

FAMILIES IN THE NORTH-WEST EUROPEAN SOCIETY

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Nowadays, there is a lot of discussion about roles and functions of families in the North-West European society. Social scientists and politicians are worried about problems families are confronted with. Themes that are central in this discussion are divorce, child rearing, juvenile delinquency and division of labor and care between men and women. There is no discussion about the phenomenon “family” as such. Family is seen as an important institution that contributes to the continuity of our society, and family is seen as the best possible structure in which children can develop.

The debate is about conditions and processes that threaten the optimal functioning of families, especially with regard to the upbringing of children. In fact, the discussion about families is a discussion about youth. Worries about the family are worries about the development of our youth.

Do we have reasons to worry about that development? Most parents and children are satisfied with each other. There is no generation gap in North-West European families. Relations between parents and children are good. Parents and children positively communicate with each other. Despite these facts, we cannot deny that a minority of children cause a lot of problems by their antisocial, aggressive and delinquent behavior. These children grow up in so called multi problem families. These families are not only confronted with child rearing and behavioral problems, but also with relational problems between partners, with structural problems as finances and unemployment, and with personality and psychiatric problems of family members. In North-West European countries, governments have taken a lot of measures and actions to handle problems of these families like juvenile institutions, child and youth welfare, psychiatric assistance, family preservation and intervention programs, training of social skills, placing in custody and divest of parental authority. Since many years, there are debates and discussions about these families and children from these families. But these families are not the focus of the contemporary debate about the family. The discussion nowadays is about more normal, ordinary families, whose functioning is threatened, especially the function of rearing children.

Several social developments and processes have led to worries about this child rearing domain. In the middle of the twentieth century, in most North-West European countries one family type was dominant. That type was characterized as the average family. The average family consisted of one or more children and a father and mother, married on the base of love and friendship. There was a clear division of work and care. Father was the breadwinner, he worked outside the house. Mother took care of the children and the household. Nowadays, this average family is less characteristic for the North-West European society. We have been confronted with an increase of one-parent families, cohabitation and single households. In the Netherlands we have 6.7 million households. About one third consists of single households, one third of pairs without children and one third of one or more parents with children. The family is less dominant as it was in the middle of the last century, but it is still very dominant in Dutch society. About nine million Dutch people, that is more than half of all Dutch inhabitants, live within a family, and nearly all Dutch people live within a family during a long period of their life.

As I said before, the number of traditional, average families enormously decreased. The most frequent occurring alternative is the one-parent family. In the past, death of one of the parents was the main cause of the origin of this kind of families. Nowadays, it is a divorce.

Since 1960, the number of divorces enormously increased in our society. About one of three marriages ends into a divorce. That proportion is less than the proportion in North European countries like Norway and Sweden or in the USA (about 50%) but much higher than the rate of divorce in South European countries (8-12%). To give an impression of the rate of divorce in the Netherlands, I show you the number of divorces during the last 15 years. I also show you the number of children that are involved in these divorces. In about half of the divorces an average of two children is involved. These numbers suggest that a lot of children live in one-parent families, but that is a wrong conclusion. Only 10% of all children live in such a family in the Netherlands. Many people remarry or decide to live together with another partner.

Do we have reasons to worry about the development of children living in one-parent or step-families? From research it is clear that divorce has negative consequences for children, but many authors emphasize that these consequences are not disastrous. Amato (2001) found that children of divorced parents show lower school performances, more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, less psychological and emotional well-being, more negative self-esteem and have more negative social relations than children from intact families. But it is also clear that the seriousness of the negative consequences is dependent on the way parents deal with their problems. If parents are able to positively communicate about the upbringing and development of their children, consequences are less negative than in case of parents continuously quarrelling about the needs of their children. Especially to these children, I think we have to pay attention to. The same holds for children in step-families, in which parents are inclined to favor their own children.

Beside the demographic development of an increasing rate of divorces, other developments occurred in our North-West European society. People marry at later age. That means that many people live alone or with a partner during a much longer period than in the past. The mean age of Dutch women giving birth to their first child is the highest in the world (29 years old). Nowadays, not only men, but also Dutch women prefer to study during a longer period of time than in the past, or to earn money by paid work before they choose for children. Moreover the number of children decreased. Nowadays, parents choose for one, two or at most three children.

These developments were possible because of the increased prosperity. Prosperity also increased choices people can make and decreased mutual dependency: the dependency of parents from each other, the dependency of children from parents and the dependency of the extended family, neighborhood and church. Moreover traditional religious and moral norms disappeared, as a result of which childless couples, cohabitation and homosexual relations are accepted. The freedom to choice has led to increased feelings of independency, to other criteria about a good marriage, to acceptance of divorce if a marriage is no longer based on love and intimacy, to emphasis on autonomy and individualization. But even these developments do not threaten the existence of families. Of course, I mentioned the increasing rate of divorces, but I also mentioned the trend of many divorced people to remarry or to live together with another partner and to take care of children.

This trend may be illustrated by the definition of the term family we use in the Netherlands. Family is no longer defined as a married heterosexual couple with one or

more children living in one house, but as a community of at least one adult who takes care of at least one child.

That family is not threatened becomes also clear from expectations young people have about their future. Most young people expect that they will marry or will live together with a heterosexual partner and that they will take care of one or more children in near future and most young people are able to realize these expectations. So, why do we worry about families in our society? Worries are not only related to the decreasing number of average families and the increase of one-parent and step-families, but also to changing roles between fathers and mothers within families.

Till the sixties of the last century it was very usual in the Netherlands that women stopped paid work outside the house after they had married. They took care of the household and, later of the children. Men were breadwinners. So, there was a clear division of labor and care within most families. After the sixties an impressive emancipation process took place. Adolescent girls get higher educated. Nowadays, more girls study at the university than boys. This process had consequences. Young women are no longer willing to stop working after their marriage. They enjoy their challenging jobs. So it became very usual that men and women had a full time job during the first years after marriage. One spoke about the DINK-generation: Double Income, No Kids. North-West European countries were not only confronted with this emancipation process at the domain of education, but also paid work by women was stimulated. Governments stimulated labor participation of women because of the strong increase of the ageing population, and the feminist movement not only stimulated higher education for girls but also women's participation at the labor market.

New households, married or not, earn a lot of money, as result of which they are able to satisfy many material needs. They give priority to satisfy these needs. While it was very usual till the sixties that women got pregnant shortly after they had married, nowadays, many couples postpone the decision to have children. Because of this development, young women participate a much longer period of time at the labor market and like to continue their jobs, even after the first child has born. Most families have to make a difficult decision at that time. Parents have several options. First they can decide that after the birth of the first child mother will take care of the child and the household and that father will be the main breadwinner. That means a return to the old fashioned average family. Many families do not choose this option. Another possibility is that both father and mother keep working full time, they place their child in a day care center during the time they work. Only a small minority of Dutch parents decide to do so, because many parents like to take care of their own child.

But who has to do that job? In the Netherlands it is very usual that fathers keep working full time and mothers part time after the birth of the first child. We speak about the one- and-a-half breadwinner family. But why has the mother to stop partially her work and why has she to take care of children and household? There are two important reasons for that decision. First, there is a financial one. Women still earn less money than men in Dutch society. During the time they were DINK's, most couples could satisfy their material needs and took on financial commitments. After the birth of the first child they like to maintain their prosperity as much as possible and they have to pay off the debts they made. Therefore, most parents decide that fathers keep working full time. He usually earns more money than his wife. Women however cannot give up their jobs, because their income is needed to pay off debts and to maintain a part of prosperity couples are accustomed to. The second reason that women partially give up their job is a cultural one. In the North-West European society the norm that men have to earn the income for the family, is still dominant. In most companies it is even

impossible to work less than five days. Men lose income, status and promotion if they decide to work four days a week or less. And also a second norm is rather dominant, this norm is that women keep working after the birth of the first child, but that their primary task is the upbringing of the child and keeping the house.

It is this double task of work and care that worries some social scientists and politicians. The combination of work and care causes stress for mothers, especially if the family consists of more children. Family matters continuously interfere with job obligations. Part time working mothers have to arrange a lot of things in our society, and that may lead to the burn-out phenomenon. A number of people fear that mothers are not able to spend optimal energy and to pay attention to their children. Children are nearly monitored, they miss control, receive less parental support than they need, and sometimes they are spoiled, because mothers feel guilty that they cannot give full attention to their children. From child rearing literature it is clear that overindulgence, lack of control and monitoring and lack of parental support are related to children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. The fear is that these children will develop to egoistic personalities and will start and persist with antisocial and delinquent behavior.

I already mentioned that governments took measures and actions with regard to children and parents of multi problem families. Nowadays, the question is whether governments have a task with regard to the upbringing of children in so called normal families, especially if one fears that children be at risk who live in families, of which both parents have work outside the house. In fact, governments in our society do. They facilitate flexibility of the labor market by stimulating work at home, and flexible working hours. Temporary parental leaves to take care for one's children are more and more allowed. The number of day care centers has enormously been increased, and children can stay at school at noon and in the afternoon after lessons have been finished.

But the fear of a negative development of children of working parents remains, despite this governmental policy. Measures I just mentioned are not fundamentally enough. For many parents it is impossible to do their job at home or to arrange flexible working hours. Temporary parental leaves are not common in business and industry. Moreover, most of these leaves are not paid by employers. Although the number of day care centers has been increased, the number is still too small. For some parents it is impossible to place their child in a day care center, because the company they work for does not have an own center or does not financially assist parents. A place in a day care center is expensive; several parents cannot pay these costs. And most important nowadays there is not only in the USA, but also in the Netherlands a lot of discussion about the pedagogical quality of day care centers and about the question whether these centers stimulate or harm child development.

Even more important is the wish of both parents to take care of their children by themselves. And this wish continuously frustrates fathers because they have full time jobs and mothers because they are hardly able to combine work and care.

How can we fundamentally change this situation? The Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs installed a study group with the task to describe several scenarios to handle the problems I discussed before. The study group described four scenarios. The first, called the continuation scenario, implied a return to the old average family, in which mother cares and father works. This scenario is not realistic. In this scenario it is impossible for fathers to take substantially care of their children, and mothers will be frustrated because it is impossible in this scenario to keep, at least partially, their job.

The second scenario is the put-out scenario. In this scenario both partners maintain their full time job after children have been born. The government takes the

responsibility to establish care institutions. Parents put off their care tasks to these institutions and pay for the care they receive. Just as the first one this second scenario is not realistic. Realizing this scenario it will be impossible for parents to spend substantial time and energy to the upbringing of their children. So this scenario denies the parents' wish to take care of their own children and will therefore not be accepted by most parents.

The third scenario is the division scenario. In that model both father and mother reduce their working hours till about 24 – 28 hours a week and therefore both have time and energy enough to take care for their own children. Governments have no obligations to establish care institutions, because parents themselves can handle problems of work and care. This third scenario is also not realistic. Many men will not accept they are only participating 24 – 28 hours a week at the labor market. They will lose income, status, influence and promotion, especially when other men and women without young children maintain their full time job.

The fourth scenario, the combination scenario, seems more realistic. In this scenario fathers and mothers of young children work each 28 – 32 hours a week. During hours both are working, child care institutions take over parental care tasks, but most of the care for children is given by parents themselves. This is a scenario that will be accepted by fathers and mothers. It meets the fathers' wish to spend more time to take care of their children and they maintain a substantial job. Mothers will accept this scenario, because they know that when they are working, their husbands are taking care of the children most of time.

This fourth scenario has been described in 1994. Has this scenario already been realized in the Netherlands? The answer is no. Last week, the Dutch Central Office of Statistics published the following information. For couples till 65 years old, the combination of a full time job of father and a part time job of mother is most frequently occurring (37%). For couples with children this percentage is even 66%. 28% of all couples till 65 years old form the old fashioned average family, in which the man works and the woman cares. In about 14% of all couples both work full time. For couples with children this percentage is 6%.

So, the one-and-a-half breadwinner family is still dominant. How can the Dutch government stimulate a development of the combination scenario for parents of young children? Therefore more fundamental measures are necessary than the measures I already mentioned. How can a government achieve that men will work 28 – 32 hours a week during the time they are responsible for the upbringing of young children? The only effective, but very rigorous measure is, that people have to pay high taxes for each hour they work more than 32 hours a week. The motivation to work longer than 32 hours a week will rapidly diminish. The second measure is to financially compensate families who make a division of work and care according to the combination model. That means, give them more family and child allowance than families with young children not arranged according to the combination model.

I realize that the measures I proposed, are very far-reaching, but I am convinced that we need to take these measures. They will lead to better functioning families and to a more positive development of children.