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Family assistantships as a professional dimension of support for modern families

Asystentura rodzinna jako profesjonalny wymiar wsparcia współczesnych rodzin

Abstract

The aim of the study was to find out in what manner the family assistants subjected to the study accompany the families they support. The manner was used as a framework for the analyses of professional functioning and experiences of the group of professionals subjected to the study. It appears that the family assistants' accounts show the essence of their professional role. The case study method was used.

In the presented analyses, assistantships appear to be work aimed at introducing changes in the lives of families whose members are treated as partners or clients, and much less frequently perceived as friends. In the development of professional competences of the respondents there is a certain randomness than the planned educational activity and insufficiently widespread systematic supervision is visible. The negative context of the research results refers to attributing the causes of failures to inappropriate attitudes of family members, limited reflection on one's own actions and the lack of a sense of being part of a team of specialists working with the family.

Keywords: family, family assistant, professional functioning, social support.

Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego opracowania była prezentacja i analiza narracji asystentek rodzin na temat ich funkcjonowania zawodowego, stanowiąca egzemplifikację zaprezentowanych wyników dotychczasowych badań. Zastosowano metodę studium przypadku. Próbowano dotrzeć do edukacyjnych wątków doświadczeń z pracy pięciu asystentek rodzin. Asystentura, w prezentowanych analizach jawi się jako praca ukierunkowana na wprowadzanie zmian w życiu rodzin, których członkowie traktowani są jako partnerzy lub klienci, a zdecydowanie rzadziej postrzegani są jako przyjaciele. W rozwoju kompetencji zawodowych badanych przejawia się pewna przypadkowość niż zaplanowana działalność edukacyjna oraz widoczna jest niedostatecznie rozpowszechniona systematyczna superwizja. Negatywny kontekst wyników badań odnosi się do przypisywania przyczyn niepowodzeń niewłaściwym postawom członków rodzin, ograniczonej refleksji nad własnym działaniem oraz braku poczucia wchodzenia w skład zespołu specjalistów pracujących z rodziną.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, asystent rodziny, funkcjonowanie zawodowe, wsparcie społeczne.

Introduction

The family, as a social group, constitutes the foundation of our civilization. In the perspective of its history, one can observe that it is a group subjected to continuous evolution. The reality in which contemporary humans live, including the constant changes to which the family sphere of human life is subjected, leads to ongoing transformations in the realm of family structures, roles and functions of the family, and even the psychosocial characteristics of individuals within the family.

Changes in family life result from at least two key factors: external and internal (Janke, 2009, p. 11). External factors refer to changes observed in the family's environment, while internal factors pertain to the family itself. Analyzing the family system, we can increasingly observe processes that lead to the weakening of intrafamily bonds, including the responsibilities of individual family members towards themselves and maintaining the family structure in full coherence. Individual needs, desires, and expectations become a central category compared to the needs of the family as a system. Subjective assessment of the quality of relationships with a spouse, children, and extended relatives determines the way individual family members function. Knowledge about family life becomes conditioned by personal experiences, a subjective view of the family perspective in a given environment, rather than objective, established models

of family life and values passed down from generation to generation. It often seems that the contemporary way of thinking about the family becomes permeated by certain intellectual currents, media messages, or even various ideologies that significantly alter the truth about what family is.

In the chaos of transformations, which primarily concern families, a relationship between the autonomy of family life and the state can be found, for which the family is a social institution (Tyszka, 2002). Adopting a universalistic model of this relationship assumes granting the state the authority to establish the scope of rights and obligations in relation to its activities, but above all, the power to make decisions regarding the extent and strength of intervention in the family (Kustra, 2004, p. 204). However, the existence of a second concept describing this relationship takes into account an individualistic model, where the primary significance lies in the goals of the individual, family, and society, with state structures serving only a subsidiary role (Kustra, 2004, pp. 207–208).

The relationships between the family and the state, although extensively regulated by the state, are still subject to changes and expanding possibilities for supporting the family system, especially in the last decade in Poland.

In social sciences, parenthood supported by various institutional and non-institutional entities is still explored and promoted (Jarosz, 2013, p. 142). This is partly due to the fact that existing forms of family support have proven insufficient. Both researchers and social services practitioners point to the need to broaden the scope of legal instruments that can be used to address family issues, especially those experiencing difficulties in fulfilling parenting roles. In this regard, the profession of family assistant has been introduced into the support system (Bielecka, 2014, p. 153; Krasiejko, 2016a; Żukiewicz, 2011). Family assistance is directed toward "environments experiencing difficulties in fulfilling caregiving and educational functions, especially families with multiple problems, at risk of marginalization, or already socially excluded. The family assistant's task is to provide comprehensive support to dysfunctional families raising minor children. The assistant also provides assistance to families whose children have been temporarily placed in foster care, as well as to related foster families and adult wards leaving families" (Bielecka, 2014, p. 154; cf.: Domaradzki and Krzyszkowski, 2016).

The professional functioning of family assistants is regulated by the Act of June 9, 2011, on supporting families and the foster care system. Among the duties of the family assistant is the development and implementation of a work plan with the family. This plan should be created (both in the planning stage and during implementation) in cooperation with family members and, depending on the needs, consulted with other specialists. The family assistant also has the

obligation to provide assistance to families in improving their living situation, including developing household management skills. Another task is to help families solve social, psychological, and educational problems with children, as well as support the social activities of families. Their work also includes assistance in improving the professional situation of supported families, such as motivating them to improve their professional qualifications and helping them find, take up, and maintain employment. Shaping broadly understood parenting skills and supporting children are also among the tasks of family assistants. They should also collaborate with other specialists in the field of family assistance (Infor.pl, 2011). In 2016, the Law of November 4, 2016, on supporting pregnant women and families "For Life" (Journal of Laws of 2019, items 473 and 1818; Prawo.pl, 2016) came into effect, regulating another area of tasks for family assistants.

Research has already been conducted among family assistants, but considering the dynamic process of professionalization of this professional group, they are still highly needed (Ciczkowska-Giedziun, 2012; Jaśkowska, 2011; Kotlarska-Michalska, 2011; Krajewska, 2012). Furthermore, researchers not only emphasize the need to continue this research but also advocate for the consolidation of academic environments (Krasiejko, 2013b, pp. 364–366; cf.: Mickiewicz, *et al.*, 2016).

Diagnoses conducted among family assistants also seem purposeful due to the dynamics of changes in the living space of individuals in need of professional assistance, contributing to the need for modifying the scope of actions taken towards them. In recent years, it has been expanded to include coordinating comprehensive support (counseling) for pregnant women and their families, with particular emphasis on women experiencing obstetric failures, complicated pregnancies, and supporting families with children diagnosed with "severe and irreversible impairment or an incurable life-threatening disease that occurred during prenatal development or childbirth" (Krasiejko, Zeller, and Kwapisz, 2017, p. 4).

Research results in the area of the professionalization of family assistants and the formation of the concept of family assistance were particularly desirable in the initial stage of its implementation. In the first decade of the 21st century, the discussed concept was mainly implemented in the form of innovative programs. Its effectiveness was confirmed at that time, with the most significant outcome being the ability to keep children in their family homes and improve the functioning of biological families (Krasiejko and Imielińska, 2011; Łangowska and Pakólska, 2011; Rudnik, 2011; Szpunar, 2011). Some of the initial studies on the role and professional tasks of family assistants focused on selected aspects of family assistance implementation within pilot programs even before the introduction

of relevant legislation. One of the necessary and pioneering procedures implemented among family assistants at that time was the Solution-Focused Work (SFW) model. The explorations conducted then showed a positive impact of the model on the actions of family assistants, their clients, and even on the client-assistant relationships.

The next stage of research on the professional functioning of family assistants covers the period after the implementation of the Act of June 9, 2011, on supporting families and the foster care system.

From the analysis by S. Lisowska (2012), a picture emerges that aligns with the narrative revealed in previous empirical studies, presenting a positive image of family assistance, most often implemented by social assistance centers. On one hand, family assistants expressed positive views on the usefulness of family monitoring, collaborated with other entities for the benefit of the family, willingly participated in training, and declared interest in various forms of professional development. On the other hand, they revealed many difficulties associated with carrying out their functions, such as excessive bureaucracy, a low sense of security in the work environment, the lack of defined work standards, unfamiliarity with the scope of actions taken by other units, non-standardized working hours, and excessive emotional involvement in client relationships.

On the other hand, the first in-depth qualitative research was conducted by I. Krasiejko (2013b). It was revealed that the establishment of this profession requires a uniform understanding of family assistance and the role of family assistants, as well as changes in legal regulations. Among other factors considered important were: salary increases, minimizing bureaucracy, integrating the community of family assistants, and formulating a code of ethics. In the process of forming the profession, family assistants also emphasized the role of education and training for workers and access to supervision (Krasiejko, 2013b, pp. 364–366; cf.: Czechowska-Bieluga, 2016). From the perspective of supported families, the uniformity of expectations towards family assistants proved to be significant (Krasiejko, 2013b, pp. 364–366).

Quantitative research conducted slightly later by K. Mickiewicz, A. Babska, K. Głogowska, and A. Günther-Jabłońska (Mickiewicz et al., 2016) focused on difficulties in carrying out professional tasks, the level of social competencies, coping strategies with stress, and professional burnout. Interestingly, the results showed that the main forms of support that should be provided by family assistants are perceived by them as issues hindering their collaboration with clients. The level of analyzed professional burnout was high, especially considering the minimal effects of work or the possibility of recognizing them only after a longer period, and due to the unspecified role of the family assistant.

For comparison, in qualitative research conducted by I. Krasiejko (2016b), family assistants are portrayed as workers who fear for their own safety and have an extensive scope of work. The research also revealed that factors such as vague legal regulations, lack of standardized work standards, and a lack of training were cited as reasons for the misunderstanding of the role. Despite these diagnoses being conducted several years after the implementation of the Act of June 9, 2011, on supporting families and the foster care system, the surveyed family assistants exhibited deficiencies even in the equipment of their own workplaces and received inadequately low salaries. The surveyed family assistants also reported employment instability and a lack of support in professional development. Despite the need to collaborate with other specialists, the surveyed individuals often did not feel like part of a team. Analyses by I. Krasiejko (2016b) revealed that the actual forms of employment for family assistants did not contribute to the professionalization of the profession at that time.

Interesting research comparing the opinions of family assistants and their clients was conducted by A. Szot (2018). The researcher noted that family assistants most often considered providing support, motivation, conducting intervention and remedial actions, assisting in problem-solving, planning work, and maintaining documentation as part of their duties. The families with whom the assistants worked primarily experienced difficult financial situations, alcohol-related problems, parenting challenges, family conflicts, unemployment, poor housing conditions, and violence. Both groups of participants (both family assistants and the families they support) indicated that assistants had to address multiple family issues simultaneously, yet they provided assistance tailored to the needs. Family assistants collaborated with other specialists, demonstrating a high level of professional activity, and their work served as a means of self-realization (Szot, 2018).

Based on the existing research results, it can be observed that the professional role of a family assistant is not yet fully formed, influenced by various factors, including diverse expectations, difficulties in task implementation (including, for example, a high risk of professional burnout), and the understanding of the concept of family assistance by both the individuals involved and professionals from other areas of family work (cf.: Krasiejko, 2016b; Szot, 2018; Hyży, 2020).

1. Methodological assumptions of own research

Professional functioning can be understood as any work-related activity related to the implementation of professional tasks. In the work environment,

it concerns the "obligations and duties" of both the employee and the employing organization (Bartkowiak, 1997). According to J. Penc (2001), various factors influence professional functioning, starting from the work process (content, organization, tasks, job position), through the social work environment (experiencing stressful situations, threats, and collaboration), to the material work environment (occupational risks, health threats, discomfort). Employee functioning is also conditioned by the magnitude and duration of the load, motives, needs, emotions, creativity, qualifications, a sense of responsibility, and health. Among the subsequent subjective factors, the perception of work and the role played, subjective assessment of the ability to act, and the body's reaction and effort play a significant role in the professional activity of workers. The condition for proper professional functioning is the effectiveness of role fulfillment, the best possible adaptation, which affects the assessment of work and the sense of professional satisfaction (Penc, 2001; Bańka, 2000).

The aim of the research was to understand how the surveyed family assistants support families, considering it as a framework for analyzing the functioning and professional experiences of the examined group of professionals. Given that the main goal of family assistants is the pedagogy of parents, the background for the presented analyses was pedagogical inspirations (Krasiejko, 2016a). Explored educational themes encompassed the image of supported families, their relationships with family assistants, and the aspects of knowledge transmission and acquisition by the surveyed family assistants.

A case study approach was employed, understood as a qualitative research strategy allowing for generalizations based on a deliberately selected, small group of precisely described cases that exemplify a chosen social phenomenon. Narrative interviews were conducted, considered as personal narratives (Chase, 2009, p. 18). Meanwhile, narrative was understood as: retrospective meaning-making; as something specific and unique. The meanings attributed by the participant were subjected to interpretation (Chase, 2009, pp. 24–26).

Efforts were made to appropriately select cases using purposive sampling based on identified criteria (Silverman, 2009, pp. 167–169). Assuming that professional functioning may vary with age, field of study, level of education, professional experience, and workplace, based on these criteria, attempts were made to explore educational threads of experiences from five family assistants with individual professional practice of no less than 2 years. Narratives of women aged 35 to 52 were analyzed, all of whom had higher education. The surveyed family assistants were graduates of bachelor's studies in social rehabilitation pedagogy with elements of prevention, pedagogy, and social work. The next two obtained a master's degree in caregiving and educational pedagogy, social work,

and preschool and early childhood education. The workplace for four of the participants was the Municipal Social Welfare Center, while one was employed at the Municipal Center for Social Assistance. The shortest work experience was 2 years, and the longest was 6 years.

The case selection had a theoretical nature and was based on the constant comparative method. The researcher, while collecting, coding, and analyzing materials, simultaneously decides where and what type of data to gather. This allows for the selection of very different as well as similar cases, thereby capturing a maximum number of conditions differentiating the occurrence of categories and their mutual relationships. The aim was to continue case selection until reaching theoretical saturation, the point at which additional cases confirm previous analytical findings (Glaser, 1978, p. 142; cf. Niedbalski, 2020). The chosen socio-demographic characteristics serve only to illustrate the group and not as a basis for further analysis or any differentiation.

Individual interviews were conducted in February 2020 in the Małopolskie Voivodeship. In-depth, unstructured interviews were carried out. The use of this type of tool allowed for individualization of the research, meaning that its course was moderated on an ongoing basis, and its content also depended on what issues the interviewee paid attention to and how they emphasized the information that emerged during the interview (cf. Niedbalski, 2020). The interviews, typically lasting 2 to 3 hours, were transcribed before the analysis began.

Table 1. Characteristics of surveyed family assistants

Item number	Age	Level of studies	Field of study	Work placement as a family assistant (years)	Work placement in JOPS (years)	Work place
K, 36	36	BA degree	Rehabilitation pedagogy with elements of prevention	4	8	GOPS
K, 52	52	BA degree	Social work	5	27	GOPS
K2, 36	36	BA degree	Social work	5	5	GOPS
K, 35	35	MA	Preschool and Early Childhood Education	2	2	MOPS
K, 37	37	MA	Care and educational pedagogy and social work	6	11	GOPS

Source: Own compilation.
An abbreviation K was used to denote the surveyed women along with their ages.

In accordance with the adopted assumption of qualitative research, the interview text served as an empirical material. The starting point was the concept of the social construction of the researched reality, based on the participants' perspectives, their daily practices, and knowledge about the subject of the study (Flick, 2010, pp. 22–23).

2. Research Results

The analysis focused on how the surveyed family assistants perceive families. The image of the supported individuals appears to be quite static, although a distinction can be observed between families willing to cooperate and those whose previous patterns of action hinder a change in their life situation, as indicated by the following statement: "For me, families constitute a group of people lost in their own world, (...). Sometimes, some of them become my partners, feel the need to accomplish common tasks (...). Others, on the other hand, are typical clients with their own habits that do not allow them to function smoothly" (K, 37). Interestingly, according to the participants' narratives, more families show a readiness for change.

The surveyed family assistants, when establishing a relationship with families, first explain what their work involves. They perceive family members as partners, emphasizing the importance of maintaining the boundaries of the professional relationship defined by specific forms of address. At the same time, they express hope that the supported families also perceive the relationship with the assistant as a partnership. The assistants were willing to provide their clients with some guidance on crisis resolution, as evidenced by the following statement: "I see them as my wards who, at a certain moment in their lives, have found themselves in a crisis and need to be shown how to get out of it" (K, 35).

The narratives of the surveyed women also reveal the theme of friendship with supported families. Such a relationship is presented in both positive and negative contexts. Treating the family assistant as a friend can hinder the building of professional relationships based on a specific hierarchy: "For me, families are both clients and partners in cooperation. In this job, you cannot have families as friends because it usually ends badly (...)" (K, 36, 5).

On the other hand, it seems that some surveyed family assistants would expect friendly behaviors from family members. They perceive these behaviors as motivating factors for their continued work. Interestingly, they focus on families willing to engage in positive, informal relationships, even after they

are no longer working with them. Despite this, family assistance appears to be a relatively formalized form of contact, where assistants sometimes seek signs of friendship, as indicated by the following statement:

"In my opinion, a small number of families treat me as a friend. They know perfectly well what to do; they need positive reinforcement from me in the form of praise, validation. It's a completely different way of working with them (...). For me, this is also important; they 'give me wings,' energy for further action. Even when I go to other families that don't want to work with me, I still think about those that give me strength" (K, 52).

When asked about the relationships with families, the family assistants most often characterized them as good, although diverse. In their opinion, the atmosphere of meetings is marked by trust, which families bestow upon assistants, but only after meeting certain conditions or after a certain period of time. Considering the unstable employment forms of assistants, establishing and deepening contact with the family may be challenging (Krasiejko, 2016b). Due to the fact that during work with a family, it happens that the assisting professional changes, the respondents pay particular attention to the professional from whom they take over tasks. Knowledge of their specific characteristics is essential to continue working with the family in a manner suitable for them, as indicated by the following narrative: "Families establish positive relationships with me. However, there is an unwritten rule among assistants. We always look at which assistant we take over the family from (...)" (K, 36). On the other hand, correctness combined with a certain openness during family assistance is demonstrated in the following way: "The relationships between me and the families are positive; I try to be friendly, helpful. It is important to build trust, which lasts even for months, but thanks to that, the family becomes open, and we can work on their resources, eliminating deficits" (K, 35).

Next, the issues of knowledge transmission and acquisition by family assistants were analyzed. From their statements, it appears that the dedicated content mainly concerns parenting aspects. The respondents focused on a broadly understood change, indicating strong resistance to its implementation experienced by the supported families. The reflections of the interviewed family assistants point to the helplessness of their clients not only in parenting matters but in a broader personal and social context. The narratives of the interviewed reveal that only repeated actions or constant motivation to undertake them can bring the desired effect in terms of changes in the clients' life situation. They even declare a certain powerlessness in informing family members. According to them, the content conveyed to them, even if repeated many times, does not find reflection in the awareness of their clients: "In my case, constant inform-

ing, even reminding, concerns parenting issues in the family. Parents are not consistent in parenting, and I have to constantly remind them of what they should say, how to behave, what to pay attention to" (K, 52). The task of providing assistance to families in solving psychological or parenting problems with children, as well as supporting the development of parenting skills, as stipulated in the Family Support Act, seems challenging and reveals many dilemmas in the functioning of assistants. The assistants examine the value hierarchy of their clients, questioning the high positions declared by them for such goals as family and work.

"My families are constantly informed about what they need to do; in fact, they ask me how to behave in a given situation, what to do when something happens. I inform them that they need to clean the house, take care of personal hygiene, and be interested in the child's affairs. It's challenging to establish good rituals for specific activities in these families; it takes us a lot of time. They know little about official matters (...) What puzzles me is that they claim that family, work, etc., are their main values, and yet most of them do not care about good family relationships (...) They also forget about work; they want to have a normal life but have thousands of excuses why they can't work (...) And I keep repeating the same content" (K, 36).

The scope of issues conveyed to families by assistants can be considered very extensive. It encompassed matters related to childcare, motivating them to undergo therapy, as well as basic information about the assistance provided by various specialists. Assistants showed a certain sensitivity when observing the families they worked with and tailored the form or intensity of their actions depending on the needs. The perspective on their own work was mainly focused on shaping parenting predispositions. Assistants identified difficulties in this area with an improper way of communication. The issue of informing supported families can be seen in the following narratives:

"Everything depends on the task that needs to be done at the moment. This mainly concerns matters related to minors (...), undertaking therapy by the mother or father, maintaining abstinence. What topics I revisit depends on the family; if I observe that they comply with the agreed-upon tasks, then I believe there is no need to revisit those issues" (K, 35)."

Informing families, for me, means conveying issues related to upbringing children (...). These contents constantly appeared in the information domain; we reiterated it incessantly. There is disturbed communication in families – there is the so-called 'bad cop,' but there is no 'good cop' (K, 52).

At times, the participants drew attention to motivating and encouraging parents to enhance their parenting skills not only within the scope of cooperation

with them but also through participation in specialized courses. This professional orientation is evident in the following statements: 'I repeated these issues very often, encouraged parents to improve their qualifications by participating in activities that enhance parenting skills (...)' (K, 36, 5).

Another narrative indicates that informing families involves 'primarily sharing my knowledge about all available entitlements they can use. The assistance I provide in this area relates to various issues such as access to doctors, lawyers, specialists of various kinds. I personally know the local community, its resources, and always try to refer to them during conversations with families' (K, 37).

The statements of the interviewed assistants suggest that they do not perceive many difficulties related to informing families. They viewed their actions as adequate, certain, and optimal, even though they previously indicated the need for repeated efforts and achieving results only after a long time. They sought potential sources of ambiguity more in the way family members accepted help than in their own action strategies. According to them, one of the limitations of family assistance lies solely in the attitudes of their clients, as indicated in the explanations below:

"I have no difficulties in conveying information to my clients; I am familiar with the opportunities of the environment, my centre, and well-oriented in handling various matters. (...). But one issue is undoubtedly difficult. Families have immense difficulty in assimilating this information; they listen, but I feel they don't understand. They thank me for making them aware, but they don't do anything with this information. I try to speak to them (...) in simple language, adapt to their level, ask them, for example, if something is not understood, I will explain it again (K, 36)."

The narratives of the respondents suggest that they feel they have the necessary competencies and do not perceive difficulties when imparting knowledge to their wards. While some respondents had certain doubts, they mainly concerned issues related to the sexuality of family members or the problems of individuals requiring specialized therapy. In such cases, it happened that the respondents felt uncertain about the course of action: 'Difficulties... for me, the biggest difficulties in informing the family are related to taboo topics. I once worked with a client who was raped by her husband (...). I was just so horrified by the situation that to this day, I don't remember exactly what I told her' (K, 37)."

In case of concern, assistants directed the family to other specialists. Among the tasks of family assistants is collaboration with units of government and local government administration, relevant non-governmental organizations, as well as other entities and individuals specializing in work for the child and fami-

ly. This includes collaboration with an interdisciplinary team or other entities whose assistance in performing tasks is deemed necessary (Act of June 9, 2011, on supporting families and foster care, Journal of Laws 2020.0.821). The statements of the respondents indicate that families are referred to other specialists when their capacity for assistance has already been exhausted. However, threads related to collaboration in teams composed of various experts did not emerge. Support in the form of indicating other specialists in the field of family assistance, such as educators, psychologists, therapists, is illustrated by the following reflections: 'I don't really have difficulties when informing families about various issues. I know, I think quite well, for example, the institutions in my environment that can support people addicted to alcohol, support groups, self-help clubs, hospitals with detoxification units (…). I also know various ways to reach specialists for my family (…)' (K, 52)."

"In my work, there were also difficult conversations, for example, about a child engaging in self-harm. The mother didn't want to believe that it was true that her daughter behaved that way. (…). At that time, I asked her to contact the school counselor and psychologist" (K, 36).

Importantly, while the statements of the respondents only conveyed general information about collaboration with other specialists, the respondents perceived it as their own potential (cf. Lisowska, 2012). Their own experience and the possibilities of working together with other specialists constituted an important area of resources, as revealed in the following narrative: "The resources I use are primarily, firstly – knowledge about various ways to solve specific problems, mainly acquired through my own experience, and secondly, a resource for me is the specialists I work with on a daily basis" (K, 36, 5).

A family assistant can be a person with higher education in pedagogy, psychology, sociology, family sciences, social work, or someone without such a diploma but with relevant work experience with children or families, depending on the level of education (Infor.pl, 2011). Although the surveyed family assistants were graduates of the aforementioned fields of study, they possessed practical experience, which they perceived as an important element conducive to carrying out their duties. They considered this aspect of their work as strengths in their functioning, as illustrated by the following statement: 'Resources for me are primarily good cooperation with schools (…). Undoubtedly, psychologists, trainers in parents' schools, employees of psychological and pedagogical counseling centres, therapists for addicted and co-dependent individuals are also significant resources for me' (K, 36, 5)."

The results of previous research indicate that education and professional development, as well as access to supervision, play a crucial role in the formation

of the profession (Krasiejko, 2013b, pp. 364–366; cf.: Czechowska-Bieluga, 2016). Family assistants are obliged to regularly improve their qualifications, especially through participation in training and self-education (Infor.pl, 2011), which is strongly supported by the narratives presented. The surveyed family assistants confirm acquiring knowledge from various sources and thematic areas, with only some of them being supervised. Importantly, professional development takes place systematically. However, it seems that the surveyed individuals perceive gaps in utilizing supervision, and the expansion of their competencies during sessions occurs more spontaneously than according to a defined plan: "In training, I can say that I participate very often, but I don't use supervision as frequently. (...). The knowledge I use to support families is acquired through my own interests, participation in training, and discussions with specialists (mostly psychologists)" (K, 37).

Their narratives also revealed concerns related to insight or expressing their own mental states in the professional environment, as expressed in the statement: "I try to participate in supervision regularly, but there is one condition: I only talk about my clients during these meetings, not about myself, my feelings, experiences. I'm afraid that my colleagues will perceive it as my weakness, and I don't want to confide in such company" (K, 36).

The gaps in knowledge revealed by the surveyed assistants do not find a complete reflection in the topics of the courses they attend. The addressed issues constitute a kind of mosaic of content, making it difficult to identify one main guiding thought. It can be assumed that this is related to the wide range of tasks carried out by family assistants. In this case, developing a professional development plan with a specific focus would not align with the needs arising from practice.

3. Conclusions

The professional group of family assistants, since the legal regulation of the profession, has been subjected to empirical explorations, the results of which mainly serve practical purposes. The presentation of this study had an exploratory nature and the achievement of its goal was treated as a framework for analyzing the functioning and professional experiences of the surveyed group of professionals.

A review of studies on the professional functioning of family assistants and the presented narratives in terms of the work process (Penc, 2001) allow for the formulation of several conclusions.

Based on the literature, one can enumerate a specific catalog of tasks that capture the essence of the professional role of family assistants. So far, attention has been drawn to fields of activity such as informing, motivating, supporting, and cooperating (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2011, p. 67; Wirkus-Ostrowska, 2011, pp. 144–145; Jaśkowska, 2011, p. 144); finding clients' resources and diagnosing them (Szpunar, 2011, pp. 91–93); strengthening clients and supporting them in actions, the ability to provide emotional support in difficult life situations (Łangowska, 2011, p. 190); directing the process of change (Czechowska-Bieluga, 2013), or transitioning from the role of an official to that of a supporting person, friend, guide, teacher (Krasiejko, 2013, p. 91; Krajewska, 2012, p. 112). Clients most often sought the assistance of family assistants in the areas of parenting and social problems (Szot, 2018). All of the mentioned areas, though to varying extents, appeared in the statements of the surveyed family assistants. In the presented analyses, differentiation in the professional functioning of the respondents based on socio-demographic characteristics was not sought (cf. Czechowska-Bieluga and Domarecka, 2017).

On the next level of professional functioning, which is the social work environment (Penc, 2001), the essence of the performed professional role becomes apparent. It aligns with the main task of assistants indicated in the literature (Krasiejko, 2016, p. 5). In the presented analyses, family assistance appears as work focused on introducing changes in the lives of supported families, conducted simultaneously with minimizing strong resistance to their implementation.

The surveyed family assistants view families as clients or partners, although the motive of friendship also emerges. The relationships they share are most often perceived as good and shaped through trust. In the narratives of the assistants, clients were portrayed more critically than the assistants themselves. In situations of encountered failures, the causes were attributed by the assistants to the attitudes of family members. There was a noticeable lack of reflection on their own competencies.

The statements of the surveyed family assistants indicate that they did not experience many difficulties related to informing families. They perceived their actions as certain and optimal. They sought potential sources of confusion more in the way families received help than in their own strategies. The narratives of the surveyed did not reveal threads related to the existence of collaboration in teams consisting of various experts (cf. Szot, 2018).

It appears that the conditions of the material work environment (Penc, 2001) are not favourable for family assistants. They are exposed to a high level of professional burnout (Mickiewicz *et al.*, 2016), have concerns about their own safety, and

have a broad scope of work (Krasiejko, 2016b). The surveyed family assistants did not address this area of work in their statements. This aspect, revealing difficulties in quantitative research, did not resonate in the presented analyses.

The explored educational threads encompassed the image of supported families, their relationships with assistants, and the dimensions of knowledge transmission and acquisition by the surveyed assistants.

Previous research results indicate that family assistants live in precarious conditions, without the possibility of career and competence development, without a vision for the future (Krasiejko, 2016b). In the presented narratives, the randomness of using various sources and forms of development is evident, although the theme of participation in training clearly resonates, and some of the surveyed had access to supervision. It seems that various psychological-educational activities, counseling interventions involving professional co-operation, work organization, or so-called practical instruction would contribute to a broader perspective on self-perception and more critical reflections on their experiences and thoughts.

Conducted explorations so far (mainly in the quantitative paradigm) have shown a positive impact of family assistance on the life situation of their clients (Krasiejko and Imielińska, 2011; Łangowska and Pakólska, 2011; Rudnik, 2011; Szpunar, 2011). However, available studies also contain calls for changes and recommendations co-authored by family assistants, indicating the need for changes in the existing system (Hyży, 2020).

The outlined picture seems to be a rather one-sided approach, with a dimension of positive reflection. The presented analyses depict the field of family assistant's activity as "a space where the symbiosis of the theoretical with the practical is realized" (Żukiewicz, 2011, p. 21). In their field of action, interdependence and mutual penetration of the effects of practical activities in the socially oriented area of strengthening families and creating conditions for their proper development are evident, as well as the achievements of theory. However, it is worth noting that for a deeper scientific discourse, it is necessary to refer to the broader context of the professional functioning of family assistants, including mainly expanding analyses on placing difficulties in achieving desired effects not in the attitudes of clients but in the competencies of assistants. Identifying threads related to collaboration with other specialists and the role played by assistants in this area is also essential. These aspects could be addressed in future research.

Translated by Michalina Trybuś

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