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*Between empowerment and self-discipline.
Money management training in the practice
of social work in Poland*

Abstract

Money management trainings have been considered as part of the financial education programs aimed at building resilience and moulding financially self-disciplined households. These practices used in the context of social work can lead to empowerment of welfare beneficiaries or it can be used as tools to control household budget and discipline its members. In this article I address this problem and present result of the qualitative study conducted with 16 social workers and 11 family assistants on the topic of money management trainings and households budget advisory for the households of social welfare beneficiaries in Poland. Based on the assumptions of grounded theory, the analysis shows that social workers and family assistants have small control on the household budgets of their clients. However, they are trying to influence their financial behaviour by forcing attitudes such as self-discipline and control of expenditures, responsibility for the providing of goods to inhabitants, and scrupulousness in paying the debts upon the client. Finally, social workers raised the need to make financial education condition for the cash transfers, which should increase their control of the household budget and prevent recipient from wasting welfare money.

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Introduction

Financial education, popularized as a strategy for solving economic problems of households, fits into the course of policies aimed at empowerment of the marginalized and poor. Building financial capabilities is an essential part of increasing an individual's ability to make positive decisions and thus increase resilience of households to economic crises (OECD, 2016).

Financial education is carried out in the form of advisory (e.g. on ways of coping with debt or consumer protection), educational activities, i.e. households budgeting seminars, entrepreneurship workshops, or as part of the so-called personal and household services, which include, among others, social work. In European countries, counselling is commonly provided by state institutions, non-governmental organizations and private companies, including banks (see, e.g. *Financial Education for all...*, 2017). Educational activities become a part of national educational programs (e.g. in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland) or national strategies implemented by third sector entities, schools or local government institutions (Czech Republic, Slovenia, Lithuania) (see e.g. Couto-Pedro, 2015; *Best Practices in Financial Education...*, 2016). Personal and household services are particularly developed in the Anglo-Saxon countries (e.g. *Personal Care Budgets* in UK or *Money and Budgeting Services* in Ireland) and cover individual support in the management of household expenses targeted at groups with special needs (e.g. dependents, debtors). Part of these personal and household services is concept of financial social work aimed at supporting the beneficiary in the every-day budgeting practices (Despard et al., 2012).

However, supporting welfare beneficiaries in money management and household budgeting has been part of social workers' activities practically since the beginning of this profession, although it was primarily related to controlling spending of welfare cash and was not a part of financial education program (Zelizer, 2017). Similar practices are present in Poland, however, their role and importance for social work has not yet been described. In the context of the growing popularity of financial education, it is important to characterize activities like money management trainings and household budget counselling provided to welfare beneficiaries by the social workers and family assistants. In this article, I discuss whether these practices are part of the empowering social work and aimed at establishing financial competences of beneficiaries or part of control practices aimed at introducing financial discipline to the household. Article presents findings of the study conducted between 2019 and 2020 among social workers and family assistants in Poland².

² The study was part of "The role of social transfers in the household budgets of social welfare beneficiaries" project (National Science Center in Poland 2017/25/N/HS5/01623).

Household budgets, social work and financial education

Support in organizing household finances has been part of social work practically since the beginning of the profession of social worker. Counselling on the household budget was part of care and educational activities aimed mainly at saving and planning expenses on food and clothing (Winslow, 1919; Stuart, 2016). On the one hand, these activities were designed to “moralize” the poor and create consumer attitudes similar to those of middle-class families (Horowitz, 1985; Zelizer, 2017), while on the other hand, they enabled social workers to maintain control over the beneficiary’s expenses, thus providing a method of preventing the waste of cash benefits (Zelizer, 2017, p. 122). It was a form of compromise that reconciled the empowerment of the beneficiary and the concern for public finances (ibid., p. 194)³.

The reorientation from welfare to workfare state set inclusion of the beneficiary in the labour market became as a central point which brought changes in the methods of social work (Mead, 1986; Gilbert, 2003, p. 65). Being dependent on welfare transfers was seen as an “addiction” and demotivating factor for the beneficiary to take up employment and even a symptom of the “demoralisation” of the family (Murray, 1996). In order to avoid dependence on social welfare, the criteria for entitlement to cash transfers were narrowed down, the amount and duration were reduced, and they were divided into categories that were closely linked to their purpose (Gilbert, 2003, p. 146). At the same time, postulates appeared that cash transfers should be connected with obliging the beneficiary to undertake activities aimed at improving family situation (Mead, 1986; White, 2000).

To enforce labour market activity and “moral” consumption of welfare transfers, social workers use conditioning methods based on rewards or punishments to influence beneficiary’s attitudes (Hudson & MacDonald, 1986, p. 14). The catalogue of obligations was mainly related to seeking employment, but it also included those that were to protect the household from destructive consumption and behaviour, e.g. consuming alcohol or drugs or gambling (ibid., p. 249). The money management trainings and household budget counselling took place in the context of enforcing the obligations assigned to the beneficiary, aimed at including him or her in the labour market and “protection” against the demoralizing effects of welfare transfers.

Nowadays, social work strongly holds the empowerment idea, aimed at increasing personal or political power of individuals, families or communities to take action to improve the situation (Dubois & Krogsrud-Miley, 2010, p. 21). Social workers are expected to support beneficiaries in the process of building capabilities necessary to

³ Although there are not many historical studies on Poland focusing on this subject, some sources from the interwar period suggest that the main argument for interference in the budgets of poor households by social services were very limited funds for support and the resulting fear of wasting them. For example, in one of the magazines devoted to the work of social workers in the interwar Warsaw, we can read: *more than once during the first visits, social workers could find out how often the help provided by the Centres is simply wasted by the applicants. So, they had to make efforts to remove this state of affairs and prevent it from happening in the future* (Starczewski, 1936, p. 8).

regain control of life and proper functioning in the family, and to work for their inclusion in communities and the labour market (Rapp et al., 2005; Karwacki & Rymza, 2017). Conditioning changes its character: obligations for beneficiaries are not defined in advance but negotiated with them and sanctions are replaced by incentives to take up action (Dubois & Krogsrud-Miley, 2010). The welfare support is carried out in “packages”, which include cash transfer, care and educational services and activities, vocational training — all this personalized to the needs of the family and expressed in the form of contracts or individual work plans (Gilbert, 2003 p. 46; Hemerijck, 2012, pp. 30–31).

These support packages for social assistance beneficiaries include trainings in budget planning, saving or responsible consumption, aimed at integration and adaptation of the individual to market conditions (Lazarus, 2016; Iwanicz-Drozdowska, 2013). On the other hand, within social work, a “financial” specialization is distinguished, aimed at teaching appropriate attitudes, moulding habits related to money management and providing financial therapy for the most problematic cases (Despard et al., 2010 & 2012; Wolfsohn & Michaeli, 2014). Services of this kind are increasingly emerging as necessary support for building the beneficiary’s “financial capabilities” that lead to empowerment.

However social policy activities focus mainly on the capabilities of the individual and preparing him or her for functioning on the market, which lead to neglecting the structural side of the problem (see e.g. Larner, 2000; Langley, 2007; Taylor-Gooby, 2011). Personalization, making cash-dependent on job-seeking activities and the focus on building a competent and participatory citizen, are interpreted as techniques of Foucault’s responsabilisation, that is, a control mechanism directed “inwards”, implemented by shaping self-discipline, resourcefulness and a sense of responsibility for one’s own fate (Foucault, 2007; Mavelli, 2017). Consequently, the responsabilisation process diverts attention from structural factors and decisions on the macro level that determines the possibilities of the individual (Hacker, 2006; Cradock, 2007).

This is also a criticism of financial education programs that shift the responsibility for dealing with the consequences of various social problems resulting from collective decisions of a national or global nature to the household level (Lazarus, 2016; Maman, Rosenhek, 2019). For example, efforts to increase the financial capabilities of beneficiaries are seen as a way to address the household debt problems that are growing as a result of easier access to consumer credit (Engelbrecht, 2009; Birkenaiier, Curley, 2009), or as a way to secure the future of the world’s growing pension system crisis (Lusardi, 2008)⁴. After the financial crisis of 2008 financial education was directly presented as an instrument for building the resilience of households (OECD, 2016), allowing the “positive adaptation” of the subject to a difficult situation and the ability to translate everyday “hardships” into “victories” (Orthner et al., 2004; Obrist et. al., 2010; Garrett, 2017). The financial resilience of a household is to manifest itself in not giving in to consumer temptations,

⁴ The term “financial capability” is commonly used in financial education programs. It is defined by e.g. World Bank: knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to manage resources in given socio-economic conditions in a way that allows making favourable financial decisions and making consumption choices that meet the needs of the entity (The World Bank, 2013, p. 7)

avoiding the threat of irrational indebtedness, looking for additional sources of income, or rationalizing expenses (Maman, Rosenhek, 2019).

However, there is no clear evidence that financial education leads to real improvements in living conditions and building resilience of the households (Dagdeviren & Donoghue, 2019), and if it does, it mainly teaches how to endure failure (Clarke, 2015). Moreover, the consequence of budget training and actions to improve household finances is to interfere in relations between family members, i.e., assigning roles and responsibilities and prioritizing the household budget according to the philosophy of responsabilisation (Maman, Rosenhek, 2019, p. 17). Solving social problems with the “own hands” of a citizen can therefore lead to locating the problems of people experiencing poverty in their lack of competence or attitudes, thus perpetuating the stigma of being “guilty” of their fate. It is also not excluded that the rhetoric of building the “financial capabilities” of the individual and the resilience of the household can be used to introduce discipline and control. For example, under the slogan of financial education, social workers in Portugal have exerted more pressure to rationalise the budget of the household, which in turn has involved limiting access to benefits and greater control over consumption (Rodrigues et al., 2016, p. 989).

Research framework

Against the backdrop of the literature presented above, the goal of my research was to understand the character of social assistance workers’ money management trainings and household budget counselling provided to welfare beneficiaries. As mentioned, I wanted to learn if and how these activities fulfil the assumptions of financial education and empowerment, and, secondly, to what extent they are tools of disciplining the recipient.

In the Polish social assistance, the idea of empowerment is strongly connected with the concept of active social policy aimed at strengthening the potential of individuals and families as well as the community, using vocational trainings and social reintegration (see e.g. Karwacki & Rymcza, 2011; Manifest..., 2014). The role of social work in this process is to consist in the cooperation of the social worker with the beneficiary in the pursuit of increasing control over one’s own life and independence (Szmagałski, 2006; Gulczyńska & Granosik, 2014) by increasing his or her capabilities. These activities also include the beneficiary’s support in the area of running household budgets. For example, the area related to money management appears as an element of activation activities (e.g. budget trainings, financial engineering workshops), learning how to run household budget is an element of social work (see e.g. the Team of the Science for the Environment Foundation, 2012; Mazurek, 2010) and part of the services provided directly by family assistants (see e.g. NIK, 2015, p. 10; Kozik, 2015). The characteristics of these activities was one of the objectives of the study. I wanted to shed light on how and who decides when the intervention in the household budget is required (identification of occurring financial problems), how the process looks like and what methods of actions are undertaken.

The interest in these three aspects of social work results from the research approach adopted in the tradition of Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB), which assumes that public policies are shaped by first-line officials (Lipsky, 2010) being a bridge between organizational guidelines and the expectations of the recipients. The SLB requires to look closely on the relationship between officials and beneficiaries created in the process of granting support and the “path” of the beneficiaries in the institution (Sztandar-Sztanderska, 2016, p. 36 et seq.). What makes the SLB a particularly useful concept is to focus primarily on the bureaucrat who interprets the situation of the beneficiary in his own categories, describes it in the language of the procedures and makes decisions about whether or not to provide support (Sztandar-Sztanderska, 2018, p. 12 ff.). Therefore, I wanted to investigate what is the purpose of used money management and budget counselling techniques? How are they related to the social work goals? And what is the motivation of social workers/ family assistant to use them?

In this context, it should be mentioned that research among the Polish social workers indicates strong “bureaucratization” of their activities and the lack of appropriate infrastructure to conduct empowering social work (see, e.g., Trawkowska, 2010; Raclaw, 2012; Kaźmierczak, 2014; Rymśa, 2012 & 2016). However, as shown by Niesporek et. al. (2013) research on the of polish social workers, a significant role in providing support is played not by formal, but subjective categorization into “deserving” and “undeserving” beneficiaries, strongly linked to the neoliberal principle of market rationality (ibid., pp. 144–145). The recipient is constantly verified in terms of his or her ability to adapt to the logic of the market and, if not, he/she is disciplined in this direction, which is seen as a “natural” part of the social work (ibid., p. 144). Therefore, one of the research questions was: how social workers define categories of being “deserving” and “underserving” in the matter of money management of the recipient?

This is also related to with the issue of social worker adjusting their decisions to the established procedural or organizational order of the social assistance system. Social workers, interpreting sometimes imprecise and vague regulations are under pressure of procedural correctness, and on the other side, beneficiaries expecting to “handle” their case successfully. As a result, instead of individual needs assessment and personalising the support path, employees focus mainly on “translating” the situation of the beneficiary to the language of procedures, law classifications and organizational requirements (Trochymiak, 2018a). The field of “household budget” is partly regulated by the Social Assistance Act that includes a paragraph on waste of welfare transfer and own financial resources of recipient which entitles a social welfare office to decline a cash transfer or to convert it into a non-monetary form (see art. 11 sec. 1 of the Social Assistance Act of March 12, 2004)⁵. However, the definition of “money wasting” is not specified in the law — there is no list of situations that would indicate what the waste is. This paragraph may be used in a social contract or an individual work plan with a family, which means

⁵ The Social Assistance Act is the highest rank law in Poland establishing social assistance organization including obligations and duties of the social workers, entitlement criteria for the cash transfers and rights of the welfare beneficiaries.

that it becomes a condition for providing cash transfer and other types of support. This leads to the question about consequences of these contradictory roles of social workers: the “guardian” of cash benefits or/and mentor-partner supporting the management of household budget. In the study, I verified whether social workers and family assistants use the “waste” paragraph, how they understand the term and whether household financial issues are subject to sanctions. Studies on the application of the conditionality principle in social welfare indicate that despite it was rarely possible to enforce contractual obligations from the recipients, employees of social welfare offices support the application of sanctions for non-compliance, although this applies only to selected groups, such as the long-term unemployed or professionally active young people (Balcerzak-Paradowska, 2018, p. 142). Therefore, it is possible that obligations related to household budget management are also applied, and consequently enforced, but only in certain circumstances.

Methodology

The objectives of the study required the reconstruction of the activities of social workers and only then was possible to define the role and functions of practices of money management and household budget counselling. For the purpose of the research, I adopted the principles of grounded theory, which determines three stages: the exploration of a phenomenon (1), deconstruction and detailed characteristics of the gathered data (2), and reconstruction to the categories that build the “theory” (Flick, 1998).

To gather research data, I used individual in-depth interviews technique, which is applied to reflect the perspectives on specific issues and allow for reconstruction of the points of view of research subjects (Miński, 2017). The interviews were done with social workers and family assistants⁶. Recruitment criteria included at least 5-year experience in social work within social welfare office. Finally, 16 social workers and 12 family assistants were recruited from 4 social welfare offices in Poland (3 offices in 2 cities over 200.000 inhabitants, last office in a city up to 20 thousand). Most of the interviewees had completed financial education training programs to work with clients (10 employees, 10 assistants), and 5 of the family assistants were also financial coaches. Only one man (family assistant) was in the group of the respondents, although this selection reflects the structure of a strongly feminized Polish social assistance service. Interviews were made between April 2019 and January 2020 and were conducted in the social assistance offices but in an isolated room, without the participation of third parties.

I asked the interviewees to describe their typical visit in the beneficiary’s household: about the objectives and frequency, what they pay attention to particularly, what are they talking about with the members of the family and what tasks they propose to them. In this context, statements were made about various situations related to household budgets and activities undertaken by the social workers/family assistants: course of these activities,

⁶ This criterium covered also family assistants who, as part of their duties under the Family Support and Foster Care Act, perform social work with families in the area of support in raising children and activation (see Article 15 of the Family Support and Foster Care Act of June 9, 2011).

circumstances and thoughts about the beneficiaries' reactions. Next, I asked about the beneficiaries themselves: labour market situation, relationships with family members, the history of social assistance support, and a description and evaluation of behaviour related to the household budget. This made it possible to reproduce what the entire process of social work looks like from the perspective of a social worker or family assistant, including practices that touch financial issues in the context every-day activities of the recipients. In the last part of the interview, respondents were asked to refer to the paragraph on wasting resources (its evaluation, examples of its application and results) and asked what they think about role of financial education as a part of social welfare support.

The disadvantage of the chosen methods consisted in the fact that it was not possible to directly observe the practices used by the respondents and to confront their opinions with reality. Although, direct observation of the interaction of social workers with beneficiaries was considered and finally rejected due to the difficult to circumvent legal procedures (concerning the confidentiality of information about social welfare beneficiaries) and the fear of "artificiality" of the situation which would be caused by the presence of the researcher. The interview technique, however, made it possible to collect research material that would allow to achieve the research goals.

The gathered material covered more than 600 pages of transcript (each interview lasted between 1.5 h to 2.5 hour) and was coded in Atlas.ti. Coding process were divided into two stages: initial coding and building code families. Initial coding was a more "intuitive" process aimed at the deconstruction of interviewees opinions and experiences into detailed categories, e.g. "talking about money with recipient" or "opinion about shopping". As a result, over 300 codes were grouped into code families accordingly to the subject and/or topic, e.g. "diagnosis of the welfare recipient", "methods of social work", "money management training practices" (25 code families). The last step was the analysis, i.e. search for the connection between codes and codes families and detailed description of the money management trainings and household budget counselling practices.

Findings

How social workers select families to money management trainings?

One of the most important findings was that money management trainings or household budget counselling is provided to families qualified for in-depth social work. The interviewees described such families as "dependent", which means they benefit from financial support of social assistance for a long time.

The question about the definition of a welfare dependency triggered in interviewees a whole series of statements about the sources of family problems, lifestyles or ways of acting and motivation. In the context of the way the household budget is managed, they made it clear that dependent families do it in an irrational way:

The family that has benefited from the financial assistance of a social welfare centre for a long time cannot be called a family that manages its budget well (family assistant, big city).

The interviewees pointed out that long-term recipients of social assistance belonged to people who grew up in poor families, where they were provided with “bad habits” and were not taught how to plan and spend money rationally. The result of these “bad habits” is an “inappropriate” adaptation to the environment of the labour market and social welfare institutions, such as a demanding attitude and a life “on a dole”. This “lifestyle,” as they called it, in which social transfers are the basic income of a household, leads to an attitude of “disrespect” for money, carelessness about the household budget, or lack of planning. A frequently cited example of the consequences of such upbringing was debt, which arises as a result of non-payment of housing bills, municipal fees, or non-payment of instalments of credits:

For them, financial stability is often not a value in the same sense as for a family without assistance. These families much easier, often thoughtlessly, take out loans and credits. And they are not aware that they have to pay it back, ok? (social worker, big city)

Some interviewees argued that defaulting on liabilities is also a strategy of beneficiaries who are fully aware of the “favourable” consequences of having a debt defined in the law, i.e. no possibility of eviction if a child is in the family or the lack of the possibility of execution of funds from social benefits. In this sense, the habit of poor budget management, resulting from the socialisation process, is somehow “grounded” by the system of benefits itself. Money from social welfare “demoralizes” and the effects of this are long-lasting.

Diagnosis of the household budget management

Information about the household’s income comes mainly from a required interview conducted by a social worker at the beginning of cooperation, but it happens that the family does not report some income. In the case of expenses, the interviewees admitted that they do not have full information on what the beneficiaries are spending money and what their financial obligations are, as there is rarely any recording of expenses.

Fragmented information about spending money in families led workers and assistants to refer to generalizations from random observations of family members’ behaviour in evaluating decisions made by beneficiaries. This was particularly evident when interviewees tried to find out why income and expenses on the household were not balanced. A popular explanation for the lack of a balanced budget was impulsive spending and ostentatious consumption. The interviewees claimed that the beneficiaries do not plan their purchases but make them under the influence of momentary needs and whims, which is the result of “not thinking” about the needs of the household and ignoring aspects such as price or product quality. Conclusions about such behaviour were drawn on the basis of interviews with the beneficiaries, observations at the household or observations during shopping (which was supposed to happen very rarely). In one of the surveyed medium-sized towns these conclusions were drawn on the basis of observations of what is happening in stores on the days after the payment of funds:

On the day they get the money, they go for big shopping and there is no shopping list, only what they want. They don't have the money for a whole month to buy various things and when they get it, it turns them on so much, they are so happy that they can afford everything they want at the moment! (family assistant, medium-sized city)

On the other hand, ostentatious consumption was associated with buying products to show off, e.g. expensive clothes, electronic gadgets (phones, tablets, etc.) or using services, such as a beautician or a hairdresser. Workers referred to it as “self-investment” and assessed it as “irrational”, exceeding the “more important” needs of the household.

The interviewees, when asked about their understanding of a “balanced budget”, referred to the rule of “meeting basic needs”, which mainly included nutritional needs, children’s needs and order in the household. The lack of satisfaction of basic needs is to manifest itself, e.g. by a poorly nourished and dressed child, lack of money for educational activities for children, lack of funds to equip the child for school, eating ready-made and unhealthy products, or lack of care for cleanliness in the household:

When I see on entering the house that the child is dirty, poorly dressed and the toy is a plastic bag, and the family takes 500+ (family allowance), I already know that there is something wrong with the money (family assistant, big city)

The classification of beneficiaries and their households into a group of “the dependent”, the lack of complete information on household expenses and the “balanced budget” vision make the diagnosis of money management a process in which generalizations about everyday life play a significant role. However, money spending is a common field for the recipients and social workers not only because it touches on everyday activities, i.e. feeding the family or shopping, but also because it happens in the same social space. Social workers, assistants and their beneficiaries do shopping in the same stores, go to the same public places, enjoy the same entertainment and experience “*the same socio-economic forces*” (family assistant, medium-sized city). Some of the interviewees were well aware that the perception of the family was more the result of a certain projection resulting from their own experiences than the result of “objective” evaluation. It should be noted here that the vast majority of the respondents were women who, as I will point out later, in their judgments on running a household, referred to the role a woman should play in the process of financial management.

Waste of resources

For the interviewees, the assessment of the waste of resources in the household is an important part of the diagnosis of the beneficiary, where it is verified whether he or she should be classified as “deserving” or “undeserving” support and it is linked to the evaluation of the beneficiary’s attitude towards money. Waste means no reflection on expenses, e.g. buying unnecessary products, not taking into account the price/quality ratio or not considering the household budget. In this context, wasted money is money spent

impulsively, on “whims” that serve the needs of the individual and not of the household, and that is “not future-oriented”, i.e., money spent on products of dubious quality that will be in short use. The circumstances were also important in evaluating the waste. The most frequently cited situations were those in which a family is suspected of alcohol abuse, use of drugs or gambling. In such families, funds are to be wasted frequently, regardless of the actual financial standing. As a result, beneficiaries from such families were more likely to be classified as “undeserving”.

The moral foundation for evaluating a beneficiary in terms of whether or not they are wasting resources is the sense of legitimacy of the objectives of state financial aid. The respondents talking about wastefulness mentioned the functions that money from social benefits should perform in the household of the beneficiary. Many of them, mainly social workers, emphasized that what households spend their money on would “not bother” them if not for the fact that the money spent came from state resources. The waste of benefits is an abuse of the rights of the social welfare beneficiary.

Working on the household budget: priorities and money management techniques

The beneficiary, who is directed to in-depth social work, always appears to social workers and assistants as an individual that needs to be “shaped” and a household as a space that needs to be “organized” according to certain priorities and rules. When asked about the objectives and techniques of family empowerment activities, the interviewees referred to the need to educate the beneficiaries on “household duties”. One such responsibility is budget planning, which boils down to the need to prioritise spending and to set the “right” ways of managing money.

The interviewees pointed out that systematic repayment of financial obligations is one of the most important priorities, indicating care for the safety and needs of a household. A beneficiary paying debts is a “prudent” person who cares about his or her future and breaks down barriers to entering the labour market:

There is no liability for debts. And debts make them not take up employment. This is the first of the obstacles they have to overcome (social worker, medium-sized city)

A similar tone was used to talk about saving. The interviewees pointed out examples of prudent and independent beneficiaries who managed to put money aside for specific purposes, e.g. a child’s education. Saving and paying off financial obligations is part of a broader strategy, the first condition of which is to limit certain expenses:

Only until we pay off our debts, we’ll press ourselves, right? That’s the minimum we are living on. We don’t have to spend on concerts, go to the movies with children (family assistant, big city)

The second condition is to control expenses. The most popular technique, as the interviewees said, is to create a shopping list, which is supposed to guarantee reflection

on needs and avoid marketing “traps” while shopping. These gave social workers and assistants the opportunity to enforce buying products, in their opinion “appropriate” for the family, and cross off some of the products that family members actually wanted to buy. For example, they felt that the families should cook, rather than buy meals such as frozen foods or fast-food. The argument was that “cooked” food was healthier and cheaper. However, asked about the reasons for such a course of action, the interviewees spoke about the need to “motivate the beneficiaries to act” and not the actual financial and health benefits.

Activities in the field of household budget organization techniques were most often directed to the mother, who also acted as the head of the household. For a social worker, the woman as a recipient of social work in the field of budget management was a “natural” choice in a sense connected with the conviction of her role in the family and adjusted to the actual division of duties in the household (e.g., being responsible for meeting the children’s needs). As a consequence, the social work related to the budget organisation was directed basically to one person, making him or her responsible for the household budget, which was also influenced by the actions of other family members:

There, the mother is also under the influence of her partner and if he wants new equipment, he takes loans from loan sharks and they have big financial arrears, which I know they are not paying back (social worker, big city)

Empowerment, control and conditioning

Dependency on cash-transfers was treated as a kind of “filter” that served employees and assistants to divide beneficiaries into those who needed “empowerment” and those who needed only financial aid. The interviewees define empowerment as a state of economic independence from the public support. Achieving this, however, requires an “internal change” of the beneficiary attitudes, which is possible only through employment. This attitude of the interviewees was moulded by their experience. They gave examples that in the past they often fought a “difficult struggle” for the existence of poorer families who made a living solely from very low social welfare cash. Back then, the beneficiary’s entry into the labour market was treated as the only way to improve the family’s material well-being. In this sense, placing a beneficiary on the labour market was often an expression of concern for the survival of the household, and not an act of empowerment — it was not about the beneficiary’s agency, but a matter of his/her existence.

The situation has changed after the introduction of the “Family 500+” allowance.⁷ In many families, the 500+ allowance has become the largest source of income, meaning

⁷ Family allowance from the “Family 500+” program, introduced in 2016, is granted to parents in the amount of PLN 500 monthly (about 115 euro) for each child up to the age of 18 and is not included in means-testing when applying for cash transfers from social assistance. For families with more than one child, for whom the main income was relatively low social assistance cash transfers, the introduction of the 500+ allowance meant a significant increase in household income.

that some “dependent” families are no longer in material need. However, the interviewees maintained that empowerment should be achieved mainly through a return to the labour market and it was associated with the conviction that living solely on cash transfers poses a threat to the proper functioning of the household. This was argued that the “500+” allowance is uncertain (“it can be withdrawn at any time when power changes”), impermanent (“and what will they do when the children grow up?”), encourages inactivity in the labour market and the abandonment of further education, which in the future may lead to being “unprepared”. Also, in the interviewees’ opinions, the families that were long-term recipients has not solved problems with money management and the 500+ allowance is even supposed to cause an escalation of problems such as debt. Also, it weakened the social workers’ ability to influence the household budgets of the beneficiaries, especially those who were only focused on consuming the cash transfers:

Many families who were on social benefits received family benefits (500+) and gave up these social benefits completely, because they were always connected with control. I have one man who openly says: “I don’t want any social worker, no one will go inside to see what I do with the money” (social worker, big city)

The 500+ allowance example brings us to the problem of control and conditioning in the context of money management. For the interviewees, the most important thing is to meet the needs of children and stabilise the household budget, which is the non-negotiable “absolute minimum” that the beneficiary should do. These priorities are translated into guidelines for the daily activities and responsibilities of the beneficiary’s household, such as paying bills or shopping, and sometimes are expressed in the form of a social contract or work plan. However, this was successful only in the case of a significant minority of families ready to cooperate. In opinion of the interviewees, in non-cooperating families, these obligations remain mainly a formality since the rhetoric of conditionality and the threat of sanctions does not affect them. For example, sanctions for failure to pay debts, in the form of the withdrawal of housing allowances, was not effective mainly because beneficiaries did not feel consequences of their obligations — it was “not painful enough”, as one social worker put it. The awards like paying off part of the debt or spread it over convenient instalments also failed to bring the desired effect. Also, the interviewees would be prepared to apply sanctions as a result of a finding that resources in household were being wasted, but it is nearly impossible to do that, because the Social Assistance Act allows a cash-benefit to be denied or exchanged for in kind benefit only if it does not worsen the situation of the family and the child.⁸ Moreover, it was difficult to prove a waste of funds if it did not directly indicate significant damage to the family (and child) caused by the beneficiary’s behaviour. Therefore, the effort to impose sanctions was made only in situations that clearly indicated that the social worker was right, e.g. when there

⁸ In 2014, the percentage of negative decisions was only 2.4% of all decisions issued in social assistance centers, of which those due to wasting cash-transfers accounted for less than 2% of all refusals. See Trochymiak, 2018b, pp. 122–123.

was a problem with alcohol or other drugs addiction and when the beneficiary had a type of mental disability that did not allow him or her to function independently.

Therefore, direct control of the household budget is almost impossible and changing the beneficiaries' spending patterns regarding money management was only possible, as one of the family assistants put it, through "ground work" by motivating, setting modest and easy goals (e.g., not exceeding the weekly cash limit, saving for new pants) or showing how to organize the daily life in the household (e.g. shopping list, bill planning). However, the interviewees aspired to gain more control over household expenditures by making sanctions more possible to execute. In this context financial education, in a form of obligatory workshops or household budget counselling was postulated as a condition for receiving cash transfers. This solution could give social workers more control over household expenditures and, in opinion of the interviewees, possibility to shape good money management habits and motivate beneficiaries to find a job.

Final conclusions

This article presents results of the study conducted with the social workers and family assistants in Poland on the topic of money management training and household budget counselling provided to the welfare beneficiaries. Based on Lipsky's (2010) Street-Level Bureaucracy concept, I describe money management and budget counselling techniques used by social workers and family assistant: how and when there are used, what purpose do they serve and how they correspond with the practice of social work? The main goal of the study was to describe and characterise functions of these practices and address the following question — do they support empowerment and financial education goals or they are used as tools to control household budget and discipline its members?

Growing popularity of financial education as a tool for building financially resilient households and a "responsible" citizen raised questions about the role of the money management training techniques and budget counselling as part of the social services. In some countries, financial education techniques are being incorporated to the personal household services (UK, Ireland) or even are a part of the social worker profession (i.e. financial social work) (Wolfsohn & Michaeli, 2014).

In Poland, financial education techniques, such as money management training and household budget advisory, are present in the profession of social worker and family assistants. However, as analysis shows, they are being applied in the context of social work goals and not as part of the financial education programme. In this sense, the "financial capability" of the beneficiary was not the main goal of money management training or the household budget advisory. The interviewees used these techniques, such as a shopping list or planning monthly budget to secure the basic needs of the household. Shaping good money management habits was the secondary goal.

This is similar to practices of the US charity workers from the beginning of the XX century, where helping with household budget was expression of the care duties and preventative measures, i.e. protection against family demoralisation (Zelizer, 2017,

p. 122). The interviewees identify with this attitude — they emphasize that public benefits will sooner or later “demoralize” beneficiaries. Therefore, activities aimed at organizing household budget are primarily intended to reduce the negative effects of dependency and reduce the risk of financial failures related to it, i.e. loss of income due to debt collection, lack of financial liquidity in the household, failure to meet the basic needs of members families, etc. All these goals are to be accomplished through actions, such as learning to save, regular debt repayment or controlling expenses and decline needs. This can be interpreted as Foucault’s “responsibilisation” techniques (Mavelli, 2016) aimed at building financial self-discipline in the name of “protecting” the beneficiary from his/hers own decisions and make them responsible for the future failures.

The interviewees emphasized that money management training will help to adapt to the existing market conditions and lead to financially resilient households — however, it is not enough to “empower” the beneficiary. Empowerment can only take place through the participation of the beneficiary in the labour market. For the interviewees, employment proves that the beneficiary “takes matters into his or her own hands” and its a better guarantor of the material security of the household than the social welfare transfers which can lead to the disappearance of “resourcefulness” of the beneficiaries. A good example of this is the opinion about the 500+ allowance, the consequence of which is to deepen the financial problems of families, including debt and even more discouragement of beneficiaries from taking up employment.

Work is therefore the only way to build empowerment, and money management trainings are provided to adapt the individual to the requirements of the market. This means that members of the household must adapt their daily behaviour and values to certain standards of financial behaviour. This applies also to family relationships and sharing of household responsibilities. In this regard, a special role is to be played by women who are assigned the role of “operators” of household finances, taking care of the household and caring for children. As a result, it was women who were the target of activities related to organising household finances and financial education. However, actions aimed at improving the ability to manage household budget are intended to develop responsibility for oneself and other family members, an attitude of resourcefulness, modesty and a tendency to sacrifice one’s own needs for the benefit of the household.

The research also addressed the problem of control and discipline of welfare beneficiaries in the context of money management. Managing household budget is a sphere regulated by the “waste of resources” paragraph in the Social Assistance Act. Social worker can use this regulation to decline a cash transfer or to convert it into a non-monetary form, if he/she acknowledge that money in the household are being wasted. However, application of this regulation is not common and rarely proves to be practical, since the current interpretation of the provisions does not allow the free application of this principle. It should be noted that the interviewees saw themselves, in this context, as fulfilling the role of a “guardian” of public money, person responsible for the distribution and consumption of welfare cash-transfers. The principle of waste as an action to the detriment (of the state and of oneself) is strongly internalized among social workers. The

act of waste is a manifestation of demoralisation, which a social worker should not allow. This was part of the argument on “deserving” and “undeserving” recipient and the main reason why the money management trainings and household budget counselling were mainly dedicated to welfare dependent families. Moulding a financially self-disciplined beneficiary and resilient household is perceived as alternative to lack of direct control over money spending of recipient, but it hasn’t been a solution that social workers were willing to use. They treated it as the only possible way of influencing the way the household budget management, which, moreover, was assessed as ineffective. In the interviewees’ opinion, such forms of action would bring better results only if they were a condition of financial support and would lead to increased direct control of employees over the budget of the beneficiaries’ households.

Above observations have important meaning for the further research in the field of personal household services (including social work), financial education and street-level bureaucracy. First, the idea of empowering social work and financial education have the same common denominator — to make individual more responsible for its own decisions and more resilient in the face of hardship. However, financial education programs are dedicated to broader public and not narrowed to recipients of welfare cash-transfer. This puts up the question about the standards of life imprinted in the programs of financial education — do they take into account more difficult situation of the welfare recipients, their social position and lesser opportunities? The consequence on the focusing on financial education of the welfare recipient can actually raise the bar of the inclusion process and higher expectations of the social service workers. This can lead to limited access to benefits, only for those who are “rational” in spending money (Rodrigues et al., 2016) or it can strengthen the subjective classification into “deserving” and “undeserving” poor.

Second, in the age of “personalisation” and “individualisation” of social services there is an increasing risk that street-level bureaucrats will be more often put in the contradictory roles and procedures and regulation will be more problematic for them to interpret and implement. For example, social workers make decisions that are affecting the beneficiary’s personal matters, i.e. household budgeting, relations, career, etc. Putting them in the role of public money “guardians” leads to the confusing questions on how to recognize and challenge, sometimes very unclear and confusing “waste of money” situations. In this context, social workers are responsible for the proper interpretation of using welfare money which can be sometimes be in conflict with the goal of social work.

The third and final conclusion is that “welfare money” is an important factor to understanding the relationship between the social worker and the welfare recipient. The interviewees saw welfare cash transfers as particular kind of contract that obliges the citizen to try to change his situation, find employment and cooperate with the social worker. This *moral commitment* is the source of power of the social worker — it legitimises actions such as money management trainings, budget counselling or even expenditure control.

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