

# MUTUAL ATTACHMENT BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AND CLIENTS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

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## Abstract

The article presents the results of qualitative research carried out in Lithuania. The research focused on the development of mutual attachment between social work students and clients during the professional practice by revealing subjective student experiences. Study participants comprised 53 final-year social work students from one university of Applied Sciences. The use of unstructured reflection as a data collection method enabled students to remember, think over and put their professional practice experiences in writing. Based on the grounded theory data analysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), open, axial and selective coding was applied. Data analysis revealed the conditions necessary for successful mutual relationships between students and clients to emerge, the context of formation of their mutual attachment, the interactions affecting this phenomenon, the conditions preventing its formation as well as the likely consequences of attachment-based relationships between students and clients. The research results revealed that once students successfully adapt to the organization and establish close confidence-based relations with their clients during the social work practice, the mutual attachment between the student and the client is being formed. The attachment is influenced not only by relations between the student and client, but also between the student and the organization's staff as well as organizational culture. The research results are useful for social work practice. They provide an opportunity to understand the new students' experiences of relationships formed with different social actors in the practice and their impact on students' professional and personal change.

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**Keywords:** Attachment, client, learning, social work, student

## **Introduction**

Social work students construct a new experience of interpersonal relations with different social actors in their professional practice. They can also enter into and develop an attachment-based relationship with their clients. The mutual attachment between social work students and clients is perceived as an emotionally significant durable dyadic relationship that gradually develops during the professional practice.

Relationships with different social actors in a practice have considerable attention in the analysis of social work practice (Fortune, McCarthy & Abramson, 2001; Barlow & Hall, 2007; Eidukeviciute & Kiznyte, 2009; Matikoviene, 2009; Litvack, Mishna & Bogo, 2010).

Social work students in professional practice experience various emotions deriving from their relationship with clients (Barlow & Hall, 2007; Litvack et al., 2010); it is important to identify and maintain the boundaries of communication with them (Davidson, 2005), and gradually students get attached to their clients (Urdang, 2010). However, it has not been revealed how mutual attachment between students and clients evolves in the professional practice; what conditions are required for a successful student-client relationship to emerge; in what context does it develop; what interactions affect such type of attachment; what consequences are likely to follow an attachment-based student-client relationship.

The aim is to develop a grounded theory on the mutual attachment of social work students and clients by revealing student experiences in their professional practice.

## **Framework of “Being attached to...”**

Attachment means a bond connecting one person to another across time and space which involves a wish to interact on a regular basis, help, and meet the need for security, and is tightly linked to the feeling of grief upon separation (Bowlby, 1958; Ainsworth, 1974).

The very first relationship between people and the caregivers significant to them formed secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-ambivalent or insecure-disorganized styles of attachment and patterns of behaviour (Ainsworth, 1969, 1974).

When the social work student and the supervisor interact in the professional practice, a new experience of attachment is formed and a specific style of attachment oriented to this relationship is developed. General and specific attachment styles focused on certain relationships are linked but they can nevertheless differ depending on circumstances (Bennett, Mohr, BrintzenhofeSzoc, Saks, 2008). Students can be those who model a new positive attachment experience for their clients.

Adult attachment is defined on the basis of two factors – anxiety and avoidance of relationships – and is divided into 4 types: secure, anxious-ambivalent-preoccupied, avoidant-dismissing and disoriented-disorganized-fearful attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005 a, b; Pielage, 2006). According to attachment theory, the key goal of a therapeutic relationship is to reappraise inadequate outdated working models of attachment in the relationship with the attachment figure (Bowlby, 1988). In our study the social work student is seen as a new reliable person with whom the client can rework his/her internal working attachment models.

The internal working models of attachment are created and constructed on the basis of experience with the attachment figure and the quality of relationship with that person (Bowlby, 1988). Therefore, the duration of time is not important for attachment between the social work student and the client to emerge during the practice. What is important is the quality of relationship, physical proximity, emotional warmth, tenderness and adequate reactions to the signals sent.

## **Research methodology**

### **Research design**

A qualitative research design (Creswell, 2003) was selected as a way to understand how mutual attachment between social work students and clients is developed during the practice by revealing subjective student experiences.

### **Sample**

A targeted sample in a relevant research context was applied. Fifty-three full-time third-year and part-time fourth-year social-work students of a one Lithuanian University of Applied Sciences upon their return from a long-term (3-month) professional practice participated in the study.

### **Methods**

Data collection method – *unstructured written reflection* – enabled students to remember, think over their professional practice experiences and put them in writing. Reflections were put in writing upon students' return from their long-term professional practice during which they worked with specific cases of social work. A *grounded theory* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was applied for data analysis through the use of open, axial and selective coding. The categories that derive from the collected data were constructed by means of open coding. Axial coding was used to identify the relationships between the categories formed in the stage of open coding by identifying the necessary conditions, context, strategies, interactions, intervening factors, and consequences. In the course of selective coding the core category was

identified; the categories formed in the course of axial coding were integrated and the relationships with it were established.

**Ethics**

The research adhered to the following principles of research ethics (Orb et al., 2001): autonomy (research participants could decide freely on their participation in the research and had a right to express their experiences through written reflections freely); beneficence (research participants were presented the research aim and purpose; the data provided inflicted no harm on research participants and their lives); confidentiality (research participants were associated with certain codes; no information disclosing their identity was provided); justice (the research is based on justice; research participants had a right to ask about the research and to receive comprehensive information; it seeks no personal benefit; the information provided by research participants was analysed in full).

**Findings**

The core category – mutual attachment between the social work student and the client – was singled out in the analysis of experiences of social work students during their professional practice. The conditions necessary for this phenomenon to emerge, the strategies explaining how attachment takes place and the context where it evolves were revealed; the interactions were highlighted; the conditions preventing the emergence and development of mutual attachment as well as the possible consequences were identified (Figure 1).

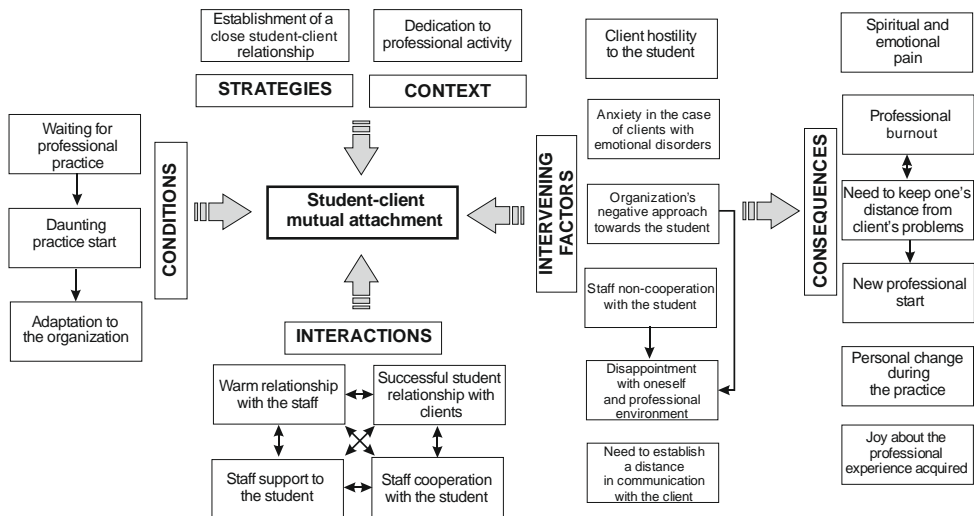


Figure 1. Mutual attachment between the social work student and the client during the professional practice

## Conditions

Social work students find the beginning of the practice rather daunting. They feel uncomfortable, lost, confused, are lacking self-confidence and self-assurance. Students are worried because they do not know the staff and clients in the organization. They are not sure how to communicate with them:

*“<...> the first week when you are an absolutely new person, when you don't have a clue what and how takes place in the organization, you don't know anyone and don't even know how to communicate and behave with such people was the hardest <...>” (R29).*

Students gradually get to know the staff, activities and clients of the organization. Little by little, they adjust to its rules, get acquainted with its order, are accepted by the staff and clients and gain an understanding of how the institution's activities are organised. In this way, students gradually adapt to the organization. This adaptation can be described by a feeling when one becomes a part of the organization: *“<...> even though I didn't feel very self-assured when going to the practice but thanks to the staff and clients, it felt like I had been working there for a long time <...>” (R7).*

Once students adapt to the organization, get to know their clients and gain their confidence, a close and friendly relationship with them is gradually established.

## Strategies

As the practice proceeds, students gradually establish a close relationship with their clients. They seek to create warm and friendly relations with their clients, thus becoming an “insider”:

*“<...> I could successfully come into contact with them from almost the beginning. Some were very well-disposed and would approach me by themselves; yet others were not willing to establish a close relationship straightaway. It is understandable. After all, I was a new person in their environment. But I may say that with time my relationship with nearly all of them was getting better and deeper. In this way I was gradually becoming an insider among them <...>” (R42).*

Tenderness is seen as an indication that a friendly relationship with clients is established: *“<...> clients would take my hand more often and wanted to touch me <...>” (R7).* When clients show attention and are willing to communicate, students try not to push them away and not to hurt them: *“<...> I wanted to be good to them, to establish a relationship quickly, to be positive towards them; thus, I would simply let them close to me <...>”*

(R42). Once a close confidence-based student-client relationship is established, their mutual attachment is gradually developed.

### **Interactions**

As the practice progresses, students' relationships with clients gradually get deeper. Clients start opening themselves to a higher degree, share and tell about themselves and their problems by creating opportunities for students to know and understand them better:

*“<...> as communication proceeded and I got to know them better, I developed the understanding about the internal worlds and internal experiences of such people as well as the causes why and how they got there, their life-stories, the stories of their biological families and the relationships with the people around them <...>” (R42).*

Mutual sharing of personal life-stories between students and clients helps to establish and maintain warm and friendly relations with clients: *“<...> they used to tell me about their family, friends, free-time; I used to tell about mine a little as well <...>” (R7).* Students' sincere communication and understanding encourage clients to open up, while their empathy and ability to listen enable clients to understand that students can be trusted. Keeping one's word to the client, and respect and attention to clients' stories are important for confidence creation and maintenance.

At the same time, staff emotional support and cooperation with students helps them take up their professional activity and successfully create warm relations with clients.

### **Context**

Mutual attachment between the student and the client is developed in the context of a student's dedication to professional activity. As soon as students adapt to the organization, they gradually get involved in their activity: *“<...> in less than a month I was completely indulged and devoted to all activities of the organization <...>” (R10).* Students try to perform their duties properly:

*“<...> when the staff and nearly all children in the foster home accepted me to their beautiful circle as a full-fledged employee, my ideas, creativity, activity, diligence and initiative-taking gradually started to unfold <...>” (R10).*

Students feel responsibility for what they do because *“<...> after all, this is the work done by social workers themselves <...>” (R1).* They try to make every possible effort in their professional activity in order to achieve that the tasks they accomplish and the assistance they provide throughout their practice actually help their clients.

## **Intervening factors**

Relationships between students and clients are not always close and warm. Whereas at the beginning of the practice clients do not know students and do not trust them, their communication is often cautious. Clients are not prone to share their life experiences and problems. Students also feel unease before meeting clients suffering from emotional disorders for the first time. They do not know what to expect.

By establishing a close relationship with clients in the practice students expect to establish a distance in communication by keeping a balance between the friendly and the professional aspects:

*“<...> how much you can get yourself involved and what to speak about with a person as a specialist of your sphere and where is that boundary where professional communication ends and casual daily communication begins <...>” (R29).*

During the practice students might face hostility from organization employees who disregard and ignore students by always reminding them their trainee status: *“<...> I was only another trainee who knew nothing and intruded into their habitual space <...>” (R22)*. The staff could be uncooperative in respect of students. The employees may not share information about clients, not involve students into case discussions, various meetings and decision-making regarding the clients. When the staff refuse to cooperate with students, the latter feel “left all alone”. Hostile relations with the employees prevent students from maintaining a close relationship with the clients.

## **Consequences**

Students might be unable to leave their work at the location of their practice and not to think about their clients at home: *“<...> I often want to do more than it is possible; I often empathize with the problems of my clients to such a degree that I carry a bunch of problems home with me <...>” (R43)*. Therefore students can suffer professional burnout: they are confused about their way of thinking and values; they suffer low self-esteem; feel a continuous tension and stress and are willing “to quit everything”. Students start reacting to clients and their entire professional environment with apathy. They start feeling emotional exhaustion and can gradually get disappointed with *“<...> the whole world <...>” (R42)*.

Where students notice the signs of professional burnout and wish to avoid it, they should give more time to themselves. Students have to realise that they are not capable of solving all the troubles of their clients and face their professional limits: *“<...> I pulled myself together and accepted the fact that I was not omnipotent – I could not help everyone <...>” (R6)*. This

is a new professional beginning which requires considerable effort on the part of the student.

Once the practice is over, students suffer sadness or even internal emptiness because they have to bid farewell to the clients they got attached to: “<...> *when everyone came for a hug, a farewell, I couldn't keep my tears from falling <...>*” (R9).

Despite the negative experience of relations with different social actors in the practice students perceive their practice as the time for giving sense to oneself during which they developed themselves “<...> *as a personality and a future social worker <...>*” (R32). They did not only acquire theoretical knowledge, developed certain practical skills but learnt lessons in humanity – “<...> *trust, forgiveness and a totally new approach towards life – easier but at the same time tremendously deep <...>*” (R24). The practice helped them “<...> *discover a new self <...>*” (R12), start “<...> *seeing life through the eyes of a grown-up person rather than a student <...>*” (R12). Students had a chance to re-think their values and to look back at “<...> *the essence of social work – assistance to those who need it <...>*” (R24). The practice gave them an opportunity “<...> *to understand their wishes and goals <...>*” (R50), “<...> *to see strong and weak qualities which I didn't even notice to have until now <...>*” (R21). The whole experience permitted students to decide on their profession in the future.

## Discussion

As students establish a close relationship with their clients during the practice of social work, a new attachment experience is being developed. Bennett & Saks (2006), Bennett et al. (2008) proposed that a specific type of attachment between the student and the practice supervisor is formed in the practice of social work. Our study revealed that attachment also develops between the student and the client. It is a new type of attachment targeted at the mutual relationship between the student and the client, emotionally significant to both students and clients. By communicating with students and seeing that they can be trusted, clients get attached to students as a new secure base for establishing a relationship. Students, who are driven by a desire to help and protect their clients, also get attached to them.

Empathy in social work is considered the basis of care-giving (Barlow & Hall, 2007). Our study revealed that students' empathy towards clients is important for the mutual attachment between students and clients to develop. However, the findings revealed that students empathize with the problems of their clients, “carry” them home and experience emotional and spiritual pain for their clients.

Facing sorrowful client life-stories during the practice, students experience such feelings as helplessness, anxiety, sadness and anger (Barlow



& Hall, 2007). Our study confirms the aforesaid and proposes that the feelings of sorrow, pain and helplessness for clients' negative experiences are faced to a much higher degree upon developing a bond of attachment to clients.

In the practice, social work students undergo varying experiences of their relationships with clients, practice supervisors and other organization employees (Barlow & Hall, 2007; Litvack et al., 2010; Baum, 2011). The findings revealed that different relations with an institution's employees affect student-client relationships and the development of mutual attachment.

Friendly relations between students and organization employees help students to establish a successful relationship with the clients. Practice supervisors are seen by students as significant persons. Once close relations based on cooperation and emotional support are established with them, the relations with clients are successfully developed as well. Then students may establish a secure environment for clients (Bennett & Saks, 2006; Bennett et al., 2008) by simultaneously modeling the relationships of secure attachment with them.

Hostile relationships with an organization's employees make students disappointed with the profession of social work (Litvack et al., 2010). Our study reveals that students' unsuccessful relations with an organization's employees degrade communication with clients and prevent the development of mutual attachment.

Due to the changes in the environment of interpersonal relations and different relationship experiences, self-perception and the perception of other people and relationships with them may also change (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005 a, b; Pielage, 2006). The results of our study revealed that as social work students live through new experiences of relationship with clients and employees during the practice, their personal change takes place. It is characterised by better understanding of oneself, re-thinking of values, internal strengthening and professional self-knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

The mutual attachment between the social work student and the client is formed during the professional practice upon establishment of close, confidence-based relationships with each other. This attachment is also influenced by relations between the student and organization's staff as well as organizational culture. The mutual student-client attachment is tightly linked to the experiences of loss, emptiness and sadness once emotionally significant relationships are discontinued upon completion of the practice.

Despite the negative experience of relations with different social actors in the practice and the emotional trials after getting attached to clients, professional practice is recognized as a useful experience for social work

students. As a new attachment experience between the student and the client evolves in the practice, the student's professional growth and personal change take place. The practice enables students to take a look at themselves and their professional environment and to resolve their professional choices.

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