The transmission of values between grandparents, parents and adolescent children; a relational-intergenerational research perspective
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Abstract
The transmission of values between parents and children plays a major social role since it represents the sharing of values and continuity between generations, which are key to the stability of society. Over the years, significant changes have characterised the Italian situation (together with the other western countries), with a shift from a “vertical” family, where the holders of knowledge and decisions were the parents, to a “horizontal” emotional family in which the children are involved in family choices.

With the acquisition of greater negotiation power by the children, which has been made stronger by social changes with the increase in individual choice and the decline of fixed points of reference, the balance of power between the two sides has changed (Baumann, 1999). These changes have called into question the relational dynamics between young people and adults that were thought to be consolidated, involving also the processes of values transmission and acquisition. In a period such as ours, which is characterised by a process of decontextualisation of classic institutions, those forms of legitimisation that provide for an intersubjective regulation and definition of values and laws become more significant (Garelli, Palmonari and Sciolla, 2006). It is therefore now indispensable to review the subject of values and their transmission from the “relational” point of view.

Based on this premise, this study examines the transmission of values, placing adolescents in contrast and in relation to the two co-present adult generations, that of the parents and the grandparents. Adolescence represents a crucial phase in the development of values, characterised as it is by the tension between the need for autonomy that is gradually developing and the need to answer to family and social expectations, and with the assimilation of shared evaluation modalities. More specifically, the study attempts to: a) describe the values of adolescents, highlighting their specificity with respect to those of the previous generations; 2) highlight some of the mechanisms (perception accuracy and acceptance, Grusec and Goodnow, 1994) involved in value transmission between parents and adolescent children; 3) make an in-depth examination using a qualitative approach of the valorisation/devalorisation process of the “family heritage”, with special attention to the renegotiation of the distances and significances typical of the adolescence phase.

381 families residing in northern Italy and made up of one adolescent child (46.2% male; average age = 17 years), the mother and the father, took part in the study. 257 of these families also included one of the grandparents. In total, the subjects taking part in the study were 1,400. To obtain the personal values each subject compiled a Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz et al., 2001), a self-report tool validated for the Italian context. A semi-structured interview for a subgroup of families (N =18) was used for the qualitative analysis.

Publications:


