

**Andrea Rácz<sup>1</sup> – Ernő Bogács**

**Narrative child protection in Hungary. The importance of knowing the history of the families in need in the social work**

**Abstract:**

The study is reflecting on the nature and features of social work with families with children, attempting to reveal the relationship between 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, respectively 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, 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’ 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. The research also examines the notion and functions of the family as children, young people and their parents themselves perceive these, and the professional attitudes and interventions these perceptions determine. The 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 of child protection actors in the Hungarian child protection system

---

<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, by the ÚNKP-19-4 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology, by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Excellence Cooperation Program Mobility Research Center, 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).

## **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 reveal the connection between 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, gradually narrowing our focus on child protection. We argue that without knowing the situation and history of the client, it is not possible to adopt a helping attitude.

In child protection, theoretical approach is important, but it is even more important to set out from a theory which 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, more weighty 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' 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, then we argue in favour of the importance of narrativity/story-based child protection on micro, mezzo and macro level. In the next part of the study we reveal the most important findings of the 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.

### **Possible connections in assistance based on the knowledge about 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, thus individual needs are the subjects, aims, partners and defining factors of child protection work. Particularity can be described only partly on the basis of norms, theories, and presumptions. It is even less possible to react adequately to it. When reacting, a helping attitude is not a guarantee for efficiency and conformity. Uniqueness can be accessed and acknowledged, if we get closer to see the details. Therefore the social work or child protection professional working with the family with children literally has to go close to the family, meaning that has to be present. Besides being close and present, they need to get to know the history and ongoing stories of the parents and children, 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 supposed 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 needs and expectations foreign to that family or at least which are irrelevant.

The classification of social work as providing help might cause difficulties, whenever the term of help is used indiscriminately in everyday language.<sup>2</sup> All 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 from the part of the latter, 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 toward 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,

---

<sup>2</sup> In the common use of the word ‘help’, the lack of own interest, own advantage or benefit is self-evident. In the scientific use however help and assistance are overlapped to a certain extent, but are not interchangeable. (See Smith, Mackie and Claypool 2016)

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” (Kr mer 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, that is the connection to the other 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 and Manning 2012, 1738). According to Fromm (2002), the minimum of identification is the identification with *the shared human core*. “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, that which separates 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, thus for identification.

For example a social worker with a syndrome, motivated by the desire of a personal reward cannot identify adequately, since their knowledge is not aimed at the other, but through the other to themselves, therefore 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 and R cz 2016).

One has to take into account the attributional and cultural determinedness of providing help. In general, we try to understand the reasons impacting our environment and ourselves. We want to know why things are happening, and what conclusions can be drawn regarding future events.

The process of acquiring knowledge can imply mistakes, so-called distortions<sup>3</sup> as well (Fincham and 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 or to put it differently, 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.<sup>4</sup>

Advantage, value, good and rightful are not only terms with a subjective content, but are also culturally determined<sup>5</sup>. 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 or something good, which is not good for the client, or does not represent any benefit for them, therefore such activity cannot be considered as 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 organisational principle of cognition. On the other hand, action (planning, creating, loving, hating, remembering etc.) is organized

---

<sup>3</sup> 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 and Hewstone 2007)

<sup>4</sup> 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 (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 and Hewstone 2007).

<sup>5</sup> 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 and Chung 2006).

also along narratives<sup>6</sup> (Hardy 1968), thus narrativity is the structuring principle of actions as well (Sarbin 1986). From this perspective, human beings are narrating beings defining themselves and others through stories, and manifesting themselves in stories.

Thus, according to narrative psychology, human beings construct themselves in narratives, and not in a logical or scientific manner<sup>7</sup>. 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, therefore it is not sufficient to know only the story, but also the environment and conditions in which the story unfolded; moreover, we have to know the language transmitting it as well. (Kaposi 2002) Thus, knowledge has to be centred on one hand on the story, on the other hand on the context it is connected to. 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<sup>8</sup>. 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 one hand, the need to get hold of the absolute truth can be dropped, especially the cognitive-deductive-logical mode of knowing it. On the other hand, one can allow space for the experiment in which knowledge in social work would 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, Clark and Waterhouse 2005). Contra-

---

<sup>6</sup> 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.

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

<sup>8</sup> "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)

diction 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 the 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 managerialism<sup>9</sup>, despite the fact that both the theory of attachment and research in neurology confirmed the causal link between personal relationship and individual development (Trevithick 2014). It is also due to the theory of psychoanalysis that the presumption that past experiences have an impact on present-day behaviour and attitude consolidated and settled (Ruch and Turney 2010). A personal relationship is needed in order to be able to acknowledge these experiences in their entirety 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 their condition and situation cannot be understood. If it cannot be understood, their needs cannot be identified either. In case of an erroneous diagnosis of needs, intervention cannot be planned in an adequate manner, thus it will not be able to achieve its goal. Through this 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 economical context (i.e. unemployment, racism, poverty etc.). The narrative-based approach is able to avoid all the extremes outlined above, 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 are those aspects the client could and therefore cannot do anything about, but also what is it what they can and have to do. On the other hand, they reveal also those aspects the larger (social, economic, political) environment is responsible for.

---

<sup>9</sup> Managerialism is an ideology, on the other hand conceals organisational solutions and techniques of control, which consolidate this ideology. Its inadaptive functioning is indicated, among others, by 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 from this process, 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, thus quality is detached from the essence of social work, and would have little importance in efficient intervention. (Kováts 2011, 482-497).

By applying the story-based approach, needs (client) and the connected intervention spots (state), respectively 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 on the level of help provision, or, in the context of our topic, on the level of child protection, which, according to the above described argument, can be labelled as mezzo level. In other words, this would represent a humanistic managerialism, more precisely an individual-centred social work including management-like elements.

In relation with the state and the society – to put it simply, 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.<sup>10</sup> These can be displayed in numbers and especially intervention costs. Besides this, especially by stories. Stories are often more efficient tools for shaping social and political mentalities, than theories or aspects of cost efficiency. One might even argue that in fact one or more stories underlie these as well. Stories can be truly dangerous or useful especially 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 loosing, 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. In turn, the same fact transmitted through a story can mobilize large masses (see the impact of tragic events with a high media coverage).<sup>11</sup> Thus, a story and a personal relationship is decisive not only on micro level (in the relationship between the client and the social worker), but on (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

---

<sup>10</sup> 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 earns a wide publicity, can influence decision-making processes faster than the theory which substantiates the same measure.

<sup>11</sup> At this point we do not argue against the mechanism of action of scientific theories, but in favour of acknowledging the importance of narrativity in decision-making.



determines the direction of the interventions, since it builds on how the target groups of child protection are approached.<sup>12</sup>

## **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 system<sup>13</sup> was concerned about a particular area or issue of the child welfare and child protection system, like the participation in the educational system of children in state care, their drop-out from professional schools (Hodosán and Rácz 2009), the overview of the factors facilitating and impeding higher education with relation to the support system of young adults (Korintus, Rácz, Csák 2011). Multiple researches examined the over-representation of Roma children in specialized care, and the removal from the family 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 researches aiming at the analysis of the professionalisation of child protection and at the interpretation of the incorporated parental roles (Rácz 2012; 2017; Papp and Rácz 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 domestic level; although several international studies examine the response to individual needs in connection with complex assistance, such studies largely shaping our thought on the issue as well (Karageorge and Kendall 2008; Fernandez 2014).

### *About the research*

The aim of the research entitled *Child Protection Trends Supporting Children' 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

---

<sup>12</sup> In the sociology of the family, many theories attempted to provide a definition to the concept of the family (Czibere and 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, in turn 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).

<sup>13</sup> On the structure and operational features of the system see for example in English: Rácz 2015; 2017. On the historic overview of the changes in the set of value the system is built on see: Rácz-Bogács 2018; and the presentation of the actual situation of the child care system in the light of the latest statistical data: Balogh, Gregorits, Rácz 2018.

the primary and secondary target group of child protection. The research also examined how the children, young people and their parents view the child protection interventions aiming the well-being and protection of children, and 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 family, and the professional treatment methods determined by these concepts. The research consisted in 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 in manager position in child protection, and the way how they define the term of family and 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 from 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 the country, as many as the number of districts in Hungary. 51 questionnaires were returned, representing a 26% response rate. Regarding territorial division, we did not receive back any questionnaire only from one county. There are 749 family and child welfare services, 244 of them filled in the questionnaire. The response rate was 33%. In case of services, we received information from all the 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 Offices,<sup>14</sup> even if the establishments themselves have much more managers. Even so, special care units have sent back 87 questionnaires, for there were a few cases, when managers sent back questionnaire from a certain institution and

---

<sup>14</sup> In this sense it targeted the top managers of the branch offices.

from the establishment under its administration as well. If we do not take into account those institutions, which answered from several of their units, we received answers from 50 institutions, thus the response rate from the entire sample is 68%.<sup>15</sup> Among the 74 institutions, some are maintained by the state, some by churches and by non-governmental organisations.

Thus 382 questionnaires were returned in total regarding the three examined areas, though in case of some of the questions, not all of the answers could be interpreted. The questionnaire consisted of three sets in each of the three areas: data referring to service providing; attitudes regarding professional functioning; the interpretation of the family concept; 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 hour. 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 put into force up until now, 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 could the theoretical context be, which should delineate the development of the Hungarian child protection system as well. Besides, 8 focus group interviews were conducted on specific topics in the capital and other locations, with 3-6 participants at each. These were discussions of 1.5 or 2 hours. The groups consisted of the following: 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

---

<sup>15</sup> 15 institutions have sent back questionnaires from several units, in total 37 questionnaires were sent in surplus.

with their children); 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 the views on the child welfare and child protection work, on the situation of distinct child protection target groups, what are the issues 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 managers*

For the purpose 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 for the most part, the managers of the child protection system have 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. In 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 on one hand along the functions of the family, on the other hand taking into account the nature of the unity and links between of the individuals constituting a family. When interpreting the provided family definitions (328 interpretable answers), the following main categories could be discerned. 1) The answers emphasizing *the household based on blood, legal or economic relationship* typically attempted to define the members of the family: mother/father/parents/children/grandparents/people living together, respectively they emphasized the blood or legal relationship existing between them: 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 for example as the scene ensuring the socialization of a child.<sup>16</sup>

Table no 1. The interpretation of the family concept by managers, N=328 persons

Categories 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: own editing, 2020.

#### *The family concept of child protection professionals and decision-makers*

Child protection professionals called attention on 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 20<sup>th</sup> century, the families and children the child protection system is preoccupied with are basically very different in many aspects, displaying typical 21<sup>st</sup> century features. 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, new types of problems arouse, to 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.

That is why the professionals argued that a service system was needed which was more tailored to the needs of children and families, which was flexible and able to create an environment for establishing efficient relationships and thus a proper context for child upbringing. *“A certain*

---

<sup>16</sup> 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 most emphasized element or the statement defining the term in the first place.

*framework is needed, regulation is needed, but not this legal system would manage to 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)

The professionals think that the care provider first of all has to map their own material and human resources, the available services, on the other hand has to create a clear and detailed view of the target group, of the families and children in their range of clients, and their social, material and relational situation and specificities, which can differ in space and time. 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 the case. *"So I do 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, 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)

### *The family concept of child protection professionals*

When giving a definition to the concept of family, professionals working on field set as a starting point the reference to the classical family model and the alteration from that. In their view the family is 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 were in the focus. The respondents refer to addictions, first of all alcohol and drug abuse and gambling addiction as to general phenomena, but the mental illness of parents is considered typical as well. An important conclusion outlined from the opinions is that in 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)

It deserves special attention the approach which interprets family not as a static entity, but as a process. The family members need to work continuously on themselves and their relationships in order to keep the process – in fact the family – functional. The family concept centred on the active individual reflecting continuously on their relationships and themselves, able to learn and develop counts to an equal extent to the active participation of the parent, child and extended family. “[...] *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, the 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 among the reasons, the existence of material problems, even poverty is indicated outstandingly. “*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 simple than that, like the kid became stubborn and isn't willing to learn. [...] Or another possible reason that can be, that for example their material situation makes it necessary.*” (parents provided with child welfare service, Budapest)

They stated that after a child is removed from the family, the life, but especially attitude and values of the parents change. The crisis caused by the removal can be also stimulative, in fact those who did not experience it in their own life envisage that the shock would have a powerful, shaking effect. It is also a very interesting distancing, driven by fear as well, that the respondents are less inclined to prevent or avoid the crisis situation, than to attempt to look for the positive outcomes of the falling apart of the family caused by the removal thought to be inevitable, as the last hope. This might also mean the preventive solutions in child welfare, and the basic services targeting empowerment and consolidation are less known and accessible to them. “*I would 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 [...]*” (parents provided with child welfare service, Hajdú-Bihar county)

Among parents included in the child protection system, when defining the concept of family, the priority of the child's interests was given a special emphasis. The main consideration refers to ensuring everyday living, to make 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 – in turn, in their view, they have little impact on their saving, protection, on improving their life. “[...] 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 social problems go beyond the situation and possibilities of families, posing unsurpassable limits to their future opportunities as well.

*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 feature of the latter are undoubtedly mutual attachment, emotional bond, affection. Among the most important functions of the family they mention mutual help, concern, protection and care. “Well, the family starts with the person who brings 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 family, she won't ever be, not even my mother.” (group of young adults, 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 real possibility to rear them, are not considered a parent by them.

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 in a certain sense brings a benefit too to the child turned to a victim, so far as the difficult conditions, abuses, the inaptitude of parents ultimately make them more resilient.

The opinion of the responding young adults about the children living in the children 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 they say most of them do not learn to be responsible. In turn, they emphasize about the children living with foster parents that they are more sensitive and mature compared to their peers living in institutions.

## **Conclusion**

In our study we argue that any help can be meaningful, if it is adapted to the individual, to the client acknowledged and experienced in their individuality, the prerequisite to ensuring quality intervention being 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 out, 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, in the operation of a certain 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 level the knowing of the individual and their acknowledgment as a unique personality. A further conclusion from all this is, as the research results also show, that normality cannot be regarded as an absolute value in child upbringing, in family structure, in the roles of the parents, in the way how we think about the family; there isn't a single normality easy to define, therefore one cannot deduce one and only family concept with clear delimitations and features. However, this relativity is entirely alien to the present-day functioning of the Hungarian child protection system. According to professionals, this contradiction can be addressed by designing case management always starting from the actual case, while the choice for services has to be preceded by the exhaustive mapping of the circumstances the child and the family is living in.

For an efficient, participatory child protection facilitating social inclusion, it is important to have an overall view on the prevailing political will, the totality of the social, economic and cultural development trends, to know the views of the political decision-makers about childhood, and the family support assigned to their vision of the childhood, the connection between child welfare and child protection, in other words, we need to know to what extent do children

and their families represent a value in the society (Rácz 2017; Rácz-Bogács 2019). It is of utmost 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 face and thus individual needs, interprets family through the system of relationships, cognition and identification. Particularity can be achieved and acknowledged, if we get closer to be able to discern the details. Therefore, any professional working with a family with children has to be present in order to get to know the history of the parents and children, of the entire family and their timely stories. That is only how they can see the “face” of the family, and provide adequate professional reactions to child protection issues. The 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, functioning as a family is a dynamic process implying many actors, the central aspect of it being development and learning. Besides progressivity, learning and continuous, advancing alignment to each other, another key term of this concept is the willingness to do something for each other. In case of a blockage, child protection professionals can assist and facilitate this process and mobilize the resources within relationships. 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 the problems and developing methods to address these can be conceived with reservations. The key of successful functioning and efficient child protection rather relies in the individual needs assessment. In our argumentation this implies that child welfare and child protection work is possible only with families having their own personal stories.

## **References**

Asquith Stewart, Clark Chris and Waterhouse Lorraine. 2005. *The Role of the Social Worker in the 21st Century – A Literature Review*. Scottish Executive. (<http://www.scottish-executive.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/47121/0020821.pdf> - last visit on January 23, 2020.)

Balogh Karolina, Gregorits Péter and Rácz Andrea. 2018. *The Situation of the Child Welfare System in Hungary*. Masters International Research & Development Center, MIRDEC 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> - last visit on March 23, 2020.)

Bogács Ernő and Rácz Andrea. 2018. The Ethical Dimension of Professional Integrity in the Hungarian Child Protection System. *Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Social Analysis*, 8: 75–89. (<http://www.acta.sapientia.ro/acta-social/social-main.htm> - last visit on March 23, 2020.)

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-Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Czibere Ibolya and Molnár Éva. 2015. „...nem a kortárs családi lét múltó aberrációja” Családdefiníciók és családelméletek az angolszász szociológiai irodalomban. *Metszetek*, 4: 19-53. ([http://metszetek.unideb.hu/files/metszetek\\_2015\\_4\\_02\\_czibere%20molnar%2019-53.pdf](http://metszetek.unideb.hu/files/metszetek_2015_4_02_czibere%20molnar%2019-53.pdf) - last visit on March 23, 2020.)

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 and Rácz Andrea. 2009. Szakmai képzésben részesülő, gyermekvédelmi szakellátásban élő fiatalok iskolai pályafutásának vizsgálata. *Család, Gyermek, Ifjúság*, 4:14-24.

Homoki Andrea and 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 and Hewstone Miles. 2007. Az attribúció elmélete és kutatása: az alapoktól az alkalmazásig. In M. Hewstone and W. Stroebe (eds.) *Szociálpszichológia: európai szemszögből*. 177-247. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.

Fromm Erich. 2002. A szeretet művészete. In Lengyel Zs. (ed.) *Szociálpszichológia: szöveggyűjtemény*. 295-304. Budapest: Osiris.

Kaposi Dávid. 2002. László János, Thomka Beáta (szerk.): Narratívák 5 Narratív pszichológia. *BUKSZ*, 3: 269-274

Karagoerge Kathy and 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. ([http://tatkteszt.elte.hu/file/Szocialis\\_munka\\_es\\_szupervizio.pdf](http://tatkteszt.elte.hu/file/Szocialis_munka_es_szupervizio.pdf) - last visit on January 23, 2020.)

Korintus Márta, Rácz Andrea and Csák Róbert. 2011. Chapter 4: Hungary. In. *Young people from a public care background: pathways to further and higher education in five European countries – final report of the YIPPEE project* (eds. Sonia Jackson – Claire Cameron) London: Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. pp.47-58. Research report.

Kováts Gergely. 2011. Menedzserizmus-kritika az angol felsőoktatásban. *EDUCATIO* 4: 482-497.

Krémer Balázs. 2009. *Bevezetés a szociálpolitikába*. Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó.

Levison Mark and Manning Rachel 2012. Prosocial Behaviour. In M, Hewstone, W. Stroebe and K. Jonas (eds.) *An Introduction to Social Psychology*. Fifth Edition. 1710-1919. Oxford: BPS Blackwell - BPS Blackwell Textbooks.

Papp Eszter and Rácz Andrea. 2016. How Professionals in the Social System and Child Protection Perceive Their Profession. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae Social Analysis*, 1: 71-91. (<http://www.acta.sapientia.ro/acta-social/C6-1/social61-05.pdf> - last visit on March 23, 2020.)

Rácz Andrea. 2012. „Barkácsolt életutak, szekvenciális (rendszer)igények”. Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetem Szociológia és Szociálpolitika Tanszék könyvsorozat, L'Harmattan Könyvkiadó.

Rácz Andrea. 2015. Social exclusion in Hungary from a child protection perspective. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 3: 458–465. (<http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ijcyfs/article/view/13565/4364> - last visit on March 23, 2020.)

Rácz Andrea. 2017. *Child Protection as Fragmented Social Institution: Interpreting Corporate Parenting in Hungarian Practice*. Kolozsvár - Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press. (<http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro/bd/ebooks/pdf/2164.pdf> - last visit on March 23, 2020.)

Rácz Andrea and Bogács Ernő. 2019. Towards an Integrative and Inclusive Child Protection Practice. *Investigaciones Regionales – Journal of Regional Research*, 2: 143-160. (<https://investigacionesregionales.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/11/9.-Racz.pdf> - last visit on January 23, 2020.)

Rubeus Egyesület. 2017. *Komplex módszertanra épülő hatékonyságmérések a gyermekvédelemben: Gyermekvédelmi szakellátásban nevelkedő gyermekek és fiatal felnőttek*

*életútjának vizsgálata a rendszer hatékonyságának mérése céljából.* (ed. Rác Andrea) Budapest: Rubeus Egyesület.

Rubin Kenneth H. and Chung Ock B. 2006. *Parenting Beliefs, Behaviors, and Parent-Child Relations.* New York-Hove: Psychology Press.

Ruch Gillian, Turney Danielle and Ward Adrian. 2010. *Relationship-Based Social Work.* London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Sarbin Theodore R. 1986. *Narrative Psychology.* Westport-Connecticut-London: Praeger Publishers.

Smith Eliot R., Mackie, Diane M. and 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. (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2014.926868> - last visit on January 23, 2020.)

VARGA Csaba. 2003. *Új elmélethorizontok előtt (Tanulmányok). Facing to New Theoryhorizons (Studys).* Budapest-Nagykovácsi. (<http://mek.oszk.hu/02000/02040/02040.pdf> - last visit on January 23, 2020.)