

Abstract

Title: Notions of the family.
On client families, contact families and ideal families
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This dissertation consists of a report and three articles. These parts, of which one is written in English, are assembled within this volume together with an introducing, summarizing, as well as theoretically deepening part and finally a Summary in English.

The dissertation concerns a child and family support system called the "contact family service", which involves a contact family, giving services on a voluntary basis (but recruited, assessed and paid by the social services), receiving a child in their home for the weekend once or twice a month. The service is provided to help mostly single mothers – with scarce social networks that lack the ability to provide support – to get relief from constant care-giving one or two weekends a month.

The study was carried out as a qualitative interview investigation. Eighteen single parent families were selected at random from three social welfare offices in Western Sweden. The three parties – client families, contact families and social workers that handled the cases – have been interviewed (a total of 54 interviews) about their experience of as well their own parenthood and family life as their notions in general, for example of a "normal" and an "ideal" family. Another perspective was to describe and analyse the contact family service as such. The interaction and influence of these notions on shaping the contact family service were studied.

The study shows that there are significant differences between the two types of families (client families and contact families), primarily with regard to three aspects: 1) financial situation; 2) social network; and, 3) parenting situation (single parent or shared parenthood).

It was stated that the contact family service might be considered as a service to all single parents who need it. Nevertheless, its design can be improved. Social workers need to reflect upon the family ideals that are reproduced in the service, especially their view on the single-parent family. Single parenthood should not be perceived as a social problem in itself. With the nuclear family as the golden standard, the burden of having the sole responsibility for the parenting of a child becomes even greater for single parents.

A special analysis focused on the single mothers, whose children have no, negligible or irregular contact with their fathers. It was shown, that socio-political positions, based on policy discourses about the caregiving father, equality between the sexes and the focus on children's needs, paradoxically can put pressure of responsibility on single mothers, not only for their children, but covering the parental responsibility of the father as well. Besides, the father, by withdrawing his support from the mother, can dominate her scope for action, not least because joint custody can enable him to deny the mother's relief through the contact family service. A conclusion was that the contact family service provides not only a breathing space once or twice a month for single mothers, but also more independence and power, which has given the mothers a better position in negotiations, because they do not need the support from the father in the same way as before.

But if these single parents are rejected when they ask for help, they will be left alone. They run the risk of becoming a group, which on all levels – social as well as personal – is symbolised by *being alone*.