In recent years much criticism has been expressed concerning the roles that youths play in our societies, decrying escapism and indulgent behavior, crime and violence (Yates and Youniss, 2009) and social and political apathy (Manning, 2012). At the same time, evidence has accumulated of increased social engagement of youth and young adults, particularly in the street-level and virtual manifestations of mass social protest such as the “Arab Spring” (Mirkin, 2013) or the “Occupy” movements around the world (Costanza-Chock, 2012; Milkman, 2012; Reimer, 2012), as well as in the growing phenomenon of social entrepreneurship (Harding and Cowling, 2004; Ryzin et al., 2009). It is often argued that it is youth’s mission to change the future and society’s duty to provide them with the proper basis for in realizing this mission. The literature on youth’s social engagement discusses the circumstances that affect youth social engagement, such as globalization, information technology and immigration (Youniss et al., 2012), the critical dimensions of effective youth empowerment (Jennings et al., 2006), or short- and long-term benefits for youth and for society (Balsano, 2005). Little is known of the course of development of the young social activist – what are the key personal, social and emotional processes and circumstances that turn him or her into a social activist or a social entrepreneur.

The current study aims to unveil factors and processes that promote the social engagement of entrepreneurial young adults, through qualitative analysis of their life stories and the narratives of their entrepreneurial trajectory. The study had two separate parts. The first consisted of in-depth interviews with fifteen young social entrepreneurs and two persons from his or her immediate environment. The sample was selected from a pool of 123 entrepreneurs who in the recent decade have established successful (based on expert judgments, awards, news coverage) and sustainable (running at least 3 years) social initiatives, and were under 35 years of age at the time; to reflect gender, nationality and religious heterogeneity, usually a parent or sibling and a close friend. The second part consisted of in-depth interviews and focus groups with funders, leaders and members of seven young urban communal societies. The sample was selected from a list of 38 such societies to reflect ideological, geographic and religious heterogeneity. All interviews and focus groups in both were recorded, professionally transcribed to preserve the richness of information, and were thematically analyzed.

While parameters mentioned in the literature as contributors to an entrepreneurial career, such as parental education and social class, turned out insignificant in our findings, several major themes arose from the interviews and focus groups. One is the role of ideological education and preparation, and particularly the critical role of youth movements, of specific mentors, and of informal education systems as providing the conceptual and ideological foundation for the social change they would undertake later. Associated with that was the influence of early experience in leadership and entrepreneurial behavior. Another recurrent theme is nonconformity and experience of feeling as outsiders in social contexts during childhood and youth, but that is in most cases nonetheless accepted and supported at home, either via role-models or explicitly and intentionally promoting social justice values at home. Deviance from the norm as a condition for social entrepreneurship is both stated and implicit in the self perception and narratives of the interviewees. In many of our cases the individuals are self and other-described as ‘damaged’. This ‘damage’ is often associated with major family or personal hardships in early life, such as death or major illness, disability, acute poverty or separation. The drive to change the world is seen as an attempt to ‘mend the damage’. It also clearly affects the nature of the social problems that they try to address, which are often closely linked to their personal strife as children and teens.

These findings help us understand the antecedents of entrepreneurial behavior and the processes that trigger the onset of entrepreneurial career. They are also helpful in more practical ways – one is in early identification of young persons who have a proclivity for such a career and providing them with the ideological and practical training and guidance that can help this potential materialize. Another is in informing our schooling systems and educators of the importance of allowing and supporting nonconformist, unusual and creative youngsters, despite the tendency of
such systems to prefer the tame and the obedient. It is the unusual, provocative and sometimes rebellious that will generate the future social innovations and be the future leaders in civil society.