Narrative Child Protection in Hungary. The Importance of Knowing the History of the Families in Need in the Social Work with Children¹

Andrea RÁCZ

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary
racz.andrea.aniko@tatk.elte.hu

Ernő BOGÁCS

Directorate for Social Affairs and Child Protection, Budapest, Hungary
bogacs.erno@szgyf.gov.hu

Abstract. The study is reflecting on the nature and features of social work with families with children, attempting to discuss social work as assistance and apprehension and to detect whether there is any causal link between the efficiency of social work and the narrative approach and the “unstoried”, “faceless” condition of the families. We argue that professional attitude aimed at providing child protection support is not possible without knowing the story of families with children. Without a helping attitude, no real social work is possible, and thus the client remains invisible and faceless in the process of child welfare or child protection interventions. Besides the actual situations of story-based intervention in social work (micro level), narrativity is also important for the transparent and adequate functioning of the system (mezzo level); moreover, it can become a factor of paradigm shift in social and political discourse on social work and its target groups (macro level). The study is based on the research entitled *Child Protection Trends Supporting Children’s Well-Being* carried out within the Research Scholarship granted by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (2017–2020). The research focused on the family concept of child protection professionals and their views of the clients that can be deducted from this concept. The research also examines the notion and functions of the family from the viewpoint of children, young people and their parents

1 This research was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the ÚNKP-19-4 New National Excellence Programme of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Excellence Cooperation Programme Mobility Research Centre, project titled *Mobility and Immobility in the Hungarian Society*. The author participates in another research project focused on social solidarity related to the social service system supporting families with children (Domonkos Sik: *Solidarity in Late Modernity*, OTKA Young Researcher Fellowship).

as well as the professional attitudes and interventions determined by these perceptions. Research results show that due to the diversity and complexity of the problems of families in the purview of the child protection system one cannot reflect on professional solutions along types of problems. Successful functioning and efficient child protection rely rather on revealing individual and specific needs. All this indicates that child welfare and child protection work is possible only if built on personal stories.

Keywords: knowledge, specificities of assistance, family concept, child protection, Hungarian child protection system

Introduction

In our study, we reflect on the nature and specificities of social work, more precisely of the work with families with children and child-protection-related activities. We attempt to approach social work with families with children as an activity of providing help and knowledge. We also examine how getting to know the “narrative” of a family can contribute to the success of child protection interventions. It is important to note that the theoretical framework is based on the specificities of social work as a discipline and a field of practice. From this approach, we are gradually narrowing our focus to child protection. We argue that it is not possible to adopt a helping attitude without knowing the situation and history of the client.

In child protection, theoretical approach is important, but it is even more important to set out from a theory that can be put into practice as well. In accordance with this conviction, the first part of the study briefly outlines the referred theoretical background and connections.

The second part of the study presents the results validated by fieldwork in social work with families acknowledged in their uniqueness and reacting to their manifested, individual needs. The study is based on the research entitled *Child Protection Trends Supporting Children’s Well-Being* carried out within the Research Scholarship granted by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (2017–2020). The research focused on the family concept of child protection professionals and their views of the clients that can be deduced from this concept.

Thus, the first part of the study examines the possible connections between assistance, knowledge, and the efficiency and success of social work, and then we argue in favour of the importance of narrativity/story-based child protection on the micro, mezzo, and macro level. In the next part of the study, we reveal the most important findings of an empirical research in terms of family concepts. On the basis of the research results, we examine the way how leaders and professionals of child protection and the children, young people, and their parents themselves interpret the term and functions of family.

Basically, we ought to have as a starting point the fact that the social field has an extensive knowledge on the character and features of assistance; the courses and various trainings also prepare us for the acquiring and deepening of the needed competences, while practical knowledge and experience gained during practice is built on this knowledge. Our focus is on the invisibility and facelessness of families and professionals, a feature prevailing despite all this complex knowledge. We invite professionals to a common reflection, our aim being to initiate and carry out a dialogue regarding the renewal of social work and, more specifically, of the child protection approach.

Social Assistance Based on the Real Knowledge of Families with Children

One can reflect on parenting on a theoretical level, but one cannot work with parents on an abstract level. Individual parents, individual children, and thus individual needs are the subjects of social work, so child protection must acknowledge the importance of individual needs. Social work can be described only partly on the basis of norms, theories, and presumptions. When reacting to social problems, a helping attitude is not a guarantee for efficiency and conformity. The uniqueness of each case, i.e. family, children, etc., can be accessed and acknowledged if we get closer to see the details. Therefore, social work itself or child protection professionals working with families with children literally have to go close to the family, meaning that they need to be present. Besides this *de facto* presence, they need to get to know the history and ongoing stories of the parents and children, i.e. of the entire family. That is the only way they can see the “face” of the family and give adequate professional answers to real and not to presumed needs.

The Features and Distorting Elements of Social Work

In what follows, we examine the possible connections between assistance, cognition, and the success and efficiency of social work. We assume that providing help is distorted by several factors. Therefore, it can occur that providing help does not target the family and its members in their uniqueness and their needs, but it reflects on abstract, theorized needs and expectations, which might be foreign to that family or at least which are irrelevant for them.

The classification of social work as providing help might cause difficulties whenever the term of help is used indiscriminately in everyday language.² All

2 In the common use of the word help, the lack of own interest, own advantage or benefit is self-evident. In scientific use, help and assistance are overlapped to a certain extent but are not interchangeable (see Smih et al. 2016).

this can be conceived even as an oxymoron. The result of social work, in a first approach, is an advantage ensured to another person without any surplus effort on the part of the latter, and thus it can be considered an act of providing help. However, in practice, the existence of such advantage might be questionable. Social work as an activity directed towards the individual does not result in a benefit for the individual in all cases. Benefit can be interpreted as an advantage experienced by the individual (real or perceived need) and as an advantage not experienced as such by the individual but which, despite this fact, is considered an advantage by others (presumed or normative need). The satisfaction of the normative need can differ from the real need. Providing help in a professional framework implies a relationship burdened by diverse external rules and obligations, where it is not always the client who defines their needs. In practice, professionals, experts, and politicians might “know better” than the clients what the latter “do need in fact” (Krémer 2009: 207). In such cases, it is the intervenor who classifies the action as providing help.

Help can differ depending on persons and situations, and it is not always an attitude originating from altruism. It might entail aspects linked to dominance, that is, to a position of power as well. Nevertheless, helping might result in shared or personal material gain and could allow the avoiding of certain damages; yet, in such situations, personal interest is also detectable (Smith et al. 2016). Contrary to the help driven by the desire to control a certain situation or by the wish to acquire material, relational, or personal gain, empathy and identification can also entice to help. Although the views of researchers differ regarding empathy as a motivational factor, they do agree on the role of identification (Levison–Manning 2012: 1738). According to Fromm (2002), the minimum of identification is the identification with *the shared human core* (authors’ emphasis). The differences in talents, intelligence, and knowledge are negligible in comparison with the identity of the human core common to all men. In order to experience this identity, it is necessary to penetrate from the periphery to the core. If I perceive in another person mainly the surface, I perceive mainly the differences which separate us. If I penetrate to the core, I perceive our identity, the fact of our brotherhood (Fromm 2002: 295). To experience this identity of the human core, knowledge, which in fact can be distorted by multiple factors, is indispensable, and it implies connectedness with the other. To put it with other words, it implies a relationship, which allows for the acknowledgement of identities, i.e. for identification.

For example, a social worker motivated by the desire of a personal reward cannot adequately identify with the members of a family he/she should assist since his/her knowledge is not aimed at the other, wherefore they can identify only with their own needs or burdens. In fact, they perceive only the burden in providing help and often see themselves too as victims (Papp–RÁCZ 2016).

The process of acquiring knowledge can imply mistakes, so-called distortions³ as well (Fincham–Hewstone 2007). The bias can refer to the identification of the reasons of an act/condition, to the traits of the observed person, or to the likelihood of future acts/conditions. From the perspective of the present study, such a relevant bias according to Fincham and Hewstone (2007) is the so-called attribution error, i.e. attribution bias, when the observer ascribes a certain behaviour to internal reasons or to an inclination. One of the explanations to the most common attribution error is control, more precisely the feeling of having control. The behaviour of the other appears to be more controllable if the behaviour is attributable to permanent personality traits; moreover, (future) events related to the person in question also seem more controllable.⁴

Advantage, value, good, and rightful are not only terms with a subjective content but are also culturally determined.⁵ The belief of the social worker regarding advantage, good, or rightful can be different from the client's views. Such difference is significant in itself only if it has an influence on the actual work of the social worker. The professional manifestations of the social worker can be traced back to the ideas, beliefs, values, and norms defining the majority culture. Besides an imperceptible impact, legitimate constraint is also a feature of the dominant culture (Katz 2011). Professionals in social work might find motivation in a view concerning a benefit, which is, however, not good for the client or does not represent any benefit for the clients, wherefore such an activity cannot be considered a helping attitude. This can be avoided only if social workers manage to become aware of the cultural differences and their impacts. In turn, this awareness implies the acknowledgement (discovery) of the cultural embeddedness of themselves and of the other (the client).

The Importance of Personal Relationships, Narrativity, and Knowledge in the Helping Process

“Human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures” (Sarbin 1986: 8). Consequently, this structure is the organizational principle of cognition. Action (planning, creating, loving, hating,

3 Or partiality: there is a case of partiality when the observer systematically distorts an otherwise adequate procedure (for example, by applying it in excess or not applying it to a sufficient extent; Fincham–Hewstone 2007).

4 A well-known example to this is blaming a person for the negative life events they went through. Something bad happened to them because they are like that, and they deserved it. It could not happen to them (i.e. to the observer) because they are not like the other. Distortion or bias is manifested in the same manner on the group level: the members of the majority group link the success of one of their members to internal causes, while the success of a member of a different group to external factors (Fincham–Hewstone 2007).

5 In this context, culture is the totality of the distinct, shared norms, ideas, values, and opinions regarding life accepted/professed by the members of a society, which have a regulatory power concerning certain attitudes (Rubin–Chung 2006).

remembering, etc.) is also organized along narratives⁶ (Hardy 1968), and thus narrativity is the structuring principle of actions as well (Sarbin 1986). From this perspective, human beings are narrative beings defining themselves and others through stories and manifesting themselves in stories.

According to narrative psychology, human beings construct themselves in narratives, and not in a logical or scientific manner.⁷ We attempt to know ourselves and our environment in narratives. Expression and interpretation are indispensable aspects of a narrative. Interpretation always implies a certain (among others, linguistic) context. This context can differ from person to person, wherefore it is not sufficient to know only the story but is also essential to acknowledge the environment and those conditions in which the story unfolded; moreover, we have to know the language transmitting it (Kaposi 2002). Thus, knowledge has to be centred both on the story and on the context to which it is connected. Interpretation has to be as close as possible to the reality of the narrator and listener.

In the process of apprehension, the attributional bias and the narrative are manifested in the causality paradigm.⁸ But this paradigm is a category for the interpretation of social work, not only a social psychology concept. Regarding social work, this could mean two things. On the one hand, the need to know the absolute truth can be dropped, especially in the form of the cognitive-deductive-logical mode of knowing. On the other hand, one should allow space for the experiment in the sense that knowledge in social work should be focused on stories. Taking into account that a story always implies a personal relationship, it is directed on the relationship itself. Stories and the relationships they display include the story and relationship of the client and social worker. Without being aware of this story and relationship, social work is not possible.

A social worker has to succeed in various roles (counsellor, administrator of social issues, advocate, partner, etc.). These roles can be contradictory, and this inconsistency results in the uncertainty of roles and thus hesitancy in action (Asquith et al. 2005). Contradiction can be dissolved (at least partially) only if there is a basic value serving also as a principle, which can balance the activity of the social worker. One such perhaps less questioned basic value is the importance of personal connection.

Practice based on personal relationship is not a novelty in social work, but it is difficult to consolidate it as a counterbalancing principle of managerialism⁹ despite

6 Narratives are texts with temporal and causal aspects, which account events (Hoshmand 2005). In the context of child protection, narrativity refers to the knowledge of personal stories.

7 According to Bruner (1990), the other basic mode of cognition is the paradigmatic or scientific-logical thought.

8 "Paradigm means the totality of thoughts, views, values and methods accepted by each member of a society or in a stricter sense of a scientific community" (Varga 2003: 10).

9 Managerialism is an ideology consisting in organizational solutions and techniques of control, which consolidate this ideology. Its inadaptive functioning is indicated, among others, by

the fact that both the theory of attachment and research in neurology confirmed the causal link between personal relationship and individual development (Trevithick 2014). The theory of psychoanalysis also holds that past experiences have an impact on present-day behaviour and attitudes (Ruch–Turney 2010). A personal relationship is needed in order to be able to acknowledge these experiences entirely and to establish the connection with the present-day attitude and condition. Being aware of the client's history is important in social work because in lack of this condition the current situation cannot be understood. If it cannot be understood, clients' needs cannot be identified either. In the case of a wrong diagnosis of needs, intervention cannot be planned in an adequate manner, and thus it will not be able to achieve its goal. Through the narrative approach, one can avoid the critics against social work based on personal relationship, which considers that it focuses only on the psycho-dynamics of the individual, and neglects the social, political, and economic context (i.e. unemployment, racism, poverty, etc.). The narrative-based approach is able to avoid all the extremes outlined above as far as it aims to identify and apply the psychic and external resources in a balanced manner tailored to the individual.

Through a recent event accounted in a story, one can discover what is happening *now* to the client (micro level). Past events are relevant at most for a deeper understanding. The significance of this approach is given by the fact that the identification of the responsibility and thus of the obligation to act is not one-sided. Past and present events highlight not only what those problems of the clients' are about which social workers cannot do anything but also what those problems are which can have a solution. On the other hand, they reveal those aspects too which are linked to the larger (social, economic, political) contexts and which are outside of the individuals' control.

By applying the story-based approach, needs (client) and the connected intervention spots (state) as well as the responsibility and possibilities of the affected persons can be properly identified. Through this, personal relationship can be established, and managerialism can be balanced by adjusting intervention to the actual situation at the level of help provision or, in the context of our topic, at the level of child protection, which, according to the above described argument, can be labelled as mezzo-level social work. In other words, the narrative approach would represent a humanistic managerialism, more precisely, an individual-centred social work including management-like elements.

the following: everything and everybody is subordinated to serving the goal, and the relation between goal and tool is reversed, the tool turning to be the goal (i.e. standards, protocols, indicators); the individual falls out of this process, and the social worker (in the context of our topic) does not work with the client but on the client; the skills and values making the profession specific depreciate or are reassessed; the feeling of uncertainty, coupled with the feeling of losing goals and values, intensifies; the content is subordinated to the process, and thus quality is detached from the essence of social work and would have little importance in efficient intervention (Kováts 2011: 482–497).

In relation with the state and the society (i.e. with social policies), stories can be tools for sensibilization and paradigm shift (macro level). It is circuitously slow to have an impact on the society and on politics in terms of sensibilization and paradigm shift through theories, standards, and protocols. It is faster and simpler with consequences and preliminaries.¹⁰ The latter can be displayed in numbers and especially intervention costs and, besides these, especially by stories. Stories are often more efficient tools for shaping social and political mentalities than theories or aspects of cost efficiency. However, stories can be truly dangerous or useful for politics. It is not primarily theories on social work (like this study) or numbers (the costs of an intervention, the number of people requesting care or having access to care, etc.) that lead to the losing, acquiring, or keeping of political power (votes) but the stories that can be linked to these theories or numbers. Society and the individuals constituting it can be addressed through stories. Any fact, even if true and significant, reflected in a number or in a scientific study, can have little impact on the voter, on the society. However, the same fact transmitted through a story can mobilize large masses (see the impact of tragic events with high media coverage).¹¹ Thus, a story is decisive not only on the micro level (in the relationship between the client and the social worker) but on the (social and political) macro level as well.

In what follows, building on the significance of social work as manifested in stories, we will examine the family concept of professionals and clients as it is reflected in the contemporary practice of the Hungarian child protection system. We argue that the family concept basically determines the direction of the interventions since it influences how the target groups of child protection are approached.¹²

10 Shaping theories and introducing them to decision making is a time-consuming process. The clear formulation of the possible impacts and causes of a measure (which can be relevant from the perspective of politics as well) can be linked to researches, theories, etc.; however, any event which gains a wide publicity can influence decision-making processes faster than the theory which substantiates the same measure.

11 At this point, we do not argue against the mechanism of action of scientific theories but in favor of acknowledging the importance of narrativity in decision making.

12 In the sociology of the family, many theories attempted to provide a definition to the concept of the family (Czibere–Molnár 2015). In the field of child protection, first of all the family ecology theory appears to be relevant; according to this theory, society does not prescribe the behaviour of the family members; however, it does determine certain settings for family members. The economic, educational, religious, social, and cultural institutions also have their own influence on the life of family members (Bronfenbrenner 1979). On the level of child protection as a social subsystem, this concept is interlinked with its social embeddedness (RÁCZ 2017).

Analysis of the Family Concept from the Perspective of Different Child Protection Actors

The Context of the Research

Research conducted in the last two decades regarding the Hungarian child protection system¹³ was concerned about a particular area or issue of the child welfare and child protection system, i.e. the participation in the educational system of children in state care, their drop-out from professional schools (Hodosán–Rác 2009), and the overview of the factors facilitating and impeding higher education with relation to the support system of young adults (Korintus et al. 2011). Multiple research studies examined the overrepresentation of Roma children in specialized care and removal from the families for material reasons (ERRC 2007, Darvas et al. 2016). There were attempts to develop tools for measuring and testing the efficiency of the specialized child protection care (Rubeus Association 2017), and a new trend is the development and introduction of child resilience assessments (Homoki–Czinderi 2015). The preliminaries to the present research are given by three research studies aiming at the analysis of the professionalization of child protection and at the interpretation of the incorporated parental roles (Rác 2012, 2017; Papp–Rác 2016). It is important to note that no research was carried out on the family concept of the child protection system either on international or on domestic level although several international studies examine the response to individual needs in connection with complex assistance, and such studies have largely shaped our thought on the presented issue (Karageorge–Kendall 2008, Fernandez 2014).

Methodology

The aim of the research entitled *Child Protection Trends Supporting Children's Well-Being* carried out within the Bolyai János Research Scholarship granted by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (2017–2020) is to examine the views of people working in the child protection system (employees of child welfare and special care institutions and services and foster families) on the primary and secondary target group of child protection. The research also examined how children, young people, and their parents view child protection interventions aiming at the well-being and protection of children as well as the operational mechanisms of the system.

A major topic of the research is the concept of the family, aiming to understand the way how managers, professionals, and clients interpret the concept of the

13 On the structure and operational features of the system, see, for example (in English): Rác (2015, 2017). On the historic overview of the changes of the values the system is built on, see: Rác–Bogács (2018); for the presentation of the actual situation of the child care system in the light of the latest statistical data, see Balogh et al. (2018).

family, and the professional treatment methods determined by these concepts. The research consisted of a quantitative and a qualitative part. First, we carried out an online questionnaire-based survey in November–December 2017 with the aim to examine the family concept of professionals serving in managerial positions within the child protection system. We were interested in understanding the way how they define the term of family and how they describe the families confronted with various child protection problems. The survey targeted two fields of child protection: 1) management of child welfare services and centres and 2) management of special care institutions and networks. Within the qualitative part of the research, individual interviews were conducted with professionals and decision makers working in different segments of child welfare and child protection (8 persons), and focus-group interviews were organized on specific topics with professionals, children and youth, and their blood parents (8 groups).

In the quantitative part of the research, we asked the managers of the institutions to submit one questionnaire per institution; for this purpose, we requested answers on the part of a general manager, a manager of a care-providing unit, and a substitute manager. In our view, the professional mentality of the managers determines and represents the principles of professional operation prevailing in the institution.

There are a total number of 197 family and child welfare centres in Hungary, as many as the number of districts in the country. 51 questionnaires were returned, representing a 26% response rate. Regarding territorial division, we did not receive back questionnaires but from one county. There are 749 family and child welfare services, 244 of which filled in the questionnaire. The response rate was 33%. In the case of services, we received information from all 19 counties. The list provided by the Ministry of Human Capacities indicated 74 child protection units, 20 territorial branch offices, 42 foster care networks, and 12 care home managing units. Regarding the foster care networks and care homes, this means 551 units (headquarters and locations). Due to the centralization of the child care system in 2014, the questionnaire targeted only central institutions and territorial branch offices¹⁴ even if the establishments themselves have much more managers. Even so, special care units sent back 87 questionnaires. If we do not take into account those institutions which answered from several of their units, we received answers from 50 institutions, and thus the response rate from the entire sample is 68%.¹⁵ Among the 74 institutions, some are maintained by the state and some by churches and by non-governmental organizations.

Thus, 382 questionnaires were returned in total though in the case of some of the questions not all answers could be interpreted. The questionnaire consisted of four sets in each of the three areas investigated: data referring to service

14 In this sense, it targeted the top managers of the branch offices.

15 15 institutions sent back questionnaires from several units; in total, 37 questionnaires were sent in surplus.

providing, attitudes regarding professional functioning, the interpretation of the family concept, and the development trends in child protection. The two latter sets consisted of open questions, asking the managers to explain with their own words what they meant by the term family or how they would describe the target groups of child protection.

In the qualitative part of the research, individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight Hungarian professionals, each of 1 or 1.5 hours. The aim of the interviews was to reveal the actual situation and the future development trends of the child welfare and child protection system. The professionals we addressed are experts involved in the development of the Hungarian child protection system, in methodology development, and in decision making. In their case, the interview attempted to reveal what important changes occurred since 1997, when the Child Protection Act still in force was introduced, how they see the present situation, what structural deficiencies they perceive, and in their view how is the concept of family interpreted in the domestic practice. It is to note that the design of the research does not ensue from the narrative, story-based approach presented above, in the sense that conducting narrative interviews was not among our goals since we wanted to explore the family concept and views of the system of many actors. In this specific case, we reflected throughout the actual research work on what the theoretical context could be which should delineate the development of the Hungarian child protection system as well. Additionally, 8 focus group interviews were conducted on specific topics in the capital and other locations, with 3–6 participants each. These were discussions of 1.5 or 2 hours. The groups consisted of the following participants: 1) employees working in child welfare services, 2) employees working in child protection specialized care, 3) employees working in the child welfare and child protection system (relying on the cooperation between the two systems), 4) children included in the child welfare basic care (aged 14–18), 5) children in child protection care (aged 14–18), 6) young adults living in child protection who are provided after care (aged 18–25), 7) families in the purview of child protection (parents who live with their children), and 8) families who live separately from their children (parents whose children live in state care). In the case of each group, the aim was to inquire about the views on the child welfare and child protection work, about the situation of distinct child protection target groups, what the issues are that the system can respond to, and what deficiencies the different actors perceive. In their case as well, a few child protection notions were discussed, first of all in order to see how they interpret the concept of the family from their own perspective. In this study, we discuss only the interpretation of the family concept by presenting the views of the various actors.

The Family Concept of the Managers

For the purposes of the present study, we highlight only one question from the questionnaire-based research – namely, the characterization of the family concept. To this question, we received 328 interpretable answers.

With regard to the present-day conditions in Hungary, the responding child protection managers interpret the concept of family as a complex unit. The complexity of the answers indicates that the managers of the child protection system have for the most part a nuanced view on the role, task, and functioning of the family as a social unit, and we can find only a few simplified, schematic views. At the same time, the answers are extremely diverse, refer to multiple areas, and interpret the concept of family along many functions. When evaluating the answers, it can be stated that the managers of child protection institutions considered and defined the concept of the family along the functions of the family on the one hand and taking into account the nature of the unity and links between the individuals constituting a family on the other.

When interpreting the provided family definitions (328 interpretable answers), the following table summarizes the three major themes obtained.

Table 1. *The interpretation of the family concept by managers (N = 328)*

The major theme in family definitions	Distribution of professionals (persons)	Distribution of professionals (%)
Emphasis on household based on blood, legal, or economic relationships	149	45.4
Emphasis on psychological need, emotional attachment	101	30.8
Emphasis on social function	78	23.8

Source: authors' data based on the research findings

As seen from the table, the three major themes in the definition of the family were the following: 1) answers emphasizing *the household based on blood, legal, or economic relationship* typically attempted to define the members of the family, i.e. mother/father/parents/children/grandparents/people living together, and they emphasized the blood or legal relationship existing between them, i.e. own children/adopted children/spouses, etc.; 2) answers stressing upon *the psychological need or emotional attachment* identified family with a unit-providing protection, safety, and a community based on affection; 3) answers *outlining social function* were given by those who defined family as, for example, the scene ensuring the socialization of a child.¹⁶

16 Coding was rendered difficult by the fact that a significant part of the answers was overlapping in terms of the categories. We included the answers in one of the three groups on the basis of the

The Family Concept of Child Protection Professionals and Decision Makers

Child protection professionals called attention to the fact that, while the functioning and mentality of child protection is grounded by a legal act, which is highly esteemed yet originating from the 20th century, the families and children the child protection system is preoccupied with are basically very different in many aspects, displaying typical 21st-century features. In consequence, child protection follows social changes with delay, and this has an impact on the views about the family as well. During the past two decades, the features of the families and the individuals constituting them transformed at an increasing pace, and new types of problems arouse on which specialist services could not reflect in time and in a properly complex manner. The definition of the family basically builds on the image of the nuclear family and on well-behaved children with normal needs of care.

The professionals argued that there is a need for a service system which is more tailored to the needs of children and families; such system should be flexible and able to create an environment for establishing efficient relationships and thus a proper context for child upbringing:

A certain framework is needed, regulation is needed, but this legal system would not be able to manage and solve the issues in institutions [...] this rigorous framework could represent the harsh challenges of life and at the same time the personal kindness of people working in it, their openness to relations, the importance of human relationships, and it could give back to children the faith in all this [...]. (national-level methodological expert, child protection theoretician, Budapest)

Professionals think that the care provider first of all has to map their own material and human resources, the available services on the one hand and has to create a clear and detailed view of the target group, of the families and children in their range of clients, and of their social, material, and relational situation and specificities, which can differ in space and time, on the other hand. Assistance, case management, and the selection of services can be organized only with a clear knowledge of these factors and along the individual features of each case:

So, there is need for an evaluation on what colleagues I have [...] what families I have, what children I have, together with these colleagues how I can address these children, what results I can have, nothing else. I need to do this consciously, and I have to register these; we have documents at our disposal, required both in child care and special care, nothing else. Thus,

most emphasized element or the statement defining the term in the first place.

there won't be any exaggerated expectation, and there is a conscious social work on one side, namely in basic child care. On the other side, there is a purposeful educational work [...]. (national-level methodological expert, Budapest)

When giving a definition to the concept of family, professionals working on field set as a starting point the reference to the classic family model and the alteration from that. In their view, the family is a close-knit community which allows for arrangements based above all on emotional and only secondarily on economic connections.

When trying to identify the features of the client typical for basic and special care, the respondents approached the issue from the perspective of the lack of the basic values of a close-knit community: lack of emotional bonds, the insufficiency of attachments conferring safety. Respondents refer to addictions, first of all to alcohol and drug abuse and gambling addiction as general phenomena, but the mental illness of parents is considered typical as well. An important conclusion outlined from the viewpoints of the professionals is that in the case of dysfunctional families the deficit of transmitting norms leads to the reproduction of this dysfunctionality throughout several generations.

[...] Well, the difficult material situation, the lack of family relationships, [...] so, the fact they have nobody to turn to. Then, there aren't models in the family, rules to follow, like I get up in the morning, I work; so, for example, the kid doesn't see this from the parents. (mixed group of child welfare and child protection professionals, Hajdú-Bihar County)

The approach interpreting family not as a static entity but as a process deserves special attention. The family members need to work continuously on themselves and their relationships in order to keep the process – in fact, the family – functional. This is a family concept centred on the active individuals who continuously reflect on their relationships and on themselves, are able to learn and to develop:

[...] being a family is a process lasting for a very long time, with different people brought together by life either because they are partners or because they are in a parent–child relationship. [...] Family is a life-long process in which one has to learn a lot of things and do many things to keep it like this. (group of child welfare professionals, Budapest)

The Family Concept of Parents in the Purview of and Included in the Child Protection System

When asked how they would describe a typical family who is already in contact with child welfare or specialist care service, respondents indicated general family problems linked, for example, to child upbringing, or difficulties experienced by themselves or observed in their environment. It is striking though that the existence of material problems, even poverty, is indicated outstandingly among the reasons.

Well, in my opinion, there must be a problem or a conflict in that family. Not necessarily of that type we had; so, it doesn't need to be a very messy case, it can be simpler than that, like the kid became stubborn and isn't willing to learn. [...] Or another possible reason can be, for example, their material situation. (parent provided with child welfare service, Budapest)

They stated that after a child is removed from the family, the life but especially the attitude and values of the parents start to change. The crisis caused by the removal can be also stimulative; in fact, those who did not experience it in their own lives envisage that the shock would have a powerful, shaking effect. Such situation implies fear as well, and it is also frequent that the parents are not inclined to prevent or avoid such a crisis, and thus the family falls apart, and the removal of children becomes inevitable. However, such extreme situations can represent also preventive solutions in child welfare:

I think that this would make them appreciate more the relationship, to give more value to the time spent together with the child. As we know, this could shed a new light on the relationship they had before [...]. (parent provided with child welfare service, Hajdú-Bihar County)

In defining the concept of the family, the parents included in the child protection system emphasized the priority of the child's interests. The main consideration refers to providing the daily livelihood and making the family functional on an everyday level in an economic sense, but it is also noticeable that they consider the child of a family in a crisis situation rather as a victim.

[...] We work to provide for our children [...] children are the most important, only then it's us. We wish that, for example, the two girls to be in a good family [...] because they don't deserve the situation in which we are now. (parents provided with child welfare service, Hajdú-Bihar County)

All this could also point to the fact that parents provided with child welfare service are aware of their families' problems and acknowledge the importance of child welfare services in providing better opportunities for the future of their children.

The Family Concept of Young People in the Purview of Child Protection and Included in the Child Protection System

Youngsters in the purview of or already included in the child protection system clearly distinguish between the biological family and the unit functioning as a family, where the most important features of the latter are undoubtedly mutual attachment, emotional bond, and affection. Among the most important functions of the family, they mention mutual help, concern, protection, and care:

Well, family starts with the person who raises you up, pays attention, who gives you love and care. So, there's no point in calling me, I do have a mother who gave birth to me but then threw me away, she's not my family, she won't ever be, not even my mother. (young adult, Hajdú-Bihar County)

Their firm opinion is that the responsibility of having children relies on the parent, and this responsibility does not come to an end with care but is a life-long undertaking. Those who are not aware of this or assume to have a child despite knowing that they do not have a real possibility to rear them are not considered a parent by the interviewees.

When discussing about dysfunctional families and the position of children in such families, the youngsters repeatedly advanced a specific thought. The point in that was that the neglecting, even endangering, abusive family background brings in certain respects a benefit for the child turned victim: the difficult conditions, abuses, and the inaptitude of parents ultimately make children become more resilient.

Young adult respondents' opinion on children living in the child protection system can be outlined along a cleavage. Their answers reveal that they think children growing up in institutions are in much worse situation than those living with foster families. They describe children placed in homes as "sad", "disappointed", and "irresponsible". In turn, they considered that children living with foster parents were more sensitive and mature compared to their peers living in institutions.

Conclusions

In our study, we argue that any help can be meaningful, if only is adapted to the individual, to the client acknowledged and experienced in their individuality. The prerequisite to ensuring quality intervention is the relationship and identification

to a certain extent with the other. Helping the other implies knowing them. Without knowledge, the client remains faceless, their history or struggle would be invisible. The proper way of helping, besides professional self-consciousness and reflexion, could be an unbiased process of acquiring knowledge, its tool being the knowledge of the history of families with children in the process of social work.

Narrative (story-based) approach and practice can be applied as an efficient balancing tool of a helping attitude prevailing in a personal relationship interlinked with managerialism (i.e. humanistic managerialism). Nevertheless, narrativity can become a factor of paradigm shift in the social and political discourse on social work and child protection. All this implies on macro, mezzo, and micro levels the knowing of the individual and their acknowledgement as a unique personality. Our research results show that normality cannot be regarded as an absolute value in child upbringing, in family structure, in the roles of the parents, and in the way we think about family. There is not a single normality easy to define, and therefore one cannot deduce a singular family concept with clear delimitations and features. However, this nuanced approach which takes in consideration the various facets of a family definition is entirely missing from the present-day functioning of the Hungarian child protection system. According to professionals, this contradiction can be addressed by designing specific case managements which start from the actual case, and the choice for services is preceded by the exhaustive mapping of those circumstances in which the child and the family are living.

For an efficient, participatory child protection facilitating social inclusion, it is important to have an overall view on the prevailing political will. That is, one must be aware of the social, economic, and cultural development trends, of the views of the political decision makers about childhood, and of the connection between child welfare and child protection. In other words, social services need to know to what extent children and their families represent a value in the society (Rácz 2017, Rácz–Bogács 2019). It is of outmost importance to lay the child protection system on new grounds along personal histories and to assess new trends building on the acknowledgement of parenthood and family. Child protection relying on stories, revealing individual destinies and giving importance to knowing the client, where families have a face and thus individual needs, interprets family through the system of relationships, cognition, and identification. Any professional working with a family with children must be present, i.e. they must be interested in knowing the history of the family. That is the only way they can see the “face” of the family and provide adequate professional reactions to child protection issues.

Research results show that child protection professionals typically see the concept of family as a complex unit. They assign multiple functions to the family, which can be seen as a positive aspect also from the perspective of case management. According to the view of the actors of child protection, being part of a family or being in a social unit which is functioning as a family is a dynamic process implying many

actors, the central aspect of it being development and learning and the willingness to do something for each other. Yet, this implies an entirely different child protection approach on the level of everyday practice. According to the interviewed professionals, the families already in the purview of the child protection system are confronted with so complex problems that defining the type of these problems and developing methods to address them can be conceived with reservations. The key of successful functioning and efficient child protection thus relies in the individual needs assessment. In our argumentation, this implies that child welfare and child protection work are possible only with families having their own personal stories.

References

- Asquith, Stewart, Clark, Chris, Waterhouse, Lorraine. 2005. *The Role of the Social Worker in the 21st Century – A Literature Review*. Scottish Executive (<http://www.scottishexecutive.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/47121/0020821.pdf>).
- Balogh, Karolina, Gregorits, Péter, Rác, Andrea. 2018. The Situation of the Child Welfare System in Hungary. *International Academic Conference MIRDEC – 10th International Academic Conference, Global and Contemporary Trends in Social Science (Global Meeting of Social Science Community)*. Conference Proceedings. MIRDEC Publishing. 87–96. (<https://www.mirdec.com/barca2018proceedings>).
- Bogács, Ernő, Rác, Andrea. 2018. The Ethical Dimension of Professional Integrity in the Hungarian Child Protection System. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Social Analysis* 8: 75–89.
- Bronfenbrenner, Urie. 1979. *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, Jerome S. 1990. *Acts of Mind*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Czibere, Ibolya, Molnár Éva. 2015. „...nem a kortárs családi lét múltó aberrációja” Családdefiníciók és családelméletek az angolszász szociológiai irodalomban. *Metszetek* 4: 19–53.
- Darvas, Ágnes, Farkas, Zsombor, Kende, Ágnes, Vígh, Katalin. 2016. Roma gyerekek a szakellátásban. *Esély* 4: 52–82.
- ERRC. 2007. *Roma gyermekek a magyar gyermekvédelmi rendszerben*. Budapest: Európai Roma Jogok Központja.
- Fernandez, Elizabeth. 2014. Child Protection and Vulnerable Families: Trends and Issues in the Australian Context. *Social Sciences* 3: 785–804.
- Hardy, Barbara. 1968. Towards a Poetics of Fiction: An Approach through Narrative. *Novel* 2: 5–14.
- Hodosán, Róza, Rác, Andrea. 2009. Szakmai képzésben részesülő, gyermekvédelmi szakellátásban élő fiatalok iskolai pályafutásának vizsgálata. *Család, Gyermek, Ifjúság* 4: 14–24.

- Homoki, Andrea, Czinderi, Kristóf. 2015. A gyermekvédelmi szempontú rezilienciakutatás eredményei Magyarország két régiójának LHH térségeiben. *Esély* 6: 61–81.
- Hoshmand, Lisa T. 2005. Narratology, Cultural Psychology and Counselling Research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 2: 178–186.
- Fincham, Frank, Hewstone, Miles. 2007. Az attribúció elmélete és kutatása: az alapkötőlazalkalmazásig. In: Hewstone, M., Stroebe, W. (eds.), *Szociálpszichológia: európai szemszögből*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. 177–247.
- Fromm, Erich. 2002. A szeretet művészete. In: Lengyel, Zs. (ed.), *Szociálpszichológia: szöveggyűjtemény*. Budapest: Osiris. 295–304.
- Kaposi, Dávid. 2002. Book Review on: János László, Beáta Thomka (eds.), *Narratívák* 5. Narratív pszichológia. *BUKSZ* 3: 269–274.
- Karagoerge, Kathy, Kendall, Rosemary. 2008. *The Role of Professional Child Care Providers in Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse and Neglect*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare Information Gateway.
- Katz, Katalin. 2011. *Szociális munka és szupervízió: irányelvek, megközelítések, dilemmák*. Budapest: ELTE, TÁTK.
- Korintus, Márta, Rácz, Andrea, Csák, Róbert. 2011. Chapter 4: Hungary. In: Jackson, S., Cameron, C. (eds.), *Young People from a Public Care Background: Pathways to Further and Higher Education in Five European Countries – Final Report of the YIPPEE Project. Research Report*. London: Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. 47–58.
- Kováts, Gergely. 2011. Menedzserizmus-kritika az angol felsőoktatásban. *Educatio* 4: 482–497.
- Krémer, Balázs. 2009. *Bevezetés a szociálpolitikába*. Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó.
- Levison, Mark, Manning, Rachel. 2012. Prosocial Behaviour. In: Hewstone, M., Stroebe, W., Jonas, K. (eds.), *An Introduction to Social Psychology*. Fifth edition. Oxford: BPS Blackwell–BPS Blackwell Textbooks. 1710–1919.
- Papp, Eszter, Rácz, Andrea. 2016. How Professionals in the Social System and Child Protection Perceive Their Profession. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Social Analysis* 1: 71–91.
- Rácz, Andrea. 2012. *Barkácsolt életutak, szekvenciális (rendszer)igények*. Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetem Szociológia és Szociálpolitika Tanszék könyvsorozata. L'Harmattan.
2015. Social Exclusion in Hungary from a Child Protection Perspective. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies* 3: 458–465.
2017. *Child Protection as Fragmented Social Institution: Interpreting Corporate Parenting in Hungarian Practice*. Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press.
- 2017 (ed.). *Komplex módszertanra épülő hatékonyságmérések a gyermekvédelemben: Gyermekvédelmi szakellátásban nevelkedő gyermekek*

- és fiatal felnőttek életútjának vizsgálata a rendszer hatékonyságának mérése céljából.* Budapest: Rubeus Association.
- RÁCZ, Andrea, Bogács, Ernő. 2019. Towards an Integrative and Inclusive Child Protection Practice. *Investigaciones Regionales – Journal of Regional Research* 2: 143–160.
- Rubin, Kenneth H., Chung, Ock B. 2006. *Parenting Beliefs, Behaviors, and Parent–Child Relations.* New York–Hove: Psychology Press.
- Ruch, Gillian, Turney, Danielle, Ward, Adrian. 2010. *Relationship-Based Social Work.* London–Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Sarbin, Theodore R. 1986. *Narrative Psychology.* Westport–Connecticut–London: Praeger Publishers.
- Smith, Eliot R., Mackie, Diane M., Claypool, Heather M. 2016. *Szociálpszichológia.* Budapest: ELTE, Eötvös Kiadó.
- Trevithic, Pamela 2014. Humanising Managerialism: Reclaiming Emotional Reasoning, Intuition, the Relationship, and Knowledge and Skills in Social Work. *Journal of Social Work Practice* 3: 287–311.
- Varga, Csaba. 2003. *Új elmélethorizontok előtt (Tanulmányok).* Budapest–Nagykovácsi: s.n. (<http://mek.oszk.hu/02000/02040/02040.pdf>).