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Examining the consistency and coherence of values in young children using a new Animated Values Instrument

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ABSTRACT

The existence and formation of values across the lifespan has been of particular interest to psychology researchers for decades. In this study we examine the consistency and coherence of values in early childhood using a new animated instrument - the AVI (Animated Values Instrument). Based on Schwartz's circular values structure the AVI is a multi-sensory instrument designed to enhance young children's understanding of each value. We present evidence from a sample of 329 five to twelve year-olds that shows children, as young as five, make consistent choices about their own values. Results show that consistency of choice is high for the majority of children across all age groups and complete consistency of choice in almost all older children. We also demonstrate coherence in the circular structure of values in young children at the sample and individual level for the first time. The discussion outlines new directions for future research on the development of values in young children.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the consistency and coherence of values in early childhood. Values are a key concept in personality and social psychology (Hitlin, 2003), as they define what is important to a person in their life. Researchers have investigated the importance and structure of values in hundreds of adult samples from over 80 countries (Schwartz, 2012). However, relatively few studies have investigated the importance and structure of values in children (e.g., Döring, Daniel, & Knafo-Noam, 2016).

A range of instruments have been developed to measure values but these rely on adequate reading ability, which limits their usefulness in the study of young children. In order to test the consistency and coherence of values in young children we introduce and test a new Animated Values Instrument (AVI). This instrument was designed to take advantage of multimedia's capacity to effectively convey visual representations of unfamiliar elements to young children (Kim, Young, Neimeyer, Baker, & Barfield, 2008) and allow the assessment of consistency of value choice. Existing instruments were primarily designed to measure value priorities (i.e., how important certain values are to a child), rather than consistency and coherence of the value structure.

The structure of values within children is of particular interest in developmental psychology. From the beginning, findings in developmental psychology have emphasized the cognitive component (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Cognitive development of the child typically goes along with a better understanding of the self and a more differentiated understanding of one's own personality. A values instrument that not only measures the child's value priorities, but also values consistency and structure at a young age will enable researchers to better understand the development of values.

1.1. Personal values theory

Personal values represent motivational goals that are relatively stable across different contexts in adulthood (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). Values are central to our identity construction and concept of self (Hitlin, 2003). They convey what is important in our lives (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003) and motivate how we interact with and shape our world (Döring et al., 2016).

Schwartz (1992) advanced the field of values research by identifying a circular motivational continuum that underlies the structure of values. He partitioned this continuum into 10 universal value types and four higher order values, as presented in Fig. 1. In this structure adjacent values in the circle (e.g., universalism and benevolence) are positively related as they express compatible motivations, whereas opposing values (e.g., power and universalism) are negatively related as they express conflicting motivations (Schwartz, 1992).

A long-standing assumption in values research has been that value structures exist within individuals, rather than only across individuals. Gollan and Witte (2014) and Borg, Bardi, and Schwartz (2015) were the first to test this assumption in adults. Their results found that value structures exist within adults. They argue that it is very unlikely to find an adult who ascribes high importance to opposing values

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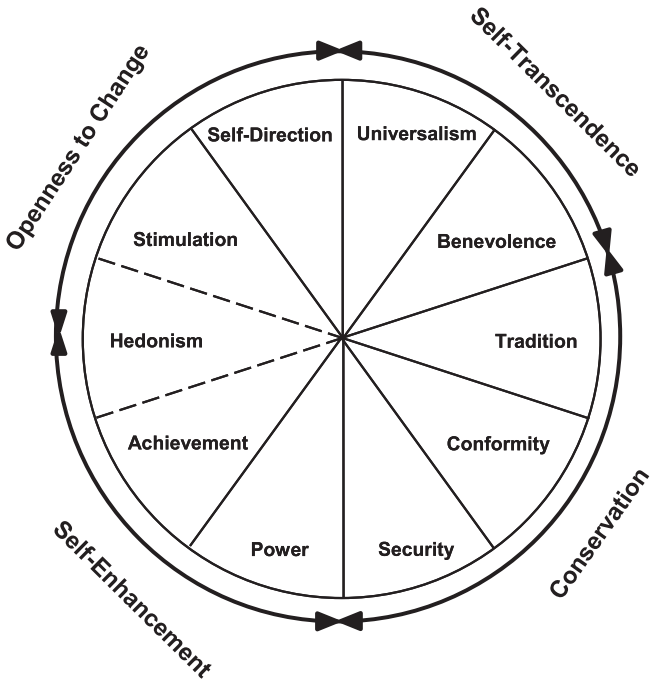

Fig. 1. Schwartz (1992) original circular model of ten basic human values and the four higher order values.

(Borg et al., 2015). We extend their research, to examine the consistency and coherence of values within young children.

1.2. Children's values

Recently, significant progress has been made in understanding the structure of children's values. Across individuals, the circular structure of values has also been found in childhood, with almost as much differentiation as adults (e.g., Döring, Blauensteiner, Aryus, Drögekamp, & Bilsky, 2010). However, younger children were more inconsistent in the ordering of values around the circle than older children (Cieciuch, Davidov, & Algesheimer, 2016; Uzefovsky, Döring, & Knafo-Noam, 2016). This evidence suggests that value development occurs in early childhood (2 to 7 years) and calls for research and instruments to assess values in early childhood.

The first longitudinal studies of children's values also shed light on the development of value priorities in childhood (Döring et al., 2016). Value priorities (i.e., how important children find each value) can be affected by individual characteristics (e.g., gender), by life experiences (e.g., growing up in a religious home), or by significant life events (e.g., immigration). These characteristics, experiences, and events also show an age trend in their influence on value priorities. For example openness to change values became more important and conservation values became less important from childhood to adolescence (Cieciuch et al., 2016). Motivational compatibilities and incompatibilities reflected in these studies are highly relevant for developmental psychology.

1.3. The measurement of children's values

Children's values have predominantly been measured using the Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz et al., 2001: PVQ), which was designed for adults. The PVQ has been used to measure values in children as young as 10 (e.g., Bubeck & Bilsky, 2004; Döring, 2010; Knafo & Spinath, 2011; Liem, Martin, Nair, Bernado, & Prasetya, 2011). Studies using this instrument found that children's values reflect the motivational compatibilities and conflicts inherent in the four higher order values. They also found less differentiation between the 10 basic values in younger children.

Döring (2010) suggested that the lack of differentiation in children's values could be related to the complex wording of the PVQ scenarios. As a result, Döring et al. (2010) developed a Picture-Based Value Survey for Children (PBVS-C). They found comparable differentiation in values to what has been found in adults, with PBVS-C data from children between 8 and 11 years old. They also found strong support for the trade-offs between Schwartz's (1992) higher order values and significant correspondence with the ordering of the 10 basic value types. However, power and achievement were reversed and tradition was located closer to benevolence than might be expected.

Research into children's values across instruments implies that the development of a coherent structure of values is a function of age. Researchers have referred to age and stage type theories (e.g., Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), with the expectation that values would be most likely to develop in the 'formal operations stage' (i.e., 12 years to adult) or the 'concrete operations stage' (i.e., 7 to 11 years old) (Döring et al., 2015). These arguments are supported by evidence of progressively differentiated values with age across both stages (e.g., Bubeck & Bilsky, 2004; Döring, 2010; Döring et al., 2010).

While age is clearly an important factor in the development of values, it is not the only factor. For instance, Bubeck and Bilsky (2004) found gender differences in the development of values, with females showing more differentiation in their values than males. This suggests that children's value development may also differ within age groups (e.g., gender differences within age groups).

Vygotsky (1933/1978) socio-cultural theory is based on learning and development taking place in a social context, supporting the idea that children develop at different rates. He believed children could be taught difficult concepts effectively at any stage of development by building on their existing knowledge. Thus, based on Vygotsky's theory, a clear and differentiated values structure could develop, for at least some children, within what Piaget refers to as the pre-operational stage (2 to 7 year olds).

One obstacle to testing the development of values in young children, with existing instruments, is reading ability. To overcome this, we developed a new values instrument that incorporated verbal, visual and auditory information about each value, to maximise young children's opportunity to understand these somewhat abstract concepts.

1.4. The current research

The aim of this research was to examine the consistency and coherence of values in early childhood using a multi-sensory instrument to enhance young children's understanding of each value. Specifically, we examined whether young children make consistent choices about the importance of values when faced with multiple choice contexts (within subsets of values) and whether their values reflect Schwartz's (1992) value theory.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 329 children (47% male) between the ages of 5 and 12 years from five primary schools in Australia. Written consent was obtained from the governing bodies, school, parents and students. Children with cognitive disabilities were excluded.

2.2. Measure and procedure

2.2.1. The Animated Values Instrument

We first developed a series of 3–5 second animated scenarios that combined visual, auditory and written cues, designed to increase young children's comprehension of the values presented. In each case,