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Susanna Rautio

Diaries of family workers: empowerment and working with families with children

ntroduction

The renewal of the family services and the developing of new kinds of functional structures are seen as a challenge for social policy in Finland. In the past few years there has been an increase in projects and new services with different working methods for supporting families with children. Many projects still concentrate on corrective work although preventive services should be emphasized more. It has been argued that the existing structure of services does not entirely correspond with the service needs of families with children. The reform of the municipal and service structure has made the development of the preventive services and different projects an even more topical issue. This in turn has underlined the importance of studying these kinds of project-based services. Family work is one of the models that support families with children.

In this article, work that was performed by family professionals with families with children is studied qualitatively. The family professionals worked in a Finnish project (PERHE-hanke) that was designed to support the well-being of the Finnish families with children. The project was implemented as a partnership project together with public and private sector as a part of national development projects in social and health services in Finland. The ministry of Finnish Social affairs and health offered financed to the project and administration was organized by local cities where each municipality project was taking place. Municipality projects worked in partnership with several partners such as local organizations, institutions and voluntary actors. The project ran from 2005-2008 in a number of municipalities in Finland; some of its practices are still running today. The overall project was designed to be a partnership program for family services with the objective of reforming the operational culture and methods of delivery of primary services for children and their families.

The aim of the program was to improve the structures and functioning of the primary services, such as child health clinics, the child day-care system and school, through extensive and systematic national, regional and local co-operation between the different administrative sectors and other actors. The goal was to form a family center model or a service network where the public sector, the families themselves, NGOs, voluntary actors, local communities, and the private sector act in partnership. The project aimed to strengthen parenting and the wellbeing of families with children. (Viitala & Saloniemi 2005, Viitala et al. 2008.)

These kinds of projects reflects shift that is ongoing in the professional arena. The public sector has been re-organized and reformed along project-like lines, and in social and health care, and especially in family services, the different professional groups have started to work as teams in interprofessional collaboration. Interprofessional collaboration is a process which includes sharing of resources, responsibility and expertise. In this project for example, family workers collaborated not only with their clients but also with other professionals such as child health nurses. This kind of collaboration is one of the key elements in the current health and social care. From the point of view of contemporary social research, projects can also be seen as examples of a so-called project society in which the public and private sectors are intertwined in a new kind of way and the bureaucratic hierarchy is replaced with different networks. (See e.g. Molyneux 2001, Pärnä 2012, Sulkunen 2006.)

In the area of family work there are several directions in the many tasks and different sectors, which all have different goals. Supporting parenthood is nevertheless seen as the main task of family work in general. The context of family work can be with for example home service, family rehabilitation, family houses, family nursing, family counseling or child custody. (Viitala & Saloniemi 2005, Heino, et al. 2000, Myllärniemi 2007.) Within this project-based family work studied here the context of working was mainly preventive. The family professionals' work with families with children varied from preventive family work done via the child day care centers to work done with the fathers alone. In addition, the project manager and a project coordinator were involved in the project. Their working tasks varied according to their position, from work done with families, for example giving home visits, to coordinating events or peer group activities for the parents. Home visiting is one of the main and popular practices in family work which is utilized in several programs and projects. Home visiting can be used to different kind of interventions focusing on different goals for families. At the home visits, family worker is able to map family's situation and their social network, together with the family itself. Home visits give the family worker possibility to observe the daily life of the family and it can be seen as an intervention to family life. For the family it is easy to receive support directly at home and they often respect the possibility to receive it but on the other hand it can be also a very sensitive and contradictory situation to be a client and receive support. Family worker can help the family to recognize their own strengths and support them by listening, discussing and consulting. Building trustfully and strong relationship with the parents and providing emotional support is important. (Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie 2002, Hämäläinen et al. 2011, Jansson et al., 2001, 144, Lynn-McHale & Deatrick, 2000, Rautio 2012, Roggman et al., 2001.)

In this article, family professionals' experiences of their working are studied qualitatively from the empowerment perspective. The concept of empowerment is used in several disciplines. The concept is abstract and therefore it is not clear what it means in practice and it is also questionable as to what it means to have such an enabling role strengthening the parents (Baggens 2002, 352). In the similar manner, Kendall (1998, 1-7) questions what empowerment actually is, and how it is attained. She states that in the nursing literature there are tacit implications that empowerment is in itself a good thing, that nursing personnel who work at promoting empowerment

become more efficient, and that people become healthier if they are empowered. Kendall also questions what people want to get from health and nursing care: whether they really want to be empowered, and which methods are the most efficient. Many questions about empowerment remain unanswered. Askheim (2003, 203-231) on the other hand argues that there seems to be an agreement that empowerment contains both individual and a structural dimension and that empowerment is seen both as a goal and as a means of attaining that goal; it is both an ideology and a methodological approach.

In the context of this study, empowerment is seen as parents' improved parenting skills, family life and well-being as a result of the family work done by the professionals. This can be achieved by the family professional by approaching the client family from a strength perspective, and in a family-centered way, for example by helping the parents to identify their own recourses, activating and encouraging them to discuss and change behavior. In the same vain the family members needs to set personally meaningful goals and take action towards these goals. (Early & GlenMaye 2000, Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie 2002, Feeley & Gottlieb 2000, Cattaneo & Chapman 2010, 647.)

If the relationship and collaboration between professionals and the parents is well-functioning, open, respectful and trustful it is likely to have empowering benefits for the parents. Professionals' role is then shifted from being an expert to become a person who working together with parents. Empowering outcomes from the supporting parents can be, for example, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors associated with perceptions of control, competence, and confidence. Interventions, such as the family work studied here, which enhance the existing resources of the families, can be valuable in improving well-being and health. Family worker can for example help the parents to find new viewpoints and to find their own solutions or give concrete advice or instructions. Empowered clients take more responsibility for their choices and their changes in behavior. When they become more aware of their own resources with the support of the family working, they are also able to conduct better decision-making and have a greater understanding of their life-course. They also can find new ways of perceiving possible problems, accomplish a revival of hope, and are better organizing their family life. Clients consider such helping relationship successful which provides equality, non-judgmental stance and flexibility. (Dunst & Dempsey 2007, Falk-Rafael 2001, Häggman- Laitila, 2005, Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002.)

Aim and questions

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of the professionals who worked within this project by analyzing their professional diaries and to consider critically whether this kind of family work has an empowering effect on the well-being of the families. In addition, it was to give the family professionals a voice and at the same time make their work more visible. The research question in this article asks: What kind of challenges and highlights did the professionals experience in their daily working with families in relation to empowerment? Implications for practice will also be discussed.

Method

Professionals' diaries as data

Traditionally, diaries have been written by the clients of the services in healthcare research (Furnee & Garrud 2010, Jones 2000, Richardson 1994, Verbrugge, 1980, see also Bolger et al. 2003). There are, however, a number of studies written by carers as well (Skott & Erikson 2004, Åstedt-Kurki, & Isola, 2001, Roulin et al. 2007). In addition, within family studies diaries have been utilized lately (Lämsä et al. 2011). In qualitative research, diaries as a data collection method can also be used together with other methods such as interviews, telephone conversations or field notes. In addition, audio diaries can be used instead of written ones. (Elliot 1997, Jacelon & Imperio 2005, Hislop et al., 2005.)

The data in this article consists of the diary data of different family professionals. These professionals were family workers, both from the child health clinic and from the day care center, the project coordinator, the project manager and a father worker. The professionals worked in the same project. All of the eight professionals except one were women. In Finland, professional family workers come from different backgrounds and educations. Educations usually vary from practical nursing to degree of Bachelors of Social services. There is a somewhat of need for making social education more consistent.

Family workers collaborated with other professionals, child health care nurses, child day care personnel's and others linked to their working community. Their task varied according to their position. Family workers' working included home visiting, peer support group activity and guidance on other services when needed. In the home visits family workers for example offered families with children support by discussing and consulting about those family matters that they needed to. The principle of the working was to offer support with low threshold and the working was free and voluntary. Family work was meant to be short-term and preventive. Some of the workers conducted partially also corrective family work. These professionals were guided by the project leader to keep an up-to-date a diary on a weekly basis and then to send it to her by e-mail. For these diaries, the professionals were asked to write about their weekly events, feelings and so forth. The professionals approached their diary writing in personal and different ways. Some informants wrote little about their doings, whereas others reflected more detailed on their work and what had happened in their current week.

Originally, the diaries were written for the evaluation purposes of the project. The project aimed to develop and reform working methods of preventive and early supporting of families with children and to strengthen partnership between professionals from different sectors (Viitala & Saloniemi 2005, Viitala et al. 2008). The diary writings were collected by the project between the end of 2005 and 2008. The length of time the diaries were kept varied by a few months. The length of the diaries varied from between 10 to almost 100 pages, including weekly memoranda parts. The overall data consist of circa 230 pages including also the professionals' weekly memoranda,

in which their working schedules are shortly illustrated. The diaries were written in a personal style and sent to the project manager who collected them. The project manager approved of the study and gave access to these diaries. In this article diaries of the family workers are taken into closer analysis.

Diaries are a suitable method for collecting the experiences of the writers. For some people it is easier to write about experiences and feelings than to talk about them. Diaries construct rich data, which varies according to the writer. Diaries can also act as a self-help tool and help writers to deal with emotions and analyze events. When professionals write about their work, they can reflect on their thoughts, emotions and actions. However, there are both benefits and limitations when using diaries as research data. The family professionals who wrote the diaries had relevant information and experience about the research topic and therefore the diary data was a successful choice for this study. Keeping a diary can be also a therapeutic experience for the writers (Välimäki et al. 2007, 73, Roulin et al. 2007, 899). However, the professionals wrote these diaries alongside their work and sometimes did not have enough time to write so there could have been deficiencies or limitations in some of the writings. Also, writing about personal issues and then letting someone read it can have an impact on the content of the diaries. The request to keep a diary might add extra stress to a professional if they are in a busy stage of working. The researcher also solely depends on the written text. Diary writing is nevertheless a good way to collect and record work and also gives the possibility to reflect on daily work and one's professional identity. (See Elliot 1998, Välimäki 2007.)

By studying diaries the researcher can achieve subjective feelings and experiences of the studied. When analyzing writing the researcher is dependent on the finished text, whereas with interviews the researcher is able to ask additional questions to define details. Diary texts can also include inconsistencies. The role of the researcher is different when studying diary data than when for example conducting interviews with the research participants. When obtaining ready-to-use diary material the researcher relies on the data as it is and does not meet the individual behind the text. Diary data offers interesting information about the studied by revealing personal experiences and makes them more visible. (Elliot 1998, Välimäki et al. 2007, Roulin et al. 2007.)

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues which are required when conducting qualitative research were taken into consideration during the research process. Ethical considerations follow the code of ethics set by Declaration of Helsinki. Before the project started it was evaluated as being ethically acceptable by the city in which the study was conducted. The project itself collected the diary writings for evaluation purposes and the manager gave access to the data for the research purposes. The city had evaluated the project and was also conducting the study in accordance with its own ethical rules and practices, and therefore the ethical board of the researcher's university (University of Jyväskylä) considered that a second evaluation was not necessary. The diary data was treated with confidentiality. The anonymity of the family professionals was taken into consideration and the identification information of the writers was eliminated from the quotations used in this article. Furthermore, pseudonyms are used when presen-

ting the data in the article. Quotations from the data are translated from Finnish into English and they are used to clarify the analysis. Clarity and clear presentation is the aimed when analyzing the diary data and reporting the findings.

Data analysis

Diaries as data allow different types of analysis methods. In the analysis of the professional diaries a qualitative, narrative and thematic approach was utilized. For studying the experiences of individuals, qualitative methods are well suited and due to the descriptive type of data a narrative approach is also suitable. Narratives represent, reconstitute as well as express experiences. Researchers using a narrative approach should retain their awareness of existing social conditions when they consider how culture and social structures surface in the stories of both the participants and the researcher. (Riessman 2008, Squire 2008, Frazer 2004, 182). The data-based analysis was started with several readings of the diary data and making notes and summaries of each diary. Each diary was read closely to obtain a sense of the whole and the focus was on the content and not for example on the timely structure of the writings. Nevertheless, narrativity is present due to the temporal dimension of the diaries and there is a sense of progression present as well from experiencing the challenges to experiencing the success of the family work. Firstly, the diaries were read to obtain a sense of each professional's working description and to learn what their positions and tasks were at that time. Secondly, each text was observed by looking at the expressions given to the experiences. Descriptive sections of the diaries were given closer and interpretive analysis. Thirdly, any similarities between the texts were searched for and collected as categories. Two narrative themes were identified from the data by looking for congruence between their descriptions and in the narrative form of the data; challenges in working in collaboration and experiencing the joy and success of the work.

Findings

Challenges in working in collaboration

According to the family professionals, there were certain factors that made them experience their work as challenging. For example, Minna had confusion about her role in the work community, which made working occasionally difficult.

I really like my job, but I do miss my colleagues for sharing and talking my things through. Also this being like "a tramp" without having my own permanent chair sometimes bothers me It would be nice to have my own space for my belongings and not to have to carry everything with me in my car all the time. (…) it would be nice to have a common space for working where I could collect different materials. A place where we (other workers) could share our experiences and get mental support. Presently I feel like I am weirdo among the other workers. (Minna's diary, family worker, child day-care center)

The above family worker felt somewhat of an outsider and different to the others due to not having a permanent workplace or office. Different expectations between diffe-

rent actors in the field were described as a challenge. A lack of support from the other professionals was mentioned as well and there being a clear need for more collegial company and peer support. Having a hectic working schedule or lots of client families was seen as a challenge to the work itself and to the professionals' ability to cope. It also challenges the quality of family-centered working and possibilities to support and empower the parents. Like Aliisa wrote in her diary in the following extract, having too many families at her task was challenging her working capacity.

I feel like new client families are coming out of the walls. I am very busy until the winter holidays, but still I try to fit in meetings with new client families. This thing is really not working at the moment. (Aliisa's diary, family worker, child day-care center)

The working relationship with the families was experienced as a challenge if the families' expectations about the support were not realistic or when they did not want to receive support from the family work.
A mother expected that she could get help for child care and with household duties. I clarified my role to her and we agreed that the working with her would start and that she could leave the house for a while when I arrived, but that the purpose of the visit was to discuss about things and reflect together where the family could find its own resources. At this point I was pissed off because my work role was marketed to the family as being one where the mother would get concrete help at home. (Maija's diary, family worker, child health clinic)

When parent's expectations did not match with the family work's tasks, it can be more challenging to be able to support and empower the parents. There should be somewhat common understanding between the parents and professionals about the goals of the working.

Experiencing the joy and success of the work
Having positive experiences and feedback was important for the professionals' with regard to their experiences of their daily work. For example, when a client family was open towards accepting a professional conducting family work through home visiting and there was development in the family's situation present, the work was experienced as rewarding and successful. The following extract from the diaries illustrates this.

On Monday night I felt good when I went to a home to visit a family. I had met the family for the first time last week and their situation was mostly chaotic. Their two-and-a-half-year was totally dominating the parents. Now their situation looked different and the parents were managing better. They followed the instructions I gave them and their interaction had improved. This is exactly what I think day care's family work is all about; when such small things and only a few home visits can bring about big changes. (Minna's diary, family worker, child day-care center)

As such, a family's situation improved due to receiving family work and support and the project's aim was accomplished. The family met their worker at the child care center and the co-operation started then and there. Home visiting was a meaningful

point in the working; the parents were able to re-organize their daily life so that their life was not so chaotic and their parent-child interaction improved. This is a good example of empowerment in the family work; the parents gained knowledge about child rearing and tip about the how they should to act with this situation. Parents' goal was to improve the interaction with their child in order to eliminate the chaotic situation at their home. This improvement was gained only with a few home visit made by family worker. Nevertheless, time and effort was sometimes required to accomplish successful working with the clients.

When family work and its support were no longer needed it was seen as a joyful and rewarding moment for the family worker and the work was considered as having been successful. Also, gaining appreciation from the other co-workers about the good work done was valued. One of the family workers wrote how she was delighted when the day-care center's personnel acknowledged her job and the advice she had provided to the parents.

Regardless of the current position and the tasks of the family professionals there were similarities between the narrated experiences. One of the main things was to have a working alliance with the client families and with other professionals. When collaboration was fluent the work was experienced as being successful and helpful both for the parents and the professionals.

On Tuesday we ran this 'power group' for mothers in which two mothers took part. We discussed about positive ways of thinking and the mothers worked with class paintings. A depressive mother told me afterwards how good she felt that she could produce such a beautiful thing with her own hands. (Erja's diary, family worker)

In the above extract the family worker tells how she gained direct and positive feedback about her work and the group activity their project had organized for the mothers. Having a peer group activity was felt as empowering for the mothers at that time not only because of the possibility to discuss with other parents, but also because of doing a class painting. Performing a functional group activity with other mothers offered the mothers strength and the feeling of competence and achievement.

The examples above describe how the family workers felt that their work had a positive and empowering effect on the parents and their well-being. The family professionals' experiences about the successfulness of their work and their professional identity was strengthened by receiving direct feedback about the family work and seeing the positive changes in the parents taking part. Appreciation was also felt for having the possibility to receive peer support, share thoughts with other professionals and take part in education.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of the professionals who worked within this project by analyzing their professional diaries and consider critically whether this kind of family work has an empowering effect on the wellbeing of the

families. In addition, it was to give the family professionals a voice and at the same time to make their work more visible. The research topic of this article can be justified because it is important to study these kinds of multi-professional family supporting models in general and in particular from the insider's perspective. Although the project itself has ended, some of the actions that were modeled in the project are ongoing. This means that studying such projects and working models remains important and highly topical. Working in multi-professional teams and collaboration are typical features in the working lives of postmodern professionals thus important to study them as well. Development of multi-professional collaboration is important in order to offer services for families with children of good quality. (Molyneux 2001, Pärnä 2012.)

The family professionals' diaries offered interesting and rich data regardless of their length, depth and style of writing. In this article the research question asked: What kind of challenges and highlights did the professionals experience in their daily working with families in relation to empowerment?

The family professionals described their work as being challenging when they had hectic schedules, which can be seen as a result of a lack of recourses. The situation was regarded as demanding if the professionals have to work for example without having a permanent office, without the support of other colleagues, or without having a clear role in the working community or with regard to work tasks. These factors challenge the work done with the parents and the possible empowerment as well.

One of the most important things in family work is to have a working alliance with the client families, and with other professionals. Client families have a good possibility to be supported and empowered when they accept family work, such as home visiting, and its support or take part in family activities or peer groups. In addition, parents' expectations for the family working should be realistic. Professionals' experiences of their work are positive and successful when a family's situation can be seen as improving and the family gives good feedback about the support. Families respect the fact that they are treated in a family-centered way and as such trustful cooperation is built. For the parents being a client of a family service and asking for and receiving support can be a very sensitive and contradictory situation (Hämäläinen et al. 2011) and therefore trustful encounters are important. Trust requires respect but also time, communication and mutual intention. When trust is established collaboration becomes easier and parents' engagement to support increases. Trust is not only an important feature in the client-family relationship, but is also important between professionals working together as teams (Häggman- Laitila 2005, Jack, et al. 2005, 185-187, Jansson et al. 2001, 144, Lynn-McHale & Deatrick 2000, 217-221). The peer support received from colleagues supported professional identity and was seen as useful.

This kind of family work and its actions can help parents with children and empower them. For example, receiving home visits can effectively support families but they require working collaboration and common understanding of the support's goals and how to gain them. As noted earlier, empowerment as a concept is understood in many ways in science. It can still be questioned, as Kendall (1998) and Baggens (2002)

pointed out, what it actually means to have an empowering effect on the well-being of families. Family professionals' work can be empowering when collaboration works between the client families and between other professionals working in the same field. Parents themselves need to adopt goals that are personally meaningful and take action towards them (Cattaneo & Chapman 2010, 647). Also when the working conditions are adequate, the role of each professional is clear and the resources for working are decent, work can be done effective and empowering. With family work it is possible to support families even with only a few meetings such as home visits to prevent families' problematic situations from evolving. Home visiting is especially appreciated practice among families. Parents often value the support they get, and also for example having a peer support group or activity is seen as empowering and important for the parents and their well-being. (Häggman- Laitila 2005, Häggman-Laitila & Pietilä 2007, Rautio 2012). Despite the benefits of this kind of family working it can be argued as to what extent family work supports and empowers the families and who really benefits the most from it. It can also be questioned whether this kind of family support reaches enough of those families who would profit from its help and support. Some parents can for example refuse from accepting the support.

Even though the project has ended, some of its practices are still in place and running. In addition, many of the professionals continue working in new family work projects and are therefore are in a great position to transfer their experiences and possible practical innovations. The family professionals themselves wished for more preventive manners of working and they should be emphasized even more. Collegial support and work counseling should be available when needed for the professionals working with the families. Also, there should be appropriate working conditions for each professional group and more standardized practices for achieving the best possible results from the interprofessional collaboration and family work.

Further research is needed on family work and similar multi-professional working models in order to develop family work, collaboration and ways by which to offer them in the most appropriate way and as effectively as possible in addition to being able to respond to the needs of the families with children.

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