Abstract

Title The Hidden Triad:
Lone mothers with sons and their need of support from social services

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Key words Motherhood; Absent Fathers; Conceptions of Family Life, Relationships; Reference
fathers, Social Networks, Male Role Models

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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.