

Family Complexity and Social Work (FACSK). A comparative study of family-based welfare work in different welfare regimes.

Vignette

Overview of the family

Maria Williams and David Bey are both 40 years old and live together in rented accommodation. There are three children in the family: Maria's son Thomas from an earlier relationship (Thomas has lost contact with his father), as well as Beth and John (Maria and David are their biological parents).

Maria is unemployed. David usually works many unpredictable hours each week. David [*moved/migrated here/to this country*] some time ago. He is having many difficulties with living here. None of his relatives live here.

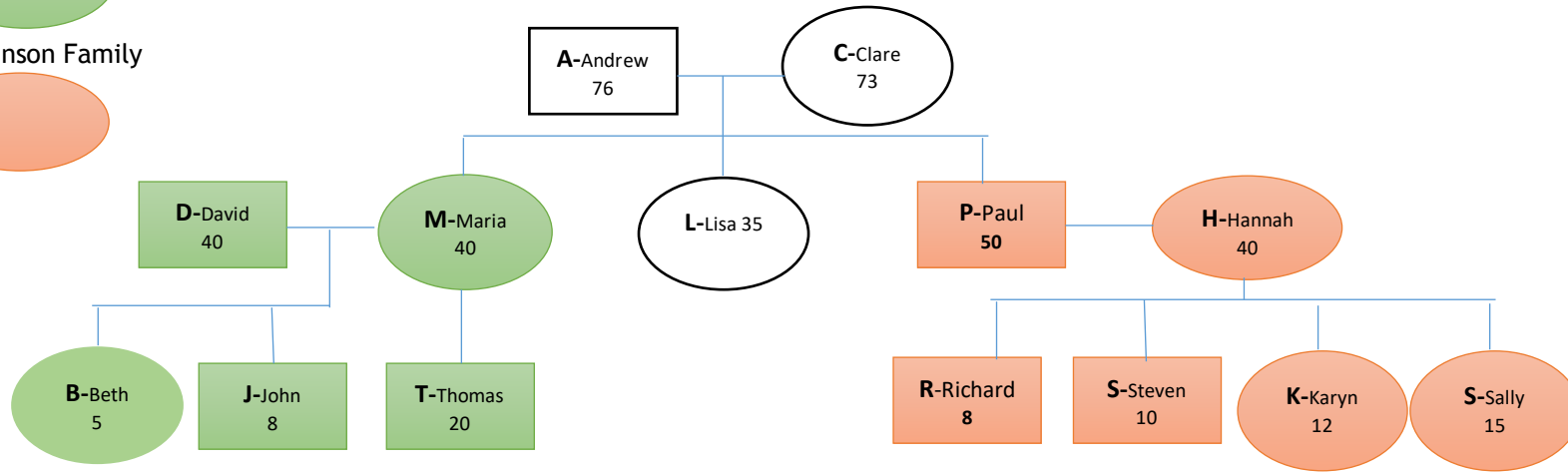
Maria and David often argue, and on some occasions, the children have witnessed David being violent towards Maria. Maria has a history of problematic alcohol and drug use. Sometimes Maria and the children have gone to stay with Maria's brother (Paul) and his wife (Hannah) who live in another part of the same city. Hannah has four children (ages 8 to 15) from a previous relationship.

Maria and Paul also have a younger sister (Lisa). She lives in another part of the country and has minimal contact with the family (neither siblings nor parents). Their parents live outside of the city. Maria and Paul have a difficult relationship with their parents and have little contact with them.

The Williams/Bey Family



The Johnson Family



Stage 1: Telephone call from mother (Maria) to you as a social worker. The social worker asks Maria to describe the situation.

“I don’t know if you can help me or not. I hope you can. I phoned my health worker/doctor/GP today to see if I could get an appointment, but I had to wait until next week. I was advised to call here to see if there was any support available, so that’s what I’m ringing for. I can’t stop crying and (pause while crying) feel like everything’s just so difficult. David, he’s my partner, he’s got different views about things and he keeps shouting and saying ‘you’re not in a fit state to have kids around you’ or that I’m not strict enough with the kids. I’m strict when I have to be but I don’t think it’s okay to give the kids beatings like he... (long pause)...

Anyway, we’ve split up three times, but then we get back together. He’s got a lot on his mind though and he’s having so many problems with trying to live here. I just feel at a loss as to what to do and really need some help (crying)!

My parents aren’t that helpful because they didn’t want me to be with David in the first place. I don’t feel like I can ask my sister either – it’s years since I’ve seen her. Basically, she gets on with her own life. Paul and his wife help a lot, he’s my brother. But they live on the other side of town, so it’s difficult to get there without a car.

Then I’ve got Thomas, my eldest child. He’s got issues about his mental health and recently came back home after he’d had a breakdown. He kept saying that he wanted to die, and he (pause) he took an overdose and was hospitalized. I feel so guilty. Now he’s lost his mechanic job, and is really depressed. He is seeing his psychiatrist every now and then. ...It’s all such a mess. My other two children are alright though, thank God.”

Stage 2 - Telephone call to social worker from mental health service working with the mother.

“I’m calling you about Maria Williams and the forthcoming meeting. My main concern is whether Maria could make a go of things and parent these children to a good enough standard. I don’t think she’s strong enough to keep dad’s negative influences away from the children lives. I would be recommending that dad’s mental health is assessed. Also, I’ve been told he is working at the moment but that it is not legitimate employment. All of the stress surrounding his trying to stay here is really having a negative effect on Maria. I can imagine it is very difficult for the children also.

The other thing is that Maria hasn’t completed her alcohol rehab and, err, I’m not sure whether she’s still using any substances, but she’s reported as being a different woman now. Having said that, some of the behaviours she’s exhibited in rehab up to now show that many issues remain. I don’t know, because rehab’s not my area, but a lot depends on what happens there and if she completes it.

There’s still a lot going on and I’m not sure about the relationship between Maria and David. She’s been back and forth to her brother’s a number of times, so the children must feel unsettled, although the brother is very supportive and his wife has a very good relationship with the children. It’s a shame they don’t live nearer so that they could be on hand for support.”

Stage 3 – Social worker reviewing a case with colleagues

“Let me give you an update up-date on the case. The last 12 months John and Beth have been living with their Uncle and Aunt. Maria has regular contact with them. Maria is hoping to reunite with her children once she has found appropriate accommodation for all of them. After she and David separated, she rented a small apartment not far from her brother and his wife. Thomas is living with his mother, and although things seem to be better there’s a lot going on within the family and he’s taking on much responsibility.

Maria has had some progress in the last six months in relation to her drug and alcohol misuse. She finally completed the rehabilitation program though I’m still a bit concerned. I’ll explain that in a minute.

David is worried for his mother who recently became a widow and he feels obliged to take care of her. So, he’s trying to make arrangements for her to move here. But, if she can’t he’s mentioned moving back. Also, he is wishing to take their children on a trip to his birthplace to see his family and all this makes Maria worry.

Beth is now nearly 7 and in school. She is a bright child and she’s doing well in school. She has some friends but still quite often sits on her own at playtime. She’s also hit two children recently and when the teacher asked her why, she says she didn’t hit them, but that they hit her. She attends regularly, but can be late sometimes and I think this is unsettling her.

John is nearly 10. He attends school most of the time and is doing well on the whole, but is quite aggressive at times to staff and runs off and he easily gets into conflict with other students. The teacher has telephoned mum and dad several times to discuss the children but did not get a reply. I mentioned being concerned about Maria. She showed up at the school gate last week and smelled of alcohol. She wasn’t speaking coherently. John got upset and ran to hide in the school. In the end the Aunt came to collect the children and they all left together. I really need to discuss what kind of services or supports we can plan for this family...”