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## GOOD MOTHERHOOD AND THE NEED FOR A TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

#### **Good motherhood and the need for a transnational perspective**

In this article, the author examines how a youth care worker in a specific case attributes meaning to the concept of “good motherhood”. The author analyzes a case-study with the help of two concepts, transnationalism and intercultural competence. She concludes that a combination of a problem-focused method and a lack of attention to cultural differences can have severe consequences.

### Keywords

Intercultural competence, Youth Care, motherhood, child protection, social work, transnationalism

### SAMENVATTING

#### **Goed moederschap en de noodzaak voor een transnationaal perspectief**

In dit artikel onderzoekt de auteur hoe een jeugdbeschermer in een concrete casus het concept van een “goede moeder” construeert en wat de gevolgen daarvan kunnen zijn. De casus, besproken

aan de hand van de concepten transnationalisme en interculturele competentie, illustreert hoe een probleemgerichte aanpak zonder aandacht voor culturele aspecten de plank mis slaat en kan leiden tot eenzijdige conclusies.

### **Trefwoorden**

Interculturele competentie, jeugdzorg, moederschap, transnationalisme, kindbescherming

### **INTRODUCTION**

A Pakistani woman leaves her children in the care of an acquaintance while she visits her family abroad. Youth Care reports her to the Child Protection Council and questions the woman's fitness as a mother. In this article, I will examine this case, focusing on how "good motherhood" is defined by some youth care workers. I try to bring to light the assumptions underlying this definition and identify the ramifications for Dutch Youth Care organizations. I will argue that some staff members use a problem-oriented approach which in combination with a mono-cultural view on "good motherhood" can lead to premature or biased conclusions.

### **WHAT MAKES A "GOOD MOTHER"?**

Most of us have a fair idea of what good motherhood involves: a mother loves and protects her child and creates a stimulating environment in which she or he can develop and grow. Some social services, such as the Dutch Youth Care, intervene on a regular basis in family life. I would therefore like to investigate which notion of "good motherhood" is used by youth protection workers at this particular institution. This is especially relevant because in our society, social workers serve a multicultural and international client base.

In her article on Transnational Mothering, Van Walsum (2009) concentrates on the tension between national Dutch immigration policy and article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which is about respect for family life. Women who have left their children in the care of family in their home country to be able to work in the Netherlands are seen as "bad mothers", since spending so much time apart means that there can be "no effective family bond" anymore. This reveals the underlying notion that the bond between an immigrant mother and her child *is assumed to have been damaged* as soon as the mother leaves her child in the care of another adult for whatever reason. Does this reveal a bias in definition of what makes a "good mother"? To what extent can and should the

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universalistic values of the Western liberal tradition define our definition of “good motherhood” – and also, therefore, of “bad motherhood”? Can we sanction families from other heritages or cultures for non-compliance with “Dutch values and norms”, however these might be defined?

A second question is on what grounds the welfare state can and will intervene in the private sphere of citizens. If we define the welfare state as a social system in which the state bears the primary responsibility for the well-being of its citizens, the state has to provide social security. In the field of child care, the state takes responsibility for upholding the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) and provides protection and support for all children residing within Dutch borders. However, European integration, the ageing of the population and social and cultural differentiation and individualization, have changed the composition of Dutch society significantly (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid [WRR], 2006, p. 56). To what extent has the Dutch youth care system adapted to these changed circumstances? Many youth workers have to deal with children and families from different cultures, and this requires different skills and knowledge to working with families who share the same cultural background. Are youth care workers today sufficiently skilled in intercultural communication?

The following case study will enable us to discuss this matter further.

### **A CASE-STUDY**

Having just learned that her father had passed away, a young single mother from Pakistan with four children – let us call her Fatima<sup>2</sup> – left her two eldest children in the care of a Pakistani woman whom she hardly knew, in order to travel to see her family. Being the eldest of the family, she was responsible for taking care of her mother and the family's possessions. Since Fatima lives on social security in the Netherlands, she was unable to visit her father when he was ill in hospital in Pakistan. With some help, she applied for a loan from the Credit Bank, which provides credit for people on low incomes. When she received the loan, one month after her father had passed away, she booked a flight immediately. It would soon be the summer holidays and then it would be impossible to find someone to care for her two eldest children, since the loan was only enough to take the two smallest children with her to Pakistan. With no family in the Netherlands, her network was very limited. Living in a predominantly Moroccan neighbourhood, she had difficulty socializing with other women due to linguistic and cultural differences. As a result, Fatima had few options about whom she could entrust her children to while she was away. Eventually an acquaintance, a Pakistani friend of a friend of Fatima, whom she had met only once before, agreed to look after them.

I asked the woman in question (who is divorced and has four daughters of her own) why she would voluntarily take on the responsibility of taking care of a stranger's children for ten days. She answered that she saw herself in Fatima. They were both single Pakistani mothers facing the same difficulties. This is why she considered it "a matter of principle" to do what she could to help when she was asked. The woman lived in a different area of the city, so she had to arrange someone to stay at her own house with her own daughters, in order to be able to stay overnight with Fatima's children. In this way, she went back and forth between the two houses; working, paying the bus fare and cooking and cleaning in both households. The "natural" solidarity that she felt towards Fatima and her children was strong enough to outweigh all these inconveniences. I visited them again later in the week and the children seemed to be fine, though they had difficulty with some of her rules – which were stricter than the rules of their own mother. Fatima telephoned twice a day – in the morning and evening – to talk to her children and to the woman taking care of them, and to make sure all was well. After ten days she came back and everything went back to normal. Or so it seemed.

As soon as they found out that she had left, Youth Care held an emergency meeting with all the social workers involved and several points of concern were formulated (see textbox A). Subsequently, Youth Care reported her to the Child Protection Council (Raad voor de Kinderbescherming), where an investigation was launched to establish whether or not she was fit to take care of her children. This was based on concerns about the emotional development of her children. After all, she had just left them in the hands of a stranger and left for Pakistan without informing the care workers. Who was to say she would even come back (source: record joint meeting care workers, November 2008)? The grounds on which the report to the Child Protection Council was made by Youth Care were as follows (translated from Dutch):

#### Textbox A

- The mother does not put the interests of her children first. This is clear from the choices she made last week. She did not discuss her trip with the Youth Care workers but merely informed them after the event. This appears to be manipulative behaviour.
- She took out a loan to book the flight despite her already minimal living conditions, incurring debts.
- The children are always anxious to please their mother. This could hamper their development.
- The mother finds repeated excuses for failing to work on her child-raising skills.
- The mother has little authority. This could pose a danger if the children fight with each other (source: record joint meeting November 2008).

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This does indeed seem to give grounds for concern. However, these conclusions stem from a problem-oriented approach. What about the mother's strengths? What was the reason she took off to Pakistan? Did she really need to inform the care workers about her trip? From a legal point of view, she still enjoyed full guardianship over her children. She knew they would not agree, so she left without informing them. She did however inform a volunteer, a close friend and her neighbours.

The Council had the authority to remove the children from Fatima's custody if they considered her "unequipped" to raise her children. Fatima herself did not understand all the fuss: "Everything was fine with the children, right?"

The Council launched an extensive investigation, drawing up Fatima's entire life story and collecting information from every teacher, day-care worker, and aid worker involved. The report included both strengths and weaknesses, and was thus more nuanced than the assumptions made by Youth Care. However, certain conclusions drawn in the report overlooked possible cultural factors. Statements made by Fatima such as that she "could no longer bear it", were taken too literally. As a professional youth protector, one is trained to quickly identify any signs of danger for the children, such as a mother who is tired of life, and act on them. Fatima's emotional statements were therefore taken very seriously and used as an argument for releasing her from custody. However, cultural factors were not taken into account. Two of Fatima's aid workers – who had known her for many years – stressed independently that her statements were an illustration of depression, and not of her in fact wanting to end her life. Nevertheless, the conclusion of the Council – despite its aim to present a balanced view – was that the mental development of her children was being seriously compromised, and that this could not be prevented by voluntary care since the mother did not "advance quickly enough". Help should therefore become mandatory for the family, by partially removing the children from Fatima's custody (Report Child Protection Council, Fatima's personal document).

## NEGLIGENT MOTHER OR CARING MOTHER?

From the perspective of Youth Care and the Child Protection Council, it might indeed have appeared worrying that a mother should leave her children with someone she barely knew and go abroad. Furthermore, Fatima was already on the Youth Care blacklist, because she displayed all the risk factors used to identify potential "multi-problem families". These risk factors included having a

low income and a low level of educational attainment, being a one-parent-family and coming from a non-Western background (see for example Bureau Jeugdzorg Utrecht, 2009, p. 2; Ince & van der Pijll, 2009, p. 1). When Fatima left for Pakistan, Youth Care were alarmed, and asked the Child Protection Service to launch an investigation, with a strong recommendation to file for court. The Council gathered background information on the family history, and asked her to tell them about all the difficulties she had encountered in her life. An extensive report was written. Since the report was filled with "red flags", with each risk factor identified by Youth Care, they based their appeal to court on the risk that the development of Fatima's children would be adversely affected. Fatima was thus construed as a "bad mother".

Now let us look at the situation from a *transnational* perspective. This urges us in the first place to question our own view of the world, which indicates that it is no longer sufficient to look at individuals or households alone, when studying social phenomena (Mazzucato, 2009). Instead, in daily life, the individual situation encompasses both the national culture and the home culture. Vertovec (1999, p. 1) defines transnationalism as "multiple ties and interactions that link people or institutions across the borders of nation states." Others emphasize the flow of immaterial things such as ideas and feelings of solidarity across boundaries that serve to form transnational identities (Clifford, 1994). Through the processes of globalization, migration and the added possibilities of the internet, new forms of transnational social systems have emerged (Hoffman, 2002, p. 13). The cultures of these social systems – which could be, for example, international social movements, religious groups or family cultures – influence how we communicate. In fact, *all* communication is intercultural communication (Hoffman, 2002, p. 13), even that between people belonging to the same ethnic group, who differ in their socio-economic background, for example. One of the most widely used definitions of "intercultural competence" is that "a person who is intercultural competent captures and understands, in interaction with people from foreign cultures, their specific concepts in perceiving, thinking, feeling and acting" (Fantini, 2000, p. 27). A person who is intercultural competent, pays special attention to cultural factors that may influence communication (Hoffman, 2002, p. 15).

In many non-Western countries, it is common to leave one or two children in the care of someone else – often members of the family – so that the mother can work or do other things. Being a "good mother" does not depend on an exclusive care-relationship, which seems to be the norm in especially Dutch culture, even though in the Netherlands we collectively "lease out" our children to day-care or grandparents. It is true that Fatima left two of her children in the care of someone she barely knew. However, as Fatima and the acquaintance shared a close mutual friend, and, as

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the acquaintance put it, they were both single Pakistani mothers who felt an obligation to help each other, this created an immediate bond of trust.

As mentioned already, in our multi-cultural society it does not suffice merely to look at the household or individual as the unit of analysis (Mazzucato, 2009). Rather, we should take a closer look at Fatima's transnational ties if we wish to understand her actions better. In Pakistani culture it is – according to her – very important that she, as the eldest daughter, went to pay her respects at her father's grave and be with her mother and brothers. Being the eldest, Fatima also had to make important family decisions about what to do with her father's investments in a shop in Pakistan. Fatima came as soon as she was financially able to do so (having found the money to pay for her flight, her two children and presents for the whole family), and entrusted the care of two of her children to a Pakistani acquaintance. Having already been blacklisted as a poorly educated, non-Western single mum, she ran the risk of losing her children as a result of this decision. When Youth Care were asked for feedback on this matter, the woman who reported Fatima to the Child Protection Council replied:

Unfortunately all those residing in the Netherlands have to conform to Dutch rules, values and norms.

An intriguing statement. Does this imply that all Dutch citizens have to raise their children in the "Dutch way"? Over and above the question of whether such a way even exists, should people not in any case be free to raise their children as they see fit? At a macro-level, can the welfare state intervene in how people raise their children – except in cases where children's rights are being violated? The answer is no, it cannot. The youth care worker referred to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, saying that the interest of the child should be paramount and that their development was being endangered. Indeed, Art. 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) says that "the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children". Also, the Article states that:

The State must ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children conform with the standards established by competent authorities, [...] and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision. (paraphrased from <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#art3>)

The state is thus responsible for guaranteeing the proper functioning of institutions such as Youth Care and the Child Protection Council, and that they have suitable staff. In today's context,

“suitable” staff means that they are interculturally competent and enjoy competent supervision. Also, Art. 3 states that:

The State must ensure child protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, *taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents*, [...] and shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures. (paraphrased from <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#art3>, italics by ES).

Indeed, the state must put the interests of the child first, and yet also take into account the rights and duties of the parents. One of these rights is to raise one’s child according to one’s own culture, as expressed in Art. 30, which specifically states that:

A child from an ethnic, religious or lingual minority group has the right to perform according to its own culture, religion or language. (paraphrased from <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#art3>)

If we acknowledge that the idea that an exclusive care relationship is indispensable for good motherhood is rooted in Western liberal tradition – or certainly in Dutch culture – and is therefore culturally determined, this should lead us to respect other types of motherhood which have their roots in non-Western traditions. Youth protection workers should begin by trusting Fatima’s judgement, instead of immediately assuming the worst simply because she trusted an acquaintance who was not known to them. It is every child’s right to celebrate his or her own culture, religion or language. Both exclusive and non-exclusive care relationships are culturally determined. There is no law that obliges parents to care for their children alone and exclusively; there is only a law which makes parents legally responsible for *providing* this care. Art. 18 states that:

Parents are responsible for the raising of their children. The state respects this prime responsibility of parents and provides them with support. (paraphrased from <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#art3>)

Furthermore, the Netherlands Youth Institute (Nederlands Jeugd Instituut) states that parents can decide for themselves which values and norms they wish to share with their children. Parents want the best for their children, even though raising them rarely goes smoothly. Youth protectors, such as those working at Youth Care, have to respect the knowledge and vision of parents, and must



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work to build an open, equal relationship with the parents. Together, aims should be formulated with a clear strategy on how and when to achieve these goals. The way in which youth protection services operate helps strengthen the autonomy and self-determination of parents in order to support them in raising their children (Nederlands Jeugd Instituut, 2008, p. 6, 8), according to the Netherlands Youth Institute.

In the case of Fatima, therefore, questions could be raised regarding the grounds for intervention. The youth care worker is obliged to respect Fatima's responsibility and provide her with support. Certainly, the child's interests should have priority for youth care workers; however, suitable staff are necessary to be able to make sound judgements regarding the fitness of parents. For this, training to enhance intercultural competence is necessary. In this case, the youth protectors involved appeared to lack these skills, becoming alarmed and falsely interpreting emotional statements with no verification.

During the court case, Fatima made a speech in which she said that she was quite capable of taking care of her children despite the hardship she faces as a single mother and that the eight community workers visiting her house every week, making video recordings of them having dinner, asking private questions, and talking to their school teachers without her knowledge, were not supporting her in the task of taking care of her four children. The judge was impressed by her speech and dismissed the claim that she needed mandatory help, leaving Fatima in full control of her children. The judge made the following remarks:

The mother has shown in the past few years that she is capable of asking for help and accepting this. [...] She is aware of the problems faced by her children. Currently there is no reason to believe that help provided through the voluntary framework [rather than the mandated framework, ES] will fail (Court decision, personal document of Fatima).

Fatima won the court case, but at a price: her trust in the Dutch social care system has been severely damaged.

I hope that this case study has illustrated how some dominant views on what makes a good mother are culturally rooted, and cannot therefore be expected to apply universally. Deeper knowledge of Fatima's network and ties put the decisions she made into a different light – a transnational perspective. Intercultural competency can help avoid premature and biased conclusions about what "good motherhood" entails. Having said this, one should urge caution

when judging parents, especially families with a different culture to the youth protection worker.

Perhaps a compulsory intercultural training programme is needed for all youth protection workers who deal directly with clients, training them in how to use the TOPOI-model, for example, as described by Hoffman (2002). The Dutch Department of Family and Defence acknowledges the need for youth care workers to develop intercultural skills: this is formulated in the National Policy Youth Care of 2009–2012 (translated from Dutch):

Children of migrants must have equal opportunities to grow up in a safe and healthy environment. They should be able to develop their talents and contribute to society. To achieve these equal opportunities, knowledge on cultural diversity should be integrated within youth policies. Academic workspaces can identify intercultural competences. These will be integrated in the course for professionals in Youth Care (Programmaministerie voor Jeugd en Gezin & Ministerie van Justitie, 2008, Landelijk beleidskader jeugdzorg 2009–2012, p. 5).

Policy thus aims specifically to enhance intercultural skills; however, more must be done to achieve full implementation in all youth care organizations. Priority should be given to employees who work directly with clients, since their actions affect the lives of parents and their children the most. New employees must be screened according to their intercultural skills.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the case study presented here, we can conclude that no consensus has yet been reached on the definition of a “good mother”. Most likely, no consensus will ever be reached, since it is not possible to generalize just how mothers should behave, as there are culturally divergent interpretations of what parenthood involves. Perhaps the most we could strive for is to reach a state of openness, where the notion of what constitutes a good mother – as well as the children’s rights framework – is left open. Youth care workers should be well aware that the social and cultural codes which they rely on – especially regarding good motherhood – are not a question of “common sense” but are heavily influenced by their own cultural background. Since we are part of a very diverse society, extra skills are necessary, especially for the youth protection workers employed by Youth Care. Further research is needed on this topic to see if more cases such as Fatima’s have occurred and monitor whether youth care workers do in fact have the necessary skills to carry out their challenging task.

**NOTE**

- 1 In the category "Student's Work" we publish articles written by students during their education, for example as part of a Master's thesis. "Good Motherhood and the need for a transnational perspective" is the 2010 prize-winning article of the Bachelor's degree in Social Work (Maatschappelijk Werk en Dienstverlening) of the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences.
- 2 Fatima wishes to remain anonymous for privacy reasons. She did however consent to this publication and provided all the documents needed. The case has been anonymized: A false name is used, and a false country of origin is mentioned.

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