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## **Lines of Activity Addressed to Families: Limiting the Participatory Approach as with Casework Practitioners**

### **Abstract**

The chapter shows the course of activity of family assistants – caseworkers situated in the field of child protection practice in Poland. The contribution undertakes a reflection on the constraints in the implementation of the participatory approach which is found in the process of activities performed by assistants. These constraints are related to the scale of the problems faced by family members, as well as the wider determinants of institutional and legislative issues that prescribe the formal framework for the activity of caseworkers. The chapter describes the types of participation of family assistants and users that show the real face of participation, located in the field of social work with families, in particular in relation to child protection practice.

### **Introduction**

The concept of participation is often referred to as contentious, which results from the multiplicity of definitional approaches and the constant variability of the scientific discourse on the subject (Croft, Beresford, 1992: 20). One of the important reasons for this is that the idea of participation acquires a definite, not abstract, meaning when it is located in a concrete context dimension (e.g. it concerns formation of various social movements, creation/transformation of social policy instruments, implementation of a specific practice of activity including conducting research).

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In this chapter, the issue of participation is considered in relation to the practice of activities of family assistants. The assistants support the families recognized by the representatives of the social welfare system as “experiencing difficulties in fulfilling care and educational functions” (*Ustawa z dnia 9 czerwca 2011 roku o wspieraniu rodziny i systemie pieczy zastępczej/Act on Supporting Family and the Foster Care System*, 2011: Art. 2 (1)). These are often parents under the supervision of a family probation officer who have limited parental rights and also parents who are trying to get their children – that have been temporarily placed outside the family – back from foster care facilities (*Ibid.*: Art. 10 (4)).

In the years 2005–2011 family assistants were employed as part of system projects co-financed from the European Social Fund, within municipal programmes funded from the city budget, projects financed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, and inter-ministerial activities (Krasiejko, 2010: 100). In 2012, *Ustawa z dnia 9 czerwca 2011 roku o wspieraniu rodziny i systemie pieczy zastępczej/the Act on Supporting Families and the Foster Care System*, which introduced the profession of family assistant into the structures of Polish social welfare, came into force. In the years 2012–2014, the employment of assistants was of an optional nature. Since 1 January 2015, the legal obligation to employ assistants in the commune and municipal social welfare centres has become effective. From the entry of the Act into force until the end of 2014, family assistants looked after up to 20 families each. Since 1 January 2015, the number of families supported simultaneously by an assistant has decreased to 15 (*Funkcjonowanie asystentów rodziny w świetle ustawy o wspieraniu rodziny i systemie pieczy zastępczej/Functioning of family assistants in the light of The Act on Supporting Family and the Foster Care System*, 2014: 16).

The procedure for assigning an assistant to a given family is governed by the legal Act, which says that a social worker applies to the head of a municipality welfare centre with a request to assign assistant to a family (*Ustawa z dnia 9 czerwca 2011 roku o wspieraniu rodziny i systemie pieczy zastępczej/Act on Supporting Family and the Foster Care System*, 2011: Art. 11(3)). Assistants, as part of working with individual families, cooperate with social workers. According to the Act, assistants are required to consult with social workers on the plan of work with the family (*Ibid.*: Art.15(1).1).

The aim of this contribution is to distinguish the types of participation of assistants and family members in the process of activity that takes place in the field of child protection practice. Interpretation of the family assistants' narrations allows us to determine the limitations in the application of a participatory approach in the area of social work with families that are considered to be experiencing difficulties in fulfilling care and educational functions.

On the basis of the reconstruction of assistants' activities, which takes into account their point of view, one can see the problematic nature, and even the inability, to implement specific goals of the participatory approach to child protection practice, such as: co-creating a partner relationship (Levin, Weiss-Gal, 2009: 194; Healy, 1998: 900; Turnell, 1998: 2–3); compliance with the principle of reciprocity (Shemmings D., Shemmings Y., 1995), treating service users as equal partners (*Family Involvement in Public Child Welfare Driven Systems of Care*; 2008: 1), non-judgmental approach (Beresford et.al., 2008: 1397); ensuring freedom of choice (Croft, Beresford, 2002: 78).

The chapter shows the limitations of the participatory approach in child protection practice that were reconstructed from narrative interviews with family assistants. The contribution contains a brief description of the research on the course of the family assistants' activities. The research results show the reconstructed lines of activities that the assistants address with the families with whom they work. These areas/lines of activities reflect the types of participation of assistants and parents in the activity process. The conclusions concern the sources of difficulties of assistants related to the implementation of a participatory approach, and discrepancies between theoretical assumptions related to participatory practice and its actual application in the field of social work with families.

## **Debate on the limitations of participatory approach in child protection practice**

Due to the complex nature of child protection work, this makes it difficult to translate the ideals of participation into reality (Farrell: 2004). Karen Healy examined the discourse about participation on child protection practice (1998). The author distinguished three limitations to the achievement of participatory practice processes: firstly – issues related to the service users' capabilities, and secondly, the attitude of practitioners, and thirdly, the organizational context (Ibid.: 902–904).

Firstly, it is suggested that limited capacity to engage on equal footing with cooperation with practitioners comes from personal, social and economic deprivations to which many clients have been subject (Ibid.: 902; see also: Polansky et al., 1979: 152). This point of view is confirmed by studies carried out by Julia Littel and Emiko Tajima (2000). The analysis carried out by researchers was based on data gathered during a large-scale evaluation of family preservation services (FPS) in Illinois, USA (Ibid.: 412). Julia Littel and Emiko Tajima (2000) state that workers of family preservation services (FPS) report lower levels of collaboration in cases

with substance abuse problems, parental mental health problems, and severe child-care skill deficits (Ibid.: 424).

Karen Healy, Yvonne Darlington and Judith A. Feeney (2011) reported their research findings from the study of young families' participation in decision making in child welfare services, conducted from 2006 to 2009 in Queensland, Australia. Respondents were recruited through the statutory child protection authority (the Department of Child Safety) and the non-governmental agencies that provided early intervention and family support services to vulnerable families (Ibid.: 284). The interviews they conducted showed that respondents (mothers engaged with a child protection or family support service) pointed out the barriers with their participation, resulting from life problems they are struggling with, which for them, are related with high level of chaos in the family's life (Healy, Darlington, Feeney, 2011: 286). More specifically, they point to problems related to homelessness, domestic violence, drug/alcohol abuse, and/or mental health issues were identified by them as severely limiting their capacity to understand and engage with service (Ibid.). The same researchers also conducted research with 28 practitioners from five service types: child advocacy, child protection, domestic violence service, family support and intensive family support (Darlington, Healy, Feeney, 2010: 1022). Interviews that were carried out with practitioners included a discussion focused on participants' ideas about and experiences of participation, and their responses to a practice vignette (Ibid.: 1021–1022). The analysis of interviews shows that the quality of parents' participation in the support process depends on their willingness to make changes in their lives in order to improve the children's wellbeing and also, on the need to engage: to take part in conversations about their children's needs, and an ability to understand that aspects of their own behaviour would need to change (Ibid.: 1023). Without these contingency factors, parents' participation is not possible (Ibid.).

Margaret Bell (1999) conducted research with twenty-two British local authority social workers carrying out child protection investigations. She used a semi-structured questionnaire (Ibid.: 439–440). According to the participating social workers, when families did not share the professionals' judgement of their parenting behaviours connected with abuse and neglecting, full partnerships seemed unrealistic (Ibid.: 447). The social workers also paid attention to the limited participation of family members who have neither the power, nor the choice, to withdraw from the engagement or, in many cases, to negotiate the terms of it (Ibid.: 451). From the perspective of the respondents, the attitude of families can become an important barrier in mutual cooperation. Many of them were difficult to access or hostile to the intervention (Ibid.).

Secondly, the attitude of practitioners can also be a limitation to the implementation of a participatory approach in child protection practice.

According to Andrew Turnell (1998), paternalism remains the dominant paradigm behind professionalism in this field of practice (Ibid.: 2). This means that practitioners rely mainly on their own opinions and treat what service recipients think as secondary (Ibid.). This kind of attitude is an obstacle in the construction of a partnership based relationship, inscribed in a participatory approach, in which practitioners are valuing their own knowledge and authority and at the same time feel secure enough to make professional knowledge and assessments vulnerable to family knowledge, perspectives and judgements (Ibid.: 4). Frequently it is asserted that, despite the popularity of the notions of participation and partnership, practitioners are often highly reluctant to relinquish their professional power and status in order to engage in more equitable and participatory relations with service users (Healy, 1998: 903; see also: Calder, 1995: 757).

The attitudes of practitioners that are not conducive to a participatory approach can be combined with their quality of micro-skills of how one builds a partnership. Noteworthy are the studies carried out by Donald Forrester, Jim McCambridge, Clara Waissbein and Stephen Rollnick (2008). They examined 40 family social workers who worked for local authorities in London (Ibid.: 28–29). Analysis was based on practitioners' responses to the "vignettes" with scenarios focused on simulated situations where there were concerns about child welfare and the parents' resistance was clearly demonstrated (Ibid.: 26–28). Key findings from this research indicated a pervasive confrontational style of interaction – a high level of confrontation and a low level of listening (Ibid.: 28–30). According to the authors, lack of ability to deal with clients' resistance means that family social workers are inadvertently increasing the likelihood of such difficult responses from the parents they work with (Ibid.: 32).

Thirdly, the organizational contexts in which child protection practice occurs can be seen as limited in regard to a participatory ethos (Healy, 1998: 903). The author points to the characteristics of many child protection agencies, particularly the high caseloads and limited resources as a reason for lowering the quality of relationship between workers and service users and for the development of an infrastructure to support participatory approach (Ibid.). Another problem that arises, according to the organizational context, is an unsupportive work environment. It would appear that child protection organizations do not often deal well with the professional support oriented towards increasing skills and knowledge useful for dealing with development of participatory culture and practice (Ibid.: 903–904; see also: Morrison, 1996: 131; Hernandez et al., 2008).

In addition, some authors emphasize that difficulties in implementing a participatory approach in child protection work are connected to the complex status of parents in this field of practice where parents present simultaneously as citizens who have basic rights, as carers of children,

and as the subjects of child protection allegations (Darlington, Healy, Feeney, 2010: 1020; see also: McLaughlin, 2007). Where children's safety and wellbeing are at risk, there may be conflicts between the goal of participation and child welfare professionals' duties and responsibilities. In particular, child protection professionals have legal obligations and public responsibilities that emphasize the need to protect children from harm. Further, they face pressure to resolve child welfare concerns in a timely manner (Maiter et al., 2006; Munro, 2002). Martin Calder (1995) claims that most interventions entail the exercise of social control under the pretext of providing welfare (Ibid.: 752). When an agency takes a decision to intervene through court proceedings, partnership may seem a meaningless concept. Power is very much concentrated on one side (Ibid.: 758). For the difficulties in maintaining the balance between care and control in child protective practice, see the work of Margaret Bell, already mentioned earlier (1999: 450).

The research I carried out with the family assistants is in line with the discussion on the limitations of the participatory approach in the child protection practice. From the perspective of assistants, the main cause for these limitations lies in the capacity of clients using their services. However, my research goes beyond the simple indication of these limitations from the perspectives of family assistant. Research analysis allows us to see the relationship between the course of activities directed to families and the assessments (categorizations) of individual family members as formulated by the assistants.

In addition, in the ongoing discussion, there are strands emphasizing the limitations of the participative approach resulting from taking compulsory actions based on legal bases (Calder, 1995; Littel, Tajima, 2000). In my research it turned out that the problem in including families in the process of activity is the usage of conflicting legal instruments or their abuse. In the light of the applicable Polish law, assistants act on a voluntary basis with families, while family probation officers have the right to use compulsory instruments. Probation officers sometimes under coercion oblige families to cooperate with assistants who no longer have the opportunity to work with them as voluntary clients. Social workers, who refer families to assistants, sometimes abuse their power, threatening their families with the loss of financial support or other privileges if they do not start working with their assistants. In both cases, the assistants are not able to work with such families on a voluntary basis.

By their nature, the interactions between child protection workers and their clients are complex and challenging to observe directly. Researchers have therefore tended to rely on retrospective accounts from participants (Forrester, McCambridge, Waissbein, Rollnick, 2008: 24). Most research studies based on retrospective accounts can be criticized for being

influenced by a desire to justify actions or to portray oneself in a positive light (Silverman, 2001). For this reason what social workers, parents and others claim happened is unlikely to be accurate (Forrester, McCambridge, Waissbein, Rollnick, 2008: 25). On this background, my research is distinguished by a different cognitive perspective – Jean Marie Barbier’s transversal analysis of the activity (2006, 2016). In my research, I analyzed the narrations about the work of family assistants, not to determine their credibility but to get the meaning that assistants give to their activities, which confirms the reflective and interpretive nature of their knowledge. Based on their knowledge, I tried to reconstruct the course of their activities, which included an interdependent type of participation between assistants and families.

## Research methodology

This contribution is based on narrative research conducted in 2011–2017. One of the research outcomes was a doctoral thesis titled: *Tożsamość profesjonalna w narracjach asystentów rodziny/The professional identity in narratives of family assistants* (Kamińska-Jatczak, 2017). The research material consisted of thirteen narrative interviews conducted with family assistants, which began with an opening question, a “narrative-generative question” (Hopf, 2004: 206): “tell me about your work”. The research consisted of analytical interpretation of the collected interviews, performed mainly with the use of the coding procedure drawn from the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). The stories of family assistants reflected the language of activity they used. The narrators used expressions that acted as “intellectual categories”, important for reading the meanings inherent in their discourse concerning their own activity (see e.g.: Barbier, 2006: 255–256; Barbier, 2016: 20–21).<sup>1</sup> In other words, in my analysis, I tried to understand the specific language of individual assistants, so as to properly understand the course of activities he/she was talking about. Important intellectual categories that assistants used, were identified as about naming the essence of activities undertaken by them or by the families, as well as assessing the possibilities of the participation of the particular families they cooperate with. The expressions that act as intellectual categories, which I quote later in the chapter, are marked in italics.

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<sup>1</sup> Intellectual categories reflect the idiomatic nature of an individual language, contains phrases reflecting the meaning that the narrator gives to his/her activity. It is worth emphasizing the difference between intellectual categories and “in vivo codes” that are used in grounded theory. In vivo codes reflect not the specificity of an individual language, but rather a part of a local discourse understood by a specific group (Charmaz, 2006: 55).

As I mentioned before, the theoretical framework of the conducted research was a transversal analysis of the activity as developed by Jean-Marie Barbier (2006, 2016). From this perspective, the effect of my research concerned the interpretation based on the comprehensibility of the meanings inherent in their discourse about their ongoing activity<sup>2</sup>. The concept of “comprehensibility” (Fr. *intelligibilité*) is understood here as a type of reflection oriented towards the analysis and interpretation of one’s own or other people’s practice (Barbier, 2006: 256).

The results of the research have not been consulted about with the family assistants at the time of writing, although the further research intent is to use the analytical interpretation in the supervisory activities addressed to them. From the socio-pedagogical point of view, the aim is to stimulate the professional development of family assistants associated with the acquisition of awareness of activity, i.e., being aware of their own activity – with the senses and meanings assigned to it – and the specificity of one’s own participation in it (the adopted orientation) (Marynowicz-Hetka, 2006: 96–97, 481–485).

The conclusions drawn from the research show the child protection practice as a process of activity, which is constructed and transformed through the dynamics of mutual relationships and interactions between assistant and family. From this point of view, this interpretation should be perceived as an attempt to capture the perspective of one category of participants in the process of activity, i.e. the practitioners (family assistants). In order to obtain a more complete interpretation of the process of child protection practice, the viewpoint of the addressees of this activity should also be taken into account.

## Lines of activity addressed to families

Each family assistant carries out many different lines of activity – formulas of activities consisting of a series of individual interactive events that are linked by a specific goal. These lines of activity are tailored to the specific category of families to which they are addressed. Categorizing families, and thus interpreting data about them, is associated with determining their ability to take independent activity. The assessment of the possibility of participation of family members in the process of activity translates into the course of specific lines of activity (Kamińska-Jatczak, 2016).

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<sup>2</sup> The conceivability of meanings inherent in the narratives of assistants was also based on the researcher’s own knowledge. The researcher worked in the years 2009–2011 as a family assistant in one of the municipal social welfare centres.

Sherry Arnstein (1969), based on the analysis of the area of citizen participation, created the *Ladder of Citizen Participation* showing different levels of involvement (Ibid.). Thus, she showed how the quality of participation in the process of activity which takes various forms should be analyzed. Analogously to S. Arnstein, in my research – embedded in the different field of child protection practice – I tried to look for distinct types of participation of family assistants combined with specific types of family members’ participation. However, I did not use the typology of Arnstein, but I tried to extract characteristic types of participation that could be reconstructed from family assistant’s narrations.

I tried to look at the assistants’ narratives about their activity in terms of seeking the attributes of the participatory approach. The separated lines of activity (tab. 1) show various types of family assistants’and family members’ participation in the process of activity, which are characterized by a greater or lesser level of directiveness and mobilization to undertake independent activity. This issue is discussed in more detail later in the chapter. Against the background of the assistants’ activity, emerges the nature of parents’ participation in this process. The table below presents the types of parents’ participation in the support process, which are the expected types of engagement that family assistants seek as part of the particular line of activity.

**Table 1.** Types of participation of assistants and parents in the process of activity

<b>The name of the line of activity</b>	<b>Type of assistant’s participation</b>	<b>Type of parents’ participation</b>
<i>The cat-and-mouse game</i>	Trying to make contact	Avoiding contact, non-participation
<i>Watching over</i>	Controlling family matters	Giving in to control
<i>Leading by the hand</i>	Giving orders, taking over the initiative	Executing commands, submission/compliance
<i>Targeting for independent activity</i>	Stimulation for independent activity and taking the initiative	Overcoming difficulties in undertaking independent activity
<i>Stimulation to self-reflection</i>	Inducing self-reflection, directing the reflection	Taking up the challenge of self-reflection
<i>Learning together</i>	Solving problems together, reciprocity	Empowerment in the process of activity, becoming a partner for the assistant

**Source:** elaborated by the author.

In the further part of the contribution, the activity lines listed in the table are discussed. These lines, discussed below, reflect the related types of participation of assistants and users of their services.

### ***Cat-and-mouse game***

According to the assistants, it is extremely difficult or even impossible to contact families who *avoid* meetings (they do not open the door, leave the house during prearranged visits, do not answer the phone). When the meeting finally takes place, family members may falsify the contact – “lie”, “pretend” etc.

Resistance on the part of some families to contact with a family assistant is a consequence of the inability to make a voluntary choice. According to the collected narratives, parents are sometimes forced to cooperate with family assistants by social workers and family probation officers who threaten them with consequences – refusal of financial support or placement of children in foster care institutions. When families are faced with coercion, they treat the visits of family assistants as intrusive. Littell and Tajima, who examined workers and recipients of family preservation service, also pay attention to the difficulty of cooperation with involuntary clients (2000: 407).

In such families, family assistants strive to seek and establish contact, which one of them referred to as a *cat-and-mouse game* (N5). The meetings were rare and irregular, which prevented the practitioner from being active in promoting family participation in the change process. The following fragment of the narration illustrates this line of activity.

#### Line of activity – *cat-and-mouse game*

Male family assistant (N5): (...) if this person does not see the need for change, is not motivated, there start all kinds of strange things happening, like people do not open doors, avoid contacts, do not answer phones, stop contacting (...) often after three weeks it turns out that we have seen each other once or twice (...) it comes to a situation (...) where we are really starting to chase a client visiting his family, (...) who lives, for example, in the same tenement house, or in a tenement house next door. We start looking for him or her and it's like playing a cat-and-mouse game. It is interesting that when you look at it from this perspective, you can even perceive it as fun, and not as work, because this is what it really comes down to.<sup>3</sup>

This line of activity is an example of the inability to cooperate with parents who become involuntary clients since they are not motivated for any cooperation with the family assistant.

According to Suzy Croft and Peter Beresford, giving people choices is the basic condition for constructing participatory practice as part of social

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<sup>3</sup> The chapter contains excerpts from narrative interviews with family assistants. The selected quotes – in order to enhance their clarity – were written using punctuation marks and without sounds associated with thinking, such as mmm, uh, etc. Transcription of the original narration is included in the doctoral dissertation entitled: *Professional identity in the narratives of family assistants* (Kamińska-Jatczak, 2017).

work (2002: 78). Unfortunately, the legislative bases that determine the voluntary support of family assistants are not comparative in this regard. *Ustawa z dnia 9 czerwca 2011 roku o wspieraniu rodziny i systemie pieczy zastępczej/The Act on Supporting Family and the Foster Care System* determines the voluntary nature of using the support provided by the assistant (2011: Article 8, Paragraph 3). On the other hand, *Kodeks rodzinny i opiekuńczy/The Family and Guardianship Code* permits the possibility to oblige parents to take up co-operation with the family assistant in the situation of “threat to the good of the child” (1964: Art. 109, Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2, Item 1). Such ambiguous legal grounds generate certain consequences in the form of involuntary clients, which is a serious barrier preventing cooperation with such parents.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasizing that in the discussed line of activity we cannot speak about the participation of family members in the process of activity, who avoid contact with assistants, because they feel forced to do so. Assistants in this situation cannot provide support, because his/her activity is limited only to unsuccessful attempts to make a contact.

### ***Watching over***

*Watching over* is a line of activity initiated in the case of family members who are considered incapable of adequately parenting their children additionally categorized as “parents with schizophrenia”.

The activity of family assistants addressed to these service users involves caring and control and is a response to their mental health problems and unpredictability. The psychological instability of parents is referred to also by other researchers as one of the main reasons for interventions among families affected by mental illness (see e.g.: Dawson, Berry, 2002: 307; Menahem, Halasz, 2000). Limited possibilities of parents to take control over their own affairs related to mental health problems were a clear barrier preventing the increase and transformation of the quality of their participation in the support process.

The essence of the assistants’ participation in this type of activity line is supervision over the course of family matters related to: health (controlling: dosing of drugs, doctor appointments, visits to the ward); education (controlling: attendance at school, payments); hygiene (monitoring the hygiene of the children). The following fragment of the narration contains the characteristics of *watching over*.

Line of activity – *watching over*

Female Family Assistant (N8): (...) you really had to watch over this lady and it was like this that when she started to get sick, she started to wander around the city, not open the door (...) in this family there was also completely different work. Here it involved contacting the school, piloting the boy’s affairs at school, checking whether he goes to

school, whether all contributions are paid, whether he is clean or dirty. Such a way of probing every time that when there was such negligence when it comes to hygiene, it was known that something was starting to happen to his mother. Whether she is taking drugs or going to this ward (this refers to a day attendance psychiatric ward). In the course of work, we managed to change to injections taken every two weeks, which this lady had to take and there had to be such a continuity. Because at the beginning it was so that she had to take the medicine three times a day and it was necessary to watch over whether she was taking the drugs or not, whether she was under the care of a psychiatrist, or went to these visits. A lot of such work based on the principle of watching over, (...) it went on well for a long time, until it turned out that this illness, nevertheless, progresses, and that despite this care, relapses are more frequent. The lady started to disappear. We managed to find a place for this boy in a foster family home, and he will be transported there (...).

Family members categorized as having a diagnosis of schizophrenia, due to the cyclical nature of their disorders, seem to be often unable to take control and accountability over their own affairs. Andrea Reupert and Darryl Maybery, who have reviewed interventions aimed at families affected by mental illness, have a similar opinion (2007: 365).

The example of *watching over* described in the above fragment of the narrative indicates that it was also of a preventive character. Regular monitoring of family life allows identification of periods of relapse and implementation of appropriate intervention measures (Ibid.: 367).

The participation of assistants in this line of activity consisted in taking control over the members who passively underwent this form of support due to their psychological inability to take the initiative and make independent decisions. Participation of assistants in the support process comes down to controlling family matters, while the participation of family members is limited to giving in to control.

### ***Leading by the hand***

According to the family assistants, in some families it was only possible to perform care and guidance activities called by them *leading by the hand*. Assistants started this kind of activity line in relation to family members with serious and chronic problems in many areas of their functioning. Such parents were categorized by them in various ways, such as: intellectually disabled,<sup>4</sup> extremely inefficient in terms of caring for their children – *those with depressive states, alcoholics, those with schizophrenia*. Taking into

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<sup>4</sup> Categorizing family members as intellectually disabled or schizophrenic has not always been associated with a medical diagnosis, which the persons often did not have due to the lack of adequate medical tests, lack of consent to carry out such tests, lack of documents specifying the type of disorder, etc. This kind of categorization has most often been associated with “the observer’s point of view” (Söder, 1989: 119) – an assistant who interpreted the capabilities of families to undertake independent activities in this way.

account the perspective of family assistants, the listed categories of family members can be collectively defined as having limited ability to undertake independent activities.

Family members categorized in this way were perceived by family assistants as unable to make independent, beneficial life choices. As a result, the assistants decided to take over the initiative in the decision-making process related to the direction of the undertaken activity.

The inclusion of family members in the activity process took place on a passive basis. The family assistant in the course of *leading by the hand*, took over the initiative, decided on what is “to be done” and how to do it, showed, instructed, while the family, at most, reenacted/implemented the assistant’s instructions.

The assistants’ narratives indicate that they mobilized the activity of family members in the form of fulfilling orders which J. Littell and E. Tajima called “compliance” (2000: 41). Kari Dawson and Marianne Berry cite research by these researchers and point to this type of parental participation in the support process, as one of the more commonly used by child welfare practitioners (2002: 296). This type of participation on the part of the parents consists of keeping appointments and completing tasks with an active support of the assistant in their performance.

The line of activity in question was launched in the process of performing specific activities, such as: handling family matters in institutions – offices, medical facilities, nursery, school, etc.; running the household – cleaning, cooking, arranging a menu, shopping, etc.

The following fragments of the narration depict the line of activity in question.

#### Line of activity – *leading by the hand*

Male family assistant (N1): (...) she could not go anywhere without me, that is go to the office, go to the doctor – because she is treated by a psychiatrist – go to the administration office, set up a bank account, it was also a problem, so we had to go everywhere together.

Female family assistant (N4): for example, I have intellectually disabled clients, where I really have to go to the offices and doctors with each of them. Not only with them, because they have their own affairs neglected, not straightened out, without medical decisions that have expired long ago, but there are also issues related to children. Children without medical decisions, without medical consultations. Well, as you know, to every specialist – a referral (...) anyway, if someone does not take them by the hand in these cases and does not go, nothing will progress.

Female family assistant (N8): (...) the work is entirely different with intellectually impaired parents of three deeply handicapped children (...) work here is basically, as I said, more like leading by the hand and helping in many things such as – medical examinations, school selection, contact with the school, offices, repayment of debts, value of money, management.

These are the basic things that you do, but really here and now with the given family.

Female family assistant (N10): as I say, I have the majority of families with intellectual disabilities, so it is also like completely different work with them, because they just need to be shown step by step. They cannot be assigned tasks because they just will not do it.

According to the family assistants, *leading by the hand* was a variant of activity tailored to the capabilities of the families. The family assistants pointed out that not everyone wants and can speak for themselves, get involved in the process of co-ordinating the designed aid plan, and negotiate.

It is worth adding that family assistants are in a somewhat paradoxical situation, because due to the limitations of some families, they are sometimes unable to provide support that meets the requirements of participatory practice, which is a formal and legal requirement. The already mentioned *Ustawa z dnia 9 czerwca 2011 roku o wspieraniu rodziny i systemie pieczy zastępczej/Act on Supporting Family and the Foster Care System*, which regulates the profession of family assistant in the Polish social welfare system, states that “supporting the family is carried out with its consent and active participation” (2011: Art. 8, Par. 3).

The family assistants’ narratives indicate that the realities of their work differ from the statutory requirements. The assistants are assigned to families who, in their opinion, are unable to cooperate based on active participation. This is happening as part of a wider trend related to the increasing number of families supported by caseworkers (Levin, Weiss-Gal, 2009: 196).<sup>5</sup>

In summary, the participation of assistants within this line of activity consists in giving orders and taking over initiative for actions. Expectations and implemented activity of family members, which is a response to the activities of assistants, consists in executing commands and submission – compliance.

## Targeting for independent activity

The family assistants also sought to involve family members in the support process based on the principle of expanding the field of independent activity. They took such an orientation of activity when they categorized family members as persons “having an intellect that is within the intellectual norm, capable of self-reflection and independent activity”.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the report of the Supreme Audit Office, in the period 2012–2014 the number of families benefiting from the support of the social assistance system and the assistance of caseworkers equaled 25% (*Funkcjonowanie asystentów rodziny w świetle ustawy o wspieraniu rodziny i systemie pieczy zastępczej/Functioning of family assistants in the light of the Act on supporting family and the foster care system*, 2014: 17).

In order to mobilize family members to be independent in accomplishing tasks, family assistants formulated certain requirements and determined the boundaries of their caring presence. They tried to minimize taking over the initiative in the implementation of individual activities, in favour of increasing the independent activity of family members. In addition, they sought to ensure that the family took the initiative and responsibility for the activity undertaken related to the change process.

This line of activity is illustrated by the following fragment of the narrative.

#### Line of activity – targeting for independent activity

[The phase of internal questions]

Researcher: and I have another question (.) because in addition to such work with people with disabilities, you still work with people within the intellectual norm (.) and then what kind of support is this?

Female family assistant (N4): well, if there are offices to attend, then once I can go together with them, for treatment, or so on. Well, but I also require self-reliance from them, it is not like with the intellectually impaired, it is completely different. We set ourselves a goal, what they are to do and that's it. On this principle. Not by the hand, once yes, I can go, but the initiative must rather come from them, because they have to learn life. Because it is known that no assistant will be there for a very long time, so – it may not sound nice – but I bring them to heel to get over and take their fate into their own hands. If there are no mental barriers.

Researcher: is it just that you try to shake them a little?

Female family assistant (N4): yes, the shock method of course. Show the dangers that children can be taken, and this is probably the worst thing that could happen to them. I'm talking about my families, so yeah, the shock method. Make them aware of certain things for which they are responsible.

The above fragment of the narrative indicates that the family assistant mobilized family members to independent activity by means of methods that could be considered authoritarian, such as putting parents in a situation of challenge to which they needed to respond “here and now” and applying *the shock method* consisting in confronting family members with probable negative consequences of their behaviour involving placement of a child/children in a substitute care facility in the event of neglecting to perform certain activities.

Ian Dempsey and Carl Dunst (2004) claim that empowering practice should contain support designed to encourage critical reflection by the help-seeker, as well as the development of knowledge and practical skills (Ibid.: 41). From this perspective, the analyzed line of activity can be seen as a manifestation of striving to empower parents by strengthening their perception of themselves as the persons responsible for the change process (Ibid.: 41).

The use of more or less authoritarian ways of influence is a debatable issue since it may not necessarily contribute to the construction of a partnership-based relationship. According to Peter Beresford, Suzy Croft

and Lesley Adshead who analyzed the needs of service users of palliative care social work, partner relationship is one of the key elements of perceived support, which emphasizes the display of understanding, sensitivity and empathy (2008: 1393–1396). On the other hand, Andrew Turnell points out that a partnership-based relationship is sometimes perceived as founded on the sincerity of a social worker, who expresses, simply and directly, his or her ability to exercise power, which does not mean that he or she is in fact seeking a paternal relationship (1998: 3). Such behaviour can be a way of making parents aware of what they are actually participating in and what they are striving for (*Ibid.*).

As part of this line of activity, assistants stimulate family members to begin independent activity and take initiatives in the decision-making process. Sometimes clients need to overcome the resistance to independence that assistants try to overcome by using more authoritarian ways of interacting. It can be an obstacle in establishing a partner relationship that is important in a participatory approach in social work.

## Stimulation to self-reflection

Conversations about the family's biographical experiences and things that happened to it are described in the narratives of some family assistants (N3, N8) as separate lines of activity, intentionally directed at stimulating family members to take self-reflection. The assistants engaged family members in discussions about the problems they experienced, which sometimes transformed into their life stories.

This type of activity was addressed to people categorized as capable of making self-reflection that were sometimes unaware of many of the causes of their problems. Some family members avoided difficult topics and were opposed to starting working on themselves.

The stimulation to reflect on oneself takes on particular meaning after breakthrough events that constitute "the turning points" (Strauss, 2008 [1959]: 95–102) in the life of the family, such as losing children who are placed in a foster care institution, taking a detoxification treatment, etc.

The following excerpts from the narrative are an example of this activity.

### Line of activity – stimulating reflection on oneself

Female family assistant (N8): Because I basically lead her through the "Happy Return" therapy (the assistant visited a woman during the period when she took part in a therapeutic and educational programme for families applying for the return of children from foster care institutions) in the centre for which she signed up. Some kind of educative training. All the time talking about problems, about drinking that ruined her family, about her experiences as she was alone with the child, what kind of family she

had, the support she has from her family. In fact, during all the three months that have passed, in the various crises she has, I accompany her with some success. She feels how I talked to her, what's important.

Female family assistant (N3): (...) I see if it is so that what the family says to me, what it expects, is more in line with what I see, or if, in my opinion, there is something to improve in a sphere where the family does not realize, maybe where it is unaware. Well, we are trying to complement each other's awareness and somehow I always try to talk about what I see and what I think and we discuss it.

Conversations aimed at stimulating family members to reflect had two essential functions. First, they served the purpose of providing the emotional support which the assistant manifested during listening by showing his or her acceptance. Second, they gave him or her access to the service users' knowledge. Such knowledge reveals the lifeworld (original: 'liebenswelt') through the prism of which family members give meaning to their life experiences (Kamińska, 2012).

The family assistants encouraged families to take reflection in different ways. One assistant (N8) gave family members various "homework tasks" consisting of formulating questions to be thought about in solitude. By asking questions she tried to induce self-reflection concerning, for example, the history of *drinking* and parenting as indicated below.

#### *Homework*

Female family assistant (N8): I give her various homework, for example, I ask her three questions, to which she does not necessarily have to write a written answer, but which she has to answer first of all for herself, concerning the needs of children, what was happening once, negligence resulting from her drinking.

The female family assistant (N3) shared with the family members her thoughts on their lives. Then she talked to them based on the presented interpretation, which – in her opinion involved *making them aware* of what they *had not realized* before. The following quote illustrates the activity of the assistant.

#### *Making aware*

Female family assistant (N3): I think that here in our work it is also often so that several problems overlap and we somehow try to show what it does, how it does (.) indicate what it will do in the future (.) show what it has done so far (...) well, I'm not hiding that I'm interested in where it all comes from and I try to bring it to light (.) to realize and to change, if possible (.) it is not possible, it is not possible (.) but maybe it is (...) sometimes it is possible to refer to a specialist (...) and in such situations these people hear for the first time that it has some impact on their lives and somehow/we are also working on it (...).

Some female family assistants (N3, N8) undoubtedly prompted service users to take up self-reflection that could act as an empowering trigger. Self-reflection is an expression of biographical work involving interpretation

and redefinition of one's own life experiences, which in turn can bring about a change in the current orientation of life (Riemann, Schütze, 1991: 339). On the other hand, the assistants took over control over the reflection, creating their own interpretations and directing the reflection.

The assistants' narratives encourage considerations regarding the challenges and limitations that result from the application of one of the key premises of participatory practice as regards treating service users as experts in the area of their own problems (*Family Involvement in Public Welfare Driven Systems of Care*, 2008: 2). It is worth considering this issue taking into account the realities of child protection practice including, inter alia, the specificity of individual capabilities of family members.

Assistants within the discussed line of activity tried to induce a self-reflection in family members who were not always ready for it. Sometimes assistants, in order to stimulate service users' self-reflection, tried to convey their own interpretations of family problems and to direct their reflection, which in some cases, could paradoxically limit family members' ideas.

### ***Learning together***

Family assistant (N2): it's more about just treating people, listening to them, respect to them yes, so such community-such a partner relationship yes.

This line of activity consisted in encouraging the involvement of family members in solving problems by initiating situations of mutual learning. The assistant who described this line of activity in his narrative did not categorize parents to whom it was matched. The narrative of this assistant shows that learning together was a trend of activity that characterized his style of action. The following fragment of the narration is an exemplification of the discussed activity.

#### ***Line of activity – learning together***

Male family assistant (N2): (...) I just do not put myself somewhere higher than these people, because I think that really a lot of harm happened to them and they have a lot more difficulties, but also enriching experiences, which I can really draw from, so I often learn being with these families, together with them. So I show them that I cannot do different things, I do not have the skills and I do not know, but I show that you can learn different things. You can find answers to various questions, arrange various things when it comes to official matters and how to communicate with your child.

It should be emphasized that the described activity contained specific attributes of the partner relationship characteristic of the practice of participatory social work such as:

- striving to minimize power differentials in mutual contact (Turnell, 1998: 3);
- building contact based on listening to parents (Beresford, et al., 2008: 1397) and showing them respect (Beresford, Croft, 2001: 305; Healy, 1998: 900);
- stimulating active participation in the process of activity, making independent decisions (Healy, 1998: 900);
- implementation of specific tasks based on the model of cooperation (Healy, 1998: 900; Shemmings D., Shemmings Y., 1995).

The above-mentioned attributes of the partner relationship were revealed in the process of activity. The assistant built up the situational identity of the one who does not know. He resigned from the position of an expert in order to become a person who reveals his limited knowledge to the family and at the same time initiates the activity of searching for answers, which serves to indicate the ways of finding solutions. The family assistant emphasized that he “learns when working with the families and together with them”. He presented family members as equal partners, from whom he can acquire knowledge.

From the perspective of this family assistant, watching the efforts that he puts in finding a solution to the problem, or searching for solutions together, encouraged parents to *overcome difficulties* themselves. This activity is illustrated in the following passage.

#### Encouragement to overcome difficulties oneself

[The phase of internal questions]

Male family assistant (N2): I often learn with them, I also show them. For me it is often difficult, too, so they see it too and it allows them to overcome their various difficulties not only my own but also theirs. Because, however, things are done together

Researcher: did I understand correctly, because you show them that you cannot do something yourself, but that you learn it, you are able to bear this effort, you also motivate them with your example to this

Male family assistant (N2): exactly, sure

Researcher: I understand.

It can be said that this line of activity was carried out in an atmosphere of mutual learning, community and avoiding confrontation and directiveness.

This line of activity contains the most attributes of a participatory approach to social work. In order for this kind of activity to occur, a specific attitude of a practitioner who gives up the status of an expert is necessary. On the other hand, supported people should join the process of activity on the basis of partnership, which requires them to overcome various types of internal barriers.

## Limitations of participatory approach – conclusions

The aim of the chapter was to highlight certain types of participation of assistants and family members in the process of activity that takes place in the field of child protection practice. Analysis of the narratives of assistants allows us to understand their point of view regarding the possibility of participation in the process of activity, which is revealed against the background of barriers and limitations present in their daily practice. The limitations included in the description of the daily activities of assistants allows us to understand difficulties in applying the participatory approach in child protection practice.

According to the assistants, the majority of restrictions result from serious deficits in emotional and social functioning that are visible in the activity of parents towards themselves and their children (see e.g.: Healy, 1998: 902; Polansky et al., 1979: 152). Personal and social deprivation, which characterizes family members, makes it impossible for them to co-create relationships with the assistants based on an equal footing (Healy, 1998: 902).

## Discussion

It should also be taken into account that there is a discrepancy between theoretical approaches related to participatory practice and its actual course in a specific field of activity (Healy, 1998: 903). I would like to draw special attention to the postulate of non-judgmentalism (Biestek, 1961), which is raised in the context of participatory practice. The advocates of this approach criticize the tendency of practitioners to take the position of an expert in the process of constructing information, who as a representative of the middle class imposes his or her own system of values and beliefs on the service users (Healy, 1998: 903; Calder, 1995: 752). As shown by the assistants' narratives, categorizing families and their assessment make an indispensable element of the activity process, without which it is not possible to make decisions related to adapting support to the specificity of problems that particular family members are struggling with (Healy, 1998: 910; Stevenson, 1996: 15). As Karen Healy (1998) rightly notes, for the participatory practice to be tailored to specific users, it must be based on categorizations containing assessments. Nevertheless, it is important that the practitioners reflect on how these categorizations emerge, what knowledge they are based on and what purposes they serve (Ibid.: 907–911).

It is about honest reflection of practitioners associated not so much with the declarative determination of their own practice as participatory, but

with the construction of a discourse unmasking the realities inscribed in a given field of activity. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink the postulates of the participatory approach within child protection practice (Healy, 1998: 906–909). This can be achieved by allowing both parties to speak – the practitioners and the users embedded in specific contextual conditions, struggling with specific difficulties and barriers regarding the flow of power in mutual relations.

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