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Who prioritizes the economy over health? The role of political orientation and human values

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ABSTRACT

One of the main challenges governments faced during the Covid-19 pandemic was to balance economic considerations with protecting the health of people (i.e., economic vs humanitarian motives). In the present study ($N = 296$), we investigated whether human values, political orientation, and fear of Covid-19 predicted economic and humanitarian motives. We found that people holding self-enhancement and normative values, had lower levels of Covid-19 fear, and were more right-leaning in terms of their political orientation, tended to prioritize the economy. In contrast, people valuing normative values less, interactive values more, reported higher levels of Covid-19 related fear, and were more left-leaning, tended to prioritize the health of people. Importantly, values explained variance above and beyond political orientation and fear of Covid-19. Together, our findings highlight the importance of values in decision making.

1. Introduction

On 22th of March, President Donald Trump announced on Twitter that US-Americans "cannot let the cure be worse than the problem [Covid-19] itself" (Haberman & Sanger, 2020). The now ex-president used such arguments to avoid imposing restrictive measures that would reduce face-to-face interactions substantially, thus allegedly saving the economy from the pandemic. Similarly, the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro argued in March 2020 that Brazil needs to "return to normality" (GloboNews, 2020), when the virus was just about to start spreading through the country. Such decisions proofed devasting: They resulted in many fatalities (Brauner et al., 2020). In Sao Paulo, for example, the rolling average of daily deaths increased by 28% over the two weeks following loosening the restrictions (Seade, 2020). So far, little research has directly investigated the motivational duality on whether a country should prioritize the economy or the health of its population. In the present manuscript, we investigate the role of human values, political orientation, and fear of Covid-19, to better understand why some people prioritize the economy over health or vice versa.

Human values are abstract ideals that guide people's behavior (Maio, 2016; Schwartz, 1992). As such, they play an important role in understanding people's attitudes, view's and behavior intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Wolf, Haddock, Manstead, and Maio (2020) argued that values drive both compliance with official regulations and prosocial behavior such as supporting others in need. For example, they postulated that self-transcendence and conservation values are positively associated with compliance of COVID-19 restriction measures. In line with this prediction, Coelho, Hanel, and Baptista (2021) found that countries in which people value on average more autonomy, which is related to self-transcendence, are more likely to adhere to governmental restrictions and reduce their mobility.

1.1. The present research

So far, the role of human values in understanding whether people place higher importance on humanitarian or economic motives has not been investigated. Therefore, the present research aims to assess whether human values can help to explain why some individuals prioritize the economy (materialistic motivation) over the health of their fellow countryhumans (humanitarian motivation). For that, we used the

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Functional Theory of Human Values (Gouveia et al., 2014), which orders values into a 2 × 3-framework based on the underlying needs and goals (see Fig. 1). Gouveia et al. (2014) distinguished values based on their survival and thriving needs, which represent materialistic and humanitarian motivators, respectively.

The present research was conducted in Brazil because Covid-19 is very salient there: It is second in Covid-19 associated deaths until December 14th (Worldmeter, 2020). People who are guided by values that represent humanitarian motives are more prone to act selflessly, care more about others, and enjoy personal fulfilment independent of materialistic goods (Gouveia, 2013; Gouveia et al., 2014). On the other hand, people who are guided by materialism, are more concerned with the preservation of the status quo and therefore with institutional stability (Gouveia, 2013; Gouveia et al., 2014). Materialianism might reduce people's concerns for others and therefore let them prioritize the economy and financial stability over health. Indeed, previous research found that values representing materialistic or self-enhancing needs are correlated with materialism (Karabati & Cemalcilar, 2010) and competitive decision making (Sagiv, Sverdlik, & Schwarz, 2011), whereas values representing humanitarian or self-transcending needs are more strongly associated with protecting the environment, cooperative decision making, and supporting disadvantaged groups (Bouman et al., 2020; Sagiv et al., 2011; Souchon, Kermarec, Trouilloud, & Bardin, 2020). Therefore, we hypothetize that prioritizing the economy would be influenced by materialistic values (i.e., promotion, existence, normative; Hypothesis 1), whereas prioritizing health would be influenced by humanitarian values (i.e., excitement, suprapersonal, interactive; Hypothesis 2).

Additionally, we explored whether the associations between values and motives would remain robust when controlling for political orientation and fear of Covid-19. This is important because both of them are likely to be associated with each of the two motives as well.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 296 individuals ($M_{age} = 31.55$; $SD_{age} = 11.58$; 210 women, 86 men). They were recruited through social media (e.g., Facebook, Reddit).

2.2. Material

The *Basic Values Survey* (Gouveia, Milfont, Fischer, & Santos, 2008) measures each of the six subfunctions with three items. Participants were asked to indicate the level of importance they attribute to each value (e.g., *power*, *affectivity*), using a 7-point scale (1 = *Completely unimportant*; 7 = *Of the utmost importance*; see Table 1 for the internal consistencies). The internal consistencies are in line with prior research (e.g., Gouveia et al., 2014; Schwartz, 1992; Vilar, Liu, & Gouveia, 2020).

The Scale of Humanitarian-Economic Priority in Crisis Situation was specifically developed for this study. It consists of six items measuring humanitarian ("We need to prioritize saving people's lives, regardless of what it costs") and economic motives ("The economy should be the main concern during this COVID-19 pandemic"). Responses were given using a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree). The items alongside their internal consistencies and factor loadings are available in Table 1 and the Supplementary material.

Moreover, to identify the unique impact of human values onto the humanitarian-economic motives, we controlled for political orientation and fear of COVID-19. Political orientation was measured using a single item (1 = *Extremely liberal*; 5 = *Extremely conservative*). The use of a single-item to measure political orientation is common in the literature (Piurko, Schwartz, & Davidov, 2011). Fear of COVID-19 was measured using the 7-item *Fear of COVID-19 Scale* (Medeiros et al., 2021; 1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*). Additionally, we investigated the unique impact of those two predictors.

3. Results

First, we correlated humanitarian and economic motives with human values, political view, and fear of COVID-19 (Table 1). Fear of COVID-19 was positively associated with humanitarian motives, and negatively with economic motives. Being left-leaning was associated with humanitarian motives, whereas being right-leaning was correlated with economic motives. Two value subfunctions were correlated with the two motives, thus supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2. The economic factor was positively associated with promotion and normative values, whereas the humanitarian factor was negatively associated with normative values.

To test the unique influence of human values on each of the two motives, we performed two hierarchical regressions. We added political orientation and fear of COVID-19 in the first step, thus controlling for their impact. In the second step, we added all six value subfunctions. Promotion and normative values remained positively associated with economic motives (Table 2). Humanitarian motives were positively predicted by interactive values and negatively by normative values. Interestingly, political orientation became non-significant when values were included to predict humanitarian motives, suggesting that interactive values are more relevant than political orientation in predicting caring for other people. Additionally, Fig. 2 displays the unstandardized regression coefficients.

		Values as guides of actions (circle of goals)		
		Personal goals	Central goals	Social goals
Values as expressions of needs (level of needs)	*Thriving*	**Excitement Values**	**Suprapersonal Values**	**Interactive Values**
	needs	Emotion	Beauty	Affection
		Pleasure	Knowledge	Belonging
		Sexuality	Maturity	Support
	Survival	**Promotion Values**	**Existence Values**	**Normative Values**
	needs	Power	Health	Obedience
		Prestige	Stability	Religiosity
		Success	Survival	Tradition

Fig. 1. Functional Theory of Human Values structure.
Note. Adapted from Gouveia, Milfont, and Guerra (2014).

Table 1
Correlations between Humanitarian-Economic Motives, Fear of COVID-19, Political Orientation, and Human Values.

		M	*SD*	α	ω	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Humanitarian Motives	4.40	0.77	0.76	0.76									
2	Economic Motives	2.14	0.82	0.77	0.78	−.641**								
3	Fear of COVID-19	3.71	1.40	0.85	0.86	.297**	−.317**							
4	Political Orientation	2.63	0.77	–	–	−.152**	.241**	−.121*						
Human values														
5	Excitement	4.76	1.04	0.58	0.58	0.047	−.024	0.071	−0.078					
6	Promotion	4.59	0.99	0.63	0.66	−0.086	.142*	−0.063	0.068	.402**				
7	Suprapersonal	5.79	0.79	0.52	0.55	0.072	−0.064	0.059	−0.066	.340**	.310**			
8	Existence	6.21	0.67	0.52	0.54	0.076	−0.065	0.016	−0.018	.288**	.319**	.471**		
9	Interactive	5.71	0.88	0.58	0.58	0.088	−0.068	0.081	0.026	.281**	.149*	.275**	.282**	
10	Normative	4.95	1.36	0.68	0.71	−.198**	.196**	−0.024	.398**	−0.004	.195**	0.103	0.099	.294**

Note: α = Cronbach's alpha, ω = McDonald's omega.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Hierarchical regressions.

Values	M	Fear of Covid19	Political orientation	Exc.	Pro.	Sup.	Exi.	Int.	Nor.	*F(df)*	R^2	ΔR^2
Economic Motivations	1	−.293***	.205**							23.778 (2, 286)***	0.143	
	2	−.281***	.141*	0.011	.131*	−0.034	−0.072	−0.080	.143*	7.743 (8, 280)**	0.181	.039*
Humanitarian Motivations	1	.289***	−.117*							16.835 (2, 286)***	0.105	
	2	.277***	−0.029	−0.016	−0.074	0.060	0.041	.132*	−.214***	6.534 (8, 280)**	0.157	.052*

Note. M = model (model 1: only fear of Covid-19 and political orientation; model 2: eight predictors); Exc: Excitement, Pro: Promotion, Sup: Suprapersonal, Exi: Existence, Int: Interactive, Nor: Normative; R^2 = Amount of explained variance by the model; ΔR^2 = increase in the R^2 between the models. Values represent standardized coefficients (βs).
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

4. Discussion

We assessed to what extent human values can help to understand why individuals prioritize humanitarian or economic motives in face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic motives were positively associated with promotion (e.g., power, prestige, success) and normative (e.g., obedience, religiosity, tradition) values, thus partly supporting Hypothesis 1. Individuals who endorse promotion values tend to be material-driven and prioritize their own personal gains (Gouveia, 2013). On the other hand, normative values are characterized by a focus on social rules with a materialistic guiding principle (Gouveia et al., 2014). This is in line with Coelho et al. (2021), who sound that cultural values such as embeddedness (e.g., tradition, conformity) and hierarchy (e.g., power) are linked to a higher mobility. In other words, cultures that highly endorse those values tend to follow lockdown measures less. Our findings extend those of Coelho et al.: we find that these higher levels of mobility might be driven by an economic motivation: Moving more can help to keep the economy going.

Further, Hypothesis 2 was partly supported: interactive values (e.g., affectivity, belonging, social support) were positively correlated with humanitarian motives. This subfunction is part of the humanitarian facet and expresses thriving needs (Gouveia et al., 2014). Thus, our research supports the previously untested claim of Wolf et al. (2020) that values which transcendent the self such as interactive values are important to help reducing the spread of COVID-19.

To assess the unique influence of values on humanitarian and materialistic motives, we controlled for fear of COVID-19 and political orientation. Individuals with a higher fear of COVID-19 are more concerned about saving lives (either their own or of others; see also Benke, Autenrieth, Asselmann, & Pané-Farré, 2020). This shows that the two motives have an affective and cognitive component, as they are predicted by fear of Covid-19 (affective construct) and values (cognitive constructs; Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, & Knafo, 2002). Further, people on the left of the political spectrum had more humanitarian motives, whereas people on the right a higher economic motivation. This is in line with related research which found that people on the left are more likely to follow government regulations (van Holm, Monaghan, Shahar, Messina, & Surprenant, 2020).

4.1. Final considerations

Our findings emphasize the central role of human values in making crucial decisions. A next step for future research would be to extent our findings and include actual behavior (e.g., compliance), which is likely predicted by values, but mediated by economic and humanitarian motives. Together, our findings demonstrate that many variables need to be taken into account when we want to understand how people make their decisions.

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.110890.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Gabriel Lins de Holanda Coelho: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Paul H.P. Hanel:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review &

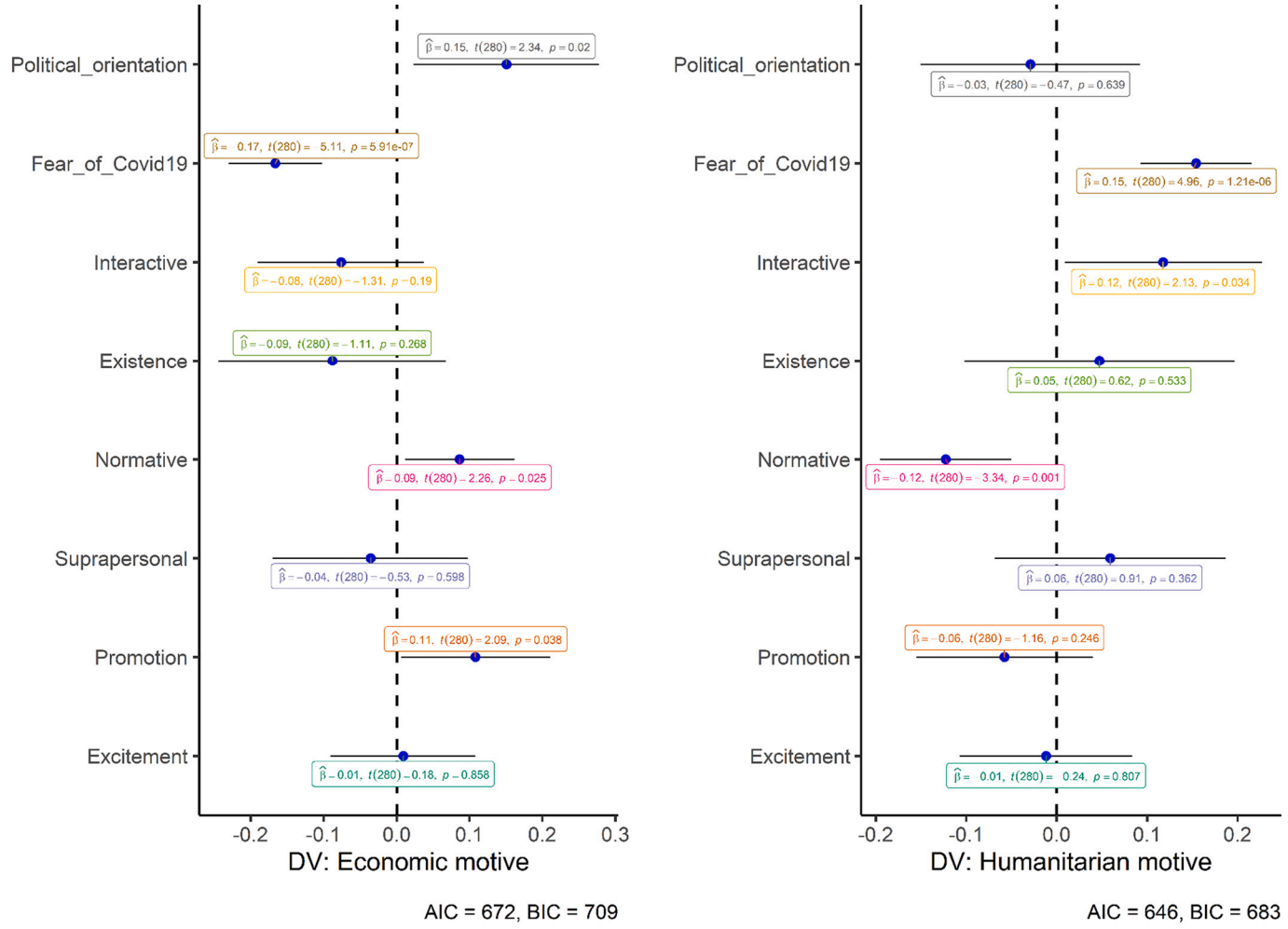


Fig. 2. Unstandardised regression coefficients. Error bars represent 95%-CIs.

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