“Constructing Men in Child Protection Work”

In this article Jonathan Scourfield, a leading researcher on the topic of social work with men, discusses the gendered constructions of clients in child protection work, focusing on the way social workers construct men (that is to say, fathers) and masculinity in child protection work.

Scourfield’s conclusions are based on an ethnographic research conducted over a period of three months in 2000 in UK, which was based on interviews with both female and male social workers as well as case records. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Scourfield’s research was conducted within the UK context, his conclusions are far-reaching and can be applied to practices of social work within other local contexts that rest on the same social parameters as Scourfield’s case study, such as the fact that the clients in question were from low-income families, white, heterosexual and able-bodied. That being said, Scourfield’s study leaves out the possibly of different constructions of male clients of different race (non-White), sexuality (non-heterosexual) or clients with disabilities.

This ethnographic research demonstrated that there is no difference in how male and female social workers’ see their male clients (fathers); namely, both female and male social workers construct men and masculinity in the same way. In this light, Scourfield outlines six main discourses of masculinity used by social workers in child protection work. Social workers usually construct fathers in a negative fashion: 1) as a threat (either as sexual abusers or as perpetrators of domestic violence), 2) as no use (men being always away from home, contributing little to the family), 3) as irrelevant (men who are not legal guardians or men that mothers do not want to be involved) and 4) as absent (men who avoid contact with social workers). Rarely, they are seen in less negative fashion, either as no different from women or sometimes even as better than women (for example in the case when mothers are seen as failed caregivers).

Within these dominant discourses that frame men in a negative fashion, such as the discourse of “men as threat”, social workers tend to refrain from engaging with men and, consequently, exclude them from child protection services, focusing only on working with mothers. This happens due to two reasons: 1) social workers fear men’s possible violent outbursts and 2) they see mothers as the main caregivers, as the main protectors of children. Consequently, they focus on working with mothers,
claiming that the solution to ending child abuse or neglect is in mother’s hands, who should either leave the husband or kick him out of the home. In case she fails to do either, she is seen by the social workers as ‘failed mother’. As a result, even in those cases when father is the abuser, social workers choose not to engage with him; rather, they blame the mother for her ‘failure to protect’ the child.

This, as Scourfield emphasizes, needs to be changed: social workers need to be trained to understand the gendered discourse of social work as a practice. It is in the best interest of child well-being that social workers stop scrutinizing mothers as ‘failed caregivers’ and include fathers in social work programs.

The document was prepared by Ana Popovic for Child Protection Hub for South East Europe, 2016.