

The heart of the helping relationship in social work

Social work is often viewed as transactional—as a service that facilitates access to housing, food, employment or other vital services for people in need. However, the relationship between a social worker and a client is often more complex and meaningful than we might imagine.

According to Hagit Sinai-Glazer, understanding the subtle nuances of the social worker–client relationship is critical to promoting optimal policies and practices in the profession. In particular, the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev researcher is interested in the nature of such relationships involving a common type of client—mothers—in the context of public social services in Israel. Her findings are detailed in “The Essentials of the Helping Relationship between Social Workers and Clients” (*Social Work*, August 2020), a study stemming from her doctoral research at McGill University on the social organization of the helping relationship in social work.

Sinai-Glazer interviewed 14 social workers and 20 of their clients, all based in southern Israel, to identify which aspects of this professional relationship matter most to both parties (see sidebar for full list). One of the most surprising insights to emerge from these conversations is the priority both sides placed on love. Many clients spoke at length about the love they feel for their social worker, and how they view their social worker as a family member, even as a mother figure. Some social workers spoke of taking on motherly roles in their relationships with their clients.



Hagit Sinai-Glazer identified these essential elements of the social worker–client relationship:

- love and support
- trust and feeling safe
- listening and feeling understood
- making an effort to help
- humanness, compassion and sensitivity
- availability, continuity, being there when needed
- chemistry

“The concept of love was striking,” says Sinai-Glazer, an Azrieli International Postdoctoral Fellow. “We are often afraid to use the word ‘love’ in reference to professional relationships, because it can be interpreted as romantic love. But the kind of love participants spoke of refers to friendship and intimacy.”

Another surprise: clients generally cared much more about the social worker being on their side than about receiving services or supports. “The client needed to feel that the social worker was there for her,” Sinai-Glazer says. Another revelation was that social workers and clients identified the same essential elements of the helping relationship, suggesting a strong shared understanding of a constructive social worker–client relationship.

“This study offers a more holistic and nuanced way to understand the helping relationship in social work,” Sinai-Glazer says. “What kinds of policies can we put into place in order to nurture relationships that are built on love, support, trust, listening, compassion and more?” ●