

Abstract

This research focuses on the developmental stage that has attracted increasing attention during the last decade, i.e., emerging adulthood. This stage comprises the third decade of life, during which young people undergo major changes during the gradual passage into adulthood. Unlike previous studies conducted on normative samples, the present study focuses on a high risk sample of emerging adults that have not been studied in the past.

At risk youth are young people who failed to attain various normative developmental markers (e.g.: an occupational pursuit amenable to their further progress in life) and are excluded from social networks. They feel isolated from their peers and from society in general. Many of them do not look for an educational or occupational alternative and are at risk of getting excluded from the normative mainstream systems of life. They feel frustrated and estranged, constituting a group at risk of vagrancy and other risk behaviors.

As in previous studies, we examined the associations between “personal assets” (i.e., personality characteristics) and “social assets” (support factors), and individual level of adaptation. In addition, considering the unique characteristics of the current sample, we examined the mediating role of sense of alienation in the adaptation process among at risk emerging adults over time.

Participants of this study are low class chronically unemployed young people. Unable to find any employment on their own, welfare authorities and units for the advancement of youth were involved in the referral of these young people to vocational training courses, in the hope of enhancing their chances of gaining social mobility. The participants were selected from a variety of vocational training courses, including –inter alia – cooking, patisserie, mechanical vehicle training, mechanical chilling training etc. These courses and training programs represent the wide variety offered for youth at risk by the welfare authorities.

A quasi-experimental longitudinal study was designed to assess study questions. Upon the commencement of the vocational training courses participants' personality (dependency, self-criticism and efficiency), as well as support factors and level of alienation were assessed – Time 1. Time 1 measurement included 257 participants (171 males, 86 females). Upon the completion of the vocational training (at about six months later) participants were reassessed and counselors were asked to

rate their success during training – Time 2. This assessment was based on 211 participants (141 males, 86 females). Finally, half a year following graduation participants were approached once more and their level of functioning and well being was evaluated – Time 3. The final assessment involved 117 subjects, 86 of whom were males, while 31 were females.

Similar to previous studies conducted on normative young people, we too found that personality and support factors to explain individual level of adaptation and sense of alienation. In contrast to our expectations, level of alienation did not mediate the association between personality and support systems and adaptation. However, sense of alienation contributed to level of adaptation above and beyond the contribution of personality and support systems. The role of alienation emerged during the post training (Time 3) assessment. It was the youngsters' sense of alienation from their families (and not personality or support factors) which best predicted the change following the completion of vocational training courses: youngsters who reported a high degree of alienation from their families tended to report a decline in various adaptation measures. In contrast, youngsters low on alienation from their family reported higher levels of adaptation. Finally, an additional unexpected finding suggested a decline in level of adaptation following the completion of vocational training courses.

The study's findings indicate that the sense of alienation from family plays a central role in the ability of at risk young people to initiate a change, develop and outgrow problematic behavior patterns. The findings underscore both the necessity to change the perception of vocational training courses as mere training courses, and the need to enhance the emotional support while targeting at risk young people.

The current research has several limitations. First of all, the participants were unemployed young people at risk, which agreed to participate in the various training courses. Therefore, the conclusions of the study are valid only to this population. Second of all, most of the participants were males, a fact which hinders the possibility to generalize our results on females. Lastly, the methodology of the current research was base on self-report questionnaires. A use of other methodologies, or gathering information from other – more independent – sources, may increase the validity of the various variables assessed in the study.