Are value priorities related to dispositional optimism and resilience? A correlational study

Elisabetta Sagone*, University of Catania, Catania, Italy
Maria Elvira De Caroli, University of Catania, Catania, Italy

Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between value priorities and two dispositional dimensions, optimism and resilience, in a sample of 307 healthy Sicilian adolescents (145 boys and 162 girls) aged from 14 to 18 years. We used the Portrait Values Questionnaire, the Resiliency Attitudes and Skills Profile and the Life Orientation Test-Revised. Results indicate that the value priorities of self-enhancement and openness to change are positively related to optimism; self-transcendence is positively related to all dimensions of resilience; conservation is positively related to adaptability, control and engagement; the value priorities of self-enhancement and openness to change are positively related to sense of humour, competence and adaptability. Additionally, boys perceive themselves as more optimist, humoristic, competent and adapted than girls, while girls are more engaged than boys; furthermore, boys judge as mainly important the values of self-enhancement and openness to change, while girls judge as mostly important the self-transcendence.

Keywords: Resilience, value orientations, optimism, adolescence.

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* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Elisabetta Sagone,** University of Catania, Catania, Italy.

E-mail address: esagone@unict.it /

1. Introduction

The framework of the current correlational study is represented by the perspective of value priorities according to the Schwartz's Universal Theory of Values (1992) that seem to be comprehensive of the major different orientations recognised across cultures. According to the first formulation of this theory (Schwartz, 1992), 10 cross-cultural human values were described in a circular motivation continuum and grouped in four macro-areas named 'self-transcendence', 'conservation', 'openness to change' and 'self-enhancement'; the values located in adjacent regions on the continuum are motivationally similar, while those that are located in opposite regions are motivationally dissimilar and express conflicting orientations. Recently, in the last refined version (Schwartz et al., 2012), the authors have deepen the configuration of model including some dimensions of the original 10 values and obtaining 19 more narrowly defined values.

- **Area of self-transcendence**. It includes the following values linked to personal and community well-being:
  1. *benevolence*, corresponding to protection and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in direct contact [new label—(1a): *caring for the welfare of in-group members*] and to an internal motivation useful to support cooperative and supportive social relations [new label—(1b): *dependability* referred more to relationships with friends and less to family];
  2. *universalism*, corresponding to *tolerance* (2a), safeguarding of the welfare of the others [new label—(2b): *societal concern*] and protection of nature [new label—(2c): *protecting nature*].
- **Area of openness to change**. It consists of the following values associated to the future experiences and self-satisfaction:
  3. *self-direction*, composed by (3a) autonomy of thought referred to developing and practice one's understanding and intellectual competence, and (3b) autonomy of action linked to exercising one's capacity to attain self-chosen goals;
  4. *stimulation*, corresponding to novelty and challenge in life;
  5. *hedonism*, corresponding to pleasure and gratification for oneself.
- **Area of conservation**. It includes the following values connected to the past experiences and stability:
  6. *conformity*, that is, the inclination to follow social expectations [new label—(6a): *interpersonal conformity*] or social norms [new label—(6b): *rules*, that is conformity to laws and authority];
  7. *security*, that is, safety, harmony, stability of society, defence of interpersonal relations and self-image, divided in (7a) *personal security* and (7b) *societal security*;
  8. *tradition* that brings to mind respect and acceptance of the customs or ideas which belong to the tradition.
- **Area of self-enhancement**. It is composed by the following values related to personal progress and improvement of social status:
  9. *achievement*, that is, personal success through demonstrating one's own competence;
  10. *power*, that is, the *control of material resources* (10a) and *dominance over people* (10b), with the maintaining of one's prestige and social status against the threats to one's security inherent in attacks on one's public image [new label—(10c): *face*].

The values in both versions of this theory can be grouped into sets of four higher order values: person-oriented vs. socially oriented values or self-protection vs. growth values (Schwartz et al., 2012). These value orientations are analysed with the original 40-items version of Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ-40: Schwartz, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2001) in which each portrait describes the individual's goals and life aspirations. A short version of PVQ includes 21 items (PVQ-21: Schwartz, 2003) and the most recent version, developed to measure the 19 values of the refined theory, consists of 57 items (PVQ-57: Schwartz et al., 2012). In the current study, we used the original formulation of theory based on the ten value priorities, as in our previous investigations with Italian samples of

preadolescents (De Caroli & Sagone, 2011), adolescents (in relation to prejudicial attitudes towards ethnic outgroup; see Falanga, De Caroli, & Sagone, 2015; personality traits: De Caroli & Sagone, 2011b), university students (in relation to motherhood and fatherhood: De Caroli & Sagone, 2011a) and adults (in relation to the role of vertical value transmission: Sagone & De Caroli, 2014) and also with refugees asylum seekers (see Sagone & De Caroli, 2012). In all these studies, the widespread results have demonstrated that Italian adolescents and young adults consider really important the values of self-transcendence and openness to change while scarcely important the value of power, whereas the adults believe very important the values of conservation, that is, specifically security and tradition.

From the deepening about the value priorities analysis, we have hypothesised the existence of a possible relationship with other psychological dimensions which influence the individual growth during the adolescence, that is, resilience and dispositional optimism: the first dimension is viewed as a personal quality that permits individuals to overcome hardships and flourish in their face (e.g., Grotberg, 1996; Wagnild & Young, 1993), to cope with adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 1994; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012), and to restore or maintain equilibrium under significant threats (e.g., Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Smith & Carlson, 1997) and the second one is analysed as a dispositional tendency (or personality trait) to expect positive outcomes even in the face of obstacles or when bad things happen (Scheier & Carver, 1985, 1987).

The theoretical background of these two constructs is represented by the model of resilient profile (De Caroli & Sagone, 2014) on the basis of Hurtes and Allen's one (2001) and by the analysis of life orientation according to the continuum of dispositional optimism (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010; Scheier & Carver, 1992). Firstly, the resilient profile is characterised by some qualities that allow individuals the positive development also in the presence of stressful circumstances, such as *sense of humour* (that is, 'the ability to view and deal with worrying situations by means of the humoristic style or laughing'), *competence* (that is, 'the perceived self-efficacy in developing the coping strategies useful to overcome the difficulties'), *adaptability* (in terms of 'the ability to adapt themselves to novelty and adversity in critical circumstances'), *engagement* (considered as 'the ability to engage in search of the better solutions and ways to resist') and *control* (in terms of 'the ability to manage and control the criticality of one's environment'). Several scholars found that highly resilient people who are considerably able to 'bounce back from adversities' are also more engaged in positive social relationships and tend to use acceptance, active coping, and positive reframing as positive coping strategies, compared with lowly resilient people (Masten et al., 1999). Moreover, in Italian school-context, we found that the more the middle and late adolescents are able to choose contexts suitable to personal needs, to see themselves as growing and expanding, and to perceive themselves as self-satisfied (all dimensions linked to psychological well-being: see Ryff & Singer, 2003), the more they show high levels of resilience (Sagone & De Caroli, 2014).

Lastly, the optimist profile is typically present in individuals who tend to see the glass of water as filled by half rather than emptied by half and it is related to traditional personality traits (Sharpe, Martin, & Roth, 2011), hope (Snyder, 2002), self-fulfilment (Archer et al., 2007), life satisfaction and well-being (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996; Monzani, Steca & Greco, 2014), generalised self-efficacy and self-competence (Nurttila, Ketonen, & Lonka, 2015; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), positive coping strategies (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002), internal locus of control (Carifio & Rhodes, 2002), and so on. As reported by Scheier and Carver (1985), individuals with optimistic orientation towards life express positive expectations regarding the future, realise that it is possible to achieve the desired goals and persist in their efforts; on the contrary, individuals with pessimistic orientation have negative expectations, tend to become passive and give up more easily on their goals.

For example, according to Archer et al. (2008) and Norlander et al. (2002) empirical evidences, individuals with a self-fulfilling profile (that is, characterised by high PA or high positive affect/low NA or low negative affect) show high levels of self-esteem and optimism, and internal locus of control,

compared with individuals with a self-destructive profile (characterised by low PA or low positive affect/high NA or high negative affect) who reveal low levels of self-esteem and optimism, and tend to adopt external locus of control (see Archer, Adrianson, Plancak, Karlsson, 2007; Archer, Adolfsson, & Karlsson, 2008; Garcia, 2012). Additionally, as verified by Brissette et al. (2002), optimist students report a greater social support than pessimist ones and, with reference to coping strategies, the optimists are more likely to adopt the positive reinterpretation, planning and active coping strategies, while the pessimists tend to use the denial and behavioural disengagement; these factors contribute to realise a better psychological adjustment during the most important life transitions.

Significant and positive relations between these two profiles have demonstrated that highly optimist individuals report a more resilient profile than lowly optimist ones (Sagone & De Caroli, in press), whereas very little evidence referring to the influence of value orientations on resilience and dispositional optimism have been verified in adolescents and young adults, also taking into consideration the cultural differences linked to value priorities (see Maercker et al., 2015; Stanley et al., 2015). The lack of data on these relations represents the rationale of this current study carried out with healthy Sicilian adolescents; so, it will be necessary to verify the existence of the relationships among these constructs and then to explore the direction of the influence of value priorities on resilience and dispositional optimism also in young adults and older people.

1.1. Purpose of study

We are very interested in the analysis of value orientations as variables that could influence the growth of individuals (and, in detail, of adolescents) and their relationships with other two important psychological characteristics (that is, dispositional optimism and resilience) both related to positive personality. In a previous research (De Caroli & Sagone, 2011b), we found that the more the adolescents scored high in: *energy*, the more they judged as greatly important self-direction and hedonism; *agreeableness*, the more they attributed importance to benevolence; *conscientiousness*, the more they attributed importance to security; *emotional instability*, the less they considered as mostly important hedonism; and finally, *openness to experience*, the more they valued as mostly important self-direction and conformity. These evidences point out the relationship between personality traits and value orientations and highlight the importance of these two dimensions in social, moral and psychological development of adolescents.

Considering the meanings and multiple psychological implications of these issues, the most direct and positive relationships that we expected to discover are referred to the value priorities of self-enhancement, openness to change and self-transcendence (seemingly addressed to the future, the openness to challenges of everyday life and contact with the others) with high optimism and resilience; on the contrary, we expected to find relationships between the values of conservation (most probably oriented to the past and the maintaining of status quo) with low optimism and resilience.

Differences for sex will be verified to confirm the superiority of boys in setting a high value on openness to change and self-enhancement whereas that of girls in self-transcendence (see Capanna, Vecchione & Schwartz, 2005; Sagone & De Caroli, 2011a; Schwartz et al., 2012). In addition, as reported in our previous study (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2014), we expect to confirm the evidence according to which girls will be more resilient than boys. Finally, we expect that boys will be more optimist than girls, even if a very reduced amount of researches have been demonstrated these sex differences.

1.2. Participants

The sample of this study consists of 307 healthy Sicilian adolescents, divided in 145 boys and 162 girls, aged from 14 to 18 years (*M* = 16.05; SD = 1.5). These have been randomly recruited from two State Senior Schools in East Sicily (Italy). Parental consent for underage adolescents for study participation has been obtained.

1.3. Measures and procedure

We used the Italian version of Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz, 1992), the Resiliency Attitudes and Skills Profile (De Caroli & Sagone, 2014) and the Life Orientation Test-Revised (Scheier & Carver, 1992).

The **Portrait Values Questionnaire** (PVQ-40: Capanna et al., 2005; Schwartz, 1992) has been used to explore the value priorities grouped in four areas (self-transcendence, conservation, self-enhancement and openness to change), by means of 40 short verbal portraits of different people, gender matched with the respondent; each portrait describes a person's goals or wishes that point implicitly to the importance of a value. Participants answered on a 6-point ranging scale from 1 (corresponding to not like me at all) to 6 intervals (corresponding to very much like me): e.g. 'It's very important to him/her to help the people around him/her'; 'It is important to him/her always to behave properly'; 'It is important to him/her to live in secure surroundings'; 'He/she likes surprises and is always looking for new things to do'; 'It is important to him/her to be in charge and tell others what to do', and 'Being very successful is important to him/her'. Cronbach's alpha for this measure ranges from 0.75 (openness to change) to 0.81 (self-transcendence).

The **Resiliency Attitudes and Skills Profile** has been used to analyse the characteristics of resilient individuals (RASP: Hurtes & Allen, 2001; for the Italian school-context, see De Caroli & Sagone, 2014) and consists of 34 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (corresponding to strongly disagree) to 6 intervals (corresponding to strongly agree). We used the Italian version of RASP including the following dimensions of resilient profile: (a) sense of humour (e.g., 'Laughter helps me deal with stress'); (b) competence (e.g., 'I know when I am good at something'); (c) adaptability (e.g., 'I can change my behaviour to match the situation'); (d) engagement (e.g. 'I try to figure out things I do not understand'); (e) control (e.g., 'I avoid situations where I could get into trouble'). Cronbach's alpha for this measure ranges from 0.57 (engagement) to 0.73 (sense of humour).

The **Life Orientation Test-Revised** (LOT-R: Scheier & Carver, 1992; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) is a measure of dispositional optimism, formed by 10 items each evaluable on a 5-point Likert scale (α =0.79) (from 1 equal to *strongly disagree* to 5 intervals equal to *strongly agree*). Three positive items have assessed the optimistic disposition (e.g., 'Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad'), three negative items have valued the pessimistic one (e.g., 'I rarely count on good things happening to me') and four items have been used as fillers. It is possible to obtain both two different scores, respectively, for optimism and pessimism or one total score only for optimism considered as a continuum from low to high optimism (see Monzani et al., 2014; Segerstrom, Evans, & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2011). In the current study, we used the total score to assess the dispositional optimism as a measure of generalised expectancy about individual's future (see Sagone & De Caroli, in press).

Data analyses have been carried out by the SPSS 20 using the *t*-test, linear correlation and linear regression with stepwise method. Mean scores obtained in PVQ, LOT-R and RASP have been counted as dependent variables while sex as independent one.

2. Results

2.1. Value priorities: descriptive analyses

As found in previous researches carried out by Capanna et al. (2005) and De Caroli and Sagone (2011), adolescents judge as mostly important the areas of self-transcendence (M = 4.58, SD =0.74) and openness to change (M = 4.49, SD =0.75) compared with those of conservation (M = 4.05, SD =0.70) and self-enhancement (M = 3.68, SD = 1.01). *T*-tests reveal significant differences for sex in three of four areas of value priorities, indicating that boys judge as mainly important the values of self-enhancement (M_{boys} = 3.99 *vs.* M_{girls} = 3.40; $t_{(305)}$ = 5.35, p <0.001) and openness to change (M_{boys} = 4.58 *vs.* M_{girls} = 4.41; $t_{(305)}$ = 2.02, p = 0.044), while girls judge as primarily important the values of self-transcendence (M_{boys} = 4.47 *vs.* M_{girls} = 4.68; $t_{(305)}$ = −2,56, p = 0.011).

2.2. Life orientation and resilience: descriptive analyses

Descriptive analyses indicate that levels of dispositional optimism in total sample are equal to M = 19.6 (SD = 5.1), with significant differences for sex ($t_{(305)}$ = 5.94, p < 0.001) in the sense that boys are more optimist than girls (M_{boys} = 21.3 *vs.* M_{girls} = 18.00).

In relation to dimensions of resilience, these adolescents have reached lower levels of adaptability (M = 4.21, SD = 0.70), control (M = 4.47, SD = 0.85) and sense of humour (M = 4.49, SD = 1.2), compared with levels of engagement (M = 4.60, SD = 0.67) and competence (M = 4.68, SD = 0.80). Differences for sex in four of five dimensions of resilience have been noted (Table 2): sense of humour (M_{boys} = 4.76 *vs.* M_{girls} = 4.25; $t_{(305)}$ = 3.98, p < 0.001), competence (M_{boys} = 4.79 *vs.* M_{girls} = 4.58; $t_{(305)}$ = 2.44, p = 0.015), adaptability (M_{boys} = 4.35 *vs.* M_{girls} = 4.08; $t_{(305)}$ = 3.48, p = 0.001) and engagement (M_{boys} = 4.48 *vs.* M_{girls} = 4.71; $t_{(305)}$ = −3,02, p = 0.003). It means that boys perceived themselves as more humoristic, competent and adapted than girls, whereas girls more engaged than boys.

2.3. Value priorities and dispositional optimism

Using the linear correlation analysis, as reported in Table 1, results indicate that for total sample the value priorities of self-enhancement (r = 0.224, p < 0.001) and openness to change (r = 0.202, p < .001) are positively related to optimism (even if the statistical deepening carried out with stepwise linear regression confirms only the moderate influence of self-enhancement on optimism: $β$ = 0.224, t = 4.017, p < 0.001).

2.4. Value priorities and resilient profile

As found by linear correlation analysis, results indicate that the area of self-transcendence is positively related to all dimensions of resilience (Table 2) and, mainly, to adaptability (r = 0.451, p < 0.001), control (r = 0.496, p < 0.001) and engagement (r = 0.424, p < 0.001). Furthermore, the area of conservation is positively related to adaptability (r = 0.433, p < 0.001), control (r = 0.590, p < 0.001) and engagement (r = 0.230, p < 0.001) (Table 2); additionally, the value priorities of both self-enhancement and openness to change are positively related to sense of humour, competence and adaptability (Table 2). The statistical deepening with stepwise linear regression confirms that:

- sense of humour is influenced greatly by openness to change (β = 0.316, t = 4.956, p < 0.001) and poorly by self-transcendence (β = 0.190, t = 3.683, p < 0.001) and self-enhancement (β = 0.145, t = 2.310, p = 0.022) (R = 0.481; R^2 = 0.224);
- competence is influenced greatly by self-transcendence (β = 0.255, t = 4.727, p < 0.001) and poorly by openness to change (β = 0.143, t = 2.146, p = 0.033) and self-enhancement (β = 0.174, t = 2.655, p = 0.008) (R = 0.398; R^2 = 0.150);
- adaptability is influenced significantly by self-transcendence (β = 0.295, t = 4.715, p < 0.001), self-enhancement (β = 0.319, t = 6.830, p < 0.001) and conservation (β = 0.234, t = 3.734, p < 0.001) (R = 0.581; R^2 = 0.331);
- control is influenced mostly by conservation (β = 0.440, t = 7.189, p < 0.001) and self-transcendence (β = 0.225, t = 3.614, p < 0.001) but negatively by openness to change (β = −0.123, t = −2.636, p = 0.009)(R = 0.618; R^2 = 0.375);
- engagement is influenced greatly by self-transcendence (β =0.423, t = 8.209, p < 0.001) and poorly by self-enhancement (β = 0.107, t = 2.078, p = 0.039)(R = 0.437; R^2 = 0.186).

Table 1. Correlation between PVQ and LOT-R

Areas of PVQ	Optimism
Self-transcendence	−0.067
	0.244
Conservation	−0.051
	0.373
Self-enhancement	0.224[**]
	0.000
Openness to change	0.202[**]
	0.000

Table 4. Correlation between PVQ and RASP

Areas of PVQ	RASP humour	RASP competence	RASP adaptability	RASP control	RASP engagement
Self-transcendence	0.245[**]	0.280[**]	0.451[**]	0.496[**]	0.424[**]
	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Conservation	0.074	0.194[**]	0.433[**]	0.590[**]	0.230[**]
	0.197	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.000
Self-enhancement	0.331[**]	0.259[**]	0.322[**]	−0.033	0.108
	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.567	0.058
Openness to change	0.434[**]	0.290[**]	0.204[**]	−0.085	0.152[**]
	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.138	0.008

3. Discussion

The empirical evidences emerged by this study show a confirmation of the expected relationships between value orientations (according to the Schwartz's theory) and the positive traits of personality in adolescence (in line with the perspective of the 'positive psychology'; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

About value priorities, this study provides a further evidence of general trend existing in population of Italian adolescents: in fact, these adolescents are likely to attribute a high value on the caring for well-being of in-group members and the safeguarding of their environment (mainly in the group of

girls) and to promote the search of novelty and challenges of their life (mostly in the group of boys). In relation to dispositional optimism, results indicate that boys express a widespread tendency to expect positive outcomes even in the face of adversity compared to girls. For dimensions of resilience, results underline that the adolescents of our sample are more likely to adapt themselves to novelty and adversity in critical circumstances, to manage and control the criticality of one's environment and to deal with stressful situations using the laughing (mostly for boys); the engagement in overcoming difficult and unexpected circumstances is mainly and typically found in the group of girls, confirming the previous empirical evidences in Italian school-context (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2014).

Considering the influence of value priorities on dispositional optimism, results demonstrate that the more the adolescents of our sample judge as primarily important the values linked to the maintaining of prestigious social status and self-realisation, the more they express high levels of dispositional optimism.

Referring with the influence of value priorities on dimensions of resilience, results show that the more these adolescents judge as mostly important the values linked to the caring for the well-being of in-group members, family and their friends, the more they are able to adapt themselves to novelty and adversity in critical circumstances, to control their environment and to be positively engaged in stressful situations searching the better solutions to resist. Moreover, the more these adolescents judge as mainly important the values associated to conservation of own customs and defence of traditional ideas, the more they are able to manage their environment and to be engaged in discovering new ways to resisting stress and opposite efforts. Finally, the more these adolescents consider as primarily important the value priorities connected to the enhancement of own social status and openness to novelty, the more they are likely to use the humour style in critical circumstances and to demonstrate own competence in searching adequate coping strategies.

The expected predictions about the influence of values on personality dimensions of optimism and resilience have been largely confirmed. Future researches in the same socio-cultural context could explore the direction of the influence of value priorities on resilience and dispositional optimism also in young adults and the elderly.

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