Introduction: Qualifying Sociality through Values

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ABSTRACT
This introduction to the special issue Qualifying Sociality through Values interrogates the relationship between sociality and values, two concepts that have gained increasing traction in anthropology, but which have not previously been jointly considered. It presents the twofold agenda of the special issue which is to explore how sociality is valued and how values affect sociality. It opens up these ambiguous and morally charged concepts and discusses their utility and ethnographic purchase as tools for understanding social life in practice. The introduction also outlines the contributions and the special issue's principal findings. Sociality is rendered as a multilaterally value-shaped and ambiguously valued situated practice which is subject to both extension and contraction. Values come out as multi-purposive evaluative criteria which operate as open-ended social resources to different effects, imparting both direction and contingency.

KEYWORDS
Sociality; sociability; values; ethics; politics

This is what social life amounts to: the ongoing re-evaluation and re-distribution of sociality itself. (Alberto Corsín Jiménez 2008b, 17–18)

This special issue proposes that interrogating the relation between sociality and values is crucial for understanding the nature of sociality. Its twofold agenda is to shed light on how sociality is valued and how values affect sociality. How are human ways of being social and sociable valued, and how do cultural values – ideals about the good, virtuous, and legitimate – shape sociality? What values are attributed to sociality in its different forms, and how do values come to exert an influence on sociality? A guiding assumption is that sociality is deeply value-laden and ambiguously valued. Through a set of case-studies on vernacular socialities, the collection challenges perceptions of sociality as a natural and self-purposive, unequivocally valued and rewarding human disposition. Sociality is rendered as a diversely realised and motivated practice, which is conditioned by values through cultural and political imaginaries, the ethical and strategic agendas of situated actors, and their aspirations to establish autonomy and separation to evade constraints. Sociality is shown to be fundamentally dynamic and dialectical, subject to...
extension and contraction, and having both positive and negative valences, it is not only a resource but also a burden.

Considering sociality and values is timely, since there has been a substantial increase in their use in anthropology in the last few decades, yet no previous attempt to systematically link them. While sociality and values have been overshadowed by the ontological and ethical turns, which simultaneously have contributed to their respective popularity, they have become catchwords in anthropological parlance, and both have been invested with hopes for revitalising the discipline. A central reason for their appeal is their potential to promote anthropology’s distinctive pursuit of examining social life in concrete ethnographic contexts by offering more apposite tools for this purpose than the extensively discredited concepts of ‘society’ and ‘culture’. Sociality and values are undoubtedly elements of fundamental significance in human lives, a fact which, besides making them worthy of attention in their own right, would seem to make their joint consideration essential to understand either one of them. At the same time, both are notoriously vague and ambiguous terms, often used idiosyncratically or indifferently. Both are notably analytical terms, originating in scholarly discourse, and are abstractions, denoting broad classes of social phenomena, a fundamental source of ambiguity in its own right.

Meanings and Genealogies of Sociality

Given its analytical nature, and the profusion of meanings attributed to the term sociality in anthropology – current usage suggests it is ‘capable of standing for anything and nothing’ (Long and Moore 2013, 2) – it is important to establish the understanding adopted in this special issue. Recognising the virtue of maintaining the concept’s comparative potential and amenability to accommodating the diversity of human sociality’s expressions, sociality is understood broadly as the process of relating to others through action. This conceptualisation does not stray far from the common vernacular and dictionary understanding of sociality as ‘the state or quality of being social’ (e.g. Dictionary.com), although rather than a quality, sociality is perceived here as an activity, the act of being social. Being social, moreover, is taken to mean not merely being sociable but denotes relating to other actors in a very broad sense, including through disjunctive interaction, disengagement, and association beyond intercourse sensu stricto through the transmission of influence. Sociality is about more than sociability – ‘sociable intercourse’ – and it is not simply about ‘how people interact’ (Miller 2019, 793), although sociability and interaction are central aspects of sociality (see also Anderson 2021, this issue). Fundamentally, sociality is ‘extended’ in the sense of transcending ongoing unmediated interaction between actors co-present in time and space (Remme and Sillander 2017). Much human interaction takes place at a distance and is asynchronous, and it may involve nonhuman actors.

Following social theorist Theodor Schatzki, sociality may be seen to include the full variety of instances of human coexistence, or the ‘hanging-together of human lives’ (1996, 14). In his view, human lives essentially hang together through practices – ‘nexuses of doings and sayings’ – and any practice harbors an extensive tissue of sociality encompassing chains of action, directedness towards others, physical connections among settings, and commonalities in as well as orchestrations of understandings, rules, teleoaffectivity, and settings. (1996, 192)
While this understanding is very broad, it observably retains a perception of sociality as social practice. In this sense, it is congruent with the currently dominant anthropological understanding of sociality as a ubiquitous social process or relational dynamic. Conversely, it diverges from so-called strong conceptions of sociality which delimit the phenomenon by restrictively associating it with intersubjectivity, collective intentionality, or some other putative collective foundation (e.g. Enfield and Levinson 2006; Gilbert 2000). The adopted understanding is deliberately ‘valence-free’ (Mason and Shan 2017) to avoid a biased perception of sociality as essentially pro-social and integrative, as exemplified by the Cambridge English Dictionary’s definition of sociality as ‘the fact of living together in an organised way as a society’.

The ambiguity of the term ‘sociality’ partly results from the fact that it is widely used in different disciplines across major scientific divisions. Besides being a relatively newfound and voguish term for variously delineated spheres of social life in socio-cultural anthropology, sociology, and posthumanist theory, it is a somewhat longer established staple in the study of human nature and animal behaviour in biological anthropology, ethology and other natural sciences. Over and beyond the numerous specific interpretations of the concept proliferating in these fields, this has made, in Michael Carrithers’s (2017) terms, for two divergent and broad ways of conceiving sociality: ‘ethnographic sociality’, varieties of social life in particular societies, and ‘human sociality’, the generic propensity of human beings to engage in complex social behaviour.

The understanding is further compounded by widespread cross-disciplinary use of the sister term sociability, with which sociality is often equated. Both terms are derivatives of ‘society’ and were first adopted in European languages from Latin in the seventeenth century, when they were mainly used in political philosophy and scholarly discourse to denote emergent forms of desirable civil and commercial association in early modern society (e.g. Gordon 1994, Chapter 2; Withington 2010, Chapter 4). Early academic interest in sociality was thus circumscribed and normative – being restricted to virtuous civil sociability in the public sphere – reflecting conceptions about ‘the social’ rooted in Western Enlightenment thought. While this heritage has continued to cast its spell on the broader study of generic human and ethnographic sociality that developed in the twentieth century, the study of the latter has been distinguished by a markedly distinct orientation from the start.

In sociocultural anthropology, which this special issue primarily concerns, ‘sociality’ gradually started to gain traction in the 1980s, becoming a ‘voice in the air’ (Bird-David 1994, 589) at around the end of the decade. This development largely reflected the influence of some authors who programmatically adopted it then, most notably Strathern, Ingold, Christina Toren, and Michael Carrithers. Of special importance was Strathern’s The Gender of the Gift (1988) and the 1989 Manchester University key debate ‘The concept of society is theoretically obsolete’, chaired by Ingold and in which Strathern and Toren argued for replacing ‘society’ with ‘sociality’ (Strathern et al. 1996). However, many other anthropologists had picked up the term even earlier in the 1980s (while before, few had used it, a notable exception being Roy Wagner 1974). There seems to have been a general momentum towards adopting it in this decade, stimulated by the ongoing practice and gender turns, and by accumulated frustration with the collectivist framework of Durkheim and British structural-functionalism, especially in certain regions where social relations are fluid and predominantly achieved
and a society and group-centred approach did not fit, such as in New Guinea, Amazonia, Southeast Asia, and Aboriginal Australia (e.g. Wagner 1974, 1988; Rosaldo 1980; Yeatman 1984; Myers 1986; Kendon 1988; Howell and Willis 1989; Overing 1989; McCallum 1990). ‘Sociality’, evoking connotations of activity and process, came in this connection to represent a congenial term and alternative framework for attending to the ongoing construction of social life through concrete activities and relations, particularly in domestic and informal social life eclipsed by anthropology’s collectivist legacy. In contradistinction to Enlightenment understandings of sociability, a main point with sociality in sociocultural anthropology has since been to break free of – as opposed to affirming – the association of social life with ‘society’ in a narrow sense, whether conceived as community, corporate groups, or the male-dominated public sphere.

These were all central concerns for Strathern, whose influence is often acknowledged as seminal for the subsequent interest in sociality and the currently prevailing processual understanding of sociality in anthropology (e.g. Long and Moore 2013, 4). Strathern’s sociality agenda was manifold; she used sociality to open up inquiry into social life on several fronts. Besides, like Ingold (1986, 1990, 1999), advancing sociality to replace ‘society’ and overcome the individual-society dichotomy, so as to foreground the relations through which social life is made, by sociality she sought a means to circumvent Western analytical frameworks to make visible the indigenous ways and constructs through which ethnographic subjects ‘present themselves’. In parallel, especially in The Gender of the Gift, she also opposed the equation of social life with collective life and the political domain, and she wanted to bring in persons, women and domestic kin relations though ‘sociality’.

Furthermore, Strathern aspired to uncover the ‘sociality within’ persons; she saw Melanesian persons as ‘social microcosms’, as the ‘plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them’ (1988, 13). This endeavour, which centred on her concept of the dividual person, suggests a pervasive presence of sociality in human lives, appearing not just through ever-present ongoing interaction practices, but in the guise of a continuous invisible backdrop of personal existence through formative past social influence. This perspective is expressly shared by Ingold who considers persons as the ‘embodiments of relationships’ enfolding within them the history of all previous interactions (1990, 222). A reminiscent view is held also by many theorists who recognise an ontogenetic foundation of sociality such as Toren (2013), who considers sociality as an aspect of everything humans do, and thus not a candidate for development into a distinct analytical field in its own right (see also Pina-Cabral 2014, 54; Anderson 2021).

**Sociality as Constitutive Force and Relational Dynamics**

This interest in the ‘sociality within’ concurs with a more general perception which is at the heart of the anthropological interest in sociality, according to which humans are social through and through, not in the sense of being sociable or companion-seeking, but by being thoroughly socially constituted. In this view, human affairs are fundamentally shaped by social life and conditions; what matters most for their outcome is people’s relationships, social encounters, and the influence of others. As suggested by Carrithers in his 2001 state-of-the-art-review of the concept, the move to sociality involves a ‘second approximation of human nature’, a paradigm shift which entails according primacy to
sociality over culture, the previous anthropological approximation (2001, 14501). As with ‘society’ and the Durkheimian legacy, objections to ‘culture’ and the Cartesian paradigm have been important incentives for the anthropological turn to sociality, but beyond mere discontent with the received views, this move has also been motivated by a perception of a foundational importance of sociality as a generative or formative force.

While for some anthropologists, like Carrithers (2001), this force of sociality derives from an internal, biologically rooted generic ‘capacity’ – in the sense of humans’ evolutionarily evolved ‘social intellect’ – for most, such as Strathern and Ingold, it arises most fundamentally from the dynamics of social relations unfolding between actors in ethnographic contexts. To Ingold, and essentially Strathern too, sociality resides neither in ‘a pre-programmed property of discrete individuals; nor ... in the force of the collectivity as opposed to individual natures’, but essentially in ‘relationships’ (Ingold 1990, 221). Over and beyond their differences (Ingold developed his conception of sociality in dialogue with biology and has mostly considered generic human or hunter-gatherer sociality, while Strathern has principally engaged in heuristic comparison of idealtype ethnographic socialities and their associated vernacular social theories), a conception of sociality as a relational dynamic unites them. In Strathern’s most famous definition, sociality is ‘the relational matrix that constitutes the life of persons’ (Strathern et al. 1996, 53), while Ingold glosses it as ‘the constitutive quality of relationships’ or ‘the generative potential of the relational field’ (1991, 372).

The fact that both authors emphasise sociality’s constitutive quality as a definitional property is telling of their interests, as of the more general interest in sociality in contemporary anthropology. For them, sociality merits attention above all as a process of becoming which ‘makes’ persons and relationships, an orientation which developed in conjunction with their critique of anthropology’s collectivist legacy. The interest in sociality as a constitutive force has notably entailed a preoccupation with sociality as ‘social influence’ – something that shapes other things (kinship, gender, personhood, etc.) – at the expense of thorough interest in its nature as interactive practice. In current usage, sociality is most often invoked – typically with little precision – as an explanation rather than an explanandum. In Strathern’s case, her interest in sociality has also been progressively overshadowed by her interest in ‘the relation’, pertaining both to interpersonal relations among ethnographic subjects and to the conceptual relations constituting anthropological knowledge practices (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 112–121; Lebner 2017, 15–19). Perhaps even more than to describe ethnographic realities, ‘sociality’ for Strathern has served to rethink anthropology, having centrally been used as ‘a solvent to loosen crystallised ways of thinking about gender, kinship, personhood and cultural difference’ (Carrithers 2017, 124).

In contrast to this orientation, this publication heeds Long’s and Moore’s (2013, 2) call for ‘defending the rightful place of human sociality as an object of enquiry’, not as a specific domain of human existence, or an ossified human universal, but as a heuristic gloss for the dynamic social processes whereby actors relate to other actors. This is to say that we consider it legitimate and worthwhile to use the term to attend to empirical phenomena, beyond anthropological self-reflection. While sociality as an ongoing relational process is an analytical term and an abstraction, and one may not encounter indigenous concepts corresponding to it (any more than to ‘society’), we suggest it may be productively used in this sense for the manifestly real processes whereby people ‘make
themselves socially’, like it was first used by Roy Wagner (1974) to get past a group-cum-society framework and so get closer to how social life operates.

While the interest in sociality as a relational process has been helpful for understanding how people and their life conditions are shaped, and served to free analysis from the twin conceptions of society as external force and the individual as preformed entity, it has recognisably come with problems of its own, one of which is the tendency to conceive of sociality as an overly generalised process of relationality. Strathern’s insistence on the importance of ‘the relation’, which is acknowledged as central to the ontological turn, has involved such a reductionism, spurring countermoves to think anthropology post-relationally (e.g. Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 110, 242). In her own words,

the more so-called ‘bounded’ notions of society and culture are held up to criticism, along with the systems and structures that were once their scaffold, the more relations, relationships, the relational, relationality, are evoked as prime movers (of sociality) in themselves. (Strathern 2014, 5)

Ingold’s notion of the relational field as an ‘implicate order’ (1990), and his focus on bodily dwelling in the world as a crucial generic attribute of sociality common to humans and nonhumans (e.g. Ingold 2000), observably have somewhat similar entailments.

This tendency is perhaps most pronounced in actor-network theory (e.g. Latour 2007) and branches of posthumanist and multispecies anthropology, which programatically extend notions of an expansive and symmetrical sociality to nonhuman actors and objects (e.g. Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Knorr-Cetina 1997; Tsing 2014). Often attracted to sociality’s implied attention to material activity or process as such – as a means of distantiating from ‘culture’ – some posthumanists even perceive of sociality as an entirely immanent self-constitutive process (e.g. Barad 2003). A strong emphasis on the materiality of sociality is shared by Ingold, who regards the importance of sociality as ‘given from the start, prior to the objectification of experience in cultural categories in the direct, perceptual involvement of fellow participants in a shared environment’ (2000, 167).

As a corrective to understandings of sociality as a reductive relationality, or self-constitutive force, many anthropologists have emphasised the importance of symbolic thought, ethical imaginaries, intersubjectivity, human virtuality, and other representational capacities of human subjects as distinctive to human sociality (e.g. Moore 2013; Enfield 2013; Pina-Cabral 2014; Toren 2013). Strathern’s (1988) perception of sociality as intrinsically connected with and shaped by vernacular social theories notably represents a distinct contribution of her own to this line of study. However important sociality may be as a ‘causal force in its own right’ (Carrithers 2017, 137) – due, perhaps most fundamentally, to the power of association through practice and the indeterminacy of multiparty associations – people are of course not determined by sociality alone in any restricted sense. Its influence is mediated by and plays out differently depending on individuals’ interpretations and cultural frames of understandings, which bear on both the motives and form of sociality. Importantly, human sociality has a ‘transcendental dimension’, an imaginary but effectively real order of essentialised roles, statuses, groups and religious conceptions overlying the ‘transactional dimension’ of direct encounter-based interchange between actors (Bloch 2008)
Cultural Values and Their Significance

While the present publication by and large follows the Strathernian-Ingoldian understanding of sociality as relational dynamic, it recognises the need to calibrate this perspective by attending to humans’ distinctive ideational and agentive capacities. This is done through values. By looking at how values shape sociality’s essentially contingent form and invest it with value-laden content, values are used to compensate for the relative inattention to the nature and constitution of human sociality which has accompanied the emphasis on its property as constitutive force. Values are treated as a means for unpacking the rationale of vernacular socialities, as a key to their varied realisation in the everyday, but also used for illuminating how sociality extends beyond the here-and-now of ongoing interaction and immediate experience. Sociality is inflected by ethics and politics, and thus cannot be reduced to a self-contained sphere of disinterested social intercourse conducted for its own sake, like sociability in Simmel’s (1949) understanding.

The special issue mainly considers cultural values, as opposed to semiotic and economic values, in David Graeber’s (2001) tripartite classification of anthropological conceptions of value. It adopts an understanding of values as notions of the ‘normatively desirable’, what people feel they ‘ought to want’ (Graeber 2001, 3, original italics). Cultural values are (to an extent) shared values: they are collectively recognised (if not uniformly held) conceptions which people in different ethnographic contexts think, voice, or feel. They are felicitous in the present context because of their broad scope and relative salience in everyday practices and ethnocultural interpretations. Cultural values include notions of the good, virtuous, legitimate and beautiful – ideals that are variously ethical, religious, political, and aesthetic. There are many kinds of cultural values: moral virtues, social mores, aesthetic ideals, localised notions of well-being, and state-imposed ideological precepts. The discussion of values in the collection is inspired by the recent revival of value theory, particularly the theories of its perhaps two most visible proponents, Joel Robbins and David Graeber. The contributors have found special value for Graeber’s (2001) action-approach whereby values represent the investment of action and Robbins’s (2018) understanding of how values are made compelling through ‘exemplars’. Unlike them, however, the interest in this collection is primarily in how values affect sociality, rather than in how they are generated.

Among the ideational constructs and resources that are available to and shape humans, values may be particularly useful for studying sociality because of the role they play in providing orientation to it. Sociality is multilaterally value-shaped and value-laden in that the nature of participation in and interpretation of sociality, as well as its form, reflects values. Arguably, the very plasticity or malleability of human sociality – its documented propensity to take diverse forms – calls for stabilisation through values that provide direction. As Nicolas Long and Henrietta Moore argue, ‘relationality in itself provides no directive force for how relations should be conceptualized, managed or experienced’ (2013, 14). Rather, ‘direction’ fundamentally derives from and requires deployment of the ‘ethical imagination’, the ‘forms and means through which individuals imagine relationships to themselves and to others’ (Moore 2011, 16).

Values may be seen, following sociologist Hans Joas, as ‘evaluative criteria’ that are used ‘to evaluate our preferences’; in this sense, values are more than preferences or
inclinations, and distinct from norms (2000, 16). Indeed, they matter largely because of a human tendency to evaluate things. In Webb Keane’s words, ‘humans are the kind of creatures that are prone to evaluate themselves, others, and their circumstances. They may act in defiance of those evaluations but are rarely just indifferent to them’ (2017, 6). Proponents of the ethical turn have drawn attention to how evaluation makes specifically ethical considerations pervasive in social and personal life (e.g. Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2015; Keane 2017). As James Laidlaw (2014) perceives, evaluation is a reflexive pursuit involving genuine freedom, ethical responsibility and self-formation which cannot be reduced to agency in practice theory’s sense of resisting structures and advancing one’s real interests. However, it appears that people also quite universally pursue different forms of status, recognition and resources, which further underscores the significance of humans’ evaluative nature (while perhaps disqualifying it as a restrictively ethical pursuit). Even though people may not be continually engaged in an all-embracing across-the-board pursuit of different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986), it would seem that this is one important aspect of what evaluation is about. Thomas Gibson’s (2021) contribution to this special issue suggests that an important way in which values impact subjectivities and socialities among the Makassar of South Sulawesi is precisely through the accumulation of symbolic capital. Moreover, an evaluative orientation is not only a product of people’s agendas or inner inclinations, but also of the nature of things and events outside selves as they appear in people’s experiences — including, importantly, of sociality itself — which often provide for what Keane (2017) calls ‘ethical affordances’, conditions that encourage evaluation.

Some of the ways in which values affect people through ethical affordances suggest that evaluation is not always incited or conducted through deliberate reflection. Even while values are ideas with an identifiable semantic core — entailing conceptual valuation of something — they are not always objectified and they should not be perceived as providing a well-organised mental map or detailed recipes for action, or as being easily transportable between and consistently imposed by intentional design over concrete contextual experiences. Indeed, this is not how they mainly work among several of the non-centralised Southeast Asian societies considered in this publication in which there is not or was not until recently a developed discourse on objectified values. Values instead often work more like what cognitive anthropologists consider as ‘schemas’ (D’Andrade 1995), and they have an important affective besides a cognitive-reflexive quality.

The manners in which values affect people through rituals in Isabell Herrmans’s (2021) contribution on Luangan ritual sociality, whether through effervescent experiences or tactile habitual appropriation, suggests that values also have a more sensuous register. The ‘ethical imagination’, which Long and Moore regard as central to human sociality, comprises, as they accentuate, ‘affective, fantasmic and highly embodied engagements’ (2013, 11) and it is clear that this pertains also to values. Philosopher Peter Carruthers observes that ‘our basic values aren’t stored categorically as structured representational states … rather, they are dispositions of our evaluative-appraisal mechanisms to respond to a certain class of inputs with a particular sort of affective response’ (2018, 558, n. 9). He argues that values exert influence largely by way of ‘affective valences’ that represent ‘non-conceptual representations of value’, which are acquired through previous experiences (somewhat like biographical experiences turn into
dispositions in Bourdieu’s habitus theory). In this sense, their mode of operation in social life resembles that attributed to affects (being similarly receptive to affordances), and a form of affective valuation may often be an initial and important manifestation of value-engagement. By the same means, being organised through their relation to patterned conditions experienced and re-experienced in practice and social situations, values notably effectively derive from sociality and life-world experiences. This is illustrated by Anu Lounela’s (2021) article in this issue, which shows how environmental conditions such as landscape degradation, and the physical work invested in production from the environment in the Central Kalimantan swamplands, form concrete contextually emergent affordances for valuation affecting the cogency of old and new social values and even the practical viability of the associated socialities.

An important reason why sociality is associated with valuation is because of its contingency on social form (see Anderson 2021 in this issue). Established social forms – such as gender relations, hierarchic constellations, and patterns or etiquettes of sociability – are probably always value-laden, and their design reflects performative processes of constitutive valuation. Social forms are fundamental parameters of sociality, just like the frames of social contexts and interaction studied by ethnomethodologists, whose configuration is similarly subject to valuation. As Sally Anderson (2015, 2021) argues, sociability – a practice which, perhaps counter-intuitively, is intensely politicised – relies on the maintenance of valued, but essentially labile, social forms, the reproduction of which requires continuous negotiation and authorisation involving values. As this suggests, ‘good’ sociality is something of a continuous achievement predicated on continual valuation. Often, as in Anderson’s (2021) case of Danish school sociability, this predicament amounts to a preoccupation with ‘good form’ in its own right which prominently involves aesthetic as much as ethical and ideological assessment.

Another central reason for the ongoing evaluation of sociality – and its interestedness – which entails a distinct type of ‘affordances’, is that interacting with others requires ‘distributive episodes’, or ‘proportionality’ (Corsín Jiménez 2008a, 2008b). The ‘stretching of the social’, the opening up of relational fields, whether through exchanges or association, involves making decisions and selections: about how much to invest, whom to address or include – about how much to ‘make available’ of oneself, or of society (2008b, 186, 194). This makes sociality subject to ‘apportioning’, to which value considerations are integral. Alberto Corsín Jiménez applies this argument primarily on the level of the state, in discussion of the political imagination and the distribution of well-being in society, although he extends it to Melanesian gift exchange and intergenerational relations, and suggests that a model of ‘proportional sociality’ can be used to reconfigure social thought. It would seem to apply as patently on the interpersonal as on the societal level across a broad scale of socialities. Sociality often involves a careful weighing of limited resources and time in response to sometimes virtually endless social demands, not all of which can be met. Relations may sometimes have to be ‘cut’, to employ Strathern’s (1996) terminology, to attribute sufficient value to those that count, or to obtain valued goods, for example, or simply to maintain autonomy or well-being compromised by the demands or threats that the relations involve. More than aberrations, recent ethnography has shown how ‘detachment’ (Candea et al. 2015), ‘disjunction’ (Amit 2015), ‘otherness’ (Stasch 2009) ‘anti-sociality’ (McCallum 2001), ‘mistrust’ (Carey 2017), and ‘subjection’ (Walker 2013) are normal features of sociality, thus challenging anthropology’s ‘fetish of
connectivity’ (Pedersen 2013). Similar qualities are illustrated in several articles in this issue, especially in Remme’s (2021) and Herrmans’s (2021) contributions, which highlight the value-guided importance of proportional sociality, and associated efforts at separation, withdrawal and contraction of sociality’s scope to counter its endemic uncontrollability.

The Political and Indexical Nature of Values

An important merit of the concept of cultural values is that it enables a more expansive and critical framework than ethics, one which brings in both ethics and politics and allows for the fact that people are influenced by values beyond their control and wants. Values are of course not a moral prerogative, the very diversity of cultural values – comprising aesthetic ideals, ideological precepts, and so on – already suggests that the motives for using them are broader. As Anderson’s (2021), Lounela’s (2021) and Gibson’s (2021) articles in this special issue bear out, the invocation of values reflects strategic interests and political schemes no less than principled ethical deliberation by autonomous subjects (see also Kapferer and Gold 2018). People do not just use values for their own purposes but also because they are affected by others’ use of them. Similarly, their existence is not always beneficial to everybody, people may use them to the detriment of others. Thus, as with sociality, a first step towards evaluating the influence of values is stripping them of their moralised cloak as intrinsically good and positive, and recognising their open-ended and morally indeterminate character.

Values have been unwarrantedly idealised as essentially positive phenomena and they have acquired a taken-for-granted status as properties of the ethical subject of late-modern individualism, a disposition which anyone is expected to have. However, as Jon Henrik Remme (2021) argues in his contribution, which contests run-of-the-mill anthropological interpretations, values are not necessarily integrative: their use does not always add up to social order. Like sociality, values do not exist simply as extensions of ‘society’. Rather, as Remme observes, they may affect sociality in unexpected and even uncontrollable ways and directions. In a sense, then, they exist more as elements of the multidetermined and multiconsequential flow that is sociality, being part of potentially open-ended social processes whose open-endedness they may reinforce as sociality becomes subjected to the complexly oriented agency of individuals and the multidirectional constraints and contingency of social contexts.

Appreciably, these qualities of sociality and values nonetheless often provoke counter-moves to achieve social order and stabilise sociality. Social values, in particular, normative ideals about social behaviour and relations, are often purposively deployed in this pursuit. Given sociality’s ‘reversibility’ (Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2007), its propensity to fail or turn on its head, to acquire precisely those traits which its manifest form serves to suppress – a topic brought up in many of the articles in this issue – values are often invoked for the purpose of coaxing people to adhere to ideal sociality. The contingency of sociality – its proneness to miscarriage through misuse, vicissitudes, unforeseen entanglements and ‘non-semiotic happenstances’ (Keane 1997, 31) – and the uncertainty of the many undertakings to which it is put into use thus often prompt value-use as a means for directing it, as with the value of ‘relationalism’ invoked in Luangan ritual sociality described in Isabell Herrmans’s (2021) article. Anu Lounela
(2021), in her contribution on sociality’s entanglement with environmental practices in southern Borneo, reveals how persisting traditional social values such as sharing and solidarity impede the impact of individualism and economic value accompanying new forms of livelihood.

Besides serving social ends and the common good, an important rationale for the invocation of values is that they represent means of authorisation by individuals. Their importance in this regard may be illuminated by cultural sociologist Ann Swidler’s (1986) toolbox metaphor of culture, which she used to dismiss the static notions of values and value-influence associated with functionalist sociological approaches. Values, like other aspects of culture, are to an important extent social resources that are flexibly drawn on in concrete situations by interested actors. In this usage, the invocation of values, like their application by institutions, often has more prominent ‘goal-rational’ or strategic as opposed to ‘value-rational’ rationales in Weber’s terms ([1922] 1978). They are means of persuasion and of obtaining legitimacy, recognition, statuses, and resources. In many situations, they may be actively used only after actions, to authorise decisions or to provide moral accountability. Even when individuals invoke values reflectively in their ‘personal’ projects of ethical self-cultivation, they retain an instrumental, as well as indexical, quality, being applied in actors’ agendas because of their relevance in their lives. Many of the contributions testify to such an indexical importance of values in and for sociality.

The commonly instrumental and indexical nature of value-use can be taken to complement Joel Robbins’s assertion that values exist in – or are brought to bear on – social life mainly in the form of ‘exemplars’, through persons or institutions that realise some value in its fullest form, a theory which is addressed by several contributors (see Remme 2021; Herrmans 2021; Anderson 2021). Robbins (2018) develops this understanding of values in an attempt to find a solution to the widely accepted critique of the notion of values as shared. Not to be taken for granted, he suggests that values come to be shared and internalised only through their expressive evocation in concrete vivid instantiations in social life. Being mainly concerned with why values have appeal, however, Robbins focuses mostly on one side of the coin, as it were, on how values are taught and learned.

Values are of course put to use also after exemplary demonstration; moreover, exemplary influence is only one way whereby they are socially transmitted, since they are encouraged also through more subtle processes, as suggested by the notions of affordances and affective valences, or ‘habitation’, as illuminated in Herrmans’s (2021) contribution. Besides in rhetorical use or exceptionally vivid ideal manifestations, then, another answer to Robbins’s question ‘Where in the world are values?’ (2018) suggested by the contributors to this collection is that they exist in ongoing instances of ordinary sociality as they are put to use by actors. Their principal domicile is emphatically social. They lead a social life, being invoked in sociality, directly or ultimately deriving from influence effected through social interaction and receiving their cogency from resonance – and at times dissonance – with experienced social conditions. Values may be employed in social contexts in pragmatic, interested, ideological, or visionary pursuits in processes of authorisation; in ethical reflection by individuals as means of self-authorisation; and often in unintentional or unforeseen ways as a result of the intended influence or side-effects of value use by others, or because of the ‘ethical affordances’ provided by social or material contexts. While, as stressed in the nineteenth-century German idealistic
philosophy in which the originally analytical notion of values developed (Joas 2000, 20–21; Robbins 2018, 176), values are ideals – which describe the ideal world and how things ought to be, as opposed to facts, or things as they are – they pertain also to real-world matters: how to live one’s life, live with others, and relate to the environing world and the world hereafter. They index life conditions, and they have a concrete bearing on and receive their purport from people’s lives and existential affairs, their management of social relations, and the complexly organised interpersonal and collective political and economic affairs in which people everywhere find themselves inescapably entangled.

Sociality as a Multivalent and Complexly Value-Laden Practice

The articles in this special issue consider how sociality is valued and shaped by cultural values through five empirical case studies. The afterword by Harry Walker (2021) reflects on the implications of the studies for how values figure in social life. The contributors were contacted on the basis of previous theoretical interests in sociality or values and selected on the basis of topical relevance from participants in a University of Helsinki workshop arranged in May 2018 and a panel at the annual conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth held in Oxford in September 2018. Four of the contributions consider small-scale Southeast Asian societies (one from the Philippines and three from Indonesia), which reflects an early focus on ‘loosely structured’ societies of the kind in which the sociality term was first adopted in the 1980s. Valuable input was provided also by conference contributions discussing other geographical regions, but for various reasons, only Anderson’s article on Denmark could be included in the present collection.1

While the geographical distribution of the contributions cannot justify universalising claims about the nature of sociality and values, each of the articles provides particular insights about linkages between sociality and values and how they appear in or impact different social contexts (including education, environmental relations, rituals, apprenticeship, and murder). The representational bias of the contributions also has advantages, bringing to the fore certain similarities whose consideration runs through the collection as central themes. For example, except for the hierarchic Makassar people discussed by Gibson, all studies, including Anderson’s, are set in societies in which egalitarianism and personal autonomy are prominent values. Besides sociality itself, prominent among the values discussed in the contributions are social values (including solidarity, relationalism, sociableness, sharing, restraint, rank, and autonomy), a condition which testifies to the political importance of values, and the qualified nature of sociality.

A central point raised in the articles is that sociality is interested and ambiguously valued. They show that it is a vital means for acquiring various resources, and that it does not equate with a pro-social or ethical orientation; it is subject to various strategic and pragmatic aspirations which, similarly to such widely valued conditions as intimacy and relatedness, may constrain and disempower actors and confer a ‘dark side’ on sociality (Geschiere 2013). While valued and crucial for human well-being, sociality is not unambiguously positive or rewarding for all people in all circumstances. It entails risks and entanglements, and relinquishing control through subjection to others’ interests and the vagaries of worldly events and conditions. This confers a dynamic quality to sociality, which as the contributions show, often fluctuates between states of extension and
contraction, and engagement and disengagement. Closely associated with this dynamic is a cultural prominence of the dialectically conjoined social values of autonomy and solidarity, which is present in both the Southeast Asian societies and Europe, and presumably a widespread global occurrence (e.g. Fajans 2006; Jackson 2012). A related observation is that sociality is extended, and embedded within larger structures beyond itself, through relations and connections that extend beyond consociates to the physical environment, material objects, nonhuman actors and extralocal agencies. It is shaped by history, cultural imaginaries, material conditions and other people and places. Sociality is in a sense always fraught with a certain différence; its meaning, motivation and import is not intrinsic to itself.

Similarly, the contributions bear out that values are not always ethical and integrative and do not always work to create social order or beneficial conditions for everyone even as they are important means for pursuing a good or ethical life for individuals and for creating social cohesion and concordance. They illustrate that values operate in multiple distinct ways and to different effects, suggesting that they form sources of both direction and contingency in sociality. The capacity for self-reflection and agency of individuals means that their import does not come down to either the top-down functional rationale of reproducing ‘society’, or to reflexive individuals’ quest for ethical coherence or self-realisation. At the same time, the contributions show that it is mainly through their concrete indexical significance in sociality that values become important, whether through their influence as authoritative exemplars; their actualisation prompted by situations imposing ethical affordances; or through their ethical or interested uses in authorising processes. They also demonstrate that their resonance with concrete material conditions is central: that their use, potential relevance and cogency significantly depends on environmental conditions, as Lounela shows, and societal infrastructures and human artefacts, as shown in Gibson’s case.

The Contributions

In her article on endosocial Danish primary school classes, Sally Anderson considers the dialectic between ‘being sociable’ and ‘being oneself’, both central qualities of the sociality expected in schools. She reveals how sociality ambiguously forms a source of heteronomy and autonomy, illuminating how the values of self-direction and communality are pedagogical resources for socialisation aimed at inculcating exemplary extra-domestic sociality concordant with idealised Scandinavian conceptions of civil society, but also how children play on the tensions and ambiguities between these conflicting values in their tactical attempts to carve out spaces for agency and self-expression in the school environment. While critical of the theoretical understanding of sociality as a process, which has involved a tendency to reinstate it as a reified abstraction, Anderson presents a practice-based view of sociality and values, showing how the form of sociality is dependent on continuous reproduction and how values are indexical and lodged in everyday socialities. In her understanding, value, just like sociality’s ‘form’, is not ‘prior to action’ but ‘a potential in action’.

In a very different setting, Anu Lounela discusses how the dialectically conjoined values of solidarity and autonomy operate in variable tension and conjunction in Ngaju Dayak sociality in the increasingly degraded swamp forests of southern Borneo.
The article sketches a gradual but incomplete transition from kinship-based to corporate socialities which is associated with non-lineal shifts in value orientations. Illustrating the utility of sociality as a means for investigating the plurality of human relationships as they cross bounded human groups and societies as well as analytical domains, Lounela describes the messy articulations of local sociality and values with environmental practices interlinked with relations with state and corporate actors and nonhuman beings. Setting the question of the relationship between sociality and values in a broader perspective, she argues that the production of both values and social relations is indivisible from the production of livelihood. In the current situation, environmental degradation not only undermines the conditions for making a livelihood and associated sociality practices but even sets limits on imagining the ‘good life’.

Isabell Herrmans considers the principles of valuation and conditions of efficacy of the ritual sociality of a group of shifting cultivators of Indonesian Borneo. Instances of performative action, Luangan rituals instantiate a multilateral temporary intensification of sociality through encounters, intercourse, collective activities, cooperation, and formal exchanges among human and nonhuman participants. Herrmans explores how this complexly orchestrated sociality is given value by being imbued by the paramount Luangan value of relationalism and by being enlisted in the value-charged pursuit of achieving well-being. Yet, she reveals, it is also qualified, like the outcomes of rituals, by worldly contingency, human finitude, the unknowability of spirits, and sociality’s own uncontrollability and potential for reversibility. She describes how this motivates a proportional sociality and dialectic between engagement and detachment with spirits, which are paralleled by similar tendencies in interaction between humans outside rituals. The article shows that the cogency of values derives from both their exemplary demonstration through sensate actualisation in rituals and their indexical importance for well-being.

Through analysis of a murder of a foreign aid worker among the Ifugao in the Philippines, Jon Henrik Remme challenges conceptions of sociality and values as intrinsically integrative and orderly. His article highlights how sociality is marked by uncontrollability, and dynamic – mitigating, but risky – extensions and contractions. Complex connections extended to nonhuman spirits and domestic animals, beyond the local setting to lowlanders and the state, and back in time to ancestors, may cause people to become unwillingly entangled in complex developments beyond their control. This indeterminacy is exacerbated by the use of values which are inherently unstable due to their domicile in situated practices and their association with ‘shadow values’ to which they are liable of reverting. Remme argues that the values informing sociality, illustrated principally by ‘autonomy’ and ‘tradition’, are much of the time only partially realised and exist in unstable configurations, as a result of which they may work in unforeseen ways. For this reason, he proposes that ‘un-exemplary’ actions reveal as much about the existence of values in the social world as their manifestations as exemplars.

Thomas Gibson shows how sociality in one place may be conducted in multiple modes and be informed by different sets of cultural values. Due to a complex history of maritime interactions, the lives of the population of a Makassar village in southern Sulawesi, Indonesia are shaped by three distinct ‘symbolic complexes’ – Austronesian, Muslim and Modernist – all of which are associated with distinct socialities and values, yet accommodate each other and are potentially operative simultaneously, providing alternative models for how to live with others. The contribution demonstrates the importance of
extended sociality with nonhuman beings and of extended human connections transcending time and space as constitutive of local social life. It also illustrates extended sociality in Schatzki’s sense (1996) through sociality’s embeddedness in the networks of conceptual schemes, embodied skills, social practices, and material objects that make up the distinct symbolic complexes. The article suggests that the shape of values and socialities importantly reflects their configuration within these larger conceptual-material-social aggregates.

Taken together, the articles suggest a mutual entwinement of sociality and values which is multimodal and makes the significance of both phenomena for actors complex. Thereby, the articles challenge ideological preconceptions of sociality and values, which are often propounded in an off-handed manner as universal ethical mores, reflecting their insufficiently acknowledged articulations with individualist ideology, capitalism, bourgeois public culture, and European notions of civil society (cf. Graeber 2013; Scobey 1992). Through adoption of a broad valence-free concept of sociality as open-ended practice and process, and a conception of cultural values as multipurpose ‘evaluative criteria’, the collection has presented a model for the unprejudiced study of these analytical concepts as they appear through their contingent empirical manifestations on the ground.

Note
1. Thanks are due to Olivia Barnett-Naghshineh, Matti Eräsaaari, Monica Heintz, Iza Kavedžija, and Tuomas Tammisto for valuable conference contributions and comments.

Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding
The work on this article and the special issue was enabled by funding from the Academy of Finland for the research project Contested Valued in Indonesia (Grant Number 1276848).

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