

Value Conflict from a Psychological Perspective: Impacts and Theoretical Explanations

Authors: Yue Tong, Wang Hong, Li Qinggong, Ren Xiaoxiao, Zhang Xinyi,
Wang Hong

Date: 2024-10-17T00:01:18+00:00

Abstract

Values conflict refers to the phenomenon of mutual negation and competition arising between individuals due to divergent value orientations. In current empirical research within the field of psychology, values conflict is typically categorized into two types: one is long-term conflict triggered by incompatible value orientations or identities, and the other is immediate conflict induced by value-dilemma choice tasks. Both types of conflict may lead to a series of adverse psychological consequences, such as increased perceived stress, anxiety levels, and psychological tension. Researchers primarily explain the origins and impacts of values conflict from two perspectives: the motivational opposition underlying values and the perceived threat to self-concept integrity. Future research needs to further elucidate the mechanisms underlying values conflict, expand understanding of moderating factors, and reveal its effects on individuals, thereby enabling the development of corresponding regulation and intervention studies.

Full Text

Values Conflicts from a Psychological Perspective: Impact and Theoretical Explanation

YUE Tong¹, WANG Hong², LI Qinggong³, REN Xiaoxiao⁴, ZHANG Xinyi¹

¹ Research Center for Psychology and Social Development; School of Psychology, Southwest University, Chongqing 400715, China

² Key Laboratory of Applied Psychology; School of Teacher Education, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing 401331, China

³ Zhejiang Intelligent Laboratory for Mental Health and Crisis Intervention of Children and Adolescents, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004, China

⁴ School of Psychology; Shaanxi Key Laboratory of Behavior and Cognitive Neuroscience, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an 710062, China

Abstract

Values conflicts refer to the phenomenon of mutual negation and competition arising from divergent value systems between individuals. Current empirical research in psychology typically distinguishes two types of values conflicts: enduring conflicts stemming from incompatible value orientations or identities, and immediate conflicts triggered by value dilemma tasks. Both categories can induce a range of adverse psychological consequences, including heightened stress perception, elevated anxiety levels, and increased psychological tension. Researchers primarily explain the emergence and impact of values conflicts through two theoretical lenses: the motivational opposition underlying values and the perceived threat to self-concept integrity. Future research should further clarify the mechanisms of values conflict generation, expand understanding of moderating factors, and elucidate their effects on individuals to inform mediation and intervention strategies.

Keywords: values conflicts, value theory, self-concept threat, circular structure

Values represent belief systems through which people judge right and wrong, good and evil, and gains and losses. They not only guide us in pursuing ideals but also determine the choices we make throughout life (Huang Xiting, 2014). With advancing globalization, rapid technological development, and cultural integration, individuals increasingly confront sharp contradictions and collisions between traditional and modern, Eastern and Western, and old and new perspectives. In this context, traditional and conservative value systems persist while simultaneously creating resistance to the establishment of new values; meanwhile, new and modern value systems demonstrate vitality amid social structural transformation. Moreover, as traditional values are dismantled, new value systems compatible with modernization practices have not yet been fully established, resulting in a values vacuum (Qin Huiyuan, 2018). Within this process, the phenomenon of mutual negation and competition between individuals due to different value systems is referred to as values conflicts (Yuan Guiren, 1991).

The most familiar values conflict to Chinese people is undoubtedly the tension between “loyalty” (*zhong*) and “filial piety” (*xiao*). A representative example from the *Han Shi Wai Zhuan* illustrates this dilemma: A law enforcement officer named Shi She released his father, who had committed murder, creating an irresolvable value predicament. On one hand, “achieving justice through one’s father is unfilial”; on the other, “failing to enforce the law is disloyal.” In modern society, values conflicts manifest in more diverse forms. For instance, traditional values emphasize collectivism, family responsibility, and respect for elders, whereas modern values prioritize individualism, personal freedom, equality, and rights. Because these value systems differ fundamentally in priorities

and behavioral norms, conflicts readily emerge in family, workplace, and social settings, creating confusion and challenges in daily life (Li, 2020; Smith & Schwartz, 2016). Research indicates that conflicts between family responsibility and personal freedom are particularly pronounced in modern Chinese families. For example, Li and Zhang (2020) conducted qualitative research on contemporary Chinese families and found that many young people pursuing personal development must frequently confront tensions with family responsibilities. These conflicts not only affect life satisfaction but may also increase psychological distress. This largely demonstrates that people cannot tolerate the coexistence of different guiding principles in their conceptual world; otherwise, they experience intense collisions between values that disrupt the mental order of their belief systems and even jeopardize psychological well-being.

In today's world of increasing value diversity, the inherent order of modern people's beliefs faces constant challenges from different ideologies, and the issue of values conflicts has gradually attracted researchers' attention. In recent years, psychological empirical research has extensively explored values conflicts. If we view personal values as an open, dynamic system, then through continuous interaction with environmental information, certain important values tend to remain stable while others are more susceptible to external influence and change. This stability or variability is closely related to their psychological representation and processing characteristics. Therefore, conflicts arising from the mutual negation and competition of different value orientations can be regarded as an unstable state of an individual's values system. From a psychological perspective, then, under what circumstances do values conflicts arise? What impacts do they have on individuals? What are the psychological mechanisms and theoretical explanations for values conflicts? By reviewing existing empirical research, this paper summarizes and explores these questions to provide theoretical insights for deeper understanding of this psychological phenomenon and future mediation and intervention efforts.

2. Situations and Manifestations of Values Conflicts

Current empirical research in psychology typically categorizes values conflicts into two major types: one involves enduring value conflicts that generally arise when individuals simultaneously endorse two contradictory values or hold different identities with incompatible value orientations that cannot be effectively reconciled. These conflicts are often persistent and have profound impacts on mental health. The other type involves immediate conflicts induced in laboratory settings, typically by creating conflict scenarios through value dilemma tasks to observe their instantaneous effects on individuals' physical and mental states. Based on a review of relevant research, this paper classifies these conflicts into enduring and immediate categories to more systematically and clearly reveal the psychological mechanisms and impacts of different types of values conflicts.

2.1 Enduring Conflicts from Incompatible Values or Identities

When individuals cannot find clear answers in their value choices or fail to effectively integrate contradictory value orientations over time, values conflicts may persistently trouble them. Such enduring conflicts often lead to continuous psychological pressure and anxiety, gradually eroding their well-being. Because these conflicts are persistent and difficult to reconcile, this paper classifies them as “enduring conflicts” and considers their negative impacts on mental health to be profound and extensive.

One manifestation of enduring conflicts from value choices is that some individuals may simultaneously endorse contradictory orientations, leaving their values world in an unstable state, with the most typical impact being on individual mental health status. For example, Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) examined the negative psychological effects of long-term endorsement of opposing values. Through questionnaire surveys, they found that for individuals who endorsed high collectively-oriented values (such as religious and family values), the more they simultaneously endorsed materialistic values, the higher their levels of psychological tension or conflict, manifested as higher depression, anxiety, and stress levels, while simultaneously weakening their capacity for well-being. In other words, individuals who value both collectively-oriented values and materialism as important life goals may remain in a persistent state of conflict and contradiction, subsequently affecting their mental health and well-being. Similarly, Furchheim et al. (2020) found that if participants remained undecided between environmentalism and materialism over time—scoring high on both green values and materialism scales—they subjectively reported stronger stress perception, which further reduced their life satisfaction. Additionally, for individuals with neurotic dysfunction (such as anxiety disorders), a chaotic values endorsement pattern may be a key factor underlying their psychological symptoms (Lange & Pauli, 2019). For instance, Arens et al. (2022) used the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) to investigate values endorsement patterns in patients with emotional disorders, severe stress reactions, and adjustment disorders. The results showed that compared to healthy individuals, they exhibited more contradictory and conflicted values patterns, such as emphasizing personal success on one hand while simultaneously prioritizing group benefit maximization to an equal degree.

Enduring values conflicts may also manifest as individuals’ difficulty in balancing different identities (such as work and family roles), leading to a series of negative psychological consequences. Values are generally considered essential components of identity, and when individuals switch between different identities, the values underlying those identities become salient (Horton et al., 2014). However, when different identities provide incompatible values (such as vegetarian and hunter identities), these values cannot simultaneously serve as sources of individual meaning (Rabinovich & Morton, 2016) and may instead create tension (Morgenroth et al., 2021), subsequently negatively impacting well-being (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002) and even causing discomfort and distress (Bernuzzi et

al., 2021; Huhtala et al., 2020). For example, Rabinovich and Morton (2016) used experimental scenarios to induce values orientation conflicts between different identities, such as differing value requirements between being a student and being a child (Experiment 1) and contradictory role definitions between being a mother and being a full-time employee (Experiment 4). These identity conflicts actually reflect differences in underlying values: student identity emphasizes personal achievement and academic pursuit, whereas child identity emphasizes family responsibility and filial piety; mother identity emphasizes family care and emotional support, whereas full-time employee identity emphasizes career development and work commitment. The results showed that after inducing values orientation conflicts underlying different identities, participants reported significantly reduced well-being and self-esteem levels. These conflicts force individuals to make difficult choices between internal beliefs and external behaviors, potentially leading to psychological confusion and dissatisfaction.

Veage et al. (2014) employed a Card Sorting Task (SGP) and found that the degree of congruence between mental health practitioners' (including psychologists, social workers, registered nurses, etc.) personal life values and work-demanded values significantly enhanced their well-being and sense of accomplishment while effectively predicting reduced burnout levels. Another frequently discussed identity conflict in Western contexts involves Catholic doctors who may refuse to perform abortions, physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, or participate in capital punishment even in regions where these are legal, because such actions violate their religious values. However, such choices may contravene professional obligations to fulfill patients' wishes, creating identity conflicts. In medical contexts, values conflicts between professional and personal (e.g., religious) identities are considered important sources of physician burnout, stress, and emotional tension (Hayes et al., 2017; Huhtala et al., 2020), further reducing their mental health levels (Carminati & Hélot, 2023).

In summary, enduring conflicts arising from incompatible value orientations or identities not only leave individuals unable to find balance in value choices over the long term but also cause profound negative impacts on mental health. Because these conflicts are persistent and complex, they often cannot be alleviated through simple behavioral adjustments, making them important factors affecting individual well-being. Moreover, research has found significant cultural differences in the manifestations and psychological impacts of enduring conflicts across cultural contexts. For example, in Western cultures, individuals tend to cope with conflicts through self-reflection and personal development, whereas in East Asian cultures, individuals are more inclined to mitigate conflict effects on well-being through social support and collectivist approaches (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022). These cultural differences underscore the necessity of understanding and addressing values conflicts within different social contexts, and future research should continue exploring how these differences profoundly affect individual mental health.

2.2 Immediate Conflicts from Value Dilemma Tasks

In real life, people frequently face dilemmas similar to the traditional Chinese “loyalty versus filial piety” choice and are required to provide immediate answers. Such conflicts are typically brief yet intense, demanding difficult value choices within extremely short timeframes. Many psychological studies have utilized value dilemma tasks in laboratory settings to replicate these situations and examine individuals’ psychological conflict manifestations when facing instantaneous decisions. This type of conflict, due to its sudden and immediate nature, is classified as “immediate conflict,” characterized by individuals experiencing intense internal contradictions and psychological pressure within short time periods.

For example, Leszkowicz et al. (2017) required participants to make rapid choices between different value word pairs, determining which principle was more important to them while recording brain activation patterns. The study found that when participants faced two incompatible values (such as “benevolence” vs. “wealth”), conflict was more apparent and choices were simpler; however, when facing two values typically considered important simultaneously (such as “benevolence” vs. “friendliness”), participants required longer reaction times and showed stronger activation in conflict-processing brain regions (such as the supplementary motor area, dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, and anterior cingulate cortex). Activation in these brain regions reflects conflict perception at the neural processing level. Lu Juanzhi et al. (2019) adapted a “coin-guessing” paradigm, establishing conditions with and without opportunity for deception to examine whether participants would choose to lie to help others, thereby creating a value dilemma between “altruism” and “integrity” in a laboratory setting. The results showed that when facing such immediate choices, individuals exhibited stronger N2 electrophysiological components, which previous research has identified as reflecting conflict detection and cognitive control processes. These findings demonstrate that when individuals confront value dilemmas, both brain region activation and electrophysiological indicators show clear conflict perception.

Generally, the immediate conflict perception triggered by value dilemma tasks is relatively mild and insufficient to affect mental health. However, if the values requiring forced choice are particularly cherished by individuals, the difficulty of choice increases significantly and may produce intense psychological conflict due to forced selection, even leading to negative psychological states such as tension and anxiety. For example, Li Jing and Guo Yongyu (2012) found that for participants who viewed both materialism and Confucian traditional values as important, compared to individuals endorsing only a single value, skin conductance responses were greater when making forced choices in dilemma scenarios reflecting conflicts between materialism and Confucian traditional values, indicating stronger internal tension during selection. Similarly, Tang and Li (2021) had college students who endorsed both Machiavellianism and moral-ethical values make forced choices across five moral dilemmas (such as maintaining a

bitter long-distance relationship with a girlfriend or abandoning her for a more beautiful and wealthy woman). The results showed these participants reported higher state anxiety levels compared to those endorsing only one value system. Mahmoudfakhe et al. (2023) compared the effects of acceptance and commitment therapy versus self-compassion therapy on cognitive flexibility in anxious female students and found that values conflict situations significantly increased individuals' psychological tension, particularly in immediate decision-making. It can be further inferred that the more important values are to an individual, the stronger the values conflict they generate, and consequently, the more pronounced the negative impact on psychological states.

In summary, immediate conflicts triggered by value dilemma tasks typically evoke strong psychological contradictions and emotional reactions when individuals face incompatible values. The sudden and short-term nature of such conflicts causes individuals to experience significant emotional fluctuations, such as increased anxiety and tension, within relatively brief periods. Research on immediate conflicts helps us better understand how values affect individuals' emotional reactions in instantaneous situations and reveals their potential short-term impacts on mental health across different contexts.

2.3 Summary

Through in-depth analysis of values conflicts, this study proposes a classification framework of enduring conflicts and immediate conflicts. Enduring conflicts typically arise when individuals cannot find ultimate balance between contradictory values, leading to persistent psychological pressure, anxiety, and decreased well-being. Immediate conflicts occur more often when facing dilemma situations requiring rapid decisions, manifesting as intense psychological contradictions in the short term. This classification not only reveals the diverse impacts of conflicts on mental health but also provides new perspectives for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying these conflicts. In terms of specific manifestations, whether enduring or immediate, values conflicts place individuals in a state of uncertainty regarding value orientations, subsequently generating a series of negative impacts on mental health (such as anxiety, stress, and other negative emotions) and potentially becoming important factors reducing well-being levels.

Furthermore, the more important the values involved, the more difficult the choice for individuals, and consequently, the stronger the resulting values conflict. So where exactly does this negative conflict experience originate when different value orientations are simultaneously "online"? The following sections will elaborate based on existing theoretical explanations and empirical research findings.

3. Theoretical Explanations for Values Conflicts

3.1 Conflict Originates from Motivational Opposition of Values

Many researchers argue that motivational opposition refers to different values existing in opposing motivational states. Because these opposing motives coexist in an individual's conceptual world, they collide and create conflict. This perspective is based on Schwartz's (1992) circular structure theory of values, which provides a systematic framework for understanding and classifying human basic values. The theory posits that the human values system as a whole constitutes a motivational continuum composed of 10 value categories, which exist in any culture because they derive from three universal human needs: biological needs, social interaction needs, and group survival and welfare needs. Based on these 10 basic motivational types, values are divided into 10 fundamental types, emphasizing that these motivations are not separate but rather compatible or opposing, forming a circular structure model. In this model, adjacent values are motivationally similar, whereas opposing values occupy opposite positions on the circle. Because these values express different goals and motivations, they sometimes conflict. For example, self-enhancement values (such as achievement and power) may conflict with self-transcendence values (such as universalism and benevolence), as the former focus on personal success and dominance while the latter emphasize caring for others and social harmony (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012).

Schwartz's motivational assumptions about the values system have received substantial empirical support. On one hand, numerous studies have found that values endorsement and evaluation are closely related to individuals' emotional experiences. For instance, Zahn et al. (2009) used magnetic resonance imaging to discover that when individuals imagined events inconsistent with their values, they experienced anger accompanied by activation in the lateral orbitofrontal cortices, dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, and anterior insular cortex—brain regions previously reported to be associated with negative emotional experiences (Seymour et al., 2007). When individuals experienced events consistent with their values, they also felt pride, corresponding to activation in the mesolimbic reward system. Tamir et al. (2015) also showed that people tend to experience emotions consistent with their endorsed values. For example, individuals endorsing self-transcendence values (such as benevolence) expect to feel more compassion, whereas those endorsing self-enhancement values (such as power) desire to experience more anger and pride. This demonstrates that values themselves have different motivational-emotional meanings. On the other hand, cross-age longitudinal developmental studies can also verify the compatible or incompatible relationships between different values in Schwartz's model. For example, tracking values development trends in both children (Daniel et al., 2021) and adults (Smallenbroek et al., 2023) has found that as the importance of values related to the self-transcendence dimension increases, the motivationally incompatible self-enhancement dimension values decrease accordingly, whereas changes in the motivationally compatible conservation dimension values remain

unaffected. Moreover, this trend becomes more pronounced with age (Daniel et al., 2021). In recent years, researchers have used experience sampling methods to capture individuals' decisions and behaviors in naturalistic settings in real time (such as continuous measurement over 7 days) to examine whether the hierarchical importance of value states is consistent with the structure obtained from values scales. The results also revealed compatible and opposing relationships, namely that competing values cannot be pursued simultaneously in the same behavior (Skimina et al., 2018, 2021).

Schwartz's proposed compatible and opposing relationships within the values system provide a possible explanation for values conflicts: simultaneously pursuing motivationally opposing values is difficult for individuals to accept. According to cognitive dissonance theory, people have a need to maintain cognitive consistency and continuity, whereas competition and mutual negation between different beliefs disrupt consistency and completeness in cognitive processing. If individuals simultaneously endorse and attempt to incorporate these opposing values into their belief systems, they create a state of tension at the motivational level (Markauskaitė & Rütelionė, 2022). For example, in previous research, materialism and collectively-oriented values (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002), materialism and green values (Furchheim et al., 2020), and materialism and Confucian traditional values (Li Jing & Guo Yongyu, 2012) all represent opposing relationships between hedonism and conformity/tradition in Schwartz's values model. Materialism emphasizes satisfaction of personal desires, whereas collective, green, and Confucian traditional values emphasize controlling personal impulses and adapting to social norms. Therefore, once individuals simultaneously endorse these opposing values, their conceptual world may exist in a state of motivational and emotional opposition, subsequently generating stress, tension, and anxiety. For explaining conflicts arising from incompatible identities, researchers have followed similar logic. For instance, Carminati and Hélot (2023) noted when explaining conflicts between physicians' professional values and religious values that inconsistent values underlying different identities lead to obvious identity confusion, and coordinating competing values requires tremendous effort, thereby consuming psychological resources and energy and ultimately reducing physicians' mental health and well-being levels.

However, existing research suggests that explaining values conflicts and their negative effects solely from the perspective of motivational opposition is insufficient. On one hand, some studies have found that even simultaneously endorsing motivationally incompatible values does not necessarily produce psychological conflict. For example, Foad et al. (2020) asked participants to report values they might prioritize in the future to examine trajectories of values change from a subjective expectation perspective. The results showed that participants expected both self-transcendence and self-enhancement values to increase equally in importance, without showing the previously observed opposing pattern. Wang et al. (2021) also found in their survey of Hong Kong teachers that self-transcendence and self-enhancement values were significantly positively correlated, produced no obvious conflict in individuals, and jointly promoted these

teachers' commitment and identification with their school. On the other hand, as previously mentioned, simultaneously endorsing compatible values that are difficult to choose between can also trigger values conflicts, a situation difficult to explain through motivational opposition. For example, Leszkowicz et al. (2017) found that word pairs capable of eliciting psychological conflict in forced-choice tasks came from compatible rather than opposing values tasks (because normal individuals generally do not simultaneously hold opposing values). Similarly, the frequently discussed "benevolence-integrity conflicts" in values research both belong to the self-transcendence dimension in terms of motivational dimensions. These "exceptional" cases remind researchers that motivational opposition may not be the only factor explaining values conflicts and their negative psychological effects.

3.2 Conflict Originates from Threat Perception of Violating Self-Concept Consistency

Some researchers argue that the conflict and negative psychological effects brought about by different values being simultaneously "online" represent individuals' responses to threats to self-concept consistency—that is, values conflicts originate at the self-concept level.

Existing research on the psychological and neural structure of values indicates that values occupy a central position in people's self-identity and self-perception (Wang Hong et al., 2021; Yue Tong et al., 2020, 2021; Aquino & Reed, 2002). Collisions and confrontations over values often involve processes of self-involvement (Kouzakova et al., 2012). For individuals, the more important the values (such as protected values or sacred values), the closer their relationship with self-concept in representation and construction. Therefore, collisions and confrontations over values often involve self-involvement processes, where making trade-offs often implies questions about which self-identity to adopt. For example, in benevolence-integrity conflicts, if a judge wants to care for the vulnerable, they cannot simultaneously maintain impartial judgment, involving opposition and choice between helping others and just self-concepts. Existing research on self-concept has found that people have a tendency to maintain self-concept consistency and completeness (Cohen et al., 2007). According to self-discrepancy theory, when individuals possess conflicting or incompatible self-concepts, they may experience psychological discomfort or distress (Higgins, 1987). Based on this, many researchers believe that the perceived threat to self-concept consistency when facing competition and prioritization among different values is the psychological root of values conflicts and their subsequent negative effects (Tao Aihua et al., 2018; Harinck & Ellemers, 2014).

Some experimental studies based on values dilemma situations have largely validated these theoretical assumptions. For example, Kaplan et al. (2016), combining individual brain neural activity results, found that values indeed involve brain processes of self-identity, moral judgment, and social-emotional processing at the neural representation level. If participants face dilemma choices between

their cherished values (liberalism vs. conservatism) in experimental situations, their default mode network-related brain regions show significant activation, and individuals experiencing more values conflicts show stronger activity in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dMPFC), insula, and amygdala. Kaplan et al. suggested that this result may indicate that the close connection between participants' values and self-concept creates self-concept uncertainty when experiencing value choices and 动摇, which in turn triggers stronger emotional reactions that may be the starting point for subsequent negative reactions. Schuster et al. (2020) created a values dilemma between environmental protection and cultural preservation through a hotel location selection topic in the laboratory and had participants debate to elicit values conflicts. The results also found that after experiencing values conflicts, participants' self-concept positivity was undermined, they experienced more negative emotions, and they were less satisfied with debate outcomes. In other words, the perceived threat to self-concept integrity and consistency triggered by mutual negation and competition among different values is the psychological root of conflict and corresponding negative effects.

If individuals are less likely to perceive threats to self-concept consistency during the mutual negation and competition of values, their experienced psychological conflict levels should correspondingly decrease. Some current empirical studies have indeed found corresponding evidence, which validates the perspective that values conflicts originate from perceived threats to self-concept consistency from another angle. Rabinovich and Morton (2016) showed that when participants faced values dilemmas from different identities (such as conflicts between campus life and family responsibility), only those who viewed self-concept as fixed and stable experienced decreased well-being and self-esteem levels. Conversely, individuals who tended to view self-concept as flexible and pluralistic (i.e., dialectical self) were less negatively affected by values conflicts. Furchheim et al. (2020) further noted that simultaneously endorsing materialism and environmental values increases psychological pressure and reduces life satisfaction. This negative effect is mediated by self-concept clarity and moderated by individuals' preference for self-concept consistency. That is, the less individuals focus on self-concept consistency, the smaller the negative psychological impact of values conflicts. Similarly, Xie et al. (2022) found in their study of Chinese college students that some individuals scored high on opposing values dimensions without showing obvious values conflict manifestations. In explaining these results, Xie et al. suggested that the dialectical thinking characteristic of Chinese Confucian Zhongyong thought enables Chinese participants to integrate individual and social orientations, traditional and modern value orientations without generating conflict, which is also consistent with previous explanations that East Asians hold more variable, contextualized self-concepts across situations (Joo & Cross, 2021).

3.3 Summary

In summary, regarding why competing and prioritized values cause psychological conflict and subsequent negative effects, two main explanations currently exist: one focuses on the inherent motivations underlying values, arguing that conflicts between different values primarily arise because their represented motivations are oppositional; the other emphasizes the close connection between values and self-concept, arguing that values conflicts and their negative effects relate to individuals' perceived threats to self-concept consistency during this process. Based on existing research, viewing values conflicts from the perspective of self-concept consistency threat appears to have greater explanatory power, as it can effectively compensate for limitations in explaining conflicts through motivational opposition (such as the previously mentioned issue that competition and prioritization among compatible values can also generate internal conflict). However, this does not mean these two theoretical explanations are incompatible. In fact, values possess corresponding affective-motivational characteristics while also being closely related to people's self-concept; therefore, many values conflicts involve both motivational opposition and negative emotional reactions arising from individuals' efforts to maintain self-concept integrity and consistency.

4. Summary and Future Directions

As globalization deepens and information grows exponentially, values from different cultures, beliefs, and lifestyles intertwine to create a complex landscape. Internal value conflicts not only affect people's choices and behaviors but also have profound impacts on societal development and stability. In rapidly changing modern society, values conflicts have become increasingly prominent, making them an unavoidable topic in our lives. Through systematic review and analysis of existing literature, this paper has examined the manifestations of values conflicts and their impacts on mental health from a psychological perspective. Specifically, this paper distinguished two primary types of values conflicts: immediate conflicts, mainly triggered by value dilemma tasks that cause individuals to experience intense psychological conflict in short periods; and enduring conflicts, stemming from persistent internal contradictions when individuals cannot reconcile different value orientations or identities, with more far-reaching impacts. Regarding explanatory mechanisms for values conflicts, this paper summarized two main theoretical perspectives: one based on motivational opposition underlying values, arguing that motivational incompatibility between different values is an important cause of conflict; the other based on threats to self-concept integrity, arguing that values conflicts trigger individuals' concerns about self-concept consistency, thereby causing psychological discomfort. The innovation of this paper lies in its systematic differentiation and analysis of the manifestations and mechanisms of values conflicts, providing new perspectives for understanding their emergence and impacts. In conclusion, values conflicts represent a timely and urgent issue, yet empirical research in psychology has

only just begun. Future research can further explore the following aspects.

4.1 Need to Clarify the Mechanisms of Values Conflict Generation

Currently, although numerous paradigms and techniques exist for studying values conflicts, there remains a lack of recognized measurement standards. The values conflicts discussed in this paper, including both enduring and immediate conflicts, specifically manifest as psychological opposition and competition when individuals hold contradictory values or identity endorsements. Some researchers have used activation in brain conflict-monitoring regions or electrophysiological indicators in value dilemma situations to characterize values conflict generation, while others have used individuals' subjectively reported stress or anxiety levels to measure values conflict magnitude. However, these measurement indicators are either difficult to compare directly or infer values conflict generation from outcomes, ultimately failing to precisely capture valid indicators of the measured variables. This creates substantial obstacles for comparison and communication in related fields, so establishing quantitative indicators that can accurately measure individuals' values conflict levels may be the first problem to solve. Another closely related question is: what exactly are the psychological mechanisms of values conflict? Although existing research has provided theoretical explanations from perspectives of values' affective-motivational characteristics and their relationship with self-concept, most relevant studies offer only indirect evidence. Future research could explore this question using relevant techniques and methods from brain science. For example, Senftleben and Scherbaum (2021) termed conflicts arising from competition and prioritization among different values as "subjective conflicts," which do not involve right or wrong choices; in contrast, they defined conflicts arising from cognitive resource competition in inhibitory control tasks as "objective conflicts," which do involve distinctions between correct and incorrect responses. Using mid-frontal theta waves (previously identified as an important indicator in conflict monitoring and detection processes that can reflect cognitive resource competition among different responses and choices) (Töllner et al., 2017; Zavala et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2015), they found that this indicator significantly predicted conflict perception only in inhibitory control tasks, not in subjective value choice tasks. Based on this, they argued that a major difference between subjective value choice conflicts and objective cognitive conflicts is that the former involves more self-control and subjective weighing processes, providing new insights for understanding values conflicts from a self-processing perspective.

4.2 Need to Expand Understanding of Moderating Factors in Values Conflicts

Values conflicts represent a highly complex psychological phenomenon that may be moderated by many psychological factors, which current research has rarely addressed. For example, based on experience and existing research findings, opposition and choice involving values do not necessarily produce values con-

flict perception, and the importance of the values involved in competition and choice should be an important moderating factor. Many researchers believe that individuals' values systems have hierarchical characteristics (Brosch et al., 2011; Schwartz, 2012): the more central the values in the system, the higher their importance and degree of endorsement, and different importance levels of values also differ in cognitive processing modes (Yue Tong et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2021). This reminds researchers in related fields that when exploring values conflicts, the hierarchical level of corresponding values in individuals' belief systems should be considered. Additionally, existing research shows that values conflicts are significantly affected by cultural differences, particularly in the East Asian Confucian cultural circle, where unique dialectical thinking characteristics enable individuals to integrate personal and social orientations, traditional and modern value orientations without generating direct conflict (Xie et al., 2022; Yanagisawa et al., 2017). For example, Yanagisawa et al. (2017) showed that when facing choices between work and family responsibilities, individuals in East Asian cultural contexts tend to resolve conflicts through reconciliation or compromise, thereby reducing psychological pressure. In Western cultures, individuals are more likely to insist on personal autonomy even when facing greater conflict and psychological pressure (Au & Lam, 2017). These cultural differences not only reveal how cultural contexts moderate values conflicts but also provide pathways for future research to explore how cultural factors further affect psychological states. Cultural backgrounds may play crucial moderating roles, particularly in the manifestations and mechanisms of enduring and immediate conflicts.

Research on self-construal also reveals how different orientations affect values conflict resolution: individuals with interdependent self-construal are more likely to demonstrate tolerance and reconciliation attitudes that help resolve contradictions, whereas those with independent self-construal are more likely to dominate in interpersonal interactions, which may increase the risk of values conflicts (Au & Lam, 2017). Therefore, future research can deeply explore how cultural factors moderate the generation and resolution of values conflicts, which can provide further insights for understanding people's interaction patterns and even international relations.

4.3 Need to Further Reveal the Impacts of Values Conflicts on Individuals

Existing research has preliminarily revealed the negative effects of values conflicts, such as increasing individuals' stress perception, anxiety levels, psychological tension, and burnout, while reducing well-being. Moreover, the more important the conflicting values are to people, the more pronounced their negative effects on individuals. However, many questions remain unclear. For example, do enduring conflicts arising from incompatible value orientations or identities and immediate conflicts triggered by value dilemma tasks have different impacts on individuals? Are there clear differences in impact effects and pathways be-

tween intrapersonal values conflicts and interpersonal value conflicts (Yue Tong et al., 2024)? Do values conflicts cause corresponding mental health problems, or do individuals with anxiety, stress, and other psychological symptoms more easily perceive values conflicts? Researchers have conducted some preliminary explorations around these questions. For example, Daniel et al. (2021) showed that with cognitive development in children and adolescents, their values systems may undergo several rounds of transitions from values conflicts to stability, requiring active cognitive adjustment; otherwise, developmental psychological problems may arise. Brandt et al. (2019) further used diary tracking methods to reveal that values conflicts experienced in daily life can predict higher negative emotional reactions, decreased mental health levels, and reduced well-being. This finding highlights that the degree or frequency of values conflicts plays a non-negligible role in shaping people's values and maintaining mental health. Future research can further explore the deep mechanisms and impacts of this phenomenon through long-term, longitudinal tracking studies.

4.4 Need to Develop Mediation and Intervention Studies for Values Conflicts

As previously discussed, individuals experiencing values conflicts often undergo a series of negative psychological experiences affecting their emotional states, work, and life satisfaction. Therefore, mediating and intervening in psychological conflict problems from a values perspective can provide new approaches for improving and enhancing individual mental health. However, because discussion of values conflicts has only just begun, empirical research on their mediation and intervention remains limited. Nevertheless, many researchers have proposed feasible solutions at the theoretical level that deserve testing and enrichment in future counseling and practice. For example, Arens et al. (2022) suggested that counselors can help individuals troubled by values conflicts escape psychological distress caused by values uncertainty through cognitive restructuring, providing necessary social support, and conducting reasonable self-guidance. Carminati and Héliot (2023), when discussing intervention strategies for physicians' professional-identity and religious-identity conflicts, proposed that external situational forces can support individuals deeply involved in such conflicts and help them effectively face the negative effects of values conflicts. Specifically, they argued that positive social support and moral climate help moderate the impact of physicians' professional-religious identity conflicts on mental health, promoting greater consistency and cohesion within organizational teams. Additionally, when mediating psychological conflicts arising from interpersonal value differences, self-affirmation methods (requiring participants to write about values important to them to consolidate the legitimacy of their self-concept) have proven effective. The reason is that individuals can utilize a resource bank including values to restore their cognition of self-integrity and worth. Future research can draw on this method to examine its role in mediating both enduring and immediate conflicts.

In conclusion, this paper provides a theoretical foundation for understanding and addressing this ubiquitous psychological problem through systematic review and analysis of the phenomena, psychological impacts, and generation mechanisms of values conflicts. Values conflicts are not simple cognitive contradictions but complex phenomena that profoundly affect individual self-identity and mental health. Future research should build on existing foundations to further explore internal mechanisms and cultural differences while developing targeted intervention strategies to help individuals better cope with values conflicts and improve overall mental health levels.

References

- Huang Xiting. (2014). *Exploring the Mysteries of Personality*. Beijing: Commercial Press.
- Li Jing, & Guo Yongyu. (2012). A study on the conflict between materialism and Confucian traditional values among college students. *Psychological Science*, 35(1), 160–164.
- Lu Juanzhi, Liao Chong, Guan Qing, Luo Yuejia, & Cui Fang. (2019). Deceptive behavior under altruistic and self-interested motivations. *Psychological Science*, 42(4), 905–912.
- Qin Huiyuan. (2018). Values conflicts in new-era China and their transcendence. *Southeast Academic Research*, (6), 10–17.
- Tao Aihua, Liu Yonghe, & Wang Pei. (2018). Personal effects of disappointment in interpersonal conflict and the moderating role of conflict type. *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, 50(2), 235–242.
- Wang Hong, Yue Tong, & Fu Mingqiu. (2021). From affective identification to self-identification: An implicit experimental study on values identification. *Guangdong Social Sciences*, 5, 64–73.
- Yuan Guiren. (1991). *Introduction to Axiology*. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press.
- Yue Tong, Huang Xiting, & Fu Anguo. (2021). How can people “sacrifice life for righteousness”? An explanation based on the cognitive neural mechanisms of protected values. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 29(3), 40–548.
- Yue Tong, Wang Hong, Fu Anguo, Xu Hao, & Li Wenqiao. (2024). Why is it difficult to reach consensus in interpersonal values conflicts? Theoretical explanations and mediation strategies. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 32(9), 1528–1538.
- Aquino, K., & Reed II, A. (2002). The self-importance of moral identity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(6), 1423–1440.
- Arens, E. A., Christoffel, M., & Stangier, U. (2022). Value priorities and value conflicts in patients with mental disorders compared to a general population sample. *Scientific Reports*, 12(1), 3974.

- Au, A. K., & Lam, S. F. (2017). Understanding response patterns in dyadic conflict: An interactive approach combining self-construal and opponent's dominance-submissiveness. *International Journal of Psychology*, 52(2), 116–125.
- Bernuzzi, C., Setti, I., Maffoni, M., & Sommovigo, V. (2022). From moral distress to burnout through work-family conflict: The protective role of resilience and positive refocusing. *Ethics & Behavior*, 32(7), 578–600.
- Brandt, M. J., Crawford, J. T., & Van Tongeren, D. R. (2019). Worldview conflict in daily life. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 10(1), 35–43.
- Brosch, T., Coppin, G., Schwartz, S., & Sander, D. (2011). The importance of actions and the worth of an object: Dissociating affective relevance from stimulus value. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 6(5), 545–
- Burroughs, J. E., & Aric, R. (2002). Materialism and well-being: A conflicting values perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(3), 348–370.
- Carminati, L., & Gao Hélot, Y. (2023). Multilevel dynamics of moral identity conflict: Professional and personal values in ethically-charged situations. *Ethics & Behavior*, 33(1), 37–54.
- Cohen, G. L., Sherman, D. K., Bastardi, A., Hsu, L., McGoey, M., & Ross, L. (2007). Bridging the partisan divide: Self-affirmation reduces ideological closed-mindedness and inflexibility in negotiation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93(3), 415–430.
- Daniel, E., Döring, A. K., & Ciecuch, J. (2021). Development of intraindividual value structures in middle childhood: A multicultural and longitudinal investigation. *Journal of Personality*, 91(2), 482–496.
- Foad, C. M., Maio, G. G., & Hanel, P. H. (2020). Perceptions of values over time and why they matter. *Journal of Personality*, 89(4), 689–705.
- Furchheim, P., Martin, C., & Morhart, F. (2020). Being green in a materialistic world: Consequences for subjective well-being. *Psychology & Marketing*, 37, 114–130.
- Harinck, F., & Ellemers, N. (2014). How values change a conflict. In C. K. W. De Dreu & P. A. M. Van Lange (Eds.), *Social conflict within and between groups* (pp. 33-50). Psychology Press.
- Hayes, B., Prihodova, L., Walsh, G., Doyle, F., & Doherty, S. (2017). What's up doc? A national cross-sectional study of psychological wellbeing of hospital doctors in Ireland. *BMJ Open*, 7(10), 1–10.
- Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94(3), 319–340.
- Horton, K. E., Bayerl, P. S., & Jacobs, G. (2014). Identity conflicts at work: An integrative framework. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35(S1), 6–22.

- Huhtala, M., Fadjukoff, P., & Kroger, J. (2020). Managers as moral leaders: Moral identity processes in the context of work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 172(4), 639–665.
- Joo, M., & Cross, S. E. (2021). A double-edged sword: Positive and negative implications of the dialectical self. *Personal Relationships*, 28(4), 961–977.
- Kaplan, J. T., Gimbel, S. I., & Harris, S. (2016). Neural correlates of maintaining one's political beliefs in the face of counterevidence. *Scientific Reports*, 6(1), 39589.
- Kouzakova, M., Ellemers, N., Harinck, F., & Scheepers, D. (2012). The implications of value conflict: How disagreement on values affects self-involvement and perceived common ground. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38(6), 798–807.
- Lange, B., & Pauli, P. (2019). Social anxiety changes the way we move: A social approach-avoidance task in a virtual reality CAVE system. *PLOS ONE*, 14(12), e0226805.
- Leszkowicz, E., Linden, D. E., Maio, G. R., & Ihssen, N. (2017). Neural evidence of motivational conflict between social values. *Social Neuroscience*, 12(5), 494–505.
- Li, J. (2020). The impact of traditional family values on modern Chinese society. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 45(2),
- Li, X., & Zhang, Y. (2020). Balancing family obligations and personal freedom: A qualitative study on value conflicts in modern Chinese families. *Journal of Family Studies*, 26(2), 123–140.
- Markauskaitė, R., & Rütelionė, A. (2022). Causes of consumer materialistic and green value conflict: A systematic literature review. *Sustainability*, 14(9), 5021.
- Mahmoudfakhe, H., Shiri, H., & Rezaei, N. (2023). Comparison of the effect of acceptance and commitment therapy and self-compassion therapy on cognitive flexibility in anxious female students of the second year of high school. *Positive Psychology Research*, 9(3), 63–82.
- Morgenroth, T., Ryan, M. K., Rink, F., & Begeny, C. (2021). The (in) compatibility of identities: Understanding gender differences in work–life conflict through the fit with leaders. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 60(2), 448–469.
- Rabinovich, A., & Morton, T. A. (2016). Coping with identity conflict: Perceptions of self as flexible versus fixed moderate the effect of identity conflict on well-being. *Self and Identity*, 15(2), 224–244.
- Rafaeli-Mor, E., & Steinberg, J. (2002). Self-complexity and well-being: A review and research synthesis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 6(1), 31–58.

- Sagiv, L., & Schwartz, S. H. (2022). Personal values across cultures. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 73, 517–546.
- Schuster, C., Majer, J. M., & Trötschel, R. (2020). Whatever we negotiate is not what I like: How value-driven conflicts impact negotiation behaviors, outcomes, and subjective evaluations. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 90, 103993.
- Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 25, 1–65.
- Schwartz, S. H. (2012). An overview of the Schwartz theory of basic values. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1), 1–20.
- Schwartz, S. H., & Sortheix, F. (2012). Values and subjective well-being across nations: A meta-analysis. In A. Tesser, J. V. Wood, & D. A. Stapel (Eds.), *The psychology of values: The Ontario Symposium* (Vol. 8, pp. 63-86). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Schwartz, S. H., and Sortheix, F. (2018). “Values and subjective well-being” in *Handbook of well-being*. eds. E. Diener, S. Oishi, and L. Tay (Salt Lake City, UT: Noba Scholar), 1–25.
- Senftleben, U., & Scherbaum, S. (2021). Mid-frontal Theta during Conflict in a Value-based Decision Task. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 33(10), 2109–2131.
- Seymour, B., Singer, T., & Dolan, R. (2007). The neurobiology of punishment. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 8(4),
- Skimina, E., Ciecuch, J., & Revelle, W. (2021). Between-and within-person structures of value traits and value states: Four different structures, four different interpretations. *Journal of Personality*, 89(5), 951–969.
- Skimina, E., Ciecuch, J., Schwartz, S. H., Davidov, E., & Algesheimer, R. (2018). Testing the circular structure and importance hierarchy of value states in real-time behaviors. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 74, 42–49.
- Smallenbroek, O., Stanciu, A., Arant, R., & Boehnke, K. (2023). Are values stable throughout adulthood? Evidence from two German long-term panel studies. *PloS one*, 18(11), e0289487.
- Smith, P. B., & Schwartz, S. H. (2016). Values and cultural models in contemporary societies: A comparative study. *Cultural Dynamics*, 28(1), 42–58.
- Tamir, M., Ford, B. Q., & Gilliam, M. (2015). Preference for emotions depends on knowledge of their social functions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109(3), 1–17.
- Tang, S., & Li, K. (2021). The influence of Chinese machiavellianism and moral identity on the level of anxiety in moral dilemma situations in Chinese students.

Frontiers in Psychology, 12, 615835.

Töllner, T., Wang, Y., Makeig, S., Müller, H. J., Jung, T.-P., & Gramann, K. (2017). Two independent frontal midline theta oscillations during conflict detection and adaptation in a Simon-type manual reaching task. *Journal of Neuroscience*, 37, 2504–2515.

Veage, S., Ciarrochi, J., Deane, F. P., Andresen, R., Oades, L. G., & Crowe, T. P. (2014). Value congruence, importance and success and in the workplace: Links with well-being and burnout amongst mental health practitioners. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 3(4), 258–264.

Wang, H., King, R. B., & McInerney, D. M. (2021). Conflicting or compatible? Evaluating teachers' self-transcendence versus self-enhancement values from a multilevel perspective. *Current Psychology*, 1–11.

Xie, J.-Q., Yin, X.-Q., Qiu, J., Yang, J., Huang, Y.-Y., Li, M., Chen, K., & Xiong, J.-R. (2022). Latent profile analysis of personal values among Chinese college students: associations with mental health disorders and life satisfaction. *Current Psychology*, 42, 27232–27244.

Yanagisawa, K., Kashima, E. S., Moriya, H., Masui, K., Furutani, K., Yoshida, H., ... & Nomura, M. (2017). Tolerating dissimilar other when primed with death: Neural evidence of self-control engaged by interdependent people in Japan. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 12(6), 910–917.

Yue, T., Anguo, F., Xu, Y., & Huang, X. (2021). The rank of a value in the importance hierarchy of values affects its relationship to self-concept: A SC-IAT study. *Current Psychology*, 41(10), 7290–7296.

Zahn, R., Moll, J., Paiva, M., Garrido, G., Krueger, F., Huey, E. D., & Grafman, J. (2009). The neural basis of human social values: Evidence from functional MRI. *Cerebral Cortex*, 19(2), 276–283.

Zavala, B., Jang, A., Trotta, M., Lungu, C. I., Brown, P., & Zaghoul, K. A. (2018). Cognitive control involves theta power within trials and beta power across trials in the prefrontal subthalamic network. *Brain*, 141,

Zhao, J., Liang, W.-K., Juan, C.-H., Wang, L., Wang, S., & Zhu, Z. (2015). Dissociated stimulus and response conflict effect in the Stroop task: Evidence from evoked brain potentials and brain oscillations. *Biological Psychology*, 104, 130–138.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.