Promoting foster families' self–help groups in Lithuania

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Abstract

The article analyses the experience of foster families' self-help groups in Lithuania in the context of the child care system reform currently taking place in the country. The research on foster families experience has revealed how self-help groups may become, through shared needs and communality, a place of real aid for families in taking care of children and promote personal growth of those families, positive changes in relations with family members and the social environment. The activities of self-help groups become an instrument of empowerment and represent important social capital resources developing trust and social relations.

Keywords

Foster families' self-help groups – Social capital – Trust – Social relations

Introduction

A widespread phenomenon with its distinct culture in most Western countries, self-help groups are still new in Lithuania. A certain fabric of society that has a complicate and mutable history and the trends of the general mentality have certainly played a part. Like in many other countries, the best known and the most spread in Lithuania are alcoholics anonymous groups and al-anon family groups. They started to develop actively after Lithuania's independence was restored in 1991. According to the Society of Alcoholics Anonymous, there are 117 groups acting today (*http://anonalko.tinklapis.lt*). There also exist other types of self-help groups in the country, including groups specially designed for individuals with mental and other health disorders, relatives and family members of disabled people, divorced people, infertile couples, parents having problems with children's education, groups for foster/adoptive families, etc. However, there is lack of

public awareness of self-help groups in general. There is no systematic information on self-help groups and little research has focused on them.

A number of foster/adoptive families' self-help groups emerged in Lithuania after a single programme for training of adoptive and foster parents (Training and Consultancy for Foster and Adoptive Parents, TCFAP; GIMK – in Lithuanian language) was launched in 2008; this groups continue to function and are followed by new groups, mainly in Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda and other large cities and regions with high concentration of foster/adoptive families. In Kaunas, foster families' self-help groups started appearing even before the TCFAP programme, since 1996, as a result of the active development of family-based foster care in child wellbeing centre Pastogė (NGO). In Vilnius, the groups have been organised since 2004 by NGO SOTAS. It is expected that the commencement of the process of deinstitutionalisation of the child care system and promotion of family-based child care will spur the development of mutual aid among families.

There are several reasons that can explain the poor spread of self-help groups in Lithuania. On the one hand, there is little information on the activities of the groups. On the other hand, this suggests the low level of initiative among citizens in general: today, after twenty-five years of independence, which was regained after fifty years' of Soviet regime, and country's accession to the European Union, the activity and development of the civil sector are still very low in Lithuania (Žiliukaitė, 2012). Also, there is a lack of motivation from professionals (social workers, teachers and psychologists) and researchers to promote the emergence and development of such groups, to organise and lead the groups, and to compile and disseminate reference material. Finally, it is also important that the initiatives of this type are little promoted on national or municipal social policy and support levels. Although the benefits and importance of self-help groups are emphasised in various national documents, there is little investment in this area: there are no adequate conditions and funding for the development of the groups.

Therefore, it is important in this context to analyse and describe best practices of the existing groups in order to demonstrate their distinctiveness in the social welfare system and the benefits they offer. The article aims at revealing the specific features of foster families' self-help groups in Lithuania as an innovative method and resources in the process of deinstitutionalisation of the child care system taking place in the country.

Foster families' self–help groups in Lithuania

The concept of self-help groups and their specific features have been quite broadly discussed in scientific literature from different perspectives (Katz & Bender, 1976; Silverman, 1989; Folgheraiter 1998; 2004; 2009; Folgheraiter & Pasini, 2009; Drumm, 2006; Gitterman & Shulman, 2005; Shulman, 2009; Gitterman, 2010; Steinberg, 2010; Calcaterra, 2013; Hyde, 2013; Raineri, 2017, Corradini, 2018; etc.). An important characteristic of the

groups is that their participants during the regular meetings share the common needs or problems they experience.

As revealed by scholars' insights, the basic principles of mutual aid have not been invented «theoretically», but observed in people's experiences and adapted to meet both the material survival needs and the root needs of existence. Activities of the groups are closely related to solidarity initiatives, the need to share with others which is common for human beings, existence aspirations, and generosity and, eventually, the need of self-giving.

In Lithuania, most self-help groups are organised and function in the non-governmental sector (NGOs). At the same time, they are informal structures, sometimes functioning independently from aid organisations. Some of self-help groups have been initiated by professionals from municipal and public institutions, and the groups are therefore set up at those institutions.

Adoptive and foster families' self-help groups are integral part of the recently escalated deinstitutionalisation of child care in Lithuania which has been one of the priority areas of Lithuanian Social Policy for last 20 years. The analysis of academic literature, research, and legislation revealed that de-institutionalization of children's boarding institutions is a complex and gradual process that involves not only the shutdown of stationary institutions, but also requires development of different forms of fostering, the support to the foster families, establishment of alternative help services and preventive work with families in order to reduce the number of children getting into the foster care system, etc. (Ivanova & Bogdanov, 2013; Buster, 2012; Dunavejas, 2012; Browne, 2009; Gudžiūnienė & Navaitis, 2016; Gončiarova & Tamutienė 2016). In spite of positive developments in this area in the country (up to 30 % fewer children in the institutions in the last years, number of foster families increased by 38 % this year, establishment of small communities for children instead of big structures, etc), this process is found to be too inefficient and slow. According to the «Statistics Lithuania»[1], each year a large number of children — more than two thousand — are still deprived of parental care, and at the end of the year there are almost 10 thousand of them in such situations (this number for the whole country of 2 and half millions of population is indeed high). Almost half of these children are provided with institutional care (4314 in 2017), other children are fostered in families (in total 5602 children), but the vast majority of whom are relatives — 70 percent and a small part — in family communities). Statistics show that in many cases because of the still underdeveloped system of family foster care and lack of alternative forms of help, the accommodation of a child in a boarding institution remains the first and unique means.

As mentioned, a single programme for the training of adoptive and foster parents (TCFAP) started in Lithuania in 2008 on the basis of the PRIDE programme (Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education«) which was created and used in the United States of America and adapted for Lithuania (Giedrimas, 2014; Gudžiūnienė &

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[1] https://osp.stat.gov.lt/informaciniai-pranesimai?articleId=5178560.

Navaitis, 2016). In earlier years, only fragmentary training for families was organised by one or another organisation in some cities, while the suitability of candidates for fostering and adoption used to be assessed by municipal specialists from The Service of Children's Rights. Today, participation of foster/adoptive parents in self-help groups is preceded by the completion of compulsory pre-TCFAP training, acquisition of knowledge about child care and adoption, as well as of basic principles and skills of participation in the group. Teachers who assess the suitability and readiness of prospective parents for fostering and adoption also lead the self-help groups thereafter. Like with training, the groups are usually organised and led by two professionals. However, unlike the training, families' self-help groups are voluntary and there are no participation restrictions or control from professionals. Participants' postures change, as participants' suitability for fostering/adoption is not assessed by the professionals in the self-help group. The professionals who lead the groups are normally not the curators, consultants or mediators for families. This is done by other professionals. However, such a procedure of professional intervention is a controversial issue (Gvaldaitė *et al.*, 2017).

On the one hand, professionals are already familiar with the families and this may be an advantage in creating mutual relationships. On the other hand, the image of professionals as that of «assessors» may be seen as an obstacle for families. We will elaborate on this in more detail in the discussion of the research of self-help groups. Another important aspect is the co-participation of adoptive parents and foster parents in the TCFAP. This has some advantages and disadvantages. Self-help group sittings are also mainly held for adoptive parents and foster parents together. In some localities whether the concentration of such families is high, efforts are taken to differentiate the groups not only by the form of taking a child (adoption or fostering), but also by the age of children; sometimes, only relative guardians meet together so that the participants' needs would be better responded to. However, this cannot apply everywhere due to the insufficient number of adoptive/foster families.

Research methodology

In order to analyse the specific characteristics of foster families' self-help groups, a total of 14 narrative interviews were held with group participants (7 interviews) and group coordinators (7 interviews). A total of 6 groups were analysed, of which 5 were non-relative foster families' groups (including 3 self-help groups attended together by foster parents and adoptive parents) and one was a child relatives' group. Informants were selected on the basis of several criteria (age, length of leading or attending the group, gender, geographical territory, type of organisation (NGO or municipal service centre), and accessibility criteria), and the principle of saturation was used to guide a sample size (as many as possible interviews were conducted until saturation was reached).

The interviewed informants were from Vilnius, Kaunas, Utena and Alytus where self-help groups are the most active.

The Grounded Theory (GT) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) approach was applied to data analysis. Open coding was used to identify the main category which was the *Added value of foster families' self-help groups*. This category was divided into 4 categories describing the features of self-help as a form of aid and its added value revealed during the interviews:

> ...participants are bound together by shared experience; the use of experts by experience; personal growth and changes in the attitude towards a foster child and family members; the role of professionals within a group — from assessors to like-minded.

Each of the categories is described in the article below (the names of the cited informants have been changed). The insights from the interviews are summarised on the basis of the social capital paradigm, taking into account the features of social capital in the relational prospective (Donati, 2003; 2007; Rossi & Boccacin, 2007; Folgheraiter & Pasini, 2009).

Participants are bound together by shared experiences

During the interviews, the informants used a variety of comparisons to describe the sense of togetherness and cosiness they feel when they gather together at the group sittings. They identified the self-help group as a community, a second home, a place of respite, recovery and/or backup. Some of them noted that the sense of communality appears almost spontaneously, as people feel like they are in the same boat due to similar child care experiences. They feel they are better accepted and understood within the group than they are by other people in their environment and, therefore, they can feel being themselves at the group sittings. For others, the feeling of togetherness is evolving gradually, as part of the self-help group process, through sharing their experiences, opening up to and communicating with others.

Some of the informants reported having quite many friends and relatives who help and support them, and with whom they can share their foster care experiences. However, foster parents do not feel fully accepted and understood even by the closest persons unless such persons have child fostering or adoption experience themselves.

One group coordinator (Linas) retold the experience of a participant:

> We have many good friends who support us about fostering, but when there is a real problem they don't know what to say.

According to another participant:

> Others cannot fully understand what we are talking about.

The literature has also tended to point out that the power of work in group, to a certain extent, lies in that each group member tells his/her experiences while interacting with each other and with the group as a whole, thus contributing to the development of authentic and genuine relationships within the group (Drumm, 2006; Folgheraiter & Pasini, 2009; Steinberg, 2010; Raineri, 2017; Corradini, 2018). The dynamic experience sharing with one another and with the group enables recognition of commonalities and differences and seeing oneself in the situation.

For some members of self-help groups, group meetings are probably the only place where they can experience the feeling of belongingness, because outside the group they feel being alone and lonely, lacking social interaction in their environments. They see the benefits of the group in being able to speak openly about themselves, telling their experiences and, finally, meeting people of the «same fate».

The interviews have revealed that interactions within self-help groups build contacts, bring people closer together and make them more important to each other. It can be said that this way group members expand their social networks and fill them with new people. According to Ivanauskienė and Liobikaitė (2004), a group becomes one more source of social support which has a potential of expanding people's social networks and activating their community life.

Members of some groups analysed by us reported extending their contacts beyond group meetings: they meet for coffee (one group has regular coffee meetings, the so-called interim meetings, between their self-help sittings; another group goes for coffee after the sittings), celebrate children's birthdays together or go to other events together. In some cases, group members help each other in daily affairs should the need arise (several examples of such help include looking after a child when one of the foster mothers had to undergo surgery, accompanying another member to a social institution to have docu-ments handled, etc.). In all groups members contact each other by phone or on Facebook, or use other modern information technologies to seek advice from among the members, ask for specific help and/or share relevant information. Such communication takes place on the initiative of the members themselves, usually without coordinators' involvement. This further illustrates how mutual aid may contribute to building trust and solidarity re-lations. Some group coordinator with a longer experience of work with groups reported several cases when people maintain those relationships after leaving the self-help group.

Therefore, common experiences can be referred to as the «glue» that binds the group together. On the other hand, however, this does not mean that communication within a group is always and unequivocally smooth, without negative dynamics, and that group members always become friends for ever or maintain long-term relationships, or that group sittings may be successfully proceeded.

It is important to note that those groups are open and marked by continual change of members which not all attend every meeting. The group openness and rotation have been identified by informants as a minor barrier which sometimes prevents the continuity

of one or another discussion. At the same time, however, it is an advantage for making groups an open space in continuous renewal.

It is also of note that a group is formed and evolves not only from common experiences but also from a common need for it. The need serves as the engine of motivation. If there is no need, groups may come to an end. As revealed by the interviews, one NGO noticed a significant decrease in membership and low attendance after fifteen years' of family meetings and considerable rotation of members. It turned out that families wanted to increase their knowledge about child growing and education, and there was a need for expanded training and refreshment of knowledge. Taking this need into account, professionals organised a year-long training for families on various topics relevant for them, while leaving space for participants' discussions at the same time. The training was a success, and attendance level was high. According to one of the leaders:

> The activity of self-help groups was a very strong experience for us that justified itself. We were enthusiasts ourselves. But when we noticed a drop in attendance after many years' of group activities, we started looking for explanations and stopped thinking that this method was a panacea (Jonas).

Now those professionals are planning to organise self-help groups next year again and to admit new families. The situation above evidences that group work is a dynamic process that depends on a number of factors. As one of the coordinators has said, it is important to not be afraid of experimenting in this work, making new decisions based on what reality is dictating, to not be afraid of admitting that something is going wrong, and, eventually, getting rid of pre-defined schemes.

Of course, the content, viability of the process and dynamics in self-help groups depend, like in any other community-type initiative, on the input of people involved in. One cannot underestimate the role of the coordinator that organises and stimulates the process. However, not everything depends on group coordinators, their competence and efforts: the process is created by a group as a whole, and the nature of the group depends on all people involved in the group.

The use of experts by experience

As mentioned above, a defining feature of a self-help group is that the principle of self-help could be implemented only through experience sharing and thus helping others in a similar situation or experiencing similar issues. Therefore, all people in those groups are potential experts, i.e., capable of providing help. It is worth recalling in this regard the «helper therapy» principle which was first described by Riessman in 1965. According to this principle, every help process should produce the so-called «boomerang effect», meaning that when you help someone, you get back what you give. The helper experi-

ences an increase in his or her own sense of competence is able to better understand and work through his or her own difficulties, and acquires social recognition (Riessman, 1965; 1997; Drumm, 2006; Folgheraiter & Pasini, 2009; Steinberg, 2010; Hyde, 2013). We can say that it is namely the helper-therapy principle that is a foundation of and a precondition for self-help groups where all of the group participants can gradually try themselves in helping others.

An informant who attended a self-help group for 9 years said:

> Sometimes I also feel like I have a «PhD» (laughs), because I feel I can help others, give them advice, not only benefit from others' experience. Then I feel important, useful and empowered (Laima).

Another member of a self-help group, Kristina, once heard a foster family telling at a group meeting that one of their foster children said he was nevertheless missing his mom. Then the foster mother answered:

> I will be your second mother who will help your mom to raise you.

The child's being open helped Kristina to bear in mind her foster child's situation. Communication between children and their parents, and other family members is a frequent topic discussed by self-help groups.

Another situation narrated by a group leader is about a foster girl's mother, with whom the girl has had no contacts and communication, who came to school and met the girl there. It is interesting that the girl, although little frightened, became calmer in general after that meeting. This episode was discussed at a self-help group meeting. The members tried to understand what happened, why the girl changed (usually children get out of balance, become anxious after this sort of episodes) and why her mother was looking for her. The group members voiced interesting insights. One of the members told she would also look for her child if she was in that mother's place.

Here is one more example from self-help group meetings. A foster mother said she understood that when a child comes to a family, the parents should rather not try to teach the child or apply some special parenting techniques for a year or two. What they should do is to «cuddle the child» and simply accept him or her. Instead of hastening to engage the child in various sorts of activities, they should leisurely stay together, play, read or eat together with the child. There are numerous different situations discussed during group meetings and the «good practices» serve as a basis for methods and/or certain action guidelines.

All of the interviewed coordinators admitted that they learn a lot from group members' experiences in the area of child care peculiarities and ways of dealing with problems. They also learn many practical things, for example, how certain institutions function, what services they provide, how the law works, etc. They use the foster families' experience in their work: it helps to better understand situations of foster parents and children who

need consultation; while maintaining confidentiality, the experiences are presented by way of examples during the training of prospective adoptive/foster parents, to other professionals and institutional representatives. This concept of learning and being helped from experience of users can be found in the studies on relational social work prospective (Folgheraiter, 2017; Raineri, 2017; Cabiati & Tagliabue, 2018; Corradini, 2018; and others).

Hence, to paraphrase the thoughts of the informants, we could say that group members conceptualise their experiences through reflection and sharing with others in the group. To use the expression of Folgheraiter (2009), the group really becomes the *laboratory of reflectivity*.

This sharing allows for increasing awareness and strengthens person's identity even though the sharer does not feel very comfortable (in cases s/he shares painful experiences and/or problematic situations).

It is also normal, however, that not all participants are active in the group and open to experience sharing. According to the informants, some people open up gradually as they gain self-confidence and start trusting other group participants. Others find it more difficult in general to open up and communicate, but they attend group meetings nonetheless, and this indicates that the group is important place to them.

Foster families' personal growth. Changes in the attitude towards foster children and family members

As highlighted by group coordinators and participants, one of the signs of personal growth is the increasing self-esteem of individuals in self-help groups. The research findings suggest that group participants may experience feelings of being recognised as important and valuable persons and free themselves from the feelings of fault, limitations, fears and loneliness.

One of the informants identified the benefits of the group as follows:

> I thought I was the only one who faced problems with the foster child, that I was the only loser, but then I received comfort from the group and certainty that I was not the only one like that and that it was normal to have issues with foster children (Dalia).

The coordinator of the relative foster families' group had observed that women (all group members were females) in the group changed even physically: they started paying more attention to their appearance, started smiling more often and feeling more emancipated.

We have mentioned before that openness and communality among group members do not rise automatically, but have to be fostered by the members through participation in group meetings. Group members are ready to share and open up when they feel they can trust others in the group. They learn openness and mutuality by asking questions

and not being afraid of showing their limitations, mistakes, and sharing not only positive emotions, but also their dramatic and painful experiences. Here is a sharing by one of the group leaders that reflects the situation above:

> You know that a person has changed. It's when s/he starts asking questions. People in the group learn to ask or show who they are to others, demonstrate their limitations and, sometimes, even vices. It's not a matter of course to show all your sides to others. It's a very important step that people take in the group (Jolita).

The change is also evidenced by the experience of another foster mother:

> Before we started the self-help group, we were weighed down by numerous small problems. When we listened to the stories told by other families in the group, they strongly contrasted with our feelings. Those stories, although dramatic, were really attractive. We were surprised at how free people were to discuss their difficulties and failures. This was extremely positive to our family which changed significantly under the influence of group members' experiences (Irena).

The research has revealed that experience sharing and appreciation within the group increased levels of foster families' flexibility, openness, self-forgiveness and forgiveness for foster children and family members, as well as helped them feel freer from various schemes and strict rules. Usually, foster parents have «big fights» about expectations they have for their children, as those expectations are too high and inadequate. Group meetings help foster families receive information how to respond to children's needs, how to treat them, and how to change own stance. Changes in participants have been observed by their group leaders and family members.

Here are changes in the attitude towards foster children narrated by the informants:

> You start treating the child with respect, appreciating his family and his roots. The problem does not disappear, but you start seeing some aspects that you've omitted before. You start seeing the issue in a broader context and more positively (Daiva).

> When you keep hearing around that it is vital to love the child unconditionally, it somehow reaches you. You start taking this into account, noticing it and applying. I'm learning to be a mother... My adult children say I'm completely different with my foster child than I was with them... I'm more lenient and better now..., but this is normal as people change (Laima).

The interviews with the participants of self-help groups further demonstrated improved relationships not only with the foster children but also with other family members (spouses, birth children). This is due to the transformation in attitudes to family members and learning how to react to unexpected situations and problems in the family in a more adequate manner. According to one of the informants, although problem solving is not on the agenda of group's goals, experience sharing and learning from others indirectly

help group participants to deal with their own problems or that of their friends or relatives, because group meetings often give answers to their own questions.

One of the group coordinators said that an important change is that communication within the families improves, family members become more open and attentive to each other. This is also confirmed by the participants themselves:

> In the family, we often pay attention to what is wrong, but nobody says what is right. When attending our group sittings, we learn to take a different look at reality and then we start seeing things changing in the family (Dalia).

It is natural that the appearance of a foster child in a family changes the organisation, tasks and mutual relationships within the family. The foster child inevitably becomes the centre of the whole family's life, especially at the initial stage of adaptation. Relationships with spouses and natural children (if any) are among the topics frequently discussed at group sittings:

> Sometimes it is difficult to come to terms not with the child who's been adopted in the family, but to accept the spouse like s/he is, i.e., to accept spouse's potential which is sometimes limited, fatigue, loss of patience, and expectations (Kristina).

Strengthening of relationships between spouses becomes the primary task for foster families. To paraphrase the words of one foster mother, if a foster child becomes the only purpose of a family, such family starts losing its identity and the power of creating which leads to family's emotional decline.

The experiences recorded during the research have demonstrated that people develop a different understanding of the meaning of family, give a greater value to the importance of the family and its purpose, and become more attentive to their children and spouses.

Given that the topics and issues analysed at group meetings are related to the family nucleus (even if the sittings are attended by one family member, the issues address all family members), this unambiguously contributes to the strengthening of family welfare. A particular emphasis during group sittings is placed on the value of family relationships, the concept and meaning of parenting, and family's social openness, considering family relationships to be valuable and likely to promote social changes.

The role of professionals within a group – from assessment to like-mindedness

The role of professionals in self-help groups remain an open dilemma which has been discussed by different authors (Silverman, 1989; Folgheraiter, 1998; Raineri, 2017; Calcaterra, 2013; and others). In Lithuania, the majority of groups are initiated and led

by professionals. This could be explained by a certain lack of activity and initiative among citizens. At the same time, this represents certain ingrained, systemic habits, e.g. despite voluntary participation, groups are seen as a service for families and thus organised by professionals. However, there is some criticism about the role of professionals expressed by Lithuanian authors, too. According to Ruškus and collegues (2013), a professional who initiates a group must see himself as a temporary measure to reduce professional intervention by increasing the autonomy of group members.

The system of work with foster families in Lithuania has also developed certain trends in self-help application. As mentioned, professionals providing adoption/fostering training programmes for families in the majority of cases invite the families to join self-help groups led by them (just few organisations have different leaders for training programmes and self-help groups). During the interviews, both leaders and participants were asked their opinion about a broader inclusion of families into the organisation of groups and delegation of the meeting-chairing function to the families. All of the informants found the question unexpected; most of them have never thought of it.

> I have never thought it could be different (Laima).

This is indicative of certain ingrained traditions. Group participants expressed their trust in the group coordinators, emphasised their competence to organise and conduct meetings, as well as friendly attitudes towards the group coordinators. According to participants, professionals in a group provide certainty and safety; they are as if *a priori* recognised authorities:

> We learn from other group participants, but the coordinator is the one who puts everything in the right place, corrects when it's necessary. I am not sure whether I could feel as good and listen, if it was one of foster parents… Sometimes people tell painful experiences and talk about various problems, so professionals know how to head discussion in the right direction, take control over the situation and navigate out of uncomfortable moments (Vilma).

During the interviews, participants of one self-help group told their experience when after long attendance of adoptive/foster families' self-help group professionals offered them to organise interim meetings autonomously. This practice has not proved effective. Several interim meetings have been organised but the professionals' presence was missing:

> It's somehow hard to get the discussion going (smiling). I don't know, when professionals are present, they initiate and stimulate the talking. There're always different, new people joining (Rimas).

Thus, what is the role of a professional in a group? The research material suggests that professionals play a triple role:

  1. they assume the role of an organiser (call up the group, communicate with group members, take care of suitable premises, in some groups, organise child care);

2. the role of a moderator/facilitator (coordination of communication processes, supervision of meetings content);
3. while, at the same time, they are group members directly participating in the group process.

What is important is that the coordinator's stance is non-directive; the leader acts in a discretionary manner, trying to build relationships with other participants

> My task is to create relationships with group participants and to promote a warm, friendly atmosphere within the group (Rita) .

In addition, coordinators also share their experiences where necessary. All of the interviewed coordinators emphasised that they learned from participants' experiences, and group sittings for them were «the school of growth» both in professional and personal terms.

In summary, the research results show that professionals leading foster families' self-help groups play empowering roles: they try to maintain non-directive stance, build relationships with group members, assess the presence and input of each group member, and encourage each of them to contribute to the group process. This way a group may become an empowerment instrument (Drumm, 2006; Folgheraiter & Pasini; 2009; Raineri, 2017; Corradini, 2018; and others). The research has highlighted a clear intention on the part of coordinators to ensure effective and useful performance of the group that would meet the needs of the participants and primarily serve as a place for receiving aid and training.

The ongoing performance reflection process, discussions with colleagues and supervisions help to assess the role of a group coordinator and group performance. Many coordinators expressed their expectations about supervision and also about possibilities for group coordinators themselves to come together from time to time and share their experiences. This could be the opportunity to systemise self-help experience and develop it in the area of child care and other areas of social work.

Conclusions

The research of foster families' self-help groups in Lithuania has revealed several advantages and benefits, or, paraphrasing the words of one of the informants, the «*added value*» of this method. They can be displayed on three levels: (1) *individual:* personal growth (improved awareness, certainty and emancipation; sense of being recognised as important and valuable persons and free from the feelings of fault, limitations, fears and loneliness; instilling trust and hope), improvement of competences (specific knowledge, ability to cope with problems and act in specific situations, conceptualisation of experiences through reflection and application, development of communication skills); (2) *family:* positive changes in relationships with the spouse, foster child, natural children and other

family members; (3) *social environment*: although marked pro-social activities have not been observed in the groups, and such activities are not specially promoted, pro-social manifestations are nonetheless present: some group members attend meetings intended for child care dissemination, participate in social advertising and media, assume active roles in adoptive/foster parents' associations; in some groups, discussions have developed into proposals to amend legislative provisions and systemic child care procedure.

The interviewed foster families have been attending self-help groups for a long time (from 1 to 9 years). This evidences that self-help groups ensure the opportunity of long-term sustainability of mutual aid, unlike professional assistance which may be limited in time. The social value of foster families' self-help groups also lies in that they perform the role of support and resources in terms of child care, i.e., they strengthen foster families, ensure the smoother child care process, serve as a preventive measure against giving back a child which is rather frequent in Lithuania in case of failure in fostering.

In fact, self-help groups can be confirmed as creating a new aid model focused on personal growth, identity strengthening, and the development of social relations and new life-styles through the empowering role of group coordinators, instead of focusing on problems (barriers, pathology) and problem solving.

There is a clear link in the summarised experiences of self-help groups participants to the social capital paradigm in the relational prospective, already analysed in the works of some authors (Folgheraiter & Pasini, 2009; Gvaldaitė, 2010; Raineri, 2017), which reflects in increased trust and social relations build-up. When the groups pursue the relationship building and implementation of reciprocity and solidarity of group members, they can become a relevant and efficient aid in the context of Lithuanian social work where orientation to result is a dominant trend instead of seeking qualitative changes that are less evident, but may be very important contributors to the child care process heading in a positive direction. Finally, this contributes to the strengthening of family welfare and can promote social changes.

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