The contribution of parental and societal conditional regard to adjustment of high school dropouts

Yael Itzhaki[a],[*], Haya Itzhaky[a], Yaacov B. Yablon[b]

[a] School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Israel
[b] School of Education, Bar-Ilan University, Israel

A B S T R A C T

This study examined the contribution of parental conditional regard (PCR) and societal conditional regard (SCR) – divided into positive and negative regard – to high school dropouts' adjustment (i.e., well-being, loneliness, and future orientation) along the different stages of the dropout process. Specifically, the current study focused on dropouts from a traditional community, where dropping out was accompanied by various social repercussions. The study, conducted in Israel among Ultraorthodox Jewish males, included 261 participants, ages 14–21 (M = 17, SD = 1.17), who were at different stages in the dropout process. Structural equation modeling indicated a negative contribution of parental conditional negative regard to adjustment, while societal conditional positive regard made a positive contribution to adjustment. Moreover, dropouts indicated higher parental and societal conditional regard than students at other stages of the dropout process. Findings highlight the importance of SCR and PCR in understanding the adjustment of dropouts in traditional communities.

1. Introduction

Dropping out of high school is one of the risk factors associated with youths' negative adjustment, and is discussed at length in the research literature (Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer, & Joly, 2006; Makarova & Birman, 2015; Rak & Patterson, 1996; Staff & Kreager, 2008). In closed traditional communities, where dropping out has enormous social significance, the repercussions are even more wide-ranging (Cates & Weber, 2013; Margolese, 2005), as will be elaborated upon below.

Although extensive research has been focused on dropouts, very little is known about the processes that explain high school dropouts' adjustment in general or about the adjustment of such dropouts in closed communities in particular. In the current research we therefore examined the contribution of two processes that are based on self-determination theory. While these processes, namely parental conditional regard (PCR) and societal conditional regard (SCR), are likely essential in understanding dropouts' adjustment, to date they have not been explored. The latter concept, SCR, is a unique theoretical development of the current research, and in this study we examined both SCR and PCR in relation to three groups of students representing three distinct stages in the dropout process: students who are having difficulty in high school, students who dropped out of high school and have entered a program for dropouts, and students who have dropped out of school and are not in any educational framework at all.

1.1. High school dropouts in closed traditional communities

Youths who drop out of high school are considered to be an at-risk group, since dropping out of school is likely to impair both their well-being and their future prospects (Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000). Various negative consequences, including high unemployment, low income, health problems, death at a young age, and delinquent behavior have been found among youths who have dropped out of school (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Brekke, 2014). For youths from traditional communities, dropping out of school carries additional repercussions, due to the strict norms observed by their homogeneous communities. In many traditional communities one of the accepted norms is studying in the community's schools, which are seen as serving several different purposes: teaching, providing an acceptable framework for socializing, and indoctrinating. Conversely, leaving this framework shows a disregard for, or even negation of communal norms, and creates the possibility that the individual will become distanced from his/her community (Bowers, 1998; Cates & Weber, 2013; Finkelman, 2011; Grilak, 2002; Hakak, 2005; Waite & Crockett, 1997). Therefore, dropping out of school in traditional communities contains both academic and social risks, which may lead to additional difficulties in the young person's adjustment.

The current study focused on Ultraorthodox youth in Israel. The Ultraorthodox community constitutes 9% of Israel's population (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016). The individuals in these communities usually segregate themselves from the society at large; they choose to live in closed or separate neighborhoods, have strict dress codes for men and women, and adhere to a rigid observance of Jewish law in both their personal and social lives. Private educational institutions, certified by the state, offer a unique study program geared to this particular population, which differs from the general state education program. In these communities, boys and girls do not study together; instead, they attend single-sex schools. From the age of 14 the boys study primarily Jewish subjects in a yeshiva high school, and they continue with these studies until they get married (Erhard & Erhard-Weiss, 2007; Finkelman, 2011; Grilak, 2002; Hakak, 2005; Lightman & Shor, 2002).

In recent years, the subject of dropping out of school in Ultraorthodox communities has sparked greater interest (Finkelman, 2011; Margolese, 2005). In contrast to what was commonly done in the past, i.e., excluding these individuals from the community (Finkelman, 2011), new programs – separate for boys and girls – have been opened for high school dropouts. These programs combine Jewish studies, social activities, secular subjects (i.e., math, science, etc.), vocational education and work opportunities, as an incentive for this at-risk group to stay in the community (Yogev & Assaf, 2002). Nevertheless, the boys studying in these programs are still considered to be failures due to their inability to remain in their yeshiva high schools (Erhard & Erhard-Weiss, 2007).

1.2. Adjustment of high school dropouts

Dropping out of high school puts young people at risk for negative adjustment (Fortin et al., 2006; Makarova & Birman, 2015; Rak & Patterson, 1996; Staff & Kreager, 2008). In their study on ethnic minority youth, including youth from traditional communities, Makarova and Birman (2015) reviewed 29 studies that explored youths' adjustment. Psychological adjustment was found to be affected by students' acculturation orientations, the social support they enjoyed, and the discrimination against them. Yet there is very little data, if any, about the psychological adjustment of dropouts from traditional communities, or about other factors that might affect their psychological adjustment.

1.3. Risk and protective factors

In the current study we examined psychological adjustment by assessing the dropouts' well-being (Makarova & Birman, 2015), loneliness (Neto & Barros, 2000; Pedersen, Vitaro, Barker, & Borge, 2007) and future orientation (Smith & Boone, 2006). Loneliness was assessed as it is likely to be associated with various forms of psychopathology and with poorer general health (Qualter, Brown, Munn, & Rotenberg, 2010). Positive future orientation was examined as it is considered to be a significant resilience factor for proper development among youth, mainly in the transition to adulthood (Levy, Benbenishty, & Refaeli, 2012; Stoddard, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister, 2011). From a theoretical perspective, the current study was based on self-determination theory (SDT) which is a theory of motivation regarding our fundamentally natural tendency to behave in effective and healthy ways. Parenting practices play a large role in a child's self-determination. In accordance with SDT, parenting practices, which cover a wide spectrum ranging from the exertion of complete control over a child's behavior to the granting of a great deal of autonomy, will naturally be internalized by the child (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Internalization processes that do not enable choice and autonomy have been found to correlate with negative adjustment and low levels of well-being among children (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989).

The practice of parental conditional regard (PCR) was found to be significant in many previous studies in explaining the behavior of children and youth (Assor & Tal, 2012; Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). Parental conditional regard is a socialization strategy that makes the granting of parental love and acceptance contingent upon the child's being compliant with his/her parents' expectations. In parental conditional *positive* regard (PCPR), parents provide more attention, affection, and esteem tan they ordinarily so when the child meets their expectations. In parental conditional *negative* regard (PCNR), parents provide less affection and warmth than they ordinarily do when the child does not meet their expectations (Assor et al., 2004; Roth, 2008). Both PCPR and PCNR are considered to be practices that suppress autonomy, and they have many negative effects. Parental conditional positive regard was found to contribute to feelings of internal compulsion, self-aggrandizement following success, and self-devaluation and shame following failure. Parental conditional negative regard was found to contribute to resentment toward the parent and self-devaluation and shame following failure, and it has also been shown to have serious negative effects for a child's well-being (Assor & Tal, 2012; Assor et al., 2004; Roth, Assor, Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009). However, Roth and Assor (2010) claim that from a behaviorist perspective, PCPR