

Values manifested in life purposes of higher education students in the Netherlands and Finland

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the life purposes and values of higher education students in the Netherlands and Finland ($n_{Dutch} = 663$, $n_{Fin} = 846$). The theoretical framework is built on the conceptualisation of life purpose by Damon et al. as well as Schwartz's values model. The study adopted a convergent mixed methods design analysing qualitative and quantitative survey data. The content of students' life purposes was explored with qualitative content analysis, followed by a statistical analysis of values measured with Short Schwartz's Value Survey (SSVS) and examination of the alignment of purpose content and values. In both countries, students studying in generalist higher education institutions identified happiness as their most important (content of) life purpose, indicating a prevalence of hedonistic values. Students at a university with a specific emphasis on moral and values education expressed universalism, benevolence and self-direction as their purpose content, and also reported these as their values. We conclude that the model by Schwartz offers a valuable analytical tool for studying the content of life purposes. We also discuss the implications of our findings for developing moral and value education in the context of higher education.

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PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Higher education in the Netherlands and Finland is expected to educate responsible and ethical citizens and professionals. To develop such (moral) education it is important to know more about students' current values and life purposes, i.e. what they aim for in life. This is what the present study provides. For practitioners in higher education, this article offers insights into students' life purposes and values. Our findings revealed how a majority of the students wished to pursue life purposes beneficial only to themselves, indicating a marked self-orientation. However, it also showed how students at an institution with an explicit value basis and clear integration of moral issues and values into all teaching, report moral life purposes and values related to benefitting other

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people, society and nature. Suggestions for future curriculum development are made. Our results also raise questions for policy development: How much support do – and should – institutes of higher education contribute to the development of other-oriented student purposes and moral values? These topics are increasingly on the agenda of mainstream higher education institutions, although they are still influenced by a neo-liberalistic culture prevailing now for several decades, when little attention was paid to these other-oriented perspectives. For northern European societies more generally, our findings can contribute to societal discussions on the prevalence of self-orientation and hedonistic values in western societies and the role of education in building moral and purposeful personal and professional lives.

Introduction

Higher education systems in the Netherlands and Finland have adopted neo-liberal principles in management, such as individualism (individual success), competition and effectiveness (Kauko 2019; Kliewer 2019). Yet higher education policies in both countries also expect higher education institutions to support students' responsible and ethical citizenship and to educate professionals invested in the well-being of societies locally and globally (Higher Education Law 1992; University Law 2009). The recent developments of societal polarisation, climate change, pandemics and warzones in Europe call for developing moral purposes and values in higher education students. Higher education students are not a homogeneous group – the divisions of worldviews and values of young people along an axis of universalism and self-direction versus tradition and conformity also apply to them (Nynäs, Keysar, and Lagerström 2022). A new sense of the importance of moral education has also become reality through commitments to the United Nation's (2015) Sustainable Development Goals. Social, environmental and economic sustainability are to become transversal topics in all teaching and research in Dutch and Finnish higher education institutions (Arene 2020; Ministry of Education and Culture 2020; UNIFI 2020; Universiteiten van Nederland n.d.; Vereniging Hogescholen n.d.).

In this article, we present a study exploring higher education students' life purposes and the values these purposes reflect. We are particularly interested in how the purposes and values aim to serve the interests above and beyond those of the students themselves to address the societal and global challenges. To study life purposes, we utilise a relatively novel theory developed by Damon, Menon and Bronk (2003; Damon 2008). While several empirical studies in the United States have examined purpose utilising this theory, its application in research in other countries is still rare (see Moran 2017, 2018). Studies have shown that life purposes are related to higher education students' educational orientation or field of study in a similar way as values (e.g. Malin 2022; Myyry 2008; Tirri and Kuusisto 2016; Verkasalo et al. 2009). However, to the best of our knowledge, the relationship between these two concepts – life purposes and values – has not been investigated. We will explore the interrelatedness of students' life purposes and values by analysing the values that manifest in the content of higher education students' purposes. In doing so, we will use as a theoretical frame Schwartz's (1992) theory of basic values, widely applied in empirical research (Sagiv and Schwartz 2022). Insight gained in this

study can be helpful in delineating the possible merits of purpose education for value development in higher education contexts, and vice versa.

Life purpose as a moral compass

Life purpose is one of the most profound aspects in human life (Bronk 2014). It offers answers to existential questions, e.g. what one is living their life for, and provides a (moral) compass (Moran 2009) that helps one to make decisions and calibrate one's life (Han 2015). Many studies have confirmed the positive role of purpose for human well-being (Seligman 2002; Sumner, Burrow, and Hill 2018). In this study, we understand the purpose in line with Damon, Menon and Bronk's (2003) conceptualisation: 'Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self' (121). This definition suggests that purpose is a multidimensional phenomenon. Purpose is, firstly, a stable and long-term *intention*. Purpose is something personally meaningful, a goal that one is aiming for. Secondly, it entails *engagement*. Purpose is not just what one dreams of; it involves committed actions towards actualising one's life goal(s). Thirdly, in this conceptualisation purpose contributes *beyond the self*. In other words, purpose should serve not only oneself but also others, i.e. other people, society, nature and the wider world. This external component makes purpose, as understood in this line of research, different from general interpretations of purpose (e.g. Ryff 2022) or related concepts like 'ultimate concerns' (Emmons 1999) or 'life goals' (Roberts and Robins 2000).

When a purpose includes all three dimensions, it can be considered a mature purpose. If one or more dimensions are not encompassed, this is considered a precursor form of purpose, which requires further development. Even though purpose develops throughout one's life, studies show that adolescence and young adulthood are the most crucial periods for purpose development (see Bronk 2014 for a review), which has also motivated the interest in the present study to focus on life purposes in the context of higher education.

It has also been argued that the beyond-the-self dimension puts purpose on a moral spectrum (Han 2015; Moran 2017). Important to note, however, is that a mature purpose does not guarantee a moral purpose (Colby 2020). For example, in Damon et al.'s definition, dictators like Hitler can be considered decidedly purposeful but utterly immoral and ignoble (Damon 2008). Thus, in order to evaluate the moral nature of one's purpose, it is important to scrutinise its contents (Malin et al. 2014).

Hill et al. (2010) have identified four orientations in the content of purposes: prosocial, financial, creative and personal recognition. They also found that only the prosocial orientation was predictive of greater generativity, personal growth and integrity 13 years later, which supports findings of studies demonstrating how contribution to other people has a positive impact on the lives of individuals themselves (e.g. Salmela-Aro and Nurmi 1997; Seligman 2002). In qualitative studies, where Dutch and Finnish students described their life purposes in their own words, *happiness* was the most frequently mentioned content category. Other important contents have been work, relationships and self-actualisation, while health and religion have been among the least mentioned content (Kuusisto and Schutte 2022; Kuusisto and Tirri 2021; Manninen, Kuusisto, and Tirri 2018). Qualitative studies have also shown that content of purpose that seems to be self-

focused, such as like hedonistic and creative content, can also serve others as well e.g. one can inspire others to enjoy life (Kuusisto and Schutte 2022; Kuusisto and Tirri 2021; see also Kuusisto et al. 2023). Thus, it seems that the content of a purpose *alone* does not always provide sufficient information on its maturity or morality. Therefore, in the present study, we analyse both the content and the direction of the purpose: whether the content is intended to benefit oneself and/or (also) others. We also argue that the content of life purposes is reflected in the values of the students and we investigate how well Schwartz's dimensional value model (and instruments based thereon) could be helpful tools for purpose studies in providing a holistic view on the content of purposes. Earlier studies have produced either a rather limited spectrum of possible purpose content (Hill et al. 2010) or a wider range but a list-like outputs (Kuusisto and Tirri 2021; Manninen, Kuusisto, and Tirri 2018; Tirri and Kuusisto 2022).

Universality and individuality of values

According to Schwartz (2012), values '(1) are beliefs, (2) refer to desirable goals, (3) transcend specific actions and situations, (4) serve as standards or criteria, (5) are ordered by importance, and (6) the relative importance of multiple values guides action' (3–4). In Schwartz's model, values form a circular structure (Figure 1) with 10 content areas: universalism (appreciation for humanity in general, nature and the world, justice), benevolence (concern for people in the immediate environment such as family, friends, neighbours etc.), tradition (respect for customs and ideas from a culture or religion), conformism (adaptation to social expectations, obedience), security (safety, health and stability), power (social status, authority), achievement (personal success), hedonism (pleasure, fun), stimulation (excitement, novelty, challenge), and self-direction (independence, self-reliance, freedom).

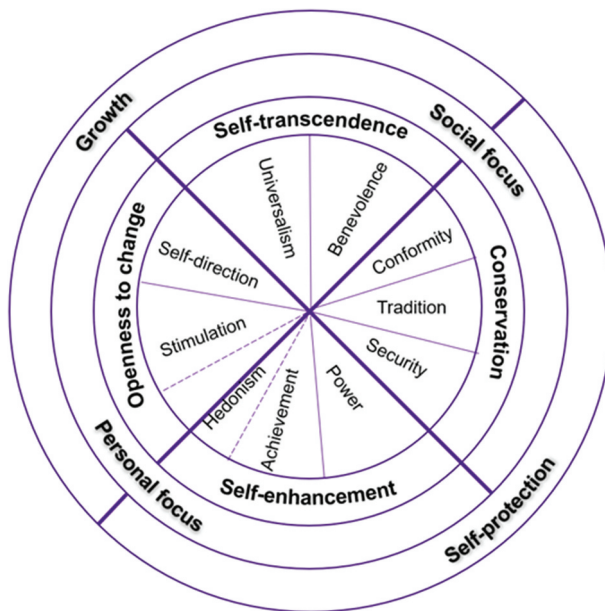


Figure 1. Schwartz's value model (figure adapted from Sagiv and Schwartz 2022, 523).

(pleasure and enjoyment), stimulation (novelty and challenge) and self-direction (independent thinking and action).¹

In this figure, the basic values are placed on two dimensions of motivation with opposite poles. The *dimension of self-transcendence* (universalism and benevolence) – *self-enhancement* (power, achievement and hedonism)² refers to the motivation in contributing to others or benefitting oneself – indicating the same dynamics as in Damon's purpose conception. The *dimension of openness to change* (self-directedness, stimulation) – *conservation* (security, conformity and tradition) denotes, respectively, interest in expansion or protection of the self. Schwartz et al. (2012; see also Sagiv and Schwartz 2022) also identified two principles structuring values and dimensions (Figure 1): Firstly, values may focus on *personal* (self-enhancement and openness to change) or *social* (self-transcendence and conservation) outcomes. Secondly, they may articulate self-expansive *growth* motivations (self-transcendence and openness to change) or express *self-protection* motivations (self-enhancement and conservation).

In the Netherlands, values have been investigated as part of large international studies (e.g. Magun, Rudnev, and Schmidt 2015; Schwartz 2007). There are also experimental studies on the relations between values and behaviour (e.g. Verplanken et al. 2009), comparative studies on word taxonomies (e.g. de Raad et al. 2016) and research on the values of Dutch parents (de Bruin et al. 2022; see also Vermeer 2011). However, we have not been able to find research specifically studying values among Dutch youth, young adults or university students. In Finland, the values of university students (e.g. Lindeman and Verkasalo 2005; Myyry and Helkama 2001; Verkasalo, Daun, and Niit 1994) and the values of youth have been and continue to be investigated fairly rigorously (e.g. Koirikivi et al. 2023; Mannerström et al. 2023; see also the annually published Youth Barometers, e.g. Pekkarinen and Myllyniemi 2019).

Earlier value studies in almost 100 countries have confirmed the near-universality of Schwartz's model (Sagiv and Schwartz 2022). The structure and rankings of the values are relatively similar especially in Western countries: Self-transcendence values being the most important and power the least (Sagiv and Schwartz 2022). This has also been the case in the Netherlands and Finland (Schwartz 2007), which is the context of the present study. Still, studies indicate discrepancies in values and attitudes towards others (Koirikivi et al. 2023) and relations between values and behaviours are complex (Verplanken et al. 2009). Beside universal value patterns, on an individual level, value priorities may vary significantly. Among university students, the field of study seems to have a greater impact on value priorities than country or culture (Verkasalo, Daun, and Niit 1994). For instance, business and technology students tend to emphasise more self-enhancement values and less universalism than students of humanities and social sciences (Arieli, Sagiv, and Roccas 2020; Lindeman and Verkasalo 2005; Myyry and Helkama 2001; Verkasalo, Daun, and Niit 1994).

Most of the value studies based on Schwartz's theory, including our study, have used variable-based methodologies. In recent years, scholars have also started to investigate Schwartz's model with person-oriented methods to identify clusters in participants' value systems (e.g. Magun, Rudnev, and Schmidt 2015; Mannerström et al. 2023; Smack et al. 2017). The two outer layers of Schwartz's model have been utilised in naming the profiles (Figure 1). For example, Magun et al. (2015) used data from the European Social Survey with populations from 29 European countries and found that in general in the Nordic

countries (including Finland) and Western Europe (including the Netherlands) the value preferences were for self-transcendence and openness to change, indicating the emergence of a *growth* profile. A North American study, the only study to our knowledge investigating the values of undergraduate students (age 17–42; 17–58 years), assigned participants to *social-focused* class (84%) and *personal-focused* class (16%) indicating that the majority of the students highlighted values of self-transcendence and conservation and the minority self-enhancement and openness (Smack et al. 2017). A study on Finnish adolescents (aged 16–20) identified three profiles: *personal focus* (56%), *growth focus* (29%) and *self-protective* (15%), which shows that over half of these young Finns emphasised values related to self-enhancement (e.g. hedonism: having fun) and openness (e.g. self-direction: own decisions) (Mannerström et al. 2023). Since these person-oriented studies are still quite rare, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions, yet these profiles seem to reflect age-related differences in values: the older the participants, the more likely they are to support collective values (Pantaléon et al. 2019). To conclude, there is a gap in value studies among Dutch youth and university students. Also, regardless of the plethora of Finnish youth studies, research on values among university students is mainly from the 1990s. Further, beside variable and person-oriented methodologies, qualitative approaches are needed to identify how values are construed in everyday lives. These are the gaps which our study aims to fill.

Data and methods

Procedure and participants

We adopted a convergent mixed methods approach (Creswell 2015) to study life purposes and values and their alignment among Dutch and Finnish students with various educational orientations by answering the following research questions:

RQ1 What is the content of students' life purposes? (Qualitative)

RQ2 What are students' values and what kind of differences are there in the values of students from different fields of study? (Quantitative)

RQ3 How do students' values (as measured with Schwartz's scale) align with content of purpose (identified from students' open-ended responses)? (Mixed)

To find answers to the research questions we approached students at two universities and two universities of applied sciences: the University of Humanistic Studies (UHS) and the Hanze University of Applied Sciences (HUAS) in the Netherlands, and the Faculty of Education and Culture at Tampere University (EDU), and Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) in Finland. All institutions have explicitly made commitments to promote the United Nations' (2015) Sustainable Development Goals by aiming to integrate them into teaching, learning and research. Students at universities (UHS, EDU) in both countries were studying humanities, social and educational sciences (Table 1) and aiming at careers in so-called 'people professions'. In the Netherlands, humanities refers

Table 1. Background information on the participants.

Country		Dutch <i>n</i> = 662				Finnish <i>n</i> = 846				Total
		UHS		HUAS		EDU		TAMK		
Institution		<i>n</i> = 231	%	<i>n</i> = 432	%	<i>n</i> = 563	%	<i>n</i> = 283	%	1509
Gender	Female	183	79	241	56	494	88	187	66	1105
	Male	44	19	189	44	65	11.5	93	33	391
	Other	4	2	2	0.5	4	1	3	1	13
Field of study	Humanities*	231	100			563	100			794
	Economics			179	41			100	35	279
	Social and health care**			134	31			96	34	230
	Technology			118	27			87	31	205
Age	<i>M</i> = 24, <i>SD</i> = 6.80	25	7.87	21.5	3.17	27	7.28	25	7.24	
Country of birth	Student Netherlands	203	94	317	93					520
	Finland					523	95	262	96	785
	Mother Netherlands	202	94	307	90					509
	Finland					515	93	259	95	774
	Father Netherlands	193	90	310	91					503
	Finland					519	94	259	95	778
User language	Dutch	231	100	401	93					632
	Finnish					538	96	280	99	818
	English			31	7	25	4	3	1	59

*In this study, humanities refers to and includes social sciences and educational sciences.

**At the HUAS, social and health care also includes prospective teachers of sports, dance and elementary school.

to philosophy, history, theology and languages. Sociology, psychology and educational sciences are social sciences. In Finland, there are similar classifications for these disciplines except that educational sciences are seen to some extent as independent of social sciences. It should also be noted that the University of Humanistic Studies is not the same as a university of humanities. Humanistic studies refers to the worldview basis of the university – its research and education are inspired by humanistic traditions and focus on issues that humanists are interested in, namely, meaningful living in a humane society. In this university, humanities is combined with social sciences. In the Finnish Faculty of Education and Culture at Tampere University, students study educational sciences that contemplates education from the perspectives of humanities (e.g. philosophy), social sciences (e.g. sociology, psychology) and teachers’ pedagogical studies. In this study, humanities refers to and includes social sciences and educational sciences.

Students at both universities of applied sciences (HUAS, TAMK) studied in several domains, including social and health care, technology and economics (see Table 1). Over half of the students identified themselves as females.

In both countries and in all institutions, over 90% of the students and their parents were born in the Netherlands or Finland (Table 1). Altogether, 59 students answered the survey in English, suggesting that they were exchange students or non-native students on bachelor’s or master’s programme offered in English. Even though the Netherlands is a multicultural society, an explanation for the small percentage of students with a migrant background in the present study could be that the Dutch students may represent the third generation. Secondly, at the UHS, it could be that humanism is not a well-known tradition amongst migrants and the idea of becoming a humanistic chaplain appeals to people who adhere to this (wide) tradition. Thirdly, in the HUAS region (Groningen) 17.5% of the citizens have a migrant background, which is lower than in general in the Netherlands, which in 2022, was 25.2% (Sociaal Planbureau Groningen

2022). Further, in 2005, when students' ethnic backgrounds were still recorded at the HUAS, only 10% of the students had a migrant background and this number also included international students (Wolff 2007). In Finland, the overall number migrants, and especially the number of higher education students with migrant background is low, in 2015 only 3% of bachelor's students belonged to this group (Nori et al. 2021).

Students filled in an online or paper-and-pen version of a survey including quantitative scales as well as qualitative open-ended questions. All the institutions granted permission to conduct the data gathering and participants were asked to give their informed consent before participating.

Instruments

The qualitative data included students' responses to the open-ended question: 'What do you think is your life purpose, or the closest thing you have to a life purpose?' (Magen 1998; Moran 2014). The students thus had the opportunity to describe their life purposes in their own words.

To study students' values, we utilised the Short Schwartz's Value Survey (SSVS) with 10 items (Lindeman and Verkasalo 2005). Students were asked to rate the importance they attached to the values mentioned as life-guiding principles on a Likert scale (0 = opposed to my principles, 1 = not important, 4 = important, 8 = of supreme importance). The items of the SSVS can be found in [Appendix A](#). Finnish items were created in the original study by Lindeman and Verkasalo (2005) and translated into Dutch from the English version by two native Dutch speakers and back translated into English by an individual fluent in both languages.

Analyses

Analysis of content of life purposes

Qualitative analysis on the *content of the life purposes* (RQ1) was conducted utilising an abductive approach combining inductive and deductive analyses (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). The analysis started inductively. The data were coded in Excel by the first author and native speakers from both countries to construct a code book. In an iterative manner, disagreements were discussed, and the code book adjusted. The unit of analysis was one meaningful content category that could be one word or several words long. Written responses could contain one or multiple content categories.

Secondly, each content category was analysed deductively to determine whether the content was aimed to benefit oneself or others (see Kuusisto and Tirri 2021). To ensure the reliability of the coding across countries, interrater reliabilities were measured by calculating kappa values for each content category and self and other orientations. Ten percent of the Dutch or Finnish data were coded by two coders separately. If the kappa values were below .6, which is considered to indicate a good level of agreement (McHugh 2012), the coders continued with the next 10% of the data and the kappa values were calculated again. In the Dutch data, the 0.6 threshold was reached in all categories after four sets of kappa calculations, in the Finnish data after two sets.

Thirdly, since we realised that the inductively identified content of life purposes was close to the values of Schwartz's (2012; Ponizovskiy et al. 2020) model, we decided to

utilise this model to refine the analysis. This final analysis phase confirmed that Schwartz's model provides a well-fitting tool for analysing content of life purposes. Below we illustrate the analysis process with examples of typical responses. The inductive content categories, Schwartz's value categories and self or other orientations are presented in square brackets:

To fully develop myself in what I can be [self-development/self-direction; *self*]. Find peace and balance in the things that take time or are difficult [balance/universalism; *self*]. Ultimately to be able to contribute to policy solutions regarding meaning, citizenship & migration. [social justice/universalism; *other*]. (Dutch humanities student at UHS, ID 10062)

To acquire wealth [economic wealth/power; *self*] and help the poor side of the world. [social justice/universalism; *other*]. (Dutch economics student at HUAS, ID20656)

Happy life [happiness/hedonism; *self*] that includes good career [work/achievement, *self*], health [health/security; *self*] and own family. [relationships/benevolence; *self*]. (Finnish student of educational sciences at EDU, ID 30701)

To get a job [work/achievement, *self*] where I am good [mastery/achievement, *self*] and that I enjoy [enjoyment/hedonism; *self*]. (Finnish technology student at TAMK, ID30962)

If two or more contents belonged to the same category they were marked only once, for example work and mastery belonged to the same category 'achievement'.

Analysis of values

The values of the Dutch and Finnish students in different disciplines (RQ2) were measured with the Short Schwartz's Value Scale and compared with two-way analysis of variances (ANOVA) in SPSS. Triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative results (RQ3) was done by visually inspecting radars produced in Excel to identify how content of purpose aligned with values measured with the Short Schwartz's Value Scale.

Results

RQ1 what is the content of students' life purposes? (qualitative)

Table 2 presents the purpose content and values reflected therein using Schwartz's values and his four value dimensions. Table 2 also shows how nearly every content category was associated with both self and other orientation.

In both countries, *self-enhancement* was the most frequently reported content of life purpose (Table 2), most notably *hedonism*. Students most frequently pursued their own happiness, enjoyment and pleasant life ($n_{\text{Dutch}} = 234, 35\%$; $n_{\text{Finnish}} = 480, 57\%$), indicating a rather hedonistic and affective approach to their understanding of life purpose. Some expressed other-oriented content of purpose in relation to these issues ($n_{\text{Dutch}} = 39, 6\%$; $n_{\text{Finnish}} = 37, 4\%$). Students also valued *achievement* since they wanted to graduate and find work. These were especially important for the Finnish students ($n_{\text{Dutch}} = 96, 14.5\%$; $n_{\text{Finnish}} = 285, 34\%$). Fewer students aimed at *power*, which referred in our data to economic wealth ($n_{\text{Dutch}} = 36, 5\%$; $n_{\text{Finnish}} = 63, 7\%$), like buying and owning a house and a car or just becoming rich.

Table 2. Content of students' life purposes in association with Schwartz's values.

Schwartz's values (inductively identified content of life purposes)	Self-orientation		Other orientation		Total <i>n</i> (%)
	Dutch <i>n</i> = 663(%)	Finnish <i>n</i> = 846(%)	Dutch <i>n</i> = 663(%)	Finnish <i>n</i> = 846(%)	
Self-enhancement	303 (46)	617 (73)	64 (10)	64 (8)	971 (64)
Hedonism (<i>happiness, enjoyment, pleasant life</i>)	234 (35)	480 (57)	39 (6)	37 (4)	743 (49)
Achievement (<i>work, education, graduation</i>)	96 (14.5)	285 (34)	26 (4)	24 (3)	420 (28)
Power (<i>economic wealth</i>)	36 (5)	63 (7)	1 (0)	4 (.5)	100 (7)
Self-transcendence	146 (22)	435 (51)	251 (38)	242 (29)	871 (58)
Benevolence (<i>family and friends, helping and being good to oneself and/or others</i>)	101 (15)	339 (40)	162 (24)	212 (25)	677 (45)
Universalism (<i>social justice, environment, making the world a better place, connecting people, meaning making and balance</i>)	62 (9)	181 (21)	164 (25)	84 (10)	441 (30)
Openness to change	135 (20)	278 (33)	56 (8)	18 (2)	460 (30.5)
Self-direction (<i>self-development, learning, own choice</i>)	91 (14)	234 (28)	40 (6)	16 (2)	360 (24)
Stimulation (<i>inspiration, motivation, challenge, travel</i>)	56 (8)	85(10)	26 (4)	2 (0)	166 (11)
Conservation	50 (7.5)	136 (16)	15 (2)	22 (3)	210 (14)
Security (<i>health, stability</i>)	35 (5)	101 (12)	17 (3)	45 (5)	155 (10)
Tradition (<i>religion, marriage</i>)	3 (.5)	23 (3)	3 (.5)	4 (.5)	30 (2)
Conformity (<i>modesty</i>)	13 (2)	18 (2)	2 (0)	–	33 (2)
No purpose	21 (3)	21 (2.5)			42 (3)
No answer	68 (10)	8 (1)			76 (5)

Self-transcendence comprises benevolence and universalism in Schwartz's model. *Benevolence* as content of purpose referred to goals related to having a *family and friends* as well as *helping and being good to oneself and/or others*. Among Finnish students, benevolence was most typically expressed with a self-orientation ($n_{\text{Dutch}} = 70$, 11%; $n_{\text{Finnish}} = 259$, 30.5%) by emphasising familial interests. Other orientation of benevolence, i.e. willingness to help others and promoting a good life was equally often mentioned content in both countries ($n_{\text{Dutch}} = 162$, 24%; $n_{\text{Finnish}} = 212$, 25%). *Universalism* as a purpose was expressed with a wide spectrum of meanings: addressing social justice, protecting the environment, making the world a better place, connecting people as well as valuing meaningfulness and balance in and between personal and professional spheres of life. Dutch students highlighted more other orientation in their universalistic purposes ($n_{\text{Dutch}} = 164$, 25%; $n_{\text{Finnish}} = 84$, 10%) while Finnish students reported more self-oriented content ($n_{\text{Dutch}} = 62$, 9%; $n_{\text{Finnish}} = 181$, 21%). However, a more detailed analysis, where we cross-tabulated content with discipline studied (see Appendix B), showed that universalism in particular ($\chi^2(7) = 116.982$, $p < .001$) and other orientation in all content categories ($\chi^2(7) = 150.482$, $p < .001$) were emphasised statistically significantly more by the *Dutch humanities students* at the University of Humanistic Studies.

In *openness to change*, *self-direction* as content of purpose meant self-development and self-actualisation. Students wanted to realise their own goals and live their lives according to their own values and choices. Self-orientation was highlighted more in this content (self-orientation: $n_{\text{Dutch}} = 91$, 14%; $n_{\text{Finnish}} = 234$, 28%; other orientation: $n_{\text{Dutch}} = 40$, 6%; $n_{\text{Finnish}} = 16$, 2%). Also, the content related to *stimulation* was more self-oriented ($n_{\text{Dutch}} = 56$, 8%; $n_{\text{Finnish}} = 85$, 10%) like desire for exciting experiences and to

travel than other-oriented ($n_{Dutch} = 26, 4\%$; $n_{Finnish} = 2, 0\%$) in which students wanted to inspire other people to find their own path in life.

Content about **conservation** was relatively rare in both countries. Few students aimed at *security*, meaning health and safety (self-orientation: $n_{Dutch} = 35, 5\%$; $n_{Finnish} = 101, 12\%$; other orientation: $n_{Dutch} = 17, 3\%$; $n_{Finnish} = 45, 5\%$). Even fewer individuals favoured *traditions* or *conformity* (see Table 2), which in this study referred, respectively, to religion or wishing for a normal life.

RQ2 what are students’ values and what kind of differences are there between students in different disciplines?

According to the means on Short Schwartz’s Value Scale, students in both countries valued *benevolence* ($M_{Dutch} = 6.63, SD = 1.63, M_{Finnish} = 7.42, SD = 1.01$) most and *tradition* ($M_{Dutch} = 4.31, SD = 1.95, M_{Finnish} = 4.15, SD = 2.16$) and *power* ($M_{Dutch} = 3.37, SD = 1.83, M_{Finnish} = 3.11, SD = 1.94$) least. Among the three highest ranked values (Table 3), *hedonism* was in third place in both countries, while the second most important value was *self-direction* for the Dutch students and *security* for the Finnish students.

We also looked at differences between the students according to discipline and country with two-way analyses of variances (ANOVA). We will present only the main statistically significant results; a summary of the analyses can be found in Table 4.

In *universalism* and *benevolence* differences by country, discipline and their interaction were greatest. Discipline explained 17% of variance in universalism and 13% in benevolence. Humanities students in both countries scored higher than others on universalism, benevolence and *self-direction*, especially Dutch humanities students, who also emphasised *stimulation* more than others. Benevolence was an especially important value for health care students, with Finnish health care students scoring the highest of all. Finnish health care students also valued hedonism and security. Overall, Finnish students highlighted *hedonism, achievement* and *security* more than did Dutch students. Technology students in both countries scored low on benevolence, self-direction, stimulation, tradition and conformity. Economics students emphasised power, conformity and hedonism.

Table 3. Rankings of values and means by country and discipline.

Country	Dutch								Finnish					
	n		M		SD		Hum	Health	Tec	Econ	Hum	Health	Tec	Econ
Discipline	663	663			231	61	118	179	842	842	561	86	87	99
n	663	663			231	61	118	179	842	842	561	86	87	99
Value	Rank	M	SD	M	M	M	M	Rank	M	SD	M	M	M	M
Power	10	3.37	1.83	3.27	2.68	3.53	3.89	10	3.11	1.94	3.11	2.58	3.05	3.68
Achievement	8	5.03	1.75	5.14	4.79	4.97	5.11	7	5.25	1.78	5.19	5.24	5.28	5.59
Hedonism	3	5.87	1.82	5.99	5.79	5.85	5.80	3	6.52	1.45	6.42	6.86	6.49	6.79
Stimulation	5	5.58	1.78	6.10	5.34	5.37	5.24	8	5.25	1.92	5.07	5.78	5.25	5.77
Self-direction	2	6.46	1.77	7.39	5.87	5.93	6.06	4	6.36	1.59	6.45	6.07	6.00	6.59
Universalism	4	5.61	2.47	7.51	4.60	4.75	4.51	5	6.30	1.84	6.54	6.21	5.42	5.80
Benevolence	1	6.63	1.63	7.59	6.19	5.89	6.22	1	7.42	1.01	7.53	7.63	6.74	7.14
Tradition	9	4.31	1.95	4.26	4.27	4.16	4.54	9	4.15	2.16	4.16	4.36	3.43	4.48
Conformity	7	5.13	1.9	4.65	5.34	5.36	5.47	6	5.32	1.94	5.31	5.69	4.45	5.76
Security	6	5.44	1.78	5.32	5.43	5.55	5.57	2	6.75	1.41	6.73	7.10	6.40	6.80

Hum = Humanities, social and educational sciences, Health=Social and health care; Tec=Technology, Econ=Economics. Bolding=high scores.

Table 4. Summary of two-way ANOVAs.

	Country X Discipline	Country	Discipline
Power	$F(3) = .456, \eta_p^2 = .001$	$F(1) = 4.405, \eta_p^2 = .003$	$F(3) = 15.423, *** \eta_p^2 = .030$ Econ, Health
Achievement	$F(3) = 1.280, \eta_p^2 = .003$	$F(1) = 8.884, ** \eta_p^2 = .006$ Finnish	$F(3) = 1.483, \eta_p^2 = .003$
Hedonism	$F(3) = 3.189, * \eta_p^2 = .006$ Finnish health	$F(1) = 62.686, *** \eta_p^2 = .040$ Finnish	$F(3) = .528, \eta_p^2 = .001$
Stimulation	$F(3) = 15.914, *** \eta_p^2 = .031$ Dutch Hum, Finnish Hum	$F(1) = .166, \eta_p^2 = .000$	$F(3) = 1.145, \eta_p^2 = .002$
Self-direction	$F(3) = 17.327, *** \eta_p^2 = .034$ Dutch Hum high	$F(1) = .160, \eta_p^2 = .000$	$F(3) = 30.2900, *** \eta_p^2 = .057$ Hum high
Universalism	$F(3) = 38.511, *** \eta_p^2 = .072$ Dutch hum high	$F(1) = 30.793, *** \eta_p^2 = .020$ Dutch high	$F(3) = 100.703, *** \eta_p^2 = .168$ Hum, Tec, Econ
Benevolence	$F(3) = 27.010, *** \eta_p^2 = .052$ Dutch hum, Finnish hum, Finnish health	$F(1) = 75.271, *** \eta_p^2 = .048$ Dutch	$F(3) = 71.841, *** \eta_p^2 = .126$ Hum, health
Tradition	$F(3) = 1.652, \eta_p^2 = .003$	$F(1) = 2.473, \eta_p^2 = .002$	$F(3) = 4.664, ** \eta_p^2 = .009$ Econ, Tec
Conformity	$F(3) = 8.712, *** \eta_p^2 = .017$ <i>Finnish Econ, Finnish Tec</i>	$F(1) = .702, \eta_p^2 = .000$	$F(3) = 10.872, *** \eta_p^2 = .017$ Econ, Tec, Hum
Security	$F(3) = 2.680, * \eta_p^2 = .005$ Finnish health	$F(1) = 179.255, *** \eta_p^2 = .107$ Finnish	$F(3) = 2.026, \eta_p^2 = .004$

Hum=Humanities, social and educational sciences, Health=Social and health care; Tec=Technology, Econ=Economics. Items in bold face=high scores, Items in italics=low scores.

RQ3 how do students' values align with values reflected in the content of their life purposes?

The third research question was answered by visually illustrating and comparing radars in Figures 2(a,b) and 3(a,b).

All students supported larger value spectrum when measured with the Short Schwartz's Value Scale (SSVS), in other words students scored fairly high on many values (Figures 2(b) and 3(b)) in comparison to the written descriptions, where the value variation was narrower, and few value areas peaked (Figures 2(a) and 3(a)). However, visual inspection revealed similar trends in the written responses and the SSVS: Dutch humanities students at UHS differed from other students; they valued most highly *universalism*, *benevolence* and *self-direction* in both the qualitative and quantitative data. Among Finnish students, *hedonism*, *benevolence* and *achievement* peaked in both radars. In the SSVS *security* was very important for Finnish students compared to the written responses. A possible explanation for this discrepancy could be that in the SSVS family was mentioned only as 'family security', while purposes concerning family and friends were coded as benevolence in the written responses in line the proposal by Ponizovskiy et al. (2020). The radars of Dutch health, technology and economics i.e. HUAS students, emphasised *hedonism*, *achievement* and *benevolence* in their written responses, but their SSVS radars did not specifically peak. In both countries, the widest variation in the SSVS was related to *power*. Economics students in both countries highlighted this value most in the SSVS (see Appendix A), but *power* was not equally visible in the written descriptions of life purposes.

Values in written responses on life purposes - Dutch students

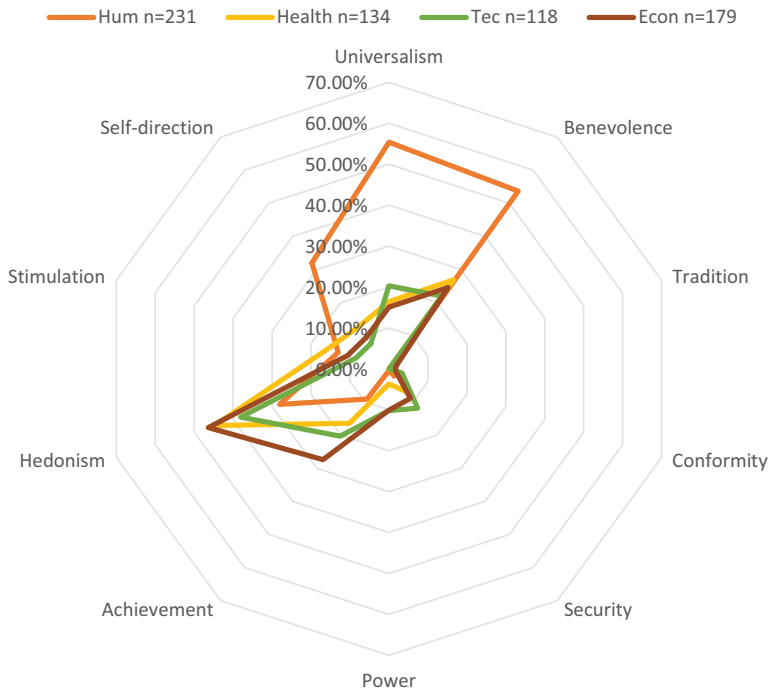


Figure 2a. Radar of Dutch students' values in life purposes in written responses (scale 0%–70% of the students).

Values in Short Schwartz's Value Scale - Dutch students

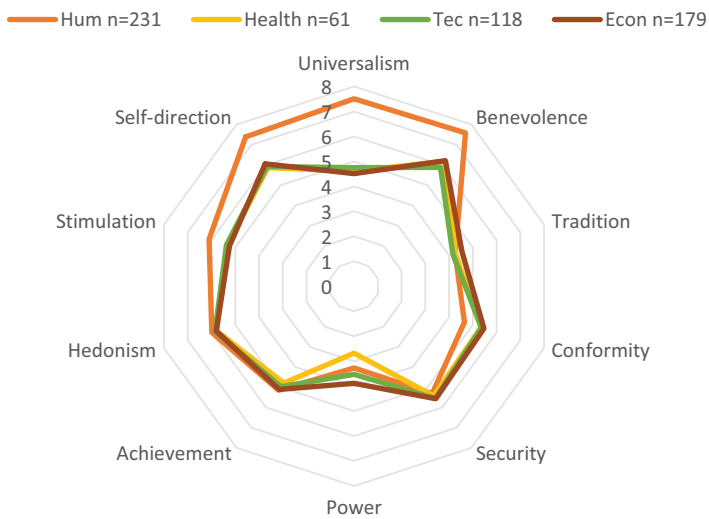


Figure 2b. Radar of Dutch students' values in SSVS (scale 0–8).

Values in written responses on life purposes - Finnish students

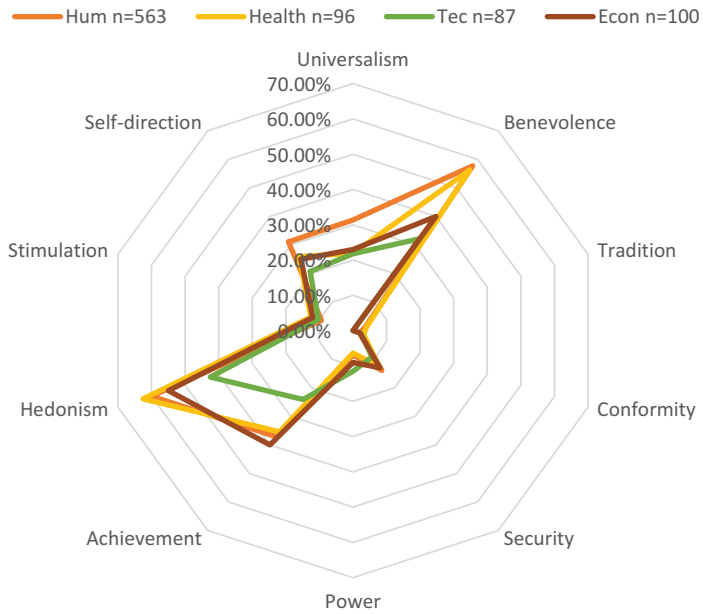


Figure 3a. Radar of Finnish students' values in life purposes in written responses (scale 0%–70% of the students).

Values in Short Schwartz's Value Scale - Finnish students

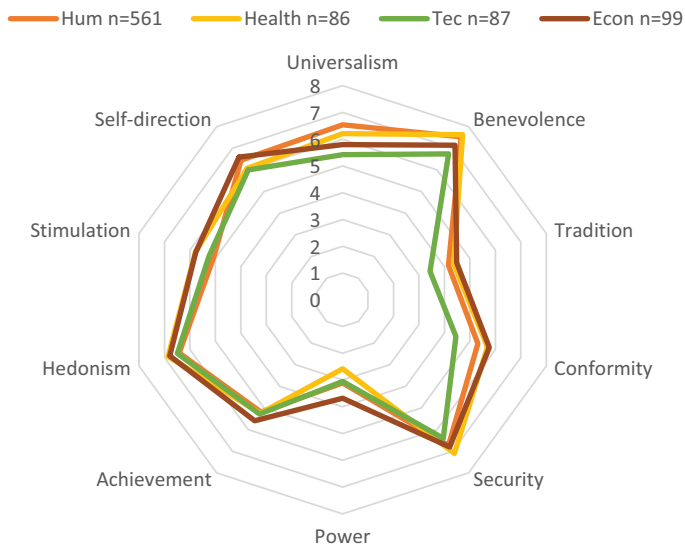


Figure 3b. Radar of Finnish students' values in SSVS (scale 0–8).

Discussion

Higher education in the Netherlands and Finland is expected to educate responsible and ethical citizens and professionals. To develop this kind of (moral) education information on students' current values and life purposes is needed, which the present study aimed to gather. As our theoretical frameworks, we utilised the definition of purpose by Damon et al. (2003) and the value model by Schwartz (1992) and implemented a convergent mixed methods design. By identifying content of life purposes and the values reflected in them we also wished to test whether instruments developed based on Schwartz's model could be useful tools for purpose studies.

When we studied the content of life purposes in the written responses, the most frequently reported content was *happiness*, indicating from the perspective of Schwartz's model the prevalence of hedonistic values. The prominence of happiness as well as the tendency to describe life purposes benefitting only the respondents themselves have also been identified in earlier Dutch and Finnish studies (Kuusisto and Schutte 2022; Kuusisto and Tirri 2021; Manninen, Kuusisto, and Tirri 2018; see also Mannerström et al. 2023). However, with regard to these trends, there was one clear exception in our data: Dutch students of humanities at the University of Humanistic Studies rarely mentioned happiness or overall self-oriented content as their purpose. Instead, over half of these students wanted to make positive contributions to other people, society or nature, indicating that these students have potentially been able to conceive of mature and moral purposes (Colby 2020, Damon, Menon, and Bronk 2003) better than other participants studied here.

When we measured students' values on the Short Schwartz's Value Scale, *benevolence* was the most appreciated value and *tradition* and *power* the least appreciated, which corroborates findings from earlier values studies among Dutch and Finnish people (Sagiv and Schwartz 2022; Schwartz 2007; see also Koirikivi et al. 2023). We also found similar dispositions between disciplines as in earlier studies, yet the differences were not equally clearcut (Arieli, Sagiv, and Roccas 2020; Lindeman and Verkasalo 2005; Myrsky and Helkama 2001; Verkasalo et al. 1994). In our data, discipline studied was associated with universalism, benevolence, self-direction, power and conformity: humanities students scored higher and technology and economics students lower on universalism. The fields of humanities and health care explained the emphasis on benevolence, while in technology this value emerged as less important. Further, being a student of economics explained interest in power and conformity.

We also found that the Dutch humanities students at the University of Humanistic Studies differed from their Dutch and Finnish peers in the structure and content of their life purposes and values since they were the only group whose qualitatively and quantitatively measured values aligned: they emphasised universalism, benevolence and self-direction. Such value combinations highlight self-expansive *growth* motivation (Schwartz et al. 2012; see also Magun, Rudnev, and Schmidt 2015). We can assume that these students have practised explicating personal purposes and values during their studies, as their views were also close to the value basis of their university (University of Humanistic Studies, 2017). Another possible explanation is that these students may have already had a specific orientation when choosing their university (Hill et al. 2010; Malin 2022).

The qualitatively and quantitatively analysed values did not align equally clearly among students in more generalist institutions, the Hanze University of Applied Sciences, the Faculty of Education and Culture at Tampere University and Tampere University of Applied Sciences. Firstly, written descriptions of purpose among students in these institutions indicated less content and thus indicated fewer values than the Short Schwartz's Value Scale scores. Here, the social desirability effect may come into play when utilising scales with readymade options and the ideals that one would like to espouse may influence responses. In the written responses, one may concentrate on expressing the actual and most pressing issues. Therefore, qualitative descriptions of life purposes may even yield more valid and accurate information about the values students actually espouse, suggesting that in future studies asking about life purposes could be an important method for examining students' values. Secondly, our results indicate that writing about one's greatest aspirations such as life purpose requires many meta-cognitive skills in the domains of moral and values education – topics that have not been explicitly on the agenda in generalist higher education institutions in the Netherlands or Finland that have more likely a neo-liberalistic atmosphere which typically neglects these skills despite the noble aims articulated in higher education policy documents (de Ruyter and Schinkel 2017).

We can conclude that Schwartz's value model is a useful framework for analysing the content of life purposes. Schwartz's model provided us with a broad and clear framework with a three-level structure that includes main categories (dimensions) and subcategories (values) as well as principles related to outcomes and motivations. While, for example, the model of life goals proposed by Roberts and Robins utilised by Kuusisto and Tirri (2021) in their analysis of life purposes produces more list-like results rather than a holistic and dimensional model. Also, the four-factor model by Hill et al. (2010) can be criticised for not capturing the breadth and nuances of individuals' life purposes. In the qualitative analysis, we also utilised the tool developed by Ponizovskiy et al. (2020) to study Schwartz's values in any written materials, which affords opportunities to analyse large datasets with computer-run algorithms. In our study, we used their instrument manually and it would be worthwhile to develop this for use with languages other than English, such as Dutch and Finnish. In the future, it might also be worth revising the concepts of values utilised in Short Schwartz's Value Scale. For example, familial values, which were among the most important content of life purposes and values, especially for Finnish students, could be presented more visibly in the scale: the Short Schwartz's Value Scale currently uses the concept 'family security' and positions it as part of security while in this study and in line with Ponizovskiy et al. we understood 'family' as reflecting benevolence.

Differences in students' purposes and values might be better explained by differences between the education institutions and between disciplines rather than between country contexts. Because of our small sample and the dissimilarity of the institutional profiles, we cannot meaningfully discuss how differences among participating institutes may relate to country contexts. Moreover, because of the specific profile of the University of Humanistic Studies, a small and unique university with a decidedly strongly and explicitly stated value base, the results cannot be generalised to other Dutch universities. Therefore, some caution is needed in drawing conclusions from

our data and there is a need to gain insight into differences in student profiles in a larger number of institutions and the differing educational policies and practices in them.

All in all, this research has provided insights that need follow-up studies on more institutions and possibly more countries. In particular, the combination of being self-focused (hedonistic) and focused on others emerging in all value radars, albeit in different ways, would require future research with person-oriented methodologies as well as qualitative interviews to understand life purposes and values and their developmental trajectories at a more profound level.

Notes

1. Schwartz et al. (2012) refined his model introducing 19 values. However, in the present study we utilise the original model from 1992 since it is still the most utilised typology (Ponizovskiy et al. 2020) and also the basis of the instrument that we are applying in this study created by Lindeman and Verkasalo (2005).
2. Schwartz's (1992, 2012) studies have associated hedonism with two different dimensions: self-enhancement and openness to change. In spite of some recent studies by Borg (2021), Khoshtaria (2018) and Ponizovskiy et al. (2020) in which hedonism is placed on the openness to change dimension, in our study we locate hedonism as part of the self-enhancement dimension.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Items of short version of Schwartz's Scale

Short Schwartz's Value Scale (SSVS)

Self-enhancement

- 1 Power, that is social power, authority, wealth
- 2 Achievement, that is success, capability, ambition, influence on people and events
- 3 Hedonism, that is gratification of desires, enjoyment in life, self-indulgence

Openness to change

- 4 Stimulation, that is daring, a varied and challenging life, an exciting life
- 5 Self-Direction, that is creativity, freedom, curiosity, independence, choosing one's own goals

Self-transcendence

- 6 Universalism, that is broad mindedness, beauty of nature and arts, social justice, a world at peace, equality, wisdom, unity with nature, environmental protection
- 7 Benevolence, that is helpfulness, honesty, forgiveness, loyalty, responsibility

Conservation

- 8 Tradition, that is respect for tradition, humbleness, accepting one's portion in life, devotion, modesty
 - 9 Conformity, that is obedience, honouring parents and elders, self-discipline, politeness
 - 10 Security, that is national security, family security, social order, cleanliness, reciprocation of favors
-

Appendix B. Values in life purposes (written responses) and results of cross-tabulation between values and fields of study, Chi-square test and standardized residuals

Country	Dutch n = 662								Finnish n = 846							
	Hum		Health		Tec		Econ		Hum		Health		Tec		Econ	
Discipline	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Self-enhancement***	79a	34	78	58	68	58	111b	62	428b	76	70	73	57	65.5	80	80
Hedonism***	65a	28	60a	45	45	38	83	46	338b	60	60	63	37	42.5	55	55
Achievement***	21a	9	22	16	24	20	49	27	209b	37	34	35	21	24	40b	40
Power***	1a	0.4	5	4	12	10	18	10	39	7	6	6	10	11.5	9	9
Self-transcendence***	177b	77	48a	36	42a	26	65a	36	388b	69	61	64	38a	44	52	52
Universalism***	128b	55	22a	16	23	20	27a	15	177	31	21	22	19	22	23	23
Benevolence***	124b	54	36a	27	26a	22	44a	25	325b	58	54	56	28	32	40	40
Openness to change***	89b	39	32	24	18a	15	33a	18	205b	36	28	29	24	28	31	31
Self-direction***	74b	32	17a	13	9a	8	17a	9.5	175b	31	25	26	18	21	25	25
Stimulation	30	13	21	16	10	8.5	19	11	53	9	12	13	9	10	12	12
Conservation***	11a	5	12	9	17	14	22	12	106b	19	18	19	9	10	15	15
Security***	5a	2	9	7	14	12	16	9	78b	14	12	13	8	9	13	13
Tradition**	2	1	0	0	0	0	3	2	21b	4	4	4	0	0	0	0
Conformity	4	2	4	3	4	3	3	2	11	2	3	3	2	2	2	2
Purpose directed towards benefitting																
Only self***	61a	26	65	49	60	51	97	54	347b	62	64	67	66b	76	78b	78
Other***(only other, self +other)	159b	69	43	32	36	30.5	53	30	206	37	28	29	11a	13	17a	17
No purpose***	4	2	4	3	6	5	7	4	6a	1	3	3	8b	9	4	4
No answer***	7	3	22b	16	16b	14	22b	12	4a	1	1	1	2	2	1	1

Hum = Humanities, social and educational sciences, Health=Social and health care; Tec=Technology, Econ=Economics. a Standardized residual negative |z| or more; b Standardized residual positive |z| or more.

*** Hedonism $\chi^2(7) = 84.531, p < .001$; Achievement $\chi^2(7) = 87.270, p < .001$; Power $\chi^2(7) = 26.262, p < .001$; Universalism $\chi^2(7) = 116.982, p < .001$; Benevolence $\chi^2(7) = 128.721, p < .001$; Self-direction $\chi^2(7) = 72.095, p < .001$; Security $\chi^2(7) = 28.239, p < .001$; Self-enhancement $\chi^2(7) = 143.793, p < .001$; Self-transcendence $\chi^2(7) = 156.105, p < .001$; Openness to change $\chi^2(7) = 44.744, p < .001$; Conservation $\chi^2(7) = 33.545, p < .001$; Only self $\chi^2(7) = 131.855, p < .001$; Other $\chi^2(7) = 150.482, p < .001$; No purpose $\chi^2(7) = 24.046, p < .001$; No answer $\chi^2(7) = 107.110, p < .001$; ** Tradition $\chi^2(7) = 21.579, p < .01$.