

Evi Hatzivarnava-Kazassi

Family support services for socially excluded families

Summary

This paper addresses conceptual issues related to the notions of 'family', 'family support' and 'social exclusion' in the Western world. The author understands the notion of family as a personal social network; social exclusion refers to a process that increasingly generates a lack of resources and family support refers to the provision of multi-functional and comprehensive support structures for personal social networks 'at risk' of social exclusion. Modern family support systems have to provide an answer to challenges related to changes in family structure and organisation. These changes include the inability of modern family structures to care for dependent family members; increasing family breakdowns and fluid family structures; inability to raise children according to the demands of modern society; violence and deviance in families; high disintegration risks of migrant families. The paper ends by presenting some core elements for family support structures that meet the challenges family life is facing in the modern Western world.

1. Defining the concepts, the issues and the context

Undoubtedly, terms like 'family', 'family support services' and 'social exclusion' mean different things not only among ordinary people, but also among practitioners and the academic community. This may be due to different cultural backgrounds and experiences and ideological presupposition, rather than to different scientific interpretations.

That is why I think that it is important, as a starting point, to clarify and demarcate the limits of the concepts we use and specify the issues we are discussing, as well as their context.

Family

For a start, what is the 'family' that services are supposed to support?

Though everybody would agree that no definition of family has ever been universally accepted, new types of family related formations and new forms of family life are emerging to an unprecedented extent and at an unprecedented rate. This forces us to think in terms of 'families' rather than 'the family'.

However, what seems to unite families is that they constitute, in a looser or tighter way, 'person supporting networks'⁽¹⁾ based on rights and obligations. This is the definition to which we will adhere here.

In the developed world, where there is a much greater plurality of socially accepted family forms, the family appears as a flexible, private unit based on ambivalent and diversified relationships, subject to alterations during one's family cycle, constructed on personal choice and negotiated between the partners.

In Western Europe the following trends have emerged as the most dominant in family development.

- Marriage is no longer the exclusive or only socially acceptable institution for sexual relationships, family formation and procreation. Its timing is postponed to later stages in life and for many, it does not constitute a lasting life-time experience.
- Cohabitation without marriage is on the increase, particularly among young people, though it seems that many partners eventually ratify their relationship with marriage.⁽²⁾
- Couples choose to have fewer and fewer children, even less than two. In the European Union the fertility rate in 1993 was only 1.46 per woman, with the Mediterranean countries - and not the northern member states - exhibiting the lowest rates.⁽³⁾
- The number of children born out of wedlock is rising, in Denmark reaching almost half of all live births.⁽⁴⁾
- The divorce rate has more than doubled in the European Union between 1970 and 1993.⁽⁵⁾ One in every three marriages ends up in divorce.⁽⁶⁾
- Higher rates of remarriage and reconstituted families mean that more children grow up in stepfamilies.
- Although a greater degree of democratisation in decision-making appears to have evolved, the traditional gender-based division of domestic tasks within the family has not changed significantly even in the most developed countries, despite women's participation in the labour market. Men, often with the approval of women, are still reluctant to assume responsibility for rearing children and an equal share in household tasks.⁽⁷⁾
- In terms of the size of the kinship support network, it is evident that it is shrinking, often being reduced to parents and their dependent children only.
- Young unmarried children tend to leave the parental home and form independent households, though at times retaining their financial dependency on parents.
- Increasing life expectancy in association with low fertility changes the age distribution of the population in favour of the elderly.⁽⁸⁾
- Family values have changed dramatically. Family formation is a choice motivated by the idea of love and the emotional rewards drawn from the close and deep relationship between the two partners, and only marginally by the idea of having children. People establishing families seem unwilling to 'sacrifice' other personal pursuits in favour of family. The decision about having children (if, when, how many) is accommodated within changing considerations and expectations related to living standards, personal freedom, career prospects and personal concern about securing resources for old age.

Social exclusion

The concept of 'social exclusion' has been widely used, particularly within the institutions of the European Union in recent years. Often, if not generally, it is used as an alternative to the poverty concept. In fact the use of the term 'social exclusion' has gradually replaced the term 'poverty', since it seems to be more effective in connoting the social and cultural aspects of poverty and the importance of socio-cultural factors in explaining the non-integration and non-participation of people in economic, political and social life.

When people agglomerate, in geographical or social terms, the financial, social and cultural disadvantages that obstruct their full participation in society, we can talk of socially excluded areas or socially excluded categories or groups.

In the midst of a developed Europe, degraded urban enclaves or isolated rural areas, groups like migrants, gypsies, one-parent families, the long-term unemployed, the elderly, people with AIDS and other deprived categories produce the map of social exclusion in Europe. It is estimated that in all more than 50 million people are involved.

However, social exclusion is not only a state of affairs; more importantly, it is a process. The lack of resources generates social exclusion, which in turn leads to a sense of powerlessness and a loss of purpose and hope. Consequently, this state of powerlessness obstructs all efforts to break out of the circle of social exclusion. 'To be excluded is not just to be in the margin but to be kept in the margin by forces beyond your choice'.⁽⁹⁾ At the same time, within the family, social exclusion is 'transmitted' to younger generations as socially excluded parents cannot provide their children with the necessary resources that would enable them to overcome their socially inherited disadvantages, thus perpetuating the vicious circle.

To all these disadvantages should be added the problem of prejudiced attitudes, along with the discriminatory practices of society at large towards the socially excluded.

Finally, one has to consider that the state of the European economy today increases the risk of social exclusion. Europe does not seem able to create or even sustain work opportunities for everyone, while it is feared that new work patterns such as part-time work or tele-work may further increase the risk for specific groups. At the same time the European economies do not seem able to support all those in need with their traditional assistance schemes.

It is clear, therefore, that any effort to combat social exclusion will have to take into account the complexities of the phenomenon; its multi-dimensional nature, its cause-generating mechanisms, the possibilities and limits of social intervention.

Family Support Services (F.S.S)

Again, there is a great deal of variation in the services selected as part of family support, depending on the criteria used.

However, the family support services that, in my view, prevail in the mind of professionals in the social welfare field, at least in my country, are the structures and programmes that:

- a. complement basic and long-established services, such as schools or medical services, by identifying and filling in 'gaps' in the provision of such services and by working between systems;
- b. have an explicit family support purpose;
- c. focus on the family as a whole (though in my experience they have a clear bias towards parents and care providers);
- d. predominantly use non-residential and community-based services.

Such services may be multi-functional family support structures or single-function structures and provide activities that range from educational programmes for the development of parental or other social skills to group support, information, training, counselling, day care or home care, temporary residential facilities etc.

It is the experience of these services that I would like to bring to your attention, drawn basically from the activities of my organisation.

2. The challenges facing F.S.S.

The challenges that F.S.S. are facing today are related to the changes in family structure and organisation and the threats of social exclusion described above, as well as to other, more comprehensive changes that have increased the burden and vulnerability of an increasing number of families, threatening their stability and functioning.

In fact, the two types of changes seem to be intertwined in a cause-effect relationship. On the one hand, changes in the family increase the vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion since the modern family can no longer provide a safety net to compensate for such processes. On the other hand, poverty and social exclusion affect family units to a greater extent than individuals, and particularly families with children.⁽¹⁰⁾

Let us identify some of the challenges that F.S.S. have to deal with.

Caring for dependent members

Caring for dependent members has become an increasingly difficult task within the family. This is due to the participation of women on the labour market, the fact that it is at odds with the family work arrangements and to the loosening of kinship support structures. The burden on women as prime care providers is particularly heavy and often more than individuals can bear. In 'crises', i.e. when the prime care provider is temporarily or permanently incapable of providing care, there is no wider kinship system that can act as a 'safety net' to accommodate the crisis. The burden and stress on the care providers at home are so great that in some countries they are reported to be organising themselves in almost militant groups.⁽¹¹⁾

F.S.S. have to take some responsibility for the 'caring' function, which can no longer be fully accommodated within the family system, by providing flexible daycare facilities, home-based services and even temporary residential care for the care receivers, and emotional support for the care-providers, as well as opportunities for relief from the caring function that allow for some free time or leisure activities. The gender bias of home-based care provision is a challenge that F.S.S. have to take into consideration, since in many cases it is a solution forced upon women while all the related consequences are taken for granted.

Family break-up and family fluidity

Family break-up is an ever increasing phenomenon, usually associated with negative consequences for family members. For the spouses, but more importantly for children, family break-up and divorce is an upsetting and often painful emotional process. In addition, it is associated with poor school results and behavioral performance among children.⁽¹²⁾

Moreover, parents often remarry and create new families with children from different marriages and new children being born.

Remarriages often break down - in fact it seems that second divorces are even more frequent than first divorces⁽¹³⁾ - and the consequences for children in this case may be even more acute.

One-parent families are on the rise, usually headed by mothers who face a lower standard of living and diminished emotional, material and social resources.

Here, again, the loosening of the wider kin support system increases the vulnerability of family members that are affected by such processes. For children in particular, the absence of wider kin support means that their frequently changing family environment lacks the framework of stability and continuity that kin support might have provided.

F.S.S. face the challenge of either 'preventing' the process or positively intervening in it, in order to look after the children's interests, reduce stress and conflict and support those in need. This means that F.S.S. must, first of all, develop programmes to enhance the functions of parenthood and child care through education and skill, promoting a deeper understanding of intimate relationships and teaching people how to form and preserve such relationships and deal with situations of conflict. It also means that, when breakdown takes place, F.S.S. must mediate between the spouses in order to best look after the children's interests. Finally, it means that, after the breakdown, F.S.S. must support the families in all possible ways (i.e. facilitating access to the labour market, providing facilities for child care, supporting the members emotionally to deal with and accept the new situation).

Raising children

Child rearing is no longer a straightforward process based on pre-existing patterns of behaviour. Not only does the segregation of ages provide fewer opportunities for young parents to learn from their grandparents, but the existence of different patterns of socialisation increases anxiety on the part of the parents as to how to raise their children and deal with their problems.

Parents therefore need help and support as they raise and socialise their children. They need to understand the anxieties, resistance and crises of their adolescent daughters and sons. In addition, they need to have a clear understanding of their own behaviour and reactions and the phases they go through themselves.

On the other hand, in a society characterised by freedom of choice, plurality in social values and flexibility, children and young people have to learn through parents and other socialising agencies how to compromise individual choice with the necessities and limits of real life, how to balance the needs of the individual with the obligations and needs of collective living, how to develop stability in a world of uncertainty, how not to raise expectations that create an illusory picture of reality.

Here, again, F.S.S. are challenged to develop skills and attitudes in both parents and children by means of education and other processes, and also to provide support and counselling when individuals seek advice and help.

Violence and Deviance

The rise of violence and crime is affecting families in a variety of ways.

Within the family, victims of violence often feel helpless as to where to look for support and how to deal with their situation.

Families that include delinquent children, drug addicts, AIDS patients and members that show different kinds of 'deviant' behaviour lack the necessary resources (financial, emotional, cognitive) to cope with and positively help their members.

F.S.S. are called upon to develop mechanisms that facilitate the access of victims of violence in the family to Services, but also to develop a variety of therapeutic, supportive and residential facilities and programmes for such victims and, in some cases, for the offenders too.

In addition, F.S.S. are requested to provide counselling and support for parents and other family members to cope with and help other members that are either victims of violence or express themselves in violent or anti-social behaviour.

Finally, F.S.S., along with other institutions in society, need to contribute to the development and propagation of a culture of non-violence.

Migration

Migration affects families in a variety of ways and increases the risk of disintegration. Migrant families experience difficulties in their social and economic integration in the host countries.

Migrant parents seem unable to reconcile their own cultural expectations regarding the education and upbringing of their children with the prevailing social values of the host society.

Prejudices, discrimination practices and even racism in the host society, not only against first but also against second and third-generation migrants, increase and perpetuate the risks of social isolation and exclusion.

F.S.S. are asked to intervene by developing programmes that facilitate the integration of migrants in the host society (e.g. training, information and development of social skills), by helping migrant parents and children to deal with their problems related to cultural identity, by facilitating the social acceptance of migrants by the host population, by educating and training both migrants and non-migrants in the skills of living in a multi-cultural society.

Families with spouses of different ethnic origin are also on the rise, due to increased migration and tourism. As a result of differing cultural traditions, pressures from the social environment and differences of opinion about the children's upbringing, such families are under considerable stress. External emotional support and advice in dealing with such problems may be requested.

These are only a few examples of the challenges that F.S.S. are facing today.

3. Meeting the challenges

Do F.S.S. appear to meet these challenges?

Today's F.S.S. are criticized for usually responding only after crisis situations have arisen and indeed after the damage has been done; for being fragmented in their approach and ineffective in their long-term results; for not being able to follow rapid changes in family needs and adjust accordingly; for their lack of 'customer focus'; for being culturally biased; for failing to secure their customers' rights; for their stigmatising and sometimes victimizing practices; for their failure to detect, reach out and help those who are most in need, and for being costly.

How should F.S.S. face this criticism? What kind of services do we need to deal with contemporary challenges? How, and to extent, can we improve the effectiveness of the services to fight social exclusion?

In sharing my ideas with you, I will draw basically from the experience of my organisation in anti-poverty projects that developed as part of the activities of its Family Centers.

Structures

I think that the word here is 'flexibility'. F.S.S. need to have flexible structures that ensure efficient decision-making processes in order to respond to social needs that often arise very fast and to local demands that often prove to be quite urgent.

Relative flexibility in staff roles is also required, unless a specialised task is to be performed. Strict role structures may split the task in parts and reduce the organisation's ability to view it as a whole and respond to it in an integrated way.

Flexibility is also needed with regard to the development and permanency of structures and their functions. Changing circumstances and changing needs, but also cost/benefit considerations, require that structures develop, are abolished or change their functions according to the changing environment.

As an alternative to permanent structures, operational methods that increase effectiveness and reduce costs may be considered. In my organisation, for example, we have recently abolished the permanent structures of family centers located in small villages, and converted their daily intervention into a periodical but systematic one in accordance with local needs and in partnership with the local community.

Tasks and functions

The word here is 'plurality'. We need a variety of services with a variety of tasks and functions in order to deal with the variety of needs that families experience.

Thus F.S.S. could develop activities of a 'supportive' nature by providing flexible day care services for children and home-based services for the elderly, the sick or those with special needs, by counselling family members that seek help, by mediating in cases of family conflict, by acting as a resource mechanism for family members as well as foster families and child minders, and by encouraging the development of kinship or community networks for the support of families in need. In addition, F.S.S. could develop 'emergency' and 'relief' services for families experiencing crisis, such as crisis units, shelters, emergency at-home services and emergency foster families. Finally, they could develop 'promotional' activities based primarily on education and information and aiming at the development of personal skills for life, at fostering human rights values and a culture of solidarity, at promoting positive health attitudes, at making people aware of environmental and social issues, at providing opportunities for education and training, at empowering and releasing unexploited human resources, at facilitating access to the labour market, even at collaborating with local agencies for the creation of job opportunities for the socially excluded. I think these proactive types of activities have gained importance in the recent years, as opposed to the more traditional supportive activities of F.S.S.

Tasks and functions could be accommodated in multi-functional family centers, particularly functions of a promotional and supportive nature. However, single-function services are more commendable for specialised tasks of a therapeutic and reconstitutive nature, as well as for residential provisions.

Uniformity of functions in the name of wider policy priorities and equal treatment or service-package offers that may or may not fit local needs and may or may not be relevant to service users must be avoided. On the contrary, the development of functions should relate to local needs identified and assessed through data collection and surveys, but also through discussion with service users and local agencies. The same is true for the continuation of functions: their relevance to local needs and priorities must be questioned through on-going systematic monitoring and evaluating processes that involve the service users.

Target groups

The word here is 'integration'. F.S.S. should address all families in need, though they may develop particular programmes and activities to deal with the specific needs of particular groups of families. We would not recommend the development of service structures that address the needs of just one particular socially excluded group (i.e. a center for single-parent families), since they would not facilitate the social integration of that group. On the contrary, experience has shown that the development of activities for socially excluded groups within integrated family services is conducive to reducing stigma and group isolation as well as possible antagonisms between groups.

Within the family itself, the focus should be on the family as a unit, since the individual is part of a family system which he both depends on and affects at the same time, though intervention may at times devote more attention to individual members.

Principles

The word here is 'the customer's rights'. 'The customer's rights' should be the guiding principle of every F.S.S. and must be apparent in all its practices. F.S.S. should accept and respect the fact that families are increasingly differentiated in terms of shape and culture. Service intervention should not only be non-judgemental and non-discriminatory, but should actively enhance tolerance, respect for the culturally and socially different, understanding of other people's perceptions and respect of the right to make different choices as long as these choices do not interfere with other people's rights.

The customer's rights principle also suggest that F.S.S. take into consideration the customers' views, involve the customers in the running of the services and ensure their participation in decision-making. Participation, after all, is a first step towards self-help.

In addition, the customer's rights demand that service provision is of high quality and accessible to those that seek it, and that equal opportunities are ensured.

Finally, the customer's rights principle means that services respect and believe in the individual's potential and look at the family members to identify strengths, skills and other personal resources in order to reinforce and develop them so that families play their part in society.

Methods and Practices

The word here is 'sensitivity'. Methods and daily practices indicate how sensitive and responsive F.S.S. are to stated principles and objectives.

Related to what we have discussed above, this means that F.S.S.

- Develop practices of client participation and client complaint mechanisms.
- Use research and evaluation mechanisms and reliable data collection processes and discuss the clients' and local agencies' views and priorities in the development and monitoring of services.
- Establish an integrated approach in working with families that secures multi-dimensional and multi-level action to deal with the multiple and complex problems of particularly socially excluded families. Experience has shown that fragmented education for such families has temporary and one-sided effects. It is no use, for example, providing training opportunities for a migrant woman if you do not, at the same time, deal with her language problem, her lack of self-confidence and the care of her children, all of which may prevent her from attending and benefiting from the training programme. A specific action programme is needed for each specific socially excluded group or area.
- Detect needs at an early stage, which means that they establish mechanisms (e.g. telephone helplines and counselling services at schools) and sensitise professionals and the public so that those at risk are 'detected' at an early stage and their needs are identified.
- Provide alternatives, which are carefully selected and decided upon in collaboration with family members according to what, in each individual situation, is judged best for the members involved and closest to their wishes.
- Avoid the establishment of delivery channels that may stigmatise certain categories of families.
- Develop strategies that lead to self-support, independence and empowerment and avoid the danger of perpetual dependency on services. This means working on strengths and not focusing on vulnerability. For socially excluded groups this strategy is of crucial importance since social exclusion, besides being a material phenomenon, as Jack Delors pointed out, is a 'state of mind'⁽¹⁴⁾ comprising a negative self-image, a loss of self-esteem and a lack of self-confidence. Examples of effective use of empowerment strategies can be found in many parts of Europe.
- Foster methods for reaching out those most in need and increase the accessibility of the service. Services cannot be merely satisfied with people knocking at their door. Socially

excluded families face a high F.S.S. threshold, for a variety of reasons (e.g. geographical isolation, distance from the Service, lack of knowledge, mistrust).

It is the task of F.S.S. to identify, in each case, the causes of this threshold and develop strategies to reduce it. Such strategies may include:

- carefully selecting the location of the service;
- using community networks and client associations to identify and gain contact with those most in need;
- using home-based as opposed to service-based intervention;
- identifying and implementing effective mechanisms for disseminating information for socially excluded groups;
- providing mobile services in order to reach the families at their homes.

Experiences and practices all over the world provide us with realistic and inspiring examples of increased accessibility. In Portugal, a Mobile Early Development project provides a home-based approach that does not only reach children in isolated rural areas, but develops alternatives to the official educational methods that encourage and strengthen the involvement of other family members in the education of young children and develop their self-confidence. In other parts of the world, buses and vans bring toys, games and company to families with young children living in remote areas. In the U.K. the Home-Start project provides the understanding and support of a 'friend' to lonely and often depressed families.⁽¹⁵⁾

Finally, build up partnerships and networks within the community and increase community involvement in F.S.S. and in their decision-making processes. Such partnerships not only enhance the democratic nature of F.S.S. but also maximise their effectiveness since they pool in experience, information and knowledge, practical and sometimes even financial support, and provide better agency coordination at the local level. Reinforcing informal community networks in particular could prove an effective way of supporting families, a way which makes use of unexploited community resources and honours non-professional experience.

In the Netherlands, for example, a pilot programme entitled 'Mothers inform mothers' is supporting first-time mothers in poor communities.⁽¹⁶⁾ Similarly, in Greece, a pilot project has trained mothers in a poor community to provide first-aid to other families in the area.⁽¹⁷⁾

Staff

The key word here is 'education'. It is obvious that the complexities of family needs and the self-perpetuating forces of social exclusion cannot be met or overcome by staff who not only lack the knowledge and skills, but also the sensitivity and commitment to support the families.

Staff are required, first of all, to have a good knowledge and understanding of the changes in family structure and organisation and the corresponding family needs, as well as a good know-

ledge and understanding of the forces of social exclusion. In addition, they need to have an understanding of what culture means and how culture affects behaviour.

It is imperative, also, for the staff to clearly understand what 'an integrated approach' is, to know how to identify and detect human needs and how to reach out to the most needy, to accept monitoring and evaluation as an integral part of action leading to improvement and not as a means of control (as is often the case), to master the skills of empowering the socially excluded and alienated and, above all, to be educated in the human rights tradition.

Finally, F.S.S. staff need to display skills relating to management and strategic planning in order to better plan, organise, implement and monitor their work, to make the best use of available resources or generate new resources in the community, to consider the cost/benefit issue as an important part of their work and to work effectively between systems.

It is obvious that the acquisition of such knowledge and skills is not only the concern of initial training and education, but of on-going training and learning processes.

However, knowledge and skills alone are obviously not enough. As described above, the work demands that the practitioner combines the methods of a professional with the spirit of the volunteer; sound education with a commitment to the issue of solidarity; the systematic approach of an official with the creative thought of a practitioner who takes initiatives and reaches for solutions; the culture of a scientist along with the culture of an activist.

4. Final comment

The overall effectiveness of F.S.S. to provide support for the families must be considered within the wider context of family policies and measures as well as other social and economic policies that affect families.

Support for families by F.S.S., no matter how well-organised or how well-educated and committed the F.S.S. staff are, will always have a limited effect if it is not part of an explicitly stated, integrated and coherent family policy that involves a variety of measures to relieve some of the pressures that families are facing today and improve their well-being (e.g. measures with regard to housing, taxation, guaranteed income, work arrangements).

The challenge, however, is not to develop relief or support measures for families, but to recognise and reverse, if possible, the processes and forces that affect families and make them so vulnerable. Unless the issues of unemployment and poverty are tackled and unless the environment (ecological, natural, social) improves, families will always feel threatened and insecure.

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