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Development directions of family assistance in Poland

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Zawód asystenta rodziny w Polsce
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Abstract

The review of a book titled *Zawód asystenta rodziny w Polsce*
by Izabela Krasiejko

The presented book shows the profession of family assistant, which is a relatively new occupation in the social welfare system. Izabela Krasiejko shows the family assistant as an acting subject, active and prepared for professional activities, as a reflective subject, remarking on reality and practice, focused on analysis and change, as well as a subject who recognises practice. The reviewed book also shows that a family assistant is a profession that faces various dilemmas and difficulties, ranging from the lack of clarity in the perception of the nature of family assistance in its original assumptions

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(supporting and pedagogical, not interventional and controlling nature of work) to organisational dimensions of work of family assistants. The monograph by Izabela Krasiejko shows a complex and, at the same time, synthetic presentation of the family assistance in the family support system. The reviewed work is an important and necessary scientific project that illustrates an innovative model of family assistance based on subjective premises.

Keywords: family assistance, pedagogical approach in social work, methodological model

The presented book shows the profession of family assistant, which is a relatively new occupation in the social welfare system. Since 1990, the expansion of the family support system in Poland (new laws, new professions) has opened up a space for the family assistance, for the idea of working with the family, the basic assumptions of which have been incorporated into the model of active social policy. The new concept of supporting families aimed at activating and empowering individuals, groups and communities. These changes were also accompanied by legislation reform. At the level of social work with the family, support should, in turn, be aimed at mobilising the family's own strengths, their sense of agency, and the ability to decide for themselves and take responsibility for their decisions. Placing the family at the centre of attention provides a starting point for reformulating the main tasks of social welfare, which would include both the subjective goals of support and help as well as the subjective nature of the assistance process. The chance for activating and empowering the approach of assistants in working with families emerged along with the distinction between social benefits and support offered by the assistant to the family. The introduction of this new profession was associated with the potential to redefine previous ways of supporting the family, which the author pays particular attention to in her work.

Izabela Krasiejko shows the family assistant as an acting subject, active and prepared for professional activities, as well as a reflective subject, remarking on reality and practice, focused on analysis and change, as a subject who recognises practice. The reviewed book also shows that a family assistant is a profession that faces various dilemmas and difficulties, ranging from the lack of clarity in the perception of the nature of family assistance in its original assumptions (supporting and pedagogical, not interventional and controlling nature of work) to organisational dimensions of work of family assistants.

In my opinion, the understanding of family assistance proposed by the author fits into the model of socio-educational work in the classical concept of social pedagogy, which is enriched by contemporary trends in strengths-based approaches. The socio-educational work of family assistants is undoubtedly both a form of social assistance and a relationship between people involved in the process of helping. Whether both of these dimensions are characterised by a subjective approach depends on a number of factors, the book's author points out. The category that determines the orientation

of the activities of family assistants in working with the family accompanies the development, which is part of non-directive trends of influence. Such an understanding of working with the family is close to a family assistance in its basic concept, which emphasises both the support of families and the accompaniment in solving life problems. This is an important indicator for the pedagogical approach in social work, which involves the strengthening and development of forces capable of the socio-educational activation of one's own environment. The pedagogical nature of the work of family assistants involves boosting individual potential, empowerment, and facilitating the establishment of broken relationships or community ties (in the family and local environment). This interpretation of human/social strengths refers to the concept of resources, and opportunities inherent in individuals, families and communities in which the socio-educational process takes place. The task of assistants working with the family is to help bring out the capabilities and talents of family members so that they themselves can succeed to the best of their abilities, as well as to base the support relationship on cooperation and partnership, and to recognise that power and strength are in everyone, not that someone has power over someone else. Izabela Krasiejko's presentation of such a model of family assistance is a clear advantage of the reviewed monograph.

The thesis contains all the necessary elements that form the structure of a monograph in the field of social sciences. The subdivision of the contents of the main body into individual chapters is clear and understandable. The book's analyses begin with the definitions and the descriptions of family assistance in relation to its original assumptions. The author shows the duality of the occupation, which, on the one hand, strives for standardisation and, on the other, responds to local needs and expectations as well as to the possibilities and limitations of specific environments. This situation results in a multiplicity of ways of understanding family assistance, which is not always conducive to the formation of this profession. Noteworthy is the definition given by the author of the work of the family assistant, which emphasises both support for families and support in solving life problems. This work involves taking action, inspiring and implementing self-help activities in order to meet the needs of family members, to improve their quality of life and, above all, to create a more favourable family environment.

In the next part of the monograph, Izabela Krasiejko shows how family assistance evolved in Polish social welfare realities over the past decade. In addition, the author points out the conditions that facilitate the development of this newly emerging profession. She describes in detail the genesis of the creation of family assistance as creative activities in which the new working method was based on empowering, strengthening and supporting the family. In addition, the author presents the background of social changes, revealing a number of failures in the area of social work with families and the need to support parents from marginalised environments in the implementation of the care and educational function in the place of residence.

The analyses undertaken in chapter three bring the original concept of family assistance closer and complement the second chapter. In my opinion, the content of this part of the work is important in order to displace the accompanying and supporting model of family assistance (in line with the original assumptions) and replace it with intervention and controlling activities used by family assistants in almost half

of the Polish municipalities. This chapter also inspires further reflection on the original assumptions of family assistance. The conducted analyses reveal, on the one hand, a picture of family assistance, which is characterised by a high degree of effectiveness of activities, especially if they are accompanied by empowering approaches; and on the other hand, a depiction that shows that this profession is faced with various dilemmas and difficulties, ranging from ambiguity in perceiving the essence of family assistance in its original assumptions to the organisational dimensions of the work of family assistants. After reading this part of the work, the following questions arise: What does the family assistance look like in comparison with the initial idea describing it? What causes the disappearance of the uniqueness and originality of the work of a family assistant in some environments? To what extent does the family assistance become an instrument of social policy, making its competencies “shallower”? These should be researched further.

The legal basis of the family assistant profession is presented in the following part of the work. Izabela Krasiejko shows the changes in social policy models, as well as the modifications in the law that led to the emergence of a new profession – the family assistant. This section also presents the legal acts regulating the work of a family assistant, which should, according to the reformers, include the promotion of preventive social work, so that as many problems of the families as possible can be solved at an early stage and the children do not have to be taken away. However, if necessary, the family assistant is obliged to take corrective measures to return the children home.

Chapter five is also worth mentioning, as it presents detailed data on the number of employed assistants and families that benefited from their support. The table in this part of the work shows how dynamically family assistance has developed in the different areas of family work in recent years.

Chapter six is the most comprehensive as it introduces the model of the work methods of the family assistant. I consider the recommendations presented by the author for the next stages of methodical activity as a particularly valuable contribution to the work of family assistants. The original methodological model offered to family assistants is the result of Izabela Krasiejko’s many years of experience in the field of family assistance research as well as the inspiration from numerous theoretical analyses and descriptions of good practices of the previous providers of this service. This model takes a supportive and pedagogical form; based on the original ideas of family assistance. The whole chapter is completed with an example of a description of the work with a case that takes into account the methodological steps of the family assistance. It should also be noted that the recommendations drawn up by the author have been recognised and adopted by both the Polish Association of Family Assistants and the Ministry of Family and Social Policy and are published and popularised on their websites, and during conferences, meetings for practitioners and training.

The last, seventh chapter is a continuation of the reflections from the previous part of the work and shows different ways in which family assistance can be implemented in the daily practice of family assistants. Izabela Krasiejko was inspired to write this chapter by the results of scientific research, which shows what the implementation of family assistance looks like from the perspective of those who perform it. The author draws on both the rich achievements of her own research and the works of other

scholars. I also consider the areas of cooperation between social workers and family assistants an interesting theme covered in this part of the work as well as the location of family assistants in the social welfare system in the context of cooperation with other professionals supporting the family. This theme is of exceptional importance because the *Act on supporting the family and the foster care system* does not define the areas of cooperation between assistants and social workers clearly.

The book, however, lacks considerations on the ethical dimension of the work of a family assistant, as well as showing the ethical dilemmas accompanying this profession. This is a crucial issue, as family assistants rarely deal with identical or similar problems experienced by families. The uncertainty and non-obviousness present in the process of helping a family is inherent in the nature of their work. They experience numerous ethical dilemmas, which can be considered on several levels. They concern mainly the sphere of values and norms, conflict in defining the goals of work with the family, and conflicts of contradictory interests. This involves the family assistant having to choose between the goals of the institution she or he represents and those of the family. Contradictions also arise in the very understanding of the family assistant's function, since she or he acts as both the helper and controller. They are also revealed when assistants construct support and assistance relationships with families and refer to such areas as the voluntariness of cooperation, the limits of cooperation, the right to self-determination, or the limits of responsibility.

In the conclusion of the book, Izabela Krasiejko states that despite the popularisation of the supportive-pedagogical model of family assistance in Poland, the care and control model is often used in practice. At the same time, this conclusion provides a strong argument for popularising the methodological model of family assistants, described in the reviewed work. I join the author's postulate to take care of the development of the professional culture of the family assistant occupation and the building of professional identity by creating opportunities for reflection on its implementers' own role, promoting the supportive-pedagogical model of assistance and raising public awareness of it. There is no doubt that these issues have been addressed in the monograph reviewed. Whereas the study did not explore the issues of values and ethical dilemmas in the work of the family assistant, the author may see this as a suggestion to publish another study.

The monograph by Izabela Krasiejko shows a complex and, at the same time, synthetic presentation of the family assistance in the family support system. The reviewed work is an important and necessary scientific project that illustrates an innovative model of family assistance based on subjective premises. It is also an extremely valuable compendium of knowledge regarding the profession of family assistant. The book is a solid, clear and compact and, above all, interesting read addressed to a wide range of practitioners and theorists concerned with family support. It is a highly recommendable work in which the author has managed to look at the analysed issue in an innovative and inspiring way that encourages further exploration.

