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## The variety of methods and techniques in family counselling used in working with children and young people and their parents

### Różnorodność metod i technik wykorzystywanych w pracy z dziećmi i młodzieżą oraz ich rodzicami w poradnictwie rodzinnym

#### Abstract

**Aim.** The subject of the article concerns family counselling in its broadest sense, understood as a form of support for marriage and family, with particular reference to the description of the variety of methods and techniques used by the counsellor in working with children and adolescents, and their families as part of the counselling process.

**Methods and materials.** A theoretical analysis of important issues from the point of view of family counselling is provided, such as: the characteristics of the condition of the modern family; the essence of family counselling and its tasks in relation to the individual and the family; the characteristics of the counsellor and the helping relationship; and a review of the methods and techniques used by the counsellor in working with children, adolescents, and adults in family counselling. In the text presented here, special attention is paid to the advantages of both the basic techniques used in family diagnosis, such as interview, observation, genogram, ecogram, as well as techniques that support the conversation, mutual understanding, and the relationship between client and counsellor. It analyses the different types of questions

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used in family counselling and highlights the need to use creative methods when working with families.

**Results and conclusion.** This variety of methods and techniques presented in the article, which the family counsellor can draw on in his/her work, will not be of tangible benefit if applied without the counsellor's awareness of purpose and reflective and empathetic following of the client.

**Keywords:** family counselling, family counsellor, family, child, counselling methods and techniques.

### **Abstrakt**

**Cel.** Tematyka artykułu dotyczy szeroko rozumianego poradnictwa rodzinnego rozumianego jako forma wsparcia małżeństwa i rodziny, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem opisu różnorodności metod i technik wykorzystywanych przez doradcę w pracy z dziećmi i młodzieżą oraz ich rodzinami w ramach procesu poradniczego.

**Metody i materiały.** Analizie teoretycznej poddano – ważne z punktu widzenia poradnictwa rodzinnego – zagadnienia, takie jak: charakterystyka kondycji rodziny współczesnej, istota poradnictwa rodzinnego, jego działy i zadania pełnione względem jednostki i rodziny; charakterystyka doradcy rodzinnego (niezbędnych cech i umiejętności) oraz relacji pomocowej, która przez licznych badaczy i terapeutów uznawana jest za najważniejszy czynnik leczący. W tekście znajdziemy również przegląd metod i technik stosowanych przez doradcę w pracy z dziećmi, młodzieżą oraz dorosłymi w ramach poradnictwa rodzinnego. W prezentowanym tekście zwrócono szczególną uwagę na walory płynące zarówno z zastosowania podstawowych technik wykorzystywanych w diagnostyce rodziny, takich jak: wywiad, obserwacja, genogram, ekogram, jak i technik wspomagających rozmowę, wzajemne zrozumienie i relację pomiędzy klientem a doradcą. Dokładnie przeanalizowano różne rodzaje pytań stosowanych w poradnictwie rodzinnym oraz zwrócono uwagę na potrzebę wykorzystywania metod kreatywnych w pracy z rodzinami.

**Wyniki i wnioski.** Ta zaprezentowana w artykule różnorodność metod i technik, z których w swojej pracy może czerpać doradca rodzinny, nie przyniesie wymiernej korzyści, jeżeli będzie stosowana bez świadomości celu i refleksyjnego namysłu doradcy oraz empatycznego podążania za klientem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** poradnictwo rodzinne, doradca rodzinny, rodzina, dziecko, metody i techniki pracy doradcy.

## **The modern family – or what kind of family?**

The modern family has recently gone through a lot – beset by constant crises, both micro and macro (violence, addictions, divorce, pandemic, warfare, economic crisis), it has become fragile, increasingly exposed to the breakdown of its structures and in need of external support. On the other hand, especially in the public consciousness, but also in the belief of many familiologists, it is still the place for optimal human development at any age.

More and more people are coming to the offices of professionals who offer support and assistance to children, young people and their parents. This number is increasing every year. They need diagnosis, parenting guidance, consultation, accompaniment in crisis. Sometimes, adult members of the family system are looking to “fix” their child with whom they claim to be “unable to cope,” and the youngest want to be listened to and to understand the difficult feelings they are experiencing during childhood and adolescence. Often, such a visit to a specialist is treated by the family as a so-called last resort, at a time when other remedial strategies already known to the family have been used and have proved ineffective.

Understanding the family system and the relationships within it between individual family members requires in-depth observation, involvement, entering the system and looking at it from many different perspectives. A thorough understanding of the family and the specifics of its functioning allows professionals to select the best forms of assistance that will ultimately enable the family (individual members of the system) to acquire the competences to deal independently with the difficulties it is facing. Family counselling and – within its framework – the various family support activities with children are today becoming a highly desirable remedy for the various difficulties and crises experienced by members of modern families.

### **Family counselling an ever-present strategy to support the modern family with children**

In searching for a definition of counselling that fully captures its momentous nature and undeniable importance in the helping processes of recent decades, I found one that captures the main idea behind counselling in an extremely general yet broad way. Alicja Kargulowa (2016) writes:

[...] counselling as an “everyday” activity of well-wishers and as a specialised activity of large institutions employing excellent professionals is, in its most general outline, a phenomenon/fact/process that can be expressed by the formula giving advice – receiving advice (p.22).

Counselling is mainly aimed at “optimisation, at improving personality traits and behaviours, thus developing motivation, transforming emotions, enriching the store of information, breaking down stereotypes of counseled persons, developing their reflexivity and criticism” (Kargulowa, 2010, p. 56) and helping them build satisfying interpersonal relationships based on respect and trust. Through counselling, individuals or groups solve their problems, which can be defined as “certain complex tasks

of an adaptive or decisional nature and/or emotional states, sometimes frustrating” (Kargulowa, 2010, p. 56), which individuals or groups face and have to cope with, and which they are unable to solve on their own in a given situation.

Among the many areas of counselling, there is family counselling, whose aim can be formulated very broadly as the provision of help and support to families, especially those in difficult situations beyond their individual strengths to cope with the crisis they are experiencing. Specialist family counselling for families with children can be considered in two aspects: institutional – understood as a system with a specific organisational structure (e.g. family counselling centre) and as specific activities/actions undertaken by professionals involved in helping families with children experiencing difficulties (Ławniczak, Marszałkowska, Mierzejewska, Polczyk, Zeller). According to Maria Ziemska, family counselling encompasses problems concerning the external relations of the family system, contacts with other institutions and environments, as well as those within the family, related to relations within the community itself (Szymczyk, 2016). Today, family counselling “is addressed to people experiencing developmental crises or having temporary difficulties in adapting to difficult life events occurring in the life of the family” (Jelonkiewicz, 2015, p. 241) The aim of the professional support provided is to support clients on the path of taking more control over their own lives. In the literature we also find specific sections of this type of counselling, then, after family counselling, the following are also mentioned: premarital counselling (covering problems in the couple occurring before marriage), marital counselling (dealing with difficulties manifesting in the relationship during marriage), sexual counselling and parenting counselling (problems concerning parental relations and the parent-child relationship) (Kowalczyk, 2005).

The tasks facing family counselling, formulated some time ago by Elżbieta Sujak (1988), seem to be still relevant, despite the social processes, economic upheavals or cultural changes that characterise post-modern societies, including families. The author herself emphasises that the task areas she has outlined are a “sign of the times” and are becoming priorities today in family-oriented activities. Among them, the most important are:

- helping the family to maintain and develop emotional bonds,
- assistance in conflict and crisis situations,
- assistance with educational tasks, especially those related to the child’s individuality and developmental changes,
- individual assistance with personal problems, both as a young person and as an adult, relating to important life decisions, individual problems related to personal development or experiencing change (Sujak, 1995, pp. 20–21).

The tasks thus outlined create a space for reflection on the contemporary family counsellor, his or her personality, the qualities predisposing him or her to the profession and the competencies understood as

[...] a combination of three attributes: knowledge, skills and attitude [...]. They refer to the efficiency, effectiveness, ease, and even a certain finesse with which individuals carry out assigned activities. Competence therefore indicates the degree of quality of the activities performed (Szumigraj, 2016, p.143).

Among the manifold qualities, one should not overlook the most important ones, of unquestionable importance for the efficiency/effectiveness of the counselling process, formulated by one of the most respected and recognised creators of client-centred therapy – Carl R. Rogers. He lists the following characteristics of the counsellor/therapist:

- authenticity (congruence) of the therapist,
- full acceptance, or an unconditionally positive attitude towards the customer,
- a sensitive, empathic understanding of what the client is feeling and what he or she really means (Rogers, 1991).

Extending Rogers' thought, it is worth noting the personal qualities of the counsellor/therapist listed by Gerard Corey. The author emphasises that the list he has created is intended to provoke reflection on “what it takes to be a person who will be able to make a significant difference in the lives of others” (Corey, 2005, p. 38) According to G. Corey, an effective therapist:

- has an identity – this means he/she knows who he/she is, he/she knows what he/she wants from life and what is important,
- respects and values who he/she is,
- can recognise and accept their own strength,
- is open to change,
- makes choices that shape his/her life,
- he/she feels full of life and his choices are life-oriented,
- is authentic, sincere and honest,
- has a sense of humour,
- makes mistakes and is able to admit them,
- lives in the present tense, is able to experience what is now and is fully present with other people in the present,
- appreciates the influence of cultural circles – is aware of the effects of his own culture on himself/herself and respects the diversity of values that other cultures foster,

- takes a sincere interest in the welfare of others – is respectful, caring, trusting and genuinely values people in his/her relationships with others,
- is deeply committed to the work and derives value from it,
- is able to maintain healthy boundaries, knows how to say ‘no’ (does not carry the client’s problems with him/her when he/she is not working and resting) (Corey, 2005).

Another important factor in the relationship between the helper and the recipient is the counsellor’s own attitude towards the client and his/her problems. Family support professionals consider that this attitude should be characterised by the following features:

- respect (expressed mainly in understanding the difficulties and suffering of parents and children),
- kindness (i.e. a friendly disposition towards all family members),
- tolerance and neutrality (expressed through an attitude of impartiality),
- honesty (meaning truthfulness and openness) (Kubitsky, 2010).

In the literature we can also find indications of negative attitudes of the counsellor, which in the built relationship with the client may lead to its closure, breaking of contact, or a significant breach of the therapeutic alliance. It is worth mentioning here the evaluative attitude, but also the rigidity in the counsellor’s thinking, the lack of openness to what the contemporary reality brings and the lack of multidimensional understanding of the experiences of the family members (children and adults).

Apart from the characteristics and attitudes of the counsellor himself/herself, which undeniably shape the helping relationship and are important in the context of the whole ongoing process, there are a number of methods and techniques for working with both the family and its individual members, which broaden the professional’s and the clients’ optics in the area of understanding intra-family relations and the difficulties the family is facing.

### **The variety of methods and techniques used in family counselling**

As Anna R. McPhatter (1991) points out, diagnosis of the family environment should focus on the following issues:

- a clear, transparent description of the problem with which the family comes forward - the history of the problem, the severity of the problem at different times in the family’s life, the perception of the problem by other family members, past so-

- lutions, intergenerational patterns and the motivation of individual family members to participate in the support process;
- a description of the family's organisational structure – the roles played by individual members, the distribution of power, socio-economic status and the influence of cultural backgrounds;
  - details of how the family functions – such as, for example, family rules, ways of communicating, problem-solving strategies;
  - strengths of family members, family resources.

Basic techniques in family diagnosis include: interview, observation, genogram and, increasingly, eogram.

The interview is a basic technique used in working with families and is widespread in psychopedagogical practice. It allows gathering the necessary information in direct contact with the client. It is an in-depth conversation that has several significant stages:

1. Starting the interview. At this stage, the factors involved in establishing contact based on mutual trust prove extremely important. The counsellor follows the client empathetically, taking a genuine interest in what he/she has to say in order to understand rather than judge. The person receiving help has a sense of acceptance of his/her statements and of sincere attention to the problem he/she is raising (Jarosz, Wysocka, 2006).
2. The sequences of topics in the interview – must not be random, but tailored to the needs of clients coming to use family counselling services, giving the opportunity to discern the specificity of the difficulty the client is coming with, as well as the nature of the whole family system of which they are a part (Jarosz, Wysocka, 2006). The structured family interview should include basic details of the family members, the date of the interview, often – if it is a child consultation – information about the young person. The next part of the interview is devoted to learning about the difficulties with which the family comes forward. First, the counsellor asks very generally: “What made you decide to see me/consult the counselling service? What difficulties are you facing in your family?”. The next area is to find out the context of the problem, i.e. the circumstances in which it occurs. Issues such as the physical and mental health of the client/family members, drug use, addictions, conflicts with the law, violence, satisfaction and stress at work or school, financial situation, sex life are worth bearing in mind here. Once the counsellor knows the problem the family is presenting and its context, it is useful for him or her to also recognise the strengths of the family, i.e. the zones free of the signalled difficulty (Chrzastowski, 2014). When dealing with parenting counselling, then within the interview conducted, more attention should be paid

to the child and recognise his/her developmental history, current health status and psychosocial functioning in different environments (home, kindergarten, school, peer group), his/her relationship with caregivers/parents, with siblings (if he/she has any) and the area related to emotions, coping with difficult situations, use of electronics and social media, play. Finally, it is useful to ask about the expectations of the parents and the child from the parenting or family counselling process.

3. Changing the subject. The counsellor, when conducting the interview, should keep in mind that the whole conversation and the collection of information should be arranged logically, hence the importance of using transitional questions to link the different thematic areas into a coherent conversation with continuity and naturalness (Jarosz, Wysocka, 2006).
4. Concluding the interview. At the end of the interview, it is useful to ask if the client/family would add anything relevant to them (of importance in the context of the family's life) which the guidance counsellor did not ask or which did not come up during the interview. This question can be of great benefit and bring new information to broaden the adviser's perspective.

Another technique, often treated as an adjunct to the interview, is observation, which can also be a stand-alone way of gathering important data about the client for the professional. As Jeanne Albronda Heaton (2003) points out, "it allows gathering the information needed to understand the client and his/her problems and to find ways out of a difficult situation" (p.15). Observation accompanies the counsellor from the very beginning of the first meeting and is present during the whole process until the end. It allows certain assumptions to be made and helps to formulate hypotheses, which can then be confirmed or denied. Depending on the situation in which the technique is applied, the counsellor may have to deal with an observation directed only at one member of the family (parent or child) or with the whole system, and may then notice certain patterns of behaviour in the family, especially towards the problem they are facing. Observing several people and interviewing them at the same time is not an easy task. It requires a great deal of attention, actively following the flow of the conversation while registering the facial expressions and gestures of the people coming for help (Kubitsky, 2010). When observing both individual clients and the family as a whole, the counsellor should consider four fundamental factors:

- non-verbal communication (appearance, clothing, facial expression, ability to make eye contact, appearance of tears, body language in the broadest sense and outlining the area of personal space),
- verbal expression (manner of speaking, fluency of articulation, giving meaning to words and their choice, appearance of laughter and silence),



- the relationship between the client's verbal and non-verbal messages,
- the counsellor's own reactions (conducting self-observation of their thoughts, behaviour, reactions to the person receiving help) (Kubitsky, 2010).

An extremely important technique, often fundamental to understanding the family system, the links and relationships within the family, is the genogram. It is a kind of map of the family system with which the counsellor has come to work. It provides a graphic representation of complex family patterns. It helps the counsellor to clearly define the family structure, to record data, and is a practical summary of the family history. The genogram makes it easier for the professional to grasp the context of the family in all its complexity, together with the history, patterns and events that may be relevant in working with the client or the family as a whole (McGoldric, Gerson, Shellenberger, 2007). In the family counsellor's practice, the construction of the genogram begins by inviting the family to try to graphically represent their story on a large board/card using symbols and slogans as a shorthand for information. The counsellor first draws out the structure of the family based on the graphic symbols (three generations) established, in order to then imprint on this "skeleton" the patterns of family interaction occurring between the different family members. The information that appears on the genogram is both demographic data, such as age, place of residence, education, occupation, etc., as well as data that relates to the functioning of individual family members (emotional, school, work and other problems), or that relates to critical events that have affected the family (separation, divorce, death, illness). Constructing a genogram together with the family has its own profound therapeutic meaning, and its analysis inspires hypotheses about the family and its problem (Kolbik, 1999).

An interesting extension of the use of the genogram in the work of the family counsellor is the ecomap, which is defined as a diagram mapping the relationship of the family and the community in which it lives, depicting the relationship of the family system to various institutions in its natural environment, showing the family's external resources or lack thereof, identifying stressors and areas of conflict that threaten family functioning (Hartman, 1995).

The techniques outlined above used in working with the family are extremely useful at the initial stage of gathering information, getting to know the system, discerning the variety of constellations of intra-familial relationships formed, the ways in which family members communicate, identifying difficulties and pointing out the resources that the family has. It is also worth mentioning other techniques used by the counsellor and applied in his/her work with the family at different stages of the counselling process. These are a group of techniques aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the family counselling interview and at building a deep relationship between the counsellor and the individual family members.

A basic technique for the family counsellor to improve mutual understanding between the counsellor and the client is active listening and understanding. Using Thomas Gordon's concept, four basic listening techniques should be mentioned here:

- passive listening (silence),
- accentuating attention (constituting verbal and non-verbal signals, i.e. nodding, smiling, leaning towards the interlocutor, “mumbling”),
- the use of “openers” and encouragement (through open questions: tell me more about it),
- active listening – according to Gordon, the most important technique for gaining a good, deep understanding of the person in need of help, involving mirroring or imaging what the client has heard before, conveying in their own words what the counsellor has heard and how they have understood it (Gordon, 1998). Through the use of this technique, the family counsellor creates a space free from judging or criticising the client, indicating that what they are saying is important to the counsellor on the path to full understanding.

A technique very similar to active listening is paraphrasing. It allows the counsellor to make sure that he or she has understood his or her client correctly. “It consists in presenting, in a slightly different form, the content of the client's message, usually using fewer words” (Wojtasik, 2011, p. 87). On this occasion, it is also worth mentioning a technique called reflecting feelings, in which the counsellor communicates to the client the feelings he or she perceives in him or her (e.g.: when you mention this, you look sad; you light up when you talk about it), which will be confirmed or denied on the client's part (Wojtasik, 2011, p. 87).

Asking questions is another technique that enhances the family counsellor's ability to get to know and understand the individual client's or the whole family's story more deeply. It is, in my opinion, an art that the counsellor has been honing throughout his or her professional life. The ability to ask pertinent questions is characteristic of counsellors who, when formulating a question, remember that their primary aim is to try to understand, expressed in a curious concern for the difficulties experienced by the client or the family. Thus, the asking of questions itself undeniably involves active listening to the client's feedback formulated as a response (Knapp, 2009). Among the numerous types of questions, it is worth mentioning the basic ones of closed and open nature and to recall the different categories of questions from which the family counsellor can draw in his/her work.

Closed questions – as many communication experts point out – are designed to elicit short yes/no answers, to give specific information, important data. Open-ended questions, on the other hand, provide the customer with more freedom and space to speak, encourage them to speak in their own words, invite them to formulate personal

feelings, encourage them to construct a more elaborate statement, accurate and detail-rich descriptions (Knapp, 2009). In addition to this basic division, it is worth noting the power of opening questions, i.e. those which introduce the client to the counsellor and set the course for the whole meeting:

- What happened that made you decide to meet with me?
- What brings you to me?

Further categories of questions are those in which we ask for clarification (detailing), aiming to clarify the meaning of the adviser's statement:

- What do you have in mind?
- What exactly does this mean?
- How should this be understood?

Others are hypothetical questions and therefore provide opportunities to consider what if: Suppose... What would happen... if...? and future-oriented questions:

- How will your life look like in 2 years' time?
- How will this solution work when children become older? (Gójska, Huryn, 2007).

Meaning-generating questions are also an important category for the work of the family counsellor. Their use during the interview allows the client to lean into the creation and reading of the meanings they give to different people and experiences in their lives:

- What does this mean for you?
- For what reason is this important to you?
- How does this happen? (Peavy, 2004).

Among the categories of questions used by the family counsellor, it is also impossible to omit the miracle question, the scale question or the exception question. The miracle question is extremely useful when working with families. It may sound like this:

I want to ask you a strange question. Suppose that while you are sleeping tonight, and the whole house is quiet, a miracle happens. The miracle is that the problem that brings you here is solved. However, because you are asleep, you do not know that the miracle has happened. So when you wake up tomorrow morning, what will change for you, what will tell you that the miracle has happened and the problem that brought you here is solved? What will be the first sign that tells you that something has changed, that a miracle has happened? (De Jong, Berg, 2002, pp. 101–102).

At least a few reasons can be given for their use. Firstly, the question gives clients the opportunity to think about an infinite number of possibilities. It enables them to recognise what changes they need in their lives. Importantly, the question focuses on the future and therefore gives an idea of a period in the client/family's life when the problems currently experienced will no longer be problems. The question shifts the family's attention away from current and past problems, leading them towards a more fulfilling life (De Jong, Berg, 2002, pp. 101–102). Also, questions about exceptions are extremely powerful when working with a client or the whole family. Exceptions are those moments in a client's life "when it could have been expected with high probability that a problem would occur, but somehow it did not" (De Jong, Berg, 2002, p. 119). This means that when working with a family that experiences arguments and conflicts in everyday life, the exceptions will be those moments when the family members communicated better, had a better relationship, less conflict. In working on exceptions, it is useful to distinguish the following stages:

- exploration of the type of experience (of a given exception),
- exploration of the client's *modus operandi*,
- deepening the client's knowledge of themselves and their competences,
- the search for opportunities to exploit a given exception in the future (Szczepkowski, 2010).

By means of scaling questions, on the other hand, the counsellor encourages the client to place his or her observations, impressions and predictions on a scale from 0 to 10. This technique offers great opportunities to work on the category of change in the life of the family. And, as Jacek Szczepkowski points out, "especially with regard to children, but also young people, it enables communication through numbers, figures and symbols, and not just words alone, with which it is sometimes difficult for them to express what they mean" (Szczepkowski, 2007, pp. 79–80).

In the practice of counselling activities, circular questions, which aim to "reveal differences in the perceptions of relationships and events by individual family members" (Kubitsky, 2010, p. 173), also prove effective. These questions are designed to gather information about the relationships within the family, make it easier for the family to talk about them (which are often uneasy and conflictual), and allow the family to be thought of as a certain dynamic whole rather than as a collection of individuals who function independently (Chrzastowski, 2014). Many studies highlight the great advantage of using circular questions in counselling and therapy, emphasising their neutral nature and the fact that their use does not lead to judgment or recrimination between the family members being interviewed (Chrzastowski, 2014).

To the above list of methods and techniques that can equip every family counsellor, it is worth adding some comments on the use of creative methods in family

counselling. In modern family counselling, the counsellor may also include play-based activities in his or her meetings with families. The use of such methods seems particularly relevant when one of the clients is a young child with limited language and cognitive skills. Family sessions incorporating play-based activities have many advantages. They allow interrupting and changing the typical way of describing family problems (e.g. role play using puppets), they offer a more conscious experience of emotions, they allow trying out new ways of interaction. They allow a move away from the rational world to the world of imagination, spontaneity and metaphor. Conducting sessions with playful elements can be challenging for the counselor. In particular, he or she should take into account possible resistance from adult participants (parents), who may not understand the purpose of using such techniques in the helping process. In such cases, it is worthwhile to take the time to explain and present the functions and advantages of working with play techniques. An intermediate solution (in case of high doubts or resistance on the part of clients) may be to plan meetings in such a way that play techniques are combined with other – described above – ways of working with families (Jelonkiewicz, 2015).

### **Instead of a conclusion**

I am aware that the methods and techniques presented above for working with families in family counselling are not exhaustive. The various ways of working with the family (its individual members) I have referred to in this text are mainly dictated by my personal preferences, relate to my own experiences of working in practice, and are also rooted in my theoretical beliefs and understanding of family systems. However, no technique will be practical and effective if it is used without the counsellor's awareness of purpose and reflective reflection. Authenticity, gentle acceptance and empathetic following of the client, awareness of one's role in the helping process and the ability to see the resources of the families one is working with, gives the counsellor the flexible space to choose ways of working adapted to the current needs of their clients.

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