Aspects of categorization of families in Lithuania

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Abstract
There are families that struggle with problems such as child neglect, alcoholism, unemployment, poverty, crime, drugs etc. These families are categorized as families at social risk. The study focuses on how families experience the category social risk family. The aim of the article is to explore social workers’ approaches concerning the impact of the category social risk family on families’ everyday life. The qualitative analysis is based on interviews with 6 social workers in Social services centre of one region in Lithuania. The findings show the category social risk family has a great impact on families as it forms negative attitudes towards such families in society. Families are usually condemned for their way of life and behaviour, and are also underestimated and serviced, or even threatened.

Keywords: family, family at social risk, categorization, social work

Introduction
Families at social risk are exposed to various hazards such as poverty, unemployment, and limited access to the labour market, addictions, crimes, child neglect and etc. Children in such families are also classified as a social risk group. In Lithuania many families at social risk are discriminated for their style of life, experience social exclusion and marginalization. The Government attention and efforts for immediate solutions are growing and as a result there are a lot of changes in legislation system concerning family and children issues in Lithuania in previous time. The process of deinstitutionalization of child custody institutions is gathering momentum, there are changes in child rights protection system making it centralised, and much more efforts are put concerning
The exploration of the topic: Different research dates reveal the complexity of everyday situations that families at social risk face in Lithuania. Some research indicates the situation of families at social risk from social workers’ point of view: R. Motiečienė (2010) studied the attitudes of social workers towards families at social risk; R. Stremauskienė, G. Žibėnienė (2014) investigated difficulties that face social workers working with families at social risk; J. Pivorienė, R. Barauskienė (2017) explored social work with families at social risk in promoting egalitarian family model in Lithuania. Others present different family life dimensions: V. Ivanauskienė (2012) studied the perspective of the women how families become families at social risk; V. Rimkus, S. Žemgulienė (2013) analysed aspects of social network and social support for families at social risk; V. Gudžinskienė and R. Augutavičius (2018) investigated the phenomenon of social risk families and its dynamics in Lithuania. There are few studies concerning macro level of social work practice with families at social risk. L. Žalimienė (2004) analysed the phenomenon of social exclusion in the Lithuanian society and also (2011) the process of categorization (“socially supported,” “families at risk of social exclusion,” “long-term unemployed,” etc.) in the Lithuanian social policy rhetoric that creates a discriminatory environment for those receiving social support. Meanwhile, personal experience of categorization and impact of discrimination for everyday life of families at social risk has not been analysed enough.

The question of the research is how families experience the category social risk family? The goal is to analyse the social workers’ view concerning the impact of the category social risk family on families’ everyday life.

A qualitative research was carried out in spring 2017 using semi-structured interviews as a data collection method. The criterion sampling was used to select the participants that had to meet predetermined criterion: a professional (i.e. having a legally required education) social worker, with seniority of two years working with families at the help to families at social risk (Cancellation of order of registering families at social risk, changing the concept of „social risk family” into „family at social risk or families that experience social risk“, introduction of case manager position who coordinates social work with families etc.).
social risk. The qualitative analysis is based on interviews with six social workers in Social services centre of one region in Lithuania. The average work experience with families at social risk varies from 2 to 14 years. The interview data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The quotation of participants in the article is presented precisely as much as possible. Unfortunately, it should be acknowledged that translation of quotations from Lithuanian to English determines a huge limitation in presenting research data. The research participants presented slang and sayings that are used by families at social risk and that characterise them very much but lose their shades in translation. Every research participant (RP) has a code (RP-1, RP-2 etc.).

1.1 Dimensions of family categorization

Since the Restoration of Lithuanian Independence in 1990 following the changes in social policy families who face social risk were labelled by different categories: antisocial families, dysfunctional families, problematic or multi-problematic families, (social) risk families etc. Law on Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania (2006) described such families as having children under the age of 18, where at least one parent abuse alcohol, narcotic, psychotropic or toxic substances, is addicted to gambling, does not know or cannot properly care for children, uses violence against children, uses state support not for the benefit of the family and therefore endangers the physical, mental, spiritual, moral development and safety of children. The family of social risk also includes the family, which in accordance with the procedure established by the law is determined by the child (custody) or (and) restricted by the authority of the parent (father or mother).

Up to the 1st of July, 2018 the municipal Child Rights Protection Service (CRPS) was in charge of registering families at social risk, identifying family and child needs and organizing of social services, as well as removing of family from the Record. According to the data of CRPS in the Record 2017, there were 9,786 families at social risk, with 18,415 underage children. It should be noted that 4918 families at social risk and in them 8213 children were living in the city, and 4868 families and 10202 children growing there, respectively in the countryside. During 2017 up to 2292 families at social risk with 3 607 children were registered. Analysing the number of families at risk and the number of
children growing up in them, it is noticeable that in the period of 2013-2017 this number is falling - families at social risk have fallen by 4 percent (449 families) and 11 percent of children growing there (2,249 children). However, it should be noted that at the end of the year 2017 the number of families listed in the Record increased slightly (110 families).

Families at social risk usually are socially excluded and so are their children (Bardauskienė, Pivorienė 2017). Categorization of families is one of the factors that contribute to social exclusion. It has to be noted that the process of categorization is contradictory and two-edged. From one side, as psychologist K. Hugenberg and D.F. Sacco (2008) point out, that activating and applying social category information, or stereotyping is a natural process of human cognition that helps to perceive the world. Categorization is described as a process which helps to reduce complexity and create order by dividing the world into groups of people having similar characteristics (Eriksson, Nissen 2017). In this sense, the categorization of people receiving social support using descriptive short and generalized labels are handy for managers and administrators of social support system: the categories allow to identify groups of people that need support, it is also helpful to perform statistical calculations etc. (Žalimienė 2011). On the other hand, such a category as families at social risk (antisocial or dysfunctional families - as they were called previously) disseminate a message to society that there are two types of families: those „normal“ and those with child neglect, alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, depression, and who need special authorities attention and support. The negative aspect of the category has consequences on family’s possibilities to be empowered to change their situation. This can be explained by Bourdieu (2001) idea of symbolic capital which is seen as accumulated prestige or honour, and official language is the example of such capital. Officially language created by those who are in power, like policy makers, bureaucrats etc., has an influence on those to whom this language is targeted, families, unemployed, elderly, disabled etc. Categorization creates a discriminative environment and fixes a hierarchical power relationship among social support organizers and receivers (Žalimienė, 2011). The research data develops further these ideas.
1.2 Data Analysis

The following main categories were distinguished in the analysis of the research data: estimation of family categorization, the impact of the category *social risk family* on family, discrimination of families at social risk. Categories are distinguished into sub-categories (see Figure 1).

| Estimation of family categorization |
|------------------------------------|
| - Positive (need to be categorized) |
| - Negative (there should be no categorization) |

| The impact of the category "risk family" on family |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| - Has the impact; discontentment; shame; insecurity; negative attitude; hope for help; indifference. |

| Discrimination patterns of families at social risk |
|--------------------------------------------------|
| - Discriminated by community: negative attitudes, condemnation, rejection to communicate, misbehaved, labelling. |
| - Discriminated by employers: underestimation |
| - Discriminated by officials: reproach; humiliation; a different approach; less attention; disinterest. |

**Fig.1 Category and sub-category**

The analysis of the data shows twofold attitude of social workers towards categorization of families at social risk. The positive estimation supports the categorization: "<...> But I think that it is good because it includes families at risk. I still think it is very good that there is "risk family"... (RP3)"; "Maybe the name might be different. And for that, I don't see anything wrong... (RP1)". Some views are connected with a need for categorization: "there is some difference to me still, it should be (RP1)". The need of categorization is associated with distinctness which helps to distinguish families who need help: "because then, then, how will you distinguish that the family has problems? (RP1)"; "because there are different families who need help, because of the lack of skills and some other problems... (RP2)"; "In fact, in my opinion, it should be divided into risk families and ordinary families, because families at risk need help... (RP4)". On the other hand, there is a negative estimation of the category "social risk family: There shouldn't really be such a difference... I don't think..."
there really should be any difference... (RP6)”. Other categories gives an evidence for such an estimation.

The categorization of families is problematic. The label of the „social risk family“ has a great impact on families included in the social risk families’ list: „Know for sure, it has an impact <...>“ (RP4). Some families included in the social risk families’ list are discontented with this situation: Yes, it has a great impact, and people are not satisfied with this label. <...> (RP1). These families experience bad feelings: „it is a shame to be involved on the list of families at risk“ (RP3). They also feel insecure: „These are families that have a permanent job, and for them it is very insecure. They feel very bad. They try to prevent the employer from knowing and that the co-workers would not know. Just for gossip (RP6). Inclusion in the Record of risk groups can be treated as very negative by the people round about: „That if somebody is included on the risk families’ Record, then something is very terrible, very bad, just. Somehow, they’re all almost criminals or alcoholics (RP2)“. There are families who are indifferent to the label social risk family and even „want to be on the list of social risk family“ (RP6). These families need help and they expect it from a social worker: „They think that this social worker will provide a great deal of help and support from everywhere... (RP4)“, „since a social worker comes. The Social worker helps to arrange everything, handle the documents... (RP6)“. Thus, in the practice of social workers, there are families who feel benefitting more from being in the Record of risk families, ignoring the negative impact of the label.

The participants of the study were asked whether they had to deal with discrimination against families at social risk. The research data show that so called social risk families are often discriminated. Discrimination is evidence at various levels: they can be discriminated by their neighbours and community: „Neighbours directly tell... (RP5)“; families can be discriminated in the workplace: „... if, let say, they start working... (RP6)“; or even they are discriminated by those professionals whose duty is to help them: „They are discriminated by the officials... (RP1)“.

The label „social risk family“ forms negative attitudes towards such families in community: „There are cases... still, there are some who think: <Oh, Risky>, <Oh, here they are...> thinks about them badly... Well, how to say, they are not harmed, bed... but anyway, well, they are imprinted
“It is a well-established attitude in society that being a family at risk is already risky.” Typically, such families are condemned for their way of life and behaviour: “So you are at risk. You are all the same.” The ties of such families with community members are usually very weak. They can’t expect much communication and help from community: “People refuse to communicate or help them if they need help.” Families at social risk can also be misbehaved in community: “People are grooming, humiliating them.” “They are directly told that they are at risk, and even they are bulldozed: <see, your children are running, running around, and you do not take care. I will report to children rights. I will take away children...> I think that there is still exclusion, discrimination, even blackmail.” Community members usually do not show sympathy to families at social risk and characterize them by a number of negative epithets (labels): “problematic families, risky”; “In my practice I hear only that they are called risky families”; “Asocial”; “Living as tramps, drinking, beating... There is an image that they are not working, foul”; “Oh it is a risky family, the scum”; “Those blotters, layabout, not caring for their children.” There are employers that underestimate families at social risk, they do not believe that these families can work hard and make progress: “... and if they start working <Oh here, a risk family>... and imply that there will be no result...”

Unfortunately, a similar approach and relationship with such families is being transferred to public services. There are reproaches for families, even from professional staff, who should help: “A man comes, applies for benefits... so they blame him for his way of life, let’s say, his problems and everything else.” It happens that some specialists have negative attitudes towards families at social risk: “Well, there are cases... <Oh, risky here they are>... thinks about them badly.” Such families experience the humiliation of professionals: “<...> actually happens to humiliate, <...>“. There is a clear distinction between families in society: there are “normal” families and families at social risk. So families at social risk do not deserve to be treated equally. Some specialist have different attitude towards such families: “That lack of social skills... they think about them differently.” and therefore they devote less attention to them: “In this health centre there are doctors, who are really responsible for their work, but there are those, who say...
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<oh, these risky, they do not understand much, we can skip them> (RP6). The data show **indifference** of some specialists to such families: „In the health care institution where the child comes from a normal family, care is completely different. But if there comes a mother with a child without a social worker, she experience indifference – not fully maintained, something not fully done, if mother asks to make some analysis or something else, they just shrug off... But well, if she goes with a social worker to the same institution, there is a different attitude then“ (RP6). There are cases when even social workers themselves have a negative attitude towards such families and do not envisage their discrimination, what is reflected in the thoughts of one of the research participants: „I do not think they are discriminated. Really, problems for discrimination arise from their own way of life“ (RP4). Research data show that such families are marginalized in the community, undergoing disrespectful treatment in both the informal environment and public service or labour market.

**Discussion**

The research data reveal that social workers has no united attitude towards the categorization of families. The necessity to distinguish somehow families who need help from other families intertwine with the negative aspects of such categorization. It is obvious that categorization affects the targeted people. This effect can be positive (enabling, motivating the recipient person to decide for himself their own problems, be more self-reliant) and harmful (accentuating the client weakness, the identity of the ward, creating a long-term dependence on support relations) (Žalimienė 2011). Namely, negative aspects of categorization disquiet over the wellbeing of families and children. As the research data show many families are not satisfied with being categorized as families at social risk. Discontentment, shame, insecurity are feelings that usually experience these families. There are also those who are indifferent to the labeling and expect benefit from being called family at social risk. L. Žalimienė (2011) explains this by emphasizing that the negative categorization of families and other social support recipients established by law of Lithuania further weakens their power and shape them, as dependent and reliant persons. The research data also show that families at social risk experience less confidence in the labour market as well as less benevolence from different institutions. There are some reproaches for
families, even from professional staff who should help. Families at social risk are often seen by professionals differently from so-called „normal“ families.

Different research data show that families at social risk have less potential and possibilities to improve their wellbeing than other families. V. Rimkus, S. Žemgulienė (2013) analyzed aspects of social network and social support of families at social risk. The research data led to the conclusion that the level of perceived support among families at social risk was lower as well as social network was noticeably smaller than among those from other families. Families at social risk were less integrated into spheres of labour and studies, had weaker ties with community institutions, experienced negative attitudes by others and risk of marginalization.

J. Pivorienė, R. Bardauskienė (2017) research on social work with families at social risk in promoting egalitarian family model in Lithuania indicates, that families at social risk experience double stereotyping as families with multiple social problems and those with traditional gender roles. Additionally, neighbours, community members usually label children from such families, what, on its own behalf, affect children negatively and prevent from positive changes. The behaviour and living conditions of families at social risk has a direct impact on children as families at social risk are usually socially excluded and so are their children. This conclusion is supported by another research based on the perspective of the women how families become social risk families, carried out by V. Ivanauskienė (2012). The childhood experience of the women were marked by the lack of love and security, their primary physiological needs were not met, the emotional ties were inadequate, they were under constant stress, their social environment was unstable, they lived in fear of the manifestations of violence and anger exhibited by their drinking parents, some of them lost parents and went through the bereavement process, they were separated from their families and learned the feeling of helplessness. All these factors had influence on the creation of their future life model.

The categorization of families is handy for managers and administrators of social support system, but on the other hand the category social risk family forms negative attitudes towards such families in society. They are usually condemned for the lifestyle and behaviour, and are also
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underestimated and serviced. Categorizing families into families at social risk enhance the risk of discrimination and drive to exclusion and marginalization.

The limitation of the study is that research participants were social workers that presented their attitude towards categorization of families. Recommendations for the further research would be to make an in-depth interview with families about their experience being called families at social risk.

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