

UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST

Habilitation Thesis

**THE FAMILY BETWEEN UNPREDICTABILITY AND
NORMALITY.
AN INTEGRATED PERSPECTIVE IN SOCIAL WORK**

- ABSTRACT -

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*All happy families are alike.
Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.*
(Lev Tolstoi)

ABSTRACT

The family and its existence in the social context have been widely discussed and continue to be debated. From a theoretical perspective and the standpoint of practical intervention, it seems that everything has been said, and all possible topics have been exhausted. Yet, there is something more to discuss. Something always surprises us and challenges our understanding and ability to intervene. This constant and ever-surprising novelty often reifies as a social constraint. Émile Durkheim was right about social constraints when he defined social phenomena as external and coercive.

Practical and research experience led me to affirm that today, we feel the social pressure exercised by fashion, rules, standards, ideologies, and various demands on the family more than ever. Ultimately, whether we view the family as a social institution, place it under the sign of social conventions, or link it to symbolic and religious understanding, it operates according to a series of cultural clichés and comprises specific mechanisms that often escape norms. This causes the family, in its classical sense, to be associated with traditionalism and a certain conservatism. The new (post)modern family forms propose cohabitation formulas that do not make the old formulas disappear. They survive either in authentic forms, as an ideal, or in a hybrid form.

Generally, daily challenges, those in the realm of technology, and those from the cultural sphere find their echo in family life. Daily pressures and the requirements of modern life are unloaded there. Why? Because it is the only place where we allow ourselves to be authentic, where we let the masks of social roles fall, and because, for many, the family still belongs to that warm community that Zygmunt Bauman spoke of in his writings. In a world of challenges and unpredictability, finding normality becomes a concern for each of us, especially for people working in the social sphere. There is a two-way relationship between family and society: social pathologies often transfer into the family space, but family dysfunctions and problems also echo in social life.

In such a complex context, family matters require a systemic approach. Solutions cannot come solely from the economic, social policies, psychological, or religious fields. A combination of factors influencing family life determines a complex, integrative approach. This is the central idea of my thesis, which I support with research conducted over the years and which I wish to develop and deepen in future research with university students and/or doctoral

candidates. This systemic perspective concerns the three primary dimensions of a social worker's activity: knowledge, understanding, and intervention.

In this thesis, I have presented my scientific achievements, including publications such as books authored or co-authored by the undersigned, books I edited, chapters in books published by recognised national and international publishers, and articles in ISI or BDI-indexed journals. The present work adheres to the structure of a habilitation thesis, as outlined in the Guideline for Writing the Habilitation Thesis.

In the first part – dedicated to scientific, professional, and academic achievements – I have outlined three chapters based on my areas of interest: family social work, abuse and domestic violence, and group in social work practice, all based on the common element (i.e., the system). These chapters are (1) *The Family Through the Systemic Lens: An Integrated Approach in Social Work Practice*, (2) *The (Un)seen Faces of Violence: A Systemic Approach*, and (3) *Beyond the Individual: The Group – a System in Social Work Practice*.

Why a system? Why a systemic, integrated approach to family and child social work are questions I attempt to answer in the following lines.

As we know, social work is both a practice-based profession and an academic discipline. Family social work has emerged and developed after individualised social work, but today, the two complement and support each other. In family social work, the intervention unit is the family group comprising multiple individuals, defined by formal and informal criteria, who share a sense of unity and are bound together by relatively stable interaction patterns. From a structural and functional perspective, a family group can be compared to a system, and its establishment, functioning, regeneration, destruction, and interconnection with other social elements can also be explained from a systemic perspective.

Systems theorists have borrowed Aristotle's maxim that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Therefore, a system is more complex than the sum of its components, as the whole system cannot be adequately explained solely by the characteristics of its parts, and the relationships between subsystems make up the essence of the system. To satisfy contemporary needs, systemic thinking has progressed, outlining over time three theoretical versions: general systems theory, ecosystemic theory, and, more recently, complex systems theory. All these theories have shaped social work practice.

Over time, I have chosen to detail the systemic perspective in my studies and lectures because it has provided me with the chance to discuss the role of social work and our interaction, as social workers, with the lives of beneficiaries. The practice has taught me that as we enter people's lives, we become part of their systems and create new systems alongside

them. As social workers, theorists, or practitioners, we are part of a professional system that interacts with the lives of others and with our own lives.

Systems theories remind us of how our roles, rules, and boundaries influence ourselves, our profession, and those with whom we work. Systemic theories help us reflect on the interactions between people and their social and physical environments and help us understand how change can be induced through simultaneous interventions at micro, mezzo, exo, and macro levels. Additionally, complex systems theory provides space for an open and interconnected world where disorder and order coexist, and new creative entities can be found in the midst of disorder. The pressure defined at the edge of disorder, the creativity presumed to emerge from this pressure, and the subsequent balancing can be correlated with human beings and their relationships with us social workers and with clients/beneficiaries of social services. Social workers strive for change in systems where the individual meets the context, and complex systems theory relies on the concepts of change – an approach compatible with the social worker's profession.

The systemic perspective invites us to view the family not as a collection of isolated individuals but as a complex system comprising dynamic interconnections and interactions. Each family member has a specific role, and the behaviour of each impact and is influenced by the behaviour of others. Upon analysing the family through the lens of systemic theory, in the first part of this work, I presented established concepts from the systemic perspective (system, subsystem, homeostasis, feedback, boundaries) used in family social work, particularly in intervention and family therapy.

Considering that social work can benefit from the systemic perspective to offer a holistic and efficient approach to the problems families face, I have emphasised that social work intervenes in complex family contexts, where the parental role can be affected by various events or factors, such as the parentification of the child, family crises, and resilience. The parentification of the child occurs in the family system when a child assumes parental responsibilities inappropriate for their age, either to compensate for the lack of parental care or cope with dysfunctions in the family (I have delved further into this topic through field studies), especially for children whose parents have gone abroad to work. Developing systemic intervention can lead to drawing intervention strategies aimed at modifying dysfunctional patterns and improving the functioning of the family as a whole.

I have outlined the family crisis – an event that significantly disrupts a family's balance and normal functioning, generating stress and emotional difficulties – in relation to resilience, with the family's capacity to adapt and overcome challenges, maintaining relatively good

functioning. Based on the same systemic perspective, I have proven that social workers who intervene in crisis situations evaluate the family as a system, considering the interactions between family members and the social and cultural context in which they live. They identify dysfunctional patterns, recognise interaction patterns adding to the family's problems, develop systemic interventions, and create new interventions aimed at altering dysfunctional patterns and improving the functioning of the family as a whole. Social workers collaborate with the family and involve them in the evaluation and intervention process, promoting autonomy and self-determination.

Among the multitude of crisis situations, I have focused on detailing the family crisis caused by domestic violence. The relationship between domestic violence and family crises is complex and multifaceted; it has been the core of studies conducted and presented in specialised works. Domestic violence can be both a cause and an effect of family crises. Family crises (i.e., job loss, financial struggles, serious illness, or death) can create significant stress on family members, potentially leading to violent behaviours as a dysfunctional response to these tensions. On the other hand, domestic violence can generate additional crises, damaging interpersonal relationships and impairing the overall stability and functioning of the family. Interventions must consider the complex family dynamics and address both risk and protective factors and the consequences of violence and crises to facilitate long-term healing and stability. The studies published in collective volumes (*Protecția victimelor [Protection of Victims]*, 2009, *Violența asupra femeii. Ipoteze. Explicații. Intervenții [Violence Against Women: Hypotheses, Explanations. Interventions]*, 2017, *Fețele nevăzute ale violenței [The Unseen Faces of Violence]*, 2021) have reinforced my belief that an integrated approach is a possible solution for these particular family crises.

I have dedicated a significant part of my work to the analysis of child abuse cases. In my book titled *Protecția socială a copilului abuzat [The Social Protection of Abused Children]* (2006), I analysed the phenomenon of child abuse gradually, from understanding to intervention. Understanding begins with the historical, cultural, social, and medical context, thus providing an anthropo-sociological perspective on the issue of children's presence in the world of violence and abuse. By reviewing these aspects, I have explained the occurrence of a social fact through its history. Since child abuse is a reported but poorly studied topic in our country, I sought to contribute to a better grasp of authors who – through their scientific interventions – are pioneers in the field. I tried to provide answers to questions such as: what is abuse? What is the contextuality of abuse? How does an abused child react? How should the

family respond to child abuse situations? What should be known so the anti-abuse response becomes effective from a systemic perspective?

In the same work, I propose a staged intervention model, which involves going through several stages (four), each with well-defined objectives and an outlined methodology. The model is systemic and proposes the use of a new set of techniques within art therapy. The model is recommended for situations of family reintegration or placement in the extended family of the child victim of abuse; the purpose is to prevent relapse.

Social work is both a practical and theoretical activity. Since there are multiple ways to conceptualise and motivate practical activity, I considered it necessary to outline a methodological approach in social work. The ideas for developing the methodology book stem from the following arguments: though practical effects prevail; social work not only relies on justificatory theory but also generates theoretical constructs or practice models. Any practical implementation model makes a practitioner adopt one or more working techniques to delineate and respect an intervention process with its phases and stages. Besides the axiological orientation, a solid social work system must functionally engage specialists and, above all, specific technical intervention methods. The more the science of using methods and techniques is perfected, the greater the efficiency of current social work actions and the more prepared the social work environment will be to address pressing issues. Therefore, I considered it necessary to shift from established individual methods to group methods and introduce new techniques as a topic for discussion and analysis (*Grupul în practica asistenței sociale. Elemente introductive* [*The Group in Social Work Practice: Introductory Elements*], 2024).

The second part of my work – titled “Plans for the Evolution and Development of My Professional, Scientific, and Academic Career” – provides a detailed account of my professional journey after obtaining a degree in social work, completing the Master's program “Social Action and Human Resources Development” at “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, and earning the title of Doctor in Sociology. I outlined the timeline for the primary dimensions of my scientific contributions, highlighting the directions of scientific research and academic development. I presented the plans for developing my professional, teaching, scientific research, and institutional career, describing a strategy for professional development and a synthesis of the actions planned for the upcoming period for each dimension.

The primary research and academic development directions I have focused on include the field of family and child social work, the field of abuse and domestic violence, and the field of groups in social work practice.

The scientific contributions described in this part of the work fall within the scope of my teaching and research interests. Since 1998, I have been working as a tenured member within the Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Human Resources at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași. My main courses focus on topics such as Family Social Work and Child Protection, Abuse and Domestic Violence, Family in Crisis Situations, Introduction to Family Therapy, and The Group in Social Work Practice. I have coordinated research projects that have resulted in articles published in ISI-indexed journals or various international databases and scientific papers presented at various international conferences, both abroad and domestically. I have coordinated author teams (an activity visible in the books coordinated and published by recognised publishers [A2] or in the thematic issues produced in scientific journals in the field of interest).