Value Accessibility and Teachers’ Ability to Encourage Independent and Critical Thought in Students

AVI ASSOR
Ben Gurion University

Abstract. This study examines the hypothesis that teachers’ educational values predict their behavior and students’ attributes when these values function as chronically accessible, positively valenced categories which are linked discriminantly to perceptions of specific behaviors. This hypothesis was tested in relation to the value of Encouraging Independent Thought (EIT). Fifty-two teachers were administered, in individual sessions, a sorting task and questionnaires assessing the variables of interest. Several months later, the 1,614 students of these teachers completed questionnaires assessing teacher behaviors and students’ attributes. Discriminant accessibility of the value of EIT in teachers predicted two value consistent teacher behaviors: showing tolerance for independent and critical students’ opinions and showing interest in and respect for students’ ideas – as well as two students’ attributes: assignment of little importance to the value of conformity and sense of acceptance by classmates. The findings demonstrate the theoretical usefulness of the notion of discriminant accessibility of values and suggest that, as part of teacher education programs, it is important to strengthen teachers’ inclinations to examine the contribution of concrete actions to the realization of abstract values. Discriminant accessibility of the value of EIT also appears to enhance teachers’ ability to foster critical thinking in students.

Many authors view values as concepts describing general desirable dispositions or end states which guide the selection and evaluation of specific behaviors (e.g., Allport, 1961; Morris, 1956; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Scott, 1965; Smith, 1979; Williams, 1968). The impact of values on behavior and interpersonal outcomes is particularly emphasized by theorists of socialization, moral education, and the “hidden curriculum,” who assume that teachers’ or parents’ values exert considerable influence on children’s personality and values (Bloss, 1982; Carbone, 1987; Giroux & Purple, 1983; Inkeles, 1969; Parsons, 1955).

In contrast to the importance assigned to values as determinants of action, research and theory focusing on the effects of attitudes and personal dispositions on behavior...
behavior suggest that the link between values and behavior cannot be taken for granted. According to Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), personal dispositions and attitudes are less likely to predict behavior if they are defined in a general way. Ajzen (1987) and Epstein (1980), following classical test theory, suggest that personal dispositions are more likely to predict behavior if they are defined as aggregates of specific behaviors representing the disposition of interest.

Given that values are usually conceptualized (and measured) as general abstractions and not as aggregates of specific behaviors (Allport, 1961; Kohn, 1963, 1977; Luster, Rhodes, & Haas, 1989; Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, 1990; Rokeach, 1973), it follows that values may often fail to influence behavior or that their influence may be indirect and complex, and therefore difficult to detect. Research shows that values are often related to behavior in cases involving consequential decisions which are made at one point in time and in which the alternatives are sharp and salient – as, for example, when making professional choices (Feather, 1970; Huntley & Davis, 1983; Rokeach, 1973; Rokeach, Miller, & Snyder, 1971), when voting (Schwartz, 1995), and when joining ideological or religious organizations (Rokeach, 1973). There is also evidence that values predict religious behavior (Schwartz & Huismans, 1995). However, in cases involving ongoing interpersonal interaction across time (for example, degree of helping or degree of autonomy given or sought in a particular relationship), there is little direct evidence that values indeed predict behavior (Aronfreed, 1969; Emmerich & Goldman, 1983; Kohlberg, 1969; Lockwood, 1976).

In view of the of the problems involved in the prediction of behavior from values, the major purposes of this article are to describe one process by which values may affect behavior and then to test several hypotheses derived from the proposed formulation. The proposed account of the value behavior link is based on research and theory concerning construct accessibility (Bargh, Bond, Lombardi, & Tota, 1986; Bruner, 1957; Higgins, 1989; Higgins & King, 1981; Wyer & Srull, 1989) as well as on Rokeach’s (1973) and Schwartz’s (1992) conceptions of values. The proposed approach is also consistent with Hodges and Baron’s (1992) ecological approach to values and with Lewin’s (1951) and Feather’s (1990, 1992) conceptions of values as valence-inducing constructs.

According to the proposed approach, values which affect behavior are assumed to function as chronically accessible, positively valenced categories. The process by which values influence behavior is assumed to involve two stages. The first stage can be described as the discriminant valence-induction phase, a phrase borrowed from Lewin (1951) and Feather (1990, 1992). In this stage, value concepts which are readily accessible are frequently and discriminantly used to categorize (encode) perceptions of specific behaviors that are linked to the value concept and are viewed as instances (or manifestations) of that concept.

The linkage of perceptions of specific behaviors to a positively valenced value concept is likely to change the valence of the attitudes held in relation to those behaviors, particularly in cases where the initial affective response to the encoded