Adolescents’ internalization of moral values in the family context: The role of paternal and maternal relationships

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Moral values in adolescence are of great importance in the study of moral development and intergenerational relationships. However, motivational dynamics of adolescents’ moral values internalization have been mostly neglected in the past research. Nevertheless, internalization of values, which is the process through which adolescents accept parental and societal values and integrate them into their sense of self, might be guided by different motivations: external and introjected motivations, where compliance with values is experienced as being externally controlled or related to a sense of internal obligation; identified and integrated motivations, where values are fully and authentically internalized into the self. Research is consistent in showing that true endorsement of values positively relates to adolescents’ psychosocial adjustment and wellbeing.

This study focused on adolescents’ motives behind moral values internalization and analyzed their associations with parent-adolescent relationship quality, by considering both paternal and maternal relationships. Despite the extant discussions on the importance of family context in the moral development, this is the first study considering both parents and several aspects of parent-child relationships (i.e., closeness and promotion of volitional functioning) in adolescents’ motivations for moral values internalization. Participants were 789 Italian adolescents (54.5% females; 14-19 years), who completed a self-report questionnaire including the Moral Values Internalisation Questionnaire (Hardy, Padilla-Walker, & Carlo, 2008), the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) and the Autonomy-Support Scale (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991).

Results showed that adolescents were mainly guided by identified and integrated motivations in value internalization. As shown by regression analyses, maternal relationship quality supported identified and integrated value internalization to a greater extent compared to the relationship with the father. Adolescents’ age, but not sex, moderated the relations between maternal relationship dimensions and identified and integrated motivations. Implications for parenting and intergenerational transmission of values will be discussed.