

# AM I A GOOD CAREGIVER FOR YOUTH AT RISK? SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL WORKERS' PERCEPTION OF SELF-EFFICACY THROUGH THE LENS OF ATTACHMENT THEORY

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**ABSTRACT.** "Have I succeeded in helping the youths I care for? Does our relationship enable the youths to make a progress? To feel better?" These questions are frequently raised during the supervision sessions with the socio-educational workers (SEWs) of the Youth Advancement Units<sup>2</sup>. SEWs provide care for youths, many of whom have dropped out from formal educational frameworks in Israel. The main role of these workers is to enhance the youths, integrating them in society by establishing a personal relationship and promoting interventions. More than once, the SEW have to cope with complex tasks in their work. Moreover, they encounter professional and personal difficulties leading to a sense of frustration, failure, and rejection. A high perception of self-efficacy enables the SEWs to experience the difficulties as challenges, believing that they can promote these youths and attain success in their work, despite the difficulties. Conversely, SEWs with low perception of self-efficacy experience the difficulties as threats and believe less in the ability of the youths to change. This article examines the benefit and importance of another variable that facilitates the work with youths in situations of risk, as such, it may contribute to the perception of self-efficacy, the attachment style of socio-educational workers, when at the core of their work these workers must build a safe and beneficial relationship and be a significant adult for youths at-risk.

**Keywords:** *Secure base, Caregiver, Socio-educational worker (SEW), Adult attachment, Self-efficacy*

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## 1. Introduction

Many definitions of social educational work have been conceived around the world. In North America, the prevalent definition is “child and youth care work”, “social pedagogy” and in Europe “social pedagogy”, “socio-Educational care work”, “social education” is applied. In Israel the terms guidance, care, social education, promotion of youths at risk, psycho-educational intervention, social educational work, or therapeutic educational work are used (Grouper, 2011; Lahav, 2011). Social educational work is defined as “the theory about how psychological, social and material conditions and various value orientations encourage or prevent the general development and growth, life quality and welfare of the individual or the group” (European Bureau of the International Association of Social Educators, 2006, p. 375).

Socio-educational workers function in the Youth Advancement Units in Israel, a service that provides a socio-educational answer for youths at-risk. The socio-educational workers provide care for youths aged fourteen to eighteen who are characterized by dropping out from the formal education system. They also provide care for youths who work or who learn and find it difficult to adjust to various frameworks. They are at risk of dropping out and are cared for in the community (Cohen-Starvichensky, 1998; Lahav, 2011). The socio-educational workers are required to cope with complex and difficult professional and emotional tasks on the background of the family, social, and emotional difficulties, poverty and distress. The encounter with individuals at high risk may cause these workers negative stress responses, including compassion fatigue and/or burnout (Himi, 2009; West, 2015). Working with youths who demonstrate these characteristics requires special efforts so as to promote them. This entails dealing with a sense of stress, continuous failure, and helplessness, similar to those of the youths themselves (Razer, 2009). Other position-holders who care for youths in situations of risk and who are responsible for certain and well-defined aspects in their lives. Unlike them, socio-educational workers are responsible for of the entirety of aspects in the youths’ life and mediates between the youths and other position-holders and the caregiving institutions, simi-

lar to the way that the parents do (Cohen & Cohen, 2003). SEWs are required to fulfil for the youths under their care different roles, when the family that is supposed to fulfil these roles cannot do so (Bar-On Cohen, 2011). One of the prominent characteristics of socio-educational workers is their continuous and intensive direct and unmediated relationship with the population they care for (Maier, 1979). Parents or other caregivers need to provide children with a secure base to which the latter can return in states of distress and stress (Bowlby, 1988). Similarly, socio-educational workers, who care for youths characterized as being in states distress or stress, should serve as a secure base for these youths. Thus, the SEWs are essentially “professional caregivers”. Acting as a secure base for the youths achieves one of the basic goals in the SEWs’ work and therefore may enhance the perception of self-efficacy. The assumption underpinning this article is that in addition to the perception of self-efficacy, which itself is of unparalleled importance in the work with youths at-risk (Sela-Shayovitz, 2014), there is another personality trait that SEWs. That is the attachment style which, on the one hand, may affect the individual’s perception of self-efficacy and on the other, the work with youths at-risk.

## **2. Aspects of Self-Efficacy and Its Effect on the Work of the Social-Educational Workers**

The research literature attributes considerable importance to the concept of self-efficacy. This concept was developed by Bandura (1982, 1986), and it constitutes a central component in his Learning Theory. The perception of self-efficacy is people's beliefs about their abilities to produce specific levels of performance that affect events having an impact on their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people think, feel, behave and motivate themselves (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy is a mechanism of the mediators’ perception between beliefs and personal knowledge and skills and the ability to implement them. (Bandura, 1986). Studies show that people with a high sense of self-efficacy set for themselves higher goals and are determined to achieve them. This is due to the direct relation between self-efficacy and expectations of result, thus affecting the future perception (Bandura, 1997). Furthermore, Bandura (2000) maintains that

there is a dramatic effect of the perception of self-efficacy on human behavior: "Among the mechanisms of self - influence, none is more focal or pervading than belief in one's personal efficacy" (p. 179).

The choice of a profession in general and the choice of working with youths at-risk in particular are related to the perception of self-efficacy. This is a decisive factor in the choice and development of one's career (Bandura, 2000). The level of self-efficacy in the professional field affects the extent to which individuals invest greater efforts in performing their roles and being initiative (Judge, Jackson, Shaw, Scott, & Rich, 2007). Workers in general and workers with youths at-risk in particular who have self-efficacy experience "control over the circumstances". They tend to interpret difficulties as affordable challenges, since they believe they have the ability to cope with them and learn from them. Conversely, workers with low perception of self-efficacy tend to emphasize interruptions, constraints, and threats, since they expect to fail (Bandura, 2000; Sela-Shayovitz, 2014). There is a direct relation between self-efficacy and expectation of outcomes, thus affecting the perception of the future. People who believe that they can take part in the generation of the changes they wish for, have a greater commitment to affect and shape their future (Bandura, 1997). A resilient sense of self-efficacy facilitates the power necessary for the persistent pursuit of innovation and excellence (Bandura, 2000) required for rising to the challenges, the complexity of the work, and the difficulties with which socio-educational workers cope (Grouper, 2007). A study that explored the perception of self-efficacy and sense of professional satisfaction among workers in the Department of Youth Advancement in Israel (Sela-Shayovitz, 2014). indicates that workers with high level of personal self-efficacy and sense of professional satisfaction reported high self-efficacy in their coping with youths at-risk.

Moreover, self-efficacy affects the individuals' relations with the organization: workers with high self-efficacy were more involved and engaged in their work (Consiglio, Borgogni, Di Tecco, & Schaufeli, 2016). Initial self-efficacy may affect workers' proactive approach to their social environment by adopting steps for improving the relations with the others who are relevant to the work place. This is undertaken for instance, by gaining the peers' trust and respect, creating opportunities for cooperation and cohesion with colleagues, striving for professional development

and active participation in the decision-making processes, and thus, reducing the distance of power with the supervisors and senior managers (Consiglio et al., 2016). Workers of the Department of Youth Advancement in Israel who described a relationship among in the staff as characterized by support and professional cooperation, displayed a higher level of self-efficacy in the care of the youths at-risk (Sela-Shayovitz, 2014). SEWs' self-efficacy is a meaningful factor in their work since it can affect their self-perception and ability to succeed in the performance of tasks, believe that change can be generated, cope with difficulties and complexity they encounter, be creative in finding the solutions, and manage the organizational aspect in the best way (Grouper, 2007; Sela-Shayovitz, 2014).

### **3. Effect of the Attachment Style and a Secure Base for Youths At-Risk**

Another contribution to the successful socio-educational work with youths at-risk stems from the intervention of another system, the attachment system. According to the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982), people are born with a system of attachment behavior that directs them to search for proximity to the caregiving figures. The search and preservation of this proximity are survival needs, the goal of which is the protection against psychological and physical threats and the reduction of anxiety. During infancy and childhood, the relations are with the parents or the caregivers who provide protection, security, and support. Later on in life, these relations continue but are complemented by new relationships. As a rule, the search for support is expressed on the part of weak or needy people and less experienced towards somebody perceived as stronger or smarter (child-parent, caregiver-patient). Children or adults who search for support remain within the range of proximity to the caregiving figure. Hence, according to Bowlby (1988), this gives rise to the concept of attachment behavior. Bowlby (1988) considered the search for proximity and preservation of supportive and warm relations as desirable situations, since attachment is an important component in human experience and is prevalent during people's entire life, from the cradle to the grave.

#### **4. Social-Educational Workers as Professional Caregivers Who Provide a Secure Base for the Youths under Their Care**

Already in the early theory of attachment (Bowlby, 1969/1982), the assumption was that another behavioral system, aside from the attachment system existed, namely the system of caregiving (CG). The CG system is a behavioral system aimed at the protection of children (Bowlby, 1969/1982; George, Solomon, Cassidy, & Shaver, 2008) and characterized by flexibility and adjustment to the separate needs of every individual (a detailed review on the CG system can be found in George et al., 2008). The caregiving system is implemented when children are in a dangerous situation. In that case, caregivers exert efforts for ensuring the children's wellbeing and welfare. This is a stand-alone system as an organized system of behaviors guided by the representation of the existing parent-child relations. Understanding this aspect in the parental role is vital to the explanation of the meaning and motivation that guides significant aspects of the behavior of parents and caregivers (George et al., 2008; Solomon & George, 1996) as well as of SEWs working with youths at-risk and are required to serve as a secure base for youths in situations of risk (Gur, 2006). Bowlby (1988) proposed that caregivers' role (and similarly socio-educational workers' role), like the parent's role, is to act as a "secure base" for the youths. From this base, the youths can explore the world of their thoughts, emotions, and actions, in the present and in the past. Thus, the caregivers respect and accept the youths as they are, encouraging them to take initiative. The SEW's role is to do everything in their power, using the means at his disposal, in order to promote the youths' wellbeing. Hence, caregivers strive to be trustworthy, attentive, and empathetic, respond sympathetically, and encourage the youths (Bowlby, 1988). The socio-educational workers, the professional caregivers, are in charge of establishing a secure and beneficial relationship with the youths, while being physically and emotionally available to serve as a secure base for the growth and development of the youths under their case. Thus, they facilitate the improvement of the youths' everyday functioning and developmental tasks they are facing (Shemesh & Shemesh, 2010; Soroka, 2008). The attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) advocates that people's attachment experience

with primary caregivers affects their tendency to investigate, communicate, and control their outside environment. If people have a secure relationship with their caregivers, then they learn to depend on the reliable and stable support, from which they can investigate the world securely, initiate warm and friendly interactions with others, and find comfort in the knowledge that the caregiver is accessible (Bowlby, 1969/1982). The caregivers' response produces an experience of a secure world (Florian, Mikulincer, & Bucholtz, 1995). Such parent-child and caregiver-client interactions, in which the base is seen as responsive, available, and secure, promote the sense of security in the attachment. Over the course of life, this support creates internal models of work that allow understanding whether to rely on others. Hence, the experience of the availability of others, primarily when they are needed, affects the quality of the secure attachment (Feeney & Thrush, 2010). Unlike therapists who sit in the clinic and see patients once a week, socio-educational workers are in the youths' different life spaces (home, neighborhood, work, studies), are available and present for many hours, often not as a routine and particularly when the youths need them (for instance, in states of crisis and distress, arrest by the Police, hearings of their case at court, and so on).

### **5. Effect of the Attachment Style on Professional Caregivers**

Bowlby (1988) maintained that part of the interpersonal treatment process can be understood as an attachment process; the parental care, the accessibility, and the response to children's needs for protection affect the development of attachment styles. Three main patterns of attachment were described by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978): the secure attachment style, the anxious attachment style, and the avoidant attachment style. The secure attachment style characterizes people who believe in the accessibility of others when they need them and at times of distress, they turn to them for support and comfort. Such people perceive relationships as satisfactory, they search for proximity and intimacy, and they have resources available for the engagement in self-realization and giving to others. The anxious attachment style characterizes people who experience others as unavailable in a time of need. They feel rejected and anxious about abandonment, and hence they have

an increased need for proximity. They are dependent and demand attention. In times of distress, they tend to exhibit excessive emotionality and demonstrate an inability to repress negative emotions. People with the avoidant attachment style are characterized by lack of belief in other people's willingness to help them. They tend to rely on themselves and to cope with difficulties and distress by themselves. They repress every need for help and every emotion of rejection and loss, avoiding emotional situations that inspire this. In relationships they are characterized by distance and control and avoidance of emotional and intimate involvement. When coping with distress, they tend to repress anxieties and painful memories (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988). The socio-educational workers "come from home" equipped with an attachment style that impacts their ability to establish relationships, build trust, contain and accept the youths, provide a sense of security and love. The parents and the caregivers differ in their ability to provide for their child a secure base. These differences are associated with the way in which they interpret their attachment history. A study of attachment patterns in childhood and adulthood illustrated considerable evidence that parents' ability to provide parental care is related to the pattern of early relationships with their own parents (Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, & Pearson, 1996; George & Solomon, 1989, 1996; Kunce & Shaver, 1994; Slade & Cohen, 1996; van Ijzendoorn, 1995 - cited in Solan & Mikulincer, 2003). The caregivers' attachment affects the youths' treatment process and may constitute inhibiting or promoting factors. Workers with autonomous secure representation, display more positive expectations from the adolescents under their care. Interpersonal differences in the attachment experience of caregivers affect the quality of treatment relations that they create. Secure caregivers answer therapeutically to people's individual needs, identify the true needs which they satisfy in a way that enables change and progress (Dozier, Cue, & Barnett, 1994; Tyrrell, Dozier, Teague, & Fallot, 1999). The research of the attachment representations of adolescents in a care-providing institution as well as their caregiving workers and their effect on the care relations, showed that the treatments and their impact on the caregiving relationships have long-term effect on the dimensions considered central to attachment. In other words, the availability and the possibility of relying on a smart and strong person as a

secure base. Caregivers with an autonomous secure attachment representation displayed more positive expectations from adolescents under their care. Hence, the adolescents experience a sense of security in times of need and distress and more readily rely on their caregivers (Zegers, Schuengel, van IJzendoorn, & Janssens, 2006).

## **6. Attachment at Work**

Hazan and Shaver (1990) were among the first researchers who linked attachment with the job. The findings of their study indicated that, in comparison to the insecure workers, the secure workers presented higher levels of economic wellbeing, experienced greater enjoyment from their work, and were less concerned about relationships at work. Conversely, the anxious workers feared rejection, their performances at work were less good, and they found it difficult to complete tasks. The avoidant workers used the job to shun social interaction and reported lack of satisfaction with collaborative work with their colleagues. A later review of the literature in the field describes an empirical relationship between secure attachment and the manifestation of leadership, effectiveness, trust, positive attitudes towards work, low tension, good health, positive coping, home-family balance, and improved work performances (Harms, 2011). A negative relationship was found between the secure attachment style and workplace burnout. In contrast, there was a positive correlation between the insecure attachment styles, avoidance or anxious/ambivalent styles and burnout in the workplace (Pines, 2004; West, 2015).

Studies also showed a relation between the attachment style of adults and the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes of pressuring events. In addition, the attachment indicates people's ability to regulate emotions (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). In the research of employees in the health and human services professions, the ability of interpersonal regulation contributes to the social interaction, which also includes caregiving behavior. Insecure behavior may cause excessive involvement or invasiveness during an interpersonal session. Alternately, it may result in the tendency to preserve emotional distance. Adult caregivers with an insecure pattern display less empathy and less

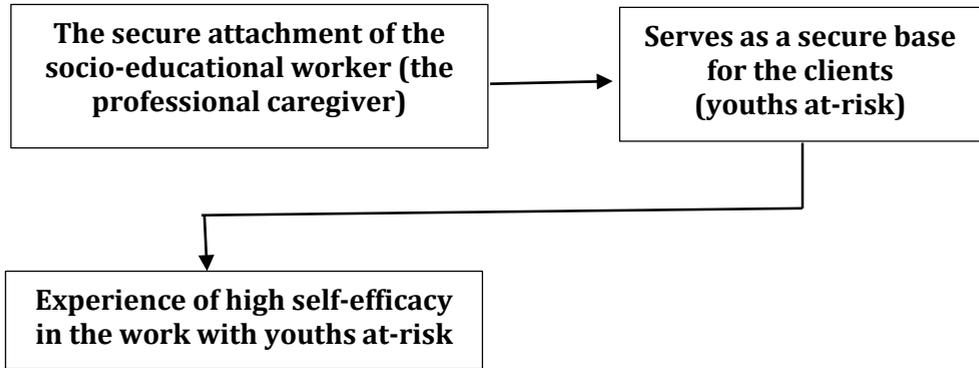
ability to see the perspective of other people. Moreover, they demonstrate high levels of negative emotion regarding those with secure attachment (Cassidy & Shaver, cited in West, 2015). It was further found that people with a high level of avoidance are less capable of being exposed to others in front of them (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). The ability to create secure interaction, proximity, empathy, intimacy, and acceptance is incomparably vital in the socio-educational work with youths at-risk (Soroka, 2008), as is coping with states of stress and lack of certainty stemming from the work with populations at-risk (Himi, 2009). The organization of parents' secure attachment provides the internal resources for responding to infants in an appropriately sensitive manner. Thus, the organization of the secure attachment of professional caregivers enables them to provide the resources required for responding with sensitivity and adjustment to the youths at risk (Dozier et al., 1994).

## 7. Conclusion

This article attempts to shed light on the contribution and importance of the socio-educational workers' attachment style to the work with youths at risk. The work assumption derived from the attachment theory maintains that in states of stress and crisis, the youths seek the caregivers' proximity so that they provide a "safe haven" (Collins & Feeney, 2000). The socio-educational workers who are endowed with a secure attachment style, can serve as a "secure base" for the youths under their care. Their ability to do so, enhances and strengthens their perception of self-efficacy in their work, and therefore intensifies their perception as professional caregivers.

The youths who come to the Youth Advancement Unit need warm, smart, available, accessible, and beneficial attachment figures, in order to grow, develop as well as overcome the difficulties and crises they face. The workers' attachment style has a considerable effect on their ability to be "professional caregivers", namely, to meet the youths' needs, serve as an accessible and secure base, and create suitable and promoting interventions. Secure attachment consolidates the inner sense of self-efficacy (Hazan & Shaver, 2007) that is required for working with youths at-risk.

**Figure 1.** Secure Attachment and Self-Efficacy at Work with Youths At-Risk: Relationship and Effect



This article illustrates the need for an applied research that will explore the relation between self-efficacy and attachment styles in the work with youths at-risk. Understanding the relation between attachment and perception of self-efficacy can facilitate the development of an instrument of assessment and measurement, the promotion of tailored instruction and training sessions, and the growth of leadership from among the workers (Harms, 2011).

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