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“I Need to Do This on My Own” Resilience and Self-Reliance in Urban At-Risk Youths

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"I Need to Do This on My Own" Resilience and Self-Reliance in Urban At-Risk Youths

Margriet Lenkens [a,b], Gerda Rodenburg[a], Loïs Schenk[c], Gera E. Nagelhout[a,d], Frank J. Van Lenthe[b], Godfried Engbersen[c], Miranda Sentse[e], Sabine Severiens[c], and Dike Van De Mheen[f]

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates urban at-risk youths' perspectives on their multiproblem situations and explores their needs for support. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 at-risk youths with varied (externalizing) problems and risk factors. The data analysis was carried out using an inductive thematic approach. Four main themes emerged: desistance from delinquent behavior, need for self-reliance, negative experiences in social relationships and need for support. The participants indicated a strong need to be(come) self-reliant, which was visible in their statements on independence, coping with problems and reluctance to seek or accept help, also regarding desistance from crime. For some, this need for self-reliance seemed to be accompanied by distrust of others, which appeared related to previous negative experiences in social interactions. The participants seemed more open to support coming from someone with similar characteristics or experiences. The findings suggest that in helping at-risk youths, a delicate balance should be sought between stimulating autonomy and providing the necessary resources for support. A focus on strengthening factors that foster resilience is recommended. Future research could investigate the possible benefits of perceived similarity between youths and their care providers.

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Introduction

When making the transition from childhood into adulthood, adolescents and emerging adults face several developmental challenges. They strive to become increasingly autonomous and to be more in charge of making decisions that will affect the rest of their lives. Simultaneously, others also expect them to become more independent and self-governing, such as in the areas of education, employment, and housing. However, some youths are unable to meet society's requirements when it comes to achieving self-governance. In addition to the challenges that adolescence brings, these youngsters are confronted with conditions in their social environment that can impede adult development (Collins 2001). These circumstances, such as a poor neighborhood or a dysfunctional family, are termed 'risk antecedents' in the risk model proposed by Resnick and Burt (1996) and they create vulnerabilities. In combination with risk markers, which refer to early negative behavior or experiences such as poor school performance or out-of-home placement, these vulnerabilities are likely to prompt problem behavior with more serious long-term risk outcomes (Resnick and Burt 1996).

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Some populations are more likely to experience a multitude of stressors, and stressful events during adolescence can lead to emotional and behavioral problems (Collins 2001). In addition, studies indicate that the relation between stressors and externalizing behavior is reciprocal, which means that behavioral problems may also cause more stressors such as attenuated relationships and failure to achieve certain tasks (Grant et al. 2004). Youngsters facing adversity could, therefore, come to experience an accumulation of problems, including dropping out of school, unemployment, substance use and involvement in delinquent behavior, thereby posing a risk to themselves and/or to society. For most of these at-risk youths, their (externalizing) problems are transitory: by the time adulthood is reached they find themselves in a prosocial environment and with a regular job. Crucial for this development into a healthy adult is being able to adapt to stressful events or situations, and coping and social support may moderate the effect of stress on externalizing behavior (Tandon et al. 2013). For a subgroup of at-risk youths, however, it appears that they have more difficulty adapting to the risk-setting or adverse events in their lives or that they are less able to profit from available resources, leading to more persistent problems. In order to gain a better understanding of what may cause these problems to develop and persist, this study will focus on how these youngsters view their multiproblem situation and what they think of the support that is available to them.

The idea of "achieving positive outcomes despite challenging or threatening circumstances, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding negative paths linked with risks" (Zolkoski and Bullock 2012) is known as 'resilience'. While in outcome-centered research on resilience the focus is on the maintenance of competent behavior when exposed to risk, process-focused research aims to comprehend the mechanisms modifying the impact of a risk setting and study the processes by which people adapt (Olsson et al. 2003). The latter approach seems more appropriate when studying a population of adolescents and emerging adults, considering the dynamic nature of the developmental stage they are in. Factors that foster or promote resilience may be assets, referring to an individual's personal attributes (such as coping skills, self-efficacy, and competence), or resources, which are external to the individual. The latter can be found in the immediate social environment (family and peer network) and at the societal level (e.g. school environment, community organizations) (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005). The field of resilience research has recently been expanding to also incorporate epigenetic processes and neurobiological correlates of resilience (Sapienza and Masten 2011).

For at-risk youths', therefore, there appears to be an imbalance between protective and risk factors, threatening their resilience. However, merely diminishing the risk factors or increasing the amount of protective factors may not be sufficient to become more resilient in spite of adversity. According to Ungar (2011), resilience also includes the capacity of individuals to actively use available resources and the ability of governments and communities to provide individuals with what they need. The life stage involving the transition to adulthood contains many 'key junctures' (i.e. choosing a school or career, building significant relationships, etc.), turning points at which a more constructive direction can be chosen and a risk trajectory may be averted (Collins 2001). However, if the youngster is not able to utilize these or is not provided with the help he or she needs, these changes might not occur.

This also applies to the specific population of at-risk youths who display delinquent behavior. The developmental period of transitioning into adulthood may not only provide opportunities to grow resilience but also for desistance to take place. This process of abstinence from crime seems to be related to that of resilience (Fitzpatrick 2011). According to Laub and Sampson (2001), both individual choices and the development of high-quality social bonds play a crucial role in desistance. As social bonds become stronger and social capital increases, the individual has more resources for support and problem solution, there is more at stake, and there is less unstructured time, making involvement in criminal activities less necessary, attractive and convenient. Although the individual does not have complete control over what happens at the social level, he or she does exercise human agency and can either seize opportunities that can become turning points or ignore them (Laub and Sampson 2001).

Thus, in both resilience and desistance a dynamic interplay of individual and social factors is present. In addition, the process of desistance resembles the aspect of resilience which concerns the avoidance of negative, risky paths (Zolkoski and Bullock 2012) and the ability to utilize protective factors in order to adapt to risk settings (Ungar 2011). Still, relatively little research is available on resilience and the utilization of social resources in the population of adolescents and emerging adults who are involved in risk-taking or delinquent behavior.

In order to have optimal utilization of social resources in striving towards resilience and desistance, it is crucial to shed more light on youths' own perspectives on their problems and on what their needs for (social) support are. In the current study, a qualitative research approach is used to explore these perspectives and needs. The two main research questions are: 1) How do at-risk youths reflect on their multiproblem situation, including any current or future delinquent behavior? and 2) What are at-risk youths' needs for support or help?

Methods

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 youths (21 males, two females) who were recruited through purposeful sampling. Only youths between the ages of 12 and 27 years who were residents of the city of Rotterdam or the surrounding region were eligible for participation. Rotterdam is the second largest city in The Netherlands (approximately 625,000 inhabitants) and home to 125,500 youths, of which approximately 7,000 are considered at risk due to multiple problems in the areas of education, employment, care and/or delinquent behavior (Scheidel 2017). Youths who matched this description were identified, selected and invited to participate by, for example, professionals working within the field of youth care or in the juvenile criminal justice system, and school attendance officers. Selection bias may have occurred because youths not enrolled in any programs were not eligible for participation. The aim was to gather a sample that was diverse, but not necessarily representative of the whole population of at-risk youths. Heterogeneity in type and severity of risk was pursued by selecting organizations that targeted varied at-risk populations. We first sampled through the municipal school attendance office, which aims to detect and supervise adolescents aged 18 and older who do not have a school certificate. Through these professionals, we also gained access to an organization (working together with the municipality) that provides such youths with practical help regarding school. The researchers accompanied two youth workers making their rounds in one of the neighborhoods. These youth workers are very familiar with certain areas of Rotterdam and have daily contact with at-risk youths. We also gained access to a residential youth care facility, which houses youths (up to 18 years of age) with behavior problems and from families with parenting problems. Regarding youths who were mainly considered at-risk youths because of their delinquent behavior, we gained access to them through a juvenile detention center, a juvenile probation program for adolescents with mild intellectual disability and a voluntary reintegration program for 18- to 27-year-olds. After being invited to participate by the selected organizations, the candidate participants were approached by the researchers. Following the interviews, the respondents were asked if they could refer others with similar problems. This snowball sampling yielded two additional participants.

Our sample of 23 participants (21 males and two females) ranged in age from 15 to 25 (M = 18.42, SD = 2.76). Although the female participants were included in the data analysis, it is important to bear this uneven distribution in mind, because the findings will apply mainly to males. The majority of the participants (n = 18) were born in the Netherlands. In total, 21 participants had at least one parent who was born outside the Netherlands. The ethnic backgrounds of the youths' parents varied widely, with the birth countries Curacao (seven fathers, six mothers) and Morocco (five fathers, five mothers) being represented most often. Rotterdam is an ethnically diverse city, in which 58% of 12- to 27-year-olds have at least one parent who was not born in the Netherlands. For at-risk youths, this

percentage is 74%. Of the total at-risk youth population, the proportion of youths of Moroccan (17%), Antillian/Aruban (13%), Surinam (13%) and Turkish (17%) heritage are highest (Roode and Paul 2017). Although our sample resembles the ethnic composition of Rotterdam's at-risk youths, it can also be seen that the proportion of native Dutch participants in our sample is smaller. This finding will be discussed in the section on strengths and limitations. Information on the demographic characteristics of our sample can be found in Table 1.

Following the conceptual model by Resnick and Burt (1996), risk antecedents (e.g. neighborhood, family dysfunction) and risk markers (e.g. out-of-home placement, poor school performance) appeared to be present for all the participants. Most of them displayed problem behaviors, such as truancy, drug use or association with delinquent peers, and for some, we can already speak of risk outcomes, such as those participants who had dropped out of school, had been imprisoned or had become parents at an early age. Regarding delinquent behavior, the majority of the participants (19/23) were approached by police officers in the past for nuisance or delinquent behavior at some point in their lives. Several of them had spent time in a juvenile detention center, had been sentenced to community service and/or were still on probation. The criminal offenses committed by these youths varied between violent assaults, drug trading, possession of weapons, and property crimes. Several participants (7/23) described how their personal situation had changed by now, making them less inclined to reoffend. They were no longer in touch with their former deviant friends or felt they could withstand the temptation of joining them in their criminal activities, earned their money the legal way, had become parents, or had come to realize that there was too much at stake.

Procedure

Prior to the interviews, the researchers explained to the participants what the study was about and asked them to sign an informed consent form. For the three participants under the age of 16, passive informed consent from parents/caregivers was obtained. The individual interviews, which lasted between 33 and 116 min (M = 69.74, SD = 22), were conducted by the first (ML) and third

Table 1. Demographic information of study sample.

	n
Age	
15–17 years old	13
18–20 years old	6
21–25 years old	4
Gender	
Female	2
Male	21
Country of birth	
The Netherlands	18
Curacao	4
Portugal	1
Parental country of birth	
Both parents born in the Netherlands	2
One parent born in the Netherlands, other parent born outside the Netherlands	5
Both parents born outside the Netherlands	15
Unknown	1
Referring agency	
Municipality's school attendance office	4
School career guidance	2
Urban youth work	4
Institution for residential youth care	4
Juvenile detention center	2
Juvenile probation program for adolescents with mild intellectual disability	2
Voluntary reintegration program	3
Referral by other participant	2

(LS) author of this paper between April and November 2016. For five of the interviews, a research intern was present to take notes. The interviews took place at several locations (public library, researchers' offices, youth care facilities), chosen in consultation with each participant. The interviews were audiotaped and manually transcribed by the research team, and each participant was given a pseudonym. On completion of the interviews, the participants received €15 to compensate for their time and an additional €5 as a token of appreciation for their help if they referred another person to the study. The current study is part of a broader research project on vulnerable and at-risk youth in urban areas, conducted by the Erasmus Urban Youth Lab (Schenk et al. 2018). The study does not fall under the scope of the Dutch Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were held to gain insight into the perspectives of at-risk youths on the problems they encountered and the help that is available to them. They were conducted using a topic list that contained several subject areas and specific questions that served as a conversational aid for obtaining the required information. The interviews covered aspects of everyday life, such as their housing situation, schooling, employment, family and friends, and several-specific themes, including mental health, the utilization of and support from resources, and participants' self-efficacy beliefs concerning the amelioration of their (problem) situations. The last part of each interview consisted of obtaining the participants' ideas on how to improve help for youths in similar situations and about a policy plan by the municipality of Rotterdam, which involves each at-risk youth receiving social support from a mentor.

Analysis

The researchers aimed for a data-driven understanding of at-risk youths' perspectives and therefore performed an inductive thematic analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Data management and interpretation were conducted sequentially and data analysis was executed by the first author using the software program NVivo and discussed with the second author.

The first step of the analytic process involved the generation of initial codes from the data. These codes identified the content at the semantic level, focusing on what participants had explicitly said. Fragments were grouped into categories on the same subjects and labeled with the corresponding code. This led to a coding scheme with a total of 38 descriptive codes. Codes were, for example indications that participants thought they *could* fix their problems on their own, that they *ought* to do so, that they *wanted* to fix their problems by themselves or that they wanted to *have a say* about their future or the support they were receiving.

For the next phase of coding, the authors aimed to identify themes. Codes were analyzed, taking into account their context, and combined into potential themes. In addition, a distinction was made between overarching main themes and sub-themes. This yielded a selection of 15 main themes, with several subcategories, dimensions, and variants for most of them. For example, several initial codes seemed related to the concept of 'autonomy'. In addition, in the context of other statements made by participants, it became clear that a subcategorization should be made. Whereas some participants expressed explicit statements such as "I need to become a man", in others there was a clear presence of negative thoughts (e.g. "I cannot trust anyone" or "no one understands me") that may lead to a desire to be autonomous. Therefore, the main theme 'autonomy' was identified with sub-themes 'autonomy as explicit goal' and 'autonomy with conducive negative thoughts'.

Prior to the third phase, relevant literature was consulted to explore possible connections between the themes and to investigate the underlying structure. The phenomenon 'survivalist self-reliance' described by Samuels and Pryce (2008), for instance, helped to further structure the aspects of autonomy and link it to the concept of locus of control, coping styles and need for support. The

several aspects of this concept were used to assess the presence of self-reliance in the current sample. Whereas some elements were present in approximately half of the sample (e.g. 'emotional problems ignored or suffered in private'), other elements were visible in almost all participants (e.g. 'not needing support of others'). From this analysis, it was clear that self-reliance was important in our sample, which is why we decided to focus on it as one of the main themes.

Findings

In the following, we will present the findings related to the main themes stemming from the data analysis, namely 1) youths' perspectives regarding desistance from delinquent behavior; 2) the need for self-reliance; 3) the multitude of negative experiences in interactions within their social environment; and 4) the support they deem appropriate for at-risk youths.

Desistance from delinquent behavior

In addition to being asked about their encounters with the (juvenile) justice system (described in the methods section), participants were asked to share their perspectives on the (dis)continuation of their delinquent behavior. Although several participants indicated to have quit delinquent behavior, they were not necessarily convinced that they would be able to persevere on the paths they had chosen. Carlos (18), for instance, found it hard to believe in his own capabilities or determination. He had been able to focus on staying on the right track for about a year at the time of his interview and credited mostly his best friend for this. However, he was suffering from a fear of failure, as he labeled it:

> It's very easy for a guy like me to end up in the wrong place (…) I'm afraid that all of a sudden I might lose everything: My school, my friends, my brains…. (…) I needed to leave the house. That's a reason for things to go wrong. I could be on the streets more, I could think 'Oh shit, I need to make more money, I am not happy with the 1,600 euro I have, I need to have 100,000.' You know, you can go crazy.

Although a minority seemed to have desisted from delinquent behavior, or expressed an intention to do so, there were examples of participants who conceded that the criminal lifestyle remained a tempting alternative to making a lawful living, such as Travis (21). While indicating that he wanted to quit, Travis gave the impression he was still involved in delinquent behavior. When asked when he would actually quit, he replied:

> When you have something…something stable. When you have a place in society, you don't have to do crazy stuff, man. When you've got a house, a job, something to do, just to make money (…) the honest way, you can take care of your people…then it's not necessary. (…) I have a lot of faith in it, but I don't believe in it, so that I don't get depressed again when it doesn't work out. If I get disappointed now, then I really don't know anymore, man… For me, it's really hanging by a thread now.

This enduring attraction to criminality even applied to youths who were voluntarily taking steps towards a crime-free future.

Need for self-reliance

Despite their realization that they might find themselves in an unstable situation and that their plans might not work out, these youngsters did not seem inclined to ask for support or to utilize the available resources. On the contrary, a prominent theme that emerged in the interviews was the expressed need or urgency to be(come) self-reliant. Various motivations for this need were mentioned, and this phenomenon was visible in the youths' accounts of their current and future situations, and in their self-reported behavior in dealing with problems.

This need for self-reliance appeared to have various underlying cognitions. A few interviewees (3/23) aspired to be independent because they felt it was time for them to 'become a man'. Travis (21)

was unsure of whether the staff members who worked with him were able to correctly assess his needs. He mentioned that he asked little of them and that he did not rely on them as much as he perhaps should.

> I keep them at a distance a bit, (…) like, 'Listen, when I need you I will come to you', but I want to do it myself first. (…) I think it has to do with growing up, you know, you need to become a man, you need to be able to take care of your own stuff. Look, I have always had organizations, you see? So I need to be able to do it myself too. I cannot always keep relying on people.

In a similar vein, Johnny (25) had stopped asking his father for financial aid, because he felt that, as a grown man, he should be able to provide for himself. Deriving a sense of pride from independence might deter some youths from attempting to develop a normative lifestyle. For instance, Jovani (19) explained that although he occasionally helped out in his father's business, he would not want to work for him, because working for his father would create the impression that he was being done a favor.

In addition to those cognitions concerned with self-esteem or strength, more negatively inclined cognitions also appeared conducive to self-reliant behavior. Younes (17), for instance, mentioned that he had realized that 'friends do not exist'. When asked how he felt about this, he replied: "It doesn't matter. You have to do everything yourself, right? I don't need that." Another participant, Pieter (15), explicitly expressed a reluctance to become attached to a care provider, as he would find it difficult to say goodbye to the person once he left the facility he was staying at.

While mentioning others' share in their problems, the participants' efforts to improve their situation had a strong self-reliant character. The participants felt they bore the primary responsibility for solving any problems, and believed it was up to them to push, motivate and encourage themselves, and to make the right decisions to not go astray. While Akun (15) was mainly trying not to get caught when he was doing 'stupid things', he also thought quitting his delinquent behavior was possible and added: "I think I have to do it myself. (…) I am the one making the decisions." When Johnny (25) spoke of the future, he emphasized his sole contribution: "[It depends] on me, only on me." Amit (17) acknowledged that others could help arrange things or give him advice when he left juvenile detention, but in the end, he would be the one standing outside faced with a choice.

The inclination to be independent was also visible in the participants' more specific statements on how they dealt with problems. Several participants (8/23) indicated that they did not talk to others about certain issues they might encounter or the choices they had to make. Milan (19) taught himself to block any emotions at the age of 16. When asked whether he would be able to talk to his parents if something was bothering him, he answered: "If I wanted to, I could go to my parents, but I just don't feel like doing that." At the time of the interview, Milan had just learned that he could not continue his current education and therefore had to choose between finding a job or enrolling at a lower education level. He was not planning to ask anyone for advice or support in making this decision, and his friends did not even know of Milan's worries about not having a high school diploma.

Although the majority of participants (16/23) indicated that in the end, they had to take care of things themselves, they did feel that others might play a part in giving them a fair chance in society, in the areas of school, employment, and housing, while still considering themselves to be the active agents in grasping these opportunities. In addition, several participants (8/23) explicitly recognized that the people around them could contribute to them attaining their goals, such as Travis (21): "Others do play a role in it, but mostly it has to come from me, because I have to do it. Others play a role in motivating or supporting me, but I do have these people around me." There were also participants who, through experience, had realized that they might not be able to deal with everything themselves. One example is Maria (20), who stayed in a youth care institution for nine months where she received therapy after being in a situation in which she was romantically manipulated in an attempt to force her into prostitution. Upon leaving this institution, she did not have a counselor to help her adjust to normal life again. While this was

her own choice, Maria regretted not having someone to talk to when things were not going well: "I just thought: 'Well, I'm strong enough, I can do it'. I don't know, I kind of had a higher expectation of myself."

Negative experiences in social interactions

Another important theme, which might be related to the tendency to (only) rely on themselves, is the multitude of negative experiences in social interactions that participants had experienced. These interactions, in which they had felt disregarded or misunderstood, can be distinguished into those with parents, institutions providing formal care, society in general, and others. The majority of examples revolved around participants' relationships with their parents, and mostly fathers, which was a clear theme in many interviews (9/23). Several instances of unresponsive parenting were mentioned, in which parents had failed to provide attention, trust or understanding. The interviewees' stories also demonstrated situations in which damage was inflicted upon them, including instances in which they had felt belittled, betrayed, accused, rejected or abandoned. For instance, Valerio (17) heard from others that his father no longer considered him to be his son, without knowing the reasons behind this rejection. As a child, he also suffered due to his father having multiple girlfriends at once:

> It has had an effect on me in the past. Having to go from woman to woman. It became quite hard at a certain moment. (…) And being left with people I didn't know out of nowhere… (…) Or being sent off to Curacao without even knowing my grandma.

Amit (17) was no longer in touch with his father. He had not been a reliable parent, had failed to abide by agreements and had given his son false hope.

> My dad never fulfilled his commitments. (…) He was never really there for me. (…) He doesn't bring me any change. And I don't want any negative people in my life right now. From the beginning, he has never really been a father. He didn't care what his children were doing, he forgot my birthday, never wanted to do fun stuff (…) he tried to be out of the house as often as possible.

In addition, several participants (8/23) gave examples of negative experiences of interactions within the context of formal care or other formal institutions such as school. Some participants talked about how they felt that their guardians or the institutional staff members had done nothing for them or were motivated only by their salaries. For Valerio (17), his psychologist quitting and not maintaining contact was an additional experience of abandonment next to the issues with his father. While living in a youth care facility, Maria (20) was cut off from any contact with family and friends, which gave her the impression that she was blamed for her situation rather than considered a victim.

At a more societal level, a few participants indicated that they had been treated as inferior or experienced discrimination. According to Anouar (15), he was treated unfairly by police officers: "Yes, it's really unjustified (…) I needed to pick up a screwdriver from my uncle (…) and bike home, and then I got another fine, because they said 'you are carrying burglary tools'." Tim (18) referred to the process of finding a job, in which he was experiencing some difficulties. He found that employers were not interested anymore when they saw him. According to him, this was because of the color of his skin or the way he spoke, and he felt rejected on those grounds.

Finally, the interviewees mentioned several other examples of situations or events in which they had felt harmed, such as through bullying by peers or betrayal by friends.

Suitable support for at-risk youths

The participants were asked about the type of help they would deem appropriate for at-risk youths. They were invited to talk about their own (positive and negative) experiences with the care they had received to date and to reflect on what in general would be most suitable for youths with similar problems.

In line with the abovementioned tendency to be self-reliant in coping with their problems, the youths (14/23) expressed that they or their peers did not need or want any help. Although the participants sometimes indicated that some aspects of their lives needed to change, they did not want to involve others in achieving this. Some referred to previous experiences in which they had received help, that later turned out not to be helpful. Other participants mentioned they did not want to burden others or that they did not feel like talking about personal issues. According to Louis (17), it was not necessary to support or motivate youths trying to cope with their problems: "If I want something, I should go for it myself." Jovani (19) felt that youths should be left alone; they might fail, but interference would only lead to annoyance.

It was also mentioned that, when offering help or support to at-risk youth, timing and dosage play an important role. The interviewees considered it essential to first gain a youngster's trust before trying to tackle his or her problems. According to Travis (21), youths should hit rock bottom before care professionals started interfering with them because prior to this they would not be open to any support. It is necessary to first gain their trust and help them realize they need help. Laura (17) gave birth nine months prior to the interview and emphasized the importance of finding the right balance in the amount of support offered. Laura: "They used to interfere with me too much, which made me reject them all. I didn't agree with anything. Now they're not on my case as much, so I listen to what they have to say."

Another factor influencing whether youths were open to help was the type of person it was coming from. Several participants assumed or gathered from previous experiences that someone with similarities to themselves would be better able to truly understand them and sincerely emphasize with them. This resemblance could include demographic characteristics or experiences in life. One aspect mentioned by a few participants (2/23) was skin color or ethnic background. When a care professional also has a migration background, this might contribute to the development of a trusting bond. This preference might not refer solely to a shared cultural background but could also concern corresponding experiences related to a minority position in society. During the period in which the interview took place, Mo (17) had a mentor who, like himself, was Moroccan and Berber. Mo: "She knows what it's like. She also has brothers, so she knows what it's like." As Louis (17) stated about an additional facet, namely socio-economic background: "I think if I would take [*choose*] someone from a rich neighborhood, they would think 'What you're doing is just stupid', but maybe because they had everything in their life, and I didn't …"

In addition to demographic characteristics and socio-cultural backgrounds, several interviewees (5/23) also mentioned similar life experiences as a source of mutual understanding. When asked whether he had ever missed any help, Amit (17) answered:

> I don't like help from other people, and especially from people who haven't been through it themselves. (…) You need to have been through it yourself before you can judge. (…) You might understand me, but you can never get me, you can never feel me, you know?

Carlos (18) expressed a similar idea and even suggested himself as a suitable help provider.

> Rather someone with experience than someone who has studied this or that, but doesn't understand even one bit of it themselves. [*I would advise the municipality*] that they need me. I swear it, lady, I would really like to do that, alongside school.

With regard to the approach professional care providers should employ, the youths indicated that they appreciated being taken seriously, treated as adults, valued for their opinion, and given more confidence. For Travis (21), it helped him that others told him "'Listen Travis, you're screwing up. You're capable of so much more, go do something with your life', (…) It has helped me to start thinking differently. To start thinking about what I was doing."

In contrast, examples of approaches that the participants deemed unhelpful had in common that their voices were not heard. In these situations, others had decided what the problem was or the solution had been chosen without the youngsters' consent, involvement or consideration.

Despite many dismissive statements regarding help or support, Milan (19), for instance, expressed that it would have been better if others had been more directive instead of giving them so much responsibility since they were too young to know what was best for them. As his statement illustrates: "They would ask me: 'How can we help you?' (…) I'm a fourteen-year-old guy, what do you think, that I know how? You are ten times my age, and you come and ask me how you can help me?"

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore how at-risk youths reflect on their multiproblem situations and to investigate their needs with respect to support or help. The need for self-reliance appeared to play a central role in the lives of the participants.

Self-reliance as risk

A strong drive for self-reliance and autonomy was observed in the narratives of many participants. Autonomy has been shown to be related to positive outcomes, such as the development of a positive self-concept, competent-decision making and increased productivity (Spear and Kulbok 2004). Youths displaying a high level of agency do not necessarily display low amounts of relatedness (Kağıtçıbaşı 2005). However, when autonomy does come hand in hand with separateness or disconnectedness, it has the potential to impact behavior negatively (Spear and Kulbok 2004).

Firstly, a strong need for self-reliance may in itself be a direct risk factor for criminal involvement. Following Moffitt's dual taxonomy theory, deviant behavior symbolizes freedom and independence and is therefore attractive as an autonomy-affirming act (Moffitt 1993). In our sample, delinquent behavior was seen by some as a means to maintain (financial) independence, albeit in a non-normative way. In addition to self-reliance as a risk factor for the development of delinquent behavior, considering desistance as an individual task might also lead to further continuation of such behavior. The participants said it was ultimately up to them to make the right decisions. Whereas for most this included abstaining from delinquent behavior, this was not always corroborated by their current behavior.

Secondly, youths in the current study demonstrated a dismissive attitude towards utilizing social resources. They indicated that people around them, both formal and informal care providers, were not able to understand them, which appeared to make them more inclined to rely solely on themselves. This is in line with the findings of a study on the experiences of young adults 'aging out' of foster care, in which Samuels and Pryce (2008) found that this phenomenon of 'survivalist self-reliance' could hinder youths from building supportive relationships or making maximum use of their social capital. In another qualitative study on adolescents in foster care, Kools (1999) observed that although these adolescents appear self-confident and independent, this layer of self-reliance could have consequences such as isolation and disconnection, a lack of actual independent problem-solving skills, and a limited future orientation. This was also visible in some of the participants in the current study.

For many of our participants, the need for self-reliance was accompanied by negative cognitions. This indicates that this need might have been borne out of necessity and experience rather than free will. The participants indicated having been maltreated or disregarded in relationships with others, which can be considered experiences of 'recognition denial', a term used by Brezina (2008) to explain why some adolescents develop an exaggerated need for autonomy. In the current study, youths mainly gave examples of denial of emotional recognition, such as situations in which they had experienced a lack of attention, esteem or emotional support in their relationships with others. This referred mainly to their relationships with their parents, particularly their fathers. As for the denial of moral recognition, the youths described having felt that they had been treated unfairly or discriminated against by the police, teachers and/or potential employers. Through these experiences, the youths might have learned that it is dangerous to rely on others and that they could trust only

themselves, implying a self-reliant inclination. In addition to decreasing the utilization of social resources, these negative experiences (particularly those of parental abuse, neglect, and rejection) might also lead to an increase of delinquent behavior by causing strain (Agnew 2001).

Hidden resilience

The self-reliance visible in our participants might also have positive aspects. The mere aim of becoming autonomous corresponds with society's demand for increasingly independent citizens. In addition, the self-reliant tendency of these youths demonstrates that they are aware of their own influence on the course of their lives and they do not hold others responsible for fixing their problems. This makes them potentially more motivated to exercise agency, by for instance looking for a job or deciding to quit substance abuse, especially since they also seem to take pride in taking care of themselves and not depending on others.

The existing literature emphasizes that, for a successful transition to adulthood, individuation should not imply detachment from the adolescent's social environment (Beyers et al. 2003). However, detachment from family members or care providers might, in fact, be functional when these cannot or will not provide the necessary support or guidance. Several participants in our sample indicated having broken all contact with a non-supportive parent or not wanting to become attached to a formal caregiver. Kools (1999) describes how distancing oneself from others and keeping relationships superficial serves as a self-protective strategy to prevent further harm. The thoughts underlying social detachment in the studied population of foster adolescents, such as "I can and must take care of myself" and "others can hurt you", are similar to those found in the current study. In a study on high-risk adolescent girls, it was also found that when protective institutional and social systems had let them down, these girls displayed this self-protective type of agency (Bottrell 2009).

Bottrell (2009) furthermore challenges dominant discourses on resilience by emphasizing the key contribution of social and cultural contexts in creating adversities that disadvantaged young people encounter. This line of reasoning follows Ungar's (2011) proposition of 'hidden resilience', which is commonly seen in deviant and delinquent youths. When exposed to a risk environment without sufficient access to resources, youths may develop non-normative behavior to achieve normative goals. These patterns of deviance, it is suggested, are sound adaptations that enable these youths to survive circumstances that are detrimental (Bottrell 2009). In the current sample, it was seen that many youths grew up in high-crime neighborhoods, problematic family situations and poverty, and were often misfits within the schooling system. Delinquent behavior was mainly money-driven and was seen by some as a necessary means to provide for the family. Others indicated that their deviant peers were an important source of support. Although usually defined as delinquent or disordered, the youths' involvement in behavior such as crime and truancy, and their orientation towards the street culture or 'negative' peer groups can therefore also be seen as the activities and relationships through which they gain a sense of belonging and wellbeing (Bottrell 2009).

Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for the endeavor to support (delinquent) at-risk youths in their challenging transition to adulthood. First, it is important to keep in mind that although these youths sometimes do realize that they could benefit from help, asking for it or even accepting it may be inconceivable to them because relying on others threatens their self-reliant identity. A delicate balance should, therefore, be sought between encouraging autonomy and conveying to the youngster that support is at their disposal. Furthermore, it could be fruitful to use the 'hidden resilience' often seen in these youths as a starting point to find more acceptable and less destructive pathways to achieving similar goals. Adopting this approach of supporting the individual, however, does not imply that we should ignore the presence of certain risk factors in

their lives. In addition, in focusing on the capacity to change, one should not put too much responsibility on the individual, leading to a disregard of the root causes of social problems, such as poverty (Fitzpatrick 2011).

Secondly, based on these youths' perspectives, it appears necessary to invest in developing a trusting relationship in which the youngster is recognized and appreciated. Besides increasing the number of social contacts at-risk youths have, attention should be paid to assessing the quality of their social networks and the nature of these interactions, because negative social interactions may be more salient than positive ones (Lincoln 2000). Having someone in their lives who truly understands them and does not judge, belittle or mistreat them might compensate for the recognition that was denied to them previously. Developing a positive trust relationship with a significant adult can constitute a 'turning point' that enables young people to distance themselves from risks and grasp new opportunities, thereby setting in motion processes leading to resilience (Drapeau et al. 2007). In addition, the interviewees indicated that they expected someone with shared characteristics to be more likely to convey a sincere interest in or concern for them. Further research is necessary to shed more light on the potential added value of shared characteristics or the similar life experiences of care providers. According to Wexler, DiFluvio, and Burke (2009), connecting to others with a shared experience of marginality may increase individuals' resilience. In addition, studies on mentoring suggest that deep-level similarities, that is, similar attitudes, values and beliefs, and self-disclosure on the part of the mentor, enhance the quality of the relationship and might thereby increase the likelihood of positive outcomes (Ghosh 2014).

Thirdly, at a broader level, it is seen that current interventions are commonly aimed at increasing self-reliance (Ortega and Margarita 2002). Furthermore, the society in which we live has a positive perception of dealing with difficult circumstances through self-reliance, whereas asking for help is sometimes pathologized. Youths' reluctance to seek emotional support can, therefore, be partially seen as a reflection of the society of which these adolescents are members (Samuels and Pryce 2008). Although self-reliance might be a resource for dealing with minor problems and therefore constitutes an aspect of resilience, it could possibly interfere with seeking professional care when needs increase (Ortega and Margarita 2002). It is therefore important that awareness is raised among policymakers that demanding high levels of independence or self-sufficiency from (at-risk) adolescents could cultivate an excessive or survivalist self-reliant attitude, in which youngsters feel as if they can count only on themselves and therefore become more marginalized and unreachable.

Strengths and limitations

The current research enhances our understanding of at-risk youths' perspectives on several aspects of their lives, including their multiproblem situation and their needs for support. With this study, we contribute to knowledge regarding self-reliance and resilience among a hard-to-reach population. We have shown that although their endeavor towards achieving autonomy might seem in line with society's demands of self-sufficiency, this might pose a problem when it is accompanied by detachment due to negative social experiences and when it hinders the utilization of social resources. A key strength of this study was the use of semi-structured interviews covering a wide range of topics, in which the focus was youths' perspectives. In order to understand them, it is essential to value youths' opinions and to validate their experiences of recognition denial. In addition, the focus on their needs provides formal caregivers with more tools to tailor their help to this at-risk population. Furthermore, although future research will have to address the extent to which the findings in the current study can be generalized to other social, cultural and geographical contexts, we succeeded in conducting this study with an ethnically diverse sample that displayed a variety of risk factors.

Semi-structured interviews provide a richness of data, but a downside could be that the quantity and quality of data varies between interviews. Due to the semi-open character of the interviews and the fact that they were conducted by two interviewers, the absence of certain themes in an interview

does not necessarily imply the absence thereof in an interviewee's life. It is important to keep this in mind when interpreting the results.

The scope of this study was limited in terms of its sampling method. Although convenience sampling is common in qualitative research, selection bias may have occurred in multiple ways. At-risk youths who were not identified by school, police, youth care or other relevant agencies were not eligible to participate, which could imply that youths with more severe risks were not included. It is also possible that professionals invited only those youngsters they expected to be interested in participation and that youngsters who decided to participate were more opinionated, inventive or talkative. In addition, as it proved more difficult than anticipated to find participants, saturation was not reached. Furthermore, although statistics indicate that at-risk youths are predominantly male, the gender ratio in the current sample (two females versus 21 males) does not fully reflect the composition of the target population. It suggests that girls with risk behavior may not be as easily detected or are not considered 'at-risk youth' as often as boys. This may have influenced the results, because there may be gender differences in the strength of the self-reliant tendency and because males and females may experience different types of negative social interactions. Further, our sample comprised fewer participants of native Dutch descent than would be expected based on official data on at-risk youth. It is possible that professionals were more likely to consider or approach youths with a migrant background when they were asked to refer at-risk youths to our study. It is also possible that problems experienced by native Dutch at-risk youths are more often approached from a care perspective instead of a security perspective, making them less likely to be enrolled in the organizations we involved in our study. Future research should be wary of any potential discriminatory mechanisms. For the current study, we consider the ethnic diversity to be sufficiently similar to the composition of Rotterdam's at-risk youth. In addition, although we aimed to include youths between the ages of 12 and 27, following the municipality's target population of their youth policies, our final sample was of a smaller age range.

Another issue is the interpretation of the data from a Western-European perspective. Even from this perspective, in which there is a strong emphasis on individualism (Hofstede 2011; Kağıtçıbaşı 2005), the self-reliant tendency seen in the current study is considered excessive. It is feasible that within collectivistic cultures, this strong need to be autonomous and independent might be seen as an even more worrisome phenomenon. Furthermore, whereas throughout this research seeking or accepting formal help was considered desirable behavior reflecting resilience, it is also conceivable that for some cultures this may be considered weak or inappropriate. It is important to keep in mind that the value placed on various factors can differ for different people and their communities (Wexler, DiFluvio, and Burke 2009) and that the interpretation of the data may, therefore, be culturally bound.

Future research

Future research into at-risk youths' perspectives could involve more specific and in-depth questions concerning the severity of delinquent behavior, the need for self-reliance and the presence of experiences of denial of the recognition. This would allow for a composition of typologies and could provide more insight into possible (causal) relations between these concepts. Furthermore, it is important to pay more attention to levels of risk, because the at-risk population might be more heterogeneous than the current analysis allowed for. In addition, it would be interesting to explore other potential sources of excessive self-reliance, such as personality characteristics or contextual factors.

As mentioned above, future research should also make an effort to study the effects, both positive and negative, of having someone with perceived similarities or similar experiences offering and providing support to at-risk youths. It would be relevant to investigate whether perceived similarities indeed increase the likelihood of these youths accepting help, perceiving this as a positive experience and benefiting from it.

Conclusion

This study offers insight into at-risk youths' perspectives on their multiproblem situation and their needs concerning formal care. While previous research has shown that increased autonomy is desirable during adolescence and emerging adulthood, the current study showed at-risk youths who have a type of self-reliant attitude that is characterized by both pride and distrust of others and fueled by negative social experiences with parents, peers, and formal care providers. While this need for self-reliance may indicate some form of resilience considering their risk environments, it may also pose an additional risk to their development due to the dismissal of support and involvement in delinquent behavior. Whereas the tendency to rely on themselves only is clearly visible in these youths, they may be susceptible to support coming from people with whom they share certain characteristics or experiences.

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