

The perception of positive relationships with social workers among girls in distress in Israel

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Abstract

Summary Adolescent girls in distress are characterized by their difficulty in social functioning; however, little is known about these girls' perceptions of their relationships with social workers. Interviews were conducted with 16 women aged 19 to 25, who had been previously treated as girls in distress in Israel.

Findings Two major themes were identified: (1) «From hostility to trust» describes the girls' transformation in attitude toward the social workers from hostility to a sense of acceptance and reliability. (2) «Friend or foe? Friend and social worker!» focuses on the perception of the relationships as integrating professionalism with friendship.

Applications The study findings emphasize the importance of developing unique relationships as the basis for intervention to empower girls in distress.

Key words:

girls in distress, clients' perception, social workers

In the literature, girls in distress are portrayed on a continuum of disenchantment with normative education and employment domains, disturbed relations with the family and close environment, alienation from social values, vagrancy, running away from home, drug abuse, and sexual promiscuity (Azaiza, 2006; Konopka, 1966; Lennon-Dearing, Whitted, & Delavega, 2013; Marchant & Smith, 1977; Sharlin & Mor-Barak, 1992). The distressed girls' families are portrayed as multi-problematic, with low socioeconomic status, and high parental divorce and violence rates, including child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, and criminal activity (Azaiza, 2006; Lennon-Dearing et al., 2013; Marchant & Smith, 1977; Sharlin & Mor-Barak, 1992). These girls feel rejected by their families and by normative society, and as a reaction, might behave in ways that exacerbate the stigmatization by the family and society (Good, 1992; Podgurski, Lyons, Kisiel, & Griffin, 2014). The girls' negative feelings toward society and lack of social skills combined with their general difficulty in seeking formal assistance are obstacles in the way of providing them with help until they reach advanced stages of deterioration (Abrams, 2003; DeWinter & Noom, 2003; Freshman & Leinwand, 2001; Sharlin & Mor-Barak, 1992).

The overall discourses of research findings emphasize mostly what Krumer-Nevo, Berkovitz-Romano & Komem (2015) conceptualizes as the discourse of pathology focusing on the psychological weakness of these girls. As such, there is a need to give voice to the perceptions of girls in distress. The aim of the present study was to add a layer to understanding the intervention process, by focusing on how those defined as «girls in distress» perceive the positive relationships provided by the social workers in the Service for Girls and Young Women in Israel.

The unique difficulties involved in treating adolescent girls in distress led to the establishment, in the 1970s, of a unique service in Israel within the framework of the Ministry of Social Affairs, namely, the Service for Girls and Young Women. According to social work regulations, this service is intended for girls aged 12 to 21 years, but in practice, is available up to age 25. The social workers operating within this service are responsible for locating girls at risk via the community: through schools, the police, and other social workers. The preferred intervention is therapy within the community, including individual and group intervention and after-school facilities. However, in cases of extreme distress or in the absence of a family framework, the intervention includes sending the girl to a foster family until an external solution is found, such as a shelter, hostel, or educational residential facility.

Overall, the research on girls in distress has focused mainly on their characteristics and partially on intervention, especially on specific programs (e.g., LeCroy & Mann, 2008). However, only few studies have examined the relationships between girls in distress and helping professionals. Baines and Adler (1996) found that professionals working in adolescent social services perceived working with girls to be more complex, difficult and frustrating than working with boys. Girls were perceived as extremely manipulative and emotional, expressed particularly through destructive anger. In a study of distressed girls' perceptions of intervention relations in Israel, Weil (1984) found relatively low satisfaction with the intervention among the girls, together with their acknowledgement of the need for and importance of intervention based on discussions on personal and broader life issues. The girls tended to prefer social workers who conveyed a sense of friendship and maintained their sense of autonomy. The girls who participated in Weil's study had encountered previous negative intervention experiences, and many of them projected this on to their relationships within the Service for Girls and Young Women. Another study in Israel examined the relationship between authority exercised by social workers over the girls in distress and the success of the intervention (Shechter, 1984). A comparison was made between the girls' socialization and behavioral patterns before and after intervention regarding belonging to a framework, absence from home, sexual behavior, drug abuse, violence, and crime involvement. The findings showed that authoritative intervention was more successful than non-authoritative treatment, when the girl belonged to a deviant subculture. However, when her disturbance was expressed through running away from home, authoritative intervention was not recommended.

Very little knowledge exists about how girls in distress perceive their treatment. Therefore, the present study used interviews to broaden the understanding of how girls in distress experienced their relationships with social workers.

Method

The qualitative research method used in this study was derived from the phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective, which perceives the human world as composed of multiple subjective realities (McLeod, 2001; Schwandt, 2000). The researcher's aim is to describe and interpret the subjective meaning and processes of the phenomenon, as perceived by those experiencing it, without attempting to support or refute hypotheses (Van Manen, 2001).

Participants

Qualitative research is based on small purposive samples consisting of a limited number of informants considered to be «information rich,» as such depth is traded for representativeness (Patton, 2002). In the present study, interviews were conducted with 16 women between the ages of 19 and 25, who had been treated at the Service for Girls and Young Women over the last five years. Participants over 18 years were chosen to enable them to express an adult, retrospective opinion of the professional relationship. Interviewing younger girls may raise ethical questions regarding the use of minors and intervening nature of research with developing underage persons and their professional relationships.

The characteristics of the sample were as follows: nine participants were born in Israel, four in the former Soviet Union, and one was born in Ethiopia and one in Iran. All participants and their families had undergone extended periods of intervention by social workers in the community and eight had experienced removal from the home to external frameworks. All the participants had ongoing contact with a social worker from the Service for Girls and Young Women: one for three years, one for four years, two for five years, six for seven years, four for eight years and two more than twelve years. Thirteen participants had completed high school, one had 11 years of education, and two had 16 years of education, including a bachelor's degree. Ten participants had served in the army, one had performed National Service, and five had been in neither of these frameworks. In Israel a compulsory military draft is in place, for all men and women aged 18. Some ethno-religious groups are exempt from this compulsory draft, including non-Jewish citizens, and religious Jewish women. Yet, a parallel voluntary track is in place for Civil National Service. This track is open to all those who are exempt from the compulsory track. The normal length of Civil National Service is one year but may be expanded to two years length. Commonly such service takes place in social, educational or health services.

At the time of the interviews, all participants were working, except for one soldier and one student. Nine participants lived alone and six lived with their families.

Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Roulston, 2010), which allow the interviewees freedom, space, and flexibility in dialogue on the subjective meanings that they attribute to the phenomenon under study (Josselson, 2013). The interviewees were located via social workers at the Service for Girls and Young Women in different cities in the north of Israel. Even though the present article is based on beneficial intervention experienced by the girls at the Service for Girls and Young Women, it should be noted that most of the girls had experienced previous intervention with other family social workers. The sampling was based on convenience sample with defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and was not random. Previous contact with social services, prior to their involvement with the Social The present study Service for Girls in Distress, was not an inclusion requirement for the current study. In addition, social workers were asked to locate study participants who had an ongoing relationship with the welfare services. All participants agreed voluntarily to participate and signed informed consent forms following a brief explanation of the general aims of the study and the researcher's guarantee to ensure their confidentiality.

The participants first completed a demographic questionnaire, and then underwent an in-depth, semi-structured interview in Hebrew, which lasted approximately two hours. The interviews were later tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide covered several topics focusing on the participants' perceptions of the intervention content and processes: the career relationships with the social workers, the intervention content and processes with social workers at the Service for Girls and Young Women, and their perceptions of the impact that social workers had on their lives.

This process reflects the aim of understanding in-depth life experiences from the participants' perspective by broadening and deepening a coherent understanding of the study participants' subjective meanings (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Lincoln & Guba (1985) asserted that a qualitative study is trustworthy when the researchers succeed in maintaining credibility in the description of varied realities authorized by in-depth interviews. Credibility is also achieved through grounding via precise quotations alongside analyses. Thus, the reader can evaluate whether and in what manner the researcher's conceptual interpretations and understandings reflect the interviewees' subjective perceptions (Maxwell, 2005).

The study was approved by the University Ethics Review Board. All participants agreed voluntarily to participate and signed informed consent forms following an explanation

of the aims of the relevant study and the researcher's obligation to safeguard their confidentiality (Thompson & Chambers, 2012).

The aim of qualitative research is to empower participants and convey that they are the creators of the meaning of their lives, carefully avoiding their objectification. The researcher does not assert for them what the truth is, but instead allows the participants the freedom to tell their stories, attempting to gain a profound understanding of their interpretations (Josselson, 2007). Thus, the researcher conducting the interviews in this study endeavored to empower the participants, and showed respect and empathy for their feelings. All of these measures were necessary because of the participants' personal, familial, and social backgrounds. Finally, in order to protect the identity of the respondents, all names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewee was informed that the interview might raise emotional pains and distress. Furthermore, at the end of the interview, a debriefing was carried out to verify their emotional reaction to the interview and they were informed that if any emotional distress may arise they are welcome to contact the interviewer who would help with referral to relevant support, and can provide emergency processing of the emotional distress. None of the interviewees has showed any distress signs through the interview, and none has requested support later.

Data Analysis

The analysis was performed in three main stages. In the first stage, the author read and reread the interviews to deepen familiarity with them. With each reading, the author gained an additional level of empathetic understanding of the interviewees' difficulties and coping strategies in a hostile world as well as the beneficial relationship with the social workers.

In the second stage, the author identified and coded the parts of the interview that were «units of meaning» that fitted the study aims (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Vagle, 2014). The units of meaning were identified through utterances that were frequently repeated or that had a wide-scale influence on the interviewees' attributed meanings to their relationships with social workers.

In the third stage, the author collected the similar units of meaning to understand the meanings attributed to the social workers by the study participants. The researcher focused, compared, and synthesized the components that shaped the themes which constitute the conceptual outline of the study findings (Roulston, 2010; van Manen, 2001). Two major themes emerged from this stage. One theme conceptualizes the transformation in the attitude of girls in distress toward social workers, from hostility to a sense of acceptance and reliability. The second theme conceptualizes the integration of poles in perceiving the social worker's role of friend and the social worker as a professional.

Findings

Two central themes evolved from the interviews. The first theme, «From hostility to security,» reflects the participants' perceptions of how the relationships developed from hostile alienation to secure relationships based on trust. The second theme: «Friend or foe? Friend and social worker!» reflects the participants' perception of their relationship with the social workers as combining professionalism and friendship.

First theme: From hostility to trust

«From hostility to trust» outlines the creation of a relationship with the social workers, perceived initially by the girls as intrusive and hostile. The participants created a barrier between themselves and the social workers, in an attempt to deter them from continuing the relationship. The participants described how social workers' efforts to continue to create a positive relationship, in spite of the difficulties and «tests,» brought about a change in the girls' trust.

Hostile beginning

The participants described how the start of the relationship evoked their hostile reactions, especially in light of their past experiences:

I wasn't open to talking at all. I wasn't willing to talk about anything, like, they would have forced it out of me. So I would run away. I wouldn't come. I would never turn up. And her pushiness didn't help...she was really pushy and I didn't want to speak to her at all. She would come to me, and I would take one look at her and I knew right then that I didn't want to talk to her! The way she went on at me, you'd think I owed her something. (Interviewee 2)

How could she care about me? She was a stranger...I didn't trust anyone, not her and not anyone else. I didn't trust her... I thought that she would disappear, like all the others. (Interviewee 15)

If someone has ever been hurt, the alarm bells are always ringing. It's always there. Any traumas in life, or serious harm, affect everything. Like sometimes, although you really know that the social worker doesn't want to hurt you...but it's natural to think that they can deceive you and disappoint you again, can hurt you and that definitely affects the issue of everything you went through before, and afterwards, and you're always kind of suspicious... (Interviewee 8)

The sense of threat, power, invasiveness, and aggression were prominent components of the girls' experiences of social workers in adolescence. They interpreted the social workers' intervention efforts as an attempt at a hostile invasion of their privacy, with

suspected harmful intent. The harder the social workers tried to make contact, the more threatened the girls felt and the more intensely they attempted to repel the «intruder» as a way of preserving their independence. In the girls' experience, the social workers, similar to other adults, posed a threat. The threat was nourished by a lack of trust rooted in previous disappointments, abandonment, and harm, which led them to feel alone in the world and thus to be on the defensive. The girls had experience in managing struggles and identifying potential «enemies,» which had created pain, anxiety, and helplessness and made staying in the relationships difficult. Therefore, they relied only on themselves and felt secure through creating a barrier that served as a shield against new harm.

To trust or not to trust: Tests and the turning point

Alongside their defensiveness, the girls were conducting an internal dialogue as to the degree to which they could trust the social workers. This deliberation was apparent in their decision to test the social workers, as described by the following participants:

Let's see how she'll accept me, if she'll accept me just as I am. I came barefoot, with this acid wash dress that I think was even a bit torn. Messy hair, as if to say, accept me as I am, this is me...at first, I had the attitude that I don't need help, that someone should just tell me I'm normal and that I'm like everyone else...I remember behaving real wild, but this didn't put her off. I actually came to tell her, don't mess with me, I'm crazy, I'm insane, just go with the flow. And she really did go with the flow. That's how I knew she was OK, she just went with the flow; and didn't work against me. (Interviewee 5)

She's a fighter, yes, she doesn't give in. She doesn't give up, which is what I liked about her role. That she fought for us. She wants us all to be happiest and best in the world, not on her terms, but according to what we want...of course, you're always testing the person from the side. I was checking her out, how she talked, how she behaved, how much she could do, what her limits... seeing how much we could push our load on to her, and how much she could take. To see if it would be too much and she would crack up and say she's had enough and it's too hard. But she didn't give up. She got angry. She got angry, but after an hour or two, or at most, a day or two, everything would be back to normal... (Interviewee 10)

The fundamental question for the interviewees was whether the social workers' limits were flexible enough to contain their behavior, resistance, and moodiness, or whether these limits would lead to their rejection. Girls who had experienced negative relationships in the past were afraid to encounter similar attitudes among the social workers, and therefore attempted to ensure that this time would be different. The testing method varied from girl to girl. Some used extrovert means of defiance and provocation, and others used avoidance and escape from the relationship. When the social workers were not deterred, shocked, or judgmental, the clear dichotomy of «I versus the world» began to crumble. The girls discovered that the social workers had no intention of harm-

ing them, which led to a reduction of their sense of threat and the need to resist, as well as increasing their availability to see the relationships in a different light. The process of change was described by the following participants:

The most meaningful day for me was when we cried together, both of us. I felt so much pain that day, throughout that whole month. I had bottled it all up inside, and then I just broke down and learned how to keep letting it out... I just came to «H» and let it all explode... I just let it all out for an hour and a half, nearly two hours, and we were both crying, and that gives you the feeling that in the middle of it all, you do have feelings. Afterwards, you can believe that she is actually one of us. Why shouldn't we trust her?...It's hard to build trust with people whom you see just as authority...in the end, you realize that a person won't put up with you for three or four years for nothing, listening to you for three or four years?... she's not in this just because she has authority and it's her obligation, but believe that she really wants to help you, then I think that everyone would turn to her. (Interviewee 7)

Suddenly I realize that I'm saying that she is against me! Against me? But she actually helps me all the time...she supported me, she spoke up for me at the trial. I understood that she wanted the best for me. I agreed to go together, to cooperate. I understood and I wanted it, but I didn't know... (Interviewee 9)

In the first quote, the change was derived from a joint, powerful event, which stirred the participant to relinquish her perception of the social worker as distant and merely fulfilling a role. The social worker succeeded in «proving» her significance, through demonstrating identification, honesty, and the breaking of boundaries. In the second quote, the statement «she wanted the best for me» represents the revolution that occurred in the participants' experience. She described an internal dialogue in which she reached the awareness that changed her previous scheme, which negated the relationship and even prevented her recognition of her own need for it. The change was manifest in her perception of the social worker's actions and intentions as genuine. Elimination of the threat and the transition to a sense of trust and security enabled her to feel as though the social worker was there for her and that there was a chance of turning the relationship into something meaningful.

Second theme: «Friend or foe? Friend and social worker!»

The basic conflict: Does the social worker relationships is genuine

The study participants described a conflict in relation to their perception of the social worker as a threatening authority and power together with the sense of trust and security. This conflict is reconciled through constructing a perception that unites the professional identity with a friendly figure.

...I found out that the relationship with the social worker was completely different. I found that she tries to see things from my point of view, and not from some point of view that she

has learned. She tries to connect with me, to see what I like to do, what I feel comfortable with, and through that, to reach some kind of agreement. Do a little less of this and a little more of that. Our relationship turned into friendship at the stage when I noticed that she was very supportive of me. (Interviewee 6)

The interviewee's previous negative relationships with adults, including with other social workers, were a source of troubles and threat. The interviewee perceived the professional intervention as a patronizing attempt to change her according to a pre-conceived model based on theoretical study. The distressed girl's social worker did not behave according to a routine pattern, and the interviewee sensed that she recognized her uniqueness and attempted to reach her through her point of view.

This is also a friendship

Experiencing the relationship as a friendship signified a new meaning to their connection. The importance of this stands out in the following quotes:

She is not too authoritative, doesn't try to represent the system the whole time. It's as if she's there especially for me. More like a friend....she wasn't representing anything...it may be that, at some point, when they represent the system more, you feel distanced. Not something close. I felt closer to her. She was a social worker, but it didn't feel that way. I felt more comfortable...I think that she was just friendly. I didn't feel too much authority, as if she was coming to tell me what to do. She came to give advice, not to preach. She was more friendly; she told me about herself. (Interviewee 14)

«S» fell in love with me, and I fell in love with her because of the kind of person she was. She agreed to everything, I mean, that I could shout, fly into a rage, or cry. There was no psychologist framework, of: «OK, time's up.» We had two hours, but if I needed more, or if I said: «S,» meet me at the coffee house, because I don't want to come to the agency, «S this» and «S that.» From every aspect, she was just a friend, although she was grown up. A friend who never wrote anything in the social worker's file, because I said: «I don't want anything put in my file.» (Interviewee 2)

In the first quote, the social worker was perceived in dual terms: both as a social worker and as a friend. This enabled the interviewee's retrospective understanding of how she had been able both to remember and to forget that she was a social worker. She was able to contain the social worker, even though she was part of the establishment and exercised authority. The identity transformation in the relationship lay in the word «friendly,» which enabled the interviewee to contain the difficult moments of authority and allowed her to cooperate, to ask for advice, and to listen.

The second quote begins with words that express love, unconditional acceptance, fulfillment of needs, and power within the relationship, which were a basis for creating trust. The interviewee's sense of security in the relationship stemmed from the transitions

made according to need, and from her request to transform the professional relationship into one of friendship, e.g., when the social worker agreed to meet her at the coffee house or agreed not to record information in her file, thus preventing stigmatization. The interviewee perceived the social worker's ability to exchange the professional relationship with friendship as strengthening her professional status, and enabled the girl to give honest expression to difficult experiences and emotions. This duality in how the social worker was perceived, and in the relationship with her, is expressed by the following participant:

We are like friends, but we know that, at some stage, there has to be a distance between us. We shouldn't go too far, so as not to get hurt. There's no favoritism among the girls. I'm not more important than everyone else. I know the limits. Because I know that she is a social worker and she has lots of girls. She actually comes here to help me. She listens to me. And I also want to have her here as a friend. (Interviewee 12)

This interviewee is aware of the complexity and duality in the fact that the social worker has relationships with other girls, and of the element of authority that prevents her from falling into the illusion of friendship. Nevertheless, the experience of a «friendship-like» relationship allows her to contain the «distance» and the need to share the social worker with other girls. Thus, the interviewee constructs an identity of a friend who is also a social worker, as well as of a social worker who is a friend. The significance of the friendship is that it enables girls in different situations to contain duality, as described in the next quote:

Our relationship was very friendly, like true friendship, closeness. I used to talk to her during the week. We would talk on the phone about things that had nothing to do with me or with her. And she would tell me things, also. It was a very special relationship...she really was like a good friend, but she was professional, and that was the important difference that made this relationship so meaningful for me. She was never authoritative; she never forced anything on me. She always encouraged me to do what I wanted to do... during the time that I was there, they used to do urine tests at the agency to check for drug addiction, and I wasn't a drug addict, and I wasn't physically addicted to drugs—more emotionally. And I didn't need all that. But one day, she came and suggested it: «Maybe come and have a urine test?» Like, if you want?! (Interviewee 5)

This relationship with the social worker was described as special, due to its reciprocity and the social worker's openness, which the interviewee perceived as proof of her authenticity and of the strength of their friendship. The experience of this kind of relationship significantly softened the professional authority and opened up an opportunity for the interviewee to act out of a different perception of the relationship. This is clearly apparent in the social worker's request that the interviewee undergo a urine test to screen for the presence of drugs. The understanding that this request was perceived as part of a relationship based neither solely on friendship nor on professionalism, but with a new quality that integrates the two, throws light on the interviewee's acceptance.

The request was not perceived as a lack of trust, did not undermine the security of the friendship aspect of their relationship, and preserved the girl's willingness to carry out the professional instruction.

Discussion

The present study analyzed how girls in distress defined their positive professional relationships with the social workers as a transformation from hostility, fear, and the need for self-defense to trust, a sense of security, and reciprocity. The theoretical concept of relational base as the basis for social work intervention (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017; Furlong, 2013) represents this quality of respecting humanity, mutuality and trust as the basis for the strength of relationships.

The concept of trust that arose in the interviews represents three principal concepts: vulnerability, reciprocity and positive or negative expectations (Tzafrir & Dolan, 2004; Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006). The beginning of the dyadic relationship represents high risk with respect to the situational context and past history. This stage is conceptually important for trust development and social workers must break through an «invisible wall» to gain the girls' trust. According to Dietz and Den-Hartoog (2006), trust is a dynamic relationship. The first stage for building a trusting relationship will be a belief that one actor (the girl) perceives the other actor (the social worker) as capable, concerned, and reliable. The second stage will focus on the intention to trust the other actor and the next stage will be an act of trust. In line with the findings, girls in distress learn to overcome their fear and become willing to take risks (Holmes, 1991; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). The entire process constructs a secure base from which the interviewees can empower girls in distress in repairing their self-esteem and develops a sense of self-efficacy (Schofield & Brown, 1999).

The dynamic relationships in these findings are reflected in the definition of trust as «a willingness to increase one's resource investment in another party, based on positive expectation, resulting from past positive mutual interactions» (Tzafrir & Dolan, 2004, 116). The girls undergo a transformation from a sense of vulnerability to experiencing potentially positive outcomes. This emphasizes the social worker's need to cope with a history of incontestably negative relationships. Despite this lack of trust and hostility, a social worker who continues to reach out starts to build up positive expectations in the girl and as such increases the level of trust. In doing so, these social workers reinforce the girls' faith that they are uniquely motivated to their needs. Finally, this relationship becomes a unique arrangement of integration, enabling the existence of two poles. On one hand, the social worker continues to act professionally while the girl's conception of her is based on a negative history. On the other hand, she defines the social worker as a friend, with all its positive connotations, reducing the threat that social workers will take unfair advantage.

The pressures and mental states of adolescent girls reflect experiences that arise from gender, micro and macro socialization, that motivate girls to aspire to unrealistic feminine ideals and exert pressure to look and behave in a way that is not empowering and unauthentic, towards their sense of self (Choate, 2014; Essau, Lewinsohn, Seeley, Sasagawa, 2010). Studies indicate that when negative life events are the same, their impact in the personal and social spheres is different and unique to girls, and sometimes even stronger and more negative for girls than boys (Belknap, 2014). One aspect is that girls, as opposed to boys, tend to base their self-worth on the success of relationships and social affirmations. Therefore, interpersonal pressures are associated with a higher level of depression for girls, but not for boys. In this way, it may be linked to the findings of Baines & Alder (1996) that girls are more complex than boys. In this way, for adolescent girls, the relationship with a female social worker is highly important, and can be seen as a model for supportive relationships, persistence and perseverance, especially when facing difficulties and personal and social pressures. Such relationship affirms the ability to believe in authentic relations within a world of gender pressures.

The present study findings are consistent with research indicating that clients in distress, including youth, respect social workers who convey warmth, informality, a sense of equality, interest, and personal concern, and who do not appear to be merely fulfilling a role (De Winter & Noom, 2003; Marchant & Smith, 1977; McLeod, 2010). The interviewees perceived the social workers as working according to a principle of perseverance, even in the face of disbelief and testing. The girls in distress were in need of such a relationship because of a lifetime of traumatic experiences (Podgurski et al., 2014). Therefore, previous behaviors toward social workers, which were typically interpreted as socially disruptive and troubled, can also be perceived as the girls' resistance in their efforts to survive and to create subjective relationships and places where they can feel secure (Abrams, 2002; Munford & Sanders, 2008). Therefore, when these girls felt that the social workers understood the situations and decisions confronting them, they understood that the other means of survival is trust. As Munford and Sanders (2015) found, making sense of the world in relation to how others behaved toward them is a key element in developing youths' sense of agency.

In general, youngsters prefer to view the good social worker as a friend and an equal, thus challenging their professional role (McLeod, 2010). In the present study, the interviewees perceived the need to integrate the friend and the professional as a fact of life. As McMullin (2018) point professional and personal boundaries are delicate balance and that social workers in many situations need to advance the personal boundaries in working with young people. As found by Weil (1984), girls in distress' preference is a social worker who conveys the sense of friendship is very important. In the present study, the girls emphasized the reciprocity within the friendship and the professional relationship. This apparently set them free from their restrictive «needy status,» taking them beyond the power relations, and thus allowing them to reduce their sense of weakness, dependence,

and shame. In such positive relational base the social workers act on equal level facilitate and motivate clients to transform their beliefs and to act (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017). The perception uniting friendship and professionalism can be explained also in terms of the gender-based self-in-relation theory (e.g., Jordan, 1997), which emphasizes women's self-development in their relationships with significant others. The basic quality of the relationships is recognition and affirming experiences (Turney, 2012). In this study, this concept of friendship seems to reflect the girls' self-in-relation, enhancing women's self-worth, improving their sense of security and control, thus reducing the threat of power relations in authoritative relationships, as experienced by these girls (Johnson, Roberts, & Worell, 2002; Milner, 2001).

The present study result The present article contributes to understanding s are in line with extant body of research indicating that levels of therapeutic alliance, empathy, positive regard, level of congruence, and self-disclosure, all contribute to positive helping results (e.g. Cooper, 2008). It is suggested that the therapeutic alliance may be more important in relationships with young clients (Hanley, Sefi, Cutts & Pattison, 2013). Overall & Paulson (2002) found that adolescents preferred therapists who are authentic, open and sincerely caring, flexible, and open-minded. Relationships focused approach to interventions emphasizes that the working alliance can construct the social worker's position as a 'significant other' that can facilitate a corrective emotional guide, resulting in challenging distortions about self and others (Banks, 2006). Similarly, the findings of the present study reflect previous practice wisdom that trauma informed social work should include basic principles of relationships, such as safety, trust, choice, partnership, collaboration, and empowerment (Levenson, 2017). Such requirements may hinder clients' experiences of professional relationships as oppressive and being marginalized. This is important since distress shapes these girls the view of others and the world, resulting in various negative behaviors that harm their social functioning. Moreover, in the context of negative experiences with other helping professionals, including the fact that in many cases adolescents are referred or subjected to professional intervention by powerful authorities, it is important to take into account the need to loosen boundaries, and while adhering to professional roles and responsibilities (Harper, 2006).

The experience of having a voice and of this voice being heard is an important element in creating a sense of agency (Munford & Sanders, 2015). Using a feminist approach, Brown and Gilligan (1992) stressed the loss of voice that typifies adolescent girls. In light of this, the girls' behavior can be viewed on a deeper level, as an expression of their resistance to this loss of voice, even if it works against them. The relationship with social workers as other women helps the girls reclaim their voice, and achieve self-expression with much greater control over their lives.

The girls also appeared to experience what Saleebey (2006) termed «suspension of disbelief» as a positive feature of the relationship, where the social workers suspended their lack of belief in their clients' strengths (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2015). The Thus, positive

relationships increase their belief in the ability to control their lives. The belief in choice in interpersonal relationships builds hope. The findings indicate that the positive relationships intervention helped the girls to preserve their perception of self-worth as containing hope. These meanings provide hope when coping with the difficulties and obstacles of life (Lopez, Floyd, Ulven, & Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1994). This hope in human relational is critical in transforming girls in distress' sense of social exclusion into a feeling social inclusion.

The present article contributes to understanding the dynamics between distressed girls and social workers, from the girls' perspective. These girls emphasize two fundamental characteristics of the relationship; one is the building of trust from a starting point of hostility and suspicion, and the other is the social worker's ability to create a sense of balance between a professional role and friendship within the relationships. Although it is impossible to give absolute guidelines to issues of boundaries between workers and girls in distress, the findings of the current study, similar to previous findings in this field, indicate the need to pave new paths in this context. To begin with, the workers may consider being more open in terms of the ongoing debilitations, and discuss and dialog with the girl the ways in which their communication and relationship should be carried out in a way that would preserve professionalism, while allowing enough leeway in order to develop trust and acceptance on both sides. Such dialog should leave enough room for the girl to express her wants, and the worker should be authentic in her/his role and difficulties and dilemmas that may arise from overstepping boundaries. Such direction emphasized the intersubjective nature of the relationships, a needed awareness and focus in contexts that often involve some kind of social and legal coercion inherent in the roles and relationships.

In light of this, social workers with girls need to examine, even if not exclusively, their professional activities and techniques within these axes. As far as research on the dynamics of girls in distress is relatively small, the present study focused on respondents who experienced a positive relationship and thus the results may be biased in this way. With all the importance of learning from success, it is also pertinent to investigate the perspective of such girls in situations of conflict, disappointment, anger. Understanding negative dynamics between workers and girls can add an important dimension to understanding the relationship as a whole.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The study focused on and explored the dynamic dyadic relationship. A broader perspective for future research would be examining the dyadic relationship in the context of the social worker representing a social institution. Another limitation of the study was the small sample size, preventing generalization of the conclusions to all girls in distress. The social workers in the Service for Girls and Young

Women made initial contact with the participants, which might have influenced the findings. Further research should develop a body of knowledge about how girls in distress in general perceive intervention processes.

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