

ARTICLE

“Tell me who your friends are, and I will tell you who you are:” The contribution of peers to adolescents' values

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Abstract

Values serve as guiding principles, motivating specific behaviors, and actions. Peers spend a considerable amount of time together, thus offering a unique platform for the acquisition and development of values. During adolescence, a stage of life when youth are actively defining their identities, peers emerge as vital social agents, contributing significantly to the process of value formation. In this article, I examine the ways peers contribute to the development of youth's values, with a focus on basic personal values theory. This theory sheds light on how and why peers play a role in shaping the values of adolescents. It examines the phenomenon of similarity in peer values (*values similarity*) and explores how factors such as gender, age, and culture act as potential moderators in the relation between peers' and youth's values similarity. I conclude by summarizing key insights and proposing directions for research.

KEYWORDS

peers, values, values development

Values play a significant role in youth's lives by influencing their self-perceptions and perspectives on the world, guiding behavior, and motivating them to act in certain ways (Sagiv et al., 2017). Thus, the development of values during childhood and adolescence is a key area of research (Twito-Weingarten & Knafo-Noam, 2022). Although studies have extensively explored the impact of parents on children's values (Grusec & Davidov, 2010; Knafo-Noam et al., 2020), limited attention has been paid to the role of nondomestic factors, such as peers.

Peer relationships offer a unique context for the development of values during adolescence. First, peers spend a significant amount of time together. They engage in shared activities and establish strong emotional bonds. Adolescents have ample opportunity to observe, learn from, and be influenced by their peers' values and behaviors (Rubin et al., 2015). Second, peer relationships are characterized by a sense of egalitarianism, where individuals of similar age and status interact on relatively

equal footing. This equality encourages open dialogue, perspective sharing, and the exchange of values (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Adolescents engage in discussions, debates, and negotiations with peers, helping them challenge and refine their own values while considering alternative viewpoints.

While peers play a significant role throughout development, their influence becomes particularly pronounced during adolescence. Brain development makes adolescents especially susceptible to socioaffective cues, such as peer feedback (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). This susceptibility might result in negative outcomes such as delinquent behaviors or positive outcomes such as prosocial behaviors (Telzer et al., 2022). Puberty brings physiological changes that allow adolescents to assume more mature roles, and they often turn to peers to accomplish various developmental tasks (Jugert & Titzmann, 2020). Cognitive advances, including enhanced abstract and hypothetical thinking, as well as improved self-regulation abilities, enable adolescents

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to contemplate their values more deeply and pursue new personal goals (Dahl et al., 2018). This transition makes adolescence a prime stage of life to explore, develop, and potentially revise values in the company of peers.

A growing body of research has examined how peers contribute to youth's personal values, yet these studies have not been reviewed. In this article, I address the gap by examining how and why peers play a pivotal role in shaping the values of adolescents. After reviewing studies on peers' similarity of values (*values similarity*), I suggest factors that moderate relations between peers' and youth's values. Finally, I suggest new theoretical and methodological directions to help the field gain a more comprehensive understanding of how peers contribute to youth's values.

WHY AND HOW PEERS CONTRIBUTE TO YOUTH'S VALUES

Although opposites are said to attract, research shows that peers who interact tend to be similar in their preferences, goals, attitudes, and behaviors (Laursen, 2017). Similarly, theories of peer values attempt to explain *why* and *how* the resemblance occurs (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). One of the answers to *why* is straightforward: Congruence in peer values is inherently rewarding (Güroğlu, 2022) and peer support boosts well-being (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Moreover, peers represent a primary source for identity formation. The influence of peers increases during adolescence; in this crucial phase of identity development, youth explore various values, lifestyles, and choices (Crocetti, 2017; Meeus, 2011). As part of the exploration process, they may question the values they have learned from their family or cultural background and actively explore alternatives. In many cultures, this process is a way for adolescents to differentiate themselves from their parents, establishing their individuality and autonomy (Branje, 2018). Through this exploration and the subsequent integration of values, adolescents gradually form a unique identity, paving the way to adulthood.

During the journey of self-discovery and identity formation, adolescents' interactions with peers play a significant role in shaping their values and behaviors. Engaging with peers allows youth to explore social roles, experiment with various interests, consider alternative paths, and establish connections with individuals who share similar values or interests. Peer interactions provide opportunities for adolescents to receive feedback, validation, and social acceptance, all of which are crucial for their self-esteem and sense of belonging (Asher & Weeks, 2018; Prinstein & Giletta, 2016). Adolescents may conform with their peers to fit in, gain acceptance, or avoid social exclusion (Prinstein & Giletta, 2016). The desire for social approval can influence adolescents to adopt and internalize certain values, as they seek to align themselves with the perceived

norms and expectations of their peer group (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021).

Two main processes explain *how* youth's values come to resemble those of their peers. *Selection* suggests that youth tend to befriend peers with similar values and interests. *Socialization* encompasses the direct and indirect influences of peers on youth's values (e.g., Brown et al., 2008; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; Veenstra et al., 2023). In socialization processes, adolescents are influenced by their peers' values through shared experiences, discussions, and social exchanges. These interactions provide opportunities to learn from their peers, thereby shaping their own values based on what they perceive as desirable or appropriate. Peers may engage in proactive measures to uphold or even reinforce shared values within the group. They can use various approaches, both negative (e.g., sanctions, rejection; Ferguson et al., 2023) and constructive (e.g., laughter, positive feedback), to ensure adoption and preservation of behaviors aligned with the group's values (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017). Values socialization also occurs indirectly through observational learning (Bandura, 1986), in which children observe what their peers perceive as important.

Studies on adolescents suggest that both selection and socialization processes contribute to youth's values resembling those of their peers (*peer values resemblance*; Laursen, 2017). Selection ensures that individuals are surrounded by peers who share similar values, creating a supportive social environment that reinforces and validates these values. Socialization provides opportunities for individuals to acquire and internalize values through direct interactions and observational learning. Studies of adults in various cultures and contexts have found evidence for both processes, with stronger support for selection (Arieli et al., 2016; Bardi et al., 2014). In a study of business school students, from the initial week of their academic journey, freshmen demonstrated values congruent with the value profile of their respective departments, suggesting a selection process based on values. A comparative analysis of Israeli freshman and senior university students, supplemented by a yearlong study of the freshman cohort, found a marginal shift in students' values throughout their academic training, offering limited support for the concept of values socialization (Arieli et al., 2016). How these processes work in adolescents has been studied less (Schmid, 2012).

BASIC PERSONAL VALUES THEORY

Values reflect people's core schemas, that is, cognitive structures operating as central aspects of the self (Bardi & Goodwin, 2011). Values broadly affect a variety of outcomes, including perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. They share some similarities with another psychological construct, attitudes. Both can actively drive behavior (Sagiv & Roccas, 2021), but values are

organized hierarchically based on their compatibility and importance. They motivate individuals consistently across various situations over time. Attitudes tend to be narrowly focused on specific objects and individuals and to predict the likelihood of only specific actions (Sagiv & Roccas, 2021). Values predict both specific and broad behaviors, so examining them is a useful way to study motivation throughout life (Knafo-Noam et al., 2023).

In this article, I focus on basic personal values theory, as outlined and conceptualized by Schwartz (1992, 2012), for several reasons. First, Schwartz's theory has received robust empirical support from more than 500 studies in nearly 100 countries (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022). Second, it has considerable influence within the academic community (by 2023, Schwartz's, 1992 work had been cited more than 23,000 times), especially in research on youth (Knafo-Noam et al., 2023). Third, it offers a wide range of motivations and facilitates studies conducted among populations such as Hispanic/Latinx families that focus on specific values like familism (Cahill et al., 2021; Knight & Carlo, 2012).

Schwartz (1992) proposed a system of 10 types of values, organized in a circular structure; adjacent values share similar underlying motivations and opposing values may have contradictory meanings (see Figure 1). The 10 values can be grouped into four higher-order categories organized along two orthogonal bipolar dimensions, where opposing poles represent conflicting motivations (Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). The first dimension

focuses on the tension between self-enhancement and self-transcendence. Self-enhancement values, including power and achievement values, focus on personal goals and success by exerting control over others. Self-transcendence values, such as universalism and benevolence, prioritize concern for the well-being and interests of others. The second dimension emphasizes the conflict between openness to change and conservation values. Openness-to-change values, including stimulation, self-direction, and hedonism, emphasize the pursuit of novelty, new ideas, experiences, and actions. Conversely, conservation values, such as conformity, tradition, and security, highlight the importance of preserving the status quo to protect oneself and society.

FINDINGS ON PEER VALUES SIMILARITY AMONG YOUTH

During early childhood, children favor peers who are in close proximity and share similar demographic traits, such as gender. As they grow older, their preferences shift toward those with similar values and interests (Ellis & Zabatany, 2017). Emerging evidence suggests that youth's values tend to resemble those of their peers, with interesting findings reported across age groups and cultural contexts. In a study in Australia (Astill et al., 2002), 12th graders demonstrated similarities with their peers, particularly in values emphasizing

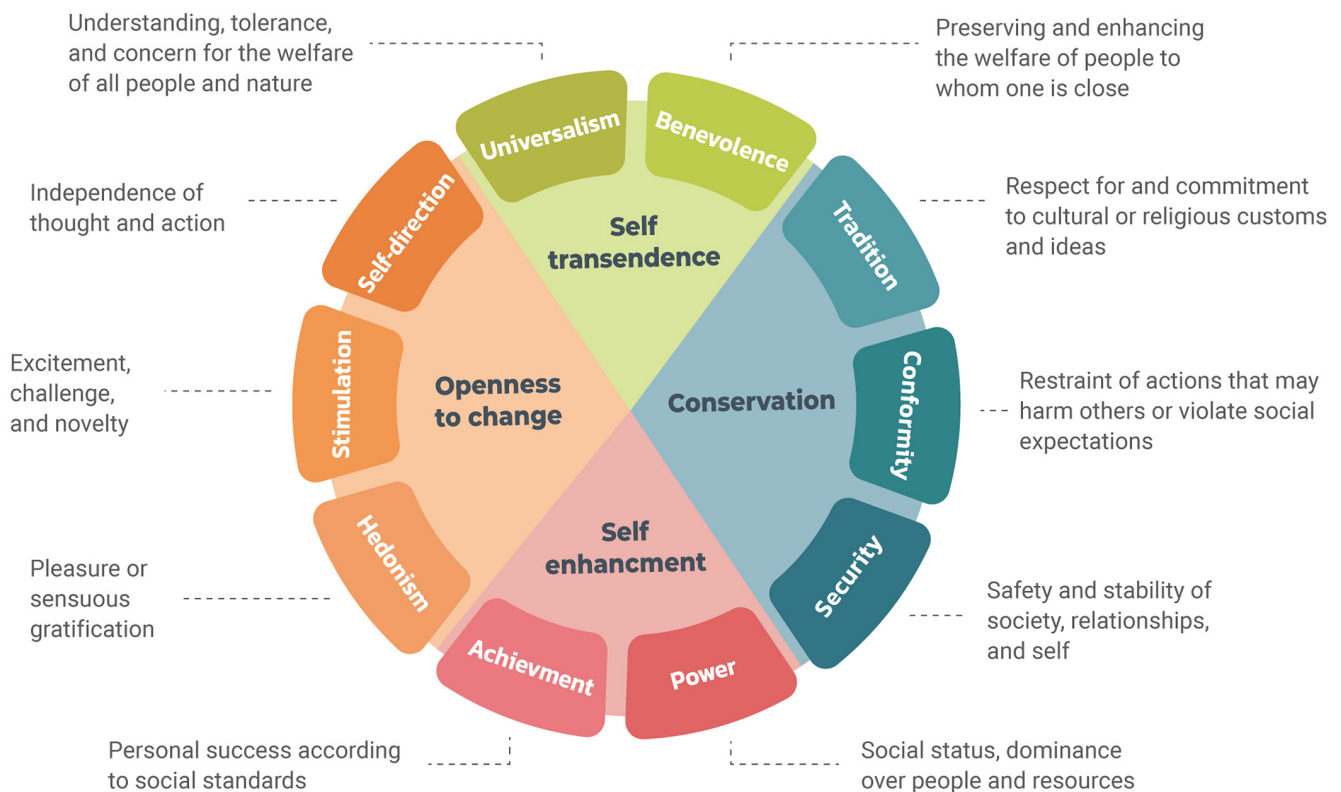


FIGURE 1 Theoretical model of the structure and definitions of the 10 values.

self-promotion. Similarly, in a study in Israel (Solomon & Knafo, 2007), researchers found a significant level of similarity in values among 11th-grade friends compared to nonfriends. These findings have been replicated in younger age groups over time. For example, in a large-scale study of elementary school students from all parts of Israel, most of whom were Jewish (Benish-Weisman et al., 2021), the values of children's peers predicted students' values 2 years later, suggesting a longitudinal association between peer values and individual values development. Taken collectively, these findings suggest that peers make important contributions to youth's values, starting at elementary school age and continuing into adolescence.

MODERATORS OF PEER-YOUTH VALUES SIMILARITY

Potential moderators of values similarity include gender, age, and culture. These factors have long been recognized as influential in shaping various aspects of human development, including the formation of values' content and structure (Benish-Weisman et al., 2019; Schwartz & Rubel, 2005). Understanding how gender, age, and culture moderate peer-youth values similarity can clarify the dynamics of selection and socialization. These factors can bring adolescents together; for example, adolescents tend to hang out with others from the same culture (Titzmann, 2014) and they grow to resemble their peers by sharing cultural rituals.

Gender

During childhood and early adolescence, children engage in play activities predominantly with peers of the same gender (Mehta & Smith, 2022; Rose et al., 2022). With some exceptions, across cultures, boys and girls in elementary school exhibit distinct play patterns (Todd et al., 2017). Boys tend to participate in physical activities, such as rough-and-tumble play, whereas girls engage in games emphasizing social relationships (Mehta & Smith, 2022; Rubin et al., 2006). Boys and girls also differ in how they handle friendship tasks. Most boys handle being fun and enjoyable companions and sustaining friendships in the broader social context more successfully than do girls; most girls are more successful at self-disclosure; helping and managing conflict; and expressing care, concern, admiration, and affection (Rose & Asher, 2017).

Despite evidence highlighting the benefits of cross-gender relationships (e.g., Halim et al., 2021), same-gender friendships and gender-typed behavior continue to be perceived as the norm and desirable among children (e.g., Lee & Troop-Gordon, 2014), a perception reinforced by parents and other authority figures (e.g.,

teachers), who tend to encourage gender-typed play (Brown & Stone, 2018). Peers also contribute to the reinforcement of gender-typed play, such as when children who deviate from same-gender friendships become targets of social sanctions and teasing (Andrews et al., 2022; Malle, 2023). Because most youth spend their days primarily with same-gender peers, these peers likely have a stronger effect on youth's values than do cross-gender peers. In a large Israeli study (Benish-Weisman et al., 2021), girls' values were predicted by female peers over time, while boys' values were predicted not only by their male peers but also by the values of their female peers, even in early adolescence. The earlier maturation of girls' personalities (Klimstra et al., 2009) may give girls a greater capacity to influence those whose personalities are less mature, suggests a Dutch longitudinal study of early to late adolescents.

Age

As youngster advanced through their formative years of childhood and adolescence, the importance of peers in their lives grow. In a U.K. study of 8- to 59-year-old, as children progressed through childhood and early adolescence, the significance of peers in their lives increased (Knoll et al., 2015). In another U.S. study, 10- to 30-year-olds from a community sample and juvenile offender samples, children took their initial steps toward emotional independence and gradually shifted their focus toward their peers (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). In yet another study, of fifth to 12th graders, most of whom were White and from middle-class backgrounds, as youth developed and entered adolescence, they were more inclined to align their preferences and priorities with those of their peers (Gavin & Furman, 1989) than with those of their parents. Finally, in an Israeli study (Benish-Weisman et al., 2021), the association between peers' values and youth's future values strengthened more during the middle school years than during the elementary school years.

Culture

Culture plays a significant role in peer values similarity. In one meta-analysis (Liu et al., 2017), in collectivistic cultures, peers exerted a greater influence on adolescent behavior than they did in non-collectivistic cultures. This could be because of the interrelation between the self and others in collectivistic cultures, where social norms have more power, thus amplifying the impact of peers. Conversely, a study of Latinx adolescents in U.S. middle schools suggests that collectivistic cultures may emphasize other sources of influence, such as the family (Cahill et al., 2021; Kho et al., 2023), or broader cultural norms (Telzer et al., 2022), thereby

reducing the influence of peers. However, few studies have focused on non-White, non-Western populations (Giletta et al., 2021), which is reflected in peer studies (Veenstra et al., 2023). This hinders our ability to fully address this topic and highlights the need for further research. Moreover, with increasing global migration, migrants from collectivistic and family-oriented cultures are arriving in countries with more individualistic cultures, such as the United States, enhancing variability in cultural values and collectivism within, not just between, countries (Cahill et al., 2021).

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS

Basic personal values theory defines the content of a range of values and thus might help researchers track specific peer values similarities. Scholars might go beyond generally examining the overall similarity of values to study whether youth are more likely to adopt certain values from their peers. In a study of Israeli adolescents and their parents (Knafo et al., 2009), adolescents tended to accept more tradition and power values from their parents than they did stimulation and hedonism values. Studies could explore whether certain types of values are more susceptible to peer influence than others (Altmann, 2022). For example, since boys handle the friendship task of fun and enjoyment more successfully than girls (Rose & Asher, 2017), they may endorse more hedonism values.

According to basic personal values theory, some values are more likely to align than others, resulting in distinct values profiles, as researchers found in a study of Australian 5- to 12-year olds (Daniel et al., 2020). Similarly, in research using social network analysis, instead of adopting a single behavior, adolescents adopted a bundle of behaviors that go together (Veenstra et al., 2023). Researchers should explore peers' influence not only on specific values but also on profiles of values.

As I have mentioned, a growing body of research is focusing on processes of selection and influence on behaviors (e.g., antisocial behavior; Sijtsema & Lindenberg, 2018). But this direction is seldom studied in relation to the values that might direct these behaviors. In a longitudinal social network analysis of middle-school students from Switzerland and Poland (Kindschi et al., 2019), researchers found values similarity among friends; they also found that similarity in self-transcendence and openness-to-change values was important to maintain friendships or initiate new ones. Research has distinguished between peer acceptance and friendship (Asher & Weeks, 2018). In one study of adolescents, friends' values were more similar than peers' values (Solomon & Knafo, 2007), but the study was small. Researchers could use social network analysis to differentiate between values of socialization and selection

of friends and peers (Leszczensky et al., 2019; Neal & Veenstra, 2021). Furthermore, although studies have examined several moderators, we lack knowledge about the mechanisms of peer values influence among youth. Theory and research have highlighted explicit (e.g., reinforcement, antagonistic teasing) and implicit (e.g., mimicking values of others, structuring opportunities) mechanisms (Brown et al., 2008; Brown & Larson, 2009). Are these factors also explanatory for peer values influence? More research is needed to pursue this direction. Some values may be more likely than others to be related to specific mechanisms. For example, conservation values that relate to rituals (e.g., religious rituals) might be more influenced by mimicking. Highly socially normative values (e.g., self-transcendence values) might be more closely related to reinforcement mechanisms (Benish-Weisman, 2019).

Distinguishing between the influence of peers on youth's values and shared-environment elements (e.g., teachers) that affect both youth and their peers (Auer et al., 2023; Boer & Boehnke, 2016) is methodologically challenging. Twin studies may be able to overcome this challenge. For example, researchers can use studies of twins to examine the influence of genetic and environmental factors on values. By comparing the resemblance of values between monozygotic (identical) twins, who share 100% of their genetic material, and dizygotic (fraternal) twins, who share approximately 50%, researchers can determine the impact of shared (e.g., family or teacher) and nonshared (e.g., peers) environmental factors on values. A review of twin studies on values (Twito & Knafo-Noam, 2020) found substantial environmental contributions to individual differences in values, mainly due to the nonshared environment. Given the importance of peers during development, researchers should examine the contribution of peers as a nonshared environmental factor.

Peers play a crucial role in the development of youth's values (Brown & Larson, 2009). As a more egalitarian reference group (in relation to adults), peers provide a valuable context for youth to learn about their own identities and practice what is important in their lives (Asher & Weeks, 2018; Prinstein & Giletta, 2016). Although peers have a significant impact on youth's values development, the influence is not one-sided. Adolescents contribute to shaping peer group values through their own perspectives, experiences, and interactions. Thus, peer relationships serve as a dynamic platform for the mutual exchange and development of values (Laursen, 2017). Individual differences, family influences, and broader cultural contexts also contribute to the development of the values system. More research is necessary to reveal the intricate interplay among peers, individual characteristics, and other influential factors in the formation of youth's values. Understanding these dynamics can yield a deeper understanding of how peers influence

the values systems of adolescents, and can inform interventions and strategies aimed at promoting positive values and well-being.


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