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Adolescents and Parental Separation or Divorce: The Protective Role of Values against Transgressive Behavior

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Abstract

Parental separation and divorce are becoming common experiences for an increasing number of children in Western industrialized countries. Although a great deal of research has been conducted on children from “broken” families, few studies have examined the impact of family structure on children’s value development. Values, which are guiding principles for evaluations and behavior, are negotiated and reevaluated especially during adolescence. Thus, this study aimed *a*) to compare the values of adolescents belonging to separated/divorced families to the values of adolescents belonging to intact families; *b*) to exam the relation between values and transgressive behavior, testing the hypothesis that contextual factors (i.e., family structure) affect the relation between values and behavior. Participants were 265 adolescents living in Northern Italy. 40.4% of them were from separated or divorced families, whereas the remaining 59.6% had intact families. Adolescents were asked to fill out the *Portrait Values Questionnaire* and the *Self-Report of Antisocial Behavior*. Results of ANOVAs and regressions showed that: *a*) adolescents from separated/divorced families gave more importance to stimulation (i.e., novelty and challenge in life) and to hedonism, and less importance to conservatism than did their peers; *b*) family structure moderated the positive relation between stimulation and adolescents’ propensity to transgression and the negative relation between conservatism and transgression. These links were significantly stronger among adolescents living in separated/divorced families, thus highlighting the crucial role of values, especially in potentially risky situations.

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1. Introduction

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In the past few decades parental separation and divorce have become common experiences for an increasing number of children in Western industrialized countries. Italy is an emblematic example of this situation, with an increase in separation of couples of nearly 70% from 1995 to 2010.

Many psychosocial studies have analyzed the effects of marital disruption on children's well being and behavior. Children whose parents separate or divorce display a great variation in their response to parental separation, but on average they show poorer outcomes (i.e., emotional problems and a variety of conduct-related difficulties) than do children of intact families. Despite the fact that a great deal of research on children from "broken" families has been performed, the range of outcome variables thus far employed has been restricted principally to children's maladjustment, and at present few studies have focused on children's resources, such as coping abilities, social skills, and values.

Values are desirable and trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that guide evaluation of the self and other people and contribute to selection of behavior [6]. According to Schwartz's Value Theory, on which the current study is based, values can be incorporated into an integrated structure composed of ten value types (Table 1).

Table 1. Definitions of the Ten Value Types

Value Types	Definitions
Power	Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources (authority, wealth, social power)
Achievement	Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards (ambition, success, social recognition)
Hedonism	Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself (pleasure, enjoying life, self-indulgence)
Stimulation	Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life (a varied life, an exciting life, daring)
Self-direction	Independent thought and action (creativity, freedom, choosing own goals)
Universalism	Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection of the welfare of all people and of nature (social justice, equality, world at peace)
Benevolence	Preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact (helpful, honesty, true friendship)
Tradition	Respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide the self (respect for tradition, humble, faith)
Conformity	Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to violate social expectations or norms (obedience, self-discipline, politeness)
Security	Safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of self (social order, national security, health)

The tradeoff among relevant, competing values is what guides attitudes and behavior. Knafo and colleagues reported that giving priority to certain value types (e.g., universalism and conformity) and rating others as low (e.g., hedonism and power) may serve as protective factors against externalizing problems and violence, especially in more stressful contexts. For example, in their recent study on Arab and Jewish adolescents from a general population, they found that in schools in which violence was more common, the relation of adolescents' universalism with self-reported violence was particularly negative, and that the relation of power was particularly strong.

Based on the above mentioned background, this study had two principle aims. The first was to explore the values of Italian adolescents belonging to separated/divorced families, comparing them to the values of adolescents belonging to intact families. The second aim was to exam the relations between adolescents' values and their

propensity to transgression, with the hypothesis – suggested by an ecological perspective on values – that contextual factors (in this case, family structure) may affect the strength of these relations.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 265 adolescents (46.8% males) living in Northern Italy and recruited with the cooperation of the high schools that they attended. They were aged between 14 and 19 ($M = 15.33$, $SD = 1.24$); 40.4% were from separated or divorced families ($N = 107$) and the remaining 59.6% from intact families ($N = 158$)[†]. The adolescents from separated/divorced families lived in single-parent homes, mostly with their mothers (87.2%), while all of the adolescents with intact families lived with both parents.

Adolescents whose parents consented to their participation in the study filled out a self-report questionnaire in their classrooms during school hours, in the presence of a staff member and of a teacher.

2.2. Measures

Values. We used the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) to measure the importance given by adolescents to the ten value types described in Schwartz's theory. The PVQ is composed of 40 verbal portraits of a person and his/her objectives or aspirations, which reflect the importance attributed to 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 self-direction 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. We calculated the importance given to each value type by averaging the items measuring that value. Cronbach's Alphas were satisfactory ($\alpha > .60$), with the exception of tradition[‡].

Propensity to transgression. The Self Report of Antisocial Behavior [10] was administered to adolescents to measure their propensity to transgression. This scale is composed of 16 items, an example of which is "In the last week, have you stolen something from a store?" (from 1 = "never" to 4 = "often"). The scale has one-factor structure, with a good internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$).

3. Results

A series of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), with family structure as between-subject factor (2 levels: separated/divorced families, intact families) and value types as dependent variables, were carried out to compare the values of adolescents from separated/divorced families to the values of adolescents from intact families.

Descriptive statistics of adolescents' values and ANOVA results are reported in Table 2. Adolescents whose parents separated/divorced held values which were largely similar to those of adolescents living in intact families. However, significant differences emerged with reference to three value types: Adolescents from separated/divorced families gave a greater importance to hedonism and stimulation, but a weaker importance to conformity, than did their peers from intact families.

Table 2. Adolescents' Values: Mean-Centered Scores. Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), and ANOVA Results

Value Types	Adolescents from	Adolescents from intact	ANOVAs

[†] Adolescents from separated/divorced families and those from intact families were not different as far as sex, $\chi^2(1) = .001$, $p = .986$, and age, $t(260) = 1.54$, $p = .124$, were concerned.

[‡] As pointed out by Schwartz [6], the low reliability of tradition might be explained in the light of the great complexity of this construct, which includes several components (e.g., faith and self-restriction). For reasons of completeness we kept tradition in the analyses, but the results as regards this value type should be interpreted with caution.

	separated/divorced families		families		
	M	SD	M	SD	
Power	-1.50	1.21	-1.33	1.20	$F(1,263) = 1.16$
Achievement	-.47	.87	-.32	.83	$F(1,263) = 2.00$
Hedonism	.87	1.06	.49	1.11	$F(1,263) = 7.73^{**}$, $\eta^2 = .03$
Stimulation	.61	.86	.30	.95	$F(1,263) = 7.38^{**}$, $\eta^2 = .03$
Self-direction	.42	.69	.42	.71	$F(1,263) = .00$
Universalism	.33	.72	.26	.72	$F(1,263) = .69$
Benevolence	.48	.77	.39	.73	$F(1,263) = 1.15$
Tradition	-.53	.76	-.45	.79	$F(1,263) = .59$
Conformity	-.36	.73	-.10	.71	$F(1,263) = 8.57^{**}$, $\eta^2 = .04$
Security	-.20	.89	-.15	.69	$F(1,263) = .38$

$^{**}p < .01$, $*p < .05$.

In order to verify the relations between adolescents' values and their propensity to transgression, and the moderation effect of family structure, a series of moderated multiple regression models were estimated separately by the ten value types. Values and family structure (dummy variable coded 0 = intact, 1 = separated/divorced) were entered in step 1; a two-way interaction term was created by multiplying values x family structure, and entered in step 2. The predictor variables were centered to reduce multicollinearity; further interpretation of the significant interactions was achieved through an analysis of the regression slopes.

All the regression models, with the single exception of tradition, were significant and explained from 3% (model with self-determination) to 19% (model with stimulation) of the variance of adolescents' transgression. Power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction were positively related to the criteria (β weights from .12, $p < .05$ for self-direction to .39, $p < .01$ for stimulation): This means that the more importance adolescents gave to these values, the more they reported to be transgressive. On the contrary, universalism, benevolence, conformity, and security were negatively related to the criteria (β weights from -.14, $p < .05$ for benevolence to -.34, $p < .01$ for conformity): The more adolescents gave importance to these values, the less they were prone to transgressive behavior.

It is worthwhile noting that two of these relations were moderated by family structure. The positive link between stimulation and transgression was relevant especially among adolescents coming from separated/divorced families (stimulation x family structure: $\beta = .23$, $p < .01$) (Figure 1). Similarly, the negative link between conformity and transgression was stronger among adolescents from separated/divorced families than among adolescents living in intact families (conformity x family structure: $\beta = -.18$, $p < .05$) (Figure 2).

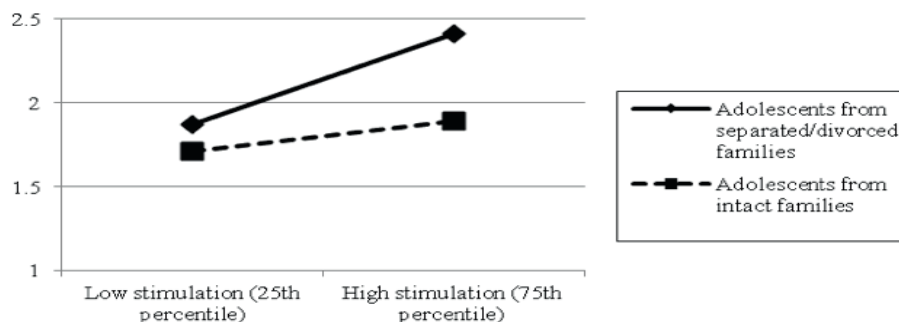


Figure 1. Moderation Effect of Family Structure on the Association between Adolescents' Stimulation and Propensity to Transgression

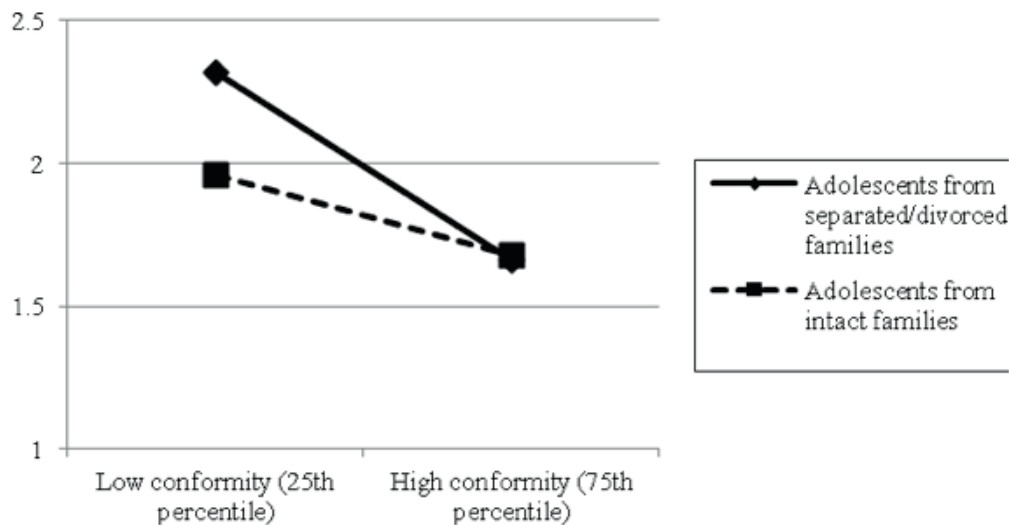


Figure 2. Moderation Effect of Family Structure on the Association between Adolescents' Conformity and Propensity to Transgression

4. Discussion

This study involved adolescents belonging to separated/divorced families, focusing specifically on their value orientations, which were compared to those of adolescents belonging to intact families, and on the role of values as protective factors against propensity to transgression.

Adolescents from separated/divorced families were quite similar to their peers from intact families as far as their value priorities were concerned, but they attributed a slightly greater importance to hedonism (e.g., enjoying life, self-indulgence) and stimulation (e.g., a varied life, daring), and less to conformity (e.g., obedience, self-discipline) than their peers did. Interestingly, hedonism and stimulation emphasize the search of new exciting experiences and readiness for changes; they were the values most directly opposed to conformity and security in Schwartz's model. Thus, we could speculate that adolescents from separated/divorced families tend to embrace those values elicited by the family contingencies (i.e., change and loss of security). Indeed, parental separation and divorce represent stressful life events for children, as they bring about changes, many of which are unfortunately negative: financial problems, house moves, the loss of significant relationships (e.g., with extended families, friends, etc.), and conflict. Moreover, parents are one of the most important sources for their children's socialization, and it is likely that parents who decide on separation are more prone to open to change and less to conformism.

Values were significantly related to propensity to transgression, for both adolescents from separated/divorced families and adolescents from intact families. In line with previous research, giving great importance to universalism, benevolence, conformity, and security reduces transgression; in contrast, the importance given to power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction increases transgression. However, intriguingly, the strength of some of these relations varied according to family structure. In particular, stimulation and conformity were more strongly related to transgression among adolescents from separated/divorced families than among adolescents from intact families. In other words, attributing a great relevance to stimulation was a risk factor for transgression, whereas the importance of conformity was a protective factor, especially among adolescents whose parents separated/divorced. Verplanken and Holland suggest that when the centrality of values to the self and their

accessibility are increased, values relate more strongly to behavior. The more values are activated (i.e., they are implied by the situation) the more they are accessible. Thus, we could suppose that stimulation and conformity, which were both distinctive of the self-perception of adolescents from separated/divorced families, are easily accessible in the context of parental separation/divorce.

Unfortunately, we can only speculate on the processes underlining the relations that emerged between adolescents' values and propensity to transgression. The main limitation of the present study is indeed its cross-sectional design, which limits causal inferences from data. However, this study is the first to investigate values and their relations to transgression in separated/divorced families according to the ecological perspective on values. Moreover, it empirically supports the idea of values as protective factors, whose relevance (for those values that are central in the self-perception and activated) is strengthened in ecologically challenging contexts. The current results may have interesting implications for interventions with adolescents, parents and with all those who play a crucial role in adolescents' education and are called to equip adolescents with values to enable them to face challenges and to achieve a psychosocial well being.

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