knowledge networks are a tool to foster this kind of cooperation. This paper focused on the normative dimension of cooperation and pledges for a greater focus on values in cooperation formats. Values give meaning to action, increase motivation to act and provide frameworks that outline the way how to act. All this is needed to increase action towards a just transformation. Prior research has often neglected the complexity of differing value systems, while presuming a consensus. Making values transparent and foster alignment while appreciating differences can be a tool to increase the effectiveness of cooperation towards a sustainable and just transformation. This paper aimed to highlight the importance of a value debate as such within cooperation projects as well as showed a practical way how to initiate a value discussion and alignment process within networks.

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