

## BUILDING A COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH AN INVOLUNTARY PARENT IN CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

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### ABSTRACT

*Building a collaborative relationship with an involuntary parent is challenging; however, the worker-client relationship is essential to promoting the wellbeing of the child and family. This article describes a small-scale qualitative study conducted with child protective workers in one region of Estonia. Findings indicate that in order to encourage involuntary parents to participate, it was crucial to learn what was provoking their resistance. Recognition was used to establish a collaborative relationship with involuntary parents. To reduce the unequal distribution of power, the parent was recognised as an equal partner and negative feelings were validated and understood as a normal reaction to intervention.*

**Keywords:** *Child Protective Services, collaborative relationship, Estonia, involuntary parent, recognition, worker-client relationship*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Although family participation and collaboration are central concepts within *Child Protective Services (CPS)* (Gibson, Samuels & Pryce, 2018; Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood & Vesneski, 2009; Roose, Mottart, Dejonckheere, Van Nijnatten & de Bie, 2009), promoting family participation in practice continues to be a more complicated endeavour (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Healy, Darlington & Yellowlees, 2012; Khan, Miles & Francis, 2018; Lehtme & Toros, 2020; Mirick, 2014; Muench, Diaz & Wright, 2017; Platt, 2012), especially in the context of involuntary worker-client relationships. According to Munro (2011), the quality of the relationship directly impacts on the efficacy of assistance; therefore, child protective workers play an important role in motivating families to engage with CPS. Engagement is considered the key to the helping process (Jacobsen, 2013) and is crucial for establishing open communication and understanding the family's situation to promote positive change. The process of understanding, motivating and working towards desired outcomes differs among families (Monclús, Inchaurredo, Fernández-Rodrigo & Balsells Bailón, 2021), which underscores the importance of participation and collaboration in order to contribute to the development of informed decision-making (Alfandari, 2017; Berrick, Dickens, Pösö & Skivenes, 2015).

Although a positive relationship creates the basis for the entire helping process (Saar, 2006), collaboration with involuntary clients is challenging in general (Bukhari, Alketbi, Rashid, Ahmed & Shakir, 2021; Sunland, 2020; Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018). De Jong and Berg (2001) indicate that parents in CPS are essentially all involuntary clients, even in cases where there is some degree of collaboration, as they feel pressured "to be clients" and might not take an active role in the helping process. Although building rapport is the role of every social worker, the extent to which a trusting relationship develops is determined by the client (Forrester, Westlake, Killian, Antonopolou, Mccann, Thurnham, Thomas, Waits, Whittaker & Hutchison, 2019; Gibson *et al.*, 2018; Nelson-Dusek, Rothe, Roberts & Pecora, 2016), specifically parents, who are the primary focus of this article. Parental resistance is considered a persistent challenge in CPS practice (Cousins, 2020; Forrester, Westlake & Glynn, 2012; Saar, 2006), with studies demonstrating that social workers experience difficulties in achieving collaboration with involuntary parents (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Sudland, 2020; Vålba, Toros & Tiko, 2017; Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018). Knowledge of how to build collaborative relationships with involuntary parents is therefore crucial. Most of the research is focused primarily on involuntary clients in general (for example, Jacobsen, 2013; Pope & Kang, 2011; Segal, 2013; Smith, 2020; Trotter & Ward, 2013; Turney, 2012) and less on involuntary parents in CPS (Forrester *et al.*, 2019; Pösö, Pekkarinen, Helavirta & Laakso, 2018; Sudland, 2020). Effective collaboration with parents enables a better understanding of the needs of the children in order to promote their wellbeing. The current article contributes to achieving this with the aim of exploring child protective workers' perceptions and experiences of building collaboration with involuntary parents whose children are registered as in need with CPS by discussing how to involve them in services. Furthermore, the interest in conducting this research is guided by practice – the first author has been finding ways to collaborate effectively with involuntary parents, and the other two authors have encountered this challenging subject in the course of their training as social workers.

## **ENCOURAGING INVOLUNTARY PARENTS TO COLLABORATE WITH CPS**

The worker-client relationship is a cornerstone of social work practice (Alexander & Charles, 2009), where collaborative relationships facilitate engagement (Gladstone, Dumbrill, Leslie, Koster, Young & Ismaila, 2014; Mirick, 2013). Engagement is often defined in a participative sense, described as a dialogue (Slettebø, 2013; van Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen, 2014) in which the family has the primary role in shaping social work processes (Gallagher, Smith, Wosu, Stewart, Hunter, Cree & Wilkinson, 2011). For Merkel-Holguin, Hollinshead, Hahn, Casillas and Fluke (2015) engagement is directly connected to a helpful worker-client relationship. Parent engagement ranges from participation in services to the construction and maintenance of the relationship between the worker (Damman, 2014). Altman (2008) elaborated on this point that the social worker has the responsibility to create an open environment to encourage the client to enter into the helping relationship and actively work towards change.

Yatchmenoff (2005) defined one dimension of engagement as a working relationship characterised by a sense of reciprocity and good communication. Through a supportive relationship, the clients develop self-efficacy (Van Hook, 2019) and trust in the helping process (Oliver, 2017), which is central to collaborative engagement (Healy, Harrison, Venables & Bosly, 2014; Khan *et al.*, 2018). Effective engagement in turn is the basis for appropriate intervention (Damman, 2014; Taylor, Toner, Templeton & Velleman, 2008) and thus for improving client outcomes (Hawkins, 2014; Saebjørnsen & Willumsen, 2017). Improved engagement is believed to enhance positive changes (Loman & Siegel, 2015) and increase clients' ability to trust in their capabilities and power to make choices and achieve the desired changes (Albuquerque, Santons & Santos Almeida, 2017).

As indicated in the introduction, parents in CPS are considered to be involuntary clients who generally struggle with engagement and are therefore viewed as resistant (Jacobsen, 2013; Mirick, 2012). Involuntary parents encompass individuals who are resistant to services but are obtaining them either because of legal requirements or pressure from formal or informal sources (Pope & Kang, 2011). Cousins (2020) defines an involuntary client as a client with no choice, and introduces the concept of 'semi-voluntary' participation, where participation is coerced. In both involuntary and semi-voluntary cases there are issues related to power dynamics, coercion and control within the provision of services. In the context of this article, parents in CPS fall into this category, so the term involuntary client will be used. Forrester *et al.*, (2012) explain that in the context of CPS, workers' behaviour in itself is likely to create parental resistance; nevertheless, the literature indicates the focus of engagement as the responsibility of parents rather than of workers (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Mirick, 2013; Platt, 2012; Toros & LaSala, 2018; Vålba, *et al.*, 2017). Honneth developed the idea of recognition, offering a framework for informing the relationship with involuntary parents (Smith, 2020). Frost (2016) refers to Honneth's recognition perspective as the basis for human wellbeing: being acknowledged, valued and empowered, regardless of whether services are being voluntarily or involuntarily received. Furthermore, this recognition framework coincides closely with social work values, specifically self-determination, respect, the worth of the person, the importance of relationships and competence (Code of Ethics, 2021).

## **CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY: CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES IN ESTONIA**

In Estonia local governments create the conditions for child protection work. According to the Child Protection Act (2014, §10), "child protection means the aggregate of activities, supports, services and other assistance following the principles provided for in this Act to ensure the rights and well-being of children". Based on statistics from the Ministry of Social Affairs (2020), the number of children identified as in need of assistance has increased in recent years in Estonia. In 2007, 2,396 children in need were registered (0.9% of the total population of children in that year), whereas in 2018, the number of children registered as in need of assistance was 9,488, representing 3.8% of the total population of children. The child in need of assistance is defined as a "child whose well-being is threatened or in whose case doubt has arisen concerning his or her abuse, neglect or any other situation violating the rights of the child and a child whose behaviour threatens his or her well-being or the well-being of other persons"

(Child Protection Act, 2014: §26). In the case of a referral or reporting of a suspected child in need, the child protective worker has the duty to carry out a child protection assessment to evaluate the need for intervention (Social Insurance Board, 2017). Family support services are provided simultaneously with the assessment to promote the wellbeing of children – mostly parenting classes for the parents, and individual or family therapy (Lehtme & Toros, 2020).

The increasing number of children in need indicates the necessity for a greater amount of assistance and support for these children, which in turn requires child protective workers to be able to facilitate trusting relationships with children and their families for increased wellbeing and positive outcomes (Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2021). Nevertheless, previous studies conducted in Estonia indicate that effective engagement of the family with Child Protective Services is challenging. One of the reasons for this is related to the quality of a child protective workers' skills (Toros, 2017; Toros & LaSala, 2018). Another reason can be associated with workers' attitude towards participatory approaches. Studies refer to assessment practices which are done for the client rather than with the client (Toros, 2012; Toros, 2019a), and children not deemed competent to be encouraged to participate (Lehtme & Toros, 2020; Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2021; Toros, Falch-Eriksen & Wu, 2021). Furthermore, data indicate the use of deficit-based and authoritative approaches by workers, who may search for evidence of bad parenting rather than engage in the construction of a trusting relationship (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Lehtme & Toros, 2020; Toros, LaSala & Tiko, 2017; Toros & LaSala, 2018), resulting in little trust in Child Protective Services.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In order to explore child protective workers' experiences with involuntary parents in CPS, a small-scale qualitative study was undertaken of six child protective workers in one county in Estonia. Although involuntary parents make up a considerable part of child protection work, working with such clients remains a complex area of practice (Bukhari *et al.*, 2021; Ferguson, 2005; Forrester, Kershaw, Moss & Hughes, 2008; Nelson-Dusek *et al.*, 2016). Despite the challenges of working with involuntary parents in CPS, there is a lack of research in this area internationally, as indicated in the introduction, and has not been studied in Estonia. The research question guiding the study is the following: What are workers' experiences with parental resistance in CPS and with the process of working toward establishing collaboration? To answer the research question, a qualitative method was chosen to allow for in-depth interviewing in order to understand the phenomenon of involuntary parents in CPS, with a central focus on meanings and interpretations (Draper, 2004).

### Participants

Each of the six local governments from one county region (administrative unit) was contacted to invite child protective workers to participate in the study. The invited workers had been assigned responsibility for all children in the jurisdiction of their local governments, including undertaking assessments in child protection cases. All of the invited workers (six women) agreed to participate in the study. At the time of consent, an appropriate time for the interview was set. Workers' ages ranged from 38 to 56 years, with a mean age of 46 years. The length of work experience in child protection ranged from 2 to 17 years, with a mean of 6.5 years. All of them had completed social work studies in higher or applied higher education. Furthermore, all child protective workers had participated in specific in-service trainings provided by the National Institute for Health Development, approved at the national level.

### Interview design and data collection

Accounts of experiences were gathered through in-depth semi-structured expert interviews. As Döringer (2021) explains, expert interviews aim at exploring data about a specific field or action, developing a better understanding of child protective workers' practices and perspectives in working and building a collaboration with involuntary parents. For the child protective workers to convey their knowledge of the phenomenon studied, the semi-structured interview format was used. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview design enabled a dialogue between the interviewer (the first author) and the

participant, keeping the focus on the central concerns of the study. Bogner, Littig and Menz (2018) indicate that this form of interviewing makes it possible to gather expert knowledge from specialists relating to their experiences and perspectives of establishing collaborative relationships with involuntary parents in CPS.

A qualitative interview guide was developed prior to conducting interviews, covering four main domains: the concept of involuntary clients and involuntary parents, collaboration with involuntary parents, resistance, and the role conflict of the worker in the process of building collaboration with involuntary parents. In developing the guide, it was essential to enable the researcher to address specific themes while considering the specific research focus (Döringer, 2021) – involuntary parents in CPS. Sample questions in the interviews included: “How would you define an involuntary client/parent?” “How do you get involuntary parents to engage in the helping process?” “Please describe an example of an involuntary parent in your practice”. Throughout the interviews, child protective workers were encouraged to reflect on their responses and provide examples to provide depth and further insight into their experiences.

All data collection was carried out personally by the first author, who travelled to each participant. Interviews with the child protection workers were carried out in February 2021. Based on the participants’ preferences, interviews with five of the workers were held in their respective offices, and one interview was conducted via telephone. All interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The average length of interviews with child protective workers lasted 51 minutes.

All participants gave their written informed consent to participate in the study and received no compensation. In the process of data collection, anonymity and confidentiality of information regarding records and study participants were taken into account. They were assured that information shared during the interview was kept anonymous. Furthermore, workers were reminded that they could stop at any time during the interview. All interviews and data analyses were conducted in the Estonian language and afterwards translated into English.

### **Data analysis**

The actual process of data transcription started after the first interview. Interviews were transcribed, after which the recorded files were deleted. The data were analysed using the principles of thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Mills, Durepos and Wiebe (2010) define thematic analysis as a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data. Research design with the chosen data-collection method enabled an inductive and code-based analysis (Döringer, 2021). To enhance the reliability, the first and second authors conducted the data analysis (open coding). As the number of participants was small, transcripts were manually coded using word-processing software. After the data were transcribed, the text was read several times independently by both authors to gain an overall understanding of the data, followed by a search for repeated patterns. Next, initial codes were developed based on those patterns, which were then compared and refined. An in-depth review of the codes led to further combining and organisation into sub-themes, which two authors performed first individually and then together. In this stage a coherent pattern between the sub-themes was identified. Consistency in the common codes and themes was achieved by reaching a consensus. Sub-themes were applied to the original transcripts, and subsequently refined and grouped into the initial themes (see Table 1). Themes were then reviewed again, and the specifics of each theme further refined. Finally, the transcripts were then read again to extract quotations illustrating connections between the raw data and the conclusions drawn.

**TABLE 1**  
**INVOLUNTARY PARENTS IN CPS: MAIN THEMES, SUB-THEMES AND LABELS**

|   |
|---|
| Perception of an involuntary parent   |
| Characteristics: <i>refusal to receive help, reluctance to collaborate, a mother</i>  |
| Working with involuntary parents in CPS: <i>pressured to engage or participate, don't acknowledge issues related to their children, not acknowledging her/his own problem(s), moving the focus of the problem from a child to a parent, reaction to workers' request to talk to a child</i> |
| Child protective workers' experiences with parental resistance in CPS   |
| Working with the resistance: <i>to learn the reasons, to work with and mitigate resistance</i><br>Causes for resistance: <i>mental health issues, denial, protecting the child or the parent, low or lack of motivation, previous (negative) experiences</i>                                |
| Building collaboration with involuntary parents   |
| The role of parents in building collaboration: <i>self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect</i>  |
| Essential values to engage involuntary parents for effective collaboration: <i>non-judgmental attitude, trust, time</i>   |
| Recognition   |
| The meaning of recognition: <i>complimenting, motivating, empowering</i>  |
| Domains of recognition: <i>parents' strengths, validating parents' feelings and emotions, value-based child protection work, the parent as the expert</i>   |
| Role conflict: <i>awareness of power, help vs power</i>   |

## FINDINGS

### Perception of involuntary parents

Reflecting on their experiences with involuntary parents, child protective workers mainly described, first, the primary characteristics of involuntary parents, and second, how the concept of an involuntary parent translates into practice.

#### *Characteristics of involuntary parents*

All child protective workers interviewed for the study understood an involuntary parent to be someone who refuses to receive help and is reluctant to collaborate. An involuntary parent was mainly associated with a mother as mothers more frequently take responsibility for children:

*Principally, a contact person from the family is a mother, which makes them an involuntary parent, client ... Even if the father is part of the family, they do not take the responsibility for the problem. (CPW 2)*

#### *Working with involuntary parents in CPS*

In practice, an involuntary parent is considered someone who does not contact CPS themselves, but is pressured to engage or participate in CPS. Fear was identified as the reason for non-engagement, specifically the fear of CPS taking unwanted actions: "... a lot of involuntary parents sense that I am dangerous and this is why they do not contact me themselves ..." (CPW 4). It was elaborated that parents are referred primarily by their children's kindergarten or school, or by the police, where intervention by CPS is judged to be necessary based on the circumstances of the case. According to workers, parents feel

pressured by messages they receive under these circumstances, for example: “... schools inform the family that as things are not getting better, we have to get child protection involved.” (CPW 5)

All of the child protective workers found that resistance arose because parents *don't acknowledge issues related to their children* – issues with a child's special needs or disability, or a child's behaviour. Workers explained that for parents, not acknowledging an issue means that the issue doesn't exist, as the following quote reflects:

*This kind of a parent, who doesn't see or want to see their child's special needs, wants to continue living and thinking that all is fine and the problem is somewhere else.* (CPW 1)

*A parent not acknowledging her/his own problem(s)* was noted to be an issue with involuntary clients in CPS, linked with parents' intellectual abilities or pride stopping them from admitting any issues impairing the wellbeing of their children and family. Furthermore, *moving the focus of the problem from a child to a parent* was discussed:

*... but she [the parent] doesn't listen that the child needs help and the focus from the child is shifted to the parent, what the parent needs. Parents are really good at putting themselves in the centre ... this shows how unreasonable they are; you cannot talk to such a parent.* (CPW 3)

Based on the workers' experience, resistance in parents is often the outcome of the *reaction to a workers' request to talk to a child*. In these cases, the parent is willing to engage until the moment the worker asks to communicate with the child. Parental refusal is expressed in the form of blaming the child protective worker for causing fear or discomfort in the child and not permitting the worker to see the child.

### **Child protective workers' experiences with parental resistance in CPS**

Resistance was acknowledged as an essential theme in the context of working with involuntary parents, specifically, the need to learn about the causes of resistance in order to manage it and continue to provide the service the family needs.

#### ***Working with the resistance***

Resistance was a concept discussed in relation to the theme of the involuntary nature of the services in question. Child protective workers noted that in order to build collaboration and encourage involuntary parents to participate, it was crucial *to learn the reasons* causing the resistance, as these child protective workers emphasised: “*I cannot go forward without looking into causes. You cannot break it [the resistance] without doing that ...*” (CPW 1); “*If I see strong resistance, it is a sign of danger for me and I cannot stop before I know reasons for this [the resistance].*” (CPW 5). These quotations suggest that resistance is not simply observed and accepted, but that workers find it important to work with and attempt to *mitigate resistance* when it is encountered.

#### ***Causes of resistance***

Several causes of parental resistance were identified. *Mental health issues* were discussed repeatedly throughout the interviews as a factor that impedes collaboration. This varies from being unable to cope with the situation to not wanting to communicate or not being able to communicate because of their current mental state, including a lack of strength and inner resources:

*She [resistant parent] has no resource to the point of not being capable of dealing with herself and providing the child a stable environment ... In general, this parent is in real trouble to the point where she refuses any kind of help ...* (CPW 2)

This, in turn, leads to possible denial, meaning the denial of the problem or situation facing the parent and child. According to workers' perspectives, denial can be associated with shame and a desire to keep something hidden (e.g. domestic violence or abuse), where the fear leads to denial or portrayed denial for CPS. Elaborating further, protecting the child or the parent can be the motivation for resistance:

*In these situations, the parent wants to protect the child or themselves and fights against the secret coming out by refusing to collaborate. (CPW 5)*

*Low or lack of motivation* to find solutions and strive for change is another cause of parental resistance. All of the child protective workers identified a lack of motivation, expressed as passivity to act or construct solutions, even when the need to act is declared verbally. Various reasons were mentioned in this context – first, parents not understanding the scope of the problem; second, the parent having no faith in workers’ intervention. Furthermore, *previous (negative) experiences* from childhood or previous negative experience(s) with CPS (e.g. impolite approach and communication by the worker, interventions not bringing about a positive change) trigger resistance to engage and collaborate. Negative childhood experiences become a generational behavioural pattern, meaning resistance to CPS can be observed in families over decades.

### **Building collaboration with involuntary parents**

Child protective workers shared their thoughts on building collaboration with involuntary parents in terms of parental roles in this process and values that support parents’ engagement in effective collaboration.

#### ***The role of parents in building collaboration***

Child protective workers value collaboration with parents, considering it an important element of understanding the comprehensive situation within a family, the family’s needs, struggles and resources to co-construct solutions. The emphasis here is on understanding and co-construction, which requires the participation of the whole family. Therefore, workers emphasised “*laying the foundation*” for collaboration, specifically, by supporting parents in developing a stronger self: self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect.

Parents with high *self-confidence* were generally perceived as being resistant to collaboration because they did not recognise the needs of their child. Conversely, parents with low self-confidence didn’t want to take responsibility, which was associated with vulnerability. Resistance was perceived to be a mask disguising parents’ attempt to hide their vulnerability. Based on the workers’ experiences, low confidence was harder to work with in terms of encouraging the parent to participate, as the following quote indicates: “*The lower the self-confidence, the stronger the resistance to collaboration.*” (CPW 6).

Parents’ *self-esteem* was seen as an obstacle in the context of facilitating collaboration, but also as an opportunity, depending on the level of self-esteem. For example, high self-esteem with education correlated with reluctance to accept and even refusal of help, while parents with low self-esteem were recognised as having a greater possibility of developing a collaborative relationship. In these cases, parents were found to be more open to accept support. Nevertheless, some experiences resulted in the opposite response: in the case of low self-esteem, defence mechanisms were activated (e.g. a desire not to be judged), creating resistance. Furthermore, *self-respect* plays a role in establishing collaboration. Parents with a high level of self-respect are more confident in their opinions and less accepting of an opinion from a third party, whereas low self-respect serves similarly as an obstacle. In these cases, the parent does not believe in the complexity of the family’s situation and does not respond well to positive reinforcement. Therefore, child protective workers highlighted understanding the issue of a parent’s sense of self in ascertaining the causes of resistance and in order to determine an appropriate approach to enhance collaboration.

#### ***Essential values to engage involuntary parents for effective collaboration***

A collaborative relationship is believed to be the basis for effective outcomes and heightened wellbeing of the child and family. Nevertheless, establishing a trusting collaboration is one of the most challenging tasks in social work practice in CPS. Collaboration was considered worker-related, meaning the initiative and environment created for collaboration is set by the worker. Essential values outlined here by workers are a *non-judgmental attitude*, *trust* and *time*. Grounding practice on these aspects not only consistently coincides with social work values, but provides hope for some level of collaboration with parents.

Regarding trust, child protective workers acknowledged the challenges of achieving real – not only perceived – trust. Nevertheless, workers focused on the importance of not fixating only on this question during the helping process, but rather considering a positive outcome to be a possibility, as this child protective worker outlined:

*... I don't know if my client is honest and there is trust on her behalf, but I do not dwell on it. I do not think or even, let's say, think constantly that maybe she isn't telling the truth or I cannot trust. As I don't know for sure and I will not know it. I trust and act in a way that she [the parent] can trust me and I believe that this fosters collaboration. (CPW 4)*

Time as a factor is related to workers taking the time to get to know the family, being patient and encouraging the family to participate.

## **Recognition**

Data analysis identified the meaning of recognition for child protective workers and how recognition is used with involuntary parents in the context of building collaboration.

### ***The meaning of recognition***

All of the child protective workers underlined the importance of recognition in building a collaborative relationship with parents. The meaning of recognition was identified as *complimenting, motivating and empowering*. They explained that focusing on competencies increases the opportunity for parents to achieve a sense of believing in themselves:

*Empowering the parent injects the belief of coping with the situation, finding the inner strengths to take steps further or at least try. The parent needs this kind of belief and this is my job. Part of it is recognising her strengths, resources and building on them, but first identifying and reminding her about these. (CPW 2)*

Furthermore, as highlighted by the workers, recognition fosters a connection that enables parents to lower their resistance and defensiveness.

### ***Domains of recognition***

During the interview process, child protective workers discussed various aspects of recognition. First, recognising *parents' strengths*, e.g. positive behaviour, self-awareness and understanding of good parenting. Recognising small steps and actions was emphasised:

*Thanking for the listening or answering the phone or a door is essential, to notice and express ... Even when the resistant parent is not responding much or talking, there is always something to recognise them for. (CPW 5)*

Second, *validating parents' feelings and emotions*. One of the examples shared by workers was parents becoming defensive – recognising and validating a parent's fear and defensiveness as a reaction to the perceived threat of CPS getting involved. Third, recognising *value-based child protection work*, including respect and self-determination. Fourth, recognising the *parent as the expert* and not taking an expert-based approach, which hinders any kind of communication and collaboration. Recognising an involuntary parent was considered the most crucial element of building the relationship. All of the child protective workers experienced a positive or neutral response when practicing this aspect of recognition. A neutral response was seen to be preferable to a negative one.

## **Role conflict**

In relation to facilitating collaboration with involuntary parents, child protective workers discussed the conflict of roles in child protection work and how this affects working with involuntary parents. They raised the power dilemma, specifically the need to be *aware of power* while not abusing this position, since doing so would only serve as an obstacle in engaging with parents. One of the workers used the term "*perception of responsibility*" here. Workers emphasised the ability to consciously think and reflect on the use of power. Furthermore, the dilemma of *help vs power* was raised. The profession itself is a

helping profession based on empowerment. However, in CPS the worker has the obligation to secure the child's wellbeing, resulting in cases where children are removed from their families because of abuse and neglect. During this process, the use of a position of power is more generally applied, as one worker explained. She acknowledged the necessity and the skill needed to always come back to the role of the helper, even if the worker-parent relationship necessitates both roles. Nevertheless, this is more complicated to apply in practice than in theory:

*I am a helper. Even in the case of a child removal, I stay in the position of the helper, although I used my power in this process. But if you only use power, not taking the position of the helper, you are not fit to work as a child protective worker. You have to balance these two [help and power] and yes, it is difficult, especially with an involuntary parent.(CPW 4)*

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Relational approaches are acknowledged as the basis for effective collaborative practice – the effectiveness of helping children and families in CPS is related to the collaborative relationship between the worker and the family, with an emphasis on the quality of that relationship (Munro, 2011) and the ability to work together in partnership (Milner & O'Byrne, 2009; Roesch-Marsh, Gillies & Green, 2017). Several authors agree that the relationship between the professional and the client constitutes the primary mechanism for achieving beneficial transformations (Bolin, 2018; Ferguson, Leigh, Cooner, Beddoe, Disney, Warwick & Plumridge, 2020; Segal 2013). De Jong and Berg (2001) view engaging and building a relationship as the basis for collaboration with involuntary parents. Smith (2020) considers collaboration with involuntary parents to be a value-based practice. Van Breda (2015) emphasises trust here – engaging with parents in order to establish a trusting relationship. In the current study, trust was acknowledged as one of the values needed to engage involuntary parents and encourage effective collaboration, in addition to respect and self-determination. Although involuntary parents were perceived as individuals who are reluctant to collaborate or likely to refuse help, child protective workers recognised the importance of treating the parent as an individual in their own right, a view also supported by Turney (2012).

Child protective workers discussed the resistance of parents in CPS to becoming engaged in the helping process. Various scholars argue that in the context of establishing collaboration with an involuntary client, including the parent, it is essential to understand and manage the factors provoking resistance (Cousins, 2020; Forrester *et al.*, 2012; Trotter, Rooney & Rooney, 2020). This in turn can transform resistance into a willingness to engage in collaboration (Pösö *et al.*, 2018). Thus, working with involuntary parents in CPS is inevitable. Child protective workers in the current study reported similar perspectives – the need for learning and validating the reasons for resistance.

Resistance is believed to be a natural reaction to changes (Rooney & Mirick, 2018). As indicated, resistance always exists when working with parents. She describes resistance as the result of fear of changes. Child protective workers shared this perception and experience. By creating a supportive environment, they continued trying to alleviate resistance with patience. Altman (2008) argues that at the core of CPS practice lies a worker's capacity to engage parents who feel most opposed to a working relationship, as well as an agency's ability to develop conditions that promote that capacity.

Furthermore, resistance is connected to an unequal balance of power between the worker and the client (Lynch, 2014). Mirick (2013) refers to clients' potential responses to power through actions characterised by anger, non-compliance or aggression. According to Segal (2013), resistance is a response to not having the power to decide. Therefore, encouraging the involuntary parent to co-create solutions in the helping process is of great importance from the very beginning of the process. De Jong and Berg emphasise co-constructing a way to collaborate with involuntary parents instead of influencing or even threatening potentially resistant parents into collaboration. Strömpl (2018) highlights that hierarchical control and a focus on power can act as impediments to collaboration. She discusses how the aim of social work is not to act from a position of power, but to support the client and empower them to become an independent,

responsible and functioning individual. Taking this into account and focusing on the aim of social work throughout the process enables a more conscious way of working with involuntary parents, while not putting the responsibility of building collaboration entirely on their shoulders. This view of power is not static or one-directional (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McKay, 2014). Healy (1998) considers the importance of Foucault's outlook on power to remind professionals not to see themselves as powerful and clients as powerless, but to think in terms of multiple relations of power, thereby understanding power as a relational concept.

Working with resistant parents creates tension for workers (Sudland, 2020). Haldre (2008) finds working with involuntary parents to be a complex process with possible negative outcomes for workers themselves, including the feeling of failure, which can lead to burnout. This also raises the question of role conflict, experienced by the child protective workers in this study: how to balance the role of caregiver and controller. This internal power struggle was acknowledged by the workers. Another factor is differences in perceptions; the worker-client relationship is grounded in dissimilar views of circumstances and intervention (Fargion, 2014). Social work values serve as a guide to more efficient work with resistant parents. Furthermore, understanding the parents to be the experts on their own lives and experiences can be emphasised, facilitating client-centred approaches to professional practice (Moher, 2019; Oliver & Charles, 2015; Rajeev & Jeena, 2020; Turney, 2012).

Saar (2006) suggests recognising the parent in order to decrease resistance, working with their feelings of shame and other negative emotions. Based on the current study, child protective workers perceived recognition as one feasible method of building collaboration with involuntary parents. Smith (2020) argues that clients in social work are not recognised enough. An individual who experiences little recognition reacts primarily with feelings of shame, anger and disappointment (Turney, 2012). According to Forrester *et al.* (2012), resistance is the outcome of low self-confidence, and recognition can boost self-confidence (see Frost, 2016). Recognition in the current study was based on the level of parents' self-confidence, self-esteem and self-respect in relation to parenting, willingness to collaborate, taking responsibility and making decisions. Recognition is linked to a strengths perspective, a framework for viewing and understanding the potential in every individual, family and community by translating their strengths into resources for positive change (Saleebey, 2012).

This study's limitations lie primarily in the fact that these findings are drawn from a small, qualitative study conducted with child protective workers in one region of one country. Therefore, it might not be possible for these findings to be applied more broadly. Nevertheless, the findings shed light on CPS practice with involuntary parents, specifically how to address resistance and use recognition, which is perceived as a crucial component in forming worker-client relationships. Smith (2020: 330) views Honneth's recognition as a "solid base" with involuntary parents, referring to "the common humanity of the other, regardless of what label has been attached to them". Elaborating on this idea further, research on workers' approaches towards involuntary parents and the role of recognition with such clients is needed; moreover, it is important to learn and identify from parents themselves, to understand what encourages them to collaborate in CPS in order to recognise and empower them and learn how workers can be best supported in that process.

Several recommendations can be drawn for CPS practice based on this study. First, recognition of parents and clients in general has the potential to enhance participatory practices – increasing the sense of empowerment and fostering rapport with involuntary parents. Various techniques and strengths-based models could be helpful here to foster workers' skills in using such approaches. For example, solution-focused techniques, which emphasise people's resilience, strengths and resources, have been found to be useful with involuntary parents, specifically with improving communication and building relationships with untrusting, uncollaborative and defensive individuals (Toros, 2019b). Second, the systematic use of recognition and strengths-based models requires self-reflection. Reflecting on practices and values when working with involuntary parents enables workers to better examine the process of building collaboration, the phenomenon of resistance and factors supporting and hindering rapport building, which

in turn enhances the quality of service provision (McCoyd & Kerson, 2013). Third, as building a collaborative relationship with an involuntary parent is challenging, workers need to be supported in this process by being equipped with tools, knowledge of best practices and efficient approaches (research), and supervision to enable reflection. Here CPS agencies and educational institutions have a role in facilitating the culture of participatory approaches consistent with the values of the social work profession.

## CONCLUSION

Collaborative relationships with parents are essential in CPS in promoting children's wellbeing. Although this study has a narrow empirical data sample, the findings acknowledge recognition as being potentially useful for CPS practices in other countries in terms of engaging with involuntary parents and building positive relationships in the helping process. Services are considered effective only in case of families' participation (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017). Therefore, child protective workers have a significant role in empowering involuntary parents to feel engaged with the process of co-constructing solutions and working in partnership with CPS.

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