IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER: TERTIARY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PERSONAL INTEREST, TASK VALUE, AND RELEVANCE

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AIM

- The **construct of relevance suffers from lack of conceptual clarity** and is often conceptualized as either *personal interest* or *task value*
- Because **students** are often the **target of relevance interventions**, this study inquired with students to capture **their understanding** of the interrelation between personal interest, task value, and relevance, as well as their definitions

BACKGROUND

- **Relevance regained popularity as a motivational construct** among educational, developmental, and social psychologists (Albrecht & Karabenick, 2018)
- **Hypothesis** that heightening students' perceptions of relevance in academic work they are assigned should translate into better learning and performance **has not been consistently empirically upheld** (Alexander, 2018)
- **Unclear how relevance is being conceptualized or subsequently operationalized** by those engaged in such research (Albrecht & Karabenick, 2018); importance of relevance in many studies "comes from what [relevance] instigates rather than what it inherently represents" (Alexander, 2018, p. 127)
- Relevance was variably positioned within Expectancy-Value Theory (Priniski et al., 2018; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), Self-Determination Theory (Vansteenkiste et al., 2018), or examined in conjunction with interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2006) Consequently, relevance was variably conceptualized by these researchers from a perspective of task value or personal interest, accordingly
- Relevance/motivation *literature offers various views on interrelation* personal interest, task value, and relevance, with conceptualizations of **relevance as more externally oriented** (i.e., task value), **internally oriented** (i.e., personal interest), as **neither or both**
- **We must question the construct validity of relevance: is it a meta-construct?**
- **No conceptual clarity** among researchers at forefront; important to **assess students' conceptualization** as they are frequently the target of relevance interventions to (1) devise valid measures; (2) develop effective interventions; (3) link perceptions of relevance to academic performance

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. (a) How do Dutch and American students perceive the interrelation of personal interest, task value, and relevance, and (b) are they able to justify that selection and give a personal example? (c) Do these responses differ between samples?
2. How do tertiary students define personal interest, task value, and relevance? (b) Do these responses differ between samples?

METHODS

- **Participants**: $n = 183$, 104 (64% female, 92% native) from mid-Atlantic American university with a lecture-based curriculum, 79 (76% female, 13% native) from urban Dutch university with a problem-based learning (PBL) curriculum
- **Material**: depicted interrelations (A-F) derived from various theoretical views
- **Procedure**: students were asked to (1) choose any of the six theory-driven *Conceptualizations of Relevance* (see middle panel) and justify and exemplify their choice; and (2) define each of the three terms
- **Analysis**: responses were analyzed using typological keyword analysis with high inter-rater reliability (89.7%, $\kappa = .82$); simple cross-tabs and Chi-square of independence for frequency of selection of representations (expected = n/k)

## CONCEPTUALIZATION OF RELEVANCE TASK

Part I: Representation

In the first task, you will be shown six (6) possible representations of the interrelation of **relevance (R)**, **task value (V)**, and **personal interest (I)**, which are depicted as follows:

Relevance (R) = [R]

Task value (V) = [V]
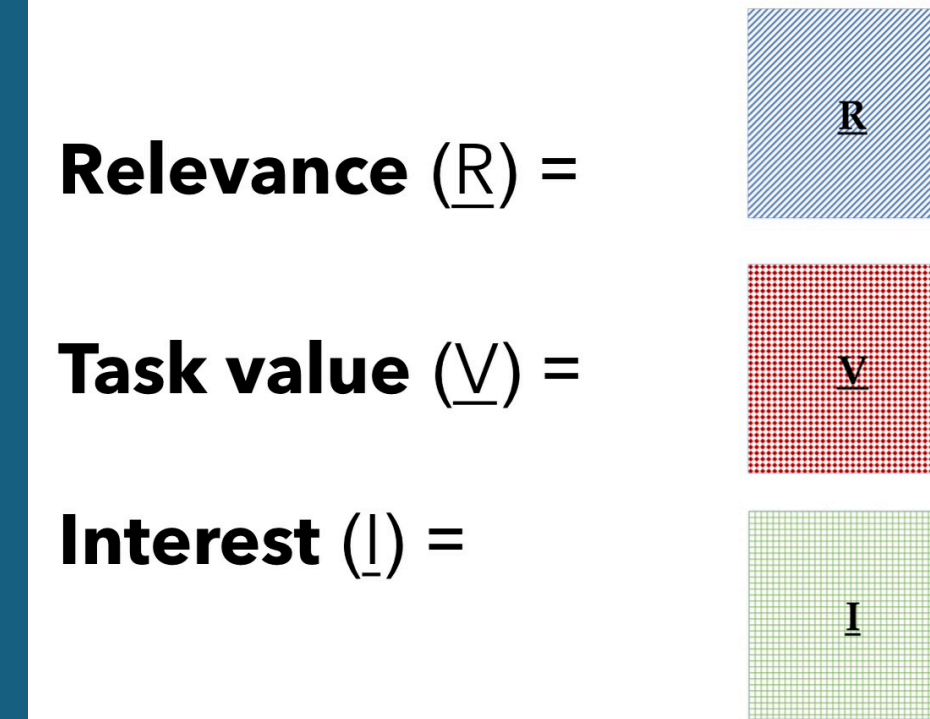
Interest (I) = [I]

DIRECTIONS: Please select the depiction that best represents how you think **relevance (R)**, **task value (V)**, and **interest (I)** are interrelated.
Note: if your depiction is not among the six, select the one that is closest to your idea.
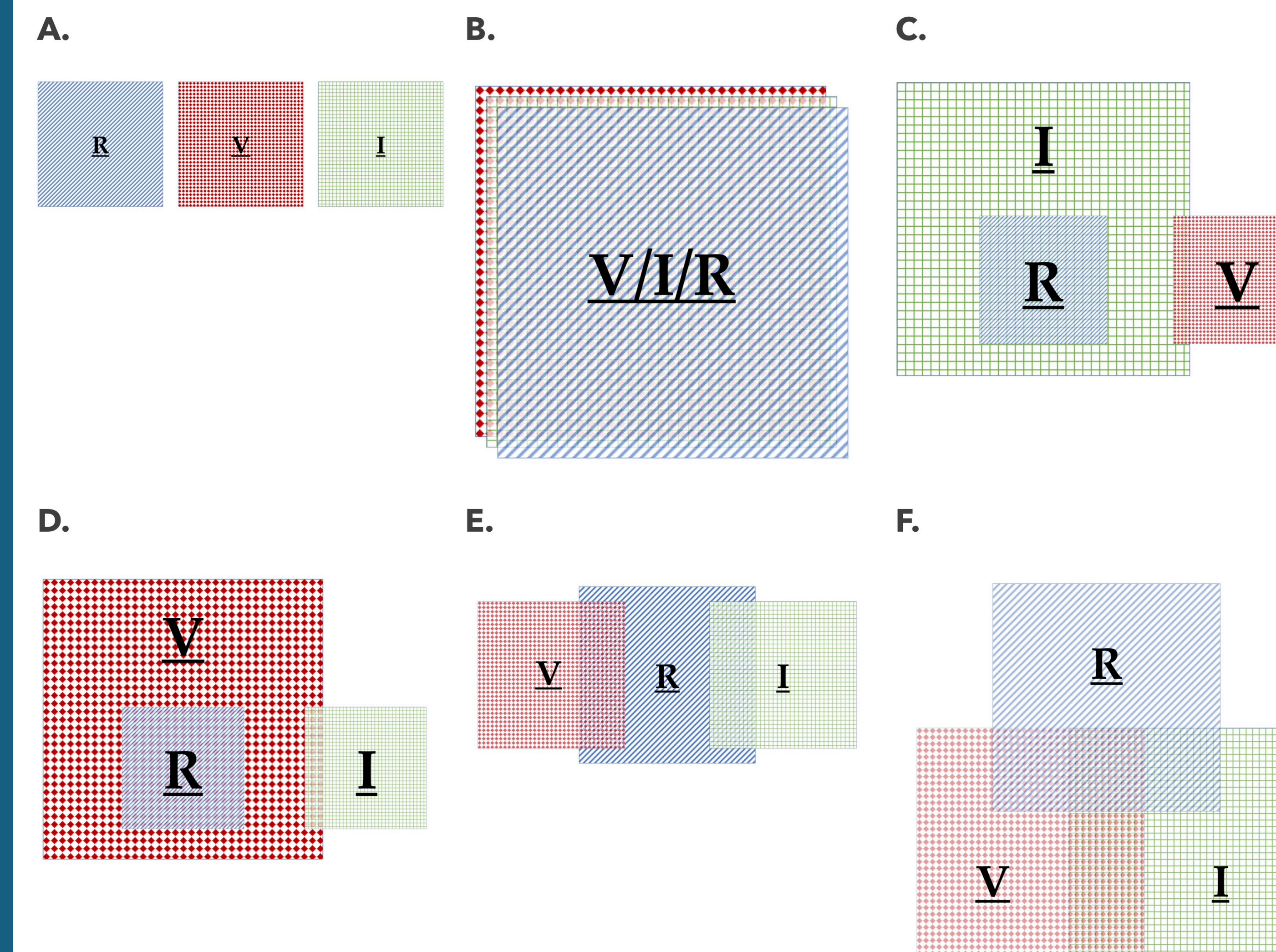
Part II: Justification

DIRECTIONS: Please justify your choice.

Explain why your choice above is the best representation of the interrelation of **relevance (R)**, **task value (V)**, and **interest (I)**.

If your ideal representation was not depicted, explain how you would represent the interrelation and how that is different from your selection.

Use a situation from your everyday life to support your choice of representation.

Part III: Definition

DIRECTIONS: Please provide your personal definition of each of the following terms. That is, what do each of these terms mean to you?

RELEVANCE

TASK VALUE

PERSONAL INTEREST

JUSTIFICATION OF REPRESENTATIONS

- Students had a **clear preference for some** representations over others [χ^2 (5, $n = 183$) = 261.75, $p < .001$]

 - Conceptually **most flexible orientation (F)** was most popular, most rigid (A) was least popular
    - **Suggests conceptualization of relevance as either personal interest or task value might be too restrictive**
  - *Relevance as central* chosen more often by Dutch students; moderately well justified
    - Suggests that relevance can be conceptualized as both personal interest or task value but that these last two constructs remain distinct
  - Few ($n = 6$) students were unable to justify; Americans > Dutch students
  - 37 students recommended changes to representation, mostly more overlap or depiction of process/causality

Legend:
- A: Distinct
- B: Indistinguishable
- C: As Interest
- D: As Task Value
- E: Central
- F: Overlapping
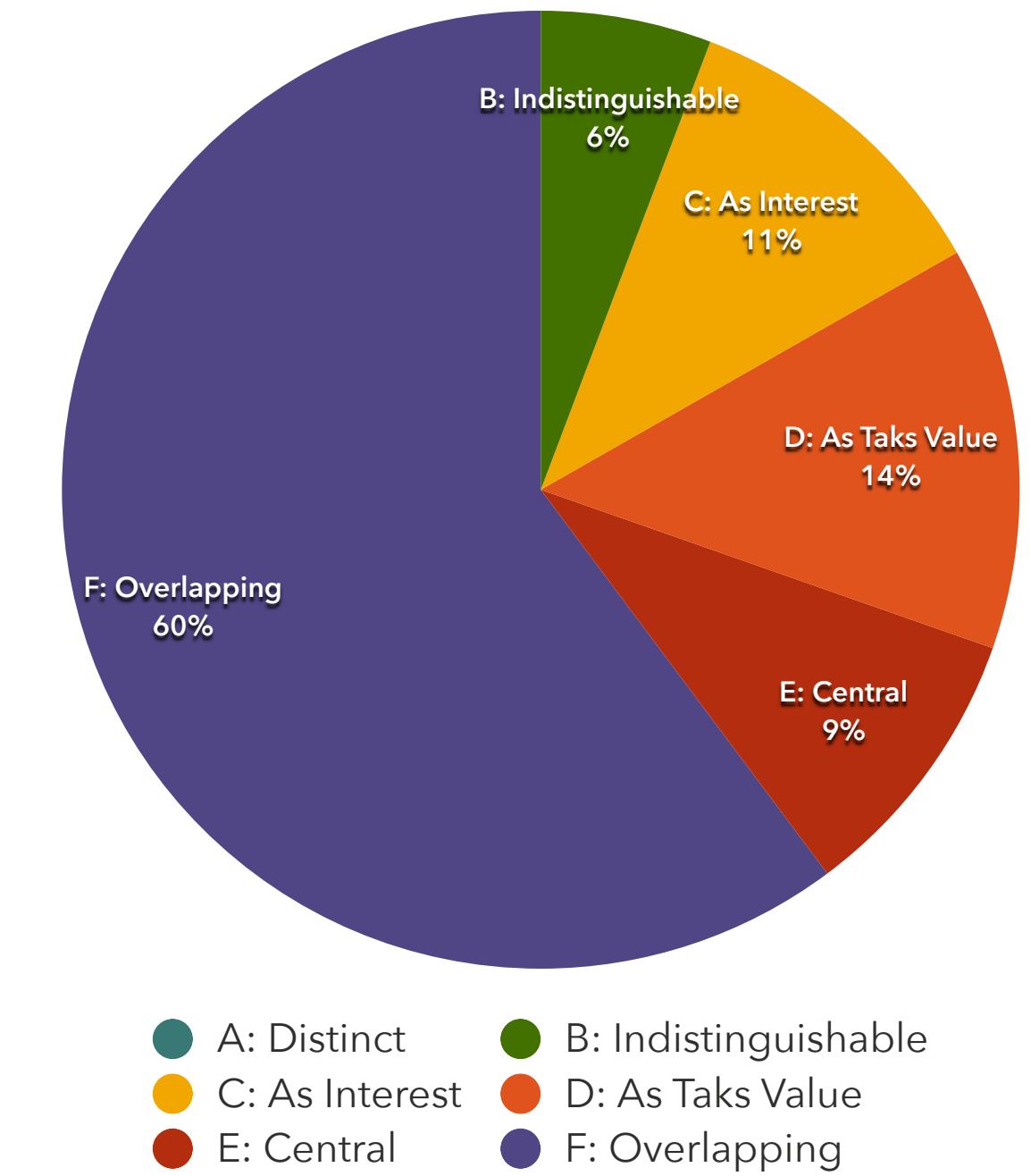
DEFINITION OF CONSTRUCTS

Frequently used words in definitions of personal interest, task value, and relevance

Interest	n	%	Task Value	n	%	Relevance	n	%
USA								
Enjoyment	16	15.4	Importance	38	36.5	Importance	31	29.8
Topic	14	13.5	Value	10	9.6	Relation	26	25.0
Wanting	13	12.5	Completing	9	8.7	Connection	23	22.1
Task	13	12.5	Benefit	9	8.7	Life	16	15.4
Motivation	13	12.5	Worth	8	7.7	Topic	12	11.5
Learning	13	12.5	Goal	8	7.7	Pertinence	12	11.5
Curiosity	11	10.6	*Life*	7	6.7	*Applicability*	11	10.6
Subject	8	7.7	Gain	6	5.8	Information	8	7.7
Personal	8	7.7	Usefulness	5	4.8	*Interest*	6	5.8
Passion	6	5.8	Assignment	5	4.8	Close	6	5.8
NL								
Liking	23	29.1	Importance	23	29.1	Importance	29	36.7
Learning	9	11.4	Usefulness	19	24.1	*Usefulness*	14	17.7
Curiosity	8	10.1	Worth	11	11.4	Relation	14	17.7
Task	7	8.9	Value	9	11.4	*Task*	8	10.1
Subject	6	7.6	Personal	5	6.3	Goal	6	7.6
Enjoyment	6	7.6	Benefit	4	5.1	Life	6	7.6
Personal	6	7.6	Subjective	3	3.8	Connection	5	6.3
Engagement	6	7.6	*Relevance*	3	3.8	*Value*	4	5.1
Motivation	5	6.3	Motivation	3	3.8	Situation	4	5.1
Intrigue	4	5.1	Interest	3	3.8	Subject	4	5.1

Note. Relative percentages indicate the proportion of participants employing that word.

- **Personal interest**: mostly internally oriented, occasionally externally oriented
- **Task Value**: mostly pragmatic/ external, especially by Americans; less richly described
- **Relevance**: both internally and internally oriented; Americans more external, Dutch more internal; some students both
- Generally, **the interrelation between constructs is reflected in definitions for the terms**
  - Some unique words suggest conceptual distinctiveness

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

- **First study to explicitly examine students' conceptualizations of personal interest, task value, and relevance**
- Conceptualizations of relevance as either internally oriented (i.e., personal interest) or externally oriented (i.e., task value) were **considered too narrow** by the recipients of relevance interventions (i.e., students)
  - However, **constructs retain conceptual uniqueness**; worth exploring
- **Future research** should use methods that **explore/test the validity of relevance as a meta-construct**
  - **In line with earlier research** that analyzed essays on students' relevant coursework to explore relevance using MDS (Hartwell & Kaplan, 2018)
  - Confirmatory factor analysis could **test whether measures of relevance are consistent with the nature of the construct as suggested here** (as both internally and externally oriented)