

VALUES AND COPARENTING: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY WITH ITALIAN FAMILIES

DOI: 10.26758/12.1.1

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Abstract

Objectives. The main purposes of this study were to: examine possible existing relationships between couple values and coparenting quality reported by both partners of cohabitants heterosexual couples; investigate whether couple values explain coparenting quality reported by both partners of cohabitants heterosexual couples.

Material and methods. 94 Italian heterosexual couples with at least one child under the age of 13 years were enrolled. Both mothers ($M_{age} = 41.25$, $SD = 6.82$) and fathers ($M_{age} = 44.21$, $SD = 6.97$) were asked to fill in two self-report questionnaires: The Portrait Values Questionnaire [PVQ] for couple values and The Coparenting Relationship Scale for the coparenting quality.

Results. The main findings of regression model analysis conducted showed that Self-Transcendence resulted the most important predictor ($\beta = .412$, $t = 4.253$, $p = .000$) for coparenting quality perceived by fathers. In contrast, Conservation resulted the most important predictor ($\beta = .239$, $t = 2.086$, $p = .040$) for coparenting quality perceived by mothers.

Conclusions. From the results obtained, the authors found an important preference for parents of respecting one's cultural traditions, respecting the rules, being tolerant, ensuring the well-being of others by mitigating impulsive behaviors that could harm others physically and emotionally. The presence of these values could allow both partners to implement supportive and collaborative behaviors, agree on education-related issues for their children, and feel close and allied in upbringing their child.

Keywords: co-parenting, couple values, mutual support, couple's well-being.

Introduction

Becoming a parent represented the earliest stage in the life's cycle of a couple. According to various authors, indeed, the birth of the parental couple takes place during pregnancy, a period within which the couple begins to imagine the child, both physically and temperamentally. The couple begins to familiarize with the idea of the baby's birth, the desired child (Giacopino, 2017).

While in the past greater emphasis has been placed on the maternal role (the mother was the one who would raise and care for the child, while the father had the task of transmitting ethical values such as justice, equality and respect), to date research merges maternal and paternal functions: they are no longer unique functions of the one or the other partner, they are

complementary experiences (Scabini & Cigoli, 2012). Specifically, according to the relational-symbolic approach (Scabini & Cigoli, 2000), the family is an organized system with specific roles, tasks, routines, and hierarchies (organizational principle), its underlying structure that connects the basic aspects of family relations is symbolic (the affective and an ethic pole), and is characterized by dynamic processes such as giving, receiving, and reciprocating.

In addition to this, parents are asked not to be only a couple, but to be "co-parents", that is, to collaborate, to support each other and to be allies for the good of their child. Specifically, the co-parenting construct refers to the partners' ability to negotiate their roles, support each other, respect each other and collaborate in caring and upbringing their child. It could be defined as the collaboration and coordination between partners to maintain a familiar style suitable for the growth of the child (McHale, 2010). Feinberg (2003) identified four fundamental domains on which the co-parenting construct is based: support, which includes the degree of understanding between parents and supporting one's partner in any situation; the division of roles, the negotiation and recognition of the roles of both partners within the couple to collaborate, the distribution of duties, responsibilities, and tasks related to daily practices involving in the care of the child; agreement and disagreement, agreeing or not on issues relating to the child's education, moral values, discipline, perception of children's emotional needs, educational standards and priorities; finally, parental responsibility, in terms of shared family management and the ability to control behaviors and the way of communicating with the other parent. The goal of co-parenting for parents is to be able to collaborate as a team, a solid team, with the common goal of bringing up their children (McHale, 2010). As in any context, the team works when there is desire and determination to achieve a particular goal, and therefore parents must be ready to overcome adversity, conflicts and obstacles through their alliance. The importance of the alliance construct, which in many ways is a synonym of co-parenting, can be found in families in which there is support, cohesion, collaboration and optimal conflict management: being able to manage discussions, uncertainties, doubts and conflicting opinions in a constructive way, allows parents to build a "secure base" for their children (Bowlby, 1989), all surrounded by feelings of security and trust (McHale et al., 2004).

These feelings, in turn, allows parents to share with their children what they have learned over time, in order to better educate them and prepare them for life. The process of transmission between generations is an important goal of socialization (Grusec & Davidov, 2007), that is the process through which the young generation acquires from the previous one ways of thinking, acting and perceiving (Durkheim, 1922), and it is crucial for the functioning of the family and of society (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004; Schönplflug, 2001). Through the process of transmission, parents, who constitute the main agent of socialization, communicate principles, teachings and values to their children. Specifically, according to the bidirectional model of the acquisition of values (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), the transmission process includes two steps. The first step consists of the transmission process of values that parents would like to transfer to their children and the degree of accuracy with which children perceive them; the second step concerns the acceptance, or not, of these values. Values guide behavior, they do not determine it, as they lead people to take both certain positions regarding problems, decisions and to prefer certain ideals over others (Barni, 2009).

Schwartz, a pioneer of theories relating to values, defines values as "*a concept that an individual has of a transituational purpose (terminal vs. instrumental) expressing interests (individualistic vs. collectivistic) linked to motivational domains and evaluated on a little continuum of importance (from very important to important) as a guiding principle in one's life*"

(Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Starting from this assumption, through his studies, Schwartz tried to identify what values are, considering them universal.

The value classification model proposed by Schwartz (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987) is based on the assumption that the origin and nature of values depend on the cognitive representation of three human needs considered universal: biological needs, which refer to the biological nature of the organism; social needs, which are linked to interpersonal relationships and socio-institutional needs, in favor of the common good (Capanna, Vecchione, & Schwartz, 2005).

Starting from these three needs, Schwartz (1992) identified 10 values: Universalism, Benevolence, Power, Success, Self-direction, Stimulation, Hedonism, Conformism, Security and Tradition (Caprara, Scabini, Steca, & Schwartz, 2011). Schwartz (1992) placed these 10 values within a circumflex structure in which the values considered similar, or rather, which describe similar ways of doing things, are adjacent, and the strength of the relationship between values decreases as their distance increases, and the maximum negative value is reached between those values that are in an opposite position (for example Stimulation and Safety). Furthermore, the model provides four broad dimensions within which these ten values are included: Openness to Change, which emphasizes the importance of independence and novelty (includes Self-Direction and Stimulation), Conservation, namely observing the rules, maintaining adequate and polite behaviors towards others, behaving in a socially appropriate manner (includes Tradition, Security and Conformism), Self-Enhancement, as control or dominance over people and resources, and personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards (includes Power and Achievement); and the dimension of Self-Transcendence, which includes the concern for the well-being, interest, and protection for others (Benevolence and Universalism) (Caprara et al., 2011).

Specifically, this paper aims to investigate, together with coparenting, the construct of couple values. Previous studies, indeed, have shown the existence of a couple identity (e.g., Acitelli, Rogers, & Knee, 1999; Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998) or identity fusion (see for example Walsh & Neff, 2018), and, since values are a central aspect of people's identity (Barni, 2009; Hitlin, 2003; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004), mothers and fathers may develop a couple value system.

For this reason, the main aims of the current study were to (a) examine possible existing relationships between couple values and coparenting quality reported by both partners of cohabitants heterosexual couples; (b) investigate whether couple values explain coparenting quality reported by both partners of cohabitants heterosexual couples.

The main hypothesis was that preferring a certain type of values, as a couple, is linked to co-parenting quality (the way the same couple collaborate and share parenting tasks).

Material and methods

Participants and Procedure

Ninety-four Italian heterosexual couples with at least one child under the age of 13 years were enrolled. Both mothers ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.25$, $SD = 6.82$) and fathers ($M_{\text{age}} = 44.21$, $SD = 6.97$) were asked to fill-in two self-report questionnaires, individually. Participants, who took part spontaneously to the research after a presentation of the research project, received written information on Italian privacy regulations, and signed informed consent. The research was

conducted following the APA's ethical principles and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002).

Measures

The questionnaire applied to the partners includes the following measurement scales:

The Portrait Values Questionnaire [PVQ] (Schwartz et al., 2001) is a 40-item scale aimed at assessing personal values within the dimensions of self-transcendence, conservation, self-enhancement and openness to change. For the present research, an adapted version for measuring values shared within the parental couple was used. Examples of items for each value dimension are: "*It is important for this couple to live in a safe environment. Avoid anything that could endanger his safety*" (Conservation dimension, 6-item subscale; $\alpha = .78$ for both partners); "*It is important for this couple to have new ideas and to be creative. She likes to do things in her own original way*" (Openness to change dimension; 6-item subscale; $\alpha = .61$ / male partner; $\alpha = .70$ / female partner); "*It is important for this couple to be rich. Aims to have a lot of money and expensive things*" (Self-Enhancement dimension; 4-item subscale; $\alpha = .81$ / male partner; $\alpha = .76$ / female partner); "*He thinks it's important that every person in the world is treated equally. This couple believes that everyone should have the same opportunities in life*" (Self-Transcendence dimension; 5-item subscale; $\alpha = .72$ / male partner; $\alpha = .76$ /female partner).

The Coparenting Relationship Scale (Feinberg, 2003) is a 35-item self-report questionnaire aimed at assessing the different dimensions of co-parenting within the couple. Specifically, it identifies seven coparenting dimensions rated by different subscales: agreement (coparenting agreement): indicates the degree of agreement between parents on how to grow up and educate their child; closeness (coparenting closeness): measures the degree of physical and moral closeness between the two partners. It also measures the degree to which coparenting has improved couple intimacy and strengthened the couple's relationship; support (coparenting support): includes recognizing the other as a parent, supporting and respecting him in decisions; support (endorsement of parenting): it concerns the degree of support perceived by both partners; weakening (coparenting undermining): related to the size of the support, evaluates the presence of conflicts, discrimination and criticism within the couple; exposure to conflict: concerns the way in which parents expose children to their conflicts; division of labor: concerns the way in which parents feel supported in being parents, in the division of duties and responsibilities inherent in the growth and care of their child.

For the present research, 5 dimensions were used, namely: agreement, support, endorsement of parenting, undermining and closeness and the overall coparenting score for each partner. The objective of this tool was to detect the quality of coparenting. This tool allows the measurement of the individual dimensions of coparenting and the calculation of the overall coparenting score, for both partners, as the partners' willingness to collaborate in caring for the child increases as the partner grows. Responses occur on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = not true for us, to 6 = very true for us. Examples of items, for both partners, are: "*My partner and I have different ideas about our son/daughter regarding eating, sleeping and routines in general*" (Coparenting agreement dimension; 4-item subscale; $\alpha = .74$ /male partner; $\alpha = .83$ / female partner); "*I feel close to my partner when I see him/her playing with our son / daughter*" (Coparenting closeness dimension; 5-item subscale; $\alpha = .62$ /male partner; $\alpha = .65$ /female partner); "*My partner asks my opinion on issues concerning parenthood*" (Coparenting support dimension: 6-item subscale; $\alpha = .55$ /male partner; $\alpha = .70$ /female partner); "*My partner disqualifies my way of being a parent*" (Coparenting undermining dimension; 6-item subscale; $\alpha = .62$ /male partner; $\alpha =$

.76 / female partner); "I believe that my / my partner is a good parent" (Endorse parent parenting dimension; 7-item subscale; $\alpha = .56$ /male partner; $\alpha = .68$ /female partner).

Results

Bivariate Analyses

Bivariate correlations (Pearson’s r) among the studied variables (couple values and coparenting dimensions perceived by both parents) are presented in Table 1 (for fathers) and in Table 2 (for mothers).

For men, results showed a significant positive correlation between the conservation value and coparenting closeness ($r = .28, p < .01$). Moreover, they showed a significant positive relationship between openness to change value with both coparenting closeness ($r = .31, p < .01$) and coparenting support ($r = .37, p < .01$), and between self-transcendence value ad coparenting agreement ($r = .35, p < .01$), coparenting closeness ($r = .46, p < .01$), coparenting support ($r = .44, p < .01$) and coparenting Endorsement ($r = .25, p < .05$). Finally, a negative association emerged among the openness to change value and the coparenting undermining dimension ($r = -.23, p < .05$).

For women, instead, results showed a significant positive correlation between the conservation value and the coparenting agreement dimension ($r = .30, p < .01$), the coparenting closeness ($r = .35, p < .01$) and the coparenting support ($r = .41, p < .01$). Moreover, a significant positive correlation was found between the openness to change value and both coparenting closeness ($r = .37, p < .01$) and coparenting support ($r = .41, p < .01$). Finally, self-transcendence value reported by mothers resulted related to both their perceived coparenting closeness ($r = .30, p < .01$) and coparenting support ($r = .38, p < .01$).

Table 1.

Bivariate Correlations among studied variables for Men

Couple Values	Coparenting Dimensions				
	Agreement	Closeness	Support	Undermining	Endorsement
Conservation	.16	.28**	.09	-.01	.17
Openness to change	.17	.31**	.37**	-.02	.17
Self-Enhancement	-.01	-.01	.07	.02	-.06
Self-Transcendence	.35**	.46**	.44**	-.23*	.25*

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

Table 2.

Bivariate Correlations among studied variables for Women

Couple Values	Coparenting Dimensions				
	Agreement	Closeness	Support	Undermining	Endorsement
Conservation	.30**	.35**	.24*	-.14	.18
Openness to change	.13	.37**	.41**	-.01	.16
Self-Enhancement	-.04	-.01	.07	.02	-.06
Self-Transcendence	.07	.30**	.38**	-.02	.15

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

Multivariate Analyses

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to further investigate the contributions of couple values to variance of the coparenting quality. Specifically, two multiple linear regression models, one for mothers and one for fathers, have been performed to evaluate the contribution of couple values (Conservation, Openness to change, Self-enhancement and Self-Transcendence) in explaining coparenting quality (Coparenting Total Scale).

Results are presented in Table 3 (for men) and in Table 4 (for women). The multiple regression model for men revealed that the model as a whole accounted for almost 30% of the variance in perceived coparenting quality. In particular, Self-Transcendence resulted the most important predictor ($\beta = .412, t = 4.253, p = .000$). For women, the model accounted for almost 20% of the variability of the coparenting quality perceived by mothers. Specifically, Conservation resulted the most important predictor ($\beta = .239, t = 2.086, p = .040$).

Table 3.

Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Coparenting Quality reported by Men

Couple Values	Coparenting Quality			
	B	S.E.	β	P
Conservation	.084	.054	.154	.122
Openness to change	.131	.078	.172	.096
Self-Enhancement	-.024	.063	-.037	.709
Self-Transcendence	.304	.071	.412	.000
R	.542			
R ²	.294			

Note. B = unstandardized Beta values; S.E. = standard error; β = standardized Beta values; p = p-value for Beta values significance

Table 4.

Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Coparenting Quality reported by Women

Couple Values	Coparenting Quality			
	B	S.E.	β	P
Conservation	.154	.074	.239	.040
Openness to change	.171	.091	.223	.065
Self-Enhancement	-.077	.084	-.101	.364
Self-Transcendence	.104	.088	.129	.243
R	.435			
R ²	.189			

Note. B = unstandardized Beta values; S.E. = standard error; β = standardized Beta values; p = p-value for Beta values significance

Discussions

The main aims of the current study were to examine possible existing relationships between couple values and coparenting quality reported by both partners of cohabitants heterosexual couples; and investigate whether couple values explain coparenting quality reported by both partners of cohabitants heterosexual couples.

Results indicated that for men the most important predictor of coparenting is the self-transcendence of couple value, that is the sense of protection towards the other by ensuring equality, tolerance, and respect for the rules. For women, instead, the most important predictor is the couple value of conservation, that is, observance of the rules, respect for the traditions of one's own culture, attention in implementing actions or behaviors that could be harmful to people.

From a relational-symbolic perspective, these results can be traced back to the dimensions of the *patris-munus*, the ethical pole represented by the father who rules, guides the respect for the rules, the transmission of the values of equality, the educational norms of the family life, the sense of belonging, and of the *matris-munus*, the affective pole represented by care for one's child, affection and protection (Scabini & Iafrate, 2003).

Even if over time this distinction has gradually diminished, stating that both partners play the same roles and that these no longer represent a distinctive trait of one or the other partner, for women, taking care of others represents a persisting feature. Similarly, for men, the role of transmitter of ideals within the family, in terms of sense of equality, responsibility and respect. From obtained data also emerged that the tendency to avoid any risks or implement certain behaviors, which can endanger one's life, to respect the rules and to be extremely careful in carrying out actions that can threaten the serenity of others, increase the support of the partner role, sharing educational styles and managing conflicts within the couple.

There are several limitations in this research work such as the small number of participants, the children limited age range and the marginally acceptance of some values related to Cronbach alphas. It would be interesting to broaden the sample as well as the age range of the children, and to take into account the length of the couple relationship as a potential predictor variable of couple values and coparenting quality. Despite these limitations, this research is, as far as it is known, the first that applies the concept of values to the couple and places it in relation with a dyadic dimension such as coparenting.

Conclusions

From the results obtained, the authors found an important preference for parents of respecting one's own cultural traditions, respecting the rules, being tolerant, ensuring the well-being of others by mitigating impulsive behaviors that could harm others physically and emotionally.

The presence of these values could allow both partners to implement supportive and collaborative behaviors, to agree on education related issues for their children and to feel close and allied in upbringing their child.

It is clear the important role that couple values play, as an innovative construct, in contributing to the maintenance and promotion of generative behaviors within the couple. Obviously, the path of collaboration and sharing of ideals, ideas and behaviors is a complex path and couples may find themselves not agreeing on all fields. However, what it is consider important is the way in which these differences are addressed.

Being a parent is certainly not an easy task, especially when there is no solid alliance and a strong desire to share, collaborate and work for a common purpose, such as growing up and educating children.

Acknowledgements

A summary of this paper was presented at the online international conference: *Individual, family, society - contemporary challenges, fourth edition*, 6 to 7 October 2021, Bucharest, Romania and published in the journal *Studii și Cercetări de Antropologie*, No. 7/2021.

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