

Professional identity, perceived job performance and sense of personal accomplishment among social workers in Israel: The overriding significance of the working alliance

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Abstract

This study examined the associations between social workers' professional identity and the quality of their work, as reflected by their perceived job performance and sense of personal accomplishment. Based on literature attesting to the contribution of the working alliance between social workers and their service-users to the attainment of interventions' goals, a model in which the working alliance mediated the associations between social workers' professional identity and the quality of their work was also tested. The study's sample consisted of 570 social workers in Israel, from a wide range of professional and organisational backgrounds. The study was cross-sectional, and data were gathered using an online questionnaire. Its results demonstrate direct effects of social workers' professional identity on the quality of their work. At the same time, social workers' working alliance with service-users acted as a mediator in the association between certain aspects of workers' professional identity and the quality of their work. These findings reassert and broaden understandings regarding the crucial role of relationships with service-users in the discussion of social work professional identity and its outcomes. The specific associations found also offer sustenance to the idea that autonomous social workers, who are committed to their profession, manage to generate stronger working alliances with their service-users; which in turn makes them better at what they do.

KEYWORDS

perceived job performance, professional identity, sense of personal accomplishment, social workers, working alliance

1 | INTRODUCTION

Professional identity is one of numerous kinds of identities people can possess throughout their lives, including personal, family, community and workplace identities (Wiles, 2013). Created in the space between individual beliefs and motives, and job-related attributes and experiences, professional identities are considered an important mechanism that affects professionals' attitudes, feelings and behaviours when performing their job (Caza & Creary, 2016). In social work, professional identity is described as an essential component of professional development (Levy, Shlomo, & Itzhaky, 2014). Professional identity

may change and evolve during a professional's career, as a result of the broadening exposure to professional knowledge, educational as well as on-the-job socialisation, and the continuous encounter with other professionals and insights derived from dealing with professional dilemmas (Freund, Cohen, Blit-Cohen, & Dehan, 2017).

1.1 | Defining professional identity

Despite, or perhaps as a consequence, of the diverse scope of influences attributed to professional identity and its dynamic nature, the

literature offers several different definitions of the term (Webb, 2017). While some definitions treat professional identity as a concept that refers mainly to professionals' self-concept (Ibarra, 1999), others describe it as encapsulating wider issues concerning workers' perceptions of the profession they belong to (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). For the current study, we adopted Barbour and Lammer's (2015) suggestion to view professional identity as a reflection of individual processes within and in correspondence with professional and organisational milieus, so that professional identity becomes 'what it means to hold a particular position or engage in a particular activity in the context of a larger, generic notion of profession' (p. 38).

In this vein, Barbour and Lammers (2015) present professional identity as covering three major areas, conceptually integrating generic approaches to occupational identity with approaches that relate to specific professional identities. The first one is professionals' choice to belong to professional associations. The second is workers' sense of attachment to their profession, including the sense of commitment to their profession, how proud they are to be associated with their profession, the extent to which they view their profession as meaningful and as fulfilling an important role in society, and their assessment of themselves as autonomous professionals. The third area is professionals' beliefs regarding the best ways to regulate professional services that they provide. This definition corresponds with wider demarcations of professionalism, which emphasise the role of distinct specialisations, autonomy of decision-making and self-regulation as crucial for the sustainability of professions over time. This sustainability can be manifested in the sense of producing unique knowledge and developing exclusive skills. And, notably, in the ability to apply such skills when faced with challenges posed by 'free market' employment or regulatory bureaucratic management (for different points of view on this, see Abbott, 1991; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2015; Freidson, 1994, 2001).

1.2 | Professional identity and work outcomes: Previous research and the current study

The strength of workers' professional identity has been frequently connected to several positive outcomes, both for the workers themselves and for the organisations within which they operate. In as such, a stronger professional identity has been found to be correlated with higher levels of workers' sense of personal accomplishment (Edwards & Durette, 2010; McCann et al., 2013) and self-perception as knowledgeable professionals (Beddoe, 2013). Research has also shown it to be related to workers' job satisfaction (Sabanciogullari & Dogan, 2015), workplace integration (Abreu, 2006), intention to leave the social work profession, and commitment to the workplace (Khapova, Arthur, Wilderom, & Svensson, 2007). Professional identity has also been associated with workers' ability to adapt to changing work environments (Carpenter & Platt, 1997; Shanks, Lundström, & Wiklund, 2014) and to create fruitful relationships with professionals from their and other fields (Sims, 2011). In other words, current literature suggests that a stronger professional identity among workers renders their work more

What is known about this topic:

- Professional identity is considered an essential component of professional development in social work.
- The strength of social workers' professional identity is associated with several positive personal and organisational outcomes.
- The working alliance between social workers and their service-users is associated with achieving interventions' goals.

What this paper adds:

- The strength of social workers' professional identity is also directly associated with the quality of social workers' work (as measured by their perceived job performance and sense of personal accomplishment).
- The working alliance between social workers and their service-users is a core mechanism that explains the variance in the quality of social workers' work, beyond certain elements of their professional identity.

consistent, their satisfaction higher, and their organisations less vulnerable to turnover and conflict. However, the ties between social workers' professional identity and their job performance have yet to be directly and explicitly observed.

In the current study we chose to address this issue, and examine the links between social workers' professional identity and the quality of their work with relation to two aspects. One is workers' perceived job performance, as a measure of the extent to which workers believe they actually fulfill the expectations derived from their role descriptions (Onweze, Veldhoven, & Biron, 2014). Another is workers' sense of personal accomplishment, which attests to their emotions on the job and the degree to which their work positively affects their feelings as competent professionals, rather than erodes them (Lee & Ashforth, 1990). As is advised in the study of work outcomes (Barrick & Ryan, 2004), both variables were examined, as together they address the adherence to *external* (organisational or managerial) requirements as well as to *internal* emotional appraisals of social workers as successful professionals.

1.3 | The working alliance as a possible mediator between social workers' professional identity and the outcomes of their work

Horvath (2001) and Bedi (2006) define the working alliance as a representation of the collaborative relationship between service-users and service-providers. This relationship ultimately includes positive feelings (such as trust, caring and respect), consensus about major elements of therapeutic process, such as its goals and the best ways to achieve them, and a general sense of partnership

and shared responsibility for the success of an intervention between service providers and service recipients (Bordin, 1979, 1980).

In the current study, we decided to examine whether social workers' working alliance with their service-users mediates the relationships between social workers' professional identity and the quality of their work, and if so, by what trajectories. This was an exploratory examination, and the rationale supporting it was twofold. First, the nature of the working alliance in social work has widely and consistently been empirically tied to the achievement of interventions' outcomes and professional tasks (Bennett, Fuertes, Keitel & Phillips, 2011; Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger, & Symonds, 2011; Tryon, Collins Blackwell, & Felleman Hammel, 2007), as well as to social workers' sense of personal accomplishment (as appraised by their service-users, Savaya, Bartov, Melamed, & Altschuler, 2016; and by social workers' themselves, Salyers et al., 2015). Second, in broader conceptual terms, the research literature on working alliances echoes theoretical assumptions core to the social work process, that emphasise the centrality of relationships between social workers and their service-users in shaping the trajectories and results of interventions (Brandell, 2014; Coady & Lehmann, 2016; Miehl, 2011). Taken together, we found these considerations render the working alliance a pertinent element to include in any model in which the quality of social workers' work is the outcome variable.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to learn more about the possible interplay between professional identity, the quality of social work interventions, and the working alliance between service providers and service-users. This examination was carried out among a sample of Israeli social workers.

1.4 | The context of israel

Social work in Israel takes place in a context that intertwines the need to respond to social hardships, constant under-budgeting, inconsistent policies, and splintered employment patterns. Social service-users in Israel deal with challenges associated with the state's high poverty rates and income inequality (National Insurance Institute of Israel, 2018), ageing society (Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020; including many survivors of the Holocaust who still bear its deep physical and psychological scars), and ongoing ramifications of exposure to war and terror-related trauma; all against the backdrop of clashes among cultural and national groups (Goldscheider, 2018), and the insistent strain of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Gerner, 2018). Social workers in Israel are employed under a wide range of contracts, and operate in all sectors of the economy. In the public sector, social workers in Israel are employed in social work titled roles (such as Family Social Worker, Child Protection Officer). In other sectors, social workers are also employed in generic roles (such as Treatment Coordinator, Therapeutic Instructor, Volunteer Coordinator). Across the board, working conditions (especially in terms of personal safety, wages, and caseloads) of social workers in

Israel are poor (Katan, 2012). While each national context is unique, profound similarities between elements of the Israeli welfare state and other welfare states (e.g. the United Kingdom, the United States, countries in the South of Europe and certain areas in the Middle East; Tarshish, 2017), suggest that understandings derived from it can be instructive and easily transferrable towards other national contexts.

1.5 | The hypothesised model

The hypothesised model tested in the present study appears in Figure 1. This model depicts a) the hypothesised positive correlation between the strength of social workers' identity and their perceived job performance; b) the hypothesised positive correlation between the strength of social workers' professional identity and their sense of personal accomplishment; and c) the hypothesised mediating role that social workers' working alliance with service-users could play in the association between social workers' professional identity, job performance and sense of personal accomplishment.

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Sampling and procedure

A sample of 570 Israeli social workers participated in the study, which was performed by means of a cross-sectional research design. Participants filled questionnaires online using Qualtrics® software. An invitation and a link towards participation were distributed through digital and social media platforms utilised by social workers in Israel. These platforms included online forums (called 'Communities of Practice') for exchanging information among professionals operated by the Ministry of Social Affairs, closed Facebook groups that are used by social workers to discuss professional issues (such as groups for members of the Israeli Association of Social Workers), and the newsletter distributed by e-mail to all members of the Israeli Association of Social Workers. Data were collected over 4 months, between August and November 2016. An indication stipulating informed consent was required before being redirected to the questionnaire itself. The study was approved by Tel Aviv University's Ethics Committee.

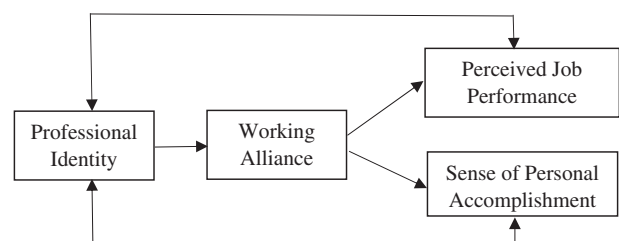


FIGURE 1 Hypothesized direct and mediated links between the study's variables

2.2 | Measures

2.2.1 | Professional identity

Professional identity was measured using a questionnaire compiled by Barbour and Lammers (2015), originally used to examine physicians' professional identity and reworded in the current study to address social workers. This questionnaire includes items composed by Barbour and Lammers (2015) as well as items taken from previously used measures (Hadley & Mitchell, 1999; Hoff, 2000; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). All in all this questionnaire is comprised of 31 items, tapping six dimensions of professional identity: (a) Professional commitment (6 items, $\alpha = 0.83$ in the present study); (b) Belief in professional autonomy (4 items, $\alpha = 0.72$); (c) Belief in self-regulation (4 items, $\alpha = 0.88$); (d) Belief in welfare economics (4 items, $\alpha = 0.75$); (e) The experience of professional autonomy (6 items, $\alpha = 0.75$). The sixth subscale from the original measure, examining beliefs in welfare services organising, had poor internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.34$) and therefore was excluded from the analysis.

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree). Scores were calculated as the mean of the responses on each subscale, and higher scores indicate a stronger professional identity. Unlike in Barbour and Lammer's (2015) original questionnaire, we did not address workers' membership in professional associations, as membership in the Israeli Association of Social Workers is mostly automatically opted for among social workers in public social services.

2.2.2 | Perceived job performance

Perceived job performance was assessed using a questionnaire based on Goodman and Svyantek's (1999) Task Based Job Performance scale. It consists of nine items ($\alpha = 0.80$ in the current study). Respondents were asked to indicate the applicability of each of the items to them, on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = totally not applicable to 5 = totally applicable). Scores were calculated as the mean of responses to all nine items. Higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived job performance.

2.2.3 | Sense of personal accomplishment

Sense of personal accomplishment was assessed using the personal accomplishment subscale from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach, Jackson, Leiter, Schaufeli, & Schwab, 1986). This measure includes eight items ($\alpha = 0.85$ in the current study). Respondents were requested to indicate how often they experience sentiments with regard to themselves, on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = never to 7 = on a daily basis). Scores were calculated as the mean of responses to all eight items. The higher the score, the greater the social worker's sense of personal accomplishment.

2.2.4 | Working alliance

Working alliance was measured using the short version of the Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989). This 12-item questionnaire measures the working alliance on three dimensions: (a) goals; (b) tasks; and (c) bond. Respondents were asked to indicate how often each of these situations takes place with their service-users, on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = never to 7 = always). In a previous study among Israeli social workers, exploratory factor analysis yielded two factors, of which one consisted of 11 items that explained 64.2% of the variance in responses to this questionnaire. The other factor contained only one item ('My social worker and I have different ideas on what my problems are'), which explained 8.9% of the variance (Savaya et al., 2016). The current study showed a similar structure and so the second factor was removed from the analysis. Thus, a working alliance score was calculated as a mean of the responses to the remaining 11 items ($\alpha = 0.91$). The higher the score, the stronger the alliance.

The construct validity of all measures was validated by confirmatory factor analyses (as will be presented in the Results section, under the testing of our measurement model).

In addition to these measures, participants reported their gender, age, family status and level of education. They also reported years in the profession and their position at work.

2.3 | Data analysis

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) of the research variables, as well as their intercorrelations, were computed using SAS™ software, Version 9.4. The research model as a whole was assessed using Structural Equation Modeling with Mplus software Version 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). In this model, all research constructs were specified as latent variables, each measured using the accepted approach of parcelling (Bandalos, 2002), by three indicators defined as random thirds of the scale items. Socio-demographic (control) variables: age, education, seniority and managerial position were used in the model as observed variables.

There were *missing values* in the data: the minimal covariance coverage in the variance-covariance matrix used in the analyses was 0.85. To take advantage of all the available data, the model was fit using full-information maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors (Little & Rubin, 2003). Following recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999), fit indexes of two types: Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and two indexes of misfit: Root Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardised Root Mean-Square Residual (SRMR) are reported. TLI and CFI close to or above 0.95, combined with RMSEA below 0.06 and SRMR below 0.08, are considered indicative of acceptable fit.

The size of the sample was deemed sufficient for the planned SEM modeling, as it exceeded by far the minimal range of 200–400 observations recommended by MacCallum, Widaman, Zhang, and Hong (1999).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Sample characteristics

Participants' demographics and professional background information appear in Table 1. As can be seen, the sample was diverse in terms of participants' age, seniority, role (managerial/frontline) and education.

3.2 | Descriptive statistics and correlations between the research variables

Means and standard deviations of the research variables, as well as their intercorrelations, appear in Table 2. As seen in the table, concerning our research hypotheses, two of the professional identity sub-scales: professional commitment and the experience of professional autonomy were significantly correlated with workers' perceived job performance and sense of personal accomplishment. Workers' perceived job performance was also significantly correlated with their belief in self-regulation. These correlations were all positive, albeit rather weak.

The findings also show that the strongest significant correlations were found between workers' working alliance with their service-users, and the quality of their work, as reflected both by their perceived job performance and their sense of personal accomplishment.

As the first stage of our main analyses, the measurement model was tested. It was found to fit the data very well: $\chi^2(224, N = 570) = 327.08, p < .001, TLI = 0.98, CFI = 0.98, SRMR = 0.04, RMSEA = 0.03 (90\%CI = 0.02; 0.04)$. These results provided support for the construct validity of the measures used in the model.

TABLE 1 Participants' demographics and professional backgrounds ($N = 570$)

Variable	N (%)	Range	Mean (SD)
Gender			
Women	505 (88.6%)		
Men	65 (11.4%)		
Highest level of education obtained			
Bachelor's degree ^a	373 (65.4%)		
Master's or Ph.D. degrees	197 (34.6%)		
Professional position			
Managerial	226 (39.6%)		
Frontline	344 (60.4%)		
Age		21–72	41.04 (10.68)
Seniority		1–43	13.49 (9.89)

^aThe entry level for social work licensing in Israel.

3.3 | Testing the structural model

Next, the research hypotheses were tested within a structural model. In addition to the hypothesised paths connecting the research variables, paths leading from the control variables (age, postgraduate education, seniority as social worker, managerial position) to each of the research variables were added to the model. This model (Figure 2) exhibited good fit to the data, with $\chi^2(320, N = 570) = 474.41, p < .001, TLI = 0.98, CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.04, RMSEA = 0.03 (90\%CI = 0.02; 0.04)$. Omitted from the figure are paths connecting the control and the content variables, they are presented in Table 3.

As can be seen in the Table, almost all the background variables tested (excluded is seniority as a social worker) were not significantly associated with the study's outcome variables. Thus, they can be ruled out as alternative explanations.

In our first two hypotheses we argued that professional identity will be positively correlated with (a) perceived job performance and (b) sense of personal accomplishment. As shown in Figure 2, two of the five dimensions of professional identity had direct effects on the outcome variables. Professional commitment was positively associated with both outcome variables: perceived job performance ($\beta = 0.16, p < .01$) and sense of personal accomplishment ($\beta = 0.11, p < .05$). Belief in self-regulation was positively associated only with job performance ($\beta = 0.10, p < .05$).

As for the exploratory hypothesis relating to the mediating role of working alliances, here too, the findings indicate that only two were (positively) related to the working alliance: professional commitment ($\beta = 0.27, p < .001$) and experience of professional autonomy ($\beta = 0.22, p < .001$). Working alliance was (positively) related to both perceived job performance ($\beta = 0.34, p < .001$) and sense of personal accomplishment ($\beta = 0.42, p < .001$). The indirect effects of professional commitment and experience of professional autonomy upon perceived job performance and sense of personal accomplishment were statistically significant (all p 's $\leq .001$).

4 | DISCUSSION

This study examined a model with direct and mediated effects depicting the relationship between social workers' professional identity, their working alliances with service-users, and the quality of their work. The discussion of its findings is structured in line with the order in which the findings were generated—from descriptive data and the first two hypothesis, to the entire mediation model and concluding suggestions.

4.1 | Social workers' professional identity and the quality of their work

Social workers in the current study reported moderate professional commitment and belief in professional autonomy, moderate-to-low belief in self-regulation and experience of professional autonomy

TABLE 2 Distribution and intercorrelations of research variables

Variable	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Professional Identity	2.95 (0.67)	—						
1. Professional Commitment								
2. Belief in Professional Autonomy	2.68 (0.69)	0.15***	—					
3. Belief in Self-Regulation	2.20 (0.94)	0.11**	0.15***	—				
4. Belief in Welfare Economics	1.36 (0.77)	-0.14***	0.04	-0.04	—			
5. Experience of Professional Autonomy	2.01 (0.71)	0.17***	0.09*	-0.04	0.06	—		
6. Working Alliance	5.68 (0.73)	0.23***	0.11*	0.04	0.01	0.23***	—	
7. Perceived Job Performance	3.96 (0.44)	0.20***	0.04	0.10*	-0.02	0.11**	0.32***	—
8. Sense of Personal Accomplishment	5.25 (0.91)	0.20***	0.08	-0.03	0.01	0.14**	0.41***	0.37***

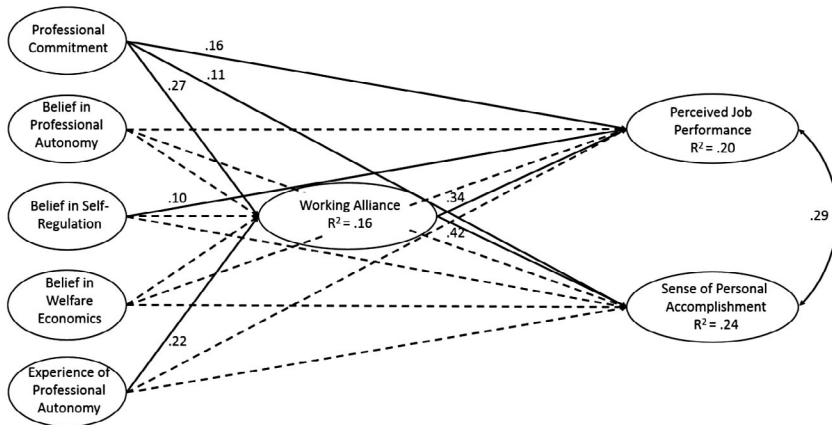
* $p < .05$,** $p < .01$,*** $p < .001$.

FIGURE 2 The tested model: Main and mediating effects

and a low belief in welfare economics. These findings indicate a professional identity of moderate strength among social workers in Israel. The findings also show that social workers in Israel perceive their job performance and sense of personal accomplishment as moderately high and high respectively.

In terms of the associations between social workers' professional identity and the quality of their work, our hypotheses were partially confirmed. In our view, the direct effects found in this sense are of particular interest when set against the context of current trends in social work practice and policy making. In as such, the conclusions that originate from them can be used to design future considerations and actions taken by social work's professional institutions, management and professional policy makers.

First, direct links were found between social workers' professional commitment and the quality of their work (both in terms of perceived job performance and sense of personal accomplishment). While this is not surprising and corresponds with the findings of previous studies (e.g. Edwards & Dirette, 2010; Shanks et al., 2014), it is worth paying attention to considering contemporary challenges social workers and the social work profession presently face. Currently,

the increasing diversification in the nature and scope of social services and social needs, in the roles social workers are assigned to, and in the expectations, legislation and regulation guiding social workers' work, are said to have deepened the fragmentations traditionally prevalent in the social work profession (Carey, 2015; Dustin, 2016). Our findings underscore the need to proactively invest in sustaining social workers' commitment to their profession despite (and indeed in response to) this trend. Notably, not only as means of solidifying the social work profession but also with relation to the continued attainment of positive professional outcomes.

Second, as our results show, a positive link was found between workers' belief in self-regulation and their perceived job performance. In recent years, institutions governing public social services in many countries (including the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden, Israel and several states in the US) have pursued reforms that reflect a movement towards expanding regulation and standardisation of social workers' operations, in line with contemporary trends in the management of social services, such as new public management approaches (Healy, 2009). While this can be said to contribute to social services' public accountability and to

TABLE 3 Paths from control variables to research variables in the structural model (Standardised coefficients)

Variable	Age	Postgraduate education	Seniority	Managerial position
Professional Identity				
1. Professional Commitment	0.21*	-0.06	0.05	0.04
2. Belief in Professional Autonomy	0.03	-0.02	-0.01	-0.04
3. Belief in Self-Regulation	-0.12	0.07	0.17*	0.09*
4. Belief in Welfare Economics	-0.45***	-0.15**	0.34***	0.07
5. Experience of Professional Autonomy	0.14	-0.02	0.00	0.19***
6. Working Alliance	0.04	0.02	-0.10	0.00
7. Job Performance	0.05	0.07	0.06	0.06
8. Self-Accomplishment	0.01	0.05	0.15*	-0.07

* $p < .05$,** $p < .01$,*** $p < .001$.

the reduction of the inconsistencies and inequalities often plaguing social service provision (Andrews & Van de Walle, 2013), our study shows that still, social workers who stipulate self-regulation report doing a better job. This finding points towards the need to seek a balance point which enables streamlining interventions on the one hand, but at the same time assists the sustainment of a high level of professional discretion. This, not only as a matter of seeking professional power and prestige (as is often argued by supporters of neoliberal welfare governance; Schram & Silverman, 2012), but as means for enhancing the attainment of professional and organisational goals.

As was shown, the correlation between social workers' experience of professional autonomy and the quality of their work (both in terms of perceived job performance and sense of personal accomplishment), found in our first stage of analysis, did not appear as a direct effect in our final observed model. This means, that while belief in self-regulation as a matter of principle professional attitudes affected social workers' performance at work, their actual experience of professional autonomy only influenced the quality of their work when mediated by the working alliances with their service-users.

4.2 | Working alliance: the relational crux

Perhaps the main finding of the current study discloses the ways in which working alliances mediate the associations between social workers' professional identity and the quality of their work. It seems that in the present study, the working alliance was the core mechanism that explained the variance in the quality of participants' work, beyond certain elements of their professional identity. This finding adds a substantive contribution to current literature, in two main ways. First, present literature in this area has so far included separate examinations of either professional identity or

the working alliance as predictors of the outcomes of social workers' interventions (e.g., Horvath et al., 2011; Khapova et al., 2007; McCann et al., 2013). As could be seen from our findings, examining models which include both these variables can reveal new venues for understanding and exploring the precursors of the quality of social workers' work.

Second, this finding lends some insights to the ongoing scholarly search (described by Webb, 2017) for more complex explanatory models of the ties between social workers' professional identity and the quality of their work. Previous research that examined moderation or mediation models linking these two issues, has primarily addressed what can be described as 'closed circuits' of professional processes, in which the connection between professional identity and work outcomes is explained by internal social work issues (such as managers' expectations, supervisors' advice, the exposure to education and training, and organisational policies; Carpenter & Platt, 1997; Healy, Harrison, & Foster, 2015; Shim, Hwang, & Lee, 2009). Our findings show that the working alliance is a powerful mediator to consider and incorporate into such models in the future. They remind us that while several worthwhile discussions can be held regarding the best ways to manage, supervise, regulate and educate towards performing social work, at the end of the day, the effectiveness of social work interventions still depends greatly on the quality of the most basic and direct human interactions between social workers and the users of their services. This suggests a need for social work policy makers, management, and educators to develop and promote social work policy, organisational structures and practices that celebrate and corroborate the interpersonal relations between social workers and service-users. This can be done through allocating resources, limiting caseloads and providing professional support and knowledge needed to ensure such relations are as positive as possible, even in the complex arenas in which social workers operate.

Interestingly, our observed model of mediation was found significant specifically for the professional identity factors that

related to participants' professional commitment and experience of professional autonomy, while similar associations were not found with factors assessing professional beliefs. It could be that professional commitment and the experience of professional autonomy are 'individual' or 'personal' conceptions; while beliefs deal more with the way workers situate themselves vis à vis broad professional principles and debates; and that as such, the latter interplay in a different way with working alliances, that are by nature relational, micro-level occurrences. It is also possible that professional commitment and the experience of professional autonomy differ from other factors of professional identity in other ways too, and perhaps represent a distinct theoretical concept worth exploring.

5 | STUDY LIMITATIONS, SUGGESTED FUTURE STUDIES AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study has some methodological limitations. First, data were collected through online platforms used by social workers in Israel. This raises a question regarding the generalisability of our findings, as it is possible that not all social workers use these platforms, and that those who do not, may differ from those who do (e.g. in terms of age, mother tongue). Moreover, it is possible that the voluntary nature of participation in the study and the self-report questionnaires that were used may have introduced a social desirability bias. Finally, since the study is cross-sectional, causality of the paths tested in the model cannot be inferred.

Future studies should use representative samples and a longitudinal research design. Furthermore, although the study's findings stem from an Israeli case they may be applicable to other countries. To test this, a replication of the study is warranted. The relative weakness of the initial correlations found between dimensions of social workers' professional identity and the quality of their work possibly attests to the numerous additional factors that can be connected to the outcomes of social work. The question of what predicts success in social work interventions should naturally continue to be the focus of future studies. Such studies may examine factors not addressed in the current study, the interaction between other factors and those tested in the present study, or even other aspects of social workers' professional identity.

Notwithstanding its limitations, this study offers several contributions to what is known about the subject of our research. It (re)introduces the crucial role of relationships with service-users into the discussion about social work professional identity and its outcomes. While this role has been suggested in theoretical writing about social workers' professional identity (Coady & Lehmann, 2016), to the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first to empirically support it. Its findings offer systematic sustenance to the idea that autonomous social workers, who are committed to their profession, manage to generate stronger working alliances with their service-users; which in turn makes them better at what they do.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We confirm that there is no conflict of interest to declare for this project.

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