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Inter-Services Communication in Child Welfare: The Interplay of Age, Work-group Identification, Trust and Self-efficacy

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Abstract

The present study involves 157 social workers employed in two public child welfare agencies of North-East Italy. Recent approaches (Pedrazza, Berlanda, 2017; Pedrazza, Sartori, Berlanda, 2017) show that social work in child welfare agencies requires communication skills and social competence, such as work-group identification and trust. These studies show that perceived self-efficacy represents an important element of inter-service communication. The aim of our study is to attempt to identify the role of age, work-group identification and trust in predicting social workers' self-efficacy in emotion regulation, procedural self-efficacy, self-efficacy in seeking support, and self-efficacy in professional communication. Assuming the causal relationship between variables, we propose multiple linear regression analysis in order to identify antecedents of self-efficacy.

Keywords: professional communication, work-group identification, self-efficacy.

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that organization studies represent a fertile ground on which to develop a dialogue between sociology and psychology. And it is right there indeed that we can find the most suitable concept of 'culture' for stimulating opportunities for exchange. Personalities in the field

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of organizational research such as Joanne Martin (1995, 2002) and John Van Maanen (1995) alternate to psychologists of the calibre of Edgard Shein (1985, 1999, 2002) and Karl Wieck (1969), ending up with composing a disciplinary hybridisation. The following paper moves right towards this tradition (Abramson, Mizrahi, 1996). Topics belonging to the area of psychology such as self-efficacy will be related to the sociological constructs of professional identity and services integration; and the cultural perspective is the common ground providing a framework for making sense of it.

1.1 Inter-services communication

The child welfare agency can be conceived of as a *dispersed team* (Sole, Edmondson, 2002; Pedrazza, Berlanda, 2017). This type of team has a common goal (autonomy and wellbeing of foster children), but often its members work in different services and with different tasks. This type of team is frequently characterized by lack of structure and lack of a common and shared language: in fact, professionals' different educational background often hinders knowledge-sharing practices and communication in cross-functional (Strauss, Olivera, 2000) and *dispersed teams*.

Although effective intra and inter-professional communication are necessary, there is a lack of studies on communication's flows in social work. However, recent studies demonstrate that formal protocols shared by all professionals and practitioners are clearly not able to reduce information redundancy in the inter-professional information flow (Pedrazza, Berlanda, 2017).

The most advanced models in organizational design underpin how the recombination of pieces of knowledge previously disconnected and widespread among the work teams is a key issue for effectiveness and efficiency (Sole, Edmondson, 2002). At the same time, more and more social work interventions require integrated actions by a mixed pool of professionals belonging to different services, in the condition of a temporary interdependence. Such configuration, shaping the team work, allows indeed to manage highly complex tasks, such as multi-professional collaborations (Pedrazza, Berlanda, 2016). Such dispersed teams can be highly effective, although combining knowledge among all the actors involved can be hard to achieve.

The impact of different organizational features of the agencies on outcomes provides proof that structural characteristics are not central in influencing outcomes: by contrast, literature (Pedrazza, Berlanda, 2016) highlight the crucial importance of intra and inter-professional communication both formal and informal. More over literature underline that

the absence of a shared common language can hinder a proper and user-centered decision-making process.

Decision making in child welfare is re-conceptualized as a collaborative practice, because teams have the potential to make better decisions. Nouwen, Decuyper, and Put (2012) propose a decision-making model for social work, and underline several team characteristics (i.e., collective information processing, shared mental models) and workers' variables of individual difference (i.e., committed professionals, trust, alignment), which should support the whole process. This study indicates that the quality of the decision-making process relates to team learning processes like team reflexivity and the construction of shared mental models.

Data are drawn from documents and official reports or certificates, and can also be represented by the smallest meaningful units of information about users. Data can be isolated or even locked and only accessible to the professional who gathered them, information is crucial in inter-services communication because it entails the interpretation of multiple data and the translation of their meaning from a strict professional jargon into a shared common language, which in turn should support the necessary multidisciplinary action (Peckham, Exworthy, 2003). Several studies underline the substantial and frequent lack of a common and shared language among all professionals, engaged in each and every single case (Brown, White, 2006; Horwath, Morrison, 2007; Pedrazza, Berlanda, 2017; Pedrazza, Sartori, Berlanda, 2017; Roaf, 2002). If professionals are able to share information in order to develop a common language they can easily integrate information and build what scholars call 'service knowledge' (Leung, 2007, 2009). According to Lee and Austin (2012) the building of a knowledge sharing team is based on two main activities: the type of information professional managed, and the integration of what others know into the organization. In fact, 'service knowledge' is essential to achieve the integration of complementary types of information on users derived from different services: social, health, educational and foster-services, and relates to the content-part of the organizational culture (Widmark et al., 2011) which should support beginners in developing expertise and in work-group identification processes. Furthermore, organizational culture should support knowledge sharing by the nature of knowledge and the opportunity that organization gives to share (Ipe, 2003).

Leung (2009) deals with the opposition between knowledge-as-object (know what) vs. knowledge-as-process (know how) as different epistemological perspectives anchoring knowledge management in social work. He pinpoints the knowledge-in-midway that is the space in between – where the process of co-construction of knowledge combines substantive data

and subjective practice experiences – as the core functioning where ‘social workers facing different practice scenarios have to reconstitute their knowing in the here-and-now context during the sharing and re-use of this knowledge’ (Leung, 2009: 695).

Conceptualised as such, knowledge-in-midway gives space to transform the emotional life in social work from discomfoting lack of control of the professional action into structural feature of the process of co-construction of knowledge. In these terms competences and skills need to be embedded into practices, that means providing procedures with meaning emerging within specific relationships (involving both colleagues and clients). Emotional work is crucial to sustain awareness of personal subjectivity and bias, as well as the process of co-construction of knowledge at large. The professional’s self, in all its connotations (rational, emotional, motivational etc.) is an essential source of knowledge due to the process-based nature of social work (Ruch, 2002) that requires to ‘recognize that perceptions are filtered through their own emotions and processes of thinking, knowing, and feeling, and through the way that they themselves integrate and regulate their own action and behaviour’ (Leung, 2007: 636).

Research also shows that age is predictive of the capacity to choose ‘better’ emotional labour strategies. In that case subjects are able to harmonize personal motivations and aims with those demanded by the organizations (Sliter, Chen, Wuthrow, 2013: 476). Data collected among customer service workers (Dahling, Perez, 2010; Sliter, Chen, Wuthrow, 2013) show a positive correlation between age and the capacity to reduce negative emotions in favour of positive ones. More specifically, authors introduce Hochschild’s concept of emotional labour (1983), a model for emotion management according to which workers regulate their affects and emotions to fulfil the organizational rules and vision. Emotional labour occurs by surface or deep acting: the first concerns the managing of the impression, while the second is an action directly involving the subjective experience of the felt emotion (Hochschild, 1979).

The capacity to tune inner feelings and personal goals to the work context, experiencing positive emotions, is not given by age *per se*; rather aging brings about a present-oriented disposition which provides motivation to maximize experience of positive emotions and life satisfaction (Carstensen, 2006; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, Charles, 1999; Lockenhoff, Carstensen, 2004) making effective emotion regulation strategies more available than for younger adults.

Managing emotion regulation is however a non-linear process. Subjects can experience a sort of emotive dissonance (Hochschild, 1979) in the development of emotional labour, with the consequence of alienating service

workers from their own feelings (Garot, 2004). Rozin and Royzman (2001) define as 'negativity bias' the tendency to develop richer vocabulary of negative emotions (instead of positive) to describe events, objects, and personal characteristics, a trend confirmed also among social workers in foster care. Also, the practice to dichotomize the positive and the negative emotions can be problematic as far as layers of positive and negative workplace characteristics are embedded within one another (Schwartz, 2011).

1.2 Work-group identification

Social identification processes (Tajfel, Turner, 1986) support and sustain professionals' activities and organizational outcomes. Social workers who share service goals, norms and values, and are proud to be part of the child welfare agency, are more motivated to work hard (Dutton, Dukerich, Harquail, 1994), to persevere and to achieve results (Walumbwa, Avolio, Zhu, 2008; Walumbwa, Hartnell, 2011; Weiseke et al., 2008). Scientific literature distinguishes between identification at the organizational level (OID), (Hekman, Bigley et al., 2009; Hekman, Steensma et al., 2009; Olkkonen, Lipponen, 2006; Vough, 2012) and identification at the work-group level (WID), (Van Knippenberg, Van Schie, 2000; Cicero, Pierro, 2007). Workers who score high in work-group identification perform better and are more involved in their job than those who score high in organizational identification. Literature shows that workers who are strongly identified with their work group are more satisfied, experience higher levels of wellbeing and evaluate more positively their work environment (Van Dick, 2004; Riketta, Van Dick, 2005).

Moreover, younger social workers are often affected by feelings of isolation, and they are also frequently willing to quit their job (Boyas, Wind, 2010; Boyas, Wind, Kang, 2012; Mor Barak et al., 2006; Ng, Feldman, 2009; Travis, Lizano, Mor Barak, 2016).

1.3 Trust

According to scholars (Kiffin-Petersen, Cordery, 2003; Kramer, 1999) a clear and universally accepted definition of trust is nowadays missing. Coleman (1990), Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995), and Kiffin-Petersen and Cordery, (2003) agree in defining trust with reference to three main concepts: vulnerability, positive expectations, taking risks without exerting control. Scholars also distinguish between dispositional and situational roots of trust. Dispositional factors refer to subjective early experiences in primary and secondary relational domains, which shape the personal propensity to trust others (Mikulincer, Shaver, 2017). Situational conditions refer mainly to

the perception of other's trustworthiness, according to work organization, interaction's opportunities with co-workers and frequency, ergonomic features of work context. Whereas situation based trust seems to predict behavior in structured teams, dispositional trust predicts behavior within unstructured and ambiguous contexts (Mayer, Davis, Schoorman, 1995). We therefore assume that in child welfare team dispositional trust should play an important role in supporting inter-professional communication.

Trust in coworkers and in other professionals promotes organizational citizenship behavior (Tan, Lim, 2009), improves job satisfaction (Papadaki, Papadaki, 2006), and can buffer against dissatisfaction. In fact, relation issues, such as lack of trust, represent the core element of social workers' dissatisfaction (Berlanda et al., 2017). According to literature, higher levels of dissatisfaction (Wagaman et al., 2015), and a wide number of negative psychosocial outcomes affect the younger population of social workers (Boyas, Wind, Kang, 2012; Boyas, Wind, 2010; Mor Barak et al., 2006).

1.4 Self-efficacy

Bandura (1986: 391) defines self-efficacy as follows: 'Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance'. Self-efficacy refers to the beliefs about the own ability to properly perform at work, in specific domains (Bandura, 1977) and situations. Self-efficacy is not a general trait and it does not manifest uniformly across activity domains. Personal self-efficacy relates to positive or negative expectations according to the domain of interest. In addition, this subjective perception is linked to strategic or erratic thinking, pessimist or optimist attitude and last but not least it influences causal attributions for failure and success (Bandura, 2012; Schunk, Meece, 2006).

Perceived self-efficacy influences human performance and outcomes in multiple ways (Bandura, 2012). In fact, efficacy expectations guide human behavior through cognitive, motivational, affective and decisional processes. Personal self-efficacy influences how individuals approach goals, tasks, and challenges (Cleary, Zimmerman, 2001). It also affects the way people motivate themselves to attain some goals (Pajares, 1997), the options that people consider, and the choices they make (Bandura, 2012). Finally, self-efficacy beliefs shape people's emotions. Awareness of emotions is more important in a context where there is high uncertainty about workers actions' outcomes. In social work, since human/users' circumstances cannot be totally foreseen (Leung, 2007), they can feed anxiety.

1.5 Aim of the present study

Interpersonal relationships for social workers of dispersed teams acquire a primary role and represent, if positive, favourable conditions for effective work team. In this context cultural issues (i.e., shared language, identification in the work group, and interpersonal trust) can be seen as the compass to refer to, for orienting into the multifaceted and complex emotional life of social workers engaged in child welfare.

Starting from these theoretical aspects our aim is to identify the role of age, work-group identification and trust in predicting social workers' self-efficacy in emotion regulation, procedural self-efficacy, self-efficacy in seeking support, and self-efficacy in professional communication.

2. Method

2.1 Ethics Statement

The data were collected from an online questionnaire. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee at the researchers' institution. Questionnaires included a section that explained the nature and purpose of these studies, and a consent form. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, who voluntarily participated in the studies. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw or refuse to give information at any time without incurring in any penalties. We protected the privacy and anonymity of answers of individuals involved in our research. The research involved child welfare workers, i.e. social workers, employed in two public child welfare agencies in the North East of Italy.

2.2 Participants and Data Collection

Participants completed a questionnaire including measures of Work-Group Identification, Trust, Self-Efficacy for Social Workers, and Self-efficacy in Professional Communication. This study was carried out in May 2016. We send by e-mail the questionnaire to 293 social workers employed in two public child welfare agencies of North-East Italy. The participation was on voluntary basis. A total of 157 questionnaires were completed, response rate was of 53.58%.

The gender distribution was 12 males (7.64%) and 142 females (90.45%); 3 participants have not indicated the gender (1.91%). The mean age was 38.95 years (SD = 9.66; range = 23-59; 0 missing data), and the mean length of service was 11.86 years (SD = 8.87; range = 1-40; 5 missing data, 3.18%). The comparison between these values and the corresponding values in the

population of the two agencies (female 93.44%, male 6.56%, mean age 36 years, and mean length of service 11 years), and the return rate suggest that the sample under analysis is representative of the population of the two agencies.

2.3 Measurement

The questionnaire included questions about Work-Group Identification, Trust, Self-Efficacy for Social Workers, Self-efficacy in Professional Communication, and some questions on demographic and occupational characteristics. Responses were given on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree).

Work-Group Identification was measured with four items (Capozza, 1995). Example of items are: 'I am proud to be a social worker'; 'To be a social worker is important in the overall image I have of myself'. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for our study was .66.

Trust was measured with three items ('I trust my colleagues', 'I trust my leaders', 'I trust other professionals'). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for our study was .75.

SESSW. The Self-Efficacy Scale for Social Workers (Pedrazza et al., 2013) consists of three dimensions: Emotional regulation (4 items), Procedural self-efficacy (5 items), and Support request (3 items). Emotion regulation refers to social workers' confidence in the own ability to manage negative emotions that arise when dealing with complex cases/situations (e.g., 'I always manage to keep my anxiety levels within certain levels when dealing with serious situations'). Procedural self-efficacy concerns the ability to deal with different aspects of the social work practice, such as establishing a fair and kind relationship with the user, writing and updating case reports, and not giving up when facing failure (e.g., 'I am always able to fulfill my commitments to the user'). Finally, support request refers to confidence in the ability to look for and find support in other professionals, supervisors and colleagues (e.g., 'I am always able to look for and find support from people in other professions'). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for emotion regulation, procedural self-efficacy, and support request subscales were .88, .80, and .88, respectively.

Self-efficacy in professional communication was measured with an ad hoc scale, inspired by Pedrazza and Berlanda (2016). We asked participants to indicate how they are able to get other professionals to listen and how they are able to reach other professionals. This scale is composed by six items (e.g., 'I can get people to listen to me', 'I am able to assert my opinion when I communicate'). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .82.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis was performed with SPSS statistical software package, Version 21.0. PRELIS (LISREL 8.7) was used for the imputation of missing data with the expectation–maximization (EM) algorithm, because it provides more accurate estimates of population parameters than list-wise deletion or mean substitution (Schafer, Graham, 2002). Only 1.12% of the total responses were missing scores (demographics were not submitted to missing data imputation). First, for each variable, a composite score was computed by summing and averaging the responses to each item. Pearson correlation was used to examine the association between variables. To test whether younger and senior social workers reported different levels of ability and self-efficacy, independent t test were applied. We divided participants into two groups on the basis of their age, using the median split method (from 23 to 37 years and from 39 to 59 years). Finally, multiple linear regression analyses were conducted: emotional regulation, procedural self-efficacy, support request, and communication’s self-efficacy were dependent variables. We included as predictors in the regression models age, work-group identification, and trust.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics, Correlations and T-test

The means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables are presented in Table 1. Age was negatively correlated with work-group identification, and positively correlated with the social workers’ confidence in their own ability to manage negative emotions. The correlations reveal that work-group identification, interpersonal trust, professional self-efficacy (SESSW), and self-efficacy in professional communication were positively related.

To test whether younger and senior social workers reported different levels of ability and self-efficacy independent t test were applied. Table 2 provide youngers’ and seniors’ mean scores on the self-efficacy scales. The effect of age was significant only for self-efficacy in emotion regulation ($p < .05$).

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and confidence intervals for the study variables (N = 157).

Measure	Mean	Standard deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	38.95	9.66	-						
2. Work-Group Identification	5.11	1.16	-.168*						
CI			[-.312,.002]	-					
3. Interpersonal Trust	4.45	1.28	-.009	.437***					
CI			[-.162,.148]	[.307,.563]	-				
4. SESSW Emotional regulation	4.26	1.14	.197*	.248***	.380***				
CI			[.034,.363]	[.070,.428]	[.227,.527]	-			
5. SESSW Procedural self-efficacy	4.50	0.97	.104	.108	.410***	.584***			
CI			[-.057,.262]	[-.048,.269]	[.247,.555]	[.452,.700]	-		
6. SESSW Support request	4.77	1.26	.090	.300***	.532***	.556***	.648***		
CI			[-.071,.242]	[.123,.446]	[.394,.648]	[.429,.663]	[.533,.748]	-	
7. SE in Professional Communication	4.97	0.99	.098	.346***	.509***	.569***	.520***	.630***	
CI			[-.058,.246]	[.176,.506]	[.355,.635]	[.436,.680]	[.363,.667]	[.499,.723]	-

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
SESSW= Self-Efficacy Scale for Social Workers

TABLE 2. Self-Efficacy Scores by Age (N = 157).

Variable	Youngers	Senior	Sig.
SESSW Emotional regulation	4.08	4.49	.036
SESSW Procedural self-efficacy	4.41	4.61	n.s.
SESSW Support request	4.68	4.86	n.s.
SE in Professional Communication	4.89	5.05	n.s.

3.2 Multiple Regression Analysis of Variables on Self-efficacy for Social Workers and Self-efficacy in Professional Communication

The regression analysis is presented in Table 3. For the emotional regulation self-efficacy, $F(3, 157) = 11.71, p < .001, R^2 = .20$, 20% of the variance in the score was predicted by interpersonal trust ($p < .001$), and by age ($p < .005$). The regression analysis, with the procedural self-efficacy, $F(3, 157) = 10.15, p < .001, R^2 = .17$ shows that interpersonal trust facilitates this type of self-efficacy ($p < .001$). The regression analysis with self-efficacy in requesting support as dependent variable, $F(3, 157) = 20.57, p < .001, R^2 = .30$, shows that interpersonal trust ($p < .001$) facilitates and supports this type of self-efficacy.

Finally, the regression analysis with self-efficacy in professional communication as dependent variable $F(3, 157) = 19.42, p < .001, R^2 = .28$, shows that interpersonal trust ($p < .001$), work-group identification ($p < .05$), and age ($p < .03$) facilitate and support self-efficacy in professional communication.

TABLE 3. Summary of the multiple regression analysis ($N = 157$).

Emotional Regulation Self-Efficacy						
Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95%CI</i>	β	<i>T</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Age	.027	.009	[.008,.047]	.225	2.974	.003
Work-Group Identification	.133	.084	[-.053,.329]	.134	1.592	.114
Trust	.282	.074	[.125,.434]	.316	3.800	.000
Procedural Self-Efficacy						
Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95%CI</i>	β	<i>T</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Age	.008	.008	[-.006,.024]	.084	1.088	.278
Work-Group Identification	-.062	.072	[-.192,.110]	-.074	-.868	.387
Trust	.328	.064	[.185,.467]	.434	5.141	.000
Self-Efficacy in Requesting Support						
Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95%CI</i>	β	<i>T</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Age	.015	.009	[-.004,.035]	.114	1.604	.111
Work-Group Identification	.115	.087	[-.065,.296]	.105	1.325	.187
Trust	.482	.077	[.324,.641]	.487	6.255	.000
Self-Efficacy in Professional Communication						
Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95%CI</i>	β	<i>T</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Age	.017	.007	[.004,.031]	.167	2.359	.020
Work-Group Identification	.141	.068	[-.011,.297]	.166	2.075	.040
Trust	.325	.060	[.194,.450]	.421	5.376	.000

Note. The 95% bootstrap confidence intervals were computed for unstandardized regression coefficients (1,000 resamples). *CI* = confidence interval.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Data give evidence that self-efficacy on communication and emotional regulation grow by age. Work-group identification predicts self-efficacy in communication. Our research assessed that trust plays a pivotal role in social workers' self-efficacy within such complex and multifaceted environments. Particularly, we have highlighted the connection between trust, emotional regulation, procedural self-efficacy, self-efficacy in seeking support and self-efficacy in communication.

The perception of an effective professional communication can be easily achieved by senior social worker, by those who trust colleagues and other

professionals and by social workers who strongly identify themselves with their work-group. It should be therefore strongly recommended to improve team work. Younger social workers should be supported through the availability of training opportunities in order to better address their own emotions and feelings at work. Group activities and meetings should be implemented and improved in order to achieve a sense of belonging within the interdisciplinary team. Institutional, professional and disciplinary barriers should be crossed through mutual understanding, development of a common language and trust.

We can enumerate some limitations of the present study. Firstly, no causal relationships can be drawn from the findings of our study because of its cross-sectional nature. A second limitation is that in our study we only used self-report measures, that could not correspond to real abilities and competence, because they could be affected by social desirability concerns as well as by other forms of response bias.

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Sabrina Berlanda, Monica Pedrazza, Luca Mori, Federica de Cordova, Marta Fraizzoli
*Inter-Services Communication in Child Welfare: The Interplay of Age, Work-group Identification,
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