

COLLABORATIVE SOCIAL WORK IN THE COMMUNITY WITH FAMILIES FACING MULTIPLE CHALLENGES²

ABSTRACT

The economic crisis has contributed to an increasing number of families facing multiple challenges in Slovenia. This sets new tasks for social policy makers and social workers to respond to new challenges on macro and micro levels. The current issue of reorganising centres for social work in Slovenia also raises questions about what types of changes are required. We have developed a model of working with families facing multiple challenges and have studied the experiences with this form of help. The results confirm that in order to competently help families, it is necessary to provide qualified social workers who consistently practice the doctrine of a working relationship of co-creating in individual working projects of help (IWPH) in community and institutional contexts, which will provide support for professional social work.

Received: January, 2018
Accepted: October, 2018
UDK 364.46:364.044.24
DOI 10.3935/ljsr.v25i3.215

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Key words:

Individual working project of help (IWPH), community, action-research project, centres for social work, institutional context.

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² The article was developed within the project, which is funded by the Norwegian Financial Mechanism and the Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy for the period from 16 February 2015 to 30 September 2016.

INTRODUCTION

Socio-economic factors that determine the conditions of everyday life have contributed to an increasing number of families in Slovenia who need help. The crucial problem we have faced in past decades is the subordination of social policy to economic policy, which undermines the welfare state, leads to the curbing of social rights, and increases poverty (Dragoš, 2013; Leskošek and Dragoš, 2014). An increased poverty rate³ has become a Slovenian reality in recent years. The problems also include high unemployment and the fact that even families whose members are employed face poverty (Boškić et al., 2013). Only a few life situations lead to more adversities and uncertainties such as poverty. Life in poverty affects human health, family relationships, the role in the community, etc. (Maholmes, 2014). The increasing number of individuals living below the poverty threshold means there are more families facing multiple challenges that need help. Social work must respond to current social circumstances and continually develop new knowledge in order to be able to create desired outcomes with people. The article addresses the internationally relevant topics for the development of social work. An increasing number of families facing multiple challenges does not only apply to Slovenia. Several countries worldwide are dealing with similar situation, where families do not get the appropriate support to overcome the complex problems (Matos and Suosa, 2004.; Meloand Alarcão, 2011, 2013.; Madsen, 2014.; Mešl and Kodele, 2016). The future challenge for many countries is to develop contemporary knowledge about working with families facing multiple challenges⁴. In addition, we are witnessing a lack of opportunities for social workers to work according to contemporary social work concepts in public social welfare organisations (e.g. centres for social work (CSWs)) due to increased formalisation and procedural demands (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000). So, we have to adapt institutional contexts (see e.g. Healy, 2014.) that will support implementation of new knowledge. We open two main research questions related to the described problem: what kind of knowledge is required in order to be able to competently collaborate with families facing multiple challenges? and what kind of institutional context is required in order to be able to achieve a contemporary doctrine of social work with families in everyday practice?

Social work with families facing multiple challenges is presented in the beginning. Then the current reorganisation of CSWs, which is affecting the institutional

³ See, e.g. <https://www.stat.si/StatWeb/en/Field/Index/39>

⁴ e.g. Slovenia has been participating in the Erasmus+ project (from September 2016 to August 2019) Learning to Innovate with Families (LIFE), where five European countries are trying to develop new knowledge, skills, competencies to enable professionals to adopt more effective interventions in working with families experiencing complex challenges.

context for working with families, is introduced. The presentation of results of the action-research project »Helping Families in the Community: Co-creation of Desired Changes for Reducing Social Exclusion and Strengthening Health« follows. Within the project, we developed knowledge for collaboration with families facing multiple challenges, also with a view to finding answers to the necessary changes in the reorganisation of CSWs. The purpose is to demonstrate the knowledge developed within the project, and present the experiences of families collaborating in the project, which we have gained by analysing the material collected through interviews with families at the end of the collaboration. The findings are an important starting point for further planning for the reorganisation of CSWs, concerning content reorganisation that will hopefully follow the organisational changes. The future aim is to create an institutional context that will support social workers at CSWs to use this knowledge in everyday practice.

SOCIAL WORK WITH FAMILIES FACING MULTIPLE CHALLENGES

Different terminology is used when addressing families facing multiple challenges. We can read about multi-problem families (Matos and Sousa, 2004; Bodden and Deković, 2016), vulnerable families (Sharlin and Shamai, 2000), families that face multiple stresses (Madsen, 2007), and problems (Walsh, 2006) etc., but all authors are writing about similar family realities. These families are facing problems and challenges which are multiple, chronic, complex, transgenerational, entangled, and reflect on various life domains (Bodden and Deković, 2016). When writing about families facing multiple challenges in this article, we are referring to families living in poverty, who are confronted daily by internal and external stressors. They are facing circumstances that contribute to multiple crises. These families strive to adapt to harsh environments which offer them unfavourable resources. These lead to an overburden and destabilisation of families. They often lack opportunities and the necessary time and support to learn, develop, and strengthen their skills and knowledge (Sharlin and Shamai, 2000; Melo and Alarcão, 2011, 2013; Madsen, 2014). The narratives of these families are too often dominant family narratives of failure, inherited from generation to generation (Madsen, 2007). We are using the term »families facing multiple challenges« as believing that families, in spite of difficult life circumstances, are more than just the problems they face and are resilient (Walsh, 2006; Melo and Alarcão, 2013; Mešl and Kodele, 2016) in coping with challenges in everyday life.

The history of the development of social work with families shows that helping families was already a relevant topic in social work in the past. Wood and Geismar

wrote (1989, according to Wise, 2005:1), that »social work owes the beginnings of professionalisation to families with multiple problems«. Nowadays, with developed, specialised, professional help within various helping professions, families facing multiple challenges often receive much specialised help. This involves help from various professionals who usually collaborate with families only in a particular field; help is fragmented (Matos and Sousa, 2004; Walsh, 2006; Madsen, 2007; Melo and Alarcão, 2011, 2013 etc.). Thus, it may occur that a family is overloaded with different kinds of help; however, desired changes have not taken, as each professional worker is focused mainly on solving a part of the problem. A lot of times help is unsuccessful due to receiving support mainly in instrumental areas (financial, food, medicine, etc.), but not targeting family relations (Matos and Sousa, 2004). Authors stress (Ibid.) that interventions focusing on this issue would be expected, because families facing multiple challenges are dealing with problems such as instability, chaotic interactions, absence of rules, poor parenting skills, etc. It seems that social agency workers' pay more attention to the parts (each problem) than to the whole (family interaction style) (Ibid.).

Melo and Alarcão (2011) point out that a large number of professionals who help families, but are not interconnected, are often burdensome and not helpful to families. Walsh (2006: 254) highlights the problem of existing ways of helping families when they are lost among many cracks in an unconnected network of professionals. It is unacceptable that despite numerous professionals, families remain without the help they truly need. A person who will join the family and connect all the professionals and family members to co-create desired outcomes in a collaborative project of help is needed.

How can social work respond to the intolerable living conditions of families? How can we support them to step away from old problems towards a new future? (Madsen, 2007) Besides necessary systemic changes that would provide conditions for a decent life,⁵ we must respond to each unacceptable story and support a family so that it can step out of the vicious circle and start co-creating a new, promising one. Melo and Alarcão (2011, 2013) and Madsen (2007, 2014) emphasise the importance of collaboration with families at their homes, as it enables professional workers to better understand the complexity of family life and needs, making it easier for them to collaborate with families with empathy.

⁵ In social work, we need to act on the macro, meso, and micro levels. The article shows processes of helping families, which fall in the micro and meso category. However, we do not wish to overlook the importance of social changes that are necessary in order to overcome the unacceptable conditions in which people live.

The Institutional Context of CSWs through the Lens of Current Reorganisation in Slovenia

In Slovenia, CSWs⁶ are primary institutions in the social protection system, which provide help to families facing multiple challenges. They are established by the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities (MDDSZ), and are public social protection organisations. Does the CSW institutional framework offer possibilities for implementation of contemporary social work knowledge? Since the establishment of the first CSW in the early 1960s, these institutions have undergone several reforms, including: the specialisation of work; a number of regulations, and extensive changes in legislation, where the notion of the controlling role of the state was noticed (Rihter, 2011); work overload; etc. led to the fact that professional social work slipped into the background. This does not apply only in Slovenia, e.g. Parton and O'Byrne (2000), Munro (2004), Madsen (2014) also express concern that social work has become overly procedural.

The institutional context that puts forward legislative and procedural issues has contributed to the dissatisfaction of users, professionals, and the public in Slovenia. Moreover, state representatives have recognised that changes are required and the reorganisation of the CSW system has been a topical issue for several years. This seemed to be a great opportunity to create something new and supportive for contemporary social work, but unfortunately the priorities of changes were different between politicians and the professional public.

In 2013, at the beginning of the reorganisation process, MDDSZ tried to include different representatives in the planning, and different working groups were established. There were also many public discussions going on aiming to open up space for more possibilities for social work at CSWs (e.g. Mešl et al. 2013, 2016; Rihter and Šugman Bohinc, 2016). When The Action plan on priority activities of ministries and governmental departments (AP) (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2016) was introduced, there was a lot of indignation from the professional public because professional voices (e.g. Association of SW, Faculty of Social Work (FSW)) were not taken into account. This resulted probably because these were mainly voices about professional content changes, while the MDDSZ and the government gave priority to organisational changes. AP (Ibid.) indicates that the reorganisation of CSWs will be implemented in three phases. This reorganisation will cover an indicative calculation, social activation, and organisational changes. An »informative calcu-

⁶ Besides the CSW, help to families is also provided by NGOs that operate in individual areas of social work with the family and are an important supplement to the CSW activities. In the continuation, I will focus only on the CSWs as public institutions.

lation of social transfers« means an automation of issuing decisions in connection with certain rights. As part of social activation, common and long-term recipients of financial assistance and the long-term unemployed will be included in social activation. The aim of CSW organisational changes is to reduce the number of legal entities (from the current 62 CSWs to 16 CSWs). They further state (Ibid.) the envisaged changes should positively effect upon the unbundling of employees, and the reorganisation of work by dedicating more time to direct social work and less to administrative work. The professional public questioned how the planned changes would support more time for direct social work.

In September 2017 the Act Amending the Social Assistance Act (2017) was accepted. Based on these legislative changes, the organisational merger of CSWs happened in October 2018. CSWs are now mostly dealing with the new organisational structure. It is still not clear how the merger will contribute to more possibilities for social work. So, after two years, after the organisational merger, we can say we are again facing the crucial task that was pointed out at the sixth Slovenian Congress of Social Work in 2016: defining the purpose and objectives of the reorganisation, which will also include professionals' and service users' perspectives (Rihter and Šugman Bohinc, 2016).

It is crucial to secure space for more opportunities to do professional social work. The definition of the AP (Ibid.) reveals that with reorganisation, the MDDSZ also wishes to provide more opportunities for direct social work with people. At this point, at least two questions arise: Will the organisational changes, made in October 2018, really open up space for more opportunities for direct social work? How will this work be carried out? It is not enough just to send social workers into the field, but the changes of the institutional context must support the implementation of paradigm changes in the understanding of the processes of help (see e.g. Jong and Kim Berg, 2002; Walsh, 2006; Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006; Anderson and Gehart, 2007; Madsen, 2007).

During the important period of planning the CSW reorganisation, a group of researchers at FSW implemented the international action-research project for helping families facing multiple challenges, which are often users of CSW. With the developed knowledge, experience in practice, and results we can be a competent interlocutor in the further process of the content reorganisation, which hopefully will follow after the organisational changes. The big question that opens up is how much our voices can be heard in this (political) project.

The Project with Key Theoretical Guidelines

On February 2015, we launched the project »Helping Families in the Community: Co-creation of Desired Changes for Reducing Social Exclusion and Strengthening Health« at the FSW, which was carried out within the framework of the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2009-2014 with the participation of the University of Ljubljana (FSW, the Faculty of Sport and the Faculty of Health Sciences), together with partners – Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway, and the Association of Friends of Youth (AFY) Moste-Polje⁷. The project objectives were directed at co-creating changes with family members in order to reduce health inequalities, to shape the model of help for families in the community, and to train professionals for work in the fields of the participating faculties.

In the context of FSW, students who have completed their undergraduate education at the FSW independently entered into the processes of help to families. During the performance of practical work, they had intensive support in small mentoring groups and the possibility of regular individual consultations with a mentor⁸ at the faculty. Students⁹ visited families independently in their homes¹⁰, and in the working relationship co-created desired outcomes with family members. The concept of a working relationship of co-creation, defines users and social workers as collaborators in a joint project with the mission to co-create shares in the solution. The working relationship helps the social worker to establish a conversation with the family, which will enable exploration and the co-creation of desired outcomes (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006). Each student collaborated with at least one family, and developed an individual working project of help (the IWPH) (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006).

In establishing collaboration and work with families, we started from the assumption that families facing multiple challenges are resilient (Walsh, 2006). Students recognised many sources of strength in family members despite their distress.

The starting point for the work was also Madsen's understanding (2007) that families are much more than the problems they face. We were not focussing on "what is missing and what should be" in their family life, but rather on "what there already is and what could be co-created" together with them.

⁷ A non-governmental organisation, which provides material assistance.

⁸ Mentors were members of the project group (teachers and researchers at the faculty).

⁹ Since it also involved a learning process, we use the term students, but this term always relates to social workers with a completed undergraduate degree.

¹⁰ Meetings (approx. 1.5 hours) were held once a week or every 14 days.

Model of Help

Students drew upon the draft model, which was created by researchers before the fieldwork, and was upgraded based on experiences gained during the collaboration with families. Figure 1 shows a model briefly described in the continuation (according to Mešl and Kodele, 2016).

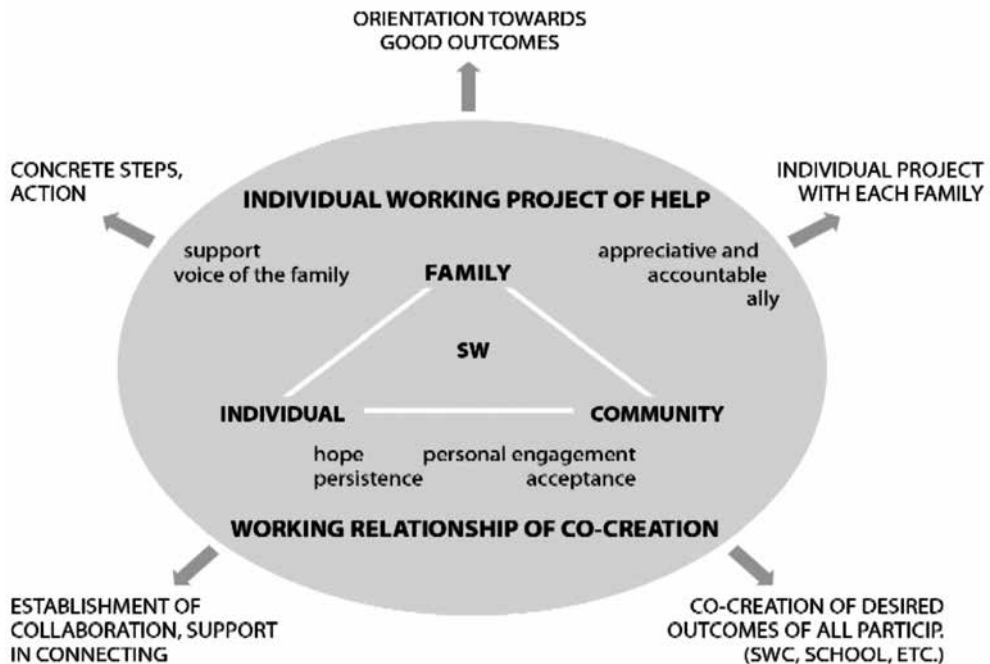


Figure 1. Model of Collaborative Processes of Social Work with Families in a Community (Mešl and Kodele, 2016)

The objective of collaborating with a family in the community is to establish and maintain a co-creative working relationship, and the IWPH. A social worker must move from personal to relational tasks with different family members. Effective projects of help in social work extend from families to the community. Help to families in the community is considered as help to families, which is implemented in people's homes, i.e. in the community where a family lives. In the IWPH, we also involve other resources in a community that support a family on their way to desired changes (e.g. school, neighbours). This way, we can overcome the problem of frequent dispersal of help. The social worker is an appreciative and accountable ally (Madsen, 2007). It is important that they be personally engaged when they enter

into the collaboration in a way that helps reshape despair into hope. Insisting on the IWPH, where we take into account the voice of each family member, we are oriented to a positive outcome, and support people in realising concrete steps can bring about desired changes.

RESEARCH

Research objectives

The research objective was to analyse the experience of families facing multiple challenges with the implementation of the model. The research objectives were divided into two sets. With the first set, we wanted to obtain general information about the experience of collaboration in the project; with the second set, we wanted to obtain detailed information about the experience related to individual process issues. The article presents results related to the first set, where research objectives were defined as:

1. To explore the family experience of collaborating according to the developed model;
2. To explore the comparison between family experiences in the project in relation to other forms of received help from other institutions (e.g. CSWs, school, health services);
3. To explore factors which, according to families, have contributed to good outcomes¹¹ and good experiences.

Research method

The research is qualitative. We carried out Grounded Theory Research (Creswell, 2007), as we wanted to explain how families experience the manner of help, which was developed based on previous understanding and work experiences. We wanted to gather information about the experience of collaborating in the project and the work process.

Population and sampling

The research population are families facing multiple challenges in Slovenia. The sample for the research encompasses families who were involved in the proj-

¹¹ Good outcomes are considered as positive changes towards commonly defined goals at the beginning or during the collaboration with the family.

ect. The AFY (24 families) and various CSWs (4 families) selected families, which according to them needed additional help, and submitted a list of families to us that were invited to collaborate. The project involved 28 families, of which six families prematurely ended the collaboration for various reasons (incorrect information about the project, employment, etc.). During the academic year 2014/15, students continuously collaborated with 22 families. The final interviews were not sampled, as we wanted to interview all families who joined the project, including those who ended the collaboration prematurely. Seventeen families, who continuously collaborated, agreed to participate.

All families (except F20 and F21) face poverty. Families needed help in several areas (e.g. housing issues, financial assistance, help with learning, relationship issues, etc.). More detailed characteristics of the sample are displayed descriptively according to each family in Table 1 in order to facilitate the traceability of the statements in the presentation of results and the understanding of family life context.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Family code	Sample characteristics	Participants and the circumstances of the interview	Received help from other institutions
F2 ¹¹	Single mother, daughter, 2 sons - twins - both diagnosed with autism. Mother unemployed, divorced 5 years, housing problems, unarranged contacts with the father, only receives financial support for the care of sick children.	Mother	CSW, school, AFY
F4	Father, mother, 2 sons, mother has cancer, came from Albania, parents do not speak Slovenian.	Father, mother, student. The conversation was carried out in Serbian	/
F5	Mother, son (elementary school with adapted programme). Mother is unemployed.	Mother	CSW, school, AFY, other NGOs

¹² We include information about families who participated in the interviews, and keep the family code from the entire list of families

Family code	Sample characteristics	Participants and the circumstances of the interview	Received help from other institutions
F6	Single father, son. Mother left them. Father is unemployed.	Father, son	School, other NGOs
F7	Single mother, two daughters, 6-year-old twins.	Mother	/
F8	Single mother, son and daughter from the first marriage, younger daughter with a current partner, who is married to another woman with whom he lives and has two adult children. The youngest girl is a child with special needs. Mother is unemployed.	Mother	AFY, other NGOs
F9	Father, mother and 3 children. Both parents are unemployed. The eldest daughter has health problems.	Mother, two older children, student	School, AFY
F10	Single mother, four children. Mother unemployed, divorced due to domestic violence. Only an 8-year-old son lives with her. Some children live with their grandmother and some with their grandfather.	Mother	CSW, School, AFY, other NGOs
F11	Mother, father and 4 children. Father is unemployed, with PTSD associated with past military experiences. Both parents are of Serbian nationality.	All members of the family, student	CSW, AFY
F12	Single mother, daughter with severe heart failure.	Mother, daughter	Child psychiatrist, AFY
F13	Mother, father, 2 children. Mother is employed but receives a modest salary; father has health problems and is unable to work.	Mother, daughter, son	School, AFY
F15	Father, mother and 3 children. Both parents are unemployed.	Mother, student	CSW, school, AFY
F16	Single mother, 3 children. Housing problems.	Mother, 3 children	CSW, AFY
F18	Father, mother, 3 children. Father is employed but receives low wage. Both parents are Albanians; they have trouble understanding the language. The youngest son has a serious health problem.	Mother, father, the youngest son, student	AFY, other NGOs

Family code	Sample characteristics	Participants and the circumstances of the interview	Received help from other institutions
F19	Single mother, daughter, son. Mother a partial disability pensioner. Son has learning difficulties.	Mother, student	CSW
F20	Grandmother, grandfather, daughter, 2 granddaughters. Grandmother takes care of her granddaughters; mother has drug problem, health problems.	Grandmother, one of the granddaughters	CSW
F21	Father, mother, son, daughter. Suspected domestic violence, alcohol addiction, son has learning difficulties.	Mother	CSW, School

Measurement instruments and data collection

For data collection, we used the guidelines for semi-structured interviews. Topics of the interview are divided into two parts:

1. Reflecting on the experiences of collaboration in the project:

Description of the collaboration experience in one or a few words.

Satisfaction with the collaboration in the project; the use of scaling questions (e.g. Jong and Kim Berg, 2002).

Differences in the method of work within the project in relation to other help, and the factors that contributed to good results of the experience of collaborating in the project.

2. Reflecting on collaboration through the process perspective (agreement to collaborate, use of strength perspective, etc.).

This article shows the results of the analysis of the first set, by means of which we wanted to obtain family feedback on the experience of collaborating on the project, and thus the experience of the model, which was the foundation for the work.

At the end of the student collaboration with a family, four FSW project group researchers carried out the final interview. Interviews were carried out from June to September 2015. Researchers carried out 17 interviews, which lasted from 20 minutes to two hours. Students were present at some interviews, upon the desire expressed by the family. Interviews (except F7) were held in the families' homes. F7 was interviewed at the FSW.

Data analysis

The analysis of the material was carried out according to the method of qualitative analysis (Struss and Corbin, 1990; Mesec, 1998). In order to ensure the most relevant results, we derived specific steps for data analysis from the systematic approach to research (Creswell, 2007). We made transcripts of interviews, which were encrypted due to data protection, and regulated according to research topics. Then we selected the relevant parts of the text considering the subject of the research; the selected material was divided into meaningful units and coded. We grouped statements according to common codes and combined the plurality of acquired concepts into categories. This was followed by axial coding, based on which we created results that were written in the form of experimental theory. The experimental theory was formed from the developed concepts and categories, and supported with original statements. Due to transparency, two topics in the article are shown with the most common codes (Tables 2 and 3). In connection with the third topic, the results are presented descriptively.

RESULTS

Definition of collaboration experience in one, or a few words

Table 2. The most common codes for identifying collaboration

Codes that appear more than once	Frequency of codes in connection with answers	Frequency of codes in connection with the number of different families	Examples of parts of statements
Satisfaction	15	7	<i>Pleasant.</i> <i>Interesting.</i> <i>Fun.</i> <i>Great.</i> <i>Excellent.</i> <i>...plus 10.</i> <i>...very good.</i>

Codes that appear more than once	Frequency of codes in connection with answers	Frequency of codes in connection with the number of different families	Examples of parts of statements
Help	8	7	<i>Great help. Helped me a lot. ... she knew how to help me ...</i>
Homework and study help	7	5	<i>... Because we learned multiplication, we counted and wrote words she helped my son learn, which he liked a lot ...</i>
Reserved at the beginning	7	4	<i>I'll say, from the beginning, very reserved, because if you do not know a person, you cannot be 100% honest at the beginning ...</i>
Professional competence	6	3	<i>For me, professional means that you are both, a social worker and human... ...Oh, professional, you know, it's hard to explain...</i>
Student characteristics	5	3	<i>... But in the end I realised that she is simple, friendly, approachable, open she is warm and you can trust her ...</i>
Provide advice	4	3	<i>... how she gave us instructions and sometimes I also needed advice.</i>
New experience	4	2	<i>... refreshing ... something new... a beautiful experience</i>
Good contact	3	3	<i>I think we got along well. We were on the same wavelength. We cooperated well. We had something in common.</i>

Codes that appear more than once	Frequency of codes in connection with answers	Frequency of codes in connection with the number of different families	Examples of parts of statements
Conversation	3	3	<i>... she talks to me ... We talked.</i>
Trusted the student	2	2	<i>... I trust her, as if I have known her for a very long time. She is a professional, who you needn't be afraid of.</i>
Not imposing	2	2	<i>... She never imposed her views She never said »you have to do this and that«...</i>
Presented her opinion	2	2	<i>... She revealed how she sees things, but so unobtrusively... ... you can ask something, and she tells you how she sees things, through her eyes.</i>
Open space for conversation	2	2	<i>... she provided space... ... we talked sincerely, I was without restraint, I told her exactly as it is...</i>
Played with children	2	2	<i>Sometimes they played volleyball and board games. She played soccer with my son.</i>

Defining the collaboration experience

Table 3. Defining the collaboration experience with the use of a scale

Position on the scale (1-10 ¹³)	No. of families	Verbal definition of the selected place in the scale-code (frequency of codes)
10	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Great pleasure (5) - Student's characteristics (3) - Great help (3) - Relief (4) - Homework and study help (2) - Method of keeping the conversation (2) - New experience (1) - Met expectations (1) - Successful collaboration (1) - Student had the time (1) - Trusting the student (1) - Adopted collaboration (1) - Listening (1) - Timely information (1) - Independent decision-making (1) - Compliance with agreements (1) - Effort (1) - Progress (1) - Support in child guidance (1) - Skills for working with children (1) - Joy at the arrival (1)
9	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student's knowledge (1) - Trusting the student (1) - Presentation of opinion (1) - Support in child guidance (1) <p>For the progress on the scale:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More communication and experience (1)
8-9	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unfulfilled expectations regarding the regulation of certain things (1) <p>For progress on the scale:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More advice regarding forms, deadlines (1)
8	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Achieved changes, progress (1) <p>For progress on the scale:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Child's educational progress (1)

¹³ One means that they are not satisfied with the collaboration, 10 means excellent collaboration.

Differences between the Method of Work in the Project and other Help

Fifteen of the seventeen families who participated in final interviews, already had experience with help from other organisations (the CSW, the AFY, health organisations, etc.). Six families expressed strong dissatisfaction with the help received from other organisations. One of the interviewees stated that the experience with help within the project did not differ from other forms of help. Other interviewees did not directly evaluate the difference of the experience, but descriptively defined the differences presented in the continuation. Dissatisfaction with the help received within the institutional context of the CSW was most often expressed, mainly because of the feeling of being unheard and the feeling that the professional worker was not willing to help. As a source of dissatisfaction, families highlighted topics related primarily to the quality of an established relationship.

For example, they verbalised the problem of a formal relationship: *»This is quite different. They ask you, you tell them what you think, what you should do, we'll try this, we'll try that, but it is, nevertheless, a bureaucratic attitude.«* (I6.F20B.7)¹⁴. They felt authentic human reactions from the professional workers were missing: *»And this is exactly why I do not like any professional worker, because none of them reacted humanely.«* (I6.F2M.3). They reported dissatisfaction, due to the feeling of disinterest from professional workers and their unfriendliness: *»The other lady was disinterested, although she has an M.Sc. As if you are sitting with someone you do not know...«* (I6.F19M.13). They also highlighted the problem of professional workers, the CSW employees' orientation towards what is impossible: *»The worst thing is when you arrive and she says: No, I cannot, it just cannot be done.«* (I6.F15M.3).

They spoke of institutional barriers associated with the number of users and rigid legislation: *»I know that you must meet five conditions to get social aid. But she always chooses the one which I do not meet, and I wonder why she doesn't choose the fifth one.«* (I6.F11F.8). One of the interviewees described the experience of participating in the project as refreshing after much dissatisfaction: *»The fact is that I do not like the CSW and these professional workers, because I had never experienced anything positive from them before. She really was refreshing for me.«* (I6.F2M.1).

¹⁴ Statements by family members that we obtained from the final interviews were encrypted by previously marking the sequence number of the question, and then we added the sequence number of a family and the initial letter of each family member. The last number is the sequence number of the statement (e.g. I1.F11M.7).

Factors that contributed to good outcomes and good experience

The interviewees highlighted the collaboration in the community as an important factor, which contributed to good experience for the families. They find it useful that families receive support in their homes: *»It's different when someone comes to your home. I like it.«* (I6.F10M.5). They believe that it enables family members to be more relaxed, and it affects their behaviour: *»She came to our house, where we behaved as we normally do in the domestic environment...«* (I6.F19M.8). Help in families' homes also enables the creation of a special contact between a social worker and a family: *»Because it creates more specific contact. I like this. This is what was missing.«* (I6.F10M.2).

When reflecting on collaboration with the family in their home, interviewees also verbalised they would like more time for collaboration in the IWP: *»This is something very different. She comes, stops here, sits down [...]. This is something very different.«* (I6.F20G.6). Another factor which contributed to a good experience is the student's willingness to help with concrete steps in order to achieve desired changes, which is part of the IWP working framework: *»I wanted a new bed because my bed was destroyed. We slept on the floor. I could not get financial assistance. I spent three months submitting applications but I did not receive financial assistance. I succeeded on the fourth attempt, because I submitted the form together with SF16.«* (I6.F16M.4).

Families also verbalised the importance of personal leading (de Vries and Bouwkamp, 1995) and work in the present. The presence of a person who helps is important: to have someone who they can turn to, that help is quickly available, and that the person listens to them: *»Here it is just you, your problems and the one who knows how to listen and give advice.«* (I6.F8M.2). One of the families pointed out the good experience of co-creating solutions as opposed to receiving advice: *»Now, it was different . . . (author's note: to visiting the child psychiatrist) We worked alone; we did most of the work. XX (XX - child psychiatrist) kept saying to do this and that, and then come back and tell me how it turned out.«* (I6.F12D.1). In identifying other important success factors, the personal commitment of social workers was most frequently highlighted: *»Just the approach. She did everything to help me.«* (I6.F15M.1). The importance of a social worker's approach to the speaker: *»Yes, yes, she totally adapted to me, and to my and my family's needs.«* (I6.F2M.9). Personal relationship: *»The relationship with the student is far more genuine than with someone from the CSW.«* (I6.F20G.8). Together with the importance of personal relationships, families also highlighted the importance of social workers' professionalism: *»Yes, it was like that, she was really so professional. Yes. She was already as she should be. I was satisfied with her.«* (I6.F10M.6). Families find conversation to be an important

element of successful cooperation: »...you talk to her, tell her what you think, and get feedback; you can complain.« (I6.F20G.2).

It was also important that the social worker took the time to collaborate; the student's attitude towards a family, children; overcoming a formal relationship; persistence that a social worker does not give up; trust, concern for the well-being of family members. The so-called common factors (Lambert and Barley, 2002) were repeatedly verbalised as a success factor at the point where families described the student's positive qualities. In the event that the interlocutors failed to connect due to their personalities, which happened between one student and a father in one family, this contributed to the interlocutors' dissatisfaction: »But how will she ever become a social worker if she cannot speak? R2: What, your...? She cannot communicate well. She is too quiet.« (I6.F11F.2). Families also highlighted authenticity of the reactions, humanity, compassion, and warmth as factors that contributed to success.

Research limitations

The circumstances of data collection and analysis of material, which might affect the final results are as follows:

- We were unable to include in the study, families who prematurely ended collaboration. These interviews would've enabled us to have a broader perspective.
- Some families involved in the project denied participation in the research, so unfortunately their perspective is unknown.
- The project involved families with complex psychosocial problems, some of which had difficulties in deciding on collaboration, nevertheless, the final criterion for collaboration was their decision. Families were able to end collaboration at any time. For further research, we would also have to test the model with families in the so-called involuntary transactions.
- Students who participated with families were present at some interviews. On the one hand, this provided families a greater sense of security; and on the other hand, the student's presence might have contributed to the fact that certain topics were not verbalised.
- The analysis was carried out by researchers, who developed a model and were at the same time mentors to students, in order to ensure a consistent implementation of the model through a reflexive learning process. Despite the systematic analysis with pre-defined steps, the participation in model development and in the action-research project might have influenced the results obtained.

DISCUSSION

What can we learn from families about the knowledge required in order to be able to competently collaborate with families facing multiple challenges? All families involved in research expressed their satisfaction with the experience of help received, and verbalised topics that we wanted to develop with the model. The experience of the established relationship significantly contributed to the satisfaction, which is also highlighted in studies on success factors in the process of help (e.g. Lambert and Barley, 2002; Forrester, 2013; Munford and Sanders, 2015). The starting point of the model is the establishment of a co-creative working relationship which is founded on respect and the social worker's support to the family (Čačinović Vogrinčić, 2006). Families verbalised the related experience with codes such as: new experience, trust, good contact, collaboration, the method of keeping up the conversation, persistence, that a social worker did not give up, etc.

The personal compatibility of participants in the processes is an important success factor; however, we believe that the success of a process of help cannot be left to chance. We believe that through education, focusing on building a relationship, we can provide more opportunities for a good working relationship. It should be a professional decision to enter into a relationship with respect, openness, compassion, etc. The working relationship of co-creation defines the role of a social worker through personal leading. This means that people are taken seriously, that we respond personally, share our experiences, and are focused on the work. At the same time, we are personally responsible for the process (Čačinović Vogrinčić, 2006). All this is professional conduct, which we can learn. Such conduct has also been recognised by families (the presence of a person who helps, joining the interlocutor, who is personally committed, makes an effort, presents their own opinion, etc.).

It is essential that agreements are translated into concrete steps. The student's help with concrete steps to achieve desired changes was a significant new experience. Often agreements on desired changes with families are co-created, and then we leave family members in the expectation that they will achieve the changes themselves. Contemporary social work with families in the community means collaboration with a family and potential resources until changes are realised. It is exactly this collaborative partnership that is regarded as a new experience for families. IWPH also contributes to overcoming dispersed help, as the social worker, who is the leader of the IWPH, constantly connects all involved. Participation in the project is new experience also because of the collaboration at people's homes (Melo and Alarcão, 2011, 2013; Madsen, 2007, 2014), which is a challenge for the further development of social work. Experiences of families in the project show that it is

necessary to move from often rigid institutional contexts to the community where all individuals involved meet in the IWPH.

What are the main obstacles to realising this contemporary doctrine of social work with families in everyday practice within the institutional context of CSW? Concepts that were used in the project are concepts that we teach at the FSW, so social workers in Slovenia should have this basic knowledge. How does such a big gap between developed theoretical knowledge and everyday practice at CSW occur? Since we have experience that when using contemporary knowledge important changes happen, we find institutional context (Healy, 2014) to be an important factor that influences this discordance in everyday practice. Social workers at CSW are facing similar institutional conditions like different practitioners worldwide. Madsen (2014) presents the results of two studies, which revealed that time consuming paperwork with a focus on cost containment and legal liability issues structure the ways professionals think and practice. This is one of the important factors for the existing gap between contemporary doctrine and everyday practice, as social workers increasingly adopted a pragmatic orientation not based on theoretical principals. According to Madsen (2014:381) an interviewed put it: »*Procedures are replacing theories*«. Munro (2004, cited in Madsen, 2014). refers to this development as »*protocolization*«. When we present project results to professionals at CSW their first response is workload, bureaucracy, or a lack of time for social work. These must be taken into account upon further reorganisation. The expressed dissatisfaction of families interviewed with the help of CSW and the information on what families need is an important starting point for future plans. As CSWs are key state institutions for social work and an important safeguard for every person who needs help, it is crucial to create an institutional context that will provide possibilities for implementing a contemporary social work doctrine. This current reorganisation is connected with the doubts and fears of professionals. When looking at the AP and experiencing initial changes, fears could be connected to lack of vision regarding the contents of reorganisation. Could the emphasis on organisational changes of the institutional context of CSW also mean new opportunities for the development of social work? Is it possible to separate these two processes?

CONCLUSION

Parton and O'Byrne (2000) emphasised that social workers traditionally built their expertise on the ability to establish relationships with people, where they were able to explore resources in the environment and use them for the benefit of users; where they were able to negotiate with various organisations in order to offer help. They describe behaviours, which families in the project described as important

success factors, which differ from experiences of help received in other institutional contexts. The main findings are similar to findings of other families' experiences in so-called family-centred services, sharing a common set of values and principles, which include an emphasis on culturally responsive, strength-based, collaborative, and accountable partnerships with families (Madsen, 2014).

The institutional context that does not support employees and enable them to implement professional social work (due to the number of procedures, work overload, etc.) must be rejected, and new ways for changes determined. Families have answers on what kind of social work they need; we only have to make space for them to be heard and taken into account. The results support the idea that it is necessary to bring social work back into the community. Thus, we can draw from the model which was developed within the project. For its implementation, it is necessary to provide an institutional context that will enable collaboration in the working relationship of co-creation with families in the community. Does the current reorganisation of CSW open up the opportunity for more collaborative social work in the community?

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SURADNIČKI SOCIJALNI RAD U ZAJEDNICI S OBITELJIMA S VIŠESTRUKIM IZAZOVIMA

SAŽETAK

Gospodarska kriza pridonijela je porastu broja obitelji koje se suočavaju s višestrukim izazovima u Sloveniji. To postavlja nove zadatke za kreatora socijalnih politika i socijalne radnike da odgovore na nove izazove na makro i mikro razini. Aktualno pitanje reorganizacije centara za socijalnu skrb u Sloveniji također otvara pitanja o vrstama promjena koje su potrebne. Razvili smo model rada s obiteljima koje se suočavaju s višestrukim izazovima i proučavali iskustva s ovim oblikom pomoći. Rezultati potvrđuju da je za kompetentnu pomoć obiteljima nužno osigurati kvalificirane socijalne radnike koji dosljedno primjenjuju načelo su stvaranja u individualnim projektima pomoći u zajednici i institucionalnim kontekstima. To će pružiti podršku profesionalnom socijalnom radu.

Ključne riječi: *Individualni radni projekt pomoći (eng. Individual working project of help, IWPH), zajednica, projekt akcijskog istraživanja, centri za socijalnu skrb, institucionalni kontekst.*



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