

Editorial overview: Relational values: what are they, and what's the fuss about?

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Abstract

Relational values—as preferences, principles and virtues about human-nature relationships—have attracted a great deal of attention in recent years. The term has been used to include concepts and knowledge from a wide range of social sciences and humanities, e.g., importantly making space for qualitative approaches often neglected within environmental management and science. Meanwhile, crucial questions have emerged. What counts as a relational value, and what does not? How do relational values (RVs) compare with other value categories and terms, including held, assigned, instrumental, moral, shared, social, and non-material values (e.g., associated with cultural ecosystem services)? In this article, we address these issues, partly by providing context about how the RV term originated and how it has evolved to date. Most importantly, because of their somewhat unique combination of groundedness and moral relevance, positive relational values may offer important opportunities for the evolution of values that may be necessary for transformative change towards sustainability. The special issue includes contributions that contemplate particular concepts (e.g., care, stewardship, eudaimonia—human flourishing), applications (e.g., environmental assessment, environmental policy design), and the history of relevant scholarship in various intellectual traditions (e.g., ecological economics, human ecology, environmental education). Together with this suite of thought-provoking papers, we hope that the clarification we provide here facilitates a broad and productive interdisciplinary exchange to create and refine a reflective but powerful tool for sustainability and justice.

Introduction

As we collectively grapple with environmental change and the challenge of sustainability, there is increasing attention to the role that values play and might play in enabling stewardship and transformation [1,2]. We and others have proposed a widening view of values to extend beyond the worth of nature itself (intrinsic values) and what nature does for us (instrumental values), to include preferences, principles and virtues about human-nature relationships (relational values) [3]. By giving a common framework for ideas long studied in a range of disciplines and fields, we hope that the concept of relational values (RV) will serve as a tool for interdisciplinary integration and the meaningful inclusion of the social sciences and diverse approaches on values with conservation, environmental management, and sustainability science [3,4].

These two motivations—interdisciplinary inclusion and real-world application—have guided development of the concept of relational values. The first aim is to foster deeper understanding of human-nature relationships by bridging concepts across divergent intellectual traditions. The second is to assist real-world decision-making and to enable change. Some who have been working on related topics for years have wondered, why do we need a new term? And—given all the different uses of the word—why use ‘values’? (e.g. some scholars from psychological backgrounds wonder why not use the term ‘attitude’, as relational values are not the held values they generally call

‘values’, and RVs do overlap with attitudes). A partial history of the RV concept may help to explain the choice of the term. We present this history from our positions as three actors in the collaborative development of the concept. This brief history thus also serves to convey part of our positionality (i.e. the contexts, identities, and background that affect a scholar’s work—acknowledgment of this is common and important in many social science approaches).

The window of opportunity for the relational values concept

For us, ‘relational values’ evolved from (slightly different) first uses by Brown [5] and—from a philosophical perspective—Muraca [6]. One of us (KC) was a co-author on an attempt to use this idea to broaden perspectives on the intersection of ecosystem services and ethics [7], and relational ideas resonated after a many-year collaboration with Terre Satterfield on these themes. With these ideas in mind, KC and UP found themselves immersed in debates about values at the final IPBES Conceptual Framework workshop in Cape Town (2013), the story of which reveals much about the vagaries of science-policy processes.

Thanks to crucial groundwork by many previous scholars [e.g. 8,9], and a series of previous workshops organized by IPBES, the Cape Town workshop provided a key window of opportunity to shape the scholarship at the heart of IPBES, with reverberations well beyond [10]. Responding to discussions which featured intrinsic and instrumental values as the only value conceptions, KC and UP argued that intrinsic and instrumental values were too narrow conceptually to include ideas crucial to human-ecosystem relationships. These omitted ideas included those from more qualitative social sciences and the humanities, many of which were embodied in recent conceptual and empirical work on cultural ecosystem services by ourselves and colleagues [11–14]. Following Muraca and Jax *et al.*, KC proposed the addition of ‘relational values’, and thanks to UP and others, other workshop participants agreed to bring this term into the IPBES Conceptual Framework [1] and eventually—given UP’s role on the multidisciplinary expert panel of IPBES—into IPBES’ pluralistic vision on values [4].

After Cape Town, Chan *et al.* (now including RG) realized that it would be helpful to more fully explain the term and expand its focus to include those values pertaining to human-human relationships that involve the environment (resulting in Ref. [3]). Inspired by this collaboration, UP and KC convened a UNESCO-sponsored workshop in San Sebastian (Basque Country) in 2016, on ‘Rethinking relational values and the environment: Implications for Science and Policy’. At this interdisciplinary workshop, the idea emerged to organize a special issue on relational values in COSUST.

This brief history reveals that the early use of the term was both strategic and tactical. It was strategic because from the beginning we aspired for the long-run bridging of diverse concepts across disparate fields and disciplines, to affect discourses on values that permeate IPBES and related science-policy organizations and networks. It was tactical in that there was a limited-time opportunity, and that opportunity was fundamentally tied to the word ‘values’ (the opportunity was to add a third kind of ‘values’ to the IPBES Conceptual Framework). Relational values—as a boundary concept between diverse fields and also policy—builds upon many decades of work in the humanities (including religious studies, cultural studies, ethics, and phenomenology), sociology and anthropology, psychology, human ecology, environmental education, human-environment geography, ecological economics, recreation studies, political ecology, common property/the commons, and more. And we believe it works best when it continues to reference these foundations of scholarship using many different terms prevalent in those fields.

Successes and challenges

We see progress on the first motivation (interdisciplinary inclusion) and also some on the second (real-world application). We are buoyed not only by the lively and interdisciplinary uptake of Chan *et al.* [3] and Pascual *et al.* [4], but more pertinently by the 65 credible abstracts that we received for this special issue (we wish we could have invited more), and the 17 articles that resulted. As hoped, the excellent contributions in this issue come from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. Working closely with the contributing authors broadened our own minds and views of human-environment interactions, and helped us to refine our approach to the relational values concept. Although it is too early to review real-world applications, at least we have uptake in science-policy processes (e.g. IPBES) of some new terms and concepts that transcend economics but still offer guidance for policy and practice.

The rapid growth of the RV idea, however, also brought challenges. The strategic and tactical use of an already broadly used term (‘values’) yielded conceptual ambiguities. Although ambiguity can be highly constructive, just as with sustainability [15], there is a real danger that an ambiguous term is popular because everyone sees what they want in it, but there is no common ground for collective action or insight. As editors we were often put in the uncomfortable position of trying not to police the interpretation of our own work on RV while maintaining some degree of consistency in the special issue. A diversity of views is rich and instructive, but not if those views are incommensurable or the differences incompletely discussed [16]. After deep and constructive discussions among editors and thoughtful authors, we think we have collectively succeeded at achieving both consistency and diversity. But you be the judge.

Conceptual clarifications

The budding literature using the term ‘relational values’ and the experience of editing this special issue made it obvious that several concepts had become—or had always been—muddled, and that there was a need to clarify. And yet we do so with considerable hesitation. Our purpose has never been to wade into and deepen esoteric nuances of semantics, and we hesitated to lose the accessibility of some of our other work [3]. For some or many readers, in some or many contexts, there is likely no need to distinguish these different conceptions of values—what matters is that there is a space to express what matters to people on their own terms.

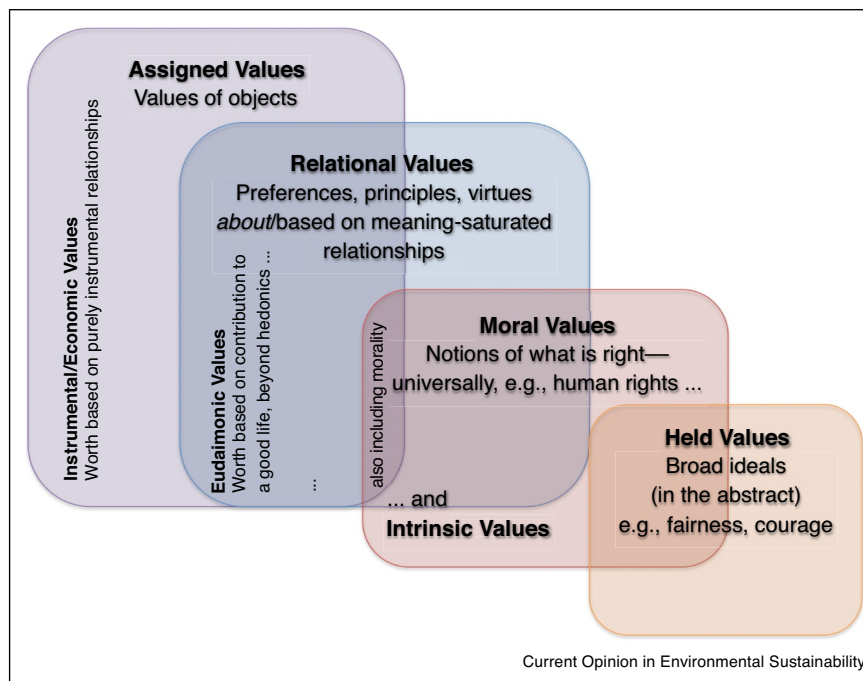
And yet, for others, understanding relational values in relation to other terms and concepts is an essential prerequisite—required before they can engage with the term at all. They have a point: without clearly delineating concepts, we run the risk of sowing not insight but confusion. Furthermore, by describing how these terms and concepts relate to each other, we hope to provide a birds-eye view of this landscape of literatures and thus enable readers to situate their work more richly and read other literatures more widely and effectively (Figure 1).

These clarifications emerged from stimulating conversations among authors of Chan *et al.* [3], participants at the 2016 workshop in San Sebastian, and between the three of us also with others, sometimes poring over key references. Because the term is still evolving, positions cannot be proven, and the answers below should be understood as proposals, not fact.

Did relational values begin with Brown [5]?

Yes and no. Brown laid groundwork, claiming that all values are relational in origin; we are focused on those that are relational in content. It has become popular to cite Brown [5] for the origin of relational values, but he never actually used that term (he wrote about ‘values in the relational realm’ (p.233)), and it seems he meant something slightly different. In one very brief section, between descriptions of held and assigned values, Brown wrote, ‘Value in the relational realm is not observable; it is only at the feeling level. However, value in the relational realm often gives rise to an expression of value, which brings us to the object realm.’ (p.233) At that point he moves on to assigned values. As such, it seems that Brown wrote only about the relational *origin* of all values—that all values

Figure 1



Relationships between several prominent value concepts. Spatial overlap indicates conceptual overlap, where, for example eudaimonic values can be both assigned and relational (see text). Sideways text indicates a defined subset within a category (e.g. instrumental/economic values are a subset of assigned values). As a single illustrative example, a farmer may have a strong **held** value regarding fairness (which is also **moral**), and also apply this notion of fairness to the context of pesticides in a **relational** (and **moral**) principle that careless pesticide applications are wrong because they undermine the utility of the chemical for other farmers (by fostering the evolution of resistance among pests). The same farmer may also care deeply for the land in a way that is crucial to her identity and well-being (a **relational** and **eudaimonic** value), while simultaneously fostering pollinators primarily for yield gains (following **instrumental/economic values**), and believing in the inherent rights of all species to exist (an **intrinsic value**). These values are deeply intertwined (e.g. caring for the land may be stronger when reinforced by the benefits yielded, tangible or otherwise).

stem from relational *processes*. In this special issue, as clarified elegantly by Himes & Muraca [27], we are talking about values that are *relational in content*, that is values where the relationship *itself* matters, as more than a means to an end (a preference for seeing birds is relational in origin; a sense of kinship with birds is relational in content) (for more about relationality in content, see ‘*Why are eudaimonic values relational . . . ?*’).

Are held values relational values?

No. Held values are wholly abstract; relational values have an object. Several authors in the special issue initially lumped held and relational values together, or included as relational values particular held values such as justice, equity, and solidarity. For the sake of conceptual simplicity, we would propose that relational and held values are related but distinct. Held values are ‘the modes of conduct, end-states, or qualities which could possibly be desirable’ for instance including ‘frugality, generosity, courage, obedience, responsibility, and fairness’ but also ‘wisdom, happiness, freedom, equality, beauty, pleasure, and friendship’ [5]. RVs can take the form of a held value *as* applied to a thing or things (e.g. equality with other species; solidarity towards a particular fox; responsibility toward living nature).

Are relational values the values ‘about nature’ or ‘of nature’?

Both. In Chan *et al.* [3], we were careful to write about relational values *about*—not *of*—nature. We sought primarily to make space for the notion that values matter, and not only as the measure of instrumental worth, but as representations of what many people find meaningful *about* nature (e.g. attachments, commitments, and responsibilities). Yet RVs can also be values *of* nature. The concept of eudaimonia is important to understanding why. Eudaimonic values concern contributions to a good life, where that good life implies not pure hedonism but rather living in accordance with moral principles and virtues. As such, eudaimonic values regarding nature are a key subset of relational values (the value *of* nature—or relationships with parts of nature—towards a good life). Whereas a relational value *about* nature might be responsibility toward a wild mushroom patch, a linked relational value *of* nature would be the multi-faceted contribution that harvesting mushrooms makes to a good life (e.g. by connecting one to the land, maintaining traditions, motivating a relaxing and contemplative activity).

Are relational values assigned values?

They can be: eudaimonic values (a subset of relational values) can be assigned values. Assigned values, following Brown [5], are values *of* things. Thus, just as eudaimonic values can be values ‘of’ nature, they can also be described as assigned values. When economists and conservation biologists speak of valuation, they generally speak of assigned values (e.g. the worth of pollination in boosting crop production); some relational values are subject to this

type of valuation (e.g. we could use constructed scales to express the worth of a river to a community [11]).

Why are eudaimonic values relational, not instrumental?

Eudaimonic values of a thing are relational insofar as the relationship with the thing matters (not just as a means to an end). Because valuation (of assigned values) so often co-occurs with economic approaches, it may be confusing to think that (eudaimonic) relational values are also subject to valuation. Why don’t we just consider eudaimonic values instrumental (not relational), then? The key point here is theoretical substitutability: if the value of a thing is in principle substitutable, and the relationship is merely a means to an end, the thing is valuable *instrumentally* [7] (Himes & Muraca, [27]). Insofar as the relationship takes on its own meaning as more than a means to an end, the thing is not wholly substitutable and the value is also *relational* (see de Groot *et al.*, this issue, on eudaimonia). We imagine that a good life would generally include some purely instrumental relationships (e.g. with any disposable item, fossil fuels for transportation, most raw metals and component materials). Yet in keeping with the above sources, we propose maintaining ‘eudaimonic values’ as a concept distinct from instrumental values, reserved for relationships wherein the thing is not entirely substitutable (e.g. a tree planted to commemorate a birth or death, which may also provide needed shade). Accordingly, although a good life might benefit from instrumental values, eudaimonic values are the contributions that are relational.

Are relational values moral values?

Some are—those values that are intended to apply universally are moral. Some authors have suggested an equivalence between intrinsic and moral values, but we argue that relational values also can be moral. However, some relational values are only intended for private application, and these are not moral. Moral values are ones that are intended to apply universally (e.g. equal consideration of interests; human rights to clean water) [17,18]. As such, any preference, principle or virtue that is only for oneself would not be moral. For example, we may see regular outdoor recreation as a private virtue—a commitment to ourselves—and we believe that people generally have responsibilities to mitigate our impacts on nature. The former is private, whereas the latter is moral.

Are shared, social, cultural, and plural values relational?

Perhaps—many shared, social, and cultural values are relational; value pluralism is different entirely. We applaud the recent attention to shared, social, cultural, and plural values [19] (see also the 2019 Special Feature in *Sustainability Science*). The terms shared, social, and cultural values are defined variously, and definitions (and distinctions among the concepts) are evolving. Common elements of definitions include that these types of values address social good; are other-regarding; and/or are shared or beyond individual values. In general, these values are not entirely

instrumental (i.e., not substitutable), so most are likely relational. Unlike many conceptions of shared, social, and cultural values, relational values can also pertain to values held by individuals, not shared collectively.

Value pluralism, meanwhile, is often defined as the position that apparently different values are not 'all reducible to one supervalue . . . that there really are several distinct values' [20] (e.g. multiple orthogonal constituents of well-being, e.g. happiness and success) [21]. Given this, relational-values approaches could be monistic or pluralistic. A strict eudaimonic approach, as one prominent example, could say that all different values are reducible to how they contribute to a good life, which would be monistic. Most considerations of relational values are likely to be pluralistic, however, such as a characterization of the many ways that a national park matters to people [4].

Are relational values just another way to talk about non-material values or cultural ecosystem services?

No. Non-material values—as from cultural services or non-material contributions to people—can be relational and/or instrumental, and material benefits can have relational values. Some existing papers [e.g. 22] and initial submissions to this issue blurred this boundary between relational and non-material or intangible values. There would be no purpose to the term 'relational value' if it were synonymous with these existing terms. Cultural ecosystem services were initially envisioned as instrumental, being a component of the ecosystem services framework. Subsequent work argued that cultural services were often not substitutable [23], but of course some benefits are substitutable to some people, particularly monetary ones as via ecotourism. The relational values concept provides a language for elements of human-nature relationships that do not fit into the provider-receiver or stock-flow metaphor of ecosystem services [3,13,24]. In addition, many material/provisioning services (e.g. related to fishing, hunting) can be deeply intertwined with instrumental values (both material and non-material) and also deep attachments to nature (which encompass several relational values) [12,23,25]. These points were fundamental to and are reflected in the conception of nature's contributions to people (NCP), e.g. recognizing RVs as key connections between NCP and good quality of life [4,26]. Thus, ecosystem services and NCP can both be valued instrumentally and relationally; relational values are also key components of the cultural context that gives meaning to ecosystem services and NCP.

Mapping relational values in the special issue

The papers in this issue represent a wide range of contributions (Figure 2). First, due to the relative infancy of relational values scholarship, some contributions help lay the conceptual and methodological foundations for interdisciplinary study of relational values. Himes & Muraca [27] distinguish between the relational (process) *basis* of all values and the relational *content* of a subset of

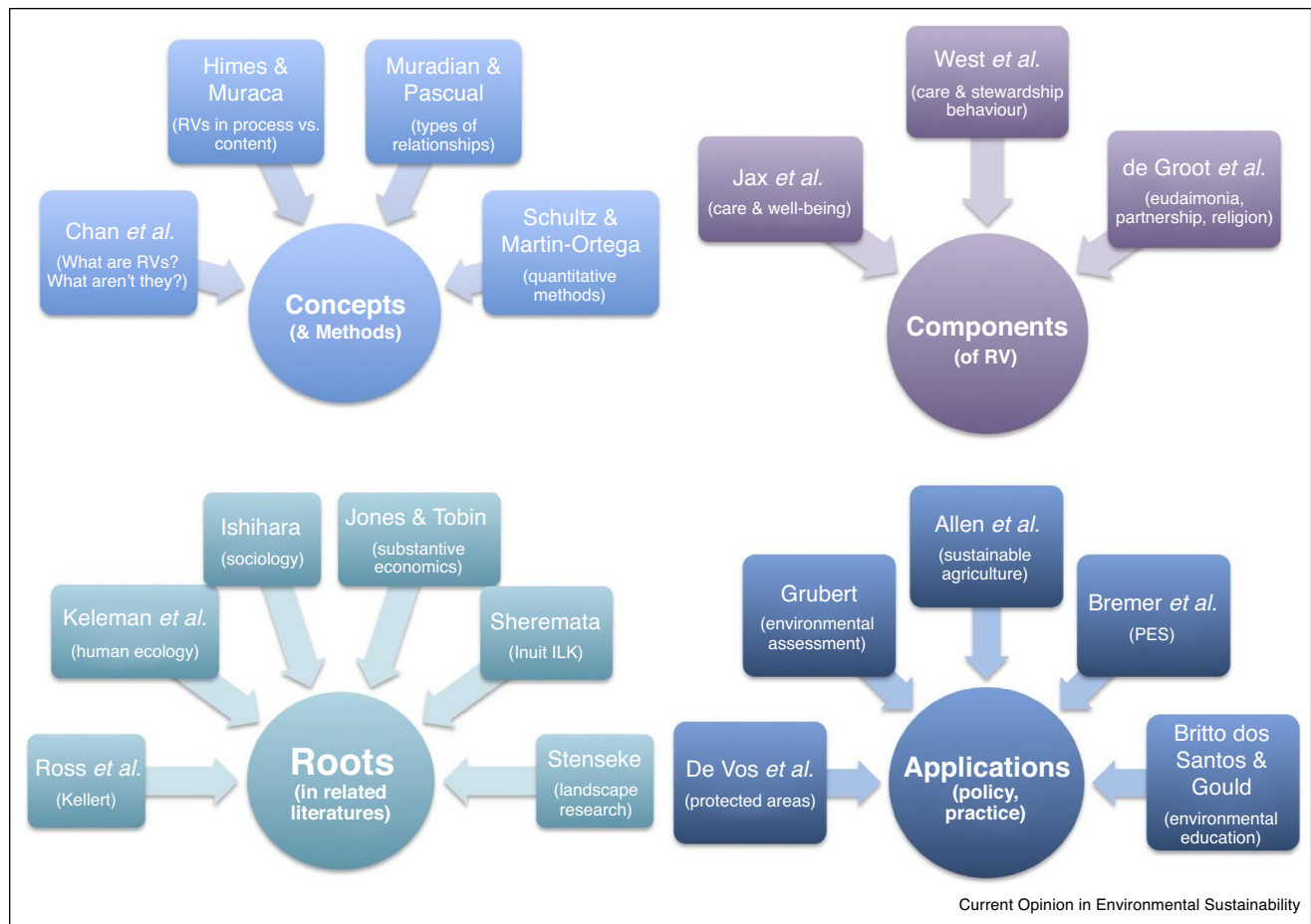
values (those we call RVs), thus elucidating differences between relational, instrumental, and intrinsic (inherent moral) values. Muradian & Pascual (this issue) propose a typology of human-nature relationships—'relational models'—which underpin instrumental and relational values. Schultz & Martin-Ortega (this issue) discuss the important ways that quantitative methods can effectively contribute to RV scholarship.

Second, because relational values encompass a diversity of separable concepts (e.g. kinship, stewardship, responsibility for nature, responsibility for people affected by environmental change), several papers address particular relational concepts of value. Jax *et al.* (this issue) and West *et al.* (this issue) consider the notion of care as a relational value, and its implications for stewardship and a richer understanding of human well-being and behavior. And de Groot *et al.* (this issue) explore the interrelated notions of partnership and eudaimonia, arguing that these ideas and other relational values are central to much religious thought and also accurate understandings of human well-being.

Third, to provide added foundations for interdisciplinary exchange, several papers review the history or recent scholarship in a field relevant to relational values. Ross, Witt and Jones Ross *et al.* [28] explore how the work of the late Stephen Kellert, an influential scholar of environmental values, informs the concept of relational values. Qualitative social science research on human ecology is reviewed by Keleman *et al.* (this issue), who conclude that both well-established ideas as well as emerging theoretical developments have much in common with and much to bear on relational values research. Ishihara (this issue) applies fundamental sociological concepts (e.g. habitus) to explore how RVs are shared culturally and negotiated in particular contexts (e.g. payments for ecosystem services programs). Meanwhile, Jones and Tobin [29] apply a 'substantive economics' lens to review how people-people relational values and instrumental values coexist in sustainable agriculture. How relational values matter for Inuit indigenous people is addressed by Sheremata (this issue), including how such values are implicit in Inuit worldviews and traditional knowledge. Stenseke (this issue) connects relational values with landscape research in the social sciences and humanities to better understand place-based human-environment interactions.

Finally, given the aspiration that relational values may offer new opportunities for application, several contributions examine relational values in particular contexts or applications. De Vos *et al.* (this issue) review relational values research about protected areas, highlighting the abundance of place-focused and psychological research at this intersection. Grubert (this issue) reviews the place of relational values in environmental assessment processes, particularly life-cycle assessment, and finds these processes lacking in their attention to crucial relational-value

Figure 2



One organization of the special-issue articles (including this introductory one). Multiple categorizations are possible, and several articles could fit in more than one category.

considerations. In agricultural systems, Allen *et al.* (this issue) examine the relevance of relational values for farmer values and agricultural biodiversity conservation. Bremer *et al.* (this issue) review the effects of payments for watershed service programmes on relational values of upstream water providers. And finally, Britto dos Santos & Gould (this issue) find evidence that relational values can change in response to environmental education interventions.

Collectively, the suite of papers develops several insights. First, although relational values are in their infancy as a bridging concept, they rest upon strong intellectual foundations in a wide range of fields and disciplines. Second, as a deeply interdisciplinary and collectively developed concept, RV can illuminate emergent insights at the intersection of fields and disciplines. Third, many promising opportunities for application exist. Such applications, in diverse contexts, would foreground crucial social and social-ecological considerations that have often been overlooked despite being at the heart of conservation, sustainability, and environmental management.

Conclusion

The relational values concept offers one potential avenue for meaningful inclusion of diverse social science perspectives into sustainability science and environmental decision-making. In this paper, we offered clarifications about what relational values are (and are not). For example, relational values are more grounded in particular contexts than held values (e.g. equity is a held value; a commitment to intergenerational equity for resource use is a relational value). RVs are not equivalent to non-material values (RVs can pertain to material or non-material benefits). They are never purely instrumental (for RVs, the relationship between the subject and object matters, whereas for instrumental values the relationship is only a means to an end). RVs are generally not values *of* a thing/component of nature but instead are values *about* relationships). Furthermore, RVs are often moral (as prescriptions applicable to all), and they are measurable, in the sense of the strength of commitment to an ideal or aspired relationship with nature. We followed by describing how the papers in this special issue further develop

and inform the—if we dare call it this?—emerging field of relational values scholarship.

As we reflect upon the rich groundwork laid by the papers in this special issue, we consider whether a revolution may be afoot—a revolution that could supplant the privileged position that economics has played as the central discipline for guiding policymaking and practice. Relational values may offer one step toward a more even playing field within which economics, other social sciences, and humanities contribute complementary insights toward a just and sustainable world. We hope that the collective effort reflected in this issue helps scholars and decision makers incorporate relational values in their work and better understand how we can collectively and individually move towards more just and sustainable relationships involving nature.

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