HOW SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL WORKERS WITH AT-RISK YOUTH ATTAIN ATTACHMENT CAPACITY AND SELF-EFFICACY: TWO RECENT FINDINGS

PAZIT LEVI-SUDAI[1*], DOINA BALAHUR[2]

ABSTRACT. Background: Although attachment theory and efficacy theory are well-developed the determinants of perceived self-efficacy have been much less researched.

Aims & research questions: This study measures and explains the association between the attachment style and perceived self-efficacy of Israeli socio-educational workers working with at-risk educational system drop-outs.

Methodology: This 2016-19 study of a large national sample deployed a Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods design. This first paper offers two findings from a semi-structured qualitative interview.

Findings: (1) An important proportion of workers come to the job pre-equipped and pre-committed for it by their upbringing and life since early childhood. (2) Almost all will significantly grow their PSE on the job.

Discussion: PSE develops throughout the lifespan. Noddings' 'pedagogy of care' helps explain many workers' heartfelt sense of mission.

Conclusions: PSE will not grow successfully on the job unless the working environment is made a 'safe haven' and 'secure base' for the workers.

Keywords: at-risk youth; attachment; perceived self-efficacy; socio-educational work.

[1] *Doctoral School of Philosophy &Social and Political Sciences, Sociology Department, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iaşi, Romania*

[2] *Department of Sociology, Human Resources and Social work, Faculty of Philosophy and Social Political Sciences, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iaşi, Romania*

* Corresponding author: lspazit@gmail.com

Background

Working with young at-risk drop-outs requires in socio-educational workers (SEWs) a high level of self-belief, something which most research into this form of work associates with a secure attachment style and a high level of perceived self-efficacy. Attachment style (ATS) is in essence the patterns of expectation, need, sensitivity and social behaviour [with respect to personal relationships] which are the outcome of the individual's attachment history (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). A secure ATS helps build a steady self-esteem, sustains mental health in the face of adversity, and makes it easier to build interpersonal supportive behaviours (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). People secure in themselves can solve quarrels and conflicts smoothly, handle painful experiences competently, channel their emotions efficiently (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). All these qualities are vital when working with adolescents caught in circumstances of failure, hardship and marginalization and in need of a strong, wise adult example to lean on (Bowlby, 1988). A SEW with an insecure attachment style would tend, it is commonly thought, to caution, would envision difficulty and failure, and fall prey to avoidant behaviours (Elliot & Reis, 2003).

As for perceived self-efficacy (PSE), it is an individual's assessment of his/her capacity to organize and execute the actions required to fulfil a given task or achieve a desired result or change one's surroundings in a desired direction (Bandura, 1986; 1990). PSE enables successful task performance and coping with difficulties (Bandura, 1997). Workers with PSE take obstacles as challenges and show initiative (Bandura, 2001). They can envision scenarios for overcoming difficulties and possess the long-term patience and experience of past successes to carry the scenarios through to fruition (Bandura, 1997). They also know how to recruit the support and advice of bosses and colleagues (Consiglio, Borgogni, Di Tecco & Schaufeli, 2016). The long experience as a supervisor of SEWs confirm this: SEWs gifted with a secure attachment style grew in self-efficacy, they generally felt themselves not only capable of solving their problems but were also willing to seek and take advice from others, admit their failures and try to learn from them. Their work with their young clients usually reached a higher level than other SEWs achieved.

Aims & research questions: Although attachment and efficacy theory are both well-developed the determinants of PSE have been much less researched and clarified. Our recent (2016-19) study of Israeli SEWs working with at-risk youth who have dropped out of the educational system was designed to measure and explain the association between the SEWs' attachment style (ATS) and their perceived self-efficacy (PSE). The study found that attachment style was indeed a significant factor in self-efficacy, explaining 51% of the variance in both total self-efficacy and its three components (building one-on-one client relationships, performing essential duties, liaising with and influencing management). The lower the SEWs scored on anxiety and avoidance in their attachment patterns the higher was their self-efficacy. This was an expected result given the consistent argument of attachment and self-efficacy theory that a secure ATS stimulates a lasting PSE, promotes the finding of coping strategies and helps create a mental approach conducive to good decision-making in both interpersonal and occupational contexts (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998; O'Brien et al., 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, 2017; Wright et al., 2014).

The finding was, for all that, somewhat surprising since Bandura (1977,1997) the prime source of efficacy theory, attributes the greater importance in building perceived self-efficacy to behavioural factors—first and foremost, successful job experience (mastery)—rather than to an unconscious process with psychodynamic roots (Bandura, 1993). Moreover, differences in attachment style explained only half the variance in PSE. This fact alone justified further exploration into the association between ATS and PSE.

Methodology: Our study had deployed a Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative data gathering. This present paper proffers two intriguing findings from the study's semi-structured qualitative interview of a sample of 10 SEWs, interviewed in order to explore the human dynamics behind the study's statistical results. The interview posed open-ended questions such as—How did you arrive at this work/job? What factors caused you to choose this line of work? What personal resources have helped you cope with this work? How are you coping with your workplace relations, with clients and with colleagues? What factors do you think have enabled you to succeed in this job?

Two intriguing findings from a qualitative interview: presentation and discussion

(a) Quantitative statistics requiring explanation: When the large nationwide sample of 175 SEWs from Israel's Youth Advancement Service (YAS) were classified by their self-reported attachment style (following the Brennan et al., 1998, method which uses position on the two dimensions/continua of anxiety and avoidance make its classification), it was found that although 58% of the sample reported the 'secure' attachment style considered the most suitable for socio-educational work, 29% reported the 'preoccupied' and 'dismissive' attachment styles, and 13% the 'fearful' style, apparently the most unpropitious for this type of work. A further finding was that 'preoccupied' and 'dismissive' SEWs reported PSE levels only slightly lower than SEWs reporting a secure attachment style. Since PSE scores are known to correlate highly and positively with practical effectiveness on the job (see Bandura, 2000, for example), this implies that the preoccupied and the dismissive found ways to function effectively despite what attachment theory argues are the disbenefits of their attachment style.

That 42% of the SEW sample currently working in the caring profession of youth advancement reported their ATS at less than secure is intriguing. That these 'insecure' SEWs seem to have found a way to cope at least competently with their very difficult work raises some doubt about the prevalent assumption that a secure attachment style is required for effective SEW work. At the least it indicates the need for research examining the relevance of this assumption in socio-educational work with youths.

A speculative explanation for the above 'insecure' ATS scores is that it reflects the finding from the present study that not a few SEWs had come to this work from emotionally deprived parental-home backgrounds. In the qualitative interview many of the interviewees admitted to be seeking some sort of "reparation" for themselves in this regard. Several made clear statements that they were using their socio-educational work to meet this need for intimacy, admitting frankly that their client relations enabled them to feel useful and strong and helped meet their need to feel human warmth, love and strong human contact. Although they were determined to advance their clients' needs the benefit was admittedly two-way.

As for the 17% of SEWs who scored as 'dismissive- avoidant', although the qualitative interview furnished no direct evidence of how someone who tended to feel uneasy with closeness and intimacy could function successfully as a SEW (interviewees were not classified by ATS), the long experience as a supervisor of SEWs suggests the following hypothesis: they may compensate for the lack of intimacy by having a PSE based on the more technical and functional aspects of their work. They might prefer to work alone rather than in teams, rebuff offers of assistance, rely on themselves, attract recognition for how organized their work is, how quick and alert they are at filing reports and the other formal elements of their job. The support they provide their young clients could be more technical and less emotional. (With respect to the 13% 'fearful-avoidant', a categorization which implies that they have internalised a negative model both of themselves and of others, and fear close personal involvement and rejection (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), we can only conclude that they have somehow slipped into in the wrong job.)

The following presentation and discussion of two findings from the qualitative interview provides further explanatory material as to how SEWs come by their ATS and PSE.

First finding: SEWs find their role early in life:
(b) Parental influence: The interview responses demonstrated that in one way or another SEWs absorb a sense of 'parental' responsibility for others at their own parents' knee and thenceforward carry this 'mission' towards those less fortunate than themselves all through their life.

For SEWs who had a parent or parents who were physically and emotionally available to them, who gave them acceptance, love, attention to their needs and set an example of caring for others, this fundamentally shaped and directed their development. It gave them a sense of self-value and security and thence the 'courage' to dare to grow. It instilled in them a profound sense of ableness towards the other.

When, on the other hand, parents were injurious or absent or of inconsistent behaviour this could conduce to a sense of insecurity in the capacity to build relationships and thence negative perceptions of themselves and others (Bartholomew,1990; Bartholomew &Horowitz, 1991) *but it did not* necessarily lead away from a commitment to caring for others,

indeed some children of failed parents took on caring, quasi-parental roles on their own initiative—offering a role model to younger siblings, taking care of them, teaching, comforting, defending, 'fighting their corner', intervening for their protection, encouraging them to dream and dare. The literature reports that parents whose own childhood needs had not been met by their own parents sometimes seek practical help from their own children. These children, knowingly or unknowingly, assume domestic roles of mediation and security provision (Jurkovic, 2014). Having failed to evoke any caring response from their parents, these children become expert at observing the needs of others.

This relational strategy adopted by 'parental children' gathers strength until in adulthood these children enter the caring professions (Blumenstein, 1986; DiCaccavo, 2002). Vincent (1996) also reports an association between parental duties in childhood and the choice of a therapeutic profession later in life. In a study of 1,577 social workers, for example, more than two-thirds reported histories of taking on 'care-taking' or 'go-between' roles in their families (Vincent, 1996). It seems that psychotherapists are especially likely to report their 'parentification' in childhood (Burton, 1994, cited in Dicacccavo, 2002).

Many interviewees in the study drawn from here made it clear that a wound from the past still motivated and drove them (Jung C. G., 1963 made famous the concept of *'the wounded healer')*. Those who are aware of the wound tend to see their work in a YAS unit as reparative. They chose not to nurse the wound in private but to do work for which their 'wound' gave them useful understanding, insights and sympathies and which would at the same time help them manage it or recover from it. One interviewee said that her relations with her parents left her feeling very alone and that her first instinct in later life was to go into the caring professions. "What I didn't get there I realise here... The lack of intimacy there was so painful that perhaps I'm restoring it here".

Parents as significant others—for good or bad—had clearly exerted a defining effect on most interviewees, pushing them in one way or another towards the caring profession of socio-educational work and equipping them, to varying extents, with the desires, experience and capabilities they need for that work.

(c) Some SEWs find their PSE later in life: Several interviewees stated that after a childhood of negative and damaging treatment from their parents they later encountered new significant others— a trainer, a spouse—who did furnish them a safe haven and secure base, and from whom they learnt security of attachment and optimism as to the potentialities of close personal connections.

Much empirical evidence for the susceptibility of attachment styles to change over time has come from a slew of recent studies. As a consequence of relationship experiences —people entering significant new close relationships—new interpersonal interaction teaches that a new pattern of attachment is feasible and successful (Feeney, 2008; Teyber, 2006; La Guardia et al., 2000; Fraley, 2016; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017; Allen et al., 2018; Fraley, 2019; Fraley & Roisman, 2019). These researchers confirm the many studies which have found that attachment experiences in early childhood are not determinist (Fraley, 2019).

Other studies have shown who can perform this reparative role. Hazan & Shaver (1987) show that spouses can; Trinke & Bartholomew (1997) that trainers, romantic partners and good friends can; Fraley (2016) that siblings, teachers and close friends can; Fitch, Pistole & Gunn, (2010) that supervisors can; Popper & Mayseless (2003) and Mayseless & Popper (2019) that bosses and other leaders can.

(d) Destiny and self-realisation: Many of the interviewees said that they had for years felt a sense of mission and destiny for this work with at-risk youth, some of them for as long as they could remember. Others responded with the Bedouin saying that "The path knows more than the one following it: once on it, do not leave it because it is always right", meaning that their feet were set on this path to socio-educational work with young people before they had even a glimmer that that was what they wanted to do with their lives. Three typical comments were: "The truth is that life drew me here even before I knew that I had made this choice." "It was always obvious to me that I had to work with people …from weak populations, weak not so much in their socioeconomic state but with regard to mental, emotional, learning and family difficulties…". "…it was as though something inside me said to me this is what you want to do…It was not that I stopped and asked myself, is that what you want to do for the rest of your life?"

Nel Noddings' (2012, 2018) understanding of the 'pedagogy of care' helps us understand the sense of mission and destiny deeply felt by many SEWs. She argues that this imperative to care for the other absorbed from within the parental family is a learnt moral choice. We learn social involvement and formulate a sense of justice, she says, from how we ourselves as children are cared for. Indeed, several of the SEWs interviewees had chosen socio-educational work in reaction to what they had gone through in their childhood—to right the 'wrongs' done to them, repair the deficits, heal the pain. They come to this work in continuation of caring roles their childhood taught them.

It is clear then that for many SEWs the emotional underpinnings of this career choice run very very deep and that this very depth gifts the SEWs some of the skills, capacities and resolve they need in order to keep fighting and succeeding in their chosen very challenging job.

The evidence of our study is that many, if not most, interviewees have been drawn into SEW work by this sense of inner need and mission, by their need to give of what they were given and taught—one way or another— by their parents, and particularly given to young people. The quality and intensity of their work in the YAS unit is to a great extent a function of this inner need. These interviewees and the others like them probably make up the core of the YAS workforce who set the tone for all the others.

(d) Inner resources: SEWs require a particular set of inner resources to cope with a job which takes them into the most difficult of places, physically and emotionally.

SEWs have to make the choice not to descend into helplessness and hopelessness but to remain proactive and project strength. They need to be creative in finding solutions to difficulties and obstacles, able to appreciate their young clients' needs and adapt their methods and skills to those needs. The relationship with their clients has to be based on the promise of non-abandonment, the resolve not to abandon their clients in their adversity and not to give up (Razer & Friedman, 2017; Razer et al., 2013). Many interviewees' own experience of emotional suffering gives them insights and sensitivities in how to relate to these client's practical and emotional situation (Barnett, 2007; Gelso & Hayes, 2007, in Zerubavel & Wright, 2012). They need to take pleasure in autonomy; in the ability to create, to take initiatives.

These personal resources translate into personal growth and efficacy in achieving the YAS's objectives for their clients. Yet, by definition, these qualities of character can hardly be taught, although careful and skilled supervision and advice from colleagues, supervisors and managers will help.

We can sum up this first finding as follows. For the majority of the interviewees their own 'parental' responsibilities for care and support, watching over and giving advice, have been part of their lives for as long as they can remember. They come to professional socio-educational work equipped with the mindset and many of the skills and insights required for that work. Many feel that they have been destined for this work from their childhood, whether they have always known it consciously or not. In other words, lifelong 'amateur' SEWs take on in adulthood the role of professional SEW and caregiver and come pre-equipped for that very role. This long-standing —if not life-long—commitment to, and understanding of, the demands of the job is certainly a major source of their attachment capacity and PSE.

Second finding: The SEW's professional home has to be both safe haven and secure base

(a) The qualities of a professional home: The character of an SEW's professional home makes itself felt primarily through its staff, manager, supervisor and colleagues, although the physical setting can also play a part. The team exerts a decisive influence on the quality of the individual SEW's work and their expression of their own individuality. It is also decisive for their ability to cooperate and seek advice and support. In a professional home that radiates security a SEW can be innovative and creative, and colleagues acting supportively as a mirror to successes and failures will clearly improve their perceived self-efficacy.

Bowlby (1988) argued that it is, fundamentally, the establishment of the parental home as a 'secure base' that allows the child to grow and develop. A secure base is a place you can leave to explore the world and return to, knowing always that there you will receive comfort, peace and protection. From a secure base you can go out to take the risks of self-

exploration which will enable you to grow and mature. The availability of a parental figure or figures and their sensitivity to the needs of dependence is the key to this acquisition of personal autonomy (Feeney & Thrush, 2010) which Bandura argued was so central to the acquisition of perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994/2010).

Bandura (1997, 2012) and other efficacy researchers' (Schunk & Parajes, 2002) have also argued that the work environment is a strong developer and shaper of PSE. Both Bandura (2000) and Mensah & Lebbaeus, (2013) came to the finding that settings which responded actively and continuously to the attempts of individual workers to handle and master the challenges of their work stimulated the worker's development, whereas settings that did not so respond retarded worker development. The result of a unit failing to provide such support will be SEWs who feel frustrated and helpless (Razer & Friedman, 2017; Razer et al., 2013).

One of the functions of SEW managers and supervisors, therefore, is, essentially, to replicate what parents do for their children. The figure most specifically responsible for this, and particularly with respect to new entrants, is the unit supervisor (who in the YAS meets twice monthly and individually with every SEW). He or she must be alert and sensitive to SEWs' needs and support them in their exploration and personal development. The association between attachment and early training has been studied by Bennet et al., (2013) who found that social work trainees' attachment behaviours reached a peak in the early stages of their training when they seek closeness as a means of coping with their uncertainty and forebodings. Fitch, Pistole and Gunn (2010) have proposed the Attachment Caregiving Model of Supervision, arguing that the nature of the relationship between supervisor and student (which we would extend to supervisor and SEW) is vital to the process during which the student builds up their repertoire of skills and is particularly critical when the student has been through an especially difficult attachment experience, such as a painful meeting with a client. Only if the supervisor can give the trainee the appropriate sensitivity, flexibility and responsiveness will they create the basis from which the trainee (or SEW) can explore their work and learn the needed skills.

A SEW must mature professionally and regular fruitful supervision is one of the keys to this. The supervisor, in addition to their essential

role of providing holding and support, will enable the SEW to continually review and revise their professional personality. The capacity for emotional self-regulation in the face of painful experiences is a function of this self-examination and self-analysis (Maddux, 2002).

As for the manager's specific role within the Unit, he or she bears, first of all, overall executive and administrative responsibility for all the socio-therapeutic and educational activities and services provided by the Unit and for working relations with the local government authority the unit is in partnership with. Some will make do with that, others add to that the same work with individual clients their SEWs are doing. The manager holds authority over their SEWs and is also responsible—together with input from the supervisor—for the SEWs' working conditions and professional development and thus for ensuring the vital 'secure base' and 'safe haven'.

Managers and supervisors reinforce SEWs' perceived self-efficacy by establishing professional covenants composed equally of demands and love, love that expresses itself in availability, attention to needs, evaluation and criticism, which does not demean but shows esteem and which therefore promotes learning and maturation. A SEW can explore their role and its challenges optimally only when the attachment system is relatively quiescent, namely, when an attachment figure feels sufficiently available and responsive (a state that Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978, refer to as having a "secure base" and that Marmarosh et al., 2013, call "felt security"). In other words, attachment needs are primary; they must be met before exploration can proceed normally" (Hazan & Shaver, 1990 pp, 271). A Unit in which SEWs feel secure frees the SEW from spending time and energy on defensive measures and so enables them to go out and develop their craft, accept difficulties as challenges and learn to overcome them.

(b) The development and growth of SEWs towards perceived self-efficacy: The common saying is that 'All beginnings are hard' and this is undeniably true for a SEW. The great majority of interviewees reported that their start in a YAS unit was problematic and difficult but that they chose to remain and face their difficulties and doubts. By seeking cooperation, advice and guidance, by shedding fantasies of rescuing souls in favour of more realistic objectives and paths along which clients could develop they succeeded in achieving strong personal growth and professional development.

The beginning is probably hardest for those who come to this work with an insecure attachment style. These are the SEWs who most need the unit to be a professional safe haven and secure base for them. Bandura (1994/2010) writes: "… one must create enabling environmental conditions so that individuals who are occupied with profound self-doubt about their coping capabilities can perform successfully despite themselves" (pp. 6). The job is difficult and complex and there is no rule book for it, no guide book on how to act in the endlessly different personal situations of the clients.

SEWs accrue PSE on the job by successfully learning from failures and painful confrontations (Bandura 1977, 1989, 2006, 1994/2010). We would add to this that, if the Unit fails to furnish SEWs a safe haven and secure base this learning and adaptation process will be significantly inhibited. The very nature of the job means that entrants can arrive only partially prepared. SEWs need to rapidly acquire professional maturity, self-knowledge, and knowledge of their clients, and channel this knowledge into improving their own work. In other words, for most if not all SEWs the path to perceived self-efficacy goes through accumulated work experience and supervised professional self-development. They learn how to cope with the job's demanding challenges or they become less effective operators, or they drop out.

We have to recall the highly dynamic nature of socio-educational work. No two clients make the same demands, methods that work with one don't with another. The work demands high levels of individual creativity and flexibility (Hertz, 2019). Seniority in the job is no guarantor of such qualities: a young recent entrant with high PSE may perhaps handle the demands of the work better than a more 'experienced' SEW. On-the-job experience is more important for the anxious and avoidant SEWs than for the secure. That is, whereas SEW entrants with a secure attachment style can settle effectively into their work with relatively little trouble, the insecure need time and the close support of managers and supervisors to explore their new work environment and find ways to meet its challenges. This is definitely supported by the years as a SEW supervisor and is an intriguing direction for future research.

Conclusions

We have seen that there seem to be at least four paths by which SEWs achieve many of the elements of a relationship-building capacity and a strong PSE: (a) They can be learnt/absorbed from strong loving parents; (b) A child can teach themselves in despite of the parental example, (c) A reparative experience can teach attachment skills and PSE later in life, (d) An SEW can augment their PSE substantially on the job with the help of manager, supervisor and colleagues.

PSE is a quality which develops throughout the lifespan (Barone, Maddux & Snyder, 2012). The two findings set out here—first, that a large proportion of SEWs come to the job pre-equipped and pre-committed by their life and upbringing, and second, that almost all will significantly grow their PSE on the job— furnish strong evidence and insights as to how SEWs get their attachment ability and develop perceived self-efficacy at work with youth at risk. However, this latter stage of professional self-development will not come about as it can unless the YAS unit makes the professional home a safe haven and secure base for its SEW's. If it does this it will promote individual PSE and retain the most competent and efficacious SEWs in their vital jobs.

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