



High self-control protects the link between social support and positivity ratio for Israeli students exposed to contextual risk[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how Israeli students, despite exposure to contextual risk factors, may experience a high ratio of self-reported positive to negative emotions (i.e., positivity ratio). Self-control skills and perceived social support were tested as protective factors, where each was posited to moderate the relation between risk status and positivity ratio. The participants were 460 Israeli students (51% girls) in grades 8–10. Contrary to expectations, students attending a school with high contextual risks did not differ from students attending a school with low contextual risks in their scores on self-control skills, perceived social support, or positivity ratio. However, an exploratory follow-up moderation analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction, indicating that while low self-control skills eliminate the link between social support and positivity ratio for students attending the school defined as at-risk, high self-control protects this link. These results suggest that neither contextual risk in itself nor initial differences in self-control or social support account for differences in students' positivity ratio. Rather, it is the way these factors interact with each other that matters. Study limitations and implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

“Society looks to schools for help: to provide a secure environment for children, to foster appropriate learning experiences, and to attend to learning and emotional problems” (McWhirter, 2013, p. 19). Parents, teachers, psychologists, and other adult change agents in schools increasingly aim to facilitate students' positive adjustment, which has been linked to experiencing a high positivity ratio (i.e., the capacity to experience more positive than negative emotional experiences) – a key predictor of human flourishing (Fredrickson, 2013a,b). This stance is true for every school, but may be particularly relevant for schools whose students are exposed to contextual risk factors that can increase their vulnerability to developing a large range of disorders. Such contextual risk factors include low socioeconomic status, single-parent or divorced-parent household, immigrant status, ethnic or racial minority group, and a disadvantaged school environment.

The purpose of this study was twofold: to examine self-control and social support as individual and environmental protective factors, respectively, that may contribute to Israeli students' positivity ratio, and to examine the buffering role of these protective factors in the relation between risk status and students' positivity ratio. We first provide an overview of the literature on at-risk adolescents and then review research on positivity, self-control, and social support that served as the basis for the hypotheses.

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2. At-risk adolescents

Whereas adolescence is a developmental period of risk-taking, sensation-seeking, and role explorations (Coleman, 2011; Steinberg, 2010, 2013), the term *risk* has several uses when applied to adolescents. First, the term adolescents at-risk refers to those who are potentially vulnerable or “in-danger of future negative outcomes” (McWhirter, 2013, p. 8). Relatedly, the term risk factors refers to factors that may predict adverse outcomes, which are broadly grouped into contextual risk factors (e.g., socioeconomic, familial, demographic, and environmental factors) and personal risk factors (individual health, skills, and resources) (Coleman & Hagell, 2007; Lengua, Bush, Long, Kovacs, & Trancik, 2008).

A substantial body of longitudinal research conducted in the United States indicates that children and adolescents from low socioeconomic status (SES) are more likely to have more academic, social, emotional, and behavior problems, and are more likely to experience adjustment difficulties in adulthood (Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Duncan, Ziol-Guest, & Kalil, 2010; Evans & Kim, 2013; Sarsour et al., 2011). Similarly in Israel, low SES has predicted an educational achievement gap (David-Hadar, 2008), students' violent behavior (Knafo, Daniel, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2008), higher levels of weapon carrying in schools (Khoury-Kassabri, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2007), and posttraumatic stress related to exposure to community violence (Klodnick, Guterman, Haj-Yahia, & Leshem, 2014). Regarding familial risk factors, previous studies have generally shown that single mothers are vulnerable to internalizing problems (e.g., depression) and ineffective parenting behaviors, often as a result of life stressors such as financial hardship (Avison, Ali, & Walters, 2007; Taylor & Conger, 2014). In the United States, children of single parent households from low SES were found to exhibit inferior self-control compared to children from low SES two-parent households (Sarsour et al., 2011).

Immigrant status is a well-documented demographic risk factor because immigration-related acculturative stress has been linked to prevalence of mental health problems among some adolescents (for a review see Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Stevens & Vollebergh, 2008), including in Israel (Wilchek-Aviad, 2014). Increased immigration-related stress was linked to increased risk for academic underperformance (Albeg & Castro-Olivo, 2014; Santiago, Gudiño, Baweja, & Nadeem, 2014). Interestingly, a recent study in Norway suggested that the relation between immigration and acculturative stress and psychosocial problems in adolescents was moderated by peer social support (Noam, Oppedal, Idsoe, & Panjwani, 2014). Another demographic risk factor is being from an ethnic/racial minority group. Racial minority students have been shown to experience cumulative risk factors (i.e., poverty, single-parent household, household density, major stressful life events, number of household moves) more often than non-minority groups (Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007). In Israel, immigrant youth was found to have higher suicidal tendencies, anxiety, and depression (Wilchek-Aviad, 2014), as well as more alcohol abuse, problem behavior, and declines in academic achievements than native-born Israeli youth (Isralowitz & Reznik, 2014). Note that Israel as a state is officially defined on national, ethnic, and religious grounds as a Jewish state; its population is 75% Jewish, and most religious minority groups are also ethnic/racial minority groups. Previous studies have shown that the educational gaps in Israel can be explained by student ethnicity and country of origin, in addition to the other variables mentioned above (Dahan, Dvir, Mironichev, & Shye, 2003; David-Hadar, 2008).

The quality of the school environment in which adolescents develop impacts both psycho-social and academic outcomes (Roesser, 2001). School environments that are perceived as less safe and supportive have been related to bullying and harassment, which in turn are often linked to socioeconomic, demographic (race/ethnicity), and cultural differences which are contextual risk factors in and of themselves (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013; Turner, Reynolds, Lee, Subasic, & Bromhead, 2014). Accumulating research has indicated that poor school environments relate to the emergence of emotional and behavioral problems in students but that a good environment can serve a protective role (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Stiglbauer, Gnams, Gamsjäger, & Batinic, 2013).

3. Positivity ratio

Being at-risk can jeopardize students' ability to experience a high positivity ratio; namely, to experience more positive (e.g., joy, love, contentment) than negative emotions (e.g., fear, anger, sadness). The positivity ratio conceptualization derives from the assumption that positive emotions and negative emotions operate as independent bipolar constructs (Bradburn, 1969; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) and that the relation between them is “distinct and complementary” (Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000, p. 238). From an evolutionary perspective, it has been suggested that whereas negative emotions promote survival in times of threat by generating specific life preserving actions (i.e., fight or flight), positive emotions promote survival in the long term by building resources for coping with life's adversities (Fredrickson, 2013b). According to Fredrickson's (2013a) broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions have an adaptive function in that they expand awareness, cognition, and behavioral repertoires (broaden effect) and build enduring bio-psychosocial resources that support resiliency to adverse situations (build effect). This theory further suggests that a byproduct of the broaden effect of positive emotions is their undoing effect; i.e., their role as an antidote that corrects or diminishes the influence of negative emotions by broadening the individual's accessible repertoire of more adaptive thoughts and actions (Fredrickson, 2013a).

Nevertheless, Baumeister and Sparks (2008) review of studies across different domains of psychological phenomena (e.g., brain responses, reacting to life events, interpersonal interactions, emotions, information processing) indicated that the psychological impact of negative phenomena (i.e., undesirable, harmful, or unpleasant) outweighs the impact of positive phenomena (i.e., desirable, beneficial, or pleasant). Research suggests that the impact of good events dissolves more rapidly than the impact of bad events and that a single bad event has a greater impact than a comparable good event (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Therefore, because of this bias towards negativity, in which “bad is stronger than good”, it takes more good emotional experiences to

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