**On the Threshold:**

**Stories of School Security Guards in Israel**

**Introduction**

In May 1974, three members of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) entered Israel from Lebanon and occupied the Netiv Meir school in the city of Ma’alot. At the time, 102 students and ten faculty members from a high school in the city of Safed were staying at that school during a field trip. The DFLP took 85 of them hostage. After a brief negotiation, an elite commando unit of the Israeli Defense Forces entered the school, but the rescue operation did not go as planned. The terrorists killed 22 students and three teachers.

This event, often referred to as the “Ma’alot massacre”, had far-reaching shock waves and set off a chain of reactions, including recognition of the state’s need and obligation to protect people at educational institutions. By September 1974, the government enacted security regulations for educational institutions. They set guidelines for security to be carried out by volunteer parents or, in emergencies, by faculty members or students in upper grades (Israel Ministry of Education and Culture 1974). Security was to be carried out selectively, not in all educational institutions. In 1992, a new government policy stipulated that security in educational institutions would be transferred to private guard companies. In 1995, it was decided that security would be implemented at all Jewish educational institutions with 100 or more students (Knesset Education, Culture and Sports Committee 2002).

These historical events are embedded in the security and political context of the Israeli state and society. At the same time, the enacted policies reflect global political-economic trends towards indirect employment and large-scale privatization of public services (Briken 2011), specifically the growth of private security services (van Steden & Nalla 2010). In Israel and internationally, indirect employment is now the primary mode of employment for security guards, including those working in educational institutions (Nissim & De Vries 2014).

Security in educational institutions has distinctive structural characteristics, given the population to be protected, and the roles, activities, and goals of these institutions. This creates an interface between two realms, with implications for both. One distinctive feature of the Israeli context is the presence of armed security at educational institutions, which is not common in other countries.

The rise of private security services has led to expanded research on the subject, most of which addresses social and economic aspects of this phenomenon. Few studies explore the personal world of guards, especially that of school guards. In Israel, research generally focuses on the problematic employment conditions of guards. No previous studies have examined their point of view. Thus, the population of school security guards in Israel is a disadvantaged population, in terms of their employment conditions and in the dearth of research dedicated to them. The current research aims to reduce this lacuna. The main research goals are to explore and document the voices of school security guards in Israel regarding their experiences, worldviews, and perceptions, taking into account the distinctive context in which they live and work.

**Neoliberalism, Defense, and Private Security**

The expansion of the private security sector around the world is linked to the spread of neoliberalism (Briken 2011; Meško, Nalla, & Sotlar 2005). While there is debate about the definition of neoliberalism (Thorsen & Lie 2007), there is agreement that one of its basic characteristics is the assumption that protecting personal freedom and especially economic freedom are among the highest goals of the state, and only for the sake of these goals is the state entitled and obliged to intervene in the functions of the market or society (Brenner & Theodore 2002). This implies that the state should minimize its economic and social involvement. Neoliberalism has guided the course of action adopted by many countries and the global economy overall, such as deregulation of market activity, cuts in state expenditure overall and for social services in particular, and the privatization of public enterprises, services, and assets (Kaplan 2010; Mandelkern 2015).

The growth of private security services can be seen as a result of the privatization of public services previously provided by the state. However, some researchers argue that this growth, like that of other private services (private schools, private medicine, etc.) reflects the neoliberal tendency to convert political and public problems into market problems and to offer market solutions (i.e. Brown 2006). Thus, in the neoliberal era, defense and security have become products. The number of private security companies and guards employed by them correspondingly rises (Meško, Nalla, and Sotlar 2005). This process is prominent in Israel, where there is a core ethos of security, according to which the state and its citizens are in constant danger and their safety must be ensured (Lissak 2001; Peri 2006).

**Status of Private Security Guards, Internationally and in Israel**

Despite increased demand for their services, the social and economic status of private security guards around the world is dismal. They are portrayed in a poor light by academics, in popular culture, and by their supervisors, who often criticize their skills, efficiency, and integrity (Dempsey 2008; Prenzler 2004). They have poor employment conditions, such as low salaries, temporariness, little bargaining power, and weak unions (Briken 2011). Many feel unappreciated and insecure.

The penetration of neoliberalism into Israel (Kaplan 2010; Mandelkern 2015), alongside the deterioration of domestic security, especially since the outbreak of the first *intifada* in 1987, has created fertile ground for the growth of private security services (Handels 2004). Private security has expanded into areas that were once the preserve of the public (Dahan 2012). Further, contractor companies have largely taken over transactions in the field of security, transforming it into a triadic field, where guards are seldom directly employed by the institution for which they are responsible (Levy 2005; Wininger & Teschner 2013).

In recent years, awareness of the precarious employment status of security guards has increased. Certain improvements have been made in the legislation, supervision, and enforcement of their rights (Wininger & Teschner 2013). However, these changes do not address the basic structure of contractual employment. Additionally, the regulations are difficult to enforce and security companies often fail to respect the rights of their employees (Davidov 2010; Levy 2005; Wininger & Teschner 2013).

**School Security Guards in Israel**

The status of school security guards in Israel is not significantly different from that of other types of security guards. In some ways, their work conditions are more problematic, because they are subject to the vacation schedule set by the Ministry of Education and are not paid for these compulsory leave days (Wheeler 2013; Wininger & Teschner 2013). It has also been found that that they receive more criticism than other types of security guards. In the hierarchy of the world of private security, personal bodyguards are at the top, and at the bottom are: “jobs where you stand daily in front of a discount store […] ‘there you are really lost,’” (Briken 2011, 137). School security guards, who spend most of their work days at the school gate, whose professional demands are minimal, and whose working conditions are among the worst, are near the bottom of this hierarchy.

Davidov (2010) argues that the justification for employment of contract workers in schools is based on the distinction between the “seed” and the “shell”; between activity that is ostensibly the core purpose of the school (teaching), and activities perceived as peripheral. He notes that, in addition to damaging economic and employment conditions, this distinction diminishes “peripheral” workers’ sense of belonging, reduces motivation, and generally marginalizes these workers. This applies not only to security guards or service staff, but to most people indirectly employed. However, there are differences between being a guard and, for example, janitorial work. Additionally, the school is a distinct framework with highly sensitive features, stemming from the institution’s population and its goals. In this respect, the lack of research on the employment conditions of school security guards is even more striking.

**Perspectives of Private Security Guards Internationally and in Israel**

One study examining the experiences and perceptions of private security guards finds that most did not plan to be guards and do not view their jobs as a career, but as a temporary stage on the path towards better employment (Briken 2011). Private security guards emphasize the boredom and stress of their work, and feel under-appreciated by the public (Briken 2011; Manzo 2011; Stephenson 2011).

The United States and Israel are among the few countries with organized, comprehensive security in schools. However, the role of school guards in the United States differs from that in Israel. The primary goal of school security in the United States is not to protect against external attacks, but to prevent violence within schools (James & McCallion 2013). The personal and social characteristics of guards in these two countries differ as well. For example, most security guards in the U.S. are police officers who have taken on extra work hours. Therefore, studies conducted in U.S. schools do not accurately portray the world of school security in Israel, but they do have some relevance regarding the work context. School guards in the U.S. perceive their role as providing security for the school, students, and staff (Caine, Burlingame, & Arney 1998). They report feeling stress and burnout resulting from their sense of responsibility and fear of injury to students (Ely 2010). Many complain of inadequate cooperation, recognition, and understanding from parents, students, and teachers; they express a desire for better communication with these groups (Caine, Burlingame, & Arney 1998; Ely 2010).

**Liminality**

The concept of liminality is critical to understanding the world of school security guards in Israel, especially the structure of experiences and perceptions it indicates. Two points should be emphasized relating to use of this term in the current study. First, the concept arose inductively from the collected data; it was not deductively imposed. Only after the concept emerged from the data analysis was it applied theoretically to the study. Second, the term’s meaning in the current study deviates from the orthodox meaning, as will be clarified, in order to adapt it to the empirical experiences of the participants.

The concept of liminality originated in anthropological research. Van Gennep (1960) first used the term to describe a ceremonial transitional phase between one social status and another. Subsequently, the term was used in Turner’s (1967, 1969) classic study of the Ndembu tribe in Zambia, to describe the transition from childhood to adulthood. Ndembu boys pass through a stage during which they are cut off from their surroundings and previous roles. They do not yet belong to the adult world, yet are no longer part of the world of children. The stage of liminality ends upon their entry into the adult world and the granting of a new status, role, and identity; stability and clear boundaries again characterize their lives.

Liminality is characterized subjectively by feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and loss, as well as objectively by the absence of rights, power and lack of defined social status and roles. In Turner’s later work (1988) and that of his disciples (e.g., Szakolczai 2000), the concept of liminality is enriched and extended beyond rituals observed in traditional societies. Application of this concept has expanded beyond anthropology to all human sciences (Thomassen 2009). Currently, the concept of liminality is flexible, emerging from Turner’s (1967) definition of it as any situation or object that lies “betwixt and between”; an intermediate stage or position between one category and another. Liminality means being on the threshold. This concept can be applied to individuals or groups, and to various periods of time. Some even apply it to non-human objects (such as international borders, Thomassen 2009). However, it is most commonly applied to human experiences with distinct beginnings and ends; there is generally an entry into and exit from the state of liminality.

The concept of liminality has been applied to research on labor and organizational relations, such as the situation of employees undergoing changes in their working relationships (Spyridakis 2013), and those in temporary or indirect employment (Borg & Söderlund 2014; Garsten 1999). The concept is often associated with negative workplace phenomena, such as stress, lack of sense of belonging, and job insecurity (Borg & Söderlund 2014). Research finds a close and even causal relationship between the state of liminality and the state of precarity. There has been a significant increase in the number of people in situations of “…employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker” (Kalleberg 2009, 2). This increase may be explained by the spread of neoliberalism and globalization intensifying competition and freedom for employers, while reducing protection and security for workers (Kalleberg 2009; Nissim & De Vries 2014). Employees are increasingly likely to experience unstable employment, non-voluntary mobility, and lack of belonging to a particular workplace.

**Research Objectives and Questions**

The objectives of the current study are:

1. to explore the worldviews, experiences, and perceptions of security guards working in the distinctive context of schools in Israel
2. to provide a platform for the voices of the disempowered population of school security guards in Israel (Cortazzi 1993), shedding light on the conditions of their existence.

Two main questions guided the study:

1. What are the characteristics of the experiences of school security guards in Israel?
2. How do Israeli school security guards perceive themselves and their work?

**Methodology**

A basic (generic) qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for the research objectives. This approach “…seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved, or a combination of these,” (Merriam 2002, 6). The generic method is limited to a certain number of base assumptions and action patterns. It is flexible, drawing from formal methodologies (such as phenomenology or grounded theory) without committing “full allegiance” to any of them (Kahlke 2014, 39).

The main research tool is semi-structured in-depth interviews. In addition, I examined and analyzed documents from sources including: the Israel Ministry of Education, police reports, transcripts of Knesset (parliament) debates, government policy decisions, and news media. I conducted several limited on-site observations of school security guards at work.

**Study Participants**

Participants were selected using the purposive sampling technique. To learn about people with a common background experience, some homogeneity is required (Patton 2002). This is one reason the study population does not include security guards in kindergartens and guards in Arab-sector educational institutions.[[1]](#endnote-1) At the same time, to explore a variety of perspectives, the selected study population is diverse in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, residential region within Israel, and type of school at which they are employed. Fifteen participants were interviewed: five females and ten males.

**Research Process**

Interviews were coordinated with the intention of finding a place that was convenient for the interviewee and with as little disruption as possible. Most interviews were conducted at the guards’ workplace, namely the entrance of the school. I conducted two pilot interviews to focus the research questions, build an interview guide, and locate potential participants.

Categorical analysis was applied to the data. This approach begins with data collection and develops in light of the findings. General coding was performed, enabling themes to be identified and their connections examined. Maximum attention was given to the data and dynamic between the analytic and holistic dimensions (Merriam & Tisdell 2015).

To ensure the quality of research, I followed Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) approach based on the concept of trustworthiness rather than validity. They recommend various means to increase trustworthiness, including deep and consistent research, triangulation, peer review, thick description, and keeping a research journal.

**Results**

Data analysis reveals five themes characterizing the world of school security guards in Israel:

(a) job definition

(b) responsibility

(c) disrespect for the profession

(d) transience

(e) solitude

One core, overarching theme connects these five themes, indicating the depth of experience and perceptions of school security guards. This theme is liminality, which exemplifies the life of school security guards in terms of their instability, insecurity, and lack of sense of belonging. In the following sections, I examine how liminality is expressed in each of the five specific themes and in the relationships between them, collectively describing the world of the study participants.

**Job Definition**

The liminality of school security guards in Israel begins with the definition of their roles. This includes three aspects: physical location, mental location, and professional location. The Director General of Israel’s Ministry of Education (2012a, 2.2.1) states that “security in educational institutions is based on the presence of a security guard/watchman at the entrance of the school.” The guard must oversee school security “and address two major threats: (a) violent terrorist activity and (b) threats to public security” (ibid).

The interviews and observations confirm that the school security guards spend most of their day at the school entrance: “For fifteen minutes, tops, I can be away from the gate, then I must go back… I use the bathroom, eat, drink, do a quick scan, walk around for a minute, then return.” “After everyone comes in, I close the gate, and I pretty much stay there.”

They emphasize their responsibility to protect the school from harm originating outside the school. “If you’re inside or not in the right place, you’re not aware of what’s going on in the area. Let’s say I go inside for a long time, and someone jumps out from here...” Thus, according to their self-defined role, school security guards are literally on the threshold between the school and the outside world. They perceive their role as a barrier between the outside and inside, protecting the latter from the former.

The official definition quoted above includes a dual reference: security guard/watchman. The formal distinction, according to the Israel Police (1998), between a watchman and a security guard is that only security guards are armed on the job. Currently, most school guidelines use the term “watchmen” (72.8% according to Wininger & Teschner 2013), and all new guidelines use this term. However, since armed security is required at Jewish schools (Israel Ministry of Education, 2012b, 1.1) their training, duties, and powers are those of security guards (Wininger & Teschner 2013). This is how most of them define their own role as well. “I am a security guard…a watchman is unarmed…a security guard is armed.”

There may be economic reasons for the preference for the term “watchman” in the guidelines, since Israel’s Ministry of Defense (via the police) finances 64% of the costs for watchmen and 100% of the costs for security guards (ibid., item 23). This causes a sense liminality among school security guards, because their place in the security hierarchy (Briken 2011) remains unclear. They are on the conceptual and practical threshold between a watchman (who requires almost no special skills or training, and whose professional position is at the lowest end of the hierarchy) and a security guard (whose required skills and perceived level of professionalism are higher). This obfuscation indicates an additional layer of liminality related to the value that society and the guards themselves attribute to this work. This is described further in the sections on the following two themes and the relationship between them.

**Responsibility**

The surveyed Israeli school security guards perceive the primary significance of their role as the responsibility to protect, especially children and youth. “… In one word? ... It’s a matter of responsibility.” Another interviewee, Meirav, says “I have responsibility for 400 children. I’m not talking about the staff; I’m talking about children. I go home every day thankful that nothing happened, no one was hurt.”

Some note the responsibility of being armed. “Weapons are a responsibility [...] You work with children and have responsibility for children, it is not a light responsibility.” They know they must protect students from possible attacks: “Especially in Israel, where the situation is volatile. There are terror attacks, and other such things.”

The need for constant vigilance is derived from their perception of responsibility and potential danger. Like guards in the U.S. (Ely 2010), Israeli school security guards feel this responsibility is accompanied by tension: “It’s hard to always be alert. You must not blink for a moment. You have to always look around, always do the tours, be attentive.” “If, heaven forbid, something happens ... and you are not alert to the environment ... it is not good.”

At the same time, they derive a certain sense of self-worth and value from their work. “This is completely different, more difficult than other places… You can never really rest. You’re in charge of the security of the school, the safety of the children, the teachers?”

**Disrespect for the Profession**

In opposition to the value that arise from their sense of responsibility, the guards are aware of disrespectful attitudes towards their role, professional ability, status, and of low value attributed to their work. This deepens their sense of liminality, of being caught between professionalism and unprofessionalism, importance and unimportance. Formation of a stable professional identity is hindered.

As discussed in the theoretical review, this problem is most obvious in their terms of employment. All the participants voice complaints about their working conditions, such as low wages: “The salary is terrible”; quality of their equipment: “Our uniforms barely qualify as clothes”; the school vacation schedule: “This is the problem with contractors who do not pay workers for the holidays, especially the school security guards,”; and not receiving the conditions they deserve from the contracting security companies: “There are some companies, like [name of company], who don’t relate to you.” “You should not have to get to … come to your supervisor and prove when you worked, when you didn’t, to fight with them. It’s not right.” (This issue is noted in previous studies such as Davidov, 2010; Wininger & Taschner 2013).

The guards make special note of the security booth; the structure at the entrance to the school where they spend most of their time, store their equipment, and sometimes keep personal items. Designed to protect them from the weather, many booths do not provide a minimal level of comfort. Some have no electricity and look like shacks on the verge of collapse.

In the words of interviewee Yossi, “The booth is an oven. Some people sit in the booth, but I don’t understand how they do it.” Some municipalities have taken steps to improve this situation, but often only after guards struggled for changes. Not everyone is capable of undertaking this. (Another issue related to their working conditions is isolation, discussed in detail below).

One interviewee, Michal, tells this story:

“Last year, the roof in my booth was dripping, there was a leak [...] I suffered terribly until they finally fixed it. Over and over I asked and begged and pleaded. I told them I was getting so wet inside I may as well be outside. Finally, they stuck up a piece of wood so no rain would come in. They told me this is temporary, in the summer there will be a real renovation. I said fine … It’s hard to have to beg for a little heating or cooling. Everyone tells me to ask someone else. Eventually, I went to the manager and told her, I don’t have a heater, I don’t have a fan, I have nothing. It’s too hot or too cold. You have to give me something. Why should I have to pay for it? So, she tells me, you know what? I’m going to fix up something for you. That was on a Friday, and on Sunday she brought me a fan. I also had to run after everyone in the school, chasing after custodians and teachers, until they gave me a heater not worth a shekel, because it only half works ... One of the teachers brought it for me, not the management, not the custodian, no one else [...] I don’t even care anymore, I’m leaving here anyway.”

Israeli school security guards also experience societal disrespect, verifying the findings of studies from other countries (Briken 2011; Dempsey 2008; Manzo 2011; Prenzler 2004). First, most of the participants feel the Israeli public’s general assessment of security guards is low.

“Society does not see the guards. We’re nobodies to them. You’re just a security guard, just someone poking your hand in their bags, into their life ... They’re always putting you down, humiliating you, saying, ‘You’re nothing but a security guard.’”

 Second, the guards complain about the failure to recognize their authority by those at the school, especially the parents. “Something we have to deal with is arguments with the parents.” “It was a difficult at first, with the parents ... because I have to write down whoever comes in, and they would either say ‘No, I’m a mother’ ... or they do not want to give me their information.” “It’s Israeli culture, and there are some [parents] who are rude, who say ‘I'll park here because I feel like it,’ or ‘I do not have time for you to check my ID.’”

Third, there is criticism of guards in the media. Alongside publications and broadcasts on the problems of guards’ working conditions, some cast doubt on their professionalism and express concern for students’ safety (Devorat 2002; Lansky 2012; Schlesinger 2013).

Finally, their employers do not appreciate their professional skills. Guards are instructed to call for assistance in every event, and to be cautious in exercising their *de jure* authority. Interviewee Ido recounts an incident of someone jumping over the fence of the school: “I was supposed to take him into custody, but I didn’t want to grab him because he hadn’t done anything ... if I touch him, he can sue me.” Later, a senior security industry official told a reporter from the news website *NRG*, “Is a school guard who makes NIS 23.70 an hour [about $6.50] and brings home a monthly salary of NIS 3,500 [about $1000] going to sacrifice his life for the homeland? It’s a joke,” (Schlesinger 2013, para. 30).

Another interviewee, Ayal expresses the oscillation between responsibility and disrespect for the profession:

“There is no doubt we have a weight on our shoulders: responsibility for the children [... but] I hope they will make a change in terms of wages, working conditions. That it is important, because then being a security guard will be a job that allows for self-respect.”

**Transience**

 All interviewees, including veterans of five or more years in the field, emphasize the transient dimension of their work. They address two main aspects. First, most express a desire to find another job, because of aspirations for greater self-realization, the difficult working conditions, or a combination of these. “I connect with kids. I’m thinking about going back to school, maybe studying to become a kindergarten teacher or assistant; some profession working with children.” “This is not a life-long job … it’s not a career. If I want to have a family … I need to find a more reasonable job.” “I want to find a job that suits my education. I don’t get anything out of working in security... They sapped all my strength.”

 Second, in line with previous research (i.e. Wininger & Taschner 2013), interviewees experience non-voluntary mobility between schools or security companies. This is a result of the market structure, in which companies offer competing tenders to provide security services. One interviewee asks: “Why are there tenders [...] and the company that gives the most for the lowest price, wins?” Some note that if the company employing them loses the tender, they can request to transfer to the company that receives it, and thus continue working at the same school. However, even when this is possible, they have to “Fill out forms, do all kinds of renewals,” and re-develop their working relationships. Most of them occasionally move between companies or schools, voluntarily or involuntarily. “If the security company suddenly loses the tender at the school, God help us.”

Transience, a characteristic of unstable working conditions in the neoliberal era (Kalleberg 2009), places Israeli school guards in a constant state of liminality, caught between their current workplace and the next. They hope to eventually find a job that is more stable, more suitable, more profitable, and less vulnerable (as in Germany, see Briken, 2011). “For now, I’ve stayed here. I have no choice until I find myself, and I have enough money. Being a security guard is not a career.”

**Isolation**

The simple definition of isolation is feeling alone, with nobody around. The isolation of school security guards begins with the physical aspect of their work: they spend most of the day alone at the school gate. All the interviewees complain about isolation, and often its companion traits of boredom and routine. “It has to do with the work itself, because it’s a lot of hours to be alone ... and it’s psychological, being with yourself a lot.”

“It’s a boring job because you have nothing to occupy you all day. There are days that no one goes in or out. You sit here for an entire day until one-thirty ... It’s a job that is exhausting from not doing anything, as they say.”

The isolation of the school security guards has deeper roots in their sense of non-belonging. School security guards do not feel they are part of the organization that employs them (the contractor companies), or part of the schools in which they work. This is indicated in complaints about lack of trust between them and their employers, such as Michal’s story of the renovation of her booth, and reiterated in reports about their need to take care of all their own needs. “Here, you have to fight with people to get a shade net, for electricity,” says Kfir. “For transportation,” adds Erez. Ido expresses the sense of isolation in a nutshell: “In security work, you have nothing ... You have no support for anything.”

However, guards’ attitudes towards the schools and the employing security companies are not completely comparable. They are at the school, even if just at the gate, for a large part of every day, and interact with the school population. Most interviewees report involvement in school activities that goes beyond the definition of their role and which suggests an aspiration to belong. Some help the school custodian: “If he needs help with something, lifting chairs or heavy tables, I help him.” Most say they help parents with matters concerning their children: “The parents trust me ... Even if this is not my job, I do it.” Most speak in positive terms about their relations with the school staff. Relations with the school staff improve security guards’ sense of belonging and enable their proper functioning (see also Caine, Burlingame, & Arney 1998; Ely 2010). “I can go to the teachers’ room, make coffee, use the sugar, glasses, drink it there, no one tells me not to, you understand? No one. It doesn’t happen. I feel like we are a family.” “It’s good that there is a connection with the teachers, because if there isn’t, the school would fall apart.”

Further, the longer guards work in a single school, the stronger their sense of belonging and familiarity with the staff, students and parents: “At first, it was hard for me ... The children do not want to check out who you are.” “In the beginning it was difficult because I did not really know them [the students, the parents and the staff] but now it’s much easier.”

However, not a single interviewee feels fully affiliated with the school system. The sense of transience, the always-present possibility of ending their work there, has an impact. Most explain that even if their relationship with the staff goes beyond the norm, this results from the initiative of individual staff members, rather than a systemic approach:

“The administration does not bother to invite me [to school events]. It is the teachers who tell me, ‘Come, you are invited.’ But the teachers are not the administration. The administration should approach me and say, “You are one of us, please come.’”

Moreover, following Davidov’s (2010) distinction between core and peripheral workers, the interviewees draw a clear line between themselves and the teachers in terms of the relationship with students. Only teachers educate, interact, and generally connect with students. “Education is for the teachers. It has nothing to do with to me.” “There are fights between the kids here, but that’s not my job. The teachers deal with these things.” “I get along with the students everywhere because I do not connect with them, I do not communicate with them.” “I tell them [the students]: I’m at work. I don’t like anyone sitting with me.”

The security guards and their employers alike interpret the law stating that they are not allowed to exercise any authority in relation to the students (Israel Authority for Maintaining Public Safety Law, 2005) as a prohibition against any contact between them and the students. “This is well known ... our supervisors tell us not to get too involved with the children.”

However, alongside their repeated statements about the lack of deep connections with students and the prohibition against developing such relationships, many interviewees mention the happiness the children bring them, and their special connection with them. “It’s best with the kids, [...] like you’re connecting with them.” “The positive side is the children; their attitude, the love shown here, it’s positive.” Some enthusiastically recall gifts they received from students. In her booth, Michal keeps greeting cards the students made for her. “It was last year on Good Deeds Day. The whole class made me cards. Really beautiful. Each wrote what he felt. ‘Thank you so much for all your hard work and effort -- from the redhead you see every Sunday at four o’clock’ [...] ‘Thank you for greeting us each morning and for laughing with us.’ – from [student’s name] in 5th grade.”

Even the security guard quoted above as saying that he doesn’t want students to sit with him at work, also says, “The relationship I have with the students is the most important.” Similarly, a security guard who said he does not approach students because of concerns about parents’ reactions, headed towards the school at the end of our interview. When I asked where he was going, he smiled and said he lent his soccer ball to a student and was going to get it back.

These contradictions in the school security guards’ stories illustrate the gap between the connections with students they perceive as forbidden to them, and the connections they want and sometimes realize. There is a gap between their defined role and the natural emergence of human interactions in a shared space. The following quote clearly expresses the guards’ isolation and sense of being on threshold, between being part of the school and being disconnected from it.

“There are times when I see myself as part of the school and times when I don’t. It’s like they say you are part of it, yet not part of it ... you feel a sense of belonging and not belonging. You are told ‘you are one of us’, but, in reality, you are not one of us.”

**Discussion**

Broad analysis indicates the findings of this study are consistent with previous research (Garsten 1999; Nissim & De Vries 2014; Spyridakis 2013). They verify that a feeling of being on the threshold and a state of liminality characterize the unstable working conditions prevailing in the neoliberal era (Kalleberg 2009). Furthermore, the findings indicate a possible connection between the structure of indirect employment and the experience of liminality. Employees are caught between the contracting company and the service-hiring company, unable to feel they belong to either, as frequently seen in the interviewees’ comments. This relates to the neoliberal labor market and indirect employment, which are widespread in Israel (Nissim & De Vries 2014).

Further analysis of the findings clarifies that while liminality is a fundamental feature of Israeli school security guards’ experiences and perceptions of themselves and their work, there are also empowering aspects that make their experiences and perceptions broader, deeper, and more holistic than what is commonly described in the research literature. First, the classic theoretical concept of liminality refers to culturally-defined situations that have temporality embedded in them, and represent an intermediate stage between a pre-threshold state and a post-threshold state, which is relatively stable and safe (Turner 1967, 1969; Van Gennep 1960). Israeli school security guards are not in this situation. Their sense of liminality is ongoing, with no clear finish line. Although they strive to overcome this liminality and establish greater security, this aspiration is purely personal. Its realization depends on the individual, without the support of any social structure or organization.

Second, liminality is structured into their job description and hence their professional identity. Their job description fluctuates between that of a guard, whose duties are passive supervision, with minimal training, located at the bottom of the security hierarchy, and that of an armed security guard, who requires greater professional knowledge and is higher in the hierarchy. This tension is intensified by their sense of responsibility about the protecting students’ lives, while also sensing that the surrounding society - the general public, their professional supervisors, students’ parents - grants them little appreciation and often expresses doubts about them.

Third, the liminality of school security guards has a tangible physical aspect, since they are required to remain at the school gate, on the threshold between the school and the outside world, neither here nor there, in between (Turner 1967). This position, rooted in the perceived need to protect the school from external threats, is projected onto their views of themselves as a barrier between the two worlds, further intensifying their sense of liminality.

Fourth, most watchmen and security guards work on the threshold between the place they are guarding and the threats to it. This is intuitively understandable in Israel, where watchmen and security guards are an integral part of the landscape of daily life, commonly seen at the entrances to malls, supermarkets, and many public institutions. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that liminality arises from the definition of the profession and the physical location of the guard. Additionally, as in the present study, there is a psychological aspect, which is the projection of the physical aspect and the role definition onto the guards’ perceptions of their work and themselves. When also considering the dimension of indirect employment, typical of the security industry in the neoliberal era (Briken 2011), especially in Israel (Levy 2005), a deep and multifaceted sense of liminality emerges.

However, a school is not a mall or parking lot or train station. It is a place in which close personal relationships are formed, and where people are engaged in common activities with shared goals with strong social and personal value. Faced with these deep and complex relationships, the lack of belonging and sense of liminality experienced by the school security guards are intensified. It is understandable why they describe feelings of isolation. They try to belong, interacting with those at the school in explicit and implicit ways, sometimes going beyond their official job description.

The law emphasizes school guards’ lack of authority over the students. Social norms differentiate between the core and peripheral realms in the school (Davidov 2010). The security companies require them to avoid contact with the students. The school administration discourages their integration into the system. All of these factors transmit the infeasibility and even inappropriateness of the guards’ sense of belonging, thus deepening the physical and psychological sense of liminality.

Nevertheless, security guards inevitably have an impact on the public and public spaces. Their liminality is also expressed through their role as agents who involuntarily bring the “real” world into the school building and educational system in general. Through them, political, security, and economic issues infiltrate from the outside world. Many parents hope to at least partially shield their children from these issues in the seemingly-protected confines of the school. But a security guard with a gun (the guards say the students inevitably ask about the gun) who sits or stands at the gate, who is part of the school but not really part of it, and who is occasionally replaced, suddenly and unexpectedly, by someone else, is part of the reality of children educated in this social environment. For education is not limited to what educators intentionally transmit to students. It is additionally -- perhaps primarily -- a product of what students see and experience, things they assimilate and that become an integral part of their worldview.

Therefore, if we move beyond the schoolyard to a broader perspective in terms of time and place, we see that the story of school security and guards in Israel, encompasses, to some extent, changes in Israeli society over recent decades. Their liminality implies a broader sense of liminality. In Israel, the security ethos has long been predominant (Lissak 2001; Peri 2006). It is tightly bound with mutual commitment between citizens and the state. Citizens are required and willing to sacrifice themselves to preserve the security of the nation, while the state is committed to citizens’ general well-being. This reciprocal relationship was exemplified when the state’s security program was based on parent-volunteers carrying out the action. Today, the security ethos has been preserved in the commitment to protect all schools, but its nature has changed. Parent-volunteer guards have been replaced by private guards employed by companies who compete with each other in the free market for maximum financial gain. Their degree of commitment to their employees is low. The result is security guards who doubt their own ability to properly protect the students, and whose social-economic security is undermined. There is dialectical tension between the collective-security ethos and the neoliberal ethos, according to which security is perceived as a commodity, and the state’s commitment to the individual is reduced to a minimum, subsumed under the general demand for personal and economic freedom. The co-existence of these two concepts creates an obscure and uncertain state of liminality arising from oscillation between two unstable systems. Like the situation of school security guards, there is no definite time when this uncertainty will end.

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**Notes**

1. There are two additional reasons for the exclusion of security guards at Arab educational institutions in this study. First, only some of these institutions are guarded. Second, the guards are mostly unarmed. Thus, the norms of retention and the social context at Arab educational institutions differ enough from those in Jewish institutions that their experiences need to be examined separately. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)