

Perception of parents as demonstrating the inherent merit of their values: Relations with self-congruence and subjective well-being

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This study focuses on the parenting practice of inherent value demonstration (IVD), involving parents' tendency to express their values in behaviours and appear satisfied and vital while doing so. Data from Chinese college students ($n = 89$) confirmed the hypothesis that offspring's perception of their parents as engaged in IVD predicts offspring's subjective well-being (SWB) through sense of self-congruence. Importantly, these relations emerged also when controlling for fundamental autonomy-supportive (FAS) parenting practices such as taking children's perspective, minimising control and allowing choice. These findings are consistent with the view that parents concerned with their children's sense of autonomy may do well to engage in IVD in addition to more fundamental autonomy-supportive practices. Future research may examine the role of IVD in promoting authentic values that serve as an internal compass that guides children to act in ways that feel self-congruent.

Keywords: Autonomy-support; Self-congruence; Motivation; Inherent value demonstration; Parenting; Well-being.

The benefit of parents' support of children's need for autonomy was demonstrated in many studies grounded in self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2003). According to SDT, a parenting practice can be viewed as autonomy-supportive if it helps children feel that they truly want to engage in a certain behaviour. SDT-based research has often demonstrated the fundamental role of the specific autonomy-supportive practices of taking the child's perspective, allowing choice and minimising controls (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997). The central role of these practices is reflected in their inclusion as the three components of the widely used SDT measure of parental autonomy-support: the autonomy-support scale of the Perceptions of Parents Scales (e.g., Niemiec et al., 2006).

While recognising the importance of these fundamental autonomy-supportive practices (FAS), Assor (2012) and Roth, Assor, Niemiec, Ryan, and Deci (2009) have tried to identify additional parenting behaviours that might contribute to children's autonomous value internalisation. The present research focuses on one such practice: inherent value demonstration (IVD). Thus, this study is the first to test the hypothesis that offspring's perception of their parents as engaged in IVD has unique

contribution to offspring's personality-level functioning, beyond the contribution of FAS practices.

The concept of parental IVD refers to *parents' tendency to behave in ways that reflect the values they explicitly endorse, and to appear satisfied and vital while engaged in the behaviour* (Assor, 2012). The behaviour is termed as IVD because the consistency between words and deeds, and the sense of enjoyment and vigour accompanying the behaviours, are likely to convey the inherent value of the behaviour to children. We assume that when children observe parental IVD they are likely to autonomously internalise the demonstrated values for two reasons: First, the fact that parents actually enact their values suggests that parents really believe in the merit of these behaviours. Second, the fact that parents appear satisfied and vital while engaged in these behaviours suggests that these acts are gratifying and worth engaging in.

Previous publications concerning IVD have used the term intrinsic value demonstration (Assor, 2012; Roth et al., 2009). However, given possible confusion with SDT's concept of intrinsic goals (Kasser & Ryan, 1996), we now prefer to use the term *inherent* value demonstration. While the construct of intrinsic goals refers to the

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This research was supported by the National Key Technologies Research and Development Program of China (2012BAI36B03). We wish to thank Beiwen Chen, Liwen Ran, Chonghua Li and Shanshan Mi for their helpful advice and quality translations.

type of goals people endorse, IVD refers to the *quality* of value-related behaviour.

Roth and Assor (2000) found that Israeli students' perceptions of their parents as demonstrating the inherent value of prosocial actions predicted autonomous prosocial motivation and consequent prosocial behaviour. Roth et al. (2009) found that adolescents' perceptions of their parents as using the practices of IVD, perspective-taking and rationale-provision in the academic domain predicted choiceful, interest-focused engagement in learning. Brambilla, Assor, Manzi, and Regalia (2014) found that parents' IVD predicted autonomous internalisation of religious values.

Overall, then, there is some evidence that offspring's perception of parental IVD predicts autonomous internalisation of parental values in specific domains. There is, however, no evidence that offspring's perception of parental IVD predicts autonomy at the more general personality level. In this study, we explore this possibility with regard to one aspect of personal autonomy that is likely to be especially related to IVD: sense of self-congruence and authorship (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2012).

Weinstein et al. (2012) developed a measure of autonomous functioning at the general personality level including three components: (a) authorship/self-congruence: the experience of oneself as the author of behaviour and as fully assenting to the actions one undertakes, (b) interest-taking: the tendency to be aware of and openly reflect on inner and outer events, and (c) susceptibility to control: the absence of external and internal pressures as motivators for behaving. In this study, we focused on the self-congruence component because this aspect of autonomous personality functioning is the one that is most likely to be enhanced by parental IVD.

Offspring's perception of parents as engaged in IVD was expected to promote offspring's sense of self-congruence through a two-step process: First, parents' convincing demonstration of their values is likely to help children internalise parents' values in ways they experience as autonomous and authentic; second, these autonomous values are then likely to be expressed in

activities that are experienced as self-congruent. The notion that autonomously internalised values are likely to be realised in actions has already received considerable empirical support (Koestner, Losier, Vallerand, & Carducci, 1996). And, according to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2003), when people act in ways that express their authentic autonomous values they are likely to feel a sense of authorship and self-congruence. In other words, perceived parental IVD is likely to promote autonomous and authentic values in offsprings, which children are then likely to express in their behaviour. And when children engage in behaviours that reflect their autonomous and authentic values, they are likely to feel a sense of authorship and self-congruence because they do things that emanate from their authentic values, and they fully assent to the actions they undertake.

We did not expect offspring's perception of parents' IVD to enhance offspring's interest-taking because the cultivation of an open and reflective approach to one's experiences may be affected by parental behaviours other than IVD; for example, parents' nurturance of mindfulness and emotion understanding. As for susceptibility to control, past research has shown that this aspect of poor autonomous functioning is affected mainly by controlling parental practices (Roth et al., 2009).

In this study, we also explored the hypothesis that the experience of self-congruence promoted by IVD enhances subjective well-being (SWB; Diener, 2000). According to SDT, self-congruent actions promote SWB because a feeling of self-congruence is a vitalising, growth promoting experience (Weinstein et al., 2012). In line with this view, Weinstein et al. (2012) showed that self-congruence predicted various indicators of SWB. As for the more fundamental autonomy-supportive practices, they too should promote self-congruence and consequent well-being because they facilitate autonomous value internalisation (Ryan & Deci, 2003). Consistent with this view, Weinstein et al. (2012) showed that self-congruence correlates with FAS, and Knafo and Assor (2007) showed that FAS predicts SWB via autonomous internalisation of parental values.

TABLE 1
Reliabilities and correlations among measured variables

	Mean	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. FAS	5.2	.869						
2. SC	5.4	.758	.315**					
3. SWLS	4.3	.742	.150	.281**				
4. PA	3.5	.746	.404***	.399***	.401***			
5. NA	2.1	.846	-.281**	-.294**	-.147	-.111		
6. SWB	NA ^a	NA ^a	.361***	.444***	.823***	.683***	-.549***	
7. IVD	5.4	.648	.249*	.350***	.190	.187	-.234*	.281**

FAS = fundamental autonomy-supportive practices; SC = self-congruence; SWLS = satisfaction with life scale; PA = positive affect; NA = negative affect; SWB = subjective well-being.

^aNA = not applicable. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Based on the foregoing considerations, we hypothesised that perceived IVD and FAS would each have unique contribution to the prediction of self-congruence and consequent SWB.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

Scales assessing the variables of interest were administered to an undergraduate psychology class ($N = 89$, 76.4% female) in a large university in Beijing. Participation was voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed.

Measures

The measures were translated into Chinese by two translators, and were then back-translated by two other translators. Unless mentioned otherwise, responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*completely not true*) to 7 (*very true*). Cronbach alpha appear in Table 1.

The autonomy support scale of the perceptions of parents scales (Niemic et al., 2006)

This scale measures the FAS practices of perspective-taking, allowing choice and minimising control. An example of the items is “My mother allows me to decide things for myself.” Consistent with previous research (Lekes, Gingras, Philippe, Koestner, & Fang, 2010), we excluded the item: “My mother tries to tell me how to run my life.”

Subjective well-being (SWB)

The SWB measure (Diener, 2000) consists of the positive affect (PA) scale, the negative affect (NA) scale and the satisfaction with life scale (SWLS). The PA and NA items were followed by scales ranging from 1 to 5. We removed the PA item “alert” because it correlated with both PA and NA. A composite SWB score was calculated by averaging the Z scores of SWLS and relative PA (relative PA = PA–NA).

Self-congruence/authorship

It is a 5-item measure developed by Weinstein et al. (2012). A sample item is: “My decisions represent my most important values and feelings.”

Inherent value demonstration (IVD)

This 3-item scale was based on a similar scale used by Roth et al. (2009). The items represent the two aspects of this concept: the extent to which parents demonstrate their values in their behaviour: “My parents’ behavior, almost always, reflect their values,” and the affective quality characterising the behaviours demonstrating the values: “When my parents do what is important for them, they feel satisfied”; “When my parents do what they think is right—they appear focused and energetic.” A pilot study with 111 Chinese students demonstrated the discriminant validity of this scale relative to two other parenting behaviour aspects proposed and explored by Assor (2012): fostering inner-directed valuing and supporting value/goal/interest examination.

RESULTS

We used structural equation modelling with latent variables (SEM, Amos 20 software; Arbuckle, 2011) to test our hypothesised model of IVD and FAS as unique predictors of SWB via self-congruence. Perceived IVD was represented by three items. Perceived FAS practices were assessed by subscales assessing two conceptual components of this construct: parent’s perspective-taking and parent as providing choice and minimising control. Each component was assessed separately for mother and for father, yielding four observed indicators of FAS. Self-congruence was represented by five items. SWB was represented by the SWLS, the PA scale and the NA scale.

Fit indices were all satisfactory, $\chi^2(80) = 97.522$, $p > .05$, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .050, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .954. The loadings of the 15 observed indicators on the relevant latent construct were all in the predicted directions; 14 loadings were significant and one was marginally significant (FAS on the father perspective-taking subscale, $p < .06$). As is often the case, the magnitude of the different loadings varied; in two cases the differences appeared notable. First, the loading on FAS suggests that this construct reflects perception of mothers more than of fathers. Second, the two items with the highest loadings on IVD refer to parents’ satisfaction and energy while performing the demonstrated actions, suggesting that, as intended, this construct captures not only the perception that parents’ behaviour reflects their declared values, but that their behaviour is perceived as intrinsically motivated. As shown in Figure 1, IVD significantly predicted self-congruence also after controlling for FAS practices.

To examine the hypothesis that self-congruence mediates the effects of IVD and FAS on SWB, we ran the bootstrapping procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Results supported the mediation hypothesis for both IVD and FAS. Thus, the 95% confidence intervals of

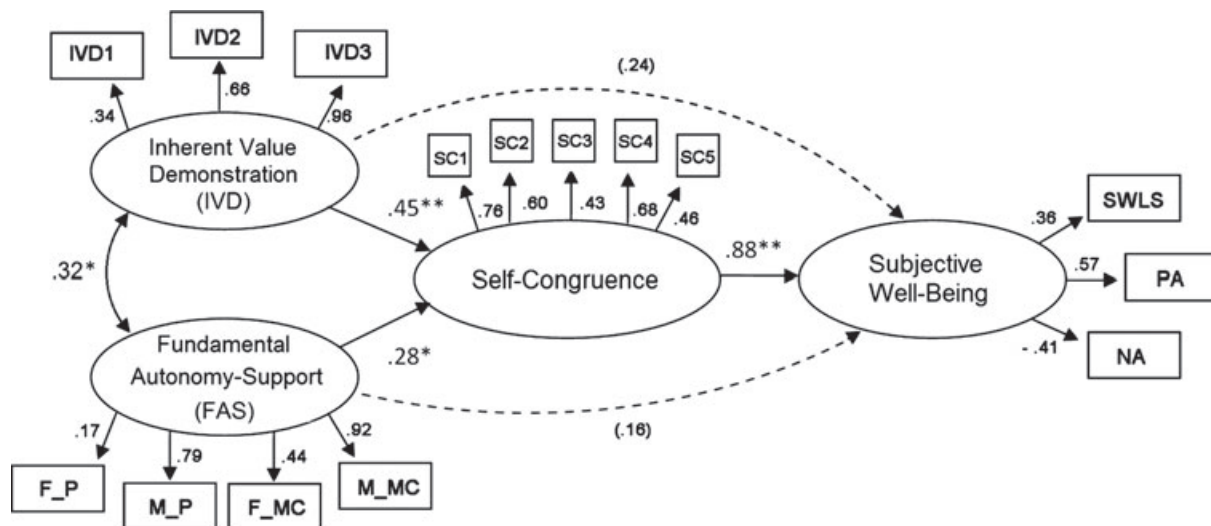


Figure 1. Perceived parental IVD and FAS as predictors of offspring’s self-congruence and SWB. *Note:* Dashed arrows indicate non-significant direct effects; fit indices reported in the text refer to the model without these direct paths. All the loadings are significant, except that the path loading from POPS to its father perspective-taking subscale is marginally significant ($p < .06$). F_P = father perspective-taking; M_P = mother perspective-taking; F_MC = father minimising-control/providing-choice; M_MC = mother minimising-control/providing-choice; SWLS = satisfaction with life scale; PA = positive affect; NA = negative affect. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

the indirect effect estimates for IVD and FAS were all above 0 (.025–.164 for IVD; .004–.032 for FAS). To test the significance of the direct effects of FAS and IVD on SWB, we compared the chi-squares in models with and without these two direct effects. None of the chi-square differences was significant (χ^2 change values ranged between 0.90 [$df = 1$] and 1.95 [$df = 2$]). Therefore, it appears that the effects of both IVD and FAS on SWB were fully mediated by self-congruence.

DISCUSSION

The results suggest that Chinese college students who perceived their parents as acting in ways that demonstrate the inherent merit of their values experienced higher self-congruence, which in turn predicted higher SWB. As expected, these relations emerged also after controlling for the effects of FAS parenting practices.

Future research may examine the role of parental IVD in promoting the formation of integrated and authentic values, which are experienced as an internal compass (Assor, 2012) that guides youth to act in ways that feel self-congruent. Research may also attempt to differentiate between the two conceptual components of perceived IVD: (a) The extent to which parents demonstrate their stated values in behaviour, and (b) the extent to which parents appear to feel vital and satisfied while demonstrating their values in behaviour. This might be done by constructing scales assessing each component separately and then examining the relative weight of each component in predicting value internalisation and self-congruence.

Interestingly, both IVD components may be viewed as extensions of the practice of clarifying the rationale for adhering to parentally endorsed values (Grolnick et al., 1997). Thus, to clarify the merit of their values, parents may not only explain their values but also: (a) frequently demonstrate their values in behaviour and (b) demonstrate their values in ways that convey the contribution of these values to well-being and vitality. Further research may examine the relative contribution of parental IVD versus parental verbal explanations to value internalisation in offspring.

The present research has a number of limitations. First, although the fit indices of the SEM analysis were satisfactory, the small sample size clearly calls for future replications with larger samples. Second, given the correlational nature of this study, it is not possible to draw inferences concerning causality. Future research should use a longitudinal design to probe the relations found in this study. Third, the study was limited to Chinese college students. Future research may examine whether similar patterns appear in other contexts, countries and age groups. Fourth, the study relied only on students reports. Future research may rely on additional informants.

The findings of the present and previous research on IVD would have to be supported by designs allowing causal inferences before practical recommendations can be made. However, to the extent that such findings would be obtained, they suggest some fairly practical implications. For example, parents wishing to enhance their children’s autonomous motivation for engaging in proenvironment activities may do well to go beyond the provision of FAS behaviours, that is, they may also try to

demonstrate this value in their own behaviour in ways that convey the inherent merit of this value for them. Similar practices might be adopted by teachers and mentors.

In summary, the findings of the present research are consistent with the view that parents who wish to enhance their children's autonomy and well-being would do well to engage in IVD in addition to more fundamental autonomy-supportive practices involving perspective-taking, choice-provision and control-minimisation.

Manuscript received April 2013

Revised manuscript accepted March 2014

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