Sensing Value in Place: Experiential Practice and the Decision-Making Process

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Extended Abstract (July 10, 2008)

The concept of value is implicit in the act of decision-making. Indeed, without some notion of value there would be no reason for making a decision and no basis for selecting one alternative outcome over another. At the same time, when we talk about place attachment and sense of place, it seems clear that we are really talking about ways in which people value places. Therefore, the concept of value provides a natural connection between place and decision-making. The question motivating this book could be framed as, "How can we ensure that the value of place will be represented in the decision-making process?"

Value is a complex concept. The word value is used in many ways and can mean many different things. Brown (1984) pointed out three basic ways in which the word value has been defined and presented a conceptual framework for understanding how these different value concepts are related. In this chapter I will build on Brown's framework and try to suggest some ways of adapting it to make it more useful as a basis for bringing the value of place into the decision-making process.

Brown considers human preferences to be the origin of value, so all of his value concepts are preference-related. He identifies 3 realms of value: the conceptual realm, which deals with the basis of preference; the relational realm, which deals with the act of preferring; and the object realm, which deals with the result of preference. Each of these realms has its own distinct concept of value. In the conceptual realm, value is defined as an enduring concept of the good or the preferable, which is assumed to motivate people's choices and actions. Brown calls this *held value*. In the object realm, value is defined as a behavioral (verbal or nonverbal) expression of the relative importance or worth of an object within a particular context. Brown calls this *assigned value*. In the relational realm, Brown defines value as the feeling or experience that emerges from a person's preference for an object in a given context. He does not, however, give a name to this third kind of value. In this chapter, I will refer to value in the relational realm as *felt value*.

Brown assumes that human preferences originate from held values, which give rise to felt values, which in turn result in assigned values. He regards felt value as merely an unobservable, intermediate step along the linear, causal pathway from held value to assigned value and therefore does not give much attention to it (Figure 1). Decision-making methods based on this understanding of value typically focus on the two endpoints of the causal pathway, seeking to specify a predictive relationship between people's held values and their assigned values for particular objects. One widely-used approach for doing this involves describing objects or decision outcomes as composed of a set of attributes (or features, or components). A weight is assigned to each attribute, presumably reflecting a person's or group's held values, and the

weighted sum of the separate attributes for an object is used to predict the assigned value that people would give to the object. (Figure 2). This general approach is the basis for many decision-making tools, such as cost-benefit analysis and conjoint analysis.

Felt value plays no explicit role in this multiattribute decision-making approach. Value is treated as an abstract quantity rather than as a subjective feeling. Once the importance weights are determined, a decision can, in principle, be made simply by carrying out a numerical calculation. The actual experience of liking or disliking, accepting or rejecting, is passed over and replaced by a mathematical formula or model for predicting assigned values. This approach, while very useful in many kinds of decision situations, may not be well-suited for decision-making about place. It implies that a place is a bundle of attributes or components whose separate values can be added up to determine the value of the whole. Research on sense of place, however, suggests that place is a holistic, dynamic, experiential phenomenon that cannot be reduced to such a simple, additive model (Patterson et al. 1998; Bott, Cantrill, and Myers 2003; Brooks et al. 2006). In other words, a place is not just the sum of its parts. The unique, hard-to-define, gestalt qualities of places as people actually experience them tend to drop out of such an analytical decision-making process.

How can the holistic, subjective experience of place be incorporated into the decision-making process? To address this question, the role of felt value in Brown's (1984) scheme needs to be reconsidered. From an experiential perspective, felt value is not merely an unobservable, intermediate step between held values and assigned values. It is the immediate, subjective feeling of the importance, worth, or significance that something has for an individual, and is in fact directly observable to the person who experiences it. Therefore, we can use methods from phenomenology and experiential psychology to study and work directly with felt value. Observing how felt value actually shows up in our experience might lead us to reconsider Brown's picture of the relationship between the 3 realms of value as well. Brown suggests that held values give rise to felt values and assigned values in a linear sequence. Experientially, however, it might be more accurate to say that felt value is the basis from which both held values and assigned values emerge. That is, our concepts of what is preferable and our assessments of the worth of specific objects both arise from our immediate feelings of value. But the opposite is also true; when we form general ideas about what is desirable and when we make assessments of the worth of specific things, our underlying feelings of value may change as a result. So the relationship between the three realms of value is not as linear as Brown pictured it, but is more interactive and dynamic (Figure 3).

At the same time, we also have the ability to think and reason logically about our values. At a cognitive level, we can make logical inferences of what our assigned values ought to be based on our held values, and we can use those deductions to guide our decision-making. But it sometimes happens that the assigned values we deduce logically from our held values don't match up with our 'gut feelings' about the options we are choosing among. When that happens, it indicates that something at the feeling level has been missed or passed over by our rational thought process. To understand how this can happen, it is useful to make a distinction between explicit and implicit levels of awareness (Figure 3). Held value and assigned value are both at the explicit level. We can express them in words, name them, communicate them, and think logically about them. Felt value, however, is at the implicit level, which means that although we experience it and it plays a

vital role in everything we do, we generally do not have it in words or explicit concepts. The implicit level is like a backdrop or background of feeling that stays on the fringe of awareness and is often overlooked.

Place attachment, I believe, is a phenomenon that goes on primarily at the implicit level. Sense of place is an implicit, preverbal, bodily sense of the kind studied by experiential psychologists and philosophers (Gendlin 1996, 1997; Hendricks 2004). The implicit dimension embodies a great deal of information – much more information than can be expressed in words and concepts at the explicit level. Thus, the felt sense of a place and of its value to a person is more intricate than can be captured in a multi-attribute utility model. The felt value of a place is not determined by its rankings on a pre-specified set of attributes. Instead, relevant attributes emerge from a person's holistic felt sense of value and may change depending on the context.

To include place in decision-making, we need a decision-making process that does not by-pass felt value and does not ignore or lose touch with the implicit level of experience that underlies held and assigned value. Our decision-making needs to include some means for directly connecting with and working with this implicit, felt level of experience. Gendlin (1981) and his colleagues have developed experiential practices that people can use to access the implicit level of experience and to work directly with what he calls "the felt sense" of a situation or concern. He defines a felt sense, as

> ... a bodily awareness of a situation or person or event. An internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about the given subject at a given time - encompasses it and communicates it to you all at once rather than detail by detail (Gendlin 1981, p. 32).

Gendlin found in his research on psychotherapy that when people attend to their felt sense of a situation in a particular way, they can experience a shift in the felt sense that brings new insights and changes the way they feel about and relate to the situation. Based on that, he developed an experiential practice called Focusing to teach people how to tune into this level of awareness.

Focusing and similar experiential practices have been applied to enhance the decision-making processes of people in their personal lives and in fields like business, medicine, and environmental management. These practices are based in the experience of the individual, but at the same time they have an inherently social aspect. The presence of another person (a listener or partner) is often found to facilitate the practice, allowing an individual to go deeper into their own felt sense of an issue or problem. This form of interpersonal facilitation has become an important part of the training in these practices. Out of this inherent social dimension of experiential practice, innovative group and community approaches to decision-making and conflict resolution are being developed (for example, McGuire-Bouwman 2007; McGuire 2007).

Based on my own experience, I think that experiential practices like Gendlin's Focusing could be effective for working with the felt sense or felt value of places (Schroeder 1990). Attending to the implicit felt sense of a place may lead an individual to new insights into how and why the place has value for them. Authentic verbal expressions of held values and assigned values that originate from a person's felt sense of value may "carry forward" an initially inarticulate, implicit

sense into a clearer and more differentiated experience of value. In a decision-making process incorporating a holistic sense of place, felt value would not be replaced by an abstract formula or decision algorithm. The process would invite people to explicate their own implicit felt sense of the value places have for them and would provide opportunities for them to check in with their felt sense of how the decision process is going. The practices developed by Gendlin and his colleagues include guidelines for listening and group process to maintain a supportive and safe environment for expressing whatever emerges from this inward awareness.

For example, McGuire-Bouwman (2007) describes a structured group process based on Gendlin's Focusing practice that was developed for collaborative, consensual decision-making in support groups. The same process is presented in a somewhat modified form for use in hierarchical organizations (McGuire 2007). The process assumes that all group members have learned and are willing to use experiential Focusing and listening practices as a basis for interactions in the group. Leadership roles of agenda-setting, time-keeping, process-monitoring, and recording are shared among group members. The group process is designed to provide individuals with opportunities to go into their felt sense of the topic under discussion, to speak from that felt sense without interruption, and to be assured that other group members have listened and accurately heard what they have said. Alternative procedures are available to work through conflicts and other obstacles to reaching consensus. Applying this kind of approach in a place-based decision-making context ideally would enable people to stay in touch with the implicit felt value that underlies the issues and choices being debated, until a decision that respects everybody's sense of place can be found.

Adapting a collaborative decision-making process like McGuire's (2007) to an agency land-use decision-making context might be quite challenging, since it requires all participants to have a high degree of trust, a willingness to step back from entrenched positions, and a commitment to really listen to those with whom they may disagree. Everyone involved in the process would have to learn the experiential practices on which the process is based and be committed to using them in reaching a group consensus. If successful, the result could be a decision-making process that is open, dynamic, creative, and grounded in an authentic, felt sense of the places about which decisions are being made.

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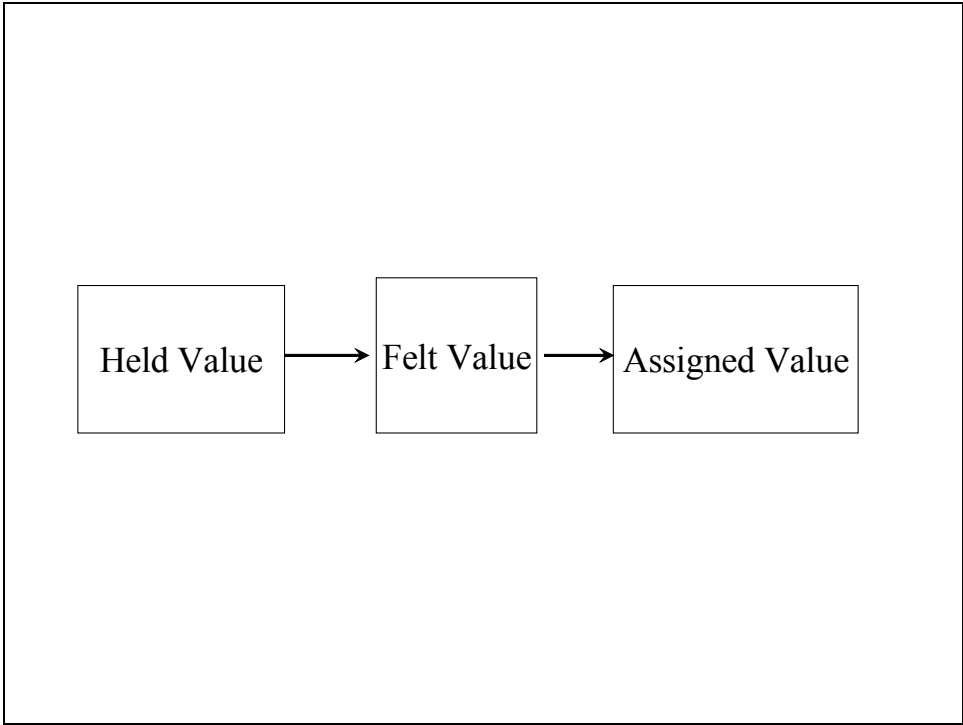
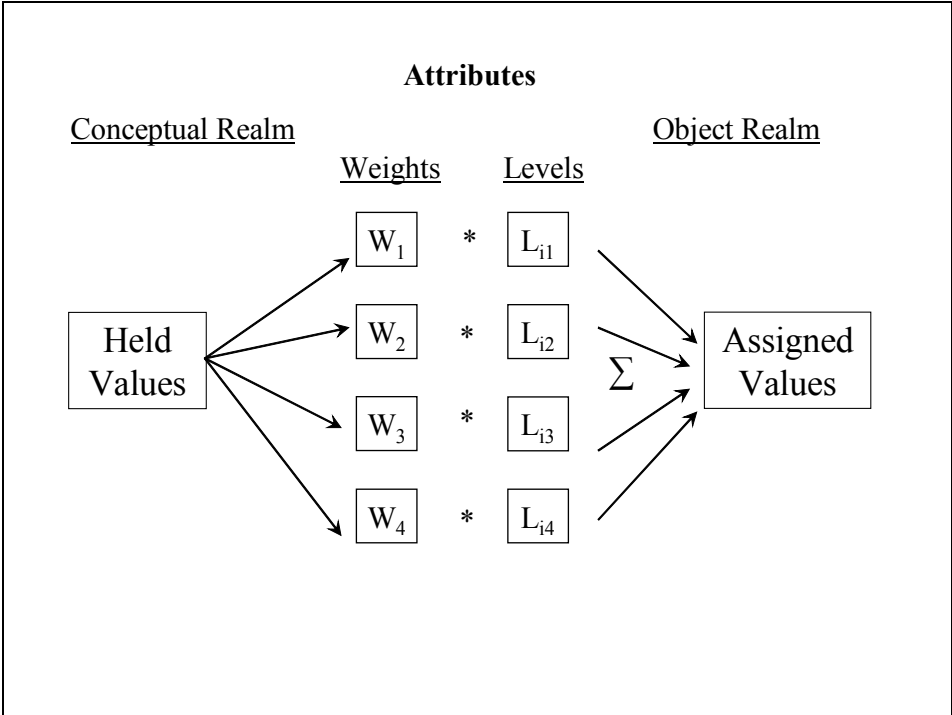Figure 1. Brown's (1984) depiction of the relationship between 3 types of value.

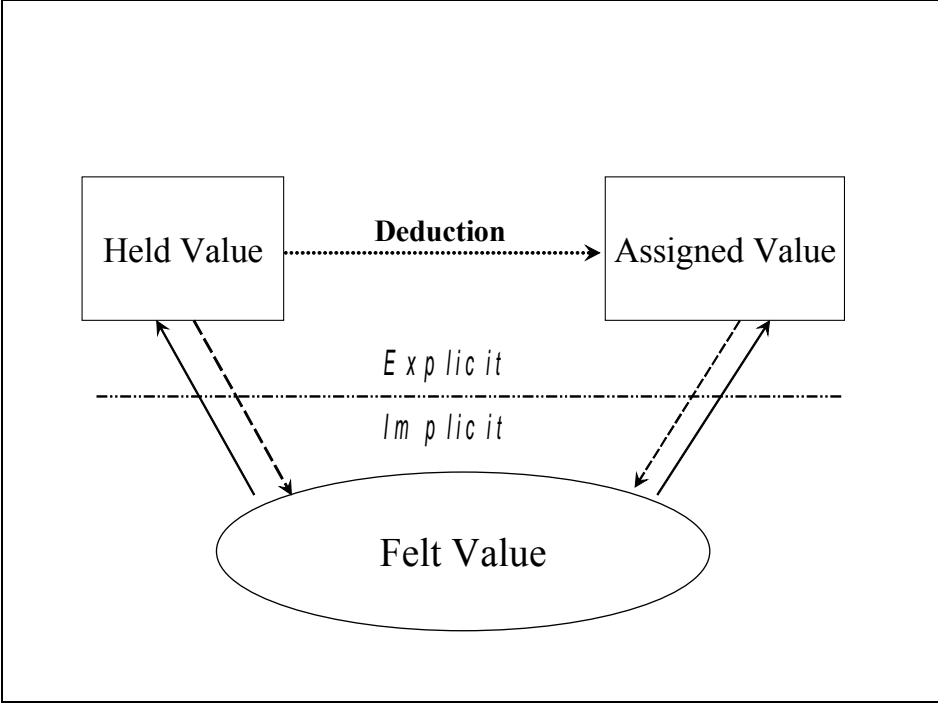Figure 2. The multiattribute decision model.

Figure 3. A revised depiction of the relationship between 3 kinds of value.