Revising the Value Shift Hypothesis: A Descriptive Analysis of South Africa’s Value Priorities between 1990 and 2001

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Since 1990 South Africa has been characterized by intense restructuring in the political, social, cultural and economic sphere, and this monumental transformation has had a multifarious impact on South African society. Much of this impact and the resultant changes have been assessed in recent academic and political debate, yet there has been little extensive and systematic research to assess the direction, magnitude and nature of these changing dynamics of South Africa’s values. Although the World Values Survey (WVS) has proven invaluable for research in this field of mass public values, most of the research has been fashioned in a manner to tap values in industrialized and western states, arguably rendering some aspects of the theoretical models of explanation less relevant for developing nations. This article therefore aims to advance an understanding of value change within the South African context, particularly in light of the expansive political, social and economic changes to have transpired since 1990, whilst simultaneously proposing one possibility of an expansion to the model currently used to measure value change. The aim of this study is to determine whether South African value priorities are changing, and, if so, what is the direction and magnitude of this change. The change will be measured in terms of the materialist/post-materialist dimension between 1991 and 2001, and a separate pre-materialist/materialist continuum,

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between 1995 and 2001, after which a comparison will be drawn to determine which dimension proves more pertinent.

On the grounds of the socio-economic and historical context of South Africa, it can be hypothesized that the pre-materialist/materialist continuum offered will prove more applicable than the original Inglehart materialist/post-materialist dimension, rendering it a better instrument for the measurement and consequent analysis of South Africa’s and potentially other developing countries’ values. The more relevant measurement scale will then be utilized to determine whether value change has occurred, and the results will be extrapolated. Ideally this article would then follow with an extensive comparison of values amongst the various population sub-groups, to show whether the divisions of South African society are reflected in its values, but unfortunately only one division in South African society will be focused upon.

Questions to be addressed are therefore: What does South Africa’s value dimension look like? What have been the most pervasive changes in public values? What are possible explanations for these changes? What are the implications of the dynamics of this value change for the present? In which way will these implications influence South Africa’s future? The principal significance of the article lies in starting to fill a knowledge gap concerning the direction, degree and nature of the dynamics of value change within South Africa, as well as testing an alternative model for value measurement in developing countries.

The capacity of this article should not, however, be overestimated. It should simply be seen as one step in the process of understanding the jigsaw of South African values, as well as the extension of a largely western-industrialized nation model to greater universal applicability and use. This article is therefore also significant in that it attempts to formalize the first few steps taken towards an expansion of a potentially relevant and insightful theory to incorporate most of the developing world.

**Socio-Economic and Political Background**

Before the results of the 1990, 1995 and 2001 WVS can be compared, it is crucial that the differing backdrops against which the three surveys were conducted be examined. This measurement and comparison of socio-economic and political settings is imperative to establish a context in which to analyze the changes in South Africa’s value dimension. To achieve this a framework of indicators of the most pervasive external changes has been selected.

The 1991 South African World Values Survey was conducted on the very eve of nationwide transition. The international community had imposed formal sanctions since 1988, and President PW Botha had