



## Typology of youth at risk

Dafna Etzion, Shlomo Romi \*

School of Education, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel



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### ABSTRACT

The absence of an accepted definition and classification for youth at risk has led to heterogeneous therapeutic grouping, often preventing appropriate intervention. The proposed typology, based on research conducted in Israel, is an initial attempt to classify these adolescents into relatively homogenous groups according to a complete set of personality and behavioral variables. The research tool was a questionnaire administered to 282 youths in distress and a contrast group of 217 normative youths. Cluster analysis that was used to construct the typology for the youths at risk, revealed four clusters: *Suspended* – relatively high scores in all positive adjustment measures, fewer-than-average deviant behaviors, higher-than average rate of suspension from school; *Sociablists* – relatively low positive adjustment measures, relatively high social adjustment, markedly higher-than-average negative adjustment measures (deviant behaviors and suspension from school); *Alienated* – significantly low positive adjustment measures, especially personal adjustment, higher-than-average negative adjustment measures; *Loners* – low positive adjustment measures, especially low social adjustment, lower-than-average negative adjustment measures (few deviant behaviors or school suspensions). The derived typology can be used to create interventions geared to personality and behavior rather than to external/demographic characteristics. A proposed intervention, with specialized programs for each group, is presented.

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### 1. Typology of youth at risk

The many attempts worldwide to define and describe the population of youth who have difficulties functioning within their age-specific educational and social settings, and eventually drop out of the normative route, have yet to yield a conclusive definition (Lahav, 1992; Resnick & Burt, 1996). An outcome of the lack of clear definition and of an agreed-upon classification of these adolescents is heterogeneous grouping of youth at risk, which, in turn, creates difficulties in the development of appropriate interventions.

In the present study we seek an innovative approach to the problem of heterogeneity by suggesting a means to construct a typology of youth at risk. To date, grouping and interventions of adolescents at risk were primarily based on characteristics such as demographics or offenses (drugs, theft, etc.). A search of the literature has not revealed classification by a comprehensive set of personality and behavioral variables, and this empirical study aims to fill that gap and also help to match appropriate and effective interventions for each group.

The idea of a personality-based typology of youth at risk is to try and create groupings – and hence interventions – that are tailored to individual needs within a group, not addressing the offense so much as the offender. We examined typologies in related subjects, and described

the methodology, the findings and both theoretical and practical value of youth at risk typology.

#### 1.1. Youth at risk

The term youth at risk refers to youth populations who are in physical, mental, or spiritual danger. The many names (among them street gang, detached youth, and maladjusted youth) given to these adolescents reflect social and organizational perspectives, as well as the problems inherent in the perception of this group and in the attempts to diagnose and analyze it. What all definitions have in common is the attempt to describe young people who have difficulties functioning within the social and educational settings for their age group, and eventually drop out of the normative route (Romi, 2007).

Youth at risk may have failed in their socialization, have difficulties accepting authority, completing their formal education, working, and even staying within the law (Hovav, 1989). In attempting to describe and define youth at risk, researchers worldwide used risk components that describe behaviors and attitudes that deviate from accepted norms (Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008; Jimenez, Dekovic, & Hidalgo, 2009; Resnick & Burt, 1996). Some of these components, such as dropping out of school, are objective, others, among them lack of adjustment, are subjective. In the current research we defined youth at risk using an objective measure: adolescents who do not belong to a normative educational framework that society had set up for their age group. The typology suggested in this study could serve to construct appropriate personality-based interventions. The interventions

\* Corresponding author at: School of Education, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 5290002, Israel.

E-mail address: [Shlomo.Romi@biu.ac.il](mailto:Shlomo.Romi@biu.ac.il) (S. Romi).

are mentioned for each group, but the details of the interventions are beyond the scope of this paper.

Glenn and Nelson (2000) claimed that all adolescents are at risk of one kind or another, and being at risk transcends gender, social class, or ethnicity (Mulvey, Arthur, & Reppucci, 1993; Rutter, 1979), at varying degrees. In Israel, where this study was conducted, the population of youth at risk is not homogeneous (Grupper & Romi, 2014, 2015), and is cared for by various educational and therapeutic agencies – within the community and out-of-home – under the auspices of several government offices. The government-appointed Schmid Committee (2006) proposed a very broad definition for youth at risk, referring to the personal, familial, social, economic, and demographic aspects of these adolescents. This multi-faceted, broad definition makes it difficult to estimate how many adolescents are truly at risk, and the following data will present some of the problematic issues. This problem is not unique to Israel and other countries are currently struggling with it, too. Thus, according to UNICEF (2009) figures, about 440 million children and adolescents (age 0–18) worldwide receive no basic education whatsoever. In addition, about 100 million children do not complete their elementary studies.

Following the Schmid Committee report, a review conducted by Sabo-Lahl and Hassin (2011) revealed that some 160,000 children and adolescents in Israel were at risk. Himi (2014) claimed that information from the Israeli Parliament (Knesset, 2011) some 400,000 children and adolescents in Israel were at risk. Of these, about 20,000 had already dropped out of normative educational settings, a figure which the Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel (2013) put at about 30,000.

A recent review conducted in Israel (Grupper, Salkovsky, & Romi, 2014) described and analyzed the complexity of children and youth at risk from various professional points of view. In most cases, risk was defined as behaviors and attitudes that deviate from accepted norms. In one study (Etzion, 2010), which looked specifically at the religiosity of youth at risk, it was found that religiosity was not be a barrier to dropping out of school. Worldwide, Chapman, Laird, Ifill, and KewalRamani (2011); Claus and Quimper (1991) and Schwartz (1995) found that children at 10th-grade age are most likely to drop out of school. In Israel, children go to junior-high school in seventh grade, and then to high school for grades 10–12. Both transitions, especially the latter, are points of crisis at which young people drop out.

## 1.2. Characteristics of youth at risk

Because characteristics overlap, assigning a causal role to each is a complex task (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlo, 2000; Kazaz, 2004). To construct and validate our typology we gathered all characteristics that the literature viewed as essential in differentiating between youth at risk and normative youth as baseline variables. These characteristics were: adjustment, well-being, deviant behaviors, socio-demographics, family ties, social ties, school experience, leisure activities, self-esteem, and attachment.

Adjustment is composed of integration, when individuals modify the environment to their needs, and adaptation, in which they modify themselves to the environment. Adjustment gives individuals a sense of confidence, self-esteem, autonomy, and the ability to cope (Erikson, 1963; Lazarus, 1963; Romi & Getahun, 2000, 2009). At various times, individuals exercise personal, social, behavioral, and emotional adjustment. Jimenez et al. (2009) found a relationship between familial attributes and personal, social, and school-related adjustment among adolescents who grew up in at-risk families.

### 1.2.1. Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction (which is part of well-being) is a positive concept which affects short- and long-term physical and mental health. Matsuba, Elder, Petrucci, and Marleau (2008) found that a program that helps youth at risk improve their psychological well-being

enhances their employment chances, and hence their chance to become normative citizens.

### 1.2.2. Deviant behaviors

These include criminal acts, violence, and substance abuse (Lahav, 2004).

### 1.2.3. Self-esteem

Individuals' assessment and judgment of their abilities, skills, behaviors, and emotions combined to form their self-esteem (Schwartzwald, 1984). Self-esteem is dynamic, and high self-esteem helps cope with failure (Abouserie, 1994).

### 1.2.4. Socio-demographics

Gender: There are more detached boys than detached girls (Dolev, Kahan-Strawczynski, & Shemes, 1999), and there are significant character differences between genders (Berger & Shechter, 1987; Nagari, 2003). Ethnic and cultural origin: In Israel, the percentage of detached adolescents is higher among immigrants than among native Israelis (Getahun, 2001; Shemesh, 1999), and detachment is more prevalent among Arabs than among Jews (Romi & Zoabi, 2003). Parents' education: Children whose parents had fewer years of schooling were more likely to drop out (Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel, 2009; Dolev et al., 1999). Socioeconomic status: Lower socioeconomic background is related to a higher chance of adolescent detachment (Levi-Zelik, 2002) and child abuse (Baumrind, 1991). Place of residence: Home, residential home or other institution (Nagari, 2003), and neighborhood (Gibbs, 1991) affect development. Other socioeconomic variables related to detachment are: parents' occupation (Barnett, Vondra, & Shonk, 1996) and family situation – single-parent family, divorced parents, large family (Brandon & Hofferth, 2003; McComb & Forehand, 1989).

### 1.2.5. Family ties

The family is the innermost circle of the child's ecological system, and parent–child relationships are essential for a child's social and intellectual development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Parents are the model for normative social behavior and for coping with conflicts, and the people who motivate a child to learn (Belsky, 1981).

### 1.2.6. Social ties

Adolescence is a period when the social circle has a great impact on individuals. Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay (2000) reported that even adolescents who had dropped out of school following poor behavior and low achievements, claimed that they respect the value of friendship and have many friends. The number of friends, degree of involvement with them, and the degree of exposure to friends who had deviated from the norm affect the tendency to detach (Ronel & Gutter, 2000).

### 1.2.7. School experience

According to Janosz et al. (2000), the school experience is composed of academic and social experiences. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) divided the school experience into three components – behavioral, emotional, and intellectual. Adolescents who are involved in school activities and feel attached to school are less likely to drop out (South, Haynie, & Bose, 2007).

### 1.2.8. Leisure activities

Leisure is the arena where adolescents address social acceptance or rejection (Workman, 1986), and the time which an individual spends alone or with friends (Dolev et al., 1999).

### 1.2.9. Attachment

An individual's attachment style is determined in early childhood, and continues developing throughout one's life (Bowlby, 1969, 1988).

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