Why Should We Be Talking About Value Reproduction?

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Abstract

This conceptual theoretical essay explores how values are continually reproduced through communication and how they shape societal norms. Although we all reproduce values on a daily basis through our various communicative practices, the definitions and functions of values are frequently ambiguous and presupposed across disciplines. By drawing from communication science and social science literature, the essay reflects on the mechanisms of value reproduction, linking the process of value reproduction to issues of inclusion, exclusion, and identity. Because, what happens when we reproduce values? Who gets to reproduce and who gets to challenge the reproduction of values? Who gets included in this reproduction and who gets excluded? What is the role of media in the reproduction of values? And importantly, underlying all these questions, what exactly are values and why should we care about how we reproduce values ourselves?

Introduction

Value reproduction is researched often, but the process is often neglected. Whether at the dinner table or on social media, we engage in and talk about value reproduction more than we think; from the ways in which political candidates reinforce known 'conservative' or 'progressive' values in their campaigns to how our favorite artists challenge the values of the status quo with their latest projects. We often do not notice the values we accept as 'normal' until someone deviates from a common norm – dresses differently, lives differently, speaks or acts differently – or when activist groups loudly challenge established beliefs and codes of conduct. We curse them, applaud them, and may even feel emboldened when we ourselves dare to go against the grain. Although our private and public discussions often seem to feature instances when someone does something that clashes with our own values, or alternatively when someone speaks up for them and goes against reigning social norms, we often do not seem to notice the myriads of ways in which we, ourselves, reinforce and reproduce existing values in and through our daily practices.

In this essay, we 'unpack' such reproduction processes and reflect on the intertwining of values and social norms therein. We state that it is important to look at the reproduction of values because the social norms that dictate how we ought to be and live do not necessarily reflect general social realities. As noted by Hauksson-Tresch, when researching semiotics and homosexuality, whilst the challenging of heteronormativity still causes a stir, everyday expressions of heterosexuality are so normalized they provide us with a false image in which society is presented as sexually uniform:

> *"The heteronormative nature of society we live in is often not even consciously recognized by the majority of the population (Valentine 1993). The repetition of heterosexual performances in the public space, such as marriages, creates the illusion that society has always been naturally heterosexual and conceals the sexualized power relations that shaped it (Browne 2007)" (2021, 559).*

In other words, the values we reproduce do not (necessarily) reflect social realities and can reinforce a false normativity that goes unquestioned. Hauksson-Tresch adds that the lack of focus on normativity can be explained, as *"the work on heterosexuality is rare because we do not deal with something that goes without saying"* (2021, 559). More broadly speaking,

the lack of conscious recognition of value reproduction – whether it concerns heterosexuality or some other social norms – is missing in academic research as well.

When it comes to the reproduction of art, culture and society, generally, research on values focuses more on 'value clashes' rather than 'value reproductions', with various disciplines studying the ways in which norms are challenged, for instance through activism (see e.g. Martinsson 2016; Plotnikof et al. 2021; Ray & Fuentes 2020). An additional focus on value reproduction in academia approaches value reproduction from a 'product' perspective. For instance, in art and cultural research we find studies on the reproduction of ideologies in/with cultural artifacts, such as critical reflections on the reproduction of (Dutch) colonial imagery in seventeenth century Dutch paintings and beyond, as well as the challenging of these value reproductions through current artistic activism (see e.g. the various essays in Van Bijnen et al. 2024).

Both prevalent approaches to value reproduction in academia are valid, necessary, and undoubtedly to be found in this journal edition on reproduction. However, re-starting the discussion on social norms and values from a viewpoint that stresses the complexity and the layers of (subconscious) processes of value reproduction is warranted as well (Xenitidou & Edmonds 2014). Especially, when, for example, any adaptation of a book or copy of a photograph automatically means the reproduction of topics, tropes, and themes. While we often discuss the fact that certain topics, tropes, and themes are reproduced in such 'products', as well as the contexts and consequences of such reproductions, we rarely focus on how we reproduce them. By deconstructing the *process* of value reproduction itself, we may be able to answer some fundamental questions on the reproduction of art, culture, and indeed societal norms: *How are values produced, reproduced and negotiated? How do values become norms? What do our norms say about us and our societies? Furthermore, who is included in the value reproduction process and who is being excluded?*

This brief conceptual theoretical essay focuses on the process of value reproduction through *communication* and highlights why we should all be talking about it, regardless of academic disciplines. As such, this essay reflects on literature from sociology, critical theory and argumentation sciences, amongst others, to elucidate the processes of value reproduction through communication and their societal implications. To shed some light on value reproductions, we illustrate three essential characteristics of value reproduction, which form the core conceptual focus of this essay:

1. Values and norms – and thus their reproduction – often remain rather implicit and unconscious but come to the fore when they are challenged and a different idea on desirability or appropriateness causes a clash or tension.
2. Our values and how they are translated to social norms are dynamic and contextual concepts; they can differ amongst social groups, generations, relationships, cultures, historic settings, spatial contexts, and so on. Thus, what is acceptable or not is changeable depending on the time, place and the social context or setting in which a value is (re)produced.
3. The (re)production of societal values is essentially linked to power relations and segmentation, meaning as a process it inherently has inclusionary and exclusionary effects.

Norms and Values

We need to define the differences and relation between values and social norms.
We all have individual intuitive ideas about what is acceptable or unacceptable to us or to others in particular settings. We know what is (seemingly) a 'right' and 'wrong' way of doing things, which core principles should guide our actions, or which key principles our society should strive for. At the same time, social norms and values are often left implicit, which makes it difficult to use them in public discourse and academic research. In fact, both values and social norms come with a plethora of definitions from different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities (see e.g., Elsenbroich & Gilbert 2014; Legros & Cislaghi 2020), which makes it even more important to clearly define what we are talking about when we use these terms – and what we mean when we say 'the reproduction of values'.

Values such as freedom, justice, equality, privacy, and security are basic beliefs and principles that refer to desirable goals that transcend specific actions and situations. These abstract beliefs and principles serve as the convictions based on which we make choices, evaluate our own actions and that of others (Schwartz 1992). Each individual carries with them multiple values that influence how they go through life in a way that they deem 'good'. As such, it is based on our values that we judge something to be 'good' or 'bad', or something as 'more important' or 'more fitting' than something else. It is also important to note that whilst we all have multiple values, we may weigh them differently. In other words, our values form a value system or value hierarchy; thus, although you may share values with your friends or within a culture, they may be weighed differently with two people, for

example, both highly valuing 'security' and 'freedom' but one favoring the former and the other the latter (see e.g. Schwartz and Bardi 2001). Values are abstract and how they are placed in our personal hierarchies is subject to change, depending on the spatial and temporal contexts we are in. For instance, we tend to value security more when we feel threatened and may have valued freedom more when we were younger and our freedom was limited by our parents, who in turn tried to make us feel safe and secure.

While values are abstract and overarching concepts, *social norms* can be explained as codes of conduct that translate values into more concrete and specific rules of what (not) to do or how to (not) behave in a given situation or context. Hence, norms serve as frameworks by which people determine and judge which kind of behavior is 'normal', socially desired, warranted, and acceptable or unacceptable. Importantly, there is a conceptual distinction between different types of norms that complement each other. Researchers distinguish between *descriptive norms* and *injunctive norms* (Cialdini et al. 1991). Descriptive norms refer to what people perceive is *commonly done* within a reference group. Injunctive norms, instead, refer to ideas what *ought to be done* and to perceived acceptance or possible disapproval and punishment (Cialdini et al. 1991; Rimal & Lapinski 2008). In this injunctive sense, norms prescribe behaviors and actions and thus ensure social order, regulation and coordination of (socially desired) practices and interactions (Bicchieri 2006, 2017; Hechter & Opp 2001; Lapinski & Rimal 2005; Rimal & Lapinski 2015).

Overall, we can state that norms are one way in which values play out in our daily lives; they are the guideline instructions by which we as people seek to adhere to values in specific situations and contexts. Here, we see the fundamental intertwining of values and social norms referred to in the introduction to this essay; it underlines why it is important to take social norms into consideration if we want to unpack and understand value reproduction.

Communication and Values

Communication is the primary conduit for value reproduction.
Communication is the main conduit by which we reproduce values. To discuss the process of reproduction through communication, we first need to briefly define what we mean with '*communication*' and '*reproduction*' here.

With *communication* we refer to social interactions, but also for example (social) media communication, advertisement, non-verbal communication and artistic expressions. This broad conceptualization of communi-

cation as a process of encoding and decoding messages through a medium, which can be speech, TikTok, a painting or a commercial, means communication is all around us, all the time. We engage with communication from the moment we wake up and read the news on our phone, to when we open Instagram on our way to work, to when we message our colleagues that we are going to be later, and this all before we even get to the office. When we arrive, we may encode a message through the medium of an email to our boss and try to decode the message they encoded in their reply.

With the *reproduction* of values, we refer to a process that occurs constantly in our various forms of communication, often without conscious reflection. If we look at the conversations that we have with the people around us, our values are often at the basis of what divides us and the common ground that unites us (van Bijnen 2020). It is primarily through communication that people seek information and learn about social reality, social conflicts or ideals – be it in everyday life when we observe others or through interpersonal communication interactions between friends, within families, in classrooms, or via mediated communication, such as 'traditional' media (e.g., news(papers), TV, advertisements) or social media (e.g., X, Instagram, TikTok) (e.g., Geber & Hefner 2019; Yanovitzky & Rimal 2006). As such, the reproduction of values and social norms is inherently linked to communication and practices (Chung & Rimal 2016; Geber & Hefner 2019; Lapinski & Rimal 2005; Rimal & Lapinski 2015; Yanovitzky & Rimal 2006).

With communication being the main vehicle for value reproduction, it is not surprising that the constant reproduction of values and norms forms the implicit core of the communication sciences. Yet, like many other academic disciplines, the concept of values and their functions is often presupposed rather than examined in depth, making it important to make the implicit explicit.

How We Learn About Norms and Values

We learn about social norms and values by observing their (re)production by others.

To get an impression of what is socially acceptable or unacceptable we observe our environments. By looking at others, we familiarize ourselves with norms and values in different, yet interrelated contexts. As such, values are most often learned, communicated, reproduced, negotiated, reinterpreted through our interactions with family members, in schools, and in inter-

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personal communication among peers (see, e.g., Chung & Rimal 2016; Geber et al. 2019; Hogg & Reid 2006).

In addition, we learn about values through our use of (social) media. A lot of research on norms and values is conducted on 'mediated norms and values', which concerns the norms and values communicated through media exposure and mediated public discourses, such as TV shows, movies, series, (digital) newspaper coverage, as well as on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook or X (Geber & Hefner 2019; Gunther et al. 2006; Tankard & Paluck 2016). Communication research has demonstrated extensively that exposure to media contents and mediated public discourses essentially shape our thoughts on topics/issues. More specifically, through mediated communication we are given an impression of which topics/issues are important in our society, as the media selects for us what we should focus on (i.e., *agenda-setting*, McCombs 2014), and how to make sense of these topics/issues by the way the selected topics are talked about (i.e., *(value) framing*, Entman 1993; Lecheler & de Vreese 2019; Entman & Usher 2018; Coleman 2010). In fact, media can shape our perceptions of the prevalence of practices as well as their acceptability; this in turn can affect people's practices, which they may adjust to what they think is considered acceptable by society (e.g., Chung & Rimal 2016; Geber & Hefner 2019; Lapinski & Rimal 2005; Nathanson 2008).

How we learn values can be done directly and indirectly. We sometimes encounter values that are communicated to us *explicitly*, for example when they are directly communicated and promoted through laws, education and so on. They are the norms that we are being taught (and told) on what is 'correct' and what is not. As such, the explicit norms on 'how we as a society' value, for example, women's health, equality or same-sex marriage are often codified in our laws and our textbooks. However, more often, we see that values and social norms are conveyed and reinforced – and thus also reproduced – in more *implicit*, yet powerful ways (see, e.g., Bergmann 1998). In fact, values and norms are produced, reproduced and maintained by social approval/disapproval and sanctions (Bicchieri 2006; 2017; Hechter & Opp 2001; Lapinski & Rimal 2005; Rimal & Lapinski 2015). In addition, we encounter values and social norms through unspoken behavioral rules that determine what is acceptable within a society, family, friend group, and so on. Rather than being codified into prescriptive documents, such as laws or textbooks, these values are often *implicitly* communicated through certain expectations of how to act 'appropriately' (Homans 1974). For example, let us consider a dinner date at a generic restaurant and the implicit social norms on what is considered 'appropriate' in that context;

social expectations presume that a dinner date is between people from the opposite sex, dictate that one should behave 'like a woman', the other should act 'like the man', as well as how one should dress, how we ought to greet people we meet for the first time, which topics you should (not) talk about in public, and the list goes on. Depending on the cultural context in which the dinner date takes place, such notions on what is 'proper' are most likely not prescribed to us *explicitly,* but instead are *implicit* social expectations (repeatedly) communicated in media portrayals of dinner dates, stories by colleagues or friends, as well as what we see ourselves when we visit restaurants. The repeated exposure to a reproduced norm reinforces the social expectations we attach to places, situations and people. We have expectations on what we will encounter when we go to a church and what we will encounter when we go to a rave; we have expectations on how people will dress, how they behave, how they move, and maybe even the 'type of people' we expect to encounter. It is how we socially condition ourselves. It helps us (try to) fit in.

Reproducing a Value vs. Challenging a Value

What happens when a value gets (re)negotiated?
Depending on the context, we have certain expectations on how we should be, how we should talk, how we should act, and so on. Aware of these expectations, we may choose to 'behave' to get approval, to fit in, or simply to avoid punishment for flouting social expectations. As such, we constantly reinforce and reproduce existing norms and values in and through our daily practices and social interactions, by the way we dress, the way we talk, the books we display on our shelves, the news outlets we claim to follow and so on.

Occasionally, we may choose to rebel because we get tired of conforming or to make a point. On a larger scale, social movements often seek to disrupt the reproduction of certain values—such as those that perpetuate inequality or discrimination—by bringing attention to alternative values and advocating for their (re)adoption as we have seen, for example, in the renewed protests for the access to abortion as right to self-determination and human right in the United States. Prevailing values and norms are renegotiated when we (or others) do not meet other people's expectations of what is desirable, acceptable or unacceptable. When socially accepted norms get tested, we can expect to see people surprised, angry, as well as pleased. We may also see the provocateur get 'nasty looks', they may be informed that they do not act or talk appropriately or are even told to *'get the*

hell out of here!' In other words, whilst a 'simple' reproduction of existing values and norms goes without further notice, they become 'visible' when they are being challenged or *negotiated*.

The question then is, do we consider it a reproduction or renegotiation of a value, if its meaning is altered due to, for example, the context in which it is reproduced? We propose that whether we can consider something a value *reproduction* or whether we consider it a *negotiation* of a value, depends on our reaction towards the challenge of an existing norm – i.e., the 'new doing or being'. As stated previously, the (re)production of a value or norm is a process that goes on without much notice or intrinsic alteration to the understanding of the value itself, as it aligns with the status quo or reinforces the status quo. However, if the new doing or being causes tension, for example others are offended, we see a negotiation of the existing norm. Whether this affects the further reproduction of that value in the future in the previous state or the altered state that includes the 'new', depends on how we deal with the tension. In other words, if our understanding of a value gets challenged or changed because a deviation of the norm is presented, the question is *whether we want to accept that deviation and adopt it, or not*.

Negotiations of values through deviations of norms happen all the time. For example, think of our understanding of 'freedom' now versus a hundred years ago; what the social value label of 'freedom' refers to now, as well as who is included in this understanding of freedom, has changed. In basic semiotic terms, when a value gets negotiated the label of the value remains the same, which is known as the *signifier*. However, the concept this signifier refers to (i.e., the *signified*) changes.[1] As such, what a specific value comes to entail can change, whether it is slowly over time or a result of more overt and immediate clashes – e.g., following protests, through the legalization of same sex marriages, or by showing the first interracial kiss on television. Moreover, various understandings (i.e., the signified) of the same value label (i.e., the signifier) may exist at the same time. Take, for example, the protection of women's health, which can mean something different when uttered by US Presidential candidates Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. Thus, different interpretations of values may be encoded as different norms by different people. As a result, the reproduction of the interpretation of these values in their respective policies and laws may also differ greatly.

The Social Dynamics of Value Reproduction

What happens when we do not fit in?

Although this essay strictly focuses on the reproduction of values through communication as a process, we briefly want to discuss an important effect, or product, of value reproduction. Specifically, while we stressed the important role of social media platforms in processes of value reproduction and value negotiation, we also need to highlight that their role in our societies also challenges social values.

Social media platforms and their algorithms have penetrated markets, labor relations, and affect democratic practices, and so on (van Dijck et al. 2018). Here, public values such as 'privacy', 'security' or 'fairness' are at stake, which causes fights over regulations between individual platforms, (supra)national governments, city councils, and NGOs. These fights lead to questions such as: *What* kind of platformed, datafied, algorithm and AI-driven society do we want to live in*? What* are the values we deem worthy of protecting? (Venema 2021). Although these questions are indeed relevant and interesting, what we are considering here is not necessarily the '*what*' but the '*who*'. More specifically, *who* do these public values include? *Whose* privacy and security are deemed worthy of consideration? *Who* is being excluded in the norms that are derived from these values? *Who* gets to challenge norms on such public values? The reproduction of values has consequences. As stated, values are encoded to present and represent social norms, which may not reflect social realities. In short, norms are exclusionary and who gets to be considered 'good', whose behavior is to be considered 'appropriate', and whose interests are considered 'worthy', is closely tied to social power relations.

Our (shared) values are part of our sense of self and sense of belonging. Identity is a key factor in the reproduction of values. In fact, values are the core of one's personal and social identities (Hitlin 2003, Schwartz 1994). Our sense of self and of belonging or distinction is closely tied to the values we hold and the groups with which we believe to share those values; with whom we have *common ground* (van Bijnen 2020). As humans we like to belong and prefer to choose our communities based on common ground, whether that be shared experiences (i.e., *personal common ground*) or because you share interests and values with others (i.e. *communal common ground*) (Clark 2006). Through communication, individuals and groups express and affirm their identities, which in turn reinforces the values associated with those identities. For example, cultural practices, language

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use, and symbolic expressions all serve to communicate and reproduce the values that are central to a group's identity.

Conversely, when individuals or groups are excluded from the process of value reproduction, it can lead to feelings of alienation and a sense of disconnection from society. This is often the case for marginalized groups whose values and identities are not reflected in mainstream media or dominant cultural narratives—or groups that claim to be marginalized such as right-wing populist political actors. In such cases, alternative forms of communication—such as social media, grassroots movements, or subcultures—can provide a space for the reproduction and affirmation of alternative values. The role that news media, films, advertisements, or social media platforms play in the reproduction of social norms and values cannot be overstated, nor does their role in reproduction of role models and harmful stereotypes.

Media contents and mediated public discourse can provide role models of 'normal', 'appropriate' or 'desirable' attitudes and practices (Chia & Gunther 2006; Elmore et al. 2017; Gunther et al. 2006; Liu et al. 2019; Shah & Rojas 2008; Tankard & Paluck 2016; Yanovitzky & Stryker 2001). Especially in advertisements such ideas of 'desirability' are often communicated by presenting idealized ideas of what individuals are supposed to look like, which includes stereotypical portraits of social groups, their practices or how they look. Such idealizations and stereotypes are thought to facilitate understanding by audiences as they reduce complexity in marketing messages. However, idealizations and stereotypes also (co)determine and reconfirm social norms (e.g., Berger 2015). For example, they often lead to cis-normative, gendered expectations in advertisements when they show what a society considers to be 'typically female' or 'typically male', which roles are assigned to the genders and what expectations are placed on them. At the same time, processes of value reproduction and value negotiation are essentially tied to social power structures and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, which play out in various ways.

The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in media are guided by *selective representation* (i.e., who gets to be seen and heard), *framing* (i.e., how are people being presented), and *agenda-setting* (i.e., what issues are given attention) (see, e.g., Lecheler & de Vreese 2019; Entman & Usher 2018; Coleman 2010; McCombs 2014). Media outlets can greatly influence which values are emphasized, which are being ignored, and what faces we see on our screens and who are being marginalized. Take the media's continuous portrayal of social groups such as immigrants and asylum seekers in a

negative light; who get to be seen and heard, how they are being presented and what issues are prioritized in public discourse can reinforce existing stereotypes, thereby influencing public perception and societal values (e.g., Brantner et al. 2011; Parry 2010; Zhang & Helmueller 2017).

Being mindful of the reproduction of values in our communication, whether social interactions or through (social) media, thus matters. Being aware of value reproductions helps us better question who is being presented to us as 'desirable' – i.e., included in the norm – and who is being presented as 'undesirable' – i.e., excluded from the norm.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reproduction of values is a complex, often implicit process deeply embedded in our daily lives and communication practices. Recognizing the dynamic and contextual nature of values and norms helps us understand their fluidity. This fluidity means that whilst we consider values and social norms rigid, they may be challenged, and contested. Mediated communciation plays a pivotal role in this, not only by reflecting societal values but also by actively shaping them, often reinforcing existing power structures and excluding marginalized voices.

By deconstructing the process of value reproduction, we gain insight into the underlying mechanisms that sustain societal norms. Thus, this essay is also meant as a call to critically engage with the values we reproduce in our own lives and through our research. We should challenge ourselves to reflect on our complicity in maintaining the status quo; by becoming more aware of how we all reproduce values through our communication practices. Only by being conscious of the *process* we can better navigate and influence the social world we inhabit, striving for a society that more accurately reflects the diverse realities of its members.

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Endnotes

[1] For more on 'signifier' and 'signified', see the works by Ferdinand de Saussure, the father or modern linguistics and semiotics. For comprehensive reference works of his theories, see e.g., Culler 1986; de Saussure 2006; Joseph & McElvenny 2022.