



Life satisfaction and positive perceptions of the future among youth at-risk participating in Civic-National Service in Israel[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In Israel, the 'Civic-National Volunteer Service for Youth At-risk' was developed to help support their transition to adulthood, while making a contribution to society. The present paper examines life satisfaction and perceptions of the future among youth at-risk completing their volunteer service. Further, the paper explores how socio-demographic background, personal strengths (sense of mastery and self-esteem), and their experiences during service predict these outcomes.

The participants were selected from a convenience sample, which included most of the participants in a cohort of national service for a project designed specifically for youth at-risk in a nonprofit organization that operates national service projects. The sample included 161 at-risk youth (93.2% females) who responded to structured questionnaires. Stepwise hierarchical regressions were conducted to examine predictor of each of the dependent variables. The findings revealed that experiences during volunteer service contributed significantly to prediction of their life satisfaction. Positive perceptions of the future, on the other hand, were predicted mainly by their personal assets of having a high school matriculation diploma and high self-esteem. In the discussion section, the paper addresses the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, with a strong emphasis on expanding this important support for normative transition to adulthood of at-risk youth.

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1. Introduction

Transition to adulthood may be a difficult developmental task for many young persons. It is even more stressful and difficult for youth at risk who have experienced multiple stressors in their lives, such as poverty, maltreatment, and out of home placement (Arnett, 2007). In Israel, the 'Civic-National Volunteer Service for Youth At-risk' was developed to support their transition to adulthood while contributing to others. The present paper examines life satisfaction and perceptions of the future among youth at-risk completing the national service in Israel. Further, the paper explores how socio-demographic background, personal characteristics (sense of mastery and self-esteem) and their experiences during service predict these outcomes.

1.1. Youth at-risk and Civic-National Service in Israel

The definition of youth at-risk in Israel relates to youth from families in distress, including youth from single-parent and poor families,

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as well as youth from families in which one of the parents has been imprisoned, and youth from immigrant families who have difficulties adjusting to the Israeli society (in recent years mainly from Ethiopia). It also includes youth who have experienced childhood maltreatment and were either treated in the community or in out of home care (Kahan-Strabtzinsky & Wazan-Sikron, 2008; Schmid, 2007).

When Jewish young persons at-risk approach the age of 18 years old they face an important developmental milestone. They could enlist to the Israel Defense Force, as expected of all Jewish citizens. This may help them join the mainstream of society and increase the likelihood that they make successful transition to normative adult life. If, however, due to their behavioral and mental health difficulties, the military is not interested in their service, or if they are not motivated to take on the challenge of military service, they are at high risk to continue being marginalized in society. The inclusion of these young persons at-risk in the Civic-National Service is intended to provide them with an alternative to the compulsory military service, as a means toward better integration into Israel main society in their transition to adulthood.

National service is a volunteer framework for youth known in many countries. The obligation to participate in national service, the nature of the activity that the national service volunteers engage in, and the age of the volunteers vary from one country to another. Notwithstanding the variations, all of these programs share the intention to contribute both to the volunteer and to the larger society (Frumkin

& Miller, 2008; Sherraden & Eberly, 1986). An overarching goal of national service is to strengthen the volunteers' sense of affiliation, identification, and belonging to the community, society, and the country. Volunteers engaging in national service are expected to contribute to the country in general and to disadvantaged populations in particular.

For many years, national service in Israel has been an alternative for young women who could not serve in the army for religious reasons. Instead, they were offered an opportunity to take on a range of roles that served as acceptable alternatives to military service. In recent years, national service has also become an option for other populations such as Arab Israelis and ultra-Orthodox Jews who do not traditionally serve in the army, as well as for youth at-risk who are considered unfit to serve in the army due to their behavioral and emotional difficulties. In accordance with its new goals, this volunteer service is now called 'Civic-National', to add the component of civic service to the community, and deemphasize service to the nation (that may be less of a priority to the social groups for which it is being offered). The focus of the present study is on outcomes of youth at-risk who entered a Civic-National Service program designed specifically for them.

1.2. Life satisfaction and perceptions of the future

Multiple intermediate and long term positive outcomes are expected of participation in the Civic-National Service. This paper focuses on two important aspects: life satisfaction, and positive perceptions of the future. Life satisfaction reflects the individuals' subjective perceptions of their lives (Diener, 1984), and is an important component of well-being. Studies have revealed that people who volunteer experience less depression and higher levels of life satisfaction in comparison with those who do not volunteer (Li & Ferraro, 2006; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005). However, few studies have examined life satisfaction among volunteers in national service. In the United States, a study on the impact of national service on life satisfaction among volunteers in AmeriCorps programs (Yamaguchi et al., 2008) revealed that national service has a strong impact on the life satisfaction of participants in those programs. Moreover, in comparison with participants in the control group, the AmeriCorps volunteers reported higher levels of satisfaction in various areas of life such as work, physical health, social and family relationships.

It has been argued that life satisfaction and perceptions of the future are interrelated (Schiff, Nebe, & Gilman, 2006), and that these variables reflect the overall well-being of individuals in the present as well as their expectations for future (e.g., hopes and fears about the future in various areas of life). In a broader sense, this concept includes not only perceptions of the future but also motivational and behavioral manifestations of those perceptions (Seginer, 2001). Although the role of young persons' at-risk perceptions of the future has yet to be examined in the context of national service, studies conducted among children and adolescents at-risk have shown that a positive future orientation can be a protective factor, and that it can promote resilience (Wyman, Cowen, Work, & Kerley, 1993).

The present study examined factors that contribute to life satisfaction and positive perceptions of the future among youth at-risk who volunteer in Israel's Civic-National Service programs. Our general hypothesis was that positive outcomes for youths are influenced by the combined effect of personal strengths with which they entered the program and positive experiences during the program.

1.3. Personal strengths

In general, we identified characteristics that reflect resources and strengths that may contribute to the dependent variables of life satisfaction and positive future perceptions. Thus, in Israel being born to a family of new immigrants (especially when they have emigrated

from Ethiopia) is considered a stressor associated with less positive outcomes. For instance, Jewish children from Ethiopian background achieved far less positive outcomes following stay in educational residential care in Israel (Zeira & Benbenishty, 2008), and had much more involvement with juvenile delinquency compared with other young persons in Israel (Shimoni & Benbenishty, 2011).

Entering the Civic-National Service with strong educational background is an important indication of personal strength that may predict better outcomes. Given that educational achievements of youth at-risk, in the child welfare system and in out of home care are notoriously low (Pecora, Williams, Kessler, O'Brien, & Emerson, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006), acquiring a high school diploma is a strong indication of resilience.

In addition to personal background we included two factors that may be considered more stable personality characteristics, associated with personal strengths and resiliency: self-esteem and sense of mastery. These two characteristics promote resilience, and reflect the attitudes of individuals about difficulties in their lives and the stressors they are exposed to, as well as their positive perceptions of how they can handle potential or existing threats (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pearlin, 1991). *Self-esteem* refers to the image that individuals have of themselves: their evaluations and opinions about their bodies, their aspirations, and their ability to cope with problems (Hobfoll & Walfisch, 1984; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). *Mastery* is defined as the individual's ability to control significant aspects of one's life, to take initiative, and to change reality (Hobfoll & Walfisch, 1984; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Rotter, 1954, 1966).

Studies have revealed that both these personal factors are positively associated with life satisfaction and positive perceptions of the future (Campbell, 1981; Diener & Diener, 1995; Kerpelman & Mosher, 2004; Pinquart, Silbereisen, & Juang, 2004; Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009).

1.4. Program experiences

Three components of participation in Civic-National Services are examined here. The first is the extent to which volunteers feel that what they do is meaningful. Here we refer to the extent to which the service is seen as contributing both to the volunteers themselves and to those they are expected to help in their volunteer work. That is, the extent to which service is responsive to both altruistic and instrumental motivations (Sherer, 2004). Frumkin and Miller (2008) and Gal, Amit, Fleischer, and Streichman (2003) found that most of the youth volunteering in national service programs reported that the experience had not only contributed to their personal and professional growth, but that they had also been able to help others as a result of their volunteer work. This sense of meaning may be an important program component that leads to positive outcomes for participants. Our hypothesis is that youth at-risk who see their experience as meaningful, will have better outcomes.

The second program characteristic we examine has to do with the program activities offered to youth at-risk while volunteering. An important part of the Civic-National Service focuses on enhancing the social capital of the participating youth through a series of educational and recreational activities that aim to strengthen the connections between these youths and normative aspects of the Israeli society. For instance, youths engage in activities that introduce them to concepts such as democracy and community engagement, go on field trips to locations that have special meaning in Israel's history, etc. These activities are an important aspect of the program for youth at-risk and we hypothesize that youths who were satisfied with these program activities would have better outcomes.

Finally, program staff may be the single most important factor of the program. Staff in Civic-National Service in Israel are usually dedicated and highly committed young adults who invest a lot of energy

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