

## REVIEW

By Prof. Margarita Angelova Stefanova-Bakracheva, PhD  
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For awarding the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”  
In the scientific area 3.2. Psychology

Doctoral programme Pedagogical and Developmental Psychology

**Author:** Lazar Stefanov Atmadzhov  
**Title:** Risk-taking behaviour in adolescence  
**PhD supervisor:** Assoc. Prof. Irena Ivanova Levkova, PhD

### 1. General description of the submitted materials

By order № PД21-569 as of 16<sup>th</sup> March 2023 of the Rector of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury for providing a procedure for the defense of a dissertation on the topic **Risk-taking behaviour in adolescence** for awarding the educational and scientific degree “doctor” in the field of higher education 3. social, economic and legal sciences, professional field, scientific area 3.2. Psychology, doctoral programme Pedagogical and developmental psychology.

The author of the dissertation is Lazar Stefanov Atmadzhov - a full-time doctoral student at the Department of Psychology with PhD supervisor Assoc. Prof. Ki Irena Ivanova Levkova, PhD from Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

The set of materials, provided by Lazar Stefanov Atmadzhov, are in accordance with Section 36 (1) of the Rulebook for development of the academic staff of Plovdiv university and they include the following documents:

- a request to the Rector of the university for initiation of procedure for PhD thesis defense;
- CV;
- record from the department council, related to readiness to disclosure of the procedure and preliminary discussion of the dissertation;
- PhD thesis;
- abstract of the PhD thesis;
- a list of the articles related to the topic of the PhD thesis;
- copies of the articles;
- a list of citations;
- declaration of originality and authenticity of the documents.

### 2. Brief biographical data about the doctoral student

According to the attached biographical data, Lazar Atmadzhov graduated from the Bachelor's programme in Pedagogy at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv in 2011, followed by the Master's programme in Preventive Pedagogy, also at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv in 2013. In the period 2019 – 2022 he had been full-time PhD student in the PhD programme Pedagogical and Developmental Psychology at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv. From 2012 until January 2022 he had been social worker in KSUDS - Plovdiv, with key functions focused on work with juvenile offenders and families in divorce / separation. From

September 2013 until now he is member of the committee for decision-making regarding educational measures for juvenile participants in educational cases, and since September 2022 until now is working as a philosophy teacher at PGTST Gotse Delchev - Plovdiv.

### **3. Relevance of the topic and appropriateness of the objectives and tasks**

This PhD thesis is within the broad perspective of risk-taking behaviour in adolescence. The topic is conventionally relevant, especially given the dynamics of the contemporary context, which confronts adolescents with increasing challenges related to the availability and abundance of information and opportunities, however in an uncertain and unsupportive environment in terms of stable perspectives and choices, and social norms that tolerate various forms of risky behaviour. The PhD student discusses the importance of parentification that in addition to the social environment in which adolescents resolve their normative crisis, can hinder the process of autonomy and identity attainment. This issue is particularly important in the perspective of increased perceived stress and various forms of maladaptive behaviour.

### **4. Knowledge of the topic**

Lazar Atmadzhov is familiar with the manifestations of maladaptive behaviour and the role of parents as a factor that can significantly increase the probable occurrence of risky behavior. He outlines the place of separation as an additional frustrating agent. He succeeds to describe some of the leading features of the developmental stage and classifies different forms of risk behaviour. He presents attachment theory and the importance of attachment style in the process of personal self-regulation. He attempts to capture the psychosocial dimensions of the adolescence and consider it in the light of the integrative interaction of family relationships, cultural framework and some individual differences as predictors of possible risk behaviours. He points parentification and family breakdown as hindering the process of identity construction and in relation to adaptive and maladaptive behaviours.

### **5. Research methods**

The research design is outlined without a clear focus, framework and is not robust in research terms. There is no clearly stated aim, objectives and substantiated hypotheses of the study. The approach for choice of respondents is not clearly described. The instruments included and their adaptation are not specified and there is no information on the psychometric properties of the instruments used. It is not clear what in particular is personal contribution (the stated questionnaire), designated for the purpose of the study. In terms of data analysis, insufficient research competence is. The scales are not described as authored, the translated items and the self-response scales are not presented, the formation of the scales is not described. The appendices, referencing the instruments, are uninformative. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient is arbitrarily added to "*omega reliability*" and there are other inaccuracies. Rosenberg's self-report scale is also referenced in this chapter without being mentioned elsewhere. It is also unclear how the school achievement variable is introduced

and how it is used. Overall, the author's research design, choice of respondents and instruments, remain unclear.

## 6. Characteristics and evaluation of the PhD thesis

The PhD thesis covers 241 pages and is structured in the classic three chapters: theoretical, research design and results with introduction, conclusion, references and appendices. The results are illustrated with 33 tables, 6 figures and 18 scales, presented in tabular form (9) and as diagrams (9). There are 10 appendices. The references, numbered by the author, include a total of 343 sources, of which 24 are in Cyrillic, which however, does not correspond to the real number. The sources are chaotic, not correctly presented and do not follow a uniform bibliographic description. Some of them are duplicated, two of them are mentioned three times, which also makes it difficult to trace their correctness (cf. Jurkovic, G. J., Morrell, R., & Casey, S. (2001a). Many of the sources presented in the bibliographic reference are absent from the text (*Parentification in the lives of high-profile individuals and their families: Zeanah, C. H., & Zeanah, P. D. (1989): A hidden source of strength and distress; Zeanah, C. H., & Zeanah, P. D. (1989). Intergenerational transmission of maltreatment: Insights from attachment theory and research. Psychiatry, 52, 177-196; Zarczynska-Hyla, J., Zdaniuk, B., Piechnik-Borusowska, J., and Kromolicka, B. (2019). Parentification in the experience of Polish adolescents. The role of socio-demographic factors and emotional consequences for parenting adolescents. New Educ. Rev. 55, 135-146; Winton, C. A. (2003). Children as caregivers: Parenting and parenting children. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon World Bank, World Development Indicators (2019). Rural population (% of total population) - Poland [Data file]. Available from: Poland: (Accessed 04 February 2021; Wasilewska, M., and Kuleta, M. (2014). "Charakterystyka cucmem rodzinnych, w których występuje zjawisko parentyfikacji [Characteristics of family systems in which parenthood occurs]" in Higiena i środowisko a zdrowie człowieka [Hygiene, environment and human health]. ed. A. Borzęcki (Lublin: Wyd. Druk Norbertinum), 46-54; Toro, R. I., Schofield, T. J., Calderon-Tena, C. O., and Farver, J. M. (2019). Filial responsibilities, familism, and depressive symptoms among Latino youth. Emerg. Adulthood 7, 370-377; Tompkins, T. L. (2007). Parenting and maternal HIV infection: beneficial role or pathological burden. J. Child Fam. Stud. 16, 113-123. doi: 10.1007/s10826-006-9072- 7; Thomas, M. (1992). Introduction to marriage and family therapy. New Jersey: Prentice Hall; Schwarzer, R. (2008). Modeling health behavior change: How to predict and modify health behavior adoption and maintenance. Applied Psychology, 57 (1), 1-29, and possibly others). There are sources in the text not listed in the bibliography (Schwarzer, 1997, p. 44) and many others. Of those repeated 2/3 times are Aldridge, J., & Becker, S. (1993). Punishing children for caring: the hidden costs of young carers. Children & Society, 7(4), 376-387. Haxhe, S. (2016). Parenting and related processes: distinction and implications for clinical practice. Journal of Family Psychotherapy, 27(3), 185-199; Haxhe, S. (2016). Parenting and related processes: distinction and implications for clinical practice. J. Fam. Psychother. 27, 185-199. doi: 10.1080/08975353.2016.1199768; appears twice but not in the text. There are 21 duplicate sources removed; there are probably a number of other inconsistencies. This reduces the author's stated number of sources to 343, in addition to the*

30 discrepancies listed here, without giving an exact number. Duplicated Baron, R. M., and Kenny, D. A. (1986). *Distinguishing moderator-mediator variables in social psychological research: conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations*. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 51, 1173-1182. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.51.6.1173; Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., & Spark, G. (1973). *Invisible loyalties: reciprocity in intergenerational family therapy*. New York, NY: Harper and Row; Carroll, J. J., & Robinson, B. E. (2000). *Depression and parenting among adults as related to parental workaholicism and alcoholism*. *The Family Journal: Chase, N. (1999) Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 8, 360-367; Chase, N. (1999). *A review of theory, research, and societal issues*. In N. Chase (Ed.), *Burdened children* (pp. 3-33). New York, NY: Guilford; Chase, N. D., Deming, M. P., & Wells, M. C. (1998). *Parenting, parental alcoholism, and academic status among young adults*. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 26(2), 105-114; Fitzgerald, M. M., Schneider, R. A., Salstrom, S., Zinzow, H. M., Jackson, J., & Fossel, R. V. (2008). *Child sexual abuse, early family risk, and childhood parenting : Pathways to current psychosocial adjustment*. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22, 2, 320-324; Haxhe, S. (2016). *Parenting and related processes: distinction and implications for clinical practice*. *J. Fam. Psychother.* 27, 185-199. doi: 10.1080/08975353.2016.1199768; Hooper, L. M. (2009). *Parentification inventory* (Available form L. M. Hooper, 108 Schindler Education Center, 50614-0410). Cedar Falls, IA: University of Northern Iowa; Hooper, L. M. (2009). *Parentification inventory* (Available form: L. M. Hooper, Department of Educational Studies in Psychology, Research Methodology, and Counseling, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487); Hooper, L. M. (2014). *Assessing parenting in South American college students: a factor analytic study of the Spanish version of the parenting inventory*. *J. Multicult. Couns. Dev.* 42, 93-106; Hu, L., & Bentler, P. M. (1999). *Cutoff criteria for fit indices in covariance structure analysis: conventional criteria versus new alternatives*. *Structural Equation Modeling*, 6(1), 1-55; Hu, L., and Bentler, P. M. (1999). *Cutoff criteria for fit indices in covariance structure analysis: conventional criteria versus new alternatives*. *Struct. Equ. Model.* 6, 1-55. doi: 10.1080/10705519909540118; Konarski, R. (2010). *Structural equation models*. *Teoria i praktyka [Structural equation modelling. Theory and practice]*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN; Mika, P., Bergner, R.M., Baum, M.C., 1987. *Development of a parenting assessment scale*. *Family Therapy*, 14, 3, 229-235; Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families and family therapy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Peris, T. S., Goeke-Morey, M. C., Cummings, E. M., & Emery, R. E. (2008). *Marital conflict and support seeking by parents in adolescence: empirical support for the parenting construct*. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(4), 633-642; Schier, K. (2014). *Adult children. Psychologiczna problematyka odwrócenia ról w rodzinie [Psychological problem of role reversal in the family. Psychological aspects of role reversal in the family]*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR; Walker, J.P., Lee, R.E., 1998. *Discovering the strengths of children of alcoholic parents*. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, 20, 4, 521-538.; Wallerstein, J.S., 1985. *The overburdened child : Some long-term consequences of divorce*. *Social Work*, 30, 2, 116-123.; Wallerstein, S. S. (1985). *The overburdened child : Some long-term consequences of divorce*. Wells, M., Jones, R. (2000) *Social Work*, 30, 116-123.

*Childhood parenting and shame-proneness: A preliminary study. American Journal of Family Therapy, 28, 1, 19-27.*

Paragraphs in first chapter are not numbered; many are of 1 page and are not summarized in any meaningful way. Paragraphs are not differentiated in chapter three. In chapter one, the literature review covers the issue of attachment, risk behaviour, and forms of expression in adolescence. Approaches to explaining the determinants of risk behaviour are outlined, grouping to some extent environmental, familial and personal factors. There are omissions and inaccuracies in distinguishing the contributions of John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, which is conflated with the contributions of Michel Delage and Stefano Cirillo, whereas the last are not referred. This applies to the entire paragraph on attachment, which is not meaningfully structured. The exposition is fragmented, there are no meaningful focuses, multiple lines intervene, no argumentation and no author position is given. It is unclear why the stage of youth is included, what is the place of the cited German Youth Protection Act and what is its relationship to the author's research. Given the PhD student's professional practice, the question is why there is no reference to Bulgarian legal documents. Against the background of the vast amount of literature on both adolescence and risky behaviour, the author's choice remains surprising and is limited to randomly selected sources. This is the general impression of the whole text, which lacks a clear focus and meaningful backbone. This also applies to parenting and parentification, which have a clear conceptual framework that can be presented in sound manner. Chapter Two describes the aim, objectives, research methods and research subjects. Chapter Three contains the results. The choice of scenarios and application of Benford's law and why the PhD student found this appropriate is unclear. The tables do not give any information. The numbering of the tables is arbitrary, e.g. Table 17 follows after 14.3. Table 17 is labelled *Potential Offender Coefficients* and it is not clear what information has been used and on what basis and how these coefficients have been derived, nor is their purpose and relevance implied other than the general request for a 4-year forecast of offending. Assuming the forecast to be accurate, what does the author propose to do on this basis? How does the stress method, applied mainly in economic research, favour juvenile work? What is the content of the unnumbered table "*regression analysis of the FRA questionnaire*"? What does the author mean by "*regression sampling methodology*" and is the rationale for deriving separate series of coefficients? What does he mean by the untitled Figure 1? What does he mean in the attempted factor analysis (p. 137) and indicating the reduction of the response scale from 3 to 3 possible responses? There is no data processing but serious gaps and discrepancies between uninformative tables and figures, indicating ignorance of data processing methods and resulting in haphazardly placed figures and text. It is not clear on what basis the 19 points labelled '*part of the identified risks or risk behaviours in adolescence*' are derived (and by whom).

## **7. Contributions and significance of the dissertation for science and practice**

The author has outlined 11 contributions that are not substantiated. They include forecasting trends in risky behaviour among adolescents in Bulgaria, creating a unified questionnaire, creating a mathematical model aimed at forecasting the

rate of increase in risk behaviour for each group of adolescents aged 13-15, 16-18 (no such contribution), analysis of historical data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) concerning child criminality in the period 2019-2021 (this is also not made), stressing and calibration of the model data, deriving specific values for the real growth rate for the number of people who would fall into the group of juvenile risk actions (no such contribution), enriching the Bulgarian scientific literature with the translation of specific information regarding the process of parentification (not done correctly), introducing some concepts that describe specific processes: "*temporary hidden parental incapacity*", "*misdirection*", "*emotional activation*", "*parental self-alienation*", etc., describing and naming the different types of parentification (which have long enough history, but these "new terms" have no contribution and are questionable), once again mentioned author questionnaire to assess and evaluate the impact of parentification on the manifestation of risk behaviour in adolescence - FRA (Family Relationships Assessment) (there is no author questionnaire, neither adaptation of existing validated scales), and quite off-topic, as a final contribution, it is pointed out that work has been initiated on the creation of a collection of case studies to support philosophy teachers for grade 8, given that the curriculum content in that grade is psychologically oriented. All these contributions sound unhelpful and unsustainable and cannot be accepted as such. A theoretical and empirical contribution can be extrapolated, as well as one with an applied focus, based on the theoretical review and research conducted, which, however, should be substantiated and correct.

#### **8. Evaluation of the publications related to the dissertation**

The PhD student has presented 8 publications on the topic of the dissertation research, all are without co-authors and published in the period 2019-2021.

#### **9. Personal contribution of the doctoral student**

I have reasons to consider that the results obtained and the contributions formulated are entirely the personal work of the PhD student.

#### **10. Abstract of a dissertation**

The dissertation abstract describes the main results implemented in the PhD thesis.

#### **11. Critical remarks and recommendations**

The title of the PhD thesis itself is too general, which implies covering the whole field of risk-taking behaviour given that there is no narrowing in the text either. There is no conceptualization of parentification (and analogous patterns in the family systems theory) and how it relates to risk behaviour in adolescence, which is predicted by a number of possible factors - deriving a direct relation requires precise research design and conduct. There also remains the question how parentification and predictive value can be measured in a convenient cross-sectional study. A correct periodization is not given and no working one is chosen. The terms adolescent, teenager, young, child, are used interchangeably. The statements, made by the PhD student, are not supported and substantiated by the concepts mentioned, among many of which one can point out

"...infantilism is becoming a characteristic feature of the social-psychological portrait of the younger generation". Still in the introduction declarative statements are made, which are not substantiated and it is not clear whether they are own and on what basis they are derived. There is no distinction between the characteristics of the normative crisis and how the distinction related to parentification is imported. The author does not explain is there a distinction between complete and incomplete families and manifestations of parentification. It is not clear exactly what risk behaviour the PhD student is addressing. Six research objectives are presented instead of one. In practice, they have the function of tasks, but are not formulated as such. For example, the theoretical model of parentification is personal, it is not clear what kind of comparative analysis the PhD student aims to do, and tasks 5 and 6 "*To identify the main methods and forms of social-psychological support for parents who have placed their children in an uncharacteristic role, position, expectations and activities; to summarize and identify processes concerning a wide range of parent-child relationships*" are not meaningfully formulated. The statement regarding the model "*The proposed model should enable practical application and address the existing need for a risk management toolkit for adolescents in a parentification situation*" raises the question of how the author believes this can be achieved. What does the author mean by '*social-psychological structure and types of parent-child relationships in the process of parentification*'? The hypotheses are presumably confirmatory, but it is not stated on what basis they are derived. More importantly, they presuppose longitudinal research to confirm or reject them. What is meant by the "*model problem*" presented? How does the doctoral student think the relationship between parenting patterns and adolescent risk-taking tendency can be confirmed? Especially as a direct relationship beyond age specificity and context effect?

The methodology is not robust. There can be no claim to representativeness of the sample that is indicated. No "*questionnaire models*" are tested as stated. Instruments and approach to sampling are not correctly described. It is not clear what the PhD student took, how and in what way he has adapted. It remains absolutely unclear why the instrument, which is stated to have been "*created for the purposes of the research paper*", is entitled Family Relationships Assessment and which scales exactly it includes. In terms of data processing, there is a lack of sufficient competence and reasoning in the choice, mathematical model, Benford's law referred to by the author and "*regression analysis statistically verified with SPSS software*" question the data processing.

It is not clear with a stated target group of adolescents why 143 university students of a significantly older age had been surveyed, what the detailed test file with explanation was and why it had been delivered to them. Why different groups had been surveyed with different instruments and how this integrates into overall findings. Does "*aggression measure*" and similar phrases one of the machine translations of a scale mean. It is stated that the '*measure*' was completed by 117 '*children*' aged 13-16 and apparently their parents. There is no information about the scales, why they were chosen, whose authorship they are, and what the results of their use, i.e. their psychometric characteristics, are in

order to be admissible for analysis of the results obtained. Another 218 adolescents are reported to have "*self-identified as twelfth graders*"? The PhD student has not clarified what individuals were ultimately surveyed, and with what instruments. In some points 3 instruments are mentioned, in others 2 instruments, and it is not at all clear what instruments were used. There is a division into 2 groups, 13-15 and 16-18, with no justification for the own position of expected maturity. What mathematical model is the author referring to and what necessitates such given the established research methods? And what exactly is meant by "*The model provides developmental data over a 4-year period ahead*"? Why are cultural stigmas mentioned when they are not part of the research? All the examples given are clear from a counselling and therapeutic point of view, but do not meet the requirements to be placed in a research study without justification. The text is not clearly structured, focuses are not drawn and argumentation is lacking. Sentences are arbitrarily combined, making the position completely perplexing, but also the author's purpose unclear. One of many examples is "*Risk-taking activities are an acceptable and necessary part of adolescence because of the increased neurological plasticity of the brain that makes it particularly flexible and responsive to experiences, and the purpose of developing such activities to prepare youth for adulthood. Therefore, "risk cessation" is applicable in most cases to those unhealthy risk behaviours (e.g., substance abuse, unprotected sexual activity) that can lead to negative health outcomes (e.g., disease, unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections). This study of youth risk behaviours does not reflect the experiences of adolescents outside of school (e.g., dropouts, homeless), many of whom are more likely to engage in or have engaged in unhealthy risk behaviours*" (p. 119). There may be some logic, but it is not evident in the text. This also applies to The current calculation is implemented with Benford's Law ( *Benford's Law.Capital.en. 2007-05-15*)." on p. 120. In contrast, it is pointed out that regression analysis does not provide information about the causes and that it derives the most frequently given uniform responses. These weaknesses in preparation must be addressed if the PhD student intends to conduct research in the future

## **12. Personal impressions**

My personal impressions are based solely on the materials submitted for review. From the research and biographical information presented, it is evident that the PhD student is more practice oriented and less research oriented. The choice of the dissertation research topic is linked to his professional realization.

## **13. Recommendations for future use of the dissertation contributions and results**

I have no recommendations for future use.

## **CONCLUSION**

The dissertation has been prepared in compliance with the requirements of the Law for Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the respective Regulations of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.



The dissertation shows that the PhD student has performed independent research and can be awarded the educational and scientific degree 'Doctor' in the professional field 3.2. Psychology, doctoral programme: Pedagogical and developmental psychology.

3<sup>rd</sup> May 2023

Reviewer:

Prof. Margarita Bakracheva, PhD