WCLTA 2013

High School Students' Value System

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Abstract

The complex and articulated process that defines Self-concept structuring is also characterized by the influences exercised by the culture and the values that distinguish one's own life context. The role of the values, as ideal benchmarks that guide a person's life, are of great significance in the adolescence, a phase in which an individual acquires the competences and the necessary requisites to undertake particular responsibilities and to re-organize one's Self. Age, gender and type of school had an impact on values. The sample is made up of 480 students equally distributed by type of school (Grammar school, Technical Institutes and Vocational Institutes) and by gender. Students attributed more importance to satisfaction and personal enjoyment. They perceived themselves as inclined to pro-sociality and openness to change. Conversely, they have given less priority to the values of the conservatism and personal affirmation. Students of vocational schools have given less priority to the values openness to change, pro-sociality and success than students in grammar and technical schools. Grammar schools students have also perceived themselves slightly more progressive than other students. Females have perceived themselves as more prosocial and open to change, while males have given higher priority to value power, apparently retracing gender stereotypes.

Keywords: Representation, Training, Formation, Education ;

1. Theoretical background

In a society characterized by rapid changes (Bauman, 2000), the idea of foreshadowing his own future (Markus, Nurius, 1986) and, with it, the ability to build their own paths, it becomes greatly complex and uncertain.

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The processes of construction of personal and social identity are today become more complex. This depends not only by the personal history and interpersonal relationships that the individual has with its environment, but also by the influence of culture. The changes of the post-modern society (Bauman, 2000) have had a strong impact on the personality, values, attitudes and behaviours. In this context, there have emerged difficulties in finding stable and permanent points of reference with effects on future seen as uncertain. Life events offer opportunities to express and pursue some values more easily than others, but they can also impose constraints to the pursuit or expression of them. Usually people adjust their values to their life circumstances, attributing more importance to the values that can achieve more easily, and demoting instead those for which the achievement is more difficult (Schwartz, 2005).

Inglehart has shown in his study, that older people compared to younger people attributed a higher priority to materialistic values (economic and physical security), vs. the post-materialist values (self-expression and quality of life). He explained these results with cohort-effect and with the increased prosperity and security, in many countries, during most of the past 50 years (Inglehart, 1997).

Young people tend to give higher priority to values such as hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, and lower priority to conformity, security and tradition. Instead, older people give more priority to the values of security, conformity and tradition, and less priority to success, hedonism and stimulation (Schwartz, 2005).

Several studies have shown that women are often more relational, affiliates and expressive than men, which would be instead more autonomous, instrumental and agentics. These gender differences in the construction of self, reflect, probably, different priority value. In particular, men would attribute more importance to power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation and self-direction; women, instead, to benevolence, universalism, conformity and security (Schwartz, 2005).

Cross-cultural study did not find a consistent gender effect on the value system across different cultures (Struch, Schwartz, Van Der Kloot, 2002). A later study by Schwartz and Rubel, carried out in 70 countries, confirms the pattern of gender differences in the value priorities with the exception of values like conformity and tradition. However, these differences were minimal and culturally moderate (Schwartz, Rubel, 2005).

Learning experiences, instead, promote, presumably, intellectual openness, flexibility and breadth of perspectives that are essential for self-direction. These same experiences increased openness to ideas and non-routine activities, central to the value of stimulation, while challenging the unquestionable acceptance of prevailing norms and traditions, thereby undermining values like conformity and tradition. These increasing skills to deal with life, which people acquire through education, can also reduce the importance of the value of security. Moreover, education is positively related to success, probably due to the constant comparisons and classifications of performance in school. One should, thus expect positive correlations between years of formal education and values of self-direction, stimulation and success, and negative correlations with values of conformity, tradition and security (Schwartz, 2005).

The value Universalism arise instead only in the last years of secondary school and has a higher priority among those who attend the university, especially humanistic faculties (Schwartz, 2003).

The priorities of the value system of the people would influence their behaviour in systematic and predictable ways. In the opinion of Verplanken and Holland (2002), however, the values influence behaviour only when they are activated.

Activation can result in conscious thought of a value: more accessible is a value, more easily it comes to mind, and more likely will be activated. Since the most important values are the most accessible, they are more related with the behaviour (Bardi, 2000).

The values influence the choice of a specific action among several possibilities, with a major impact on the planning ability (Feather, 1995; Boehnke, Sagiv, Schwartz, 2000).

2. Overview of the current study

The research aims to explore the value system, in students of secondary schools. In particular this study aims to explore how gender, years of training, and type of training affects values priorities.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The research sample consisted of 480 subjects, belonging to the second (II, *n*=245) and fifth year (V, *n*=235), of which 247 were males and 233 were females (age, *M*=16.59 *SD*=1.64 range 14-22). The sample is equally divided between Grammar Schools students (GS, *n*=160), Technical Schools (TS, *n*=160) ones and Vocational Schools (VS, *n*=160) ones.

3.2. Measures

The Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) by Schwartz (2001), in the Italian version (Capanna, Vecchione, & Schwartz, 2005). This scale has been used in order to assess the subjects' value system. The questionnaire consists of 40 items and the subject has to check the answers that most closely describe his preference, on a six grade scale (from "1", "not like me at all" to "6" "totally like me"; mid-point=3.5). Questionnaire offered the possibility to analyse ten types of universal value: power (*α*=.62), achievement (*α*=.66), hedonism (*α*=.66), stimulation (*α*=.57), self-direction (*α*=.53), universalism (*α*=.68), benevolence (*α*=.63), tradition (*α*=.57), conformity (*α*=.59), and security (*α*=.59). In particular, four higher order value types can be singled out: Self-enhancement (*α*=.75), Self-transcendence (*α*=.77), Openness to change (*α*=.67), Conservatism (*α*=.77).

Background questions were used to get information about sex, age, educational level, type of school, and place of residence.

3.3. Preliminary Data Processing

The checking for statistically significant differences was carried out using the following tests: Analysis of Variance, within N factors, concerning the comparison of subscale scores; one-way ANOVA in order to verify the incidence of independent variable; One-sample t-test in order to compare sample means with mid-point value; Student's Test for Independent Samples, to verify the impact of the independent variables; Cronbach's alpha to check the reliability of the assessment inventory scales, we analysed only subscales value with a Cronbach's alpha value above .60, which is considered an acceptable value (Pallant, 2007). The data analysis was performed using SPSS v.20 for Windows.

4. Results

The sample attributed high-medium $F(4,1916)=209.57$, *p*<.001 importance to values hedonism (*M*=4.53 *SD*=1.00), benevolence (*M*=4.47 *SD*=.83), universalism (*M*=4.46 *SD*=.82) and achievement (*M*=4.37 *SD*=.94). They attributed scores slightly below the midpoint to power value (*M*=3.21 *SD*=1.05) *One sample t-test* [midpoint: "Neutral"=3.5], *p*<.001.

Variables type of school, and gender had a significant impact on values priorities.

Vocational schools students compared to students of Grammar and Technical schools attributed lower importance to values benevolence (GS: *M*=4.56 *SD*=.79 *vs*. TS: *M*=4.53 *SD*=.72 *vs*. VS: *M*=4.33 *SD*=.94) *F*=3.66, *p*=.027; universalism (GS: *M*=4.61 *SD*=.77 *vs*. TS: *M*=4.45 *SD*=.78 *vs*. VS: *M*=4.34 *SD*=.86) *F*=4.38, *p*=.01; and achievement (GS: *M*=4.42 *SD*=.98 *vs*. TS: *M*=4.48 *SD*=.90 *vs*. VS: *M*=4.20 *SD*=.92) *F*=3.85, *p*=.022

Gender variable affected values priorities. Female students' more than male ones attributed importance to values: benevolence (Female *M*=4.66 *SD*=.76 *vs*. Male *M*=4.30 *SD*=.85) *t*=5.04, *p*<.001; universalism (Female *M*=4.57 *SD*=.78 *vs*. Male *M*=4.37 *SD*=.83) *t*=2.69, *p*=.007.

Male students instead attributed higher importance than female ones to value power (Male *M*=3.36 *SD*=1.05 *vs*. Female *M*=3.05 *SD*=1.04) *t*=3.29, *p*=.001

The value system of our students seemed to be characterized by an inclination for social relations and an open attitude toward changes $F(3,1437)=106.22$, *p*<.001. In particular, our students attributed: medium-high level scores

to Self-transcendence (*M*=4.47 *SD*=.72), and to Openness to change (*M*=4.50 *SD*=.71); medium-low level scores to Conservatism (*M*=4.06 *SD*=.69) and to Self-enhancement (*M*=3.87 *SD*=.85).

In line with results on single values, a similar pattern has emerged with regard to effect of variables type of school, and gender on value system dimensions.

Vocational schools students compared to students of Grammar and Technical schools attributed lower scores to: Openness to change (GS: *M*=4.59 *SD*=.72 *vs*. TS: *M*=4.54 *SD*=.65 *vs*. VS: *M*=4.37 *SD*=.74) *F*=4.29, *p*=.014; Self-enhancement (GS: *M*=3.92 *SD*=.90 *vs*. TS: *M*=3.97 *SD*=.81 *vs*. VS: *M*=3.72 *SD*=.82) *F*=3.88, *p*=.021; and Self-transcendence (GS: *M*=4.59 *SD*=.65 *vs*. TS: *M*=4.48 *SD*=.67 *vs*. VS: *M*=4.34 *SD*=.82) *F*=4.93, *p*=.008.

Grammar schools students compared to students of Technical and Vocational schools attributed lower scores to Conservatism (GS: *M*=3.92 *SD*=.69 *vs*. TS: *M*=4.17 *SD*=.64 *vs*. VS: *M*=4.08 *SD*=.71) *F*=5.47, *p*=.004.

With regard to gender variable, females compared to males attributed higher scores to Self-transcendence (Female *M*=4.61 *SD*=.68 *vs*. Male *M*=4.34 *SD*=.73) *t*=4.24, *p*<.001; and Openness to change (Female *M*=4.59 *SD*=.66 *vs*. Male *M*=4.41 *SD*=.74) *t*=2.67, *p*=.008; whereas males compared to females attributed higher scores to Self-enhancement (Male *M*=3.96 *SD*=.83 *vs* Female *M*=3.78 *SD*=.86) *t*=2.24, *p*=.026.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Both single values and value dimensions outline a coherent framework. Students attributed more importance to satisfaction and personal enjoyment. They perceived themselves as inclined to pro-sociality and openness to change. Conversely, they have given less priority to the values of the conservatism and personal affirmation. Analysing the priority given to the individual values composing Self-enhancement dimension, it has emerged that students have attributed a higher importance to personal success and low priority to power.

Students of vocational schools, generally oriented to concrete thinking, have given less priority to the values openness to change, pro-sociality and success than students in grammar and technical schools, generally oriented to abstract thinking. Grammar schools students have also perceived themselves slightly more progressive than other students.

In line with the studies by Schwartz (2005) females have perceived themselves as more prosocial and open to change, while males have given higher priority to value power, apparently retracing gender stereotypes.

Years of training had no impact on value system of the students. This datum allows to assume that the differences emerged among students does not depend entirely on the type of school attended. These differences might have occurred already before entering in secondary schools and have originated within the processes of primary socialization. This assumption would also explain the tendency of the value system to retrace gender stereotypes

It is therefore interesting to explore the value system of those who contribute to the primary education and formation of teenagers, and its possible effects on the value system of these.

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