

# Does the intra-individual structure of values exist in young children?



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## ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown that the Schwartz circular structure of values exists at the intra-individual level within adults. We extend this work by testing whether this structure also exists within children. We analysed responses from 748 Australian children (5 to 12 year-olds). We show, for the first time, that the circular structure of values exists within children as young as five. There is some evidence of greater differentiation with age. Further, we show that girls and boys share the same structure, but differ in their values priorities. Boys were generally located closer to self-enhancement and openness to change values, whereas girls were generally located closer to self-transcendence and conservation values. These results are discussed in light of the developmental literature.

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## 1. Introduction

Personal values are defined as guiding principles or motivational goals that are relatively stable across situations and time (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). The common theoretical premise that values are formed during adolescence (Erikson, 1968) led to a scarcity of research on children's values (Döring, Daniel, & Knafo-Noam, 2016). Yet, recent research established that children hold relatively stable value priorities over time (Cieciuch, Davidov, & Algesheimer, 2016). Moreover, children's values meaningfully predict their behavior (Vecchione, Döring, Alessandri, Marsicano, & Bardi, 2016).

Schwartz's (1992) values theory has significantly influenced values research. In this theory, values form a circular structure based on an underlying motivational continuum. This structure captures the conflicts and compatibilities between the motivations that individual values express. Schwartz (1992) partitioned the circle into 10 basic values and four higher order values (see Fig. 1). Adjacent values in Fig. 1 (e.g., power and achievement) express compatible motivations, such that the choice to pursue one value can simultaneously promote the attainment of the other. Opposing values in Fig. 1 (e.g., power versus universalism) express conflicting motivations, such that the choice to pursue one value violates the attainment of the other. Evidence supports the circular structure of values in hundreds of adult samples from over 75 countries (Schwartz, 2011). However, this evidence only established

that the conflicts and compatibilities among values exist between individuals.

Recent evidence using unfolding analysis (Borg, Bardi, & Schwartz, 2015) has also found that the circular structure exists within adults. For example, individuals who place a high importance on power are also likely to place a similar importance on the neighboring value of achievement and far less importance on the opposing value of universalism. Researchers argue that a within-individual approach is an especially appropriate paradigm to test the premise that the theory of human values is essentially a theory of within-individual associations of motivations (Borg et al., 2015).

Schwartz (1992) values structure has also found support in samples of children (e.g., Döring, Blauensteiner, Aryus, Drögekamp, & Bilsky, 2010); however, the circular structure of values has not yet been studied within children. We address this gap by investigating whether the intra-individual structure of values exists in young children, using recent advances in unfolding analysis (Borg et al., 2015). We do this in three age groups, ranging from 5 to 12 years old, and examine whether children's value priorities differ by gender within age groups. Finding support for an intra-individual values structure in young children would add to our understanding of the acquisition and development of values in children.

### 1.1. Values in children

The study of children's values has emerged as a promising field of research in the last decade. Children, from an early age, use internal goals to direct their behavior (Jennings, 2004). Developmental studies

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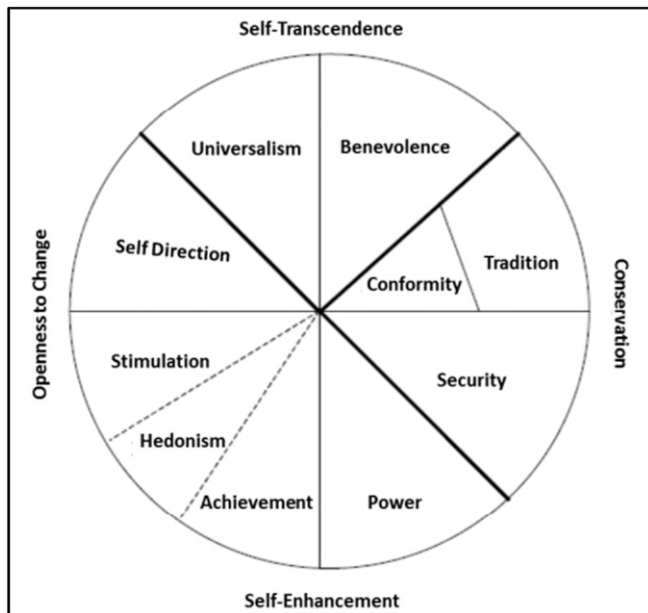


Fig. 1. The circular model of the structure of relations among ten basic human values and the four higher order values.

suggest that children's goals may closely align with the basic conflicts described in Schwartz's (1992) theory of personal values. For instance, young children feel the conflict between care for the self and care for others, deeply. They show individual differences in their behavior toward moral obligation to promote other's interests, an obligation that increases with age (Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008; Smith, Blake, & Harris, 2013). Similarly, from an early age, children negotiate the conflict between personal autonomy and conformity to social conventions. As children mature, they increasingly value their independence and uniqueness (Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014; Wray-Lake, Crouter, & McHale, 2010).

Studies of children's values have consistently supported the tradeoffs between the two higher order dimensions shown in Fig. 1: self-transcendence versus self-enhancement and openness to change versus conservation. For instance, studies using versions of the adult Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ; Schwartz et al., 2001) have shown support for the location of the four higher order regions around the values circle in adolescents; with increasing differentiation between the 10 basic values in older children (e.g., Bubeck & Bilsky, 2004). Studies of children in early and middle childhood have also shown support for the circular structure, using child-specific instruments, such as Döring et al.'s (2010) Picture-Based Value Survey for Children (PBVS-C) and Collins, Lee, Sneddon, and Döring's (2017) animated values instrument (AVI). There is also support for differentiation of all or some of the 10 basic values in children (Cieciuch, Döring, & Harasimczuk, 2013; Collins et al., 2017; Döring et al., 2010).

### 1.2. Intra-individual values structure

Although past studies established children's value structure across individuals, only one study has attempted to investigate the structure of values within children (Collins et al., 2017). This study examined the extent to which individual value profiles were similar to ten ideal value type curves predicted by Schwartz's (1992) theory, following the rank-order correlation method of Gollan and Witte (2014). Their findings support the idea that individuals have opposing values or adjacent pairs of values, but this method does not establish whether the circular structure of 10 basic values exists within individuals (Borg et al., 2015). Borg et al. (2015) noted this limitation and developed an approach to test whether the circular structure exists within individuals,

based on Coombs (1964) unfolding theory of preferential choice. This method is not limited to testing a particular values structure; instead, it allows the data to exhibit a circular structure or any other pattern that may represent the data more precisely. This method has not yet been used to examine children's values.

The unfolding model developed by Borg et al. (2015) computes a two dimensional structure, in which each individual and each value is represented as a point. The model computes the location of each person-point in space relative to the ten value-points, so that the distance between a person-point and a value-point will be closer the more important the value is to the person. If people prioritize theoretically adjacent values similarly, and opposing values differently, the location in space of the computed value-points will correspond to the value circle postulated by Schwartz (1992). Borg et al. (2015) found the circular structure to be supported within adults, in four different samples, using three different measurement instruments. In each sample, the order of values around the circle closely corresponded to Schwartz's (1992) theory. These results indicate that the value priorities of the vast majority of adults are organized according Schwartz's (1992) circular values structure.

We extend the understanding of within-person values by applying unfolding analysis to values data from children aged 5 to 12 for the first time. Children's self-descriptions develop between early-middle childhood and middle-late childhood. While young children do not typically describe the relations between their self-characteristics or integrate them, they acknowledge strong conflicts between self-attributes. However, they are less likely to attend to small discrepancies. Only in the course of middle childhood, do children gain the ability for high-order generalizations of self-descriptions. They also learn to integrate self-descriptions, while understanding ambivalences and complex conflicts (Harter, 2012). We therefore hypothesize that at all ages, children will report value importance that takes into account the conflicts between opposing values. However, minor differentiations between similar values may develop between early and late childhood.

### 1.3. Gender differences in value importance

From an early age, children differentiate in behavior according to gender. In many ways, this differentiation increases during early childhood, as they identify more strongly with their gender group (Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). Past studies of value importance found gender differences among adults (Schwartz & Rubel-Lifschitz, 2009) and children; with girls placing a higher priority on self-transcendence and conservation values than boys and boys placing a higher priority on self-enhancement and openness to change values than girls in middle childhood (Döring et al., 2015; Uzefovsky, Döring, & Knafo-Noam, 2016). However, previous studies were limited to comparing the importance of single values between genders rather than examining potential differences in value profiles.

Borg et al. (2015) examined the differences between gender value profiles of adults by examining the location of each person-point relative to the ten value-points using unfolding analysis. They found that although men and women shared a common circular value structure, they differed in their value profiles, with women being more likely to prioritize benevolence and less likely to prioritize power values than males. We therefore hypothesize that girls and boys will share a common values structure, but that differences will exist in their value profiles, consistent with patterns found in prior research.

## 2. Materials and method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

The sample consisted of 748 Australian primary school children (48% female) between the age of 5 and 12 years ( $M_{age}$  8.67 years,  $SD = 2.11$ ). Consent for participation was obtained from the school, parents and

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