Adolescents' basic personal values and sense of coherence

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the relation between adolescents' basic personal values, so as conceptualized in Schwartz's Value Theory, and sense of coherence (SOC). SOC, which describes a general attitude towards life in terms of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness, is a resource for coping with stress and improving health. Five hundred and ninety-four Italian adolescents, aged between 14 and 19 years, filled out the Portrait Values Questionnaire and the Orientation Life Questionnaire. Results showed that values explained a moderate proportion of the variations among adolescents with regard to SOC. Adolescents' conservative and self-transcendence values were the most important predictors of adolescents' SOC: the more importance was given to conservatism and self-transcendence, the stronger was the confidence in the perception that problems to face are clear, manageable, and worthy of commitment and engagement. Implications of these results and their possible developments are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Sense of coherence (SOC) is the core concept of Antonovsky's salutogenic model focused on health resources rather than disease and deficits (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987). It has been consistently found that individuals with a strong SOC are healthier than individuals with a weak SOC, making it an interesting concept for those concerned with health and its promotion (Eriksson & Lindström, 2005).

SOC refers to a global and enduring orientation to view the life and world as "making sense cognitively, instrumentally and emotionally" (Antonovsky, 1996, p. 15). It indeed comprises three key dimensions: a cognitive component labelled comprehensibility (i.e., the extent to which events are perceived as structured and predictable); an instrumental component labelled manageability (i.e., the extent to which a person feels he/she can cope with events); and a motivational component labelled meaningfulness (i.e., the extent to which life is perceived as worthy of commitment and engagement). That is, individuals with a high SOC tend to perceive stressors as explicable, have confidence in their ability to cope with stressors, and judge it worthwhile to rise to the challenge they face (Buddeberg-Fischer, Klaghofer, & Schnyder, 2001).

As with many other individual characteristics, SOC especially develops during adolescence, in which coping resources are being tried and formed, and becomes more or less stable in the period of early

adulthood (Antonovsky, 1987). As known, adolescents begin to develop more abstract and differentiated self-concepts, and they become increasingly more autonomous, also taking more decisions that affect their health (Myrin & Lagerström, 2006; Steinberg & Sheffield-Morris, 2001). Previous studies found a strong SOC in those adolescents who understand the demands and respond to the expectations of the surrounding environment and who can be successful with developmental tasks (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). Girls tend to have significantly weaker SOC than boys (Larsson & Kallenberg, 1996), likely due to the fact that the expectations towards females in adolescence are less clear than those towards males (Antonovsky & Sagy, 1986), and that girls usually are more aware of their inner conflicts (Honkinen et al., 2008).

SOC is assumed to be primarily affected by generalized resistance resources, that is, any personal characteristic that can facilitate effective tension management (Antonovsky, 1979). The characteristics studied so far in relation to SOC include socio-demographic variables (e.g., gender, socio-economic status) (e.g., Cohen, 1997; Volanen, Lahelma, Silventoinen, & Suominen, 2004), work-related variables (e.g., Feldt, Kivimäki, Rantala, & Tolvanen, 2004), personality traits (e.g., Feldt, Metsäpelto, Kinnunen, & Pulkkinen, 2007; Hochwälder, 2012), self-esteem (e.g., Moksnes & Lazarewicz, 2016), subjective and psychological well-being (e.g., Krok, 2015), and religiosity/spirituality (e.g., Stefanaki et al., 2014). Moreover, Sagy and Antonovsky (2000) and Lindström and Eriksson (2006) suggest that a stable value system influences life orientation and promotes the development of high levels of SOC. Meaningfulness particularly seems to be based on the individual's value system (Meyer, 2001). However, despite these suggestions and the relevant heuristic power that personal values have in other

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psychological domains (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Ranieri & Barni, 2012), including identity construction, values have almost never been empirically used as predictors of SOC. One exception is the recent study by Louw, Mayer, and Baxter (2012), which analyzed the relationships between values and SOC among managers in an organisational context and recommended that universalistic values should be embedded in the creation of meaningfulness.

Referring to Schwartz's classification of basic human values (2006), the present study aimed at analyzing, for the first time among adolescents, the associations between values and SOC. Values have been defined by Schwartz (1992) as desirable and trans-situational goals that serve as guiding principles in people's life to select modes, means, and actions. The author (1992, 2006) identified ten motivationally distinct basic values: power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security (Table 1).

These values are dynamically related and exhibit a quasi-circumplex structure that derives from the fact that actions taken in the pursuit of each value have psychological, practical, and social consequences, which may conflict or may be compatible with the pursuit of other values. At a higher level of abstraction, the oppositions between competing values can be summarized by viewing values as organized along two bipolar dimensions: openness to change (hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction) versus conservative values (tradition, conformity, and security), and self-enhancement (power and achievement) versus self-transcendence values (universalism and benevolence). The first dimension captures the conflict between the emphasis on one's own independent thought and action and favouring change versus self-restriction, preservation of traditional practices, and protection of stability. The conflicting motives represented by the self-enhancement/self-transcendence dimension are the extent to which people enhance their personal interests, even at the expense of others, versus the extent to which people transcend selfish concerns and promote the welfare and interests of others.

2. The present study

In the light of the above background, the goal of this study was to explore the importance of adolescents' basic personal values (i.e., conservatism, openness to change, self-transcendence, and self-enhancement) in predicting SOC. Specifically, we focused on the *relative importance* of each value dimension in the context of the others, addressing these questions: "How much can values explain the variation among adolescents with regard to SOC?"; "Which value is the most important predictor of SOC?". In answering both these questions, we controlled for adolescents' gender, that is a variable that previous studies showed to

Table 1
Schwartz's value types.

Value type	Description
Power	Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources
Achievement	Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards
Hedonism	Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself
Stimulation	Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life
Self-direction	Independent thought and action: choosing, creating, exploring
Universalism	Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection of the welfare of all people and nature
Benevolence	Preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact
Tradition	Respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture and religion provide the self
Conformity	Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and to violate social expectations or norms
Security	Safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of the self

be significantly related to SOC (e.g., Larsson & Kallenberg, 1996), with boys expected to have a stronger SOC compared to girls.

As far as values were concerned, we hypothesized that conservative values were the most important source in promoting SOC. Indeed, conservative values, which include tradition, conformity and security, push to preserve and to give sense to the current state by reducing threats and by honoring traditions. For instance, several researchers have suggested that religions and cultural traditions typically provide their members with a "worldview", that is a significant framework to interpret life events. This worldview would seem to meet Antonovsky's concept of SOC (George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002).

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 594 adolescents (50.9% male, 49.1% female), aged from 14 to 19 years (M = 15.22, SD = 1.20), living in Northern Italy. A large majority of these adolescents (86.7%) lived in two-biological parent families, while a minority lived only with their mother (12.0%) or with their father (1.3%); 14.6% were only-children, whereas 85.4% had one or more brothers or sisters (M = 1.60, SD = 0.96).

Adolescents, all high-school students, were recruited through the collaboration of 15 public and private high schools located in the North of Italy. Students and their parents were informed by letter about the main objectives of the research, and they were advised that participation would be free and voluntary. Adolescents whose parents consented to their participation filled in a self-report and anonymous questionnaire (response rate: 75.3%) in their classrooms during school hours, in the presence of a teacher and of a research staff member.

This study was approved by the scientific board of the Family Studies and Research University Centre.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Personal values

We used the Italian version of the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) (Schwartz et al., 2001), which was validated in Italy by Capanna and her colleagues (2005), to measure the importance adolescents give to the four value dimensions described in Schwartz's (1992) theory. The PVQ is composed of 40 verbal portraits of a person and his/her objectives or aspirations, which implicitly reflect the importance of a value. For example, "Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to him/her. He/She likes to do things in his/her own original way" describes a person for whom openness to change is important. 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.

Compared to other scales used to measure values (e.g., Schwartz Value Survey; Schwartz, 1992), the PVQ is designed to be more concrete and context bound, and less cognitively complex, hence also usable with young people (from age 11). Moreover, it captures the person's values without explicitly identifying the topic of investigation.

We calculated the importance given to each value dimension by averaging the items measuring that value. The number of items used to measure each factor varies from 7 to 13. Cronbach's Alpha ranged from 0.77 (openness to change) to 0.85 (self-transcendence).

3.2.2. Sense of coherence (SOC)

We used the Italian short version of the Orientation Life Questionnaire (OLQ) (Antonovsky, 1987; Barni & Tagliabue, 2005) to measure adolescents' SOC. The original OLQ was composed of 13 items on a 7-point Likert scale; however, the analyses carried out by Barni and Tagliabue on a large Italian sample led them to extract 11 items, invariant across age and gender, tapping comprehensibility/manageability (7 items, example: "How often do you have feelings that you're not sure