

Editorial:

Families in contexts

by

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The phenomenon of family exists in all cultures and countries, although the composition of a family varies. When we ask the question about how to define a family, we will get a lot of different answers, as function, norms, rights and duties are contextual. There is no neutral position to speak from when we present family definitions and knowledge about families. We encounter a world in which some have power and some have less power. In the hierarchy, the majority position may sometimes present their knowledge as *the* knowledge, and not only one specific position. Family has been a contested issue in the Western women's liberation movement. The argument is that women tend to be suppressed within this institution, though some postcolonial perspectives also argue that women are protected within the family system. The protection from the state differs according to how comprehensive the welfare system is for inhabitants. We should therefore be careful to not use what Donna Haraway has called the "God-trick"; we should not generalize one specific standpoint, as if we think we are able to talk from a neutral standpoint and being situated.

The different materials presented in this issue are all linked to the topic of family. They are about families in a diverse and changing society, and also contribute with how social work is linked with families in different cultural and international contexts. The articles give examples that address family issues in relation to social work with both Native- and other North Americans. These examples are complemented with a case from a Northern European, Nordic context, in which the focus is on how individuals more than the family are defined as service users. Families and what takes place within a family are interpreted differently in relation to the position it is seen from, such as for example according to a minority or a majority position, or according to positions within or in relation to different social service organizations.

The article, "Tribal and Non-tribal Agencies: A Comparison of How Social Work with Families is Conceptualized in the United States" by Marissa O'Neill and Debbie L. Gonzalez, discusses Native American child welfare and not-for-profit family services. In a Native context, agency defines family in terms of psychosocial functioning. In a three-generation context, the oldest generation in a tribal context would be called upon in their role to reprimand the father in the middle generation for his abusive

behavior, while social workers in a non-tribal setting used a structural family definition. As a consequence of this, neither the grandparents nor the father would have been included as family. The article adds to the increased interest in social work research on the conditions for native populations, but it also reflects critical issues related to the expanding research field that addresses grandparenting and the several dilemmas related to the complex relationships within three-generation families. This study contributes to the more general topic of the role and dilemmas of the family in the particular social work field of child welfare.

“Resource Development in Canada’s North: Impacts on Families and Communities” is written by Glen Schmidt. The changes associated with resource development exert some serious negative effects on communities and families, and it is important for social workers to acquire knowledge and develop understanding. The case examples demonstrate an important paradox in that economic development that provides jobs and improves the standard of living also has serious costs for many families and individuals. The situation is complex and poses challenges for social workers in such settings. This is an example of phenomena that have followed industrialization through the decades, in which technical innovations and discoveries also sometimes rapidly destroy previous social structures, thereby leading to new challenges for both families and communities. There is a need to develop more knowledge about this since globalization and the increasingly faster transfer of production technology in most industrial branches lead to a more fluid and insecure labor market. The pressures on the family may cause stress and social exclusion, which are problems that many times become the focus of social workers’ interventions.

In the article, “Family as raw material – The deconstructed family in the Swedish social services,” Ahmet Gümüşcü, Evelyn Khoo and Lennart Nygren find there is a lack of a family-oriented approach in Swedish social service provision. Their study reveals the impact of individualization across different social service sectors, showing that Swedish social workers do not often “think family” when targeting clients. Professional discretion is used to determine which parts of the deconstructed family will be included in service decisions. The article provides an example of a study of the defamilialized welfare model according to a typology suggested by Sigrid Leitner,

Gösta Esping-Andersen and others. The Scandinavian welfare models tend to relieve the family from the burden of caring, financial provision and support via the general welfare schemes and reforms implemented after World War II. However, within the more residual parts of the welfare model, i.e. the social care services, the family as a support system is still important, though in different ways in relation to various problems or service areas. The institutional and universal character of the Swedish model turns out to be less unambiguous in relation to the family when looking at social care services.

“Questioning the Question: How can a husband rape his wife?” is an essay about the critical incident that Anjali Nicole Walquist experienced as a master student in an international classroom. She discusses answers to this question from different perspectives such as culture, gender, opinions and personal definitions. As a former minority student in the US, she has now been put in a majority position in the global classroom with students from both Africa and Asia. While in the minority, she thought it would be better to be in the majority and vice versa. Hence, the essay is an intriguing example that illustrates the need for- and the value of inter-sectional reflexivity when students and academics meet across nations, cultures, genders and other social divisions.