

Abstract

Title	The Hidden Triad: Lone mothers with sons and their need of support from social services
Author	Mona Franséhn
Key words	Motherhood; Absent Fathers; Conceptions of Family Life, Relationships; Reference fathers, Social Networks, Male Role Models
Distribution	Göteborg University, Department of Social Work Box 720, SE 405 30 Göteborg
ISBN	91-628-6208-1
ISSN	1401-5781

The overall aim of the thesis is to discuss and understand different aspects of the family life that lone mothers with sons develop in relation to absent fathers and the support from social services. The study is based upon nine case studies, each of them including qualitative interviews with the mother, the son (age 13–18), the male contact person from social services and the responsible social worker. Furthermore three biological fathers and a few managers and youth workers with connection to the cases have been interviewed. Discourses on motherhood and fatherhood as well as modern family life and different kinds of relationships between lone mothers and sons are discussed both theoretically and empirically.

The study shows that the lone motherhood for this group of vulnerable mothers is very complex. They have in general a mother-centring view, taking on the main responsibility for the family life and also for the present problems in the family. It is obvious that the mothers are definable not only as lone mothers but primarily as lone-responsible for the family life. Even when new partners are entering their lives, the picture of lone-responsible motherhood remains. The psychological family is intact in spite of the fact that new adults are coming into the family sphere.

The different kinds of relationships that are formed between mothers and sons are initially categorized as close, indifferent and balanced on the basis of the informants' own views. The actual contact between the father and the son and mother has a relatively subordinate importance for how the relationship between mother and son is formed. Instead the joint construction of the father figure, a reference father, and the way the mother and son relate to this construction in different situations are more significant. A negative construction of the father seems to strengthen the relationship between mother and son and the development of a close relationship. Though the fathers are in principle absent, they seem to be extremely present as psychological father figures in these families.

The access to siblings, the provision of support from the social network, and the sons' social contacts are important factors that affect the family life and the relationship between mothers and sons. At the same time it is evident that the mothers' feelings of insufficiency can be related to structural reasons such as exclusion from the labour market, bad health and weak economy. From this perspective the previous categories of relationships can be redefined from psychoanalytical terms with social family descriptions referring to isolated, transformed, and socially established families. The social hardship that some of these families experience will to a great extent affect what kind of relationships mothers and sons develop.

Despite an overall conception of lone mothers as an accepted and well-functioning family form, traditional ideals are manifest in the interaction between the families and social services. The absence of the father is assumed to imply a need for limits and authority, which are to be transformed into male functions. The contact persons look upon themselves as male role models and as possible identification objects for the sons. The social workers are in general less attached to the idea of male role models and stress instead the importance of access to other adults. At the same time it is obvious that there exists a hidden gender discourse in their argumentation in favour of using male contact persons. With the help of the contact persons they aim to compensate for a negative father figure by presenting alternative male ideals.