



Risk and protective factors for problem behaviors among youth in residential care



Eran Melkman*

Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar Ilan University, Israel

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ABSTRACT

In accordance with problem behavior theory (PBT), the study examined the contribution of risk and protective factors among high-risk adolescents living in residential care settings (RCSs) to their delinquency, substance abuse, and risky sexual behavior, as well as the inter-correlations between these problem behaviors. The specific study variables were chosen to represent the personal and environmental factors operating on the adolescent. It was hypothesized that higher levels of problem behaviors would be associated with higher levels of sensation-seeking and deviant peer associations (risk factors), and lower levels of future orientation and parental support (protective factors).

One hundred and forty seven adolescents ($M = 16.03$) from seven residential facilities for children with severe emotional and behavioral problems in Israel responded to structured self-report questionnaires.

The powerful associations found between the abovementioned risk behaviors suggested a problem behavior syndrome among this group. The risk factors of sensation-seeking and deviant peer associations made the largest contribution to the prediction of problem behaviors beyond any background or protective factors examined. Of the protective factors, only future orientation was found to be significantly associated with problem behaviors: i.e., a more positive future orientation correlated with lower engagement in problem behaviors, an association that increased in strength with age.

The apparent existence of a single behavioral syndrome among youth in RCSs and the central contribution to the syndrome of risk factors – in particular, deviant peer associations – points to the need for holistic group interventions addressing multiple risk factors.

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1. Introduction

Adolescent problem behaviors of delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse, and risky sexual behavior pose a major health risk as well as a threat to adolescents' further psycho-social development. Consequently in the past two decades a large number of scientific research efforts have attempted to unravel the factors underlying these behaviors (Hair, Park, Ling, & Moore, 2009). The last national risk behavior survey conducted in the U.S. revealed that among 15–19 year-old high school students, 21.9% were engaged in binge drinking, 21.9% used marijuana, 16.6% had carried weapons during the previous month, and 39.2% had not used a condom during their most recent sexual activity (Eaton et al., 2012). Other western countries present similar data (Currie et al., 2012). Although such behaviors also occur in adulthood, rates of engagement in problem behaviors among adolescents are especially high and may lead to long-term problems such as substance abuse, persistent delinquency or mental health problems (Hair et al., 2009). Addressing

these behaviors therefore constitutes a central part of prevention programs for high-risk youth around the world (Palmgreen, Lorch, Stephenson, Hoyle, & Donohew, 2007).

Adolescents in residential care are considered to be at especially high risk for the development of a range of behavioral problems (Hussey & Guo, 2002). They present multiple risk factors including a history of maltreatment and neglect, lack of familial functioning and stability, alcohol- or drug-abusing parents, and poverty – all known to be related to increased vulnerability for engaging in problem behaviors (Harden, 2004). Despite this population's profound vulnerability, relatively few studies have investigated problem behaviors among youth in RCSs (James, Montgomery, Leslie, & Zhang, 2009).

Problem behavior theory (PBT) asserts that common risk and protective factors underlie involvement in problem behaviors (Jessor, 1991, 2014). It should be noted that this theory, which primarily draws on cross-sectional data, does not assert causal relationships or temporal precedence. Rather, it asserts that there are correlational connections between these factors and problem behaviors, with risk factors being associated with an increased statistical likelihood of engagement in problem behaviors, whereas protection factors are associated with a decreased likelihood of engagement in problem

* Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 52900, Israel. Tel.: +972 506850090; fax: +972 37384042.
E-mail address: eranmelkman@gmail.com.

behaviors (Jessor & Turbin, 2014). Despite these limitations the current study followed Jessor and colleagues' strategy of using cross-sectional data to examine the contribution of risk and protective factors, among high-risk adolescents living in RCSs in Israel, to their delinquency, substance abuse, and risky sexual behavior, as well as the inter-correlations between these problem behaviors. The specific study variables were chosen to represent the personal and environmental factors operating on the adolescent. It was hypothesized that higher levels of problem behaviors would be associated with higher levels of sensation-seeking and deviant peer associations (risk factors), and lower levels of future orientation and parental support (protective factors).

1.1. The problem behavior syndrome

Among the theories that have attempted to explain the development of problem behaviors (Igra & Irwin, 1996), only PBT – an ecological model that encompasses the multiple systems influencing the adolescent – has an empirical base that goes beyond gender, socio-economic or race differences (Jessor et al., 2003). A basic tenet of the theory is that the behaviors are inter-related and constitute a single behavioral syndrome (Jessor, 1991). A large body of research documenting correlations between two behaviors or more has provided partial evidence for the problem behavior syndrome hypothesis (Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus, Gonzales, & Bouris, 2008; Zweig, Lindberg, & McGinley, 2001). However, other studies (Guilamo-Ramos, Litardo, & Jaccard, 2005), showing that reported correlations between behaviors are not uniform across all adolescent populations, suggest that groups with different socio-demographic characteristics may present different combinations of behaviors according to different social or cultural perceptions (Basen-Engquist, Edmundson, & Parcel, 1996).

The correlation between problem behaviors has drawn the attention of researchers as well as practitioners as it is crucial in determining effective intervention (Hair et al., 2009). The existence of a problem behavior construct suggests that effective interventions should be targeted at a whole group of behaviors rather than applying a range of interventions targeting each behavior separately; the latter method suffers from the concomitant disadvantages of overlap in content and questionable long-term effectiveness (Dryfoos, 1990). Still, very little is known about the co-occurrence patterns in clinical samples – e.g., youth in residential care – as studies addressing this topic have focused almost entirely on community samples. Therefore, the current study addresses this gap in the literature and examines the associations between the different behaviors among adolescents in RCSs in Israel. Furthermore, the study examined the role of risk factors such as sensation-seeking and deviant peer associations (i.e., factors that increase the likelihood of engagement in problem behavior) and protective factors such as future orientation and parental support (i.e., factors that decrease the likelihood of engagement in problem behavior).

1.2. Risk factors: sensation-seeking and deviant peer associations

Sensation-seeking is conceptualized as a biological tendency to seek novel, exciting and intense experiences and the readiness to take physical, social, legal and financial risks in their pursuit (Zuckerman, 1994). Extensive studies have shown that sensation-seeking youth use more alcohol and marijuana (Crawford, Pentz, Chou, Li, & Dwyer, 2003), take part in more delinquent activity (Harden, Quinn, & Tucker-Drob, 2012) and engage in more unwanted sex under pressure or when inebriated (Donohew et al., 2000) than youth who aren't sensation-seeking, both concurrently and distally. There is also reason to believe that adolescents who come from lower socioeconomic classes, such as those at the focus of the present study, are especially vulnerable to the negative influences of sensation-seeking (Zuckerman, 2007).

Whereas peer groups can be a source of protection and encourage pro-social behaviors (Kiuru, Aunola, Vuori, & Nurmi, 2007), negative peer behavior is a central risk marker for a range of problem behaviors (Dryfoos, 1990). Many studies point to the strong association between the involvement of peers in problem behaviors and an adolescent's own engagement in similar behaviors (Barnes, Hoffman, Welte, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2006; Bowman, Prelow, & Weaver, 2007). This relationship is attributed to deviant peers' tendency to reinforce existing behaviors or encourage the acquisition of new ones (Brown, Dolcini, & Leventhal, 1997; Dishion, 2000). Empirical data showing that children who come from difficult personal, familial, or environmental backgrounds are at a higher risk for deviant peer associations indicate the dangers in placing such youth in RCSs that expose them to other youth involved in problem behaviors (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2004). Indeed, exposure to the impact of problematic peers in group care settings has been a longstanding concern of the scientific community (Barth, 2005). Nevertheless, very few studies have empirically addressed the issue, and it is yet unclear to what extent such concern is justified (Huefner & Ringle, 2012).

1.3. Protective factors: future orientation and parental support

Future orientation is an individual's expectations about and actions related to the future (Nurmi, 2005). It serves as the basis for exploring future options, setting personal goals and undertaking commitments toward their fulfillment (Nurmi, Poole, & Seginer, 1995), thereby playing an important role in guiding individual behavior in the present. Persons with a developed sense of future orientation are more aware of the consequences of their present behavior, are more motivated to delay gratification, and can forgo immediate pleasures for future rewards (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Nurmi (1991) states that while most adolescents are able to plan for their future by setting goals and committing to them, those who lack this capacity may be more inclined to engage in problem behaviors. Indeed, numerous studies testify to the negative association between future orientation and the various indicators of problem behaviors among adolescents (Chen & Vazsonyi, 2013; Robbins & Bryan, 2004).

The central role that parents play in the development of problem behaviors among adolescents has been emphasized in clinical (Dishion & McMahon, 1998), developmental (Shaw, 2003) and criminological (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1994) theories. Parental support (encouragement and expression of warmth) is particularly important as it constitutes the emotional basis for the parent-adolescent relationship (Baumrind, 1991) and mediates the effects of other family-related attributes tied to problem behaviors such as structure or socio-economic status (Valiente, Lemery, & Reiser, 2007). Evidence for its role as a protective factor has been found in many studies of substance abuse (Beyers, Toumbourou, Catalano, Arthur, & Hawkins, 2004), delinquency (Hoeve et al., 2009) and engagement in risky sexual behavior (Voisin, Neilands, Salazar, Crosby, & DiClemente, 2008).

Maladaptive parenting styles and problem behaviors, however, may make parental support less effective and at times even harmful (Barrera et al., 2002). Whereas scientific literature in the substitute care field often refers to the importance of incorporating parents and families in treatment (Nickerson, Salamone, Brooks, & Colby, 2004), few empirical studies have examined the contribution of parental relationship dimensions to children's behavior, and the existing evidence is inconsistent (Attar, 2006).

The overall purpose of the current study was twofold. One purpose was to investigate the existence of a problem behavior syndrome among youth in RCSs, through the exploration of a range of problem behaviors. The second purpose was to investigate the contribution of risk and protective factors in accounting for the variance in the range of problem behaviors. Specifically, we hypothesized that adolescents with higher levels of sensation-seeking or deviant peer associations (i.e., risk factors) would be more involved in problem behaviors. In

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