

MRS Awards 2021

International Research

Highly Commended:

**Opinium, the British Council,
the Electoral Psychology
Observatory (EPO) &
the London School of Economics**

Going beyond face value:

understanding how citizens can
support international cooperation

SUMMARY

People like the idea of international cooperation to take on the big issues facing the world. But as soon as the details emerge, they fragment, with democratic governments reluctant to ask citizens to concede or make sacrifices for fear of electoral backlash.

The Big Conversation is an attempt by the British Council, Opinium, and the Electoral Psychology Observatory at the LSE to go beyond the easy, reassuring but insufficient answers people give, and to understand deeper, more complex and subconscious values that shape the conditions for international cooperation.

Using a unique quantitative and qualitative approach covering 7 countries, we explored 2 modules relating to Covid-19 and to climate change using a combination of implicit value priorities questions, visual prompts to measure value differences and commonalities beyond language, and tension scales to force hierarchisation between competing values.

The impact has been to offer new methodological tools for understanding how we move from values in theory to values in practice when it comes to effective international cooperation. This project brought together over 100 major organisations from 43 countries across 6 continents and has transformed how the British Council approaches these issues.

SYNOPSIS

Having disrupted almost every aspect of economic, social, political, and human normality, the Covid-19 pandemic has reignited our collective consciousness that the planet's most pressing problems can only be addressed through unprecedented levels of international cooperation. The situation is not new. For decades the public has recognised, in principle, the need for tighter collaboration around pressing global threats, such as environmental disasters, terrorism and poverty. Yet, when it comes to details, problems multiply and citizens either express concerns about the sacrifices they are being asked for, or governments refrain from asking them to concede any for fear of being electorally punished.

This paradox underlines a key challenge for researchers, insight agencies, and practitioners alike. How should they approach questions where the social attractiveness makes it difficult to derive the crucial insights needed to improve the world?

The Big Conversation is an international research collaboration between the British Council, Opinium and the Electoral Psychology Observatory (EPO) at the London School of Economics uncover these crucial insights by applying cutting edge science and methodology to go beyond easy and reassuring – but insufficient – answers and understand what citizens' deeper, more complex, and subconscious values and emotions shape the conditions for real progress in international cooperation. This programme's unique approach aims to revolutionise the industry's understanding of the role of values in international cooperation in 7 countries and around two complementary modules relating to the Covid-19 pandemic and the fight against climate change.

Approach overview

The British Council chose to work with Opinium and the Electoral Psychology Observatory because they wanted a methodology that went beyond what is usually captured by value research. To overcome this, the programme uses cutting-edge protocols to tap into subconscious emotions, values in tension and value ownership models. Key linguistic and cultural limitations in comparative research were averted by using a unique combination of qualitative and quantitative, static and dynamics, comparative, as well as transnational methodologies including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and deliberative pilots.

The Big Conversation began with an initial pilot in culturally diverse case countries: Malaysia, South Africa, and the UK at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. This provided a timely opportunity to develop our initial hypothesis of how value emphasis can shift in times of crises. The fascinating findings led the British Council to commission an extension of the original project to examine the impact of sustainability challenges on values in international cooperation in four new countries: China, India, Japan, and Mexico.

Progressively, the Big Conversation moved from an exploratory research project to a modular application revolutionising the ways in which international organisations understand the weight of values on citizens and stakeholders' priorities and desires in international cooperation around shared global

challenges. This project brought together over 100 major organisations from 43 countries across 6 continents.

The Big Conversation is now having major impact across countries and international organisations, by offering new methodological tools for understanding how we move from values in theory to values in practice as the prerequisites for novel and effective international cooperation.

Designing cutting edge international research

Research on values and their role in international cooperation can be difficult to conduct as there are important discrepancies between the values that individuals and organisations agree upon and support, and how these are implemented in practice. To tackle these challenges, The Big Conversation included several pioneering research components aimed at examining value priorities and tensions. Furthermore, especially in comparative contexts, values become prisoners of language, bounded with contextualised meaning and cultural connotations.

The project included innovative qualitative and quantitative methodologies. To enable meaningful comparisons and global policy impact the quantitative measures included three key components:

1. pioneering implicit value priorities questions
2. the use of visual prompts to measure value differences and commonalities beyond language
3. tension scales forcing hierarchisation between competing positive or negative values.

Additionally, the survey used key established items from the World Value Survey enabling the creation of instruments to “plug” our study into the largest value study in the world and instruments intended to create bridges with the qualitative parts of the study through data squaring. (*Attachment 1*)

These tools, piloted across different cultures and contexts, created metrics with which allowed us to compare values across and within nations. Their combination was specifically studied to tap beyond consciousness, enact values in realistic tensions, and enable comparative researchers to go beyond the linguistic and cultural connotations that can limit meaningful comparative values research as does the inherent disconnect between values in theory (and thought) and values in practice in traditional explicit instruments.

To add both depth and breadth to our study, The Big Conversation also included qualitative research (interviews and both comparative and transnational experimental focus groups). Interviews with British Council staff and key stakeholders enabled us to examine overlaps and differences between staff, stakeholders, users, and the public within which the organisation operates.

Alongside these, comparative focus groups (within nations and transnational) were conducted which had a deliberative experimental design. This tested how different value-frameworks and prompts impact the quality of deliberation

and decision-making in an interactive context, its resilience to threats and responsiveness to inclusion.

The result

The Big Conversation uncovered thought-provoking insights on how values permeate, and at times challenge, international cooperation. A key finding is the concept of value ownership, which shows that beyond sheer preferences, respondents make clear distinctions between which values they wish to be championed by different institutions in international cooperation. We could thus identify a ‘value niche’ for the British Council, which aligns the expectations of the public with the mission of the organisation through a specific value framework, but also to understand how citizens wish international collaboration to be grounded on an equilibrium of values carried by different actors. (*Attachment 2*)

The research also identifies international cooperation value sets derived from overlaps and tensions between the preferences of organisations, staff, stakeholders, existing users and the wider public. These findings map clear critical options for institutions on whether to ringfence internal value priorities, strengthen links with existing communities, or find commonalities with new populations at the risk of alienating staff or existing users. (*Attachment 3*).

Crucially, this has a transformative impact on putting values at the heart of international action in the face of threats, with a third key finding pertaining to which values citizens are willing to sacrifice to fight key threats such as pandemic, environmental disasters or terrorism.

Finally, we uncovered the logic behind international cooperation priorities, notably highlighting how under an appearance of common good, populations tend to prioritise areas in which their country may be more vulnerable. Countries such as South Africa are more likely to prioritise economic and educational cooperation whilst in a country like the UK, citizens prefer to focus on international cooperation to fight terrorism or advance science.

Finally, our findings highlight the specific value sets of crucial categories such as disabled citizens, ethnic minorities, and young people, uncovering counter-intuitive generational divides. For example, older generations are in fact more likely to consent sacrifices in the name of fighting climate change compared to younger generations.

Why we should win the award

The research has far-reaching and continuous impact. Over 100 leading organisations from 43 different countries and 6 continents have been associated with the research, ranging from Parliament, Scottish Government and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to the British Museum, the National Arts Council, the International Music Council, and multiple national Councils (Korea, Japan, Canada, Namibia, South Africa, etc).

Almost 1,000 people attended our initial events, 84 staff were trained by our team and 53 more engaged into our Action Research strategy through working groups, mobilising British Council staff across countries.

The research has transformed British Council activities as described by C. Wilson, Director of Research and Policy Insight: *“This research has enabled us] to understand more about values and priorities for our work during a time of significant global crisis of COVID-19. The action research dimension of the research has been particularly successful, engaging 53 staff directly in the development of the research itself [...] to generate new knowledge that is relevant and actionable for practitioners as well as for researchers”*.

As well as other cultural institutions: *“The Big Conversation impressed me with its systematic approach [and] helped us to learn how to understand issues theoretically while simultaneously applying them in our day-to-day work in practice.”* (Geun Lee, President of the Korea Foundation)

We have developed new tools that go beyond assessing which values matter to whom, to inform practice on how to put powerful values at the heart of international action across different contexts and crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic, and environmental and terror threats. These tools will durably transform transnational research on values, uncover what unifies countries and populations and what might be important, but divisive, in society.

Our replicable and systematically piloted visual questions and implicit tools will crucially free researchers from critical linguistic and cultural constraints in comparative attitudinal research. Our triangulation of insights from very heterogenous bodies of data including surveys, interviews, focus groups and deliberative experiments set a new standard for integrating streams of research to the service of tackling the most complex questions.

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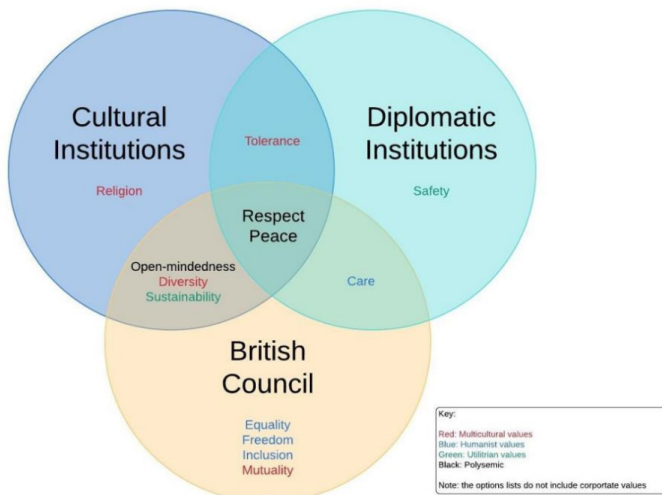
Attachment 1: Research design – sample and approach

Approach	First module: Values, International Cooperation in the fact of External Threats	Second module: Values, International Cooperation and Sustainability
Markets	UK, South Africa, Malaysia	China, India, Japan, Mexico
Quantitative Component	1,000 nationally representative respondents per market <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disabilities and ethnicity disaggregation in addition to traditional social and demographic controls Explicit value hierarchy items Explicit international cooperation hierarchy items Tension scale items Implicit items and cross-culturally piloted non-verbal items “Pluggable” instruments using World Value Survey items 	
	Implicit value-threat sacrifices items: - pandemic, terrorism, environmental disaster	Implicit value-threat sacrifices items: - sustainability and environmental protection
Qualitative Component	Focus groups of British Council users with deliberative components based on 6 threat and prompts framing	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparative users focus groups (x 10) Semi-structured staff interviews Semi-structured external stakeholders interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transnational users focus groups (x 2)
Bridges for data squaring	Restricted version of the mass survey questionnaire administered to all focus group and interview participants Integrative work on value perceptions and implicit prompts	



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Attachment 2: Value ownership Cultural institutions, diplomatic institutions and the British Council



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Attachment 3: Values options

Table 11. Comparison of Most important values for the British Council

General Population		Staff Interviews	Stakeholders	Focus Groups
Value	%	Value	Value	Value
Respect	48%	Open-mindedness	Equality	Inclusion
Equality	18%	Diversity	Open-mindedness	Respect
Open-mindedness	17%	Mutuality	Diversity	Sustainability
Inclusion	16%	Sustainability	Sustainability	Open-mindedness
Peace	15%	Inclusion	Respect	Mutuality
Tolerance	23%	Equality		Solidarity
Freedom	17%	Respect		Equality

Note: Whilst the survey of the general population used a representative sample, the samples for the questionnaires at the end of the staff and stakeholder interviews and the focus groups are non-representative. Red represents multicultural values, blue represents humanist values, green utilitarian values, and black represents polysemic values.

