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ZOOM IN AND ZOOM OUT: REFLECTIONS AND EVERYDAY ROUTINES OF THE CHILD PROTECTION PROFESSIONALS

Abstract

The research examines how the routines of child protection professionals in child welfare services and centers, institutions and foster care system reflect on professional work. What kind of dysfunctions are identified in the field work of child protection, how social work training and child protection (territorial work) can be solved to satisfy the needs of families with complex problems and enforce children's rights. In general, how do professionals zoom in into casework? How and when do they zoom out from the whole profession? From the client system on the level of the child protection system, what kind of development is expected from the system criticisms?

In this presentation, I try to find the answer to these questions: how the pervasive nature of social work can be interpreted in the practice of the Hungarian child protection. Also, I try to find out how it can be interpreted along professional treatments, reflections and everyday routines. I investigate what constitutes the barrier and ground for the fulfillment of the social profession's value system and knowledge base.

Keywords: Child protection, professional mentality, children's rights, system criticism, social work training

JEL Codes: I31, I38, I23

1. Introduction

The present study attempts to interpret the pervasive nature of social work within the practice of the Hungarian child protection, in the light of professional treatments, reflections and everyday routines. Along the interpretation of *the concept of the family*, it examines those factors, which hamper, respectively allow for the prevalence of the set of values and knowledge of social profession. The study also provides an overview of the development trends in child protection.

The study is based on closely connected researches in terms of issues, which examine the view on the child protection profession of certain child protection actors (child welfare services and centres, employees of service provision and foster parents) and of future professionals; they inquire their notion of family; the way of approaching case management of professionals already working in the field, how and when they detach from the profession and thus from the client system, and what kind of role can training and professional socialization in general play in this process. A further aim of the researches was to reveal the system critics underlying development needs, formulated by leaders and employees of child protection regarding the future of Hungarian child protection.

The thematically interrelated researches are built on quantitative and qualitative methodology. Within this framework, on online national survey was conducted among the representatives of the family and

child welfare service and centre, and of the child protection institutions and networks,[2] in order to reveal the attitudes of managers, their views on the families of children at risk, included in the child protection and child care system, and certain child protection terms. Besides this, individual interviews were conducted with professionals working in various segments of child welfare and child protection, with decision-makers, and people involved in trainings. Finally, focus group interviews were organized with professionals working in child welfare and child protection, children, young people, their parents, and with people participating at various levels of training.

In what follows I will highlight a few dimensions of the research on the basis of the results deducted from the survey with managers and individual interviews with professionals.

Professionals working with families with children included in the child protection system deal with individuals living in a social environment, who have a mutual influence on each other. This is expressed by the holistic approach of social work, the human ecosystem theory. Social work and child protection are activities implying intervention, characterized by a constant oscillation between individual help and care, and community tasks. It is a process during which problems of the private sphere are transposed to the public sphere. (Katz 2009; Johnsson-Svensson 2005) Its central term is empowerment, targeting above all to increase the ability to self-determination of the individual and to allow them to have an increasing control over their lives.

In Foucault's conception, power is a real system of relations, where central power is able to adapt to the needs of its citizens, while the individuals are able to integrate into power as acting subjects, that is they are able to influence power relations. One of the basic values of child protection is normalisation, therefore it is important to examine the nature of power and the attitude of professionals and clients toward it. The *government of complex systems* implies that the child protection system calls for the close cooperation of multiple actors and several sub-systems, and its functioning is embedded in the social system. It can be regarded successful if the system protects the child in accordance with the rights of the child, while the state basically respects the family and considers that the place of any child is with their family, which is supposed to protect them. The structure of the child protection system determines the way how the basic elements of the system (the services) are interconnected, and the range of the available material and HR capacities. The examination of the outcomes, therefore financial accountability are also important requirements, alike accountability in political terms, that is whether the government represents the interests of the citizens and responds to social needs. (Foucault 1980; Rácz 2016; Wulczyn et al. 2010)

2. Typology of child protection professionals on the basis of the analysis of professional mentalities

The typology of professionals was carried out according to variables regarding professional mentalities and attitudes based on 3 issues: 1) The child protection system is ready to address the problems of children and their parents on individual and systemic level. 2) At present the child welfare service and the child protection service are lacking methodological tools, which would be suitable to adequately address the complex problems of families with children. 3) In the field of family and child welfare and child protection, burn-out and professional isolation are extremely characteristic of professionals. The values of the dummy variables creating the groups show statistically significant correlation.

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[2] Within the framework of the research, online surveys were effectuated on three areas of care, in 2017. There are a total number of 197 family and child well-being centres in the country; in these, 51 questionnaires were filled in, representing a 26% return rate. The total number of family and child well-being services is 749; a number of 244 filled in the questionnaire. The return rate is 33%. Due to the centralization of the child protection service in 2014, the questionnaire targeted only central bodies, namely the top management, despite the fact that regarding the local establishments, there are much more managers. 87 questionnaires were sent back from the centralized organisations of the child protection system, the return rate being 68%. Among the child protection institutions, there are institutions supported by the state, the church and by non-governmental organisations as well. I performed the analysis together with my colleagues László Kiss, Karolina Balogh and Péter Gregorits.

The distribution of the answers allowed for the setting up of 7 groups, from which the second and third group, respectively the fourth and fifth group have similar views, and their difference is given by the systemic appraisal of child protection.

Table 1. Types of professionals on the basis of professional mentalities

Groups	Distribution of professionals (persons)
Disillusioned	153
Burn-out, positive	47
Burn-out, negative	45
Dedicated	11
Dedicated, disillusioned	14
Satisfied	37
Incoherent	70

Source: Author.

The *first – and most numerous – group* includes those, who think that child protection is not sufficiently elaborate in order to be able to address the problems of children and their parents, the system does not ensure adequate methodological tools to address issues, and professionals show symptoms of burn-out and isolation.

The *second* and *third group* includes those who think that although the system ensures the proper working tools, the professionals within the system are burn-out and deserted; yet, while according the second group, the child protection system is able to carry out its tasks, the third group considers that the child protection system is unable to function efficiently.

The *fourth* and *fifth group* includes those who think that the child protection system does not ensure adequate methodological tools, yet they do not find the professionals working in the system burn-out. The difference between the two groups is given again by the different appraisal of the functioning of the child protection system. The dedicated are those who declare that despite insufficient tools, the child protection system is able to fulfil its tasks, while the dedicated, though disillusioned consider that the system functions improperly.

The *sixth group* includes the satisfied professionals. In their view, the child protection system functions satisfyingly, and provides proper tools for carrying out the various tasks; burn-out is not necessarily a typical phenomenon among professionals either.

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The *seventh group* includes inconsistent respondents; they either think that the system functions adequately, although the necessary methodological tools are not ensured, and professionals are burn-out and isolated; or they consider that child protection system functions deficiently, although it does provide proper tools for addressing problems, and they do not think that professionals working in various institutions are burn-out either.

The way how the child protection system is viewed is closely connected to the extent to which the professional considers their colleagues competent.

3. Views about the family in child protection

In recent years, social trends affecting family structure are well-known. These are:

- The fertility rate fell below the reproduction rate;
- First childbirth is postponed.
- The age of marriage is also delayed.
- Relationships are more fragile.

All this lead to increasingly varied family settings, as there are more and more types of families and relationships. Gender roles are changing as well, first the economic role within the family of women, then the role of men in the upbringing of children and in family life. (Oláh et al. 2018) All this have an impact on services consisting in support activities as well.

The research examining the views on the profession and family aimed at unveiling the way how managers in the child protection system determine the term of family. The respondents typically see the family as a complex unit, as determined by the conditions prevailing at present in Hungary. The intricacy of certain answers indicates that the leaders in child protection system have a rather nuanced view of the role, task and functioning of the family, as a social unit, and simplistic and schematic answers are rare. Nevertheless, the answers collected in various fields of child protection are extremely varied, as the respondents define the concept of the family in relation to many fields and along many functions.

The analysis of the answers reveals that the respondents approached and determined the notion of the family on one hand from the perspective of the functions of the family, on the other hand from the perspective of the character of the relation which makes the individuals composing the family belong to each other. The most frequent functional elements of the term are family, as a social unit, family, as an economic unit, and family, as a consumer unit. Terms designating the possible types of family bonds are an extremely important element of the answers: family, as a social unit built on emotional attachment; family, as a social unit built on blood relationship/kinship; but we can refer here to the notion of family as a household as well.

Relatively a few respondents mentioned family as a legal unit, and marriage, as a precondition to family was also sparsely indicated. It seems unambiguous that the concept of family among respondents, as they project it to the Hungarian context, is not exclusive. Nevertheless, the association of family and children is important in their thought: extremely typically, the interviewed managers conceive the family as the background of raising the children, as the primary field of socialization, and as the guarantee of the safe upbringing of children.

Thus, the definitions formulated by the professionals can be sorted in three main groups. Respondents emphasizing the household based on blood, legal or economic relations attempted to determine the members of the family: mother/father/children/grandparents/people living together, and they highlighted the blood or legal relationship between them: own children/adopted children/spouses etc.

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Respondents stressing upon the mental need and emotional attachment identified family with the protection, safety and community based on love ensured by the family. The social role was emphasized by those who determined the family for example as a field of the socialization of children.[3]

Table 2. The definition of the family according to the views of managers		
Groups on the basis of the definition of family	**Distribution of professionals (persons)**	**Distribution of professionals (%)**
Emphasis on household based on blood, legal or economic relationships	149	45.4
Emphasis on mental need, emotional attachment	101	30.8
Emphasis on social function	78	23.8

Source: Author.

During the individual interviews, the interviewed managers (8 persons) all agreed that since 1997, when the Child Protection Act was issued, the pace of social changes significantly accelerated, therefore the term at the core of the law and of the entire child protection system, namely the term of the family needs reconsideration. As one of the interviewees put it:

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[3] The fact that a significant number of answers were overlapping regarding the categories, made the coding more difficult. Our methodological decision was to rank the answers into the 3 categories in each case on the basis of the most emphasized element or the statement primarily defining the issue.

"[...] child protection has to react to what happens to the children and to their families. And what is happening to the children and their families is that huge changes are occurring constantly in their everyday lives, in their relationships, culture, thought, and during the last 20 years all this speeded up at an astonishing level. [...] compared to this, our child protection system is a very nice creation from the 20th century [...] the ideal family as conceived by the child protection law [...] is the family of parents with fixed working time, having one, two or several children, where parents go to work in the morning. Children leave as well, or are taken to kindergarten, crèche, school, then at around 5 pm, the family gets together, and they all have a certain time together, until dinner, when they can discuss the events of the day. They play together, they spend some time outdoors, at least one hour and a half with the children, then, in the evening, everybody is performing the tasks assigned to them regarding housekeeping. Daddy takes out the garbage, mummy makes the dinner, children are lining up things or whatever, they are dusting, it depends how work is divided. Then they take dinner, still have some time to watch cartoon, then everybody is slowly settling down, the kids go to take a bath, the good-night-kiss follows, and a short tale, after that the couple can engage in a more intimate talking, while the kids are reassuringly breathing next door." (Child protection professional)

Professionals think that even if we conceive an ideal family, as a basic concept, this family model certainly cannot be regarded as general. On one hand, the timetable and working hours of the parents radically changed during the last few decades, the daily routine as described above is rare in contemporary families; on the other hand, communication channels and norms are entirely transformed as well. Furthermore, the structure and composition of the families can be described with totally different features than a few decades ago, since stepfamilies are much more frequent.

A further aspect raised by the professionals is that the application of a concept of family – in fact irrelevant of its actual content – is relative in itself. The application of the criteria referring to the ideal family is much more consistent and rigorous from the part of professionals working with clients, if they need to formulate their expectations towards the clients during case management, and it is significantly more flexible and permissive, if they attempt to define these criteria not as child protection actors. As the segment of an interview reveals, this is partially due to the excessive expectations towards the professionals, the restrictions on their professional freedom, and their sense of threat. Relativity, the flexible application of criteria in many cases depends whether the professional engaged in case management is willing to take risks. At a systemic level, it is not encouraged that a professional ponders over the decision possibilities and the timely application of the available tools at a relatively large scale, taking into account the actual circumstances and the specificities of the family.

"So deep down inside there is that image of the ideal family, but when he/she sees, so gets to know that family, and realizes that it would never be up that scale, then he/she is more permissive with that family. But whenever a conflict occurs, [...] inclusion into the child protection system, or a child is removed from the family, this ideal model of a family would hang over our head [...] when we remove the child from the family, we're overwhelmed by a strong sense of fear too, that I won't leave the child there, because if I do, and something happens to that child, I would be deemed responsible. Therefore I would remove the child, and the reason for that is that ideal model of a family, because that's what they would make me account for [...]." (Methodological expert)

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When addressing the issue of the concept of family, the answers of the professionals and decision-makers were determined by the idea that normality cannot be regarded as some sort of incontestable value in child raising, in the structure of the family, in the responsibilities assumed by the parents, in general in the reflections about the family, in the sense that there isn't one single, clearly defined norm or normality, therefore one cannot deduce from the notion of norm or normality a single notion of family, which could be described with clear-cut boundaries and features. However, this relativity prevailing in the thought about the notion of family, moreover, which is the basic condition of the authenticity of the definition of the term, is entirely alien from the actual functioning of the child protection system. The professionals think that the primary solution to this contradiction, especially which can be immediately applied, is to build up case management always from the perspective of the concrete case, the choice for the services being possible following the thorough assessment of the life conditions of the child and of the family – however, in lack of a systemic support (methodology, tools), and if resources and capacities are deficient, in most cases this cannot be achieved.

According to the opinion of the professionals, the problems of the families which came into the attention of the child protection system are so intricate and in almost all cases so multi-layered, that the definition of the types of problems – in conclusion the working out of the methods to address or solve these – can be conceived only with serious reservations. The key of a successful functioning and of efficient child protection thus can be addressed rather from the perspective of the assessment of individual needs.

To sum up, in the opinion of the professionals, the reaction of the system to the problems of children growing up without a family can be regarded as obsolete. It attempts to be in line with an interpretation of *family*, which does not exist in today's society; it endeavours to provide functions, services and conditions replacing the family, while it does not take into account, or does so only to a small extent, the expectations of clients regarding the family, most importantly the changes in these expectations, and the radically new features of these compared to the former ones. Besides, the pace and extent of the systemic reflections determining the philosophy of care upon these expectations lags far behind the pace and extent of the changes in social processes.

In the view of the professionals, it is important that on the level of the entire society, the concept of the family is increasingly lacking content related to blood relationships and kinship; the attempts to define or interpret the term are increasingly appealing to informal relations, connections established within the social network shaped in space and time, which are based most of all on similarities of life situations, their basic value being not the origin, but the relationship. The analysis of the attitudes of children and young people allows us to conclude that being in a family can be described much better as the multi-layered, complex network of affection relationships, than by applying the rigid categories and labels of deterministic relations. Yet these relationships – contrary to the categories and connections applicable in case of blood family – are definitely determined by volatility, they are dynamic instead of being static; thus, they bear the marks of an approach, which is not built around the actors, but around the ever changing relations and connections.

4. Development needs according to the views of managers and professionals

The open questions applied during the survey included one referring to the definition of the concept of the *"child protection, as service"*. We asked the representatives of centres, services and care centres alike what this concept meant for them.

The relevant answers focused around the following main issues:

   a) *Improvement and enlargement of services, quality improvement*

"Acknowledging the need for support prior to the escalation of the problem, addressing it on a systemic level, healing the physical and mental injuries." (Manager of foster care network)
"Providing service through mapping the needs of families." (Manager of a child welfare centre)

   b) *Supporting children, ensuring priority to the protection of children*

"The service, as an approach and operational modus enables to adapt to the individual needs of children, thus it can provide help and support more efficiently." (Manager of a specialist child care centre)

   c) *Supporting families, paying attention to families*

"It means the maintaining and supporting of the FAMILY, the most important group for socialization within society. It directly fosters social integration and the improvement of the possibilities of the family." (Manager of family support and child welfare service)

Related to developments, the interviews with professionals point out the following aspects:

On conceptual level, the professionals do not call into question the appropriateness of the transformation trends in basic care; yet, several respondents pointed out that the legal and operational framework is not able to solve the problems in itself, as it relies on the service provider applying the provisions and on the professionals and managers carrying out professional work whether they are familiar with the problems faced by the clients, their specificities, and whether they can find the proper, efficient services and methods.

A further problem is caused by the fact that in many cases alternative solutions are not available besides services within the institutional framework. In order to ease this deficiency, many respondents call for the enhancement of service providing, ensuring it more freedom and flexibility within the legal framework, and which can adapt more efficiently to needs.

The professionals interviewed within the research agree that child protection work can be efficient and progressive both in basic and specific care only if organized and performed within the framework set by the legislation, along the comprehensive methodological guidelines, but expressly adapted to the actual conditions. When carrying out professional tasks, material and human resources and applicable services need to be mapped, and clear and detailed view needs to be shaped regarding the target group, the families, children within the sphere of clients, their social, material situation and relationships, their specificities, which are changing both in space and time. The work of providing support, case management and the selection of services can start only when the implied professionals are familiar with all these factors, and can be carried out only on the basis of the distinct features of the concrete case.

"I believe in minor things, in the methodology of tiny things [...] So I make an assessment concerning my colleagues [...], my families, my children, how I can intervene with these colleagues in the case of these children, which results I can achieve, which not. This has to be done consciously, and registered, there are documents available for this as requested in basic care too, and the same thing goes for specialist care, nothing more. Thus there wouldn't be any exaggerated expectations, and a conscious social work is carried out on one side, meaning in basic care. And on the other side a conscious educational work is performed." (Methodology expert).

Professionals engaged in training highlight that professional socialization is a long process, training being an important part of it, but professional personality development has to be continued in field work as well, since this relates to the ethical attitude, protection of values, the conscious use of intervention models of various levels, and results in the professional being able to act as "the agent of change" in the work with the client.

"Three or five years pass, well, if all was set from the start, then what training is good for, then it's only a transmission of knowledge, nothing more, I can send the materials within a distance learning framework, they would read it, and that's all. But much more happens during our trainings; knowledge transfer is important, yes, but the professional personality, the ethics, the confrontation with professional dilemmas, community work, the constant questioning of concepts, and the convincing. So this is a process, one develops a professional personality not only in relation to the client, but in relation to themselves as well, they need to understand the institutional system, the social task developed by social work during 300 years. What our oath is about is that I would tell those who have the power that we have a problem, that I rise against inequalities, that the vulnerability of a distinct community matters to me, and that's what I'm talking about. [...] I need to show up in the media, in the parliamentary legislation, at the local council, even if it's not a single person, because one person can't do everything, but as a profession, because that's why we created professional associations, to be able to do all this." (Director responsible for trainings).

5. Conclusion

The findings of the research show that the managers and professionals of various segments of the child protection system consider the family as a complex unit. They assign multiple functions to the family, which can be seen as positive aspects from the perspective of case management as well.

Based on their views, it is important though to emphasize that while the functioning and philosophy of child protection is grounded in a much valued, functional, yet 20th century legislation, the families and children targeted by the child protection system (alike the entire society) are basically different from many aspects, they belong to the 21st century. The Child Protection Act and the related legislation tried to follow these social changes during the last two decades, but the pace and significance of the changes are vast, and the adjustment of the system through minor corrections is not sufficient. Time has come to redefine the concept of the family, which is of central importance from a child protection aspect. New social challenges require that the profession reinterprets the term of the family, as it is a basic concept of social work and child protection, maps the actual features of the client (and which are relevant in their relationships), and restructures its tools and methods applied in basic care services.

In order to render child protection successful, basic and specialist care efficient, social and cultural processes need to be mapped and interpreted; nevertheless, the quest for adequate answers and relevant reactions from the part of the system are indispensable as well.

The results of the research undoubtedly indicate the structural deficiencies of child protection, but addressing these deficiencies is closely related to the issue of professional mentalities. When determining the development and advancement possibilities, an important consideration is that transformation has to take into account the present condition of the system, specifically the features of the professional attitudes of those working in the system; for example, one needs to take into account that a large-scale awareness-raising cannot be carried out in a short time, in a forced, up-to-down manner. It is possible to introduce new concepts through a bottom-up approach, by implementing new perspectives (the elucidation of the basic issues of care philosophy, the definition of purposes free of any uncertainty, the real participation of clients etc.) gradually into an organic system, followed by abstracting these considerations towards theoretical syntheses.

The most important feature of an ideal child protection system is that it removed a child from the family only if such intervention is unavoidable. For this unambiguous expectations need to come from the part of the society, respectively, from the state representing social expectations, that is: it has to be clearly determined what outcomes and results are expected from the functioning of the child protection system. When setting the goals, besides ensuring the framework and the resources, it is necessary also to determine which is the operational model which would become the basis of the functioning of the system. Besides, the expectations towards people working as helpers have to be real and achievable.

"[...] the duty of the state would be to make it clear what it is expected. When it is unambiguous, it can be fulfilled in various ways. It can be done in a system operated by the state, [...] saying that here it is the task, we have jobs, you can apply for [...], just as when an investor has to be convinced [...] The same should be done by the service providers, since this way one had to pay attention to the service users [...] it's just that this approach should pass over the head of the colleagues too, and this vision should be affordable. So it's wrong when the expectation is that no problems should occur in child protection, it must not happen that a child is starving, we mustn't allow a child to be hurt, not a single tragedy should occur. They would occur. Of course, we attempt to avoid it, but it's bloody stressful to raise such an expectation towards professionals. One need to set as an expectation to do everything to avoid any such event. If you've done everything you could, still it happens, then you can be certain you wouldn't be hanged for that." (Methodology expert).

It is an important challenge for Hungarian child protection to ponder what the real reasons for doing social work with families with children are. It is a known phenomenon in international child protection discourse as well that professionals typically are focused on "what and when" should be done, and less on "why and how". (Wilkins – Whittaker 2018).

Managers are typically aware of the deficiencies of the system, of the goals of the child protection work; however, there are many unanswered questions, like how could goals be rendered operational, and which are the professional, methodological tools, the application of which would allow for achieving these goals.

Child protection faces a conceptual turn, during which we should debate again the way how we think about families in trouble or facing multiple problems. Views about families are typically negative, thus, even the fairest child protection intention is at place – according to which the goal is to ensure support and to strengthen families in a difficult life situation –, we should reconsider at macro level (system level), mezzo level (the range of services within an institution) and micro level (actual intervention) what the real targets are, and how we can achieve them while preserving the basic professional values, and taking into account the social embeddedness of child protection. (Rácz 2016) One might ask what social work represents in society, how social worker is helping families, when, due to the managerial and risk management endeavours, the contradiction between theory and practice, control functions, and exaggerated administration are discernible. (Papp – Rácz, 2014).

Related to participation, as a value and as a basic right, more inclusive and supportive approaches are needed in professional and legal procedures which prepare and perform the removal of a child from the family. Such an approach is the empathic approach, that is the understanding of the situation and of the context, the acknowledgement of the reactions to the situations, of the emotions and behaviours. Following the removal of a child, we need to organize in the shortest possible time the meeting of the child and the parents, thus facilitating the dialogue between them. It is important to describe the removal to the child as an open and hopefully short term option at an early stage, and we should not suggest that this would be the definitive situation, when time frames are not known. Regarding parents, it is an important requirement to inform them regarding the expectations related to them, the reasons of the removal of the child, what the parents should change, and what kind of help is available for the efficient solving of their problems. (Ross et al. 2017) As we look at the everyday routines and rituals of child protection from the parents' perspective, we realize that this should be a two-directional process. The power (government) frames this process as a real system of relations, adapting to the needs of the citizens – in its dual meaning: to the needs of the system of clients (the cared) and of the employees (the service providers). In turn, the individuals, as acting subjects are able to integrate into the power relations, that is they are able to shape them: the client, by taking control over their lives, the professional, by standing up for the powerless, as the member of a professional community, guided by the vision of a good quality society.

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