The family models held by social workers and family policy programmes: critical remarks on gender and class perspectives

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Abstract

Supporting families is one of the main tasks of social work. Financial support, health or psychological assistance: social workers have to deal with families. But what are families? Which models do social workers employ when they think of a "normal family", what do they expect of mothers and fathers? What is in their eyes "successful" parenting? On the other hand, how does the family experience itself as a client? Are there discrepancies between their own understanding of the notion family and what they think social workers expect of their family life? Empirical studies on the family model ideas held by social workers and their clients illustrate differences, e.g. the different parenting models of "natural growth" vs. "concerted cultivation" (Lareau 2003). They also show us how gender and class perspectives are integrated in the different family models. Furthermore, empirical reconstructions of the different family models held by clients and social workers show growing feelings of uncertainty among clients about their way of living family. This constrains contact and evokes shame. The article intends to open the discussion on family models and their embedded gender and class constructions. The ability to reflect on thinking of a "normal family" should be part of the professional toolkit of social workers.

Preliminaries: Starting with a practical example

Today the girls from the Youth Club in Reutlingen, South Germany, are going in a day trip. They're off to the Swabian Alps where they plan to explore the Bear Caves and then have a barbecue. The parents of the seven to ten year old girls were given a handout with information about the trip. They were requested to ensure that the girls were appropriately dressed and to provide them with food suitable for a barbecue. The bus is waiting for the girls as they arrive with their mothers. Some make their way to the bus station alone. A Bosnian mother accompanies her two daughters to the bus. She's looked out their best dresses for the trip. The social workers who greet the mothers and girls exchange a meaningful glance: "How are the girls going to explore the cave in those dresses?" The mother catches the glance and is upset. She wonders why the social workers look so scruffy and asks herself whether her daughters are really in good hands. She hopes they'll come back in one piece.

Later on the group prepares for the barbecue. The girls unpack the food they've brought: sausages, chops, vegetables, bread. Mandy, the daughter of a lone mother who holds down several low-paid jobs in an attempt to keep her head above water, opens her rucksack and finds a packet of crisps, coke and marshmallows. She's pleased because she loves toasted marshmallows and her mother packed her favourite crisps. But Silke, one of

the social workers, gives her a hard stare. She asks, "Didn't your mother give you any vegetables or meat for the barbecue?"[1]

Family models are negotiated everyday in the small encounters between social workers and mothers, fathers, children, grandparents and other relatives. Small comments, a look, things that remain unsaid all transport preconceptions of 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad', 'normal' or 'deviant'. If these explicit or implicit negotiations about 'proper family', 'healthy eating' or even the 'right clothes' in the sense of 'modern gender roles' intrude into the foreground, then the emotional interaction between parents and children in client families is not receiving enough attention. The pleasure of the child who realizes her mother packed her favourite crisps becomes denigrated and irrelevant in negotiations about healthy eating.

The examples show that the relationships between social workers and clients of social work have to be analysed. Negotiations about models of good parenting are currently taking place between the professionals and their clients. Even though social work has historically always dealt with families, in late modernity society has new expectations of social work. The future of highly-developed service and knowledge economies lies in education as a natural resource. Therefore, the upwards social mobility through educational attainment of even the lower social milieus is of great economic significance. With the example of early prevention programmes ('Frühe Hilfen') there is a trend towards implementing new family models in deprived families. A basic distrust of poor families is becoming visible that undermines the fundamental role of advocacy in social work. At the same time a trend towards retraditionalization with respect to gender is becoming evident.

In the first section, it will be given a short description of class differences and the influence of ethnicity on the ideas of family models and approaches to child-rearing. Secondly, the role model of a 'good mother' and a 'good father' will be discussed together with their impact on gender constructions. In a third step, using the example of early prevention it will be shown how new role models are currently being negotiated. Finally, it will be invited to rethink family models and good parenthood. The suggestion for a new family model is – in line with Winnicott (1953) – captured with the notion 'the good-enough family'.

1.) Unequal conditions for everyday life of families: the impact of class and ethnicity experiences

When we think of families today, we have to bear in mind the enormous changes in the societal framework surrounding families. For several decades, Europe has been facing changes captured by the term 'Late Modernity': from an industrial to a service economy, from Fordism to Post-Fordism and from societies with strong social institutions to individualized societies (Beck, 1986; Sennett, 2000). In many countries this goes hand in hand with rising unemployment, big changes in demands of vocational qualification and also social inequality (Christiansen/Koistinen/Kovalainen, 1999). The driving forces behind these processes are, firstly, changing gender relations, which lead to higher female and maternal employment rates and, secondly, the tendency to flexibilization in the work sphere, i.e. 'blurring boundaries' (Jurczyk/Lange 2007). Depending on cultural and structural patterns, we find different employment patterns of parents. The range goes from the male breadwinner model to the modernized breadwinner, very rarely to an egalitarian adult worker model, but increasingly to the single-earner lone mother model. Because of structural interdependencies, it is obvious that these transformations change the context of private lives. The '24/7 society' (Presser

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[1] This example was brought in from a social worker within the frame work of a vocational training the author was given to practitioners in 2010.

2003) is a huge challenge to organizing everyday family life. Additionally, the rising demands of education are passed down to families. The changes highlight that family life does not simply occur by itself. More and more we have to consider family life as an active process of construction – the "doing family paradigm" (Jurczyk/Lange/Thiessen 2012). Historically this is not really new. But today the traditions and institutions that organized and stabilized the process of constructing family life are no longer plausible or have even decayed. It can be seen that in the negotiations on ethnic minority and lower class families new models of 'the right family' are created.

Families are not, however, defenceless victims of social and economic transformation. Rather, they try, within the limits of their imagination, goals in life and resources, to contribute to the shaping of the social and economic transformation. One result of greater competition is that parents are more aware of the importance of education. And in surveys we can see that all parents, regardless of class or ethnicity, want higher education for their children (OECD 2009). But their opportunities are very different and we can see growing inequalities between families. Annette Lareau, who interviewed children and parents of different classes and ethnicities in the United States, summarizes her results under the title "Unequal Childhoods" (2003). Through her observations she discovered differences in parenting styles that related to class distinctions. Specifically, she observed how different family circumstances influenced the children's performance and interactions in and out of school. Her findings allowed her to draw a major distinction between the parenting styles of working class parents on the one hand and middle class parents on the other. Here are the frantic families managing their children's hectic schedules of "leisure" activities; and here are families with plenty of time but little economic security. Lareau shows how middle-class parents, whether black or white, engage in a process of "concerted cultivation" designed to draw out children's talents and skills, while working-class and poor families rely on "the accomplishment of natural growth," in which a child's development unfolds spontaneously—as long as basic comfort, food, and shelter are provided. Each of these approaches to child-rearing brings its own benefits and its own drawbacks.

The aim of the "Concerted Cultivation" type of child-rearing is that children are taught lessons through organized activities that help prepare them for a white-collar job and the types of interactions that a white-collar worker encounters. Social workers can be included in this milieu. Parents with the "Natural Growth" type of child-rearing have less education and time to impress the values upon their children that will give them an advantage in school. Their children have fewer organized activities and more free time to play with other children in the neighbourhood. In an economy founded on industrial production this way of raising children was indeed understandable and successful. However, with the demise of unskilled jobs in industry, "natural growth" child-rearing has become less conducive to successful employment prospects. The typical clients of social work are recruited from this milieu. Important to see is that parents in all classes pursue the strategy to keep their children close to themselves: The middle-class parents want their children to be in same positions as they are. And so do the poor families as well. All parents want the best for their children. The practice of greater parental involvement is what perpetuates inequalities from one generation to the next. Bearing in mind the class differences between social workers and client families, we can see that the ideas of what the 'right', decent way of child-rearing should be ("concerted cultivation" or "natural growth") are totally contradictory. And remembering the little scenes in the beginning, we can consider that looking at 'the right' way of child-rearing sometimes obstruct social workers' view of the emotional quality of the parent-child relationship.

A further differentiation between approaches to child-rearing is visible between autochthonic and immigrant families, particularly families who have migrated from rural regions where traditional agricultural subsistence communities are common and the welfare state is rare. In this situation, families depend on a high degree of solidarity and tribalistic (i.e. community-

oriented) systems of rules and exchange (Nauck 2007). The production of welfare in the family is based on a highly segregated division of labour according to generation and gender (Mansfeld 2006). Whereas modernization processes are leading to change in the country of origin, the family bond gains importance in the new country of residence and is further strengthened by experiences of rejection, dismissal and discrimination (Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The collectivist attitude is expressed in child-rearing in scepticism towards strengthening children's autonomy or their individualization. The migration situation and coming to terms with a foreign country is a "multi-generational project" (BMFSFJ 2000) that initially promotes family solidarity. This explains why, as Uslucan (2008) has shown in his empirical work, Turkish families in Germany, for example, practice a more protective and controlling style of parenting than Turkish families in Turkey. This can have an inhibiting effect on the children because they have to be encouraged to be independent in order to gain the education they need to capitalize on the employment opportunities offered by the modern service and knowledge economy. Simultaneously, in an environment marked by everyday racism (Leiprecht/Lutz 2009) they need the security and support of their family. An understanding of these parenting questions is not necessarily to be expected from social workers. The proportion who have either personally or through their parents experienced migration is below average. Professional publications call on social workers to critically examine their own cultural clichés, but outside of large cities this rarely occurs in practice. In the following part it will be shown that gender issues are important understanding family models.

2.) The notion of the 'good mother' and the 'good father': The impact of gender constructions

Colleagues from other European countries working in West Germany for some years are often very astonished when they look for daycare for their children. The persistence of the housewife is comparatively amazing. And there would be a lot to say about the historical development of this German case, the influence of Luther and his ideas of "The Protestant family" (Vinken 2007). Here only two German peculiarities should be mentioned: The denigrating expression 'Rabenmutter' for working mothers only exists in Germany. And secondly, in the rural areas of conservative southern Germany (Bavaria, Baden-Wuerttemberg), pre-school daycare was practically unknown before the start of the 2000s.

This makes the most recent development even more astonishing: a new law guaranteeing daycare for all under-threes from 2013 onwards. Daycare facilities and capacities are being expanded across the country because family policy is now considered a new, hard location factor. Economic development requires an increasing number of women in paid employment and highly skilled specialists. Today, more than one-third of mothers with at least one child under three are in paid employment as are two-thirds of mothers with school-aged children (BMFSFJ 2012). The increasing educational demands placed on children are a further reason for the considerable changes to the role model for the 'good mother'. She is no longer the homemaker and wife but the working mum who encourages and stimulates her children and – not only in the event of a separation – can financially support them. It is remarkable that the assumption of an ostensibly instinctive and natural motherly love is no longer sufficient and plausible for a successful upbringing (Thiessen/Villa 2008).

The emotionalized discussion of 'right' motherhood can be followed in afternoon television in the daily talk and reality shows. These programmes regularly pillory mothers, primarily from lower social strata, who cannot 'offer' their children anything. This does not mean that they cannot give love, security or joy, but that they cannot offer economic security, good education and training, and educational toys. The one-sided orchestrations of such formats are particularly insidious because they take people who are overwhelmingly structurally

disadvantaged and make them individually responsible for their situation. Being a 'good mother' means being in paid employment, being self-reliant and not being a burden to the state (Thiessen/Villa 2008).

What about fathers? In the last two decades there have been signs of an astonishing new orientation among men: fathers no longer want to be just an 'earner' but also a 'carer' in their children's lives. At the same time, there is hardly any evidence of changes in the practice of fathering, apart from the surprisingly high rate of participation of fathers in parental leave since its reform in 2006 (23%, BMFSFJ 2012). Even if two-thirds of fathers on leave have only used their minimum entitlement of two months up until now, they are increasingly perceiving the problems of reconciliation. In addition to their unchanged full-time paid employment, they are aiming for active fatherhood. However, young men and fathers are especially caught in the model of the "modernized breadwinner" (Zerle/Krok 2008) that does not question the full-time employment identity but extends it with active fatherhood. Until now there have been neither political nor employer-based measures to support this model. In particular, the increasing blurring of spatial and temporal boundaries of fathers' paid employment makes it even harder for them to reconcile it with family activities. But precisely this point implies great potential for pressure on families. Furthermore, the 'new father' is still searching for an appropriate role that does not undermine his construction of gender. The question is, how the new role models for fathers retain the old masculine template of ingenuity and heroism and expand them by adding the element of care. Changing fatherhood is even more precarious if there is no paid employment. It is therefore no surprise that in deprived families traditional gender patterns predominate.

Excessive demands on both mothers and fathers are becoming clear in the new role models. Women's and men's individual options for action can easily be overestimated if the contemporary framework for family life (blurring boundaries, intensification, and precariousness) slips from sight. At this point a well-known concept of parenting should be implicated that Winnicott developed back in 1953.

Winnicott's starting point was the basic needs of infants and children that change during the course of their development. The infant is dependent for its existence on the skills of an attachment figure to satisfy its needs so that it never feels abandoned. Nevertheless, the attachment figure has to extricate themselves from this close attachment so that the child can learn that they are not a part of the attachment figure. As Winnicott wrote (1953: 91f.), "The good-enough mother ... starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure ..." From this perspective, motherhood can be viewed as a continuous balancing act between attachment and separation in the relationship with the infant. This is not only valid for mothers but for every attachment figure of a child. After giving birth and breast feeding women have no other exclusive function or significance for the child. The figure of the 'good-enough mother'' – and we can add to it the 'good-enough father' – shows that beneficial conditions for children to grow up are those in which there is a balance between security and developing autonomy through separation and are not related to gender or an exclusive devotion to the child.

3.) Coming together: The interaction between social workers and clients

Social work always deals with families. At the start of the 20th century the newly constituted youth and family welfare primarily addressed parenting skills (Bauer/Wiezorek 2009) and developed the concept (particularly in German social work) of "spiritual motherhood" (Allen 1991). Social workers as 'super-moms'. Even if many historical conceptual approaches, like Jane Addams' for example, aimed at an empowerment-oriented strengthening of mothers and community structures, an ideal of the "competent parenting family" oriented on the role

model of the middle-class family can still be proven (Bauer/Wiezorek 2009). The significance of the mainly (upper) middle-class origins of the protagonists of social work has not yet been investigated thoroughly enough. The parenting skills of the (proletarian) client families was and still is measured by criteria like the cleanliness of the home, the domesticity of the mother and the moral behaviour of the family members (Bauer/Wiezorek 2009). In fact, significant historical parallels can be identified: it could be postulated that at the start of the 20th century social work served to make proletarian families fit for industrial modernity and today, at the start of the 21st century, social work is concerned with optimization processes for the service and knowledge economy.

Using the example of 'early prevention' it will be shown how new role models of parenthood are currently being negotiated. Since 2006 in Germany is improved a child protection system by better preventing neglect and violence against infants and children. It is aimed to support practitioners in recognizing risks and burdens in families at an earlier stage more effectively and in providing appropriate support for families with high-risk of child neglect. The interventions should help to improve parents' attachment capability and sensitivity. Whereas youth welfare has for a long time tended to overlook pre-school children, in recent years early prevention programmes have been developed and expanded at a great pace in western societies. The catalyst was not a rising number of child murders but a shift in the media and political treatment of the abuse and neglect of infants and children. These appalling and emotionally charged events were picked up on by the media and politicians at a time when the structural consequences of poverty became visible in a growing social divide. One reaction (e.g. in Germany) is the 'activating welfare state' with its principle of supporting but also challenging the individual (or in the UK, 'The Third Way' of 'New Labour').

Political programmes and concepts for early prevention contain a negative image of deprived families that brands them as 'dysfunctional' or a danger to others.

Featherstone (2006) cites one such example from the "White Paper Respect and Responsibility" which was to result in the Anti-Social Behaviour Act (2004):

"There are a small number of families that can be described as 'dysfunctional'. Two or three families and their wider networks can 'create havoc' in a neighbourhood or estate. It is always in areas of greatest disadvantage that this 'corrosive effect' is seen and felt most clearly. Sometimes it occurs where there has been considerable family breakdown; multiple partners can pass through the house; children do not have a positive role model; little in the way of a predictable orderly routine; and the lifestyle is such that it makes the lives of neighbours a complete misery. Some professionals have refrained from demanding changes in standards and behaviour from such families, in an effort to remain non 'judgemental'. This stance alienates those living alongside chaotic families and who legitimately complain that professionals can go home to areas not beset by this kind of misery. It also fails children in dysfunctional families by not asserting their need for care and discipline." (Home Office, 2003, p, 23)

In Germany too early prevention programmes focus on developing parenting skills. They follow concepts of parental competence that have been formulated for parents in general, for example by the Scientific Advisory Board of the Federal Family Ministry (2005): "Competences related to the child: parents should be able to respond sensitively to the child according to her/his stage of development; Personal competences: parents should be able to reflect about parenting, to acquire knowledge about child development, control their own negative emotions and not behave impulsively; Action-related competences: parents should develop confidence in their own self-efficacy, keep their promises, not be contradictory in their dealing with their child and adapt to new circumstances; Context-related competences: parents should be able to make arrangements for the positive development of their child

outside of the family" (Wissenschaftlicher Beirat 2005). High expectations which idealize families. It seems that they can only be disappointed.

When early prevention programmes attempt to improve parents' competences then the terms "attachment" and "sensitivity" – well-known from attachment theory – enjoy a prominent role. In spite of claims to the opposite, the programmes in reality address almost exclusively mothers. The experts' aim is to get the mother to put the child and her or his needs first. The intention in this article is not to discredit attachment theory. Studies inspired by attachment theory have just recently proven again the significance of primary relationships. Furthermore, by studying the actual behaviour of carer and child this approach opens up the mother-child attachment to critical reflection as opposed to mystifying it and veiling it in the cloak of instinct. For example, Crittenden's "CARE-Index" (2005) is an instrument that makes sensitivity measureable which means it can furthermore be operationalized and 'degendered'. It is therefore all the more surprising that the professional debates and the practical approaches to early prevention almost exclusively address mothers. Against the background of a division of labour based on gender hierarchies, mothers are primarily responsible for the child and therefore more readily available as clients and subjects of investigation. In addition to this justification from the view of project and research efficiency, it can be surmised that assumptions of a traditional responsibility of women for infants are being resurrected without further thought. Hellbrügge, for example, explicitly refers to the mother as "a unique person for the child and his development and an institution" (2008: 8). Fathers are frequently mentioned rhetorically in early prevention programmes. In reality, they are rarely involved (Liel/Kindler 2009). One reason might be that the content and framework of the early prevention programmes are not designed for fathers and do not correspond to their gendered ideas of being a father.

A further core issue for early prevention programmes is gaining access to the so-called 'families at risk'. Considering how debates about child murder have been whipped up by the media it is easy to understand how the fantasy of being able to reach all children at risk arises. In doing so the focus of the prevention programmes shifts from open offers for families to an offensive intervention opportunity for professionals (e.g. home visits for missing a regular health check-up for the child). The term 'high risk family' is very telling: it is not the risks arising from poverty and deprivation that are named but the risks that the family apparently creates by its way of life. More discussion is required on to what extent families' self-determination can be preserved with the new focus on outreach work. The question of access is also a question of gender: pregnant women and new mothers can easily be reached by midwives, maternity clinics, gynaecologists and social workers. It is then up to the mothers/parents or the experts to which extent the father is involved. Furthermore, with the phrase 'child protection starts in the womb' the rights of children to well-being and of women to self-determination are being renegotiated. For example, if imposing restrictions as opposed to offering support is proposed as an appropriate measure for pregnant women who drink alcohol and/or smoke, then this becomes a political controversial issue for women.

Finally, the example of early prevention programmes specifically shows what the professionals consider to be normal with respect to families, fatherhood and motherhood. These ideas determine the conception and direction of social work interventions without themselves being explicitly articulated. Here an example is given from the research project "Vocational Competences for Young Mothers. Cooperation of Counselling, Training, and Profession (MOSAIK, University of Bremen)" (Thiessen 2007), where interviews and group discussions with teenage mothers had been done: in an advice centre for pregnant women a pregnant 17 year old asked about how she could continue her schooling. She was referred to a midwife. Her same-aged boyfriend was being motivated to focus on completing his education and occupational training by a social worker. The example (more details in Thiessen 2007) illustrates how social work frequently propagates traditional family role models without any

further thought. These are neither helpful in keeping a family together nor in the event of a separation. Since the father would be absent from the family for his education and training, he would have few opportunities for establishing an attachment to his child. If the relationship broke up, the young mother who had been stuck at home would be likely to be dependent on benefits. Why not part-time vocational training for them both? The question of what distinguishes a family and which skills are necessary to successfully share responsibilities when living together are still controversial. Milieu specific considerations colour the answers. A risk assessment is more likely to take place if both parents are unemployed and in a deprived situation than if they are two full-time 'high potential' parents with over-long working hours. What do the professionals consider normal and where does a risk for the child's development start?

The common practice in the middle class is to organize family formation and child-rearing by means of rational planning and acquisition of expert knowledge, and expending considerable cognitive, financial and emotional resources. The aim is the social placement of their offspring by means of education and cultivation. Is it not an insult to them when the 'disadvantaged' seem to simply live from day to day, have unplanned pregnancies, hardly think about child-rearing and to top it off live from benefits? Possibly a "moral panic" (Cohen 2002) is running its course when a "sexual depravity" is assumed for the underclass. Even experts are not completely free of such attitudes. In dealing with teenage mothers they can project what for them is impermissible behaviour onto their clients, for example, living in the here and now, the desire for a child at an inappropriate time or demanding help and support.

Client families are very sensitive towards the denigrations of professionals. Helming found this out in her interviews with clients of family social work. For example, one woman said, "They think, 'what sort of a family has six children?' – first off the stupid answer 'selfish'. But I'm not selfish." (Helming et al. 1999) Different experiences of successful interventions could also be reconstructed. "And 'cos she just treated us as normal people (…) not like the others who say 'look at them'." (ibid.) A significant key to a successful intervention seems to be promoting self-confidence and perceived self-efficacy. As one mother said, "She didn't say – like others do – 'you can't do it, go away'. She said, 'try, try and try again'. And she could see what I can do and she said it again and again. 'Cos back then I was trying to get a part-time job or just a few hours and 'cos no one wanted me she kept saying 'give it another go'. And that always gave me self confidence." (ibid.)

4.) Rethinking family models and good parenthood: 'The good-enough family'
All too often, experts are looking for mistakes. In doing so, they often allocate mothers the sole responsibility for bringing up their children well. They measure them against the norms of the middle class. One problem with concepts based on attachment theory – as they are applied in early prevention with remarkable success – but one problem I see is the narrow focus on the behaviour of the primary carer. Other factors, such as income or living conditions, which in my opinion are at least as important, are not considered. With respect to the long-term effects of advisory and training programmes for promoting parenting competencies I would like to point out that improved sensitivity and attachment behaviour can wither away if the circumstances of the family do not change (Jungmann 2010). This primarily refers to attaining independent economic security by means of training and paid employment at a living wage. In this context it should also be mentioned that improving long-term employment prospects through occupational training can also lead to an improved mother-child attachment (Thiessen 2007).

In addition to the sensitivity of the parents, sufficient self-confidence and the belief in self-efficacy among mothers; parents who do not have to worry about securing a livelihood and a successful partnership are all further factors contributing to a good childhood. The

introduction of a minimum wage could do as much to ensure child well-being as programmes to promote parenting skills. This implies a refocusing of the political dimension of social work. The advocacy position of the "human rights profession" (Staub-Bernasconi 2007) merits further discussion. It becomes clear that the role models of families, motherhood and fatherhood held by the experts need to be fundamentally reviewed and should be discussed openly. A good mother is also one who recognizes the limits of her possibilities and has a well-founded hope that she will find someone to talk to who respects her limitations and considers her gender.

Social work with deprived families should not be put into a position where it is expected to deflect all risks from children at risk. Social work has to clarify how it treats fears and ambivalence in order not to succumb to one-sided concepts and simple screenings. It's all about being in contact with people who possibly have different ideas of what is normal. Borrowing from Winnicott it is suggested developing a role model for the 'good-enough family'. This means an adequate – if possibly unconventional – mutual provision for the family and a style of child-rearing that is not aimed at achieving optimal employability. Family would then be understood as an intergenerational, long-term care relationship. So the focus is on function instead of form. The significance of family lies in assuming enduring responsibility for another person with an intergenerational perspective, not in the form of living arrangements (such as marriage, heterosexual or mono-ethnic relationships). Consequently, the professionals should be looking at the real care constellations in the everyday life of their clients. At the same time, it is the task of social work to demand an adequate public infrastructure that provides compensatory inclusion conditions for families and appropriate employment structures. The 'good-enough family' needs 'good-enough' respect and life conditions.

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