Multiple sources of adolescents' conservative values: A multilevel study

This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:
This version is available http://hdl.handle.net/2318/144615 since 2015-09-13T15:34:37Z

Published version:
DOI: 10.1080/17405629.2013.857307

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Abstract

In a sample of 677 adolescents, extracted from 39 classes of 15 different high schools in Trento, Italy, a multilevel analysis was performed to analyze the influences exerted on adolescents’ conservative values by their perceptions of the conservative values their mothers would like to transmit them (i.e., maternal socialization values) and by the conservative values prevalent in their class context (i.e., classmates’ and teachers’ values). The cross-level interaction between mothers’ and classmates’ conservative values significantly influenced the dependent variable. In particular, the effect of perceived mothers’ conservatism on children’s conservatism was stronger when adolescents perceived an alignment between their classmates’ conservative values and their mothers’ expectations of those values. Conversely, the interaction between mothers’ and teachers’ conservatism did not influence the dependent variable. Implications of this research and its possible developments are discussed.

Keywords: Conservative values, Adolescence, Family, School, Multilevel analysis.
Multiple Influences on Adolescents’ Acquisition of Conservative Values: A Multilevel Study

Basic values are organizers of political evaluations and choices, and of positions on public policies (Feldman, 2003; Gunther & Kuan, 2007). In particular, research has shown the importance of conservative values to political thought and action and to civic engagement (e.g., Stubager, 2008). According to Schwartz (1992), conservative values—including tradition, conformity, and security—emphasize promoting traditional practices, conventional norms, and social order, also by self-restrictions. This dimension is related to matters such as law and order, immigration/multiculturalism, patriotism, and the role of authority in society. For instance, in Schwartz and colleagues’ (2010) study, performed before and after the Italian 2006 national election, conservatism was the value dimension having the strongest positive associations with political core values—such as traditional morality, blind patriotism, and law and order—and the strongest negative associations with preference for free enterprise and accepting immigrants.

People may differ considerably in the importance given to conservative values (Schwartz, 2005), but little is known about the origins and development of conservative values within individuals’ life trajectories. Although some studies have pointed out the genetic hereditability of conservatism (e.g., Alford, Funk, & Hibbing, 2005), according to the broader body of literature child value development is largely based on the socialization process (e.g., Grusec & Hastings, 2008). The more recent perspectives recognize that, especially from adolescence, children are active participants in their value development (Kuczynski & Navara, 2006), and, consistent with earlier theories (e.g., Ecological Systems Theory; Bronfenbrenner, 1979: see below), they underline that development can occur in a variety of interacting settings.
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In this process, adolescence is the most critical time; Adolescents express clear preferences for specific values (Barni, Ranieri, Scabini, & Rosnati, 2011), and have relatively stable political values and knowledge (Krampen, 2000). Parents (especially the mother; see Coffé & Voorpostel, 2010; Trommsdorff, Mayer, & Albert, 2004) are the most important agents of socialization for children. For example, if parents are involved vs. not involved in civic and democratization processes, their children are more likely to be involved as well (Miklikowska & Hurme, 2011). However, as children grow older, they acquire further skills (e.g., to think about what others are thinking, to negotiate, etc.) and face with further sources of influence outside the family, mainly peers and teachers (Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009; Wentzel & Looney, 2007), which may mitigate or magnify earlier experiences in the family domain.

The Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) posits that proximal processes in one microsystem (e.g., the family) may impinge on children’s experiences in another (e.g., the school). Because of their proximity to the individual, components of the microsystems (e.g., parents, peers, teachers) can directly affect children’s development. However, interactions between microsystems (mesosystem) have rarely been investigated, although they have a great potential for an additional influence on children’s development (Lenzi et al., 2012).

In the present study we aimed to contribute to overcome this limitation, examining how some of the most significant components of the adolescent’s microsystems (mothers, classmates, and teachers) contribute, directly or in interaction, to children’s conservatism.

Family Context

Most parents heavily invest in transmitting values to their children and tend to desire children to develop values similar to theirs; Thus, parent-child value similarity is considered the hallmark of a successful socialization (Barni, 2009). According to Grusec and Goodnow’s
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(1994) two-step model of internalization, transmission involves both the child’s perception of parents’ socialization values (i.e., the values parents want their children to endorse) and the child’s acceptance or negotiation of the parents’ perceived viewpoint. There is some evidence that adolescents’ perception of their parental socialization values is quite accurate (Knafo & Schwartz, 2003) and significantly related to adolescents’ personal values (Barni et al., 2011).

Moreover, Gniewosz and colleagues’ (2009) study on political alienation in adolescence showed that the associations between adolescent and parental views about politics was completely mediated by adolescents’ perceived parental alienation. Consistently, Førland, Korsvik, and Christophersen’s (2012) retrospective analysis on the 1960s protest from a large sample of former students at the Oslo University showed that participants’ perception of their parents’ political preferences was the strongest predictor of their own political preferences.

However, results about the outcomes of parent-child value transmission are inconsistent: Reports of a striking concordance between parents’ and children’s values coexist with findings of a very low parent-child value similarity (Roest, Dubas, Gerris, & Engels, 2009). These differences may be ascribed to several factors, such as specific value content and measurement strategies. A further confounding factor is that parent-child value transmission takes place within a wider social context that can promote values, more or less similar to parents’ ones, and can affect parents’ efficacy in transmitting values (Friedlmieier & Trommsdorff, 2011). Actually, an effective socialization involves the child’s internalization of advocated values to function in an adaptive way within and across the significant social groups he/she belongs to (Barni, Ranieri, & Scabini, 2012).

School Context

In Western countries adolescents spend a lot of time at school, daily in contact with their classmates and teachers. Although models of socialization at school are not well developed (Wentzel & Looney, 2007), researchers consistently consider the school as a rich
social context which provides adolescents with experiences of plurality, consistent or

discrepant respect to what they have learned within their family. The school potentially

provides social interactions that represent a level of (at least pre-) political stimulation and

communication that may not be available from parents at home (Kiousis & McDevitt, 2008).

In this context, teachers hold a key position in determining the activities and discussions in

the classroom (Jones, 1971).

Ongoing social interactions with classmates shape adolescents’ expectations about what

they need to do to become accepted and competent members of their peer groups (Vieno,

Perkins, Smith, & Santinello, 2005). In the value domain, classmates appear to be similar

among them in their value preferences: Each adolescent tends to see the agreement with

his/her friends as providing an external validation of his/her own value priorities. This

reassurance of the value system potentially supports adolescents’ wellbeing through

increasing confidence and self-respect, and stabilizing identity (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi,

Golledge, & Scabini, 2006).

Interactions between Family and School: Isolation, Competition, or What?

Family and school are portrayed by several studies as operating primarily in isolation

from each other. For example, in “two social worlds” theories (for a description, see Cooper

& Cooper, 1992), the influence of parents and classmates on children’s values is seen as

distinct, with little or no overlap in the experiences and relationships across the two settings.

However, most investigations on value socialization have analyzed the contributions

of the family and the school to adolescents’ value development in terms of “competition”

between them. Few researchers, going beyond this “competitive perspective”, considered the

joint contribution of the different socialization agents to adolescents’ value acquisition. For

example, Knafo (2003), in his investigation on Israeli families with religious and nonreligious

parents, concluded that a lack of fit between parents’ and school’s values may hinder parents’
value transmission. In high-fit contexts (in which parents were religious and children attended religious schools, and those in which parents were not religious and children attended nonreligious schools) adolescents’ acceptance of parental values (including conservative values) was higher than in low-fit contexts. Does this mean that parental efforts are moderated (facilitated or hindered) by the school context? And what about the moderation effects of classmates and teachers, each with a specific role in the school context?

Aims of the Current Study

In the light of the literature above, in the present study we analyzed the interweaving of family and school in contributing to adolescents’ conservative values. Given the great importance of mothers as socialization agents for their children, our focus was on the conservative values mothers wanted to transmit to their children. More specifically, as transmission outcomes strongly depend on the child’s perception and acceptance of the parents’ values (Barni et al., 2011), the adolescent’s perception of his/her mother’s socialization values was taken into consideration.

Using a multilevel approach, we investigated whether and the extent to which the values shared in the school context by classmates and teachers moderate the relation between mothers’ conservative values, as perceived by their children, and adolescents’ conservative values. In particular, we hypothesized high levels of classmates’ and teachers’ conservatism to amplify the influence of perceived mothers’ conservatism on their adolescent children’s conservatism, whereas low levels of conservatism within the school context to weaken this influence.

Method

Participants and procedure

Thirty-nine classes, from 15 different high schools located in Trento (North-Eastern Italy), participated in the study. The 83.1% of the schools was public, whereas the remaining
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16.9% was private. A total of 789 students were contacted. Adolescents whose parents consented to their participation in the study filled in a self-report questionnaire in their classrooms. Moreover, the participation of at least one teacher per class was requested. Data have actually been collected from 677 students (response rate: 85.8%)—with a mean of 17 students per class (range: 8-26)—and from 122 teachers—with a mean of 3 teachers per class (range: 1-11).

Students (41.6% males) were aged between 14 and 18 (M = 15.26, SD = 1.20). A large majority of them (84.6%) lived with both parents; a minority lived only with one parent (mostly the mother). Teachers (28.3% males) were aged between 25 and 67 (M = 44.24, SD = 9.60); 15.0% of them had a medium educational level (more than 8 years of education, but less than 14) and the remaining 85.0% had a high level of education (more than 13 years). On average, teachers worked in the schools which participated in the study for 7.93 years (SD = 8.13, range = 1-34) and spent 4.84 (SD = 2.97, range = 1-15) hours per week in one of the classes involved in the study. The 49.5% of them taught scientific subjects, the 34.3% humanistic subjects, and the remaining 16.2% foreign languages.

Measures

Individual level variables

Students’ conservative values. Students’ conservative values were measured by the 6-item Conservatism scale from the short version of the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) (Schwartz et al., 2001). Confirmatory factor analysis and the multistep procedure suggested by Byrne (2001) were performed to examine the factorial structure and measurement invariance of the Conservatism scale across adolescents’ perceptions (personal values and perceived mothers’ socialization values) and teachers’ personal values (results available upon request). The following five items, which resulted to be invariant, were used in the analysis:

(a) “It is important to him/her to live in secure surroundings. He/She avoids anything that
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might endanger his/her safety”; (b) “He/She believes that people should do what they’re told. He/She thinks people should follow rules at all times, even when no-one is watching”; (c) “It is very important to him/her that his/her country be safe. He/She thinks the state must be on watch against threats from within and without”; (d) “It is important to him/her always to behave properly. He/She wants to avoid doing anything people would say is wrong”; and (e) “He/She thinks it is important to do things in the way he/she learned from his/her family. He/She wants to follow their customs and traditions”. Adolescents answered “How much is this person like you?” for each portrait. They checked one of 6 boxes labelled: “very much like me”, “like me”, “somewhat like me”, “a little like me”, “not like me”, and “not like me at all”. Respondents’ own values were inferred from their self-reported similarity to people who were described in terms of these values. Based on α = .65, we computed adolescents’ conservative values by averaging the 5 items.

Perceived mothers’ conservative values. The conservative values children perceived their mothers wanted them to endorse were measured by asking adolescents to answer the same items above indicating: “How would your mother want you to respond to each item?”. Again, in spite of the low number of items of the battery, the internal consistency of the measure verged on the usual threshold: α = .62. Thus, we computed mothers’ conservative values as the average of such 5 items.

Control variables. Based on Barni (2009), we used adolescents’ gender, age, and religiosity—measured by the ad-hoc item “How much do you perceive yourself as religious?” (from 1 = not religious at all to 7 = very religious) —as control variables.

Class level measures

We used two contextual level variables: (a) the class mean of the conservative values of the adolescents attending each class, used to assess the mean conservatism of each participant’s peers; and (b) the class mean of teachers’ conservative values, measured using
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1 the same items we used to assess adolescents’ personal values and mothers’ socialization

2 values, $\alpha = .62$.

Analytic strategy

3 We examined the predictors of adolescents’ conservative values, discriminating
4 between the independent variables lying at the individual and at the ecological (school) level,
5 by means of the multilevel regression technique of Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM6,
6 Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). After running a preliminary unconditional model, we ran a two-
7 level hierarchical regression model: The within-group (Level 1) model estimated the
8 influence exerted on adolescents’ conservative values by mothers’ conservatism, partialling
9 out the effects of the control variables for the student $i$ in the class $j$. Moreover, we estimated
10 the variability of this effect. At Level 2, we entered class mean conservatism and teachers’
11 conservatism (at the class level) to explain the variability of the effect that mothers’
12 conservatism exerted on the dependent variable. Thus, the Level 1 model included 4 variables
13 (mothers’ conservatism was class mean centred):$^1$

14 $\text{Children's conservatism}_{ij} = \beta_0j + \beta_{1j} (\text{gender}) + \beta_{2j} (\text{age}) + \beta_{3j} (\text{religiosity}) + \beta_{4j}$

15 (mothers’ conservatism$_{ij}$) + $r_{ij}$

16 With the aim of verifying if the relationships between mothers’ and children’s
17 conservatism ($\beta_{4j}$) depended on the class characteristics, in Level 2 we entered the class
18 characteristics as independent variables after entering the principal effects of those variables
19 (expressed at the second level as the effects they exerted on the variability of the intercepts:
20 effects on $\beta_{0j}$):

21 $\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} (\text{class mean conservatism}) + \gamma_{02} (\text{teachers’ conservatism}) + u_{0j}$

22 $\beta_{4j} = \gamma_{40} + \gamma_{41} (\text{class mean conservatism}) + \gamma_{42} (\text{teachers’ conservatism}) + u_{4j}$

1$^1$Even if the intercept variability ($\gamma_{00}$) resulted non-significant $\chi^2 (38) = 37.53, \text{ns}$, we decided
to run the analyses by controlling for the design bias by introducing also the $u_{0j}$.
Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables considered in the study (Table 1 about here).

After partialling out the effects of our control variables (socio-demographics did not influence our dependent variable, while religiosity fostered it), perceived mothers’ conservative values positively influenced adolescents’ conservatism, explaining 20.6% of its variability at the individual level (see Table 2). Conversely, the mean class conservatism and the teachers’ conservatism did not influence our dependent variable.

Most importantly, since we found a significant random variance for the effect of perceived mothers’ conservatism values, $\chi^2(38) = 62.69, p < .01$, we were allowed to formally test our moderation hypothesis. The last three columns of Table 2 show that the class mean level of conservative values heightened the effect exerted by perceived mothers’ conservative values on the dependent variable. However, the cross-level interaction between perceived mothers’ conservative values and teachers’ conservative values did not reach statistical significance (Table 2 about here).

Figure 1 shows the relationship between perceived mothers’ and children’s actual conservative values at the 25th percentile and at the 75th percentile in the class conservatism. As hypothesized, in classes characterized by high vs. low conservatism the effect of perceived mothers’ conservative values on children’s conservative values resulted stronger (Figure 1 about here).

Discussion

In this study we focused on the origins of adolescents’ conservative values, taking into account different sources of influence, namely the family (mothers) and the school (classmates and teachers). Working with a multilevel approach, mothers, classmates, and teachers were not considered as competing socialization agencies; indeed, we focused on
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their synergistic effects, explicitly testing the effects exerted on adolescents’ conservative values by the two cross-level interactions between perceived mothers’, on one hand, and actual classmates’ and teachers’ conservative values, on the other.

Results showed that conservative value socialization is a complex process deeply embedded within a wide context, including multiple sources of influence. Indeed, as hypothesized, the cross level interaction between perceived mothers’ and classmates’ conservatism significantly influenced our dependent variable: In very conservative classes the relation between mothers’ conservative values, as perceived by children, and adolescents’ conservative values was stronger than in very liberal classes. However, contrary to what we expected, teachers’ conservatism did not moderate such relation. In terms of mesosystemic processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), adolescents’ acceptance of maternal values resulted to be facilitated if peers provide experiences parallel to those lived in their family. That is, in conservative classes, children who perceived their mothers to want them to be very conservative or unconservative, tended to be so in their values. Thus, conservative classmates might make the child not conservative tout court, but more ready to comply to his/her mother.

These results were partially consistent with those from Knafo’s study (2003), which highlighted that the fit between the family and the school values supported value transmission between parents and children. However, Knafo could not disentangle the moderator effects of classmates’ and teachers’ values, because he operationalized such fit just in terms of in/consistency between family’s religiosity and attending vs. not attending a religious school. Our study showed that, in the case of fit, the horizontal (i.e. among peers) value socialization enhances the vertical one between the two generations (i.e. between parents and children), whereas the oblique socialization (i.e. with significant adults outside the family, in our case between teachers and children) does not.
We could thus speculate that there is a certain amount of naive and uncritical internalization of parental values—a sort of “family heritage”—which is then renegotiated within the social context. This renegotiation seems to occur mostly with peers, rather than with teachers. On one hand, this may be an age-specific phenomenon and, on the other, it may be attributed to the current Italian *Zeitgeist*. As known, in adolescence more than in any other age, the peer group acts as an emotional anchor and as a social comparison resource (Seltzer, 1982). However, different cultures weigh various possible models in the transmission process in different ways. In Italy, in the last decades adolescents have become less and less inclined to give importance to significant adults outside the family and they report a growing paucity of role models in the adult generation whom they could rely on (Lanz, Iafrate, Marta, & Rosnati, 1999; Torre, 2008). Thus, before closing the book on the moderator role of teachers’ conservative values, new studies in other cultural contexts should be performed. Additionally, although there are not significant relations between students’ and teachers’ conservative values, it is likely that teachers influence their students’ orientations in a more distal way, by their behaviors or styles of instruction (e.g., degree of openness, of promotion of students’ autonomy, etc.; see Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007). Future research aimed at explicitly addressing this issue would be interesting.

While researchers into value socialization have traditionally postulated a unidirectional influence stemming from parents to children (e.g., Hyman, 1959), more recent and convincing models postulate children to be active in building their values (e.g., McDevitt, 2005). Our results have been consistent with these new approaches: The informal comparison and negotiation occurring in the interaction among peers can carve out a space for social change based on reworking of what was received from previous generations.

This research had two main strong points. First, we analyzed data stemming from a large, heterogeneous sample, involving more than one informant. Second, our study was one
of the first using the multilevel approach to analyze the socialization of conservative values. This approach looks as particularly fruitful in studies on value socialization, allowing to test the synergistic role of family and contextual socialization agencies. As a matter of fact, multilevel methods are becoming more and more promising in explaining social psychological phenomena. According to Doise (1986), these phenomena can be explained at four different levels, respectively making reference to intra-individual, inter-individual, positional, and ideological dynamics. Multilevel analyses allow researchers to make one step further, because they can be the basis of predictions performed taking into account individual and contextual independent variables and their cross-level interactions at the same time. In our opinion, psychological research would significantly benefit from their diffusion, even outside the value field.

However, as often happens, our research had some limitation and left some questions unanswered, suggesting promising routes to further research. First, a longitudinal development of the present research perspective would be fruitful: Indeed, while some studies have found a greater importance given to conservative values by emerging adults than by adolescents (e.g., Alfieri, Barni, & Rosnati, 2011), some others have reported opposite results. Among them, the classic Bennington study (Newcomb, 1943) showed that attending faculties which foster social and communicative skills helps students to become aware of the others’ reasons and points of view and hinds the transmission of conservative values from the family to the offspring. In methodological terms, this would lead researchers to test longitudinally the impact exerted on the relation between family’s and offspring’s conservatism by the three-way cross-level interaction among parents’ and peers’ conservative values and type of faculty attended.

Second, Hastie (2007), in her recent review of the literature, has reported that the horizontal socialization can happen via processes of normative socialization (people’s values
change to match those around them) and/or informative influence (greater knowledge may lead to changes in values). New multilevel research aimed at testing these two possibilities will be interesting.

Third, we focused on the perception the adolescents reported about the conservative values their mothers wanted them to develop, and not on a survey of their mothers’ values. Although adolescents’ perceptions of their parents’ socialization values are pretty accurate (e.g., Knafo & Schwartz, 2003) and constitute a necessary step towards internalization (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), new research performed by directly asking adolescents’ mothers to report their conservative values should be improved.

Finally, according to some researchers, people’s political values have at least in part genetic origins (e.g., Alford et al., 2005). In this study we could not take into account the genetic predictors of our dependent variable. New research aimed to integrate the interactive effects of genes, socialization within the family, and socialization within the school context will plausibly be the new frontier in this field of study.

In conclusion, according to Vandell (2000), when studying children’s socialization researchers need to better understand the complex system of social relationships occurring in children’s lives. The present study constitutes a relevant step in this direction, showing the importance of both vertical (i.e., with mothers) and horizontal (i.e., with classmates) relationships, and, more interesting, of the relation among these relationships.
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