Value transmission in the family: do adolescents accept the values their parents want to transmit?

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This study focused on value transmission in the family and assessed adolescents’ acceptance of the values their parents want to transmit to them (socialisation values), identifying some factors that may affect the level of acceptance. Specifically, actual value agreement between parents, parental agreement as perceived by adolescents, parent–child closeness and promotion of child’s volitional functioning, were considered as predictors. Participants were 381 family triads (father, mother and adolescent child) from northern Italy; the adolescents (46.2% male) were all high-school students from 15 to 19 years of age. Both parents and their children filled out self-report questionnaires. Findings showed a moderate level of acceptance in families, suggesting the presence of similarities as well as differences between parents’ socialisation values and adolescents’ personal values. All the predictors considered except parents’ actual agreement, were found to be significantly and positively related to acceptance. Implications for moral development are discussed and suggestions for education and future research are provided.

Introduction

How adolescents formulate their own value system and how parents may transmit values, affecting their children’s moral development, are topics of great interest among researchers, educators and policymakers. Morality, which refers to both ‘doing good’ and ‘not doing bad’, implies autonomous action carried out in the service of internally held values (Hartup & Van Lieshout, 1995).

Value transmission from parents to adolescent children is often considered the hallmark of successful socialisation, which involves adolescents’ voluntary ‘acceptance of values, standards and customs (…) to function in an adaptive way in the larger social
context’ (Grusec & Davidov, 2007, p. 284). Indeed, this voluntary acceptance would allow self-regulated action in accordance with the expectations of others.

The process by which values are acquired has been widely discussed but not extensively researched, particularly in families with adolescents. Adolescence is a very important phase for studying value transmission because it is the time of identity development, characterised by tension between an increasing need for autonomy and an increasing conformity to societal expectations, with the latter being essential for acquiring models of appropriate behaviour. Thus, children become very vulnerable to value messages during adolescence, more than at any previous time in childhood (Padilla-Walker, 2007).

Early research on transmission in adolescence was guided by a deterministic perspective, whereby adolescents’ acquisition of values was the result of the direct, exclusive and unidirectional action and practices of parents. The parent (the ‘source’) provided the child (the ‘recipient’) samples of completed knowledge, and the recipient of such messages was expected to passively accept these as given: any changes in transmitted knowledge were explained as errors in the process.

This conception has recently been criticised for reducing transmission to an automatic copying process (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007). Transmission is now conceptualised as an interactive process in which parents and children are assumed to have inherent capacities for initiating action, making sense of their interactions with each other and making choices (Kuczynski & Navara, 2006; Roest et al., 2010). Given its interactive nature, transmission may produce intergenerational change as well as intergenerational similarity: change is not necessarily an error but a possible result.

Intergenerational differences may come from choices that parents make regarding which values they will transmit and from choices that children make about accepting or rejecting those values. This has been clearly shown in Grusec and Goodnow’s (1994) model of value acquisition, which is one of the few empirically tested models emphasising the constructive contribution of both parents and adolescents.

According to this model, transmission may involve more than a simple reproduction of parents’ personal values in their children. Parents may acknowledge the need to differentiate between what is good for them and what may be good for their children. The values parents would most like to see in their children—what literature calls ‘socialisation values’—are not necessarily identical to parents’ personal values. Although some studies (e.g., Knafo & Schwartz, 2001) revealed a high correlation between the values parents want for themselves and for their children (Pearson correlation from .60 to .80), there was not perfect concordance. Thus, it is the measured congruence between parents’ socialisation values and children’s personal values, rather than between parents’ personal values and those of their children, that reflects the success of intended socialisation.

Beyond parents’ goals, transmission ‘involves both the child’s perception of the parents’ position and the child’s acceptance or rejection of what is perceived to be the parents’ viewpoint’ (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994, p. 4). In other words, transmission is conceptualised as a two-step process: first, children perceive, either
accurately or inaccurately, the values their parents want them to endorse; second, children may choose to accept or to reject the values they perceive. Accuracy of perception and acceptance predict parent–child value congruence (e.g., Knafo & Schwartz, 2009).

A number of studies have examined the factors that may influence the accuracy with which children perceive parental values. Getting the child’s attention, clarity and redundancy of the parents’ messages are positively related to accuracy (Okagaki & Bevis, 1999; Knafo & Schwartz, 2003). On the other hand, little is known about factors that affect children’s acceptance.

Grusec and Goodnow (1994) proposed two groups of variables that are relevant to children’s acceptance, according to their impact on: (a) children’s motivation and (b) the degree to which children see a value as self-generated. The first group has to do with the extent to which children are motivated to accept parental values: agreement between parents, warmth and closeness between parents and their children are important contributors. More generally, a positive relationship quality (low conflict and high closeness) should increase children’s willingness to comply with parental wishes, because it promotes children’s desire to identify with parents as well as children’s desire for compliance. The second group concerns variables such as the minimisation of threats to autonomy that may lead to children’s belief that values are self-generated. Attributions of intrinsic motivations would promote a higher level of children’s openness to and acceptance of parental messages since these messages are not perceived as being ‘threatening’ to autonomy. In this way, children are able to satisfy two important needs: conformity to others’ expectations and autonomy.

In addition to these factors, studies indicating that boys and girls are socialised in different ways suggest that children’s gender may play a role in acceptance. On the one hand, girls, rather than boys, are asked to give more importance to values focusing on relationships, such as care-giving, satisfying the needs of intimate others and conforming to others’ expectations. On the other hand, boys rather than girls are encouraged to give more importance to values related to agency, such as a sense of accomplishment and social power. Consistent with these gender differences, girls more than boys tend to adopt the viewpoint of significant others, scoring higher on measures of perspective-taking (Zentner & Renaud, 2007).

The study

In the light of the evidence and reasoning summarised above, this study focused on the transmission of values in families with adolescents, empirically investigating a number of predictors of adolescents’ acceptance of perceived parental socialisation values.

Following Schwartz’s theory (1992), 10 motivationally distinct value types were considered:

- power (social status, dominance over people and resources);
- achievement (personal success according to social standards);
 hedonism (pleasure or sensuous gratification);
● stimulation (excitement, challenge and novelty);
● self-direction (independence of thought and action);
● universalism (understanding, tolerance and concern for the welfare of all people and nature);
● benevolence (preserving and enhancing the welfare of people to whom one is close);
● tradition (respect and commitment to cultural or religious customs and ideas);
● conformity (restraint of actions and impulses that may harm others or violate social expectations);
● security (safety and stability of society, relationships and self).

These value types can be organised along two bipolar higher-order dimensions: openness to change values (hedonism, stimulation and self-direction) vs. conservation values (tradition, conformity and security) and self-enhancement (power and achievement) vs. self-transcendence values (universalism and benevolence).

The specific aim of this study was twofold:

(1) To examine the extent to which adolescents accept the values their parents want to transmit to them, with attention to gender differences. Because conformity with others’ expectations is more encouraged in girls than in boys, we hypothesised greater endorsement of parental values in female adolescents than in male adolescents.

(2) To investigate the effects of some factors on adolescents’ acceptance of parental values. As proposed by Grusec and Goodnow (1994), these factors were grouped into two sets:
   (a) factors impacting on children’s motivation to attend to parental messages;
   (b) factors affecting the degree to which children see values as self-generated.

(a) Children’s motivation to attend to parental messages

Actual and perceived value agreement between parents. Most value transmission studies have examined parents as if they were a unity, not differentiating between paternal and maternal influence. However, as suggested by Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman (1981), treating parents as a unity overlooks a potential source of variation in accepting represented by the congruity of fathers’ and mothers’ values. Our expectation was that parental agreement would support children’s motivation to attend to parental values: when parents actually agree, their value messages are clearer; and where children perceive their parents as having the same values, children are likely to find it easier to identify with them.

Closeness. According to Aron and his colleagues (1992), closeness is defined as a sense of union of child and parent. In a close relationship, individuals may perceive
the self as including resources, perspectives and characteristics of the other. Thus, we expected that parent–child closeness would enhance children’s motivation to attend to and accept parental values.

(b) Degree to which children see values as self-generated

Parents’ promotion of their child’s volitional functioning. The promotion of volitional functioning is a construct that was elaborated within Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). It is a characteristic of parents who empathise with their children’s perspective, who provide choices for their children whenever possible and who help their offspring to explore and act upon personal values and interests. To foster volitional functioning, a parent must communicate the relevance and meaning of the introduced values so that the child can grasp the importance of these values and internalise them as his or her own (Soenens et al., 2007). We expected a positive relation between promotion of child’s volitional functioning and acceptance of parental values, since children may consider these values inherently worthy.

In order to determine if different predictors were more or less salient for boys than for girls, we examined whether the associations among actual and perceived value agreement between parents, closeness, parents’ promotion of volitional functioning and adolescents’ acceptance were moderated by child gender.

Method

Participants

Participants were 381 family triads (father, mother and adolescent child) from northern Italy. In total, the sample was composed of 1143 subjects.

Adolescents (46.2% male, 53.8% female) were all high-school students between 15 and 19 years of age (M=17.01, SD=1.27). In keeping with the family structure, a large majority of these adolescents (95.3%) lived in two-biological parent families; a minority lived only with their mother (3.9%) or with their father (.8%). While 14% were only children, 86% had one or more brothers or sisters (M=1.35, SD=.66).

Fathers and mothers had a mean age of 49.5 years (SD=5.32) and 46.3 years (SD=4.76) respectively. Ninety-five percent of parents were married (on average, for 21.9 years), 3.7% were separated and 1.3% of parents were unmarried but living together. Regarding parents’ education level: 41.7% of fathers and 36.1% of mothers had a low educational level (equal to, or less than eight years of education); 43.5% of fathers and 53.1% of mothers had a medium educational level and 14.8% of fathers and 10.8% of mothers had a high level of education (more than 13 years of education).

With respect to socio-economic status (SES), 30.3% of families were classified as upper, 61.0% middle and 8.7% lower socio-economic status.¹
Procedure

Families were recruited with the collaboration of 15 public and private high schools located in two large cities in northern Italy (Milan and Treviso) and were informed by letter about the main objectives of the research. They were not randomly selected. The participation of the adolescent and his/her parents was requested. Adolescents whose parents consented filled out a self-report questionnaire in their classrooms during school hours in the presence of a teacher and a staff member. They were then asked to deliver questionnaires to their parents. Parents filled out the questionnaires at home and were asked to return them once they were completed (response rate=65.3%). Parents had the opportunity to phone researchers if any help was needed.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at the Catholic University of Milan.

Measures

Socio-demographic information. Participants were asked questions about personal characteristics (gender, age, educational level, professional position) and family characteristics (family structure, number of children).

Values. Socialisation and personal values were measured by the Italian version of the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) (Schwartz et al., 2001). The PVQ measures the 10 value types described in Schwartz’s theory. It includes 40 short verbal portraits that describe a person’s goals, aspirations or wishes. An example of an item is ‘He/she thinks it is important to do things in the way he/she learned from his/her family. He/she wants to follow his/her customs and traditions.’ Respondents’ values were inferred from their self-reported similarity (from 1=not like me at all to 6=very much like me) to people described implicitly in terms of particular values.

To measure parents’ socialisation values as perceived by their children, adolescents indicated how their father/mother would want them to respond to each item, for each of the 40 portraits. To measure adolescents’ personal values, adolescents answered the question ‘How much like you is this person?’ for each portrait. To measure actual parents’ socialisation values, parents (fathers and mothers separately) were asked to indicate their response to the question ‘How would you want your child to respond to each item?’ The internal consistency of the scale ranged from $\alpha = .55$ (fathers’ tradition, as perceived by adolescents) to $\alpha = .84$ (fathers’ universalism).

Closeness. Closeness between adolescents and their parents was assessed by the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron et al., 1992). This is a single-item pictorial measure intended to directly tap people’s sense of interpersonal closeness, defined as ‘overlap of selves’. Adolescents selected the picture that best described their relationships with their mother and their father separately from two sets of seven Venn-like
diagrams, each representing different degrees of overlap of two circles (from diagram number 1= no overlap to diagram number 7= almost complete overlap).

**Promotion of volitional functioning.** In order to measure the extent to which parents promote their child’s volitional functioning, we used the Autonomy Support Scale drawn from the Perceptions of Parents Scale (Grolnick et al., 1991). This subscale contains six items (e.g., ‘My father/my mother allows me to choose my own direction in life”) that are each scored on five-point Likert scales from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot). Adolescents completed a version for the father and a version for the mother. Cronbach’s alphas were .77 and .73 for paternal and maternal measures respectively.

**Data analysis**

**Preliminary analysis.** We first analysed parents’ socialisation values as perceived by their adolescent children and adolescents’ personal values in terms of means and standard deviations for each of the 10 value types. Descriptive statistics were calculated separately for boys and girls and, in the case of children’s perception of socialisation values, also separately for fathers and mothers.

**Acceptance.** To assess the degree that adolescents accept their parent’s values, we computed the within-dyad correlations across values, by correlating the parents’ 10 socialisation value ratings, as perceived by the adolescent, with the adolescents’ 10 personal values. This was done within each family separately for the father–child dyad and for the mother–child dyad. Within-dyad correlations (Kenny & Acitelli, 1994) allowed us to measure the congruence in the shape of each parent’s value profile and his/her own child’s value profile. Each value was treated as part of a broader system and our interest was in the relative strengths of the value types in relation to one another. Similar to other correlation coefficients, within-dyad correlation coefficients also range from -1 (total opposition) to +1 (total congruence). According to Cohen (1988), coefficients lower than .30 (absolute value) are of small entity, whereas coefficients higher than .50 (absolute value) are large.

To examine whether the degree of acceptance was different according to parent and child gender, we performed a mixed-design ANOVA with parent gender as the within-subjects factor (2 levels: father, mother) and child gender as the between-subjects factor (2 levels: male, female). In the presence of a significant interaction effect, a simple effects analysis was conducted. Because the dependent variables (acceptance scores) were correlations, we performed the analyses on transformed \( r \) to \( Z \) scores.

**Predicting acceptance.** We carried out two multiple hierarchical regression models separately for father–child dyads and mother–child dyads to test whether actual and perceived agreement between parents’ socialisation values, parent–child closeness
and promotion of volitional functioning influenced adolescents’ acceptance of perceived values. In order to analyse whether child gender moderated the effects of predictors on acceptance of parental values, we performed regression equations whereby child gender was entered in the first step, the other predictors in the second one and the gender x each predictor interaction in the third. If gender is a moderator, then the interactions of gender with each predictor will be significant when main effects are controlled (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Kenny et al., 1998).

Results

Preliminary analysis

Figure 1 shows means and standard deviations of parents’ socialisation values as perceived by adolescents. Generally, boys and girls perceived their parents, both fathers and mothers, as wanting to transmit to them the importance of safety and stability (security), obedience and respect for social expectations (conformity) and, to a lesser extent, traditional customs and ideas (tradition). Security, conformity and tradition are all part of the higher-order conservation dimension. It is worth noting, however, that along with these values, adolescents believed that their parents also gave importance to autonomy and independence of thought and action (self-direction), one of the value types included in the higher-order openness to change dimension.

Adolescents perceived their parents as judging benevolence and universalism (included in the self-transcendence dimension) to be very important for their child’s socialisation. On the other hand, parents were perceived as giving less importance to

![Figure 1. Parents’ socialisation values as perceived by adolescents (boys and girls). Means and standard deviations](image-url)

Standard deviations = from .77 (mothers’ SD) to 1.21 (fathers’ PO)

PO = Power, AC = Achievement, HE = Hedonism, ST = Stimulation, SD = Self-direction, UN = Universalism, BE = Benevolence, TR = Tradition, CO = Conformity, SE = Security.
power, achievement, hedonism and stimulation—values along the dimensions of self-enhancement and openness to change.

A different picture emerged when we considered adolescents’ personal values. As shown in Figure 2, hedonism, stimulation and self-direction were the most important values for boys. These values of openness to change were priorities in the value profile for girls as well, together with self-transcendence values. Otherwise, adolescent males and females turned out to be less interested in values belonging to the conservation and self-enhancement dimensions.

Acceptance

Children’s acceptance was moderate, ranging from $r = .35$ for mother–son dyads to $r = .50$ for mother–daughter dyads (see Table 1).

![Figure 2. Adolescents' personal values (boys and girls). Means and standard deviations](image)

Standard deviations = from .81 (girls’ TR) to 1.26 (girls’ PO)

PO = Power, AC = Achievement, HE = Hedonism, ST = Stimulation, SD = Self-direction, UN = Universalism, BE = Benevolence, TR = Tradition, CO = Conformity, SE = Security.

Table 1. Acceptance within father–adolescent and mother–adolescent dyads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dyads</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>$r_{\text{mean}}$[^a]</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father–son</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>−.76</td>
<td>.98</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother–son</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>−.74</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father–daughter</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>−.85</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother–daughter</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>−.83</td>
<td>.98</td>
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Notes: [^a] $r_{\text{mean}}$ was obtained transforming the $r$ to $Z$, averaging, and then transforming back to $r$

** $p < .001$
A mixed-design 2 (parent gender) x 2 (child gender) ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect, although with a small effect size \([F(1,379)=4.82, p<.05, \eta^2 = .01]\). As shown in simple effect analyses, daughters appeared to accept maternal values more than boys did. The effect of parent gender was not statistically significant \([F(1,379)=3.21, p=.07]\), whereas the effect of child gender was significant \([F(1,379)=5.30, p<.05, \eta^2 = .01]\): girls accepted their parents’ socialisation values more than boys did.

**Predicting acceptance**

Findings showed that, in both father–adolescent dyads and mother–adolescent dyads, parental agreement as perceived by the child, closeness and promotion of volitional functioning significantly and positively predicted the adolescent’s acceptance. On the contrary, actual agreement between parents’ socialisation values was not a significant predictor in our models. A moderation effect of child gender was not found (see Table 2).

**Discussion**

The present study focused on adolescents’ acceptance of the values their parents want to transmit to them. Recent perspectives have shown that value transmission is a reciprocal process between parents and their adolescent children, producing inter-generational similarities and changes. Therefore, we took the active roles of both parents and adolescents into account. Since parents may differentiate between what is good for them and for their children, we did not consider adolescents’ perceptions

<table>
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<th>Table 2. Hierarchical regression models</th>
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<td><strong>Independent variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fathers–adolescents</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>R^2 (∆R^2)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Child gender[^a]</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Actual agreement</td>
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<td>Perceived agreement</td>
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<td>Closeness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Volitional functioning</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Child gender × Actual agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child gender × Perceived agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child gender × Closeness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child gender × Volitional functioning</td>
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</table>

Notes:[^a] Dummy variable: 0=boys, 1=girls. * p < .01; ** p < .001
of parents’ personal values. Rather, we focused on adolescents’ perceptions of the values parents would like to see in them. Moreover, as adolescents may interpret and decide whether or not to accept parents’ socialisation values, we measured the correspondence between parents’ socialisation values as perceived by their adolescent child and values the adolescent perceived as being important for him/herself.

Our findings showed that adolescents were moderately willing to accept perceived parental socialisation values, indicating that there were some similarities and some differences between parental values as perceived by adolescents and adolescents’ personal values.

Similarities were seen along the self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence continuum, with the former dimension emphasising pursuit of self-interests and the latter involving concern for the interests and welfare of others. In adolescents’ perceptions, parents did not want to transmit power and achievement. Similarly, these value types were of little importance to the adolescents themselves. Power and achievement were downgraded in both the profile of perceived parental values and in the profile of adolescents’ personal values. In contrast, universalism and benevolence were perceived to be important for parents to transmit to children and were also perceived by adolescents (especially girls) as being important personal values. Another similarity involved self-direction: both adolescents and parents—at least as perceived by children—were interested in the promotion of and search for independence of thought and action. This suggests that adolescents are willing to accept values that encourage their autonomy and personal growth but, at the same time, values that emphasise concern and respect for the welfare of others.

Intergenerational differences between perceived parental socialisation values and adolescents’ personal values were seen in two value dimensions: openness to change (hedonism and stimulation) vs. conservation (tradition, conformity and security). The first dimension emphasises enjoyment, pleasure, personal gratification and readiness for new experiences, whereas conservation emphasises self-restriction, order and resistance to change. Adolescents perceived their parents as wanting them to endorse primarily conservative values, whereas they were more open to new experiences and challenges. Thus, adolescents declined to accept conservative values.

Adolescents are involved in exploring and developing their autonomous and independent identity. Values of openness to change are most effective for this task since they promote the pursuit of independence. On the other hand, during this stage of the family life cycle, parents must be able to care responsibly for their children. Parents must consider the aspects of dependency and the need for security and rules that continue during adolescence, as well as the adolescent’s increasing need for autonomy (Scabini et al., 2006). From this perspective, an opposite perceptual pattern (adolescents who perceive themselves to be conservative and their parents as promoting enjoyment and the search for novelty) or a perfect correspondence between parents’ values and those of children (‘I’m exactly as my father/mother wishes’) would be surprising and also in contrast with the challenges of this family transition (Barni, 2009).
Therefore, the moderate level of correspondence between adolescents’ and parents’ values in this phase of the family life cycle may be indicative of the identity construction and differentiation process in which adolescents are engaged. As found in previous studies (Barni & Ranieri, 2010), we can hypothesise that parents’ and adolescents’ values become more similar at the end of the transition to adulthood. Children’s progressive assumption of adult roles and responsibilities also implies the internalisation of shared priorities and beliefs with parents, according to personal and social life and adult generations in general. Some authors (Vollebergh et al., 2001) consider late adolescence as a ‘formative phase’ for establishing more shared moral and cultural orientations.

In our study we did not treat parents as a unit, but instead looked at the specificity of each family dyad: father–son, father–daughter, mother–son and mother–daughter. Girls had a slightly higher endorsement of parental values than boys: female adolescents accepted their parents’ socialisation values more than male adolescents. More precisely, girls accepted their mothers’ socialisation values more than boys did. There were no gender differences in acceptance of paternal values. It is worth noting that the size of this effect was small and that our hypothesis concerning the presence of significant differences on the basis of child gender was only partly confirmed. Nevertheless, these results seem to support the hypothesis (Whitbeck & Gecas, 1988; Barni & Ranieri, 2010) of a ‘female lineage’ of value transmission: girls are more prone to accept the values their parents, especially mothers, want to transmit to them. Sensitivity to relationships, which is a typical characteristic of females, may facilitate girls’ perception and acceptance of values (Scabini, 2006). Moreover, girls’ higher degree of acceptance can be explained, as discussed in the introduction, as girls being more encouraged to attend to intimate others’ needs and to conform to their expectations. Boys, in contrast, are encouraged to develop an identity that is more distinct from intimate others’ wishes. These gender differences in the socialisation process may promote girls’ ability to take the perspectives of others and to assume significant others’ points of view (Zentner & Renaud, 2007), as well as their ability to accurately perceive parental values and to develop value priorities that are more similar to their parents’ values than are the values priorities of boys.

Beyond measuring level of acceptance (‘how much adolescents accept parents’ socialisation values’), we investigated the potential predictors of acceptance (‘under which conditions adolescents accept’). We analysed the influence of perceived and actual parental agreement in socialisation values, parent–child emotional closeness and parents’ promotion of their child’s volitional functioning.

Our findings clearly showed the relevance of perceived parental agreement: the more children perceived that their fathers and mothers had similar values, the more children were ready to accept parents’ value priorities. This perceived agreement may allow adolescents to accept equally both the values they perceive as coming from their father and values coming from their mother (as these values are exactly the same). In this way, children are able to avoid any ‘conflict of loyalty’.

Adolescents’ perceptions of parental agreement were more relevant than the actual degree of agreement between parents in defining the level of acceptance. This
confirms the centrality of perceptions in interpersonal processes and the role of these perceptions as filters of reality (Gagné & Lydon, 2004), supporting the importance of relying on individual perceptions. Several studies over the past decades have relied on adolescents’ self-reports of parent–child relationships as meaningful sources for understanding family processes. The choice of using adolescents’ perceptions was made based on evidence that adolescents can accurately report on family relations and also because, regardless of whether adolescents are accurate or not, their perceptions of family processes are likely to guide their choices and behaviours (Smetana et al., 2002). This seems to hold true for the step of acceptance in the value transmission process as well.

Our results have also indicated that the quality of the parent–child relationship can be a significant predictor of acceptance. A close and supportive family context may increase adolescents’ willingness to accept their parents’ values because it promotes the child’s desire for compliance with parental wishes. Moreover, a close family climate is usually characterised by shared interests, values and behaviours among all family members (Scabini et al., 2006). Indeed, we can speculate on the existence of a bidirectional relation between emotional closeness and acceptance: the closer children are to their parents, the more they are willing to accept parental values and the more similar adolescents’ values are to those of their parents, the more children perceive themselves as being close to their parents.

Parents’ promotion of a child’s volitional functioning was found to be another significant and positive predictor of acceptance. In this regard, Grusec and Goodnow (1994) introduced the concept of self-generation, which states that children need to feel that they generate their own values and that this feeling promotes acceptance. We prefer, however, to refer to self–other generation: adolescents give importance to values they perceive to be inherently worthy and the result of their own choices but which at the same time are also shared by significant others (in this case, parents).

In sum, the influence of value agreement between parents, of closeness to parents and of promotion of volitional functioning suggests that acceptance is a ‘relational property’, supported by adolescents’ identification with parents but also by adolescents’ feelings that they are stimulated to explore and act upon their own true personal values and interests. In our study, these relational variables were more relevant and influential than personal characteristics, such as parent and child gender.

The results of this study have relevant theoretical and practical implications. They have demonstrated the importance of searching for ‘why’ and ‘under which conditions’ a certain level of acceptance is achieved. A modest acceptance due to low agreement between parents is not the same as one due to a distant parent–child relationship or to parents’ incapacity to legitimise their child’s autonomy. Low agreement and a distant relationship are likely to make it difficult for a child to identify with his/her parents, because parents are perceived as being distant from each other and toward their child. On the other hand, in families where parents ask an adolescent for compliance and do not provide their child with choices or recognise their child as a separate person, the child might perceive this request as a threat
to his/her autonomy. Paradoxically, in this case, parents seem to be too close to their child.

Thus, a modest degree of acceptance may have different origins and consequently different implications for interventions. Creating a relational balance within the couple subsystem and within the parent–child subsystem (in which parents and children are neither too distant nor too close) should be the principal goal of any intervention aimed at promoting value transmission in the family and adolescents’ moral development. Parents and educators in general may facilitate adolescents’ moral development by promoting relationships that have a positive quality and encouraging adolescents’ volitional functioning. As suggested by Kuczynski and Hildebrandt (1997), most socialisation problems have to do with relationship management. In particular, elevated levels of children’s resistance may result from poor relationship history. This makes it necessary for interventions to shift the focus from using specific techniques and competencies to manage children’s behaviour (e.g., effective application of external contingencies to force compliance) to enhancing the marital and parent–child relationship (e.g., through regulation of distance and negotiation). Moreover, parents should communicate the relevance and meaning of introduced values so that the child can fully grasp their importance and internalise the values as his or her own, thereby feeling volitional when following them (Hardy et al., 2008). Increasing children’s volitional functioning is, in turn, a crucial determinant of adolescents’ psychosocial adjustment and is linked to various desirable educational outcomes (Grolnick et al., 1991; Soenens et al., 2007). In educational settings, students who experience autonomy support tend to be more autonomous in learning and more likely to integrate the material being taught.

This study certainly has some limitations. First, it used a cross-sectional design. Longitudinal studies are needed to truly gain an in-depth understanding of the bidirectional and interactive nature of value transmission and the development of adolescents’ value patterns over time. A second limitation concerns the nature of our sample. Data were collected from northern Italy only and although the sample was large, it was not representative. Since we cannot exclude the possibility that larger representative samples from other areas of Italy might provide different results, caution is needed when generalising our findings to all Italian adolescents and beyond Italy.

It would be interesting for future research to adopt multiple methods and consider not only self-reports but also other kinds of methodologies such as observational measures and graphic-projective instruments. Moreover, it would be interesting to analyse adolescents’ acceptance together with their accuracy in perception, which are the two steps of transmission described in Grusec and Goodnow’s model. In fact, to reach a high level of parent–child value congruence it is not merely sufficient that the child is willing to accept, but it is also necessary that he/she accurately perceives the values parents want to transmit.

In conclusion, this study has shown that the acceptance step in the value transmission process should not be considered as the passive conformity of adolescent
children to their parents’ wishes and goals but rather as a process of comprehension, sharing and internalisation. To promote values they would most like to see in their children, parents have to create a close and harmonious family context in which children perceive themselves as legitimated people and are encouraged toward autonomy. This is an expression of the ‘flexible protection’ (Scabini et al., 2006) that characterises responsible care in this stage of the family life cycle.

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Notes

1. The SES was coded according to information provided by parents on the basis of Hollingshead’s classification (1975) for parental occupation.
2. Within each parental dyad, the correlation between fathers’ and mothers’ 10 socialisation value ratings measured actual value agreement. The correlation between fathers’ and mothers’ 10 socialisation value ratings, as perceived by the adolescent, measured perceived value agreement.

References


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