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# **Family Functioning's Contributions to Values and Group Participation in Italian Late Adolescents: A Longitudinal Study**

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*This longitudinal study aimed to investigate the contributions of family functioning (in terms of support and control) to the development of civic engagement in terms of personal values (i.e., values related to health, school, religion, and disapproval of deviance) as well as participation in groups that pursue cultural, religious-volunteer, and sport goals. The study controlled for sociodemographic factors, such as parental level of education and integrity of the family. Two waves of data were collected among 175 Italian late adolescents at a one-year interval. Hierarchical regression analyses showed that the average level of parental support positively related to both health value and religion value; increased parental control positively related to health value and disapproval of deviance; and average levels of both parental support and control positively related to religious-volunteer group. However, increased parental support negatively related to participation in a cultural group. The discussion focused on the important role of the family in current Italian society for youth socialization in regard to civic engagement.*

**KEYWORDS** *civic engagement, group participation, late adolescence, parental control, parental support, parenting, values*

An integrated moral and civic identity and a commitment to society beyond the limits of individual existence enable youths to be agents of their own positive development as well as enhance other people and society (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). An integrated moral and civic identity may be expressed by personal values as such values related to specific goals and life domains are relevant as potential motivation driving human action and enlightening what is meant as socially and/or personally desirable (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Schwartz, 1992). In addition, commitment to society or active citizenship may be articulated as youth belongingness to associations, organized volunteerism, and political parties (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). In particular, participation in groups that pursue constructive activities, such as church, sport groups, and volunteers (Cairano, 2008), represent a great opportunity for practicing personal responsibility, exercising rights, and fulfilling obligations as members of organizations and institutions (Egerton, 2002; Flanagan, 2004).

In sum, youth become generative adults through the progressive enhancement of values and behaviors that are appreciated in their specific cultures and that reflect the universal value of contributing to civil society. Although inclusive participation has been widely acknowledged as a primary component of contemporary society, current knowledge about the developmental pathways that may lead youths to higher levels of civic engagement is still limited (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). Among all the other aspects that may contribute to youth civic engagement, including youth ownership, youth–adult partnerships, and facilitative policies and structures (Camino & Zeldin, 2002), the current study focuses on investigating the contribution of family functioning in both the construction of a system of values and the promotion of engagement in constructive activities. Feeling connected to the family may enable adolescents to develop responsibility for the future and a sense of membership to the broader social context (Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2009). In addition, the family may orient the adolescent toward social participation (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998).

The socializing role of civic engagement in the family consists of both implicit and explicit communication related to local and global representations of social reality (Grusec, Goodnow, & Kuczynski, 2000). A high level of supervision (in terms of knowing where children are, with which friends they spend time, and in which activities they are involved) and monitoring (in terms of settling clear rules and expectations for behaviors as well as consequences of transgressions) is generally associated with a high level of social competence and morality, especially at younger ages (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000). Family rules promote the assimilation of behavioral models that subsequently serve as personal regulations for positive involvement in the social context (Caprara, 2006).

Furthermore, parental support, which consists of expressive and instrumental affection and acceptance, grants the child not only confidence in the self and in others, but also the capability to identify and select the most appropriate behavior in different situations (Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994). Thus, family functioning seems to influence first the way in which the child perceives and constructs inner models of relationships with the social context and afterwards the way in which he/she reproduces these relationships in different contexts and situations (Mestre, Tur, Samper, Nàcher, & Cortés, 2006).

Building on these premises, the current study seeks to investigate the association between family functioning and youth values and participation in groups that pursue constructive activities. The research aims to determine whether any relationship exists among family functioning (as support and control) and youth personal values (among values related to health, school, religion, and disapproval of deviance) and group participation (among religious-volunteer, sport, and cultural groups) over time. A time interval of one year near the last years of high school was appositively selected in order to explore the additional contributions of family functioning when participants entered the majority age in addition to previously occurring influences in their lives. Based on the studies discussed herein, youth values and participation in groups that pursue constructive activities are expected to be positively related to both parental support and control. Furthermore, considering that participants are late adolescents, parental support is expected to fulfill a more important role than control.

## METHOD

### Participants

One hundred seventy-five late adolescents ( $N = 86$  girls, 49%) participated in this two-wave longitudinal study. During the first wave, participants ranged from 17 to 20 years old ( $M = 17.9$ ;  $SD = .97$ ) and attended the twelfth grade in two different types of high schools (46% scientific lyceum and 54% vocational school) in northwest Italy. During the second wave, they attended the thirteenth and final year of high school. Between the two waves, four participants were dropped from the study (attrition rate of 2%) because they did not pass the 12th-grade school year.

The majority of participants (89%) lived in two-parent families. Most parents had completed compulsory education (76% of mothers and 71% of fathers). In addition, 86% of participants' fathers and 44% of their mothers worked full time. These figures are very similar to those reported in national samples for the same age (ISTAT, 2009).

## Measures

A set of scales and/or items drawn from the questionnaire “Me and My Health” (Bonino, Cattelino, & Ciairano, 2005) was used to gather data—namely, the following values:

- Value related to health (9 items; e.g., “How important is it to you to feel in good shape?” Range = 9–36; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .66$ ).
- Value related to school experience (4 items; e.g., “How important is it to you to get good grades this year?” Range = 4–16; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .60$ ).
- Value related to religion (4 items; e.g., “How important is to you to be able to rely on religious teachings when you have a problem?” Range = 4–16; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .84$ ).
- Disapproval of antisocial behavior (13 items; e.g., “How wrong is it to you to start a fist fight or a shoving match?” Range = 13–52; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .84$ ).

With respect to group participation, adolescents were first asked: “Do you belong to any religious/volunteer, sporting, cultural group?” (Range = 0–1). Participation in both waves was calculated in each group separately (Range = 0–2) according to absent in both waves (0), present in one wave (1), or present in both waves (2). Participation in political group was not included as only 4% of the adolescents participated in such groups.

Finally, with respect to family functioning, the following issues were considered:

- Parental control (8 items; e.g., “In your family, how strict are the rules you have to follow about getting your homework done?” Range = 8–32; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .74$ ).
- Parental support (2 items; e.g., “Is it easy for you to talk with your parents about personal problems, thoughts, feelings/problems with schools?” Range = 2–8;  $r = .69$ ).

## Procedure

Two waves of data were collected at a one-year interval at the end of the spring semester. In accordance with Italian law and the ethical code of the Association of Italian Psychologists, students were informed about the characteristics of the study; all agreed to participate, providing written consent. Trained researchers administered the questionnaire at school while teachers were absent. Questionnaires were completed individually.

## Strategy of Analyses

To investigate the relationships between family functioning with respect to youth values and group participation, the regression approach was used in

the current study, as suggested by Holmbeck (1997). In addition, colinearity among predictors was controlled for by centering the variables as suggested by Aiken and West (1991). In the regression models for predicting values (one for each outcome), the same outcome was initially entered at T1 in Step 1 and the information about family structure and level of education was entered in Step 2 as controls. Second, consistent with the established aims, parental support and control were entered simultaneously into the regression models in the form of time-averaged levels and change scores. For instance, given a measure X with scores X1 at T1 and X2 at T2, X was entered into the analyses both as an average level  $(X1 + X2)/2$  and as a change  $(X2 - X1)$ . Such re-parameterization of the regression models emphasizes the distinction between participants who are chronically low versus chronically high on a given variable used as predictor (Labouvie, Pandina, & Johnson, 1991). Consequently, four predictors were entered—namely, average and change measures of parental control and support. A similar approach was used for predicting youth group participation. The only difference was that, considering the nature of the variables, the association can be explored only with involvement in both waves together; thus, Step 1 of the analyses was skipped.

## RESULTS

All descriptive information and the correlations about the study variables are included in Table 1. With respect to youth personal values (see Table 2), the level of parental support was positively related to value related to health ( $\beta = .27, p < .001, \Delta R^2 = .07$ ) and religion ( $\beta = .19, p < .003, \Delta R^2 = .05$ ). In other words, the higher the parental support, the more value youths attributed to both health and religion. In addition, the change of parental control was positively related to value related to health ( $\beta = .21, p < .004, \Delta R^2 = .05$ ) and disapproval of deviance ( $\beta = .17, p < .022, \Delta R^2 = .04$ ). Thus, youths increase the value they attribute to health and the disapproval of deviance at increasing levels of parental control. Finally, no significant relationship was found between family functioning and value related to school (see Table 2).

With respect to youth group participation (see Table 3), the average level of both parental support ( $\beta = .18, p < .036$ ) and control ( $\beta = .23, p < .01$ ) was positively related to religious-volunteer group ( $\Delta R^2 = .08$ ). In other words, youths whose parents used stable and high levels of support and control were also more likely to participate in religious-volunteer groups. However, the change in parental support (i.e., the increase of parental support) was negatively related to participation in a cultural group ( $\beta = -.24, p < .01, \Delta R^2 = .05$ ). No other significant relationships were found between family functioning and group participation (see Table 3).

**TABLE 1** Intercorrelations Among and Descriptive Information on Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Value on health T1	—	.52**	.32**	.17*	.19*	.12	.19*	.13	.21**	.17*	.15	-.01	.11	.21**	-.04
2. Value on health T2		—	.21**	.21**	.17*	.25**	.11	.21**	.10	.30**	.25**	.24**	.10	.21**	-.08
3. Value on school experience T1			—	.59**	.26**	.22**	.36**	.31**	.28**	.25**	.22**	.12	.10	.02	.06
4. Value on school experience T2				—	.23**	.28**	.26**	.27**	.24**	.28**	.18*	.18*	.17*	.00	.05
5. Value on religion T1					—	.74**	.27**	.32**	.38**	.35**	.17*	.01	.25**	-.12	.08
6. Value on religion T2						—	.21**	.23**	.31**	.40**	.28**	.19*	.32**	-.05	.02
7. Disapproval of antisocial behavior T1							—	.53**	.34**	.17*	.20**	.08	.06	.05	.10
8. Disapproval of antisocial behavior T2								—	.15	.31**	.20**	.24**	.06	-.14	.15
9. Parental control T1									—	.54**	-.00	-.15	.21**	.02	-.08
10. Parental control T2										—	.07	.07	.21**	-.01	-.02
11. Parental support T1											—	.46**	.11	.11	.20**
12. Parental support T2												—	.14	.15	.09
13. Religious and volunteer group													—	-.01	.07
14. Sporting group														—	-.04
15. Cultural group															—
<i>M</i>	30.15	29.72	12.14	11.30	9.35	8.96	42.45	41.68	18.77	17.58	5.61	5.71	.53	.80	.56
<i>SD</i>	3.52	3.50	2.16	2.50	3.17	3.08	6.58	6.38	4.19	4.19	1.54	1.37	1.05	1.19	1.06

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 2** Hierarchical Regression Results of Family Characteristics Predicting Youth Personal Values

Predictors	Value on health T2		Value on school T2		Value on religion T2		Disapproval of deviance T2	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1—Outcome baseline T1		.29***		.41***		.49***		.32***
Step 2—Family structure Integrity (Yes = 1)	.54***		.64***		.69***		.57***	
Mother education	.09	.02	-.08	.01	.03	.01	.01	.00
Father education	-.17*		.02		-.02		-.03	
Step 3—Levels	.05	.07**	.07	.01	-.09	.05**	-.01	.01
Parental control	.10		.11		.11		.08	
Parental support	.27***		.07		.19**		.09	
Step 4—Changes ( $\Delta$ )		.05*		.00		.01		.04*
Parental control	.21**		.06		.08		.17*	
Parental support	.04		.02		.02		.08	

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 3** Hierarchical Regression Results of Family Characteristics Predicting Youth Civic Engagement (Participation at Different Group Activities)

Predictors	Religious/Voluntarism		Sport		Cultural	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1—Family structure		.01		.02		.04
Integrity (Yes = 1)	-.08		-.05		-.15	
Mother education	.09		.09		-.1	
Father education	-.03		.06		-.07	
Step 2—Levels		.08*		.02		.03
Parental control	.23*		.06		-.09	
Parental support	.18*		.14		.14	
Step 3—Changes ( $\Delta$ )		.00		.00		.05*
Parental control	-.02		-.07		.09	
Parental support	.01		.01		-.24*	

Note. \* $p < .05$ .

## CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to analyze the association between family functioning and youth personal values and participation in groups that pursue constructive activities over a one-year interval. As expected, an association was found between family functioning and the values youths attributed to health, religion, and disapproval of deviance as well as with youth participation in a structured activity, such as a religious-volunteer group. More specifically, parental support seems particularly effective in the transmission and promotion of values in youths. In fact, parental support was found to be positively associated with values related to both health and religion. This finding is not surprising considering that the availability of parents to talk with children and provide them affection may serve as a platform for developing the tendency to take care of one's own health as well as personal moral values.

However, the increase in parental control was also relevant as it positively related to value related to health and disapproval of deviance. This finding is quite interesting, especially considering the fact that the participants were late adolescents and had all entered the age of majority. Parental control tends to decrease when children enter adulthood; however, the participants in the current study still seemed to need some parental supervision. This finding certainly needs further confirmation by other studies. However, it may also be interpreted considering the difficulty (as previously acknowledged by some existing studies) that Italian adolescents encounter when making the transition into adult life (Arnett, 2006).

Furthermore, parental support and control also demonstrated an influence on youths' use of leisure time by promoting their participation in religious-volunteer groups. This finding was expected in light of previous studies by Marta and Scabini (2003), which highlighted the intergenerational

transmission of participation in such groups as well as the potential positive effects of this participation on individuals' general well-being and adjustment.

However, it is also important to note the unexpected finding of the negative relationship between increased parental support and youth participation in cultural groups. That is, children of parents who increased their support also seem less likely to participate in cultural groups. This finding certainly requires further investigation. However, it seems reasonable to interpret it considering that a further increase in parental support at an age when youths need to start constructing an autonomous adult life may sometimes be perceived as over-protecting, which in turn might end in limiting the individual's chance to search for stimulus to satisfy his/her intellectual curiosity outside the family context. Furthermore, the participants in the current study were all students in their final years of high school; their efforts in studying might have limited their chances of satisfying their cultural motivation and needs in a different manner.

Synthesizing the results, these findings confirmed what some previous studies have already underscored. During the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, family functioning may still be related to youth's personal values and participation in groups that promote constructive activities. The family still fulfills an important guiding role in the construction of the youth's system of personal values and in orienting the youth toward activities that may constitute the bases of his/her future civic engagement (Chapman, Nolin, & Kline, 1997; Guglielmetti & Marta, 2003; Stattin & Kerr, 2001). In other words, the family values provide a context in which youths can partially create personal definitions by framing their view of the world as well as suggesting how to relate to other people in this world. Consequently, during late adolescence, when youths have already developed complex and abstract self- and other-related concepts (e.g., philosophies of life, beliefs, principles, and moral standards), the family continues to contribute to the general value orientation by supporting and controlling youths (Damon & Hart, 1988; Nurmi, 1991).

The current study resulted in some partially unexpected findings as well. In fact, considering the participants' age, parental control was expected to be less relevant than support, yet parental support and control were relevant to the same extent. It seems reasonable to interpret this finding in light of the current pattern of transition to adulthood in the context of Italian life (Arnett, 2006), which is delayed with respect to many other European countries, and to the peculiarities of Italian family development, as previously highlighted by Scabini and collaborators (1999). Italian parents and their late adolescent children seemed to behave consistently with regard to the concept of delayed transition into adulthood: Late adolescents still need some behavioral controls by their parents—at least with respect to the construction of a system of values and the promotion of participation in groups promoting constructive activities.

Although the current study has numerous limits, such as the limited sample size, the short time interval between the two waves, and the consideration of only youth perception, the study also has some merits. First, the study demonstrated that the family can still make a significant contribution to the socialization of young people by promoting their learning of socially accepted values (Smith, 1999). In addition, the study underlined the relevance of investigating social capital represented by youths' promotion of their social and civil adjustment and further development. According to this perspective, such social capital is produced through relationships with family members as well as through relationships with others in the organizations and the community. Finally, as Putnam (1995) stated, social capital concerns the "features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 67).

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