

# Factor analysis of selected tools for assessment of the social risk of families

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**Abstract** Tools for assessing the social risk of families are instrumental for assessors in understanding the context, processes, system structure and indicators for the assessment of such risks. This paper assists in the search for the possibilities and limits of selected assessment tools, the reasons for assessors' decisions to not use standardized tools and the factor analysis of indicators in the assessment of the social risk of families of the assessment tools as one of the methods used in the analysis of qualitative data of the conducted research. In phase I, the main objective of this research project has been to identify the key concepts of selected system theories which comprise the framework for the assessment of the social risk of families and subsequently to assess the extent of the concordance and difference of key terms in system theories in the process of assessing the social risk of families. This article presents partial results of research that was carried out by using semi-structured interviews with assessors at the department of social and legal protection of children and social guardianship as well as assessors from selected bodies accredited to do family social work. This paper focuses on selected assessment tools and the identification of assessed family areas and an analysis of the indicators for social risk assessment.

**Key words** Social risk assessment, System theories, Assessment tools, Family, Child

## 1. ASSESSMENT OF THE SOCIAL RISK OF FAMILIES

Assessing the social risk of families within the intentions of the social legal protection of children is oriented on acute risks faced by a child as a result of the socially risky functioning of the family system. The conceptual framework of this research is based on family system theories and clinical research related to the assessment of dysfunctional family systems. Many tools and the assessment scales based on them indicate the great interest of experts to conduct research on the assessment of the social risk of families and to formulate a new quality of understanding. Family diagnostics is difficult and methodologically different from the diagnostics of individuals, their personalities and their relationship to the social environment. Since individual diagnostics methods cannot be used for the family system, it is impossible to transfer them to family diagnostics. [1] The identification of assessment tools, their orientation on aspects of family functioning and the ability of assessors to become acquainted with the spectrum of

socially risky factors could improve the quality of their decision-making strategies when assessing the extent of the risk for a child in relation to the assessment of the specific area of family functioning. Many assessment instruments and scales for the assessment of the social risk of families evaluate acute social risks for individual family members which arise from dysfunctional family environments. This paper is oriented on meta-analysis based on the comparison of assessment tools with the aim to identify essential areas of family functioning and their relationship to the extent of their social risk.

We have selected the following assessment tools which constitute theoretical baselines for establishing indicators for the assessment of the risk of families: the McMaster model, the Beavers system model and the Olson circumplex model. All three models are oriented on the knowledge relevant to structural, dynamic, organization, cohesive qualities and relationship and communication processes in families. In order to identify the assessed areas of families we included the following assessment tools: The Darlington Family Assessment System (DFAS) and the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale (NCFAS). [2]

## 2. RELUCTANCE OF ASSESSORS TO USE STANDARDIZED TOOLS

One of the goals of this paper's is to describe the reasons for which assessors prefer to use their own judgment rather than assessment tools when evaluating the social risk of families and the extent of risks for children. (1) Assessment tools are not sufficiently sensitive for measuring family progress which takes place over time. The detection of the presence of social pathology in a family during the initial examination may not be sufficiently sensitive for measuring changes in the family system. (2) Assessment tools cover a wide range of factors from tangible evidence related to child neglect up to factors related to the internal qualities of the family system structure, the distribution of power, relationship aspects, self-respect, communication, parental skills and atmosphere. The use of intuitive procedures in assessment may be related to the more technical-rational nature of assessment tools which are oriented on internal processes taking place in the family rather than the social environment which may be the source or a crucial factor in the persistence of the dysfunctional nature of the family environment. At first sight, the assessor may not be able to identify the areas of family life that the specific tool evaluates and the extent to which there is an accord with the expectations of the agency concerning the outputs and objectives of the assessment process. (3) Assessment

tools and the completion and evaluation of psychometric scales represent a time-consuming process which due to time constraints should be as prompt as possible. The quality of the assessment of the social risk of the family should not be at the expense of effectiveness, which however may not always be in compliance with the expectations of the agency and the work load of the assessors. (4) Most of the assessment tools were validated on an English-speaking Europoid sample. There are cross-cultural studies which confirm the reliability of certain assessment tools, but the multicultural aspects and geopolitical and social issues concerning the assessed families must still be taken into consideration. (5) The choice of assessment tool should be based on an evaluation of its possibilities and limits. Sometimes an assessment focuses on an evaluation of meeting of the child's needs, and threats to his/her interests, life and health; at other times, the focus is on riskiness of the social environment of the family, parental skills or the presence of socio-pathological phenomena. Certain assessment tools have been developed for trained assessors in a specific approach; they distinguish between ordinary assessors and experts from social assistance professions. Limitations may also arise during the methodologically correct use of tools with child-clients and clients with mental disabilities. (6) Assessment tools are not universally consistent; indeed they may even be of a contradictory nature in clarifying the indicators for the assessment of the social risk of a family, especially in terms of family adaptability and cohesion. (7) Most assessment tools of psychological discourse are based on the statistical analysis of risk factors arising from many case studies. The assessment of the social risks of a family should reflect the functioning of and ties to the social environment. Due to the multilayered nature of social reality, it is not always possible to design a standardized assessment tool. A similar situation can be found in the field of family theories where "the social reality in which social assistance professionals function is so complex that it is impossible to imagine one universally applicable scientific theory" [2] (8) Most assessment tools were created in a clinical research environment and do not provide the necessary guidelines and clinically relevant norms for their practical application. Furthermore, they do not always adequately and simultaneously underpin all aspects of family functioning. [3] (9) Assessment tools use self-reporting instruments and thus provide a unique view of the family life and a reliable method for evaluating measurable utterances and standpoints of individual family members. Self-reporting scales through which individual family members assess the functioning of the family system are a subjective method for establishing functional/dysfunctional nature of family environment; however they are not sufficient for evaluating the functional nature of the family system as a whole. The benefit of family theories based on system theories lies in the rejection of studies of isolated phenomena in therapy in favour of the study of the processes which take place among them. The variability of the responses of the family members and their perspective on the performance of family functions may be used to evaluate subjective satisfaction or to establish the extent of the risk which may vary from one family member to another. (10) It is difficult for assessors and researchers to establish a sufficient differentiation between assessment tools which should be able to distinguish between clinically functional and dysfunctional families.

Absence of definition of functional and dysfunctional family functioning adds up to the lack of theoretical basis for assessing the social risk rate of the family system. Opinions of the assessors are divergent in terms of selection of dimensions of family functioning and key processes that should be included in the assessment process of families. If there was a consensus in these fields. (11) As for conditions of the assessment of the social risk of families in Slovak Republic, the assessment process is carried out by the social and legal protection of children and social guardianship department

workers, who mostly attained education in the social work major. Based on the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which symbolically demonstrates the succession of satisfying human needs ranging from the physiological through social, psychological, axiological needs to the need of developing one's self-actualisation potential, there comes up a disputable question of the assessors' competence in terms of practical skills, as well as theoretical knowledge. Education of social workers has been assuming transdisciplinary character in the last few years, as it integrates social and current scientific knowledge about the state of society and character of sociopathological phenomena from the reference and bordering scientific disciplines. Prevailing, however, is the evident focus of the social workers' academic education on the area of sociology, economy and law, over the area of psychology. As an interdisciplinary scientific discipline researching social phenomena, subjects and processes at the given time, social work affects the first two levels of the Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

### 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

Theoretical outlets for the research are based on the systemic theories of family and clinical research concerning family therapy. Unlike classical approaches that are based on the clinical point of view of medicine when describing the client's symptoms, systemic theories bring entirely new terminology into the work with family. Family therapy pioneers started drawing from Bertalanffy's general system theory, cybernetics and communication theory, which we already focused on in the historical context of formation of systemic theories. [4] It is important to mention, however, that it wasn't always like that, and in the early phase of the development of systemic theories there was a visible effort to apply elements of the traditional psychodynamic therapy of the individual on the family. Family therapy pioneers were inspired by the work "General system theory" by Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy from the 1940's. [5] This distinguished biologist came with an idea of connecting the individual parts into the whole - an idea which transcended borders of the atomistic understanding of the world at the time and very quickly started penetrating other scientific disciplines as well. [6] From the work of the Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, family therapy adopted the term system, defined as "the interconnection of individual elements, mutual reciprocity and identifiable boundaries which form the complex, or the unity of the whole." [7] Authors Gjuríčová and Kubička comment that, besides the term "system", family therapy adopted nothing else from the work of Bertalanffy. "Nevertheless, the term 'system' was very important, as it made it possible to focus on family and other superindividual systems as something equally real (or constructed in the same way) as the individual with their consciousness, unconsciousness, emotions..etc." [8] As for the systemic theories as we know them today, more beneficial than Bertalanffy's general system theory for their development was the science of conducting technical machines - cybernetics. Author Pecháčková writes that cybernetics was developed in the US approximately in 1940's following the impuls of the conferences focused on control and management of the automatized and living systems. The centre of attention of the therapists becomes the family - cybernetic system that overcame limits of causal thinking, the traps of which were being pointed out by Gregory Bateson in the last decade of his life, e.g. "the conviction of objectivity, ignoring the circularity of the system, belief in the possibility of one-sided control" [9]

In our research objectives we included mainly the assessment tools such as McMaster model, Beavers systems model and Olson's circumplex model among the selected models. All three models are to a various degree oriented on the knowledge relevant to structural,

dynamic, organization, cohesive qualities and relationship and communication processes in families. On the representative level, selected assessment tools present systemic models, based on which it is possible to describe objects of reality. Using the precise shaping of the statistical analysis of the risk factors in families, the assessors are enabled to explain complicated phenomena such as social and sociopathological phenomena in the social, psychological and physical context. Psychometric tools found in the above-mentioned models of evaluating family functioning, are based on statistical analysis of the risk factors, coming from a great number of case studies, and they analyse level and quality of the processes and relationships in families. The benefit of the models of evaluating family functioning for the process of assessing families is visible in visualising indicators of assessing the social risk rates of family system. Models of evaluating family functioning are used as schemes when assessing various aspects of family functioning. These models, aimed at the functionality - dysfunctionality of family system, provide a strong terminological basis to the evaluation process and, according to T. Jacobs they present several functions: "descriptive, diagnostic, predictive and prescriptive." [10]

#### 4. METHODS, PROCEEDINGS AND OBJECTIVES OF CONDUCTED RESEARCH

The aim of the research was (1) to identify and to describe indicators of assessment of the social risk of families in the context of systemic theories (2) to identify and to describe indicators of assessment of the social risk of families in the process of assessing (3) to assess the extent of the concordance and difference of the indicators of assessment of the social risk of families in the context of systemic theories indicators of assessment of the social risk of families in the process of assessing. In order to clarify the crucial theoretical concepts and indicators of assessment of the social risk of families in terms of social and legal protection of children, we compiled basic research questions to find out what the assessors find to be the family at the social risk, how they assess the risk of families and family environment, what signs are in their opinion the indicators of the increased risk of families, what they notice throughout the process and what ways they use to find it out. Other questions of the qualitative research that the respondents in the interview were asked, were aimed at clarifying the questions such as what proceedings, methods, tools and techniques do the assessors use for detection of the social risk of families, who they cooperate with, respectively, who else enters the assessment process and how they try to ensure the objectivity of the assessment process. Qualitative research was carried out using the method of semi-structured interviews with assessors at the department of social and legal protection of children and social guardianship and the assessors of accredited subjects, who in accordance with the Act No. 305/Coll. on Social and Legal Protection of Children and on Changing and Amending of other Acts, as amended, carry out the measures of the department of social and legal protection of children and social guardianship.

#### 5. ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH DATA IN THE SPIRIT OF HERMENEUTICAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL TRADITION

In the hereby presented article, indicators of assessment of the social risk rate of families are formulated and interpreted on the foundation of hermeneutical circle, which is based on interpretation of acquired data in the qualitative research with assessors and is backwardly interlinked with formulation of the indicators of assessment of the social risk rate of families in the particular tools of assessment. Hermeneutical circle is being closed by returning repeatedly to primary data of the qualitative research, which

constitute the background for more detailed analysis of the indicators of assessment of the social risk rate of families and creation of the outputs of the method of anchored theory. Holistic approach to the understanding of social risk rate of families in theory and in practice is the selected method for determining intersections and differences of these two levels and for formulation of redundant indicators of assessment. [11] Many tools of assessment originate in clinical environment and are oriented on the particular manifestations of sociopathological phenomena in the family; risk factors on the side of parents as well as children and insufficient environmental sources contributing to maintaining social problems are assessed. The paper is based on the philosophical tradition of hermeneutic exegesis and interpretation of qualitative data as a part of creative process. Choosing hermeneutical and phenomenological intellectual tradition in factor analysis of selected assessment tools of the social risk of families is related to the effort to avoid reductionism when utilising technical-rational assessment tools that do not take into account specific differences between families, geographical and multicultural aspects that are tied to the family members and enter with them each and every area of assessing any particular risky manifestation. Entering the process of assessing the social risk of families is also the subjective and often highly intuitive factor of the assessor as a person, who, when interpreting the objects of reality, must be able to view its construction through the prism of the family in its historical, social and cultural context. The effort to exclude the aspect of subjectivity from the assessment process is not possible and, in the context of the undesirable reductionism of the assessment tools to mechanistic implementation of interpretations of the observed objects of reality, neither it is desirable. The development of knowledge of the objects of reality in the spirit of phenomenology describes description as a process, in which deformation suffered by the examined object throughout the cognitive process can in no case be avoided. Assessor himself is a medium, whose interpretation of social reality already corresponds only to the reflection of the examined object that is being changed in the cognitive process. Determination of the extent of deformation of described objects of reality is not even measurable with regards to the phenomenological understanding of cognition in human consciousness. To make it possible we would have to get on the position outside consciousness, from which we could compare the object and its reflection in the mind of a person, in our case, of the assessor. This paper assists in the search for the possibilities and limits of selected assessment tools, the reasons for assessors' decisions to not use standardized tools and the indispensable factor analysis as a method used in the analysis of qualitative data. [12]

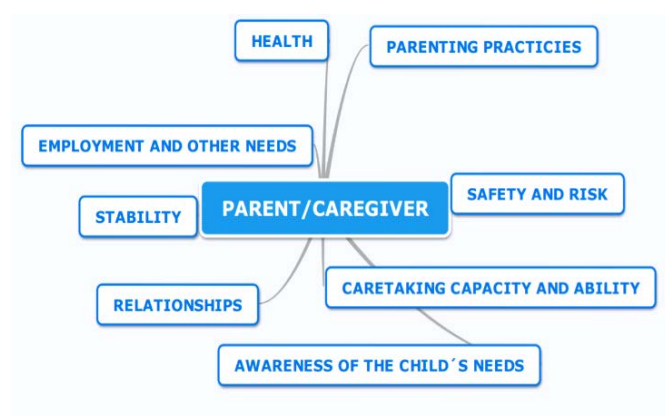
#### 6. FACTOR ANALYSIS OF SELECTED ASSESSMENT TOOLS

In order to simplify the comparison of indicators of assessment of the social risk of families in theory and in practice, we chose the method of reducing the qualitative data acquired from the semi-structured interviews with assessors by narrowing down the area of family functioning that should be evaluated in the assessment process. The dimensions of family functioning established in advance made it easier for us to search for terms and relevant sources of scholarly literature and research focused on assessment of the social risk of families. The table presents the dimensions of family functioning and their level of saturation of indicators of assessment of the social risk of families.

Indicators of the social risk rate of parents or persons, to whom the children are entrusted into custody, are assessed by:

- parent or caregiver's disciplinary practices for the children
- understanding of child development and emotional needs of children
- current habitability of housing and age-appropriate safety concerns in the home
- Patterns of social interaction
- Relationships within the family and with peers and others
- the nature of contact and involvement with others, the presence or absence of social support networks and relationships
- physical, intellectual and cognitive disabilities
- the degree of visibility of the children
- Problems in Access to Basic Necessities
- financial management skills of the caregivers,
- income, employment, adequate housing,
- The degree to which food and nutritional needs of the children are met.
- The degree to which personal hygiene needs are met
- Background and History of Caregivers, including the history of abuse and neglect
- domestic violence, alcohol and drug use
- Recurrent patterns of behaviors and response to stressors
- the stability and history of the current housing situation
- mental illness, physical health,
- An understanding of the parent/caregiver's physical health, including chronic or debilitating conditions that may impede caregiving
- An understanding of the parent or caregiver's mental or emotional health, including an understanding of any current or historical conditions and how this may impede caregiving
- domestic violence, substance abuse, disabilities,

Table 1 Assessing the social risk rate of parents



Source: comparison of assessment tools (DFAS a CFAS)

Factor analysis of indicators of assessment of the social risk rate of families on the side of parents is, from the point of view of phenomenological tradition, constituted by theories and approaches aimed at the individual, such as psychodynamic theories, cognitive behavioural approaches, humanistic and existential theories focused on human. [13] Assessors' understanding of broader context of the history of acute risky manifestations in the parent's behaviour enables them to notice the extent of imperilment of the child and to keep the necessary distance in order to adopt an unbiased stand. Concepts related to the ambivalence and development of anxiety in people are, as seen from the perspective of psychodynamic theories, derivatives of inadequate problem-solving in the early stages of the child's development. Reflection of social circumstances where the problematic behaviour has its roots, and the limited possibilities for the child to change them, enable the assessors to keep the distance from categorising law constructs identifying the aggressor and the

victim. We know from experience that aggressor is often also a victim in their life, and vice versa. [14] Parenting skills can be limited for various reasons, in terms of flexibility, adequacy and variability in relation to the concrete child. They reflect theoretical concepts of intuitive parenting, attachment, adolescence theory, high risk youth, condemned parent etc. Assessors realise that, *"sometimes the parent themselves is a peril. They will come and say they have ten children and the eldest one doesn't listen to them and is troublesome, steals and they will tell me - put him in an institution, I want to take care of the rest of the kids and this kid is a burden for me and I don't want to take care of him anymore. In my opinion that parent is the risk itself in the child's upbringing and their best development possible, in that pubescent age when they would need the maximum care and the parent fails in this."* The dimension of assessing the category of parent's upbringing style is captured on another place in the testimony: *"Everyone has a different idea of what is normal. For some people it is normal to live in a messy house and for others it is normal that child must have stacks of clothes and what is good about having the stacks that the child really has to abide because the T-shirt is sticking out more, that is also a risk factor."*

Table 2 Assessing the social risk rate of the environment



Source: comparison of assessment tools (DFAS a NCFAS)

- Strengths, needs, resources of the family and their support systems
- The developmental or enrichment opportunities for the children
- safety concerns within the community
- child care, transportation and needed services and supports, cultural concerns
- the presence or absence of social support networks and relationships

Factor analysis of indicators of assessment of the social risk of families based on the natural social environment of the family is of great interest to the assessors. Assessment methods, techniques and concepts reflect social-ecological, antioppressive, antidiscrimination, multicultural and ethnic aspects tied to the environment where the family lives, and the way in which it fulfills its functions. Theories of social and community development lead assessors to the reflection and assessing the level of development of specific localities, areas, regions, and possibilities available for the community members to achieve the corresponding life standard quality. Theories of social development are above all related to economical and social level reached by the given locality, to the access to healthcare, educational institutions, civic amenities, developed infrastructure, urbanistic sources etc. [15] Assessors operating in this field of social work performance have to take into account the transgenerational processes such as non-changing social conditions, poverty and social exclusion the population has to cope with. The reflection is captured in the testimony of an assessor, who focuses their attention on social conditions saying: *"It's mainly the*

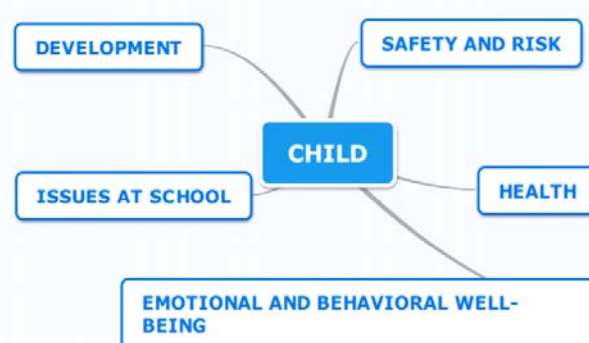


environment they live in. Now it has in fact been confirmed that we have groups of people here who live in bad living conditions. Those are pumps, but I would literally call it slums. So what is important for us are the localities, where those families reside." On another place the assessor reflects environmental factors of the environment risk rate that influence the opportunities for development of adults and children. "Again it concerns a group of population, as targeted education does not exist. From our point of view it is a risk, but from theirs it is not. It is normal for them. For example when the child does not go to school, so what, they will still learn what they need. In that family they know very well they are not going anywhere. And they count on just going for social welfare benefits again, and again someone will they care of them. They know it." Passing on the model of behaviour in this case does not have to be assessed by the assessors as highly risky for the child by the neglect from the parents' side that is implicitly related to their parenting skills, strategies, practices etc. Social environment and human are constantly interacting and the environment with insufficient impulses does not stimulate one to adopt active approach towards their own life. [17] Thus closes the vicious circle of transgenerational transmission of the environmental social risk factors. Assessors are aware of it in the form of long-term unemployment and unemployability of the family members. "Similar phenomenon works in unemployment as well, there you have the third generation of people, where grandfather was unemployed, father is unemployed and the young one leaves the school and it never occurs to him that he should go to work somewhere because that's the behavioural model of that family" When assessing the social risk of environment where the family lives, seemingly the most visible impression is the one that the family presents outwards. Social risk factors then do not even result so much from reality as they do from the representation of the social risk rate of the environment, as constructed by external observer. Hermeneutical circle is closing in social interaction between the assessor and the family, where the family contributes to its own oppression. Assessors build on their own personal experience and their view of normality, that is a construct of the society they live in, they assume the social risk rate of the family in advance because of the environment the family lives in. "We go to the family based on the monitorings we carry out regularly in the colonies in the families at risk. Now by the way we identified and visited all the apartments on Lunik IX. Our main goal was to observe things, with regards to the season of the year. For example, whether the children are at risk considering the season because of the cold, if they have enough clothes, if the family has got a stove or some other heating device respectively. Whether the family has got enough income, cash at disposal, two weeks after welfare benefits" A certain shift of expectations of the assessors for the change of the exerted lifestyle is taking place on the conscious level. "Concerning the socially excluded families we have to take into account that reality that those families are here, they live this way and it seems they will live this way in the next generations as well. So expecting some substantial changes in their life, in their goals and in their values would probably not be realistic." On another place assessors reflect that material conditions do not always play the prime role in assessment of the social risk of families. We evaluate the distance from postmodern construction of consumption and commercially set up lifestyle from tradition of phenomenology as attitudinal values that the assessors gained thanks to professional and ethical basis of helping professions: "so we watch securing the meeting of those basic needs that have to be secured. We also focus on the feeling of safety, support, family functioning, of how they communicate, if that father really is for example willing to accompany his son to school in the morning because of truancy, if he takes the trouble and does it, or if he simply just states that he is a truant and what concern it is of his."

Indicators of the social risk rate of children:

- Absence/presence of physical abuse of the child(ren), or any history of such for the child and family
- Absence/presence of sexual abuse of the child(ren) or any history of such for the child and family
- Absence/presence of emotional abuse of the child(ren) or any history of such for the child and
- Family
- Absence/presence of neglect of child(ren) or any history of such for the child and family
- Absence/presence of domestic violence between
- Parents methods of discipline, patterns of supervision for the children

Table 3 Assessing the social risk rate of the child



Source: comparison of assessment tools (DFAS a NCFAS)

Factor analysis of indicators of assessment of the social risk of families on the side of children is, from the point of view of phenomenological tradition, constituted by the theories and approaches focused on the individual, such as psychodynamic theories, cognitive behavioural approaches, humanistic and existential theories focused on human. Psychodynamic perspectives and the recent shift in the possibilities of diagnostics of attachment bond offers relevant scientific explanation of hardships the child endures in the case they are neglected, abused and maltreated. [16] Estimating the extent of imperilment of the child is not simple at all and is in fact very challenging for the assessor. This is also confirmed by the testimony of an assessor from the department of social and legal protection of children and social guardianship. "To see or to trace that potential of that family in the areas where it is hard to measure is not easy for us at all. Because you check the wardrobe and the finances, but if the mother had the risk that a child would be taken from her because she did not go to the doctor regularly, then we worked on making her realise her duties, even though she has those 7 - 8 children and is not always able to manage it, but also on the other side, to make the doctor realise that that mother really isn't doing it on purpose that she doesn't go there. So that they are able to communicate together and for example this mother then tried to follow the scheduled appointments and if it was not possible, to send one of her sons to the doctor and let her know: 'Today I can't make it, the kid is here, the another one there, but I will come to the next session on Thursday for sure, OK?'" To estimate the extent of the imperilment of the child is the most important task of the assessor. This is also clear to workers on the leading positions at the departments of social and legal protection of children and social guardianship when we observed the effort to create a clue that would draw the assessors' attention towards the potential aspects of the risk rate of families and their impact on the child, in our research answers: "We worked on the standards, how to assess that risk rate from the point of view of the child because there

*can be various risks, but it does not necessarily have to have some heavy impact on the child."*

## 7. CONCLUSION

The article presents partial results of research focused on the assessment of the social risk of families. It identifies assessment tools, analyses the distance of assessors from the standardised screening tools and creates the terminological constructions related to factor analysis of indicators of assessment of the social risk from the side of parents, environment and the child. It is based on hermeneutical and phenomenological tradition of scientific thinking in effort to avoid reductionism when using technical rational assessment tools and, at the same time, it assists in viewing family from the holistic point of view, as a unique subject disposing of actualisation potential for carrying out necessary changes.

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