CHILD DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES

What Can We Learn About Aggression From What Adolescents Consider Important in Life? The Contribution of Values Theory to Aggression Research

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ABSTRACT—***Values are abstract goals that serve as guiding principles in people's lives. Schwartz's theory (1992) offers a comprehensive framework to understand what motivates human behavior. It classifies people's broad motivations into a system of values organized in a circumplex structure. In this article, I explain how recent findings from studies of values can add to our knowledge of what motivates adolescents to behave aggressively. For example, during adolescence, values emphasizing caring for others and maintaining social norms relate negatively to aggression, whereas values promoting self-focus and pursuing new experiences and stimulation relate to aggressive acts. I also discuss the potentially protective role of some values, the mechanisms mediating the relations between values and aggression, and the relations between values and aggression over time. Finally, I suggest new directions for research and discuss the importance of including values in interventions to prevent aggression.***

KEYWORDS—*values; aggression; adolescence*

Aggression in adolescents is a major concern for researchers and educators alike. This behavior that deliberately aims to harm others has a long-lasting effect on the psychological and physical health of individuals as well as on the social fabric more broadly (Fahy et al., 2016). Aggression has many sources, including ones that are influential in early childhood. Yet, aggression appears frequently in adolescence, though it varies substantially by individual. In this article, I focus on the ability of the Schwartz basic values theory (SBVT), currently the most prevalent and validated theory of human values, to contribute to our understanding of adolescent aggression. This theory defines values as abstract and desirable goals that function as guiding principles in life and motivate action (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012). It is associated with a large range of behaviors (Roccas & Sagiv, 2010), including aggression, and can extend or strengthen underdeveloped aspects of developmental theories of aggressive behavior among adolescents. Some of these theories focus on specific motivations or goals, such as agency or communion (Ojanen, Grönroos, & Salmivalli, 2005). SBVT broadens this perspective because its *comprehensive framework* introduces a wide range of general goals. Other theories focus on specific situations and stimuli leading to aggressive acts. However, some adolescents are aggressive with no previous cues or provocations, which calls for research on *internal motivations* for aggression. Finally, our values shape our perception and interpretation of the world (Roccas & Sagiv, 2010); as such, they can be considered glasses though which we see the world. While researchers have made considerable progress describing *processes* associated with aggression (e.g., moral judgment, social information processing [SIP]; Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004), we know very little about the *predisposition* of adolescents to act aggressively in the world. In this respect, SBVT complements theories that focus on process.

Values emerge in early childhood through interactions with meaningful socialization figures such as parents and by immersion in significant social contexts like schools. Heritability plays an important role in the development of values (Uzefovsky, Döring, & Knafo-Noam, 2016). Before values develop, toddlers sometimes act aggressively to achieve a goal (e.g., grabbing a

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I would like to thank my colleagues and friends Ella Daniel and Ariel Knafo-Noam for reading an earlier version of the manuscript and providing enlightening comments. A special acknowledgment should be given to Ross Thompson for his generosity in sharing his knowledge and his helpful and constructive comments on the manuscript.

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DOI: 10.1111/cdep.12344

toy from a peer). Later in life, young people's many specific and concrete goals develop to become more abstract motivations reflecting more general goals (Döring, Daniel, & Knafo-Noam, 2016). Until recently, studies on values were not conducted on children younger than adolescents, but in studies using new methods, children demonstrated the same interrelated values structure, even in elementary school (Döring et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, it is not surprising that researchers who study values are more interested in adolescents. Since values reflect abstract goals, they require advanced cognitive skills that reach maturity during adolescence. Once teenagers can think abstractly, they can consider and evaluate hypothetical scenarios; this advanced thinking allows them to refine their values. During adolescence, they also begin to distinguish themselves from their parents and form a separate identity. As adolescents learn who they are, they can reflect on and explore their values, developing a unique personality in the process (Daniel & Benish-Weisman, 2018).

Values represent what is important in the lives of all individuals (Döring et al., 2016). Although all our values are important to us, we organize them by their importance and endorse some but not others. Thus, different adolescents endorse different values. For example, some endorse social justice while others pursue enjoyment. Although value priorities differ between individuals and cultures, the interrelations between the values hypothesized by SBVT, as I detail later, are consistent in more than 200 studies in more than 70 cultures (Sagiv & Roccas, 2017). This finding validates its equivalence in meaning across countries, and it suggests the utility of examining individual differences in the relations between values and aggression internationally.

Values are often mentioned alongside similar concepts such as social goals, attitudes, and traits, but these concepts differ in important ways (Roccas & Sagiv, 2010): *Social goals* are socially specific (i.e., they focus on social relations; Ojanen et al., 2005) while values demonstrate broader motivations. Unlike *attitudes*, which are specific to a particular situation or object, values are stable across situations and time, with some small variations (Daniel et al., 2012). Like values, *traits* tend to be stable. However, values represent desirable goals that are commendable and worthy, whereas traits can be either positive or negative, with some experienced as contradictory to adolescents' ideal self-image.

VALUE IMPORTANCE AND AGGRESSION

Schwartz (1992) defines 10 values and organizes them on a circumplex continuum. In this model, relations in space reflect associations between variables. The organization of the values on the circle reflects this principle: Values that are adjacent to each other share similar broad motivations and are related similarly to behavior while those opposite each other reflect different motivations and different behaviors. This structure is based on social and psychological contradictions or congruities between values that people experience when they make decisions and perform behaviors. That is, pursuing one value will come into conflict with some values and be congruent with others. While it is useful to examine how each of the 10 values relates to aggression, many studies have focused on four broader values created by combining adjacent values on the continuum and organizing them on two orthogonal bipolar dimensions (see Figure 1).

The first dimension contains self-enhancement values (power and achievement) versus self-transcendence values (universalism and benevolence); these focus on the goal of promoting the self and controlling others versus the goal of caring for the interests and welfare of others. Adolescents who attribute more importance to self-enhancement values are more aggressive than adolescents who attribute less importance to them (Benish-Weisman, Daniel, & Knafo-Noam, 2017). This is especially true for power values because the aspiration for social status and the desire to control others often lead to aggressive behavior (Benish-Weisman, 2015). These values strengthen during adolescence (Daniel & Benish-Weisman, 2018), making this developmental period an important area of study. Self-transcendence values represent opposite motivations; adolescents who attribute importance to others' well-being and value tolerance and equality are less aggressive than their peers who do not do so (Seddig & Davidov, 2018) because the outcomes of behaving aggressively are contradictory to these broad motivations. These results echo findings from studies of social goals in which agentic goals (i.e., goals reflecting the desire to establish authority, gain resources, or appear confident) are associated with aggressive behavior, whereas communal goals (i.e., goals that emphasize closeness and affiliation with others) are associated with prosocial behavior (Ojanen et al., 2005).

The second value dimension captures two powerful motivations in adolescents' lives. Openness-to-change values capture the aspiration to think and act independently, be involved in new experiences, and enjoy life (values of self-direction, stimulation, and hedonism). In contrast, conservation values reflect the desire to keep social order and maintain the status quo (values of conformity, tradition, and security). This dimension receives less attention in theories of aggression development but has theoretically meaningful and empirically significant associations with aggression, especially during adolescence. Along with the attempt to form an independent identity, the neurological changes accompanying adolescence increase teenagers' tendency to pursue excitement and seek pleasure; the area of the brain responsible for controlling emotions and impulses and for planning matures fully only in early adulthood (Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008). The need for excitement without the fully developed ability to assess the consequences of acts may lead some adolescents to be more aggressive, but the wish to meet social expectations and follow traditions and norms may lead others in the opposite direction. Studies find openness-to-change values

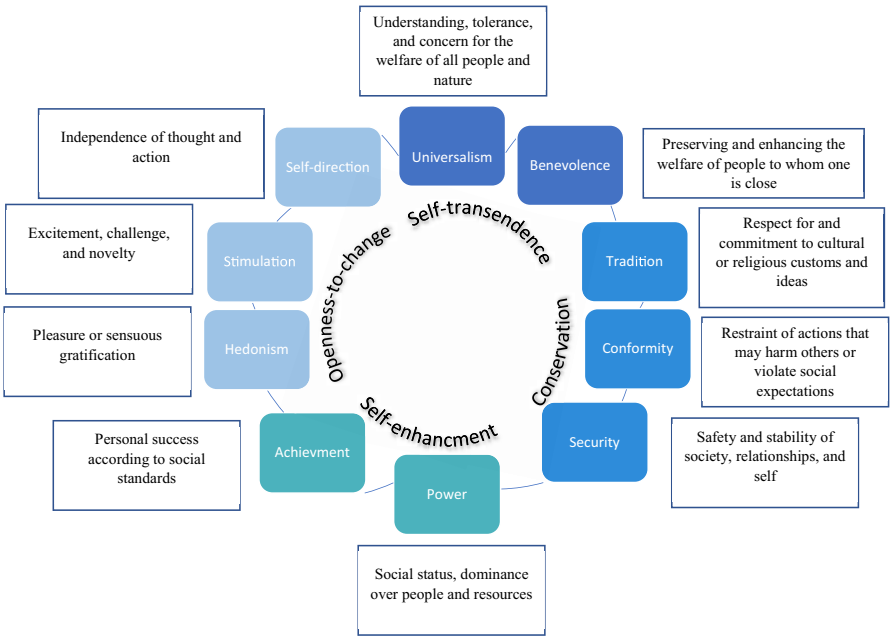

Figure 1. The theoretical model of the structure and definitions of the 10 values. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

relate positively to aggression and conservation values relate negatively to aggression (Benish-Weisman et al., 2017).

RELATIONS BETWEEN VALUES PROFILES AND AGGRESSION

Adolescents often need to balance and negotiate more than one value when considering behaviors, such as aggressive behaviors. Values do not operate in isolation. Rather, values that share similar motivations enhance the same behaviors, and those based on contradicting motivations diminish or even hinder such behaviors (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Sverdlik, 2012). SBVT predicts which values are likely to be endorsed together. For example, adolescents who attribute importance to self-enhancement values that might lead to aggressive behaviors might also attribute importance to openness-to-change values, but they are not likely to endorse the conflicting motivation of self-transcendence values that relate negatively to aggressive behaviors (see Figure 1). Many studies have focused on relations between a single value and aggression, but their failure to assess the co-influence of values on behavior might make associations with aggression less accurate.

This person-centered approach allows us to examine not only the effect of one specific value but also the potentially protective effect of one value from the potentially destructive effects of another. For example, we know openness-to-change values relate positively to aggressive behavior among adolescents. However, in a study of North American and Israeli adolescents, youth who attributed importance to openness-to-change *and* self-transcendence values were less aggressive than youth who attributed importance to openness-to-change *and* self-enhancement values (Ungvary, McDonald, & Benish-Weisman, 2018). Thus, openness-to-change values, such as seeking pleasure but also curiosity and the need for novelty, can be enhanced by parents and educators without the potential risk of increased aggression *if* values of caring for others are also inculcated.

MECHANISMS UNDERLYING THE RELATIONS BETWEEN VALUES AND AGGRESSION

Values affect behavior through two main mechanisms: They evoke an emotional reaction, and they increase the perception and interpretation of a specific stimulus (Schwartz, 2017). Although the mediating role of emotions in the relations between values and aggression has never been tested, theory suggests that values might activate specific emotions, and, indeed, evidence shows that values relate to specific emotions. For example, in a cross-cultural study of adults, self-enhancement values were related to a desire to feel anger (Tamir et al., 2016), and in a study of Finnish adolescents, guilt and empathy were correlated negatively with power values and associated positively with universalism and benevolence values (Silfver, Helkama, Lönnqvist, & Verkasalo, 2008).

Values lead individuals to observe the world in a specific way. They draw attention to information cues, and affect how people interpret events and behave as a result (Roccas & Sagiv, 2010). For example, when a person cuts into a line at the supermarket, people who attribute high importance to self-enhancement values might interpret the intruder's intention as the need to be ahead or even to deliberately make others late,

and they may react aggressively; people who attribute high importance to self-transcendence values might simply think the person is in a hurry and act prosocially by allowing the intruder to pass without comment.

How perception and interpretation affect aggression fits into the SIP model (Crick & Dodge, 1994). The circular SIP model focuses on six mental processes (encoding of cues, interpretation of cues, clarification of goals, response access or construction, response decision, and behavioral enactment). According to the SIP model, each of the mental processes is affected (but also influenced) by a mental structure called the database that stores memories, experiences, social schemes, and knowledge.

I suggest that values might affect every step of the model, especially accessing and evaluating responses. In this way, values become part of the database. The distinctive framework of value theory could add a significant component to the SIP model, one that might be seen as value blind (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001). As mentioned earlier, values are like glasses though which adolescents view the world, and each step in the SIP model is affected by the values through which they interpret their reality. As in the example from the supermarket, values add specific content, with the potential to influence our understanding and predictions of individual differences in the antecedents to aggression.

Two types of social goals relate to aggression: instrumental and dominance goals and intimacy and relational goals. The former are more common among boys and often correlated with direct aggression, whereas the latter are more pertinent to girls and correlated with relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Although similar gender differences have been found for values (Schwartz & Rubel, 2005), few studies have examined the associations among values, gender, and different types of aggression. Researchers should attempt to fill this gap.

One of the advantages of examining values as antecedents to aggression is that the values are abstract and likely reflect people's core schemas (i.e., the cognitive structures that operate as central aspects of the self; Bardi & Goodwin, 2011). As such, they are expected to relate to aggression, with some variations, across situations and contexts. Indeed, the aforementioned associations between values and aggression are found consistently for different kinds of aggression, such as direct, indirect, and cyber-bullying (McDonald, Benish-Weisman, O'Brien, & Ungvary, 2015; Menesini, Nocentini, & Camodeca, 2013), and in different contexts, such as schools and sports (Danioni & Barni, 2017; Knafo, Daniel, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2008). They are also found in studies in which aggression is reported by various informants (e.g., self-reports, peer nominations; Benish-Weisman & McDonald, 2015; Seddig & Davidov, 2018).

Although values are associated with aggression across settings, the relations are not always similar in different contexts. Different contexts can enhance or hinder the ways values are manifested in the form of aggressive behavior. For example, schools with high levels of aggression may provide a more permissive atmosphere where adolescents have more legitimacy to express their values in aggressive acts and face fewer social restrictions. Indeed, in studies, the correlations between values and aggression were stronger in such schools (see Bacchini, Affuso, & Aquilar, 2015; Knafo et al., 2008).

In summary, values relate to different kinds of aggression in various contexts. Adolescents who attribute importance to their own needs and goals, that is, to self-enhancement and openness-to-change values, tend to behave more aggressively than adolescents who attribute importance to other people's needs and to social norms, that is, to self-transcendence and conservation values. Values affect aggression through emotion and cognition. For example, self-enhancement values connected to emotions have been related positively to aggression (e.g., anger). In addition, values affect the way adolescents perceive and interpret the world.

RELATIONS BETWEEN VALUES AND AGGRESSION OVER TIME

Although some Western studies suggest an increase in self-focused values during adolescence, values are generally stable during this period (Aquilar, Bacchini, & Affuso, 2018; Daniel & Benish-Weisman, 2018). This makes them a useful tool to study behavior (e.g., aggression) across time. Longitudinal models allow us to examine the direction of relations between values and behavior. By definition, values are hypothesized to direct behavior, including social behavior. Behaving in accordance with one's personal values seems beneficial; by pursuing those values, adolescents are more likely to fulfil their goals (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Oppenheim-Weller, Roccas, & Kurman, 2018). This mechanism also tends to preserve itself by contributing to self-consistency (Bardi & Goodwin, 2011; Rokeach, 1973). The role of values in promoting behaviors is supported by experimental studies of adults and adolescents (Döring & Hillbrink, 2015; Maio, Pakizeh, Cheung, & Rees, 2009) and longitudinal studies of adolescents (Vecchione, Döring, Alessandri, Marsicano, & Bardi, 2016).

Behavior might affect values, too (Vecchione et al., 2016). In a study of Israeli adolescents, a decrease in aggression was associated with an increase in self-transcendence values over time (Benish-Weisman, 2015). Similarly, in a study of Italian teenagers, aggression was related negatively to self-transcendence and also to conservation values over time (Aquilar et al., 2018). Arguably, when acting in a nonaggressive and peaceful way, adolescents observe their own behavior and attribute it to their values (Bem, 1967). These correlations might be strengthened by the social environment; parents, educators, and peers could observe behavior and reinforce the values they assume adolescents have. These reciprocal associations may create a virtuous cycle in which social-focused values are strengthened; because of this, aggressive behavior decreases, leading to another increase in social-focused values. Therefore, changes in

behavior might be a key to changes in values. In interventions, to instigate changes in values, the aggressive behavior could be changed first using specific reinforcement or influencing attitudes such as moral judgment (Aquilar et al., 2018).

DIRECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Studies suggest that culture and social norms might moderate the ties between values and behavior (Roccas & Sagiv, 2010), but I suggest that individual characteristics also play an important role. Specifically, when adolescents are more aware of their values and their identity is more consolidated, they are more likely to follow their values and express them in a congruent behavior. For example, among boys who reported high levels of private self-consciousness, self-transcendence values were significantly and negatively correlated with aggression (Benish-Weisman & McDonald, 2015); no such relations appeared among boys who reported low levels of private self-consciousness. Similarly, I suggest that among adolescents who developed a committed identity, the associations between values and aggression may be stronger. Researchers should take a closer look at this direction.

Studies of the moral domain have focused on children's understanding of morality as distinct from social conventions and how this affects their behavior (Killen & Smetana, 2015). Although most children judge aggression as morally wrong, some still act aggressively, possibly because of individual differences in distinguishing moral from conventional concepts. For example, in one study, children who differentiated moral from conventional norms less successfully engaged in more proactive aggression (Jambon & Smetana, 2018). Because values reflect an important individual difference among adolescents, adding this component to studies of the moral domain may deepen our understanding of variations in how the moral domain relates to aggression. For example, adolescents who attribute high importance to power values (i.e., those promoting self-gain and dominance over others) may be less able to differentiate moral from conventional events, and thus be more likely to display more proactive aggression.

The relations between values and aggression are well established; we know much less about the mechanisms mediating these associations (Hanel, Vione, Hahn, & Maio, 2017). As mentioned previously, a possible mechanism is emotions (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004), which have not yet been examined as a mediator of values and aggression. Emotions might provide a link between values and aggression, even without an initial external stimulus. In their model of emotion processes, Arsenio and Lemerise (2001) recognized the need to integrate emotions into the SIP model. For example, instrumental goals might relate to a lack of empathy, which promotes aggression. However, focusing on a relatively narrowed concept of social goals (instrumental vs. relational) does not permit us to grasp the variety of motivations and how the dynamic between them affects aggression. Researchers should examine this possibility more closely in relation to values.

The SBVT model can add another layer to the study of aggression, complementing SIP. Enhancing social-focused values (especially self-transcendence values) in intervention and educational programs may help decrease levels of aggression. Moreover, since values are broad concepts, unlike attitudes (which tend to be specific and relate to a particular behavioral outcome), they may influence a variety behaviors, not just aggression. For example, self-transcendence values relate to other positive factors, such as prosocial behavior and self-esteem (Arieli, Grant, & Sagiv, 2014; Sagiv, Roccas, & Oppenheim-Weller, 2015). Enhancing self-transcendence values might have a larger beneficial effect than just decreasing aggression, improving adolescents' prosocial behaviors, well-being, and adjustment.

In this article, I reviewed research on values and aggression in adolescents. Overall, during adolescence, values emphasizing caring for others and maintaining social norms are associated negatively with aggression, whereas values enhancing self-focus and promoting personal excellence, new experiences, and excitement are associated positively with aggressive acts. Findings suggest that self-transcendence values can serve as a protective factor from the potentially violent effect of openness-to-change values as well as from the negative influence of a violent environment. Emotions, perception, and interpretations may be important mechanisms that mediate the relations between values and aggression. Values predict aggression, but aggression can also predict values. An effective way to change values and behaviors over time is to start with changing behavior, followed by changing values. However, including a component that emphasizes self-transcendence values is crucial when planning intervention and educational programs to prevent aggression.

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