

# Parents on a Fast Train to Where? Random Reflections on Solidarity with Parenting in **Viral** Times

---

PROF. CARMEL BORG

**HEAD**, DEPARTMENT OF ARTS, OPEN COMMUNITIES AND ADULT EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

# About this keynote

---

The keynote will provide the speaker with:

1. an **opportunity** to empathise with some of the challenges parents face on a daily basis;
2. a **prompt** to reflect on the impact that such challenges may have on the dynamics of the family and on the families' relationship with the world; and
3. a **forum** to underscore the characteristics of concrete initiatives in mitigating the impact that some challenges may have on the texture of the family.

# The train as a powerful metaphor



Plans got derailed

On the right track

Fallen by the wayside

Full steam ahead

End of the line

Backtrack

On the fast track

Wrong side of the tracks

Light at the end of the tunnel

# Demystifying the train journey...understanding the complex nature of parenting

---

**Values** (Interrogating our value system)

**Evidence** (knowing the facts, where science meets experience)

**Analysis** (language of critique)

**Action** (language of possibility)



# Contextualising Parenthood

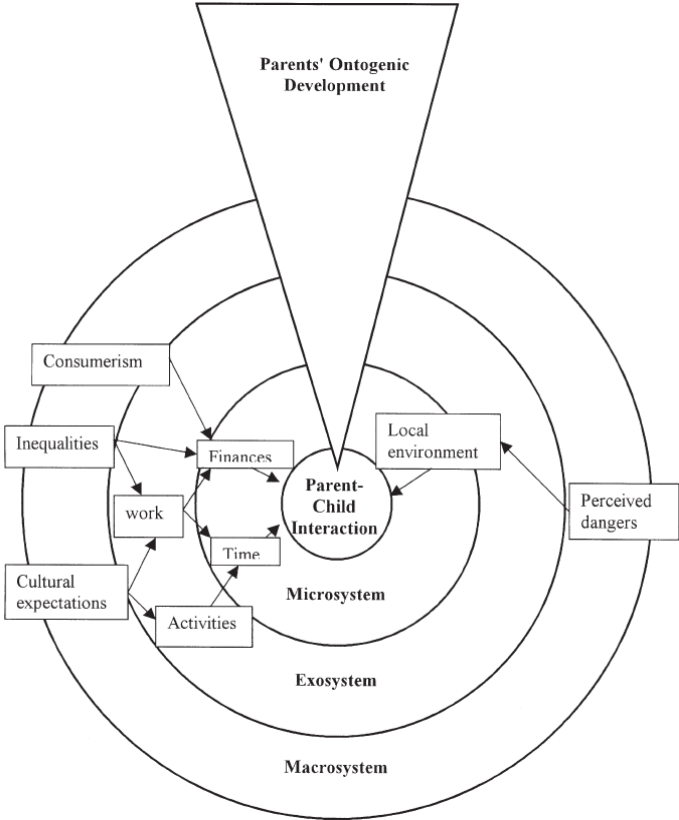


Figure 3 Cultural factors affecting parenting

# When the train crashes...(negative) perceptions of parenting

---



# Blaming the 'victims' for the crash







“Either there was no one at home, they didn't much care or they'd lost control. Families matter. I don't doubt that many of the rioters out last week have no father at home. Perhaps they come from one of the neighbourhoods where it's standard for children to have a mum and not a dad, where it's normal for young men to grow up without a male role model, looking to the streets for their father figures, filled up with rage and anger. So, if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we've got to start” (Cameron, 2011).



# All Aboard? Social Justice Index (SJI) 2019



FIGURE 2 SJI 2019 Rankings

Country	Overall						
		Poverty Prevention	Equitable Education	Labor Market Access	Social Inclusion and Non-discrimination	Inter-generational Justice	Health
Australia	26	30	22	8	16	21	8
Austria	17	16	36	25	20	17	12
Belgium	18	14	26	29	15	32	21
Bulgaria	38	33	28	31	41	19	39
Canada	12	25	4	10	6	25	14
Chile	37	36	27	35	34	11	38
Croatia	32	29	17	34	31	27	32
Cyprus	20	17	19	32	23	39	30
Czechia	8	4	40	4	22	14	26
Denmark	3	2	1	12	2	2	10
Estonia	25	28	10	11	17	5	24
Finland	4	3	6	26	10	4	20
France	15	7	35	38	21	20	4
Germany	10	15	14	15	18	22	13
Greece	35	22	31	41	29	41	19
Hungary	21	9	39	17	33	30	37
Iceland	1	1	5	1	3	6	7
Ireland	13	10	29	21	14	29	18
Israel	30	40	8	9	32	9	9
Italy	29	26	25	39	27	40	5
Japan	27	32	24	2	38	38	15
Korea	34	38	21	19	40	16	28
Latvia	33	34	12	27	30	10	41
Lithuania	31	37	18	20	25	12	33
Luxembourg	19	24	30	23	4	28	2
Malta	23	19	34	18	24	36	31
Mexico	41	39	32	24	36	15	40
Netherlands	6	6	20	16	5	26	17
New Zealand	9	23	9	3	7	8	3
Norway	2	5	2	13	1	3	1
Poland	16	12	13	22	28	31	34
Portugal	24	20	33	28	11	34	23
Romania	39	35	38	33	35	23	35
Slovakia	22	11	37	36	26	35	27
Slovenia	7	8	7	14	19	13	25
Spain	28	27	23	40	9	33	6
Sweden	5	13	3	30	8	1	11
Switzerland	14	21	15	7	12	7	16
Turkey	40	31	41	37	39	18	36
United Kingdom	11	18	11	5	13	24	22
United States	36	41	16	6	37	37	29

Source: Social Justice Index.

| BertelsmannStiftung



# It's structural stupid



Note: 2018 estimated data.  
Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc\_pees01 and ilc\_peps01)

# Images of **Poverty**

---



# COVID-19 and Poverty

---

Poverty projections suggest that the social and economic impacts of the crisis are likely to be quite significant.

COVID-19 could push between 70-100 million into extreme poverty

First increase in global extreme poverty since 1998, effectively wiping out progress made since 2017. projected impacts are likely to be long-lasting.

(Global Economic Prospects, June Report)



# COVID-19 and Poverty in Europe

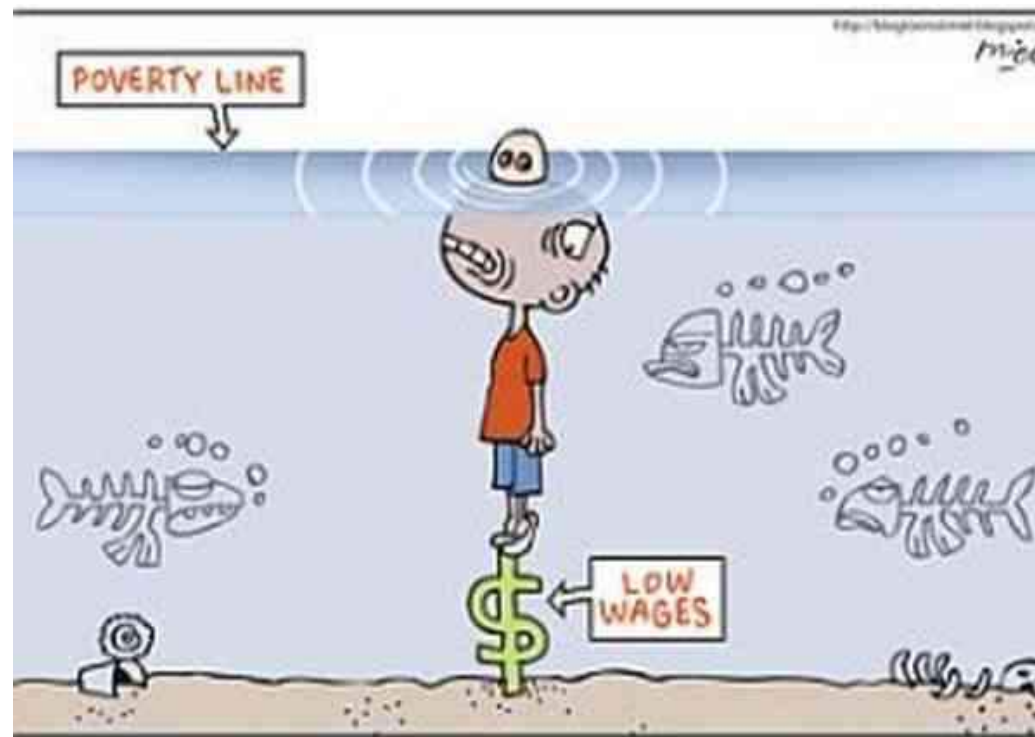
“In the absence of compensating measures by governments, the most conservative scenario anticipates a 10% mean loss for the poor, while wage inequality increases by 3.5% on a continental-basis. Meanwhile, the more severe scenario sees a loss rate of 16.2% of earnings for poor workers and a rise in 9.4% in the headcount poverty index.”

(Institute for New Economic Thinking, University of Oxford, 2020)



# The challenge of living close to the poverty line...listening to the **voice** of families (Ridge, 2009)

- Parents, especially mothers, often do without basic needs in trying to ensure their children's needs are met.
- Parents faced with the challenge of balancing the costs of meeting everyday needs against the costs of meeting social imperatives, such as participation in cultural norms and expectations.



# The challenge of living close to the poverty line

---

Difficult decisions to be made about buying essential goods or saving for future expenditure. Trying to make money stretch and avoid debt is taxing.

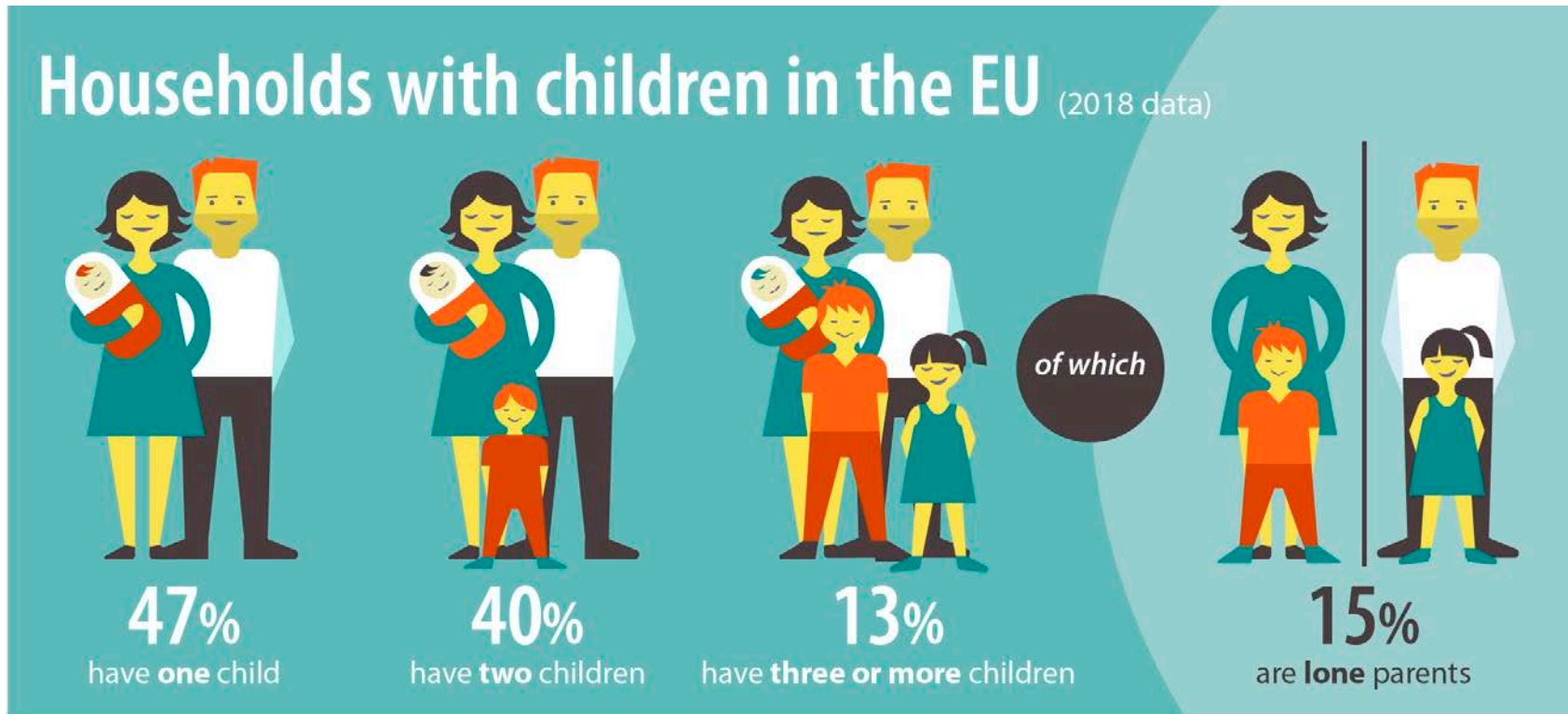
Families had little access to affordable credit, and accessing expensive credit had to be balanced against going without essentials.

Money for supervised play and leisure activities for children was difficult to find, but the alternative when children lived in degraded neighbourhoods was that their opportunities for play were in dangerous or unsuitable environments.

Work can be an essential strategy for reducing family poverty, but parents had a range of concerns about employment, including the costs and availability of childcare, time poverty and travel costs.

Working parents were often torn between doing the right thing for their children and satisfying the needs of their employers. Sustaining work and care was extremely challenging. For some, work meant long hours in low-income employment and this affected their family life and spending time with their children.

# COVID-19 and Lone Parenthood



# COVID-19 and Lone Parenthood

---

Denmark (29%) and Estonia (28%) had the highest proportions of single-parent households among households with children, ahead of Lithuania and Sweden (both 25%), Latvia (23%), the United Kingdom (22%) and France (21%).

The lowest proportions of single-parent households were in Croatia (6% of all households with dependent children), Romania (7%), Greece, and Slovakia and Finland (all 8%).

(Eurostat, 2018)





# COVID-19 and Lone Parenthood

47.7% of all single-parent families in Europe are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, while this is only true for 17.7% households with two adults and a child.

(Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2019)



# The Impact of **COVID-19** is not Gender Neutral

---

## **Economic crises hit women harder. Here's why.**

Women tend to earn less.

Women have fewer savings.

Women are disproportionately more in the informal economy.

Women have less access to social protections.

Women are more likely to be burdened with unpaid care and domestic work, and therefore have to drop out of the labour force

**Women make up the majority of single-parent households.**



# Frontline Mothers (UNWomen, 2020)

---

Globally, [70 per cent of health workers and first responders are women](#), and yet, they are not at par with their male counterparts.

At 28 per cent, the gender pay gap in the health sector is higher than the [overall gender pay gap \(16 per cent\)](#).



# COVID-19 and Women/Mothers on the Margins (UNWomen, 2020)

Women who are poor and marginalised face an even higher risk of COVID-19 transmission and fatalities, loss of livelihood, and increased violence.



# What works... (UNWomen, 2020)

## **Direct income support to women**

Economic support packages, including direct cash-transfers, expanded unemployment benefits, tax breaks, and expanded family and child benefits for vulnerable women and their families. Direct cash-transfers, which would mean giving cash directly to women who are poor or lack income, --can be a lifeline for those struggling to afford day-to-day necessities during this pandemic. These measures provide tangible help that women need right now.

## **Support for women-owned and -led businesses**

Businesses owned and led by women should receive specific grants and stimulus funding, as well as subsidized and state-backed loans. Tax burdens should be eased and where possible, governments should source food, personal protection equipment, and other essential supplies from women-led businesses. Economic relief should similarly target sectors and industries where women are a large proportion of workers.

# What works...

## **Support for women workers**

Gender-responsive social protection systems to support income security for women. For instance, expanded access to affordable and quality childcare services will enable more women to be in the labour force. Bridging the gender pay gap is urgent, and it begins by enacting laws and policies that guarantee equal pay for work of equal value and stop undervaluing the work done by women.

## **Support for informal workers**

Social protection and benefits to informal workers. For informal workers left unemployed, cash transfers or unemployment compensation can help ease the financial burden, as can deferring or exempting taxes and social security payments for workers in the informal sector.

## **Reconciliation of paid and unpaid work**

Provide all primary caregivers with paid leave and reduced or flexible working arrangements. Provide essential workers with childcare services. Unprecedented measures to address the economic fallout have already been taken, but comparatively few measures have been directed at supporting families grappling with paid and unpaid work, including care needs. More efforts are also needed to engage citizens and workers in public campaigns that promote equitable distribution of care and domestic work between men and women.

## COVID-19 and Voices of Parents with disability (National [US] Research Center for Parents with Disability)

---

Parents described how their concerns and experiences related to COVID-19 differ from nondisabled parents. Many parents were worried about what would happen if they got ill, and were particularly nervous about bias within the healthcare system.

“It’s a scary time for everyone but most nondisabled parents who aren’t high risk don’t have to grapple with the potential that they could very likely die if infected.”

“The idea of one or both parents succumbing to the virus is horrific to think about. I also worry that my children could lose their grandparents and their great grandmother, all vulnerable to this.”

## COVID-19 and Voices of Parents with disability (National [US] Research Center for Parents with Disability)

---

“Honestly, I feel like I’m not going to be able to maintain the stamina needed to manage working from home full time and homeschooling a VERY ACTIVE almost 9-year-old who would rather be out playing ball...”

“I also fear that if my husband and/or contracted, we’d encounter the bias and discrimination that we’re hearing about in attempts to get what would be life-saving treatment. That keeps me up at night too.”

“Blind folk touch things, including other people, to provide sighted guide. Public life will change. More than that though, I worry that if I get sick, all the doctors will see is that I can’t see and my health care will be rationed accordingly.”

“Underlying health conditions + the possibility of acquiring #COVID19 is concerning. Who decides if our #disabled community is worth saving? We’ve fought for disabled education + accessibility on behalf of non-disabled parents. Will they do the same?”



# COVID-19 and Voices of Parents of Children with Disability (<https://www.bbc.com/news/education-52806105>)

---

## Gail

"We have to work out who is home, so he's not left on his own. We have to make sure one of us is in the house with him. It's a real juggling act for us," says Gail.

Gail says that for families with disabled children, the lockdown has made things even tougher. It's created an even more intense sense of being cut off and ignored.

The fragile health of some young people with disabilities makes it even less likely that they can go outside. And some cooped-up children are showing much more challenging behaviour.



# Caroline

---

Caroline says she has become very dependent on a network of support services and the respite when her daughter is at school or a play group.

"Take all that away and life can feel quite bleak. If I were a single parent, living in a small flat, I don't know what I would have done."

It's a theme you hear from other parents of disabled children. There is a reliance on help and fears it will be swept away by the pandemic, or the economic storm that might follow.

## COVID-19 and Migrant Parents (OECD Report, 2020)

---

“Due to a range of vulnerabilities such as higher incidence of poverty, overcrowded housing conditions, and high concentration in jobs where physical distancing is difficult, immigrants are at a much higher risk of COVID-19 infection than the native-born. Studies in a number of OECD countries found an infection risk that is at least twice as high as that of the native-born.

COVID-related mortality rates for immigrants could also be significant, exceeding those of the native-born population.

Immigrants are potentially in a more vulnerable position in the labour market due to their generally less stable employment conditions and lower seniority on the job. Studies also suggest that discrimination strongly increases in times of a slack labour market, while networks of contacts – of which migrants have fewer – become more relevant for finding a job.

## COVID-19 and Migrant Parents (OECD, 2020)

---

The negative impact on immigrants' labour market outcomes is increased still further by the fact that they are strongly overrepresented in those sectors most affected by the pandemic to date. For example, in the particularly hard-hit hospitality industry, a quarter of employees in the EU are foreign-born, twice their share in overall employment.

The school closures and distance learning measures put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19 put children of immigrants at a disadvantage, in several ways. Their parents tend to have fewer resources than native-born parents to help them in their homework, and 40% of native-born children of immigrants do not speak the host-country language at home. Such children are also less likely than students with native-born parents to have access to a computer and an internet connection at home or to a quiet place for study.

The pandemic gave a push for remote language learning for adults as well. A number of countries introduced innovative new schemes. In Germany, for example, online tutorials were set up to compensate for the temporary closure of immigrant integration courses. However, such online learning has proved difficult for low-educated immigrants, especially at early stages of language learning, leading to delays in both language learning and broader social integration.”

# Parental Stress (Brown et al, 2020)

---

Greater COVID-19 related stressors and high anxiety and depressive symptoms are associated with higher parental perceived stress.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213420303549>



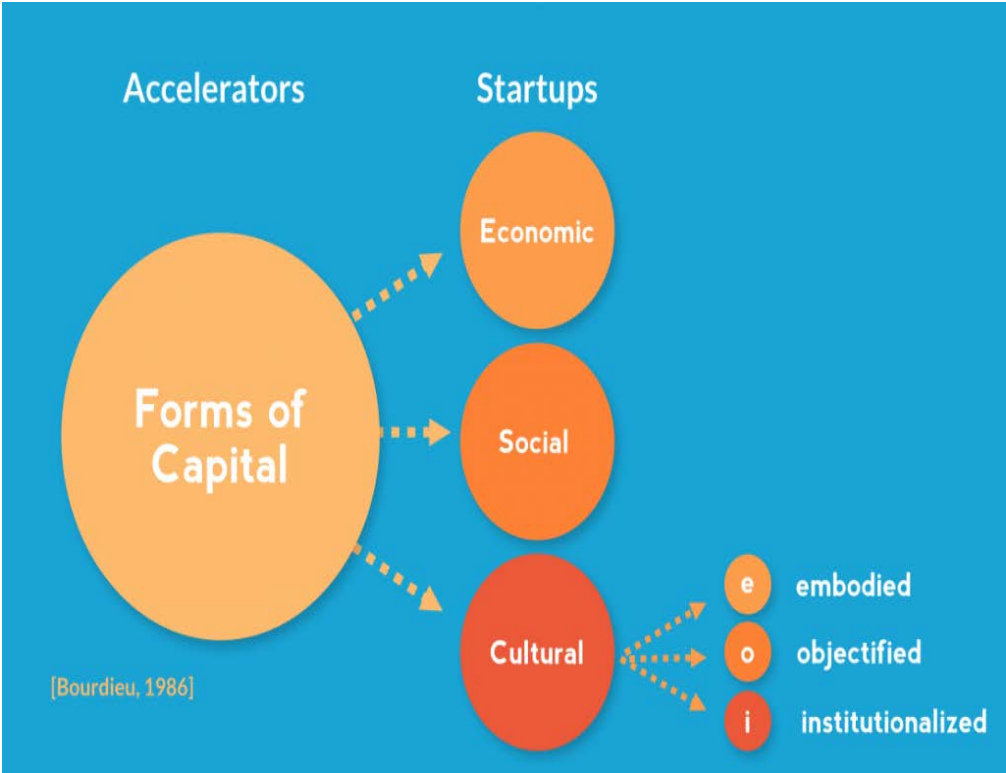
# Stress and harsh parenting

---

Emerging research has shown that parents' perceived impact of COVID-19 is associated with increased parenting stress and, in turn, increased risk of harsh parenting ([Chung, Lanier, & Ju, 2020](#)).



# Family Capital and Reproduction of Family's SES



# Blainey et al, 2020

---

## **The Impact of Lockdown on Children's Education: a nationwide analysis**

This paper analyses changes in attainment among primary pupils in England following the school closures and suspension of most in-person teaching during the spring and summer of 2020. The analysis is based on the test results from over 250,000 primary school pupils who sat an RS Assessment from Hodder Education assessment in 2020.

These tests include Progress in Understanding Mathematics Assessment (PUMA), Progress in Reading Assessment (PiRA) and Progress in Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling Assessment (GAPS).



# Blainey et al, 2020

---

There were substantial drops in attainment between 2019 and 2020 across all subjects and year groups.

Not all pupils appear to have been affected equally. Younger year groups generally showed bigger reductions in attainment than older year groups, and children eligible for the Pupil Premium showed larger average declines than those who are not.

There were also considerable differences by school type. Those with higher levels of deprivation, situated in urban areas or located in the north or midlands, tended to show greater declines.

Differences were also seen between topics within the same subject. For example, Fractions scores were affected more than Number, while Punctuation fared worse than Spelling.

These results are consistent with increases in various well-established educational attainment gaps, particularly those related to poverty.

# Deprivileging our minds

---

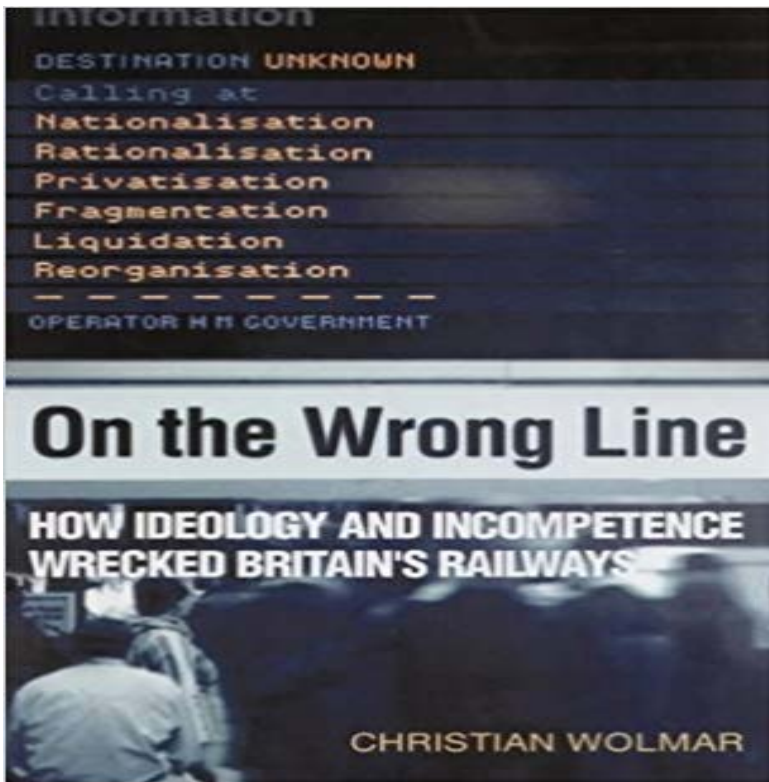
**Empathy** with the plight of millions of families is heavily fashioned by our value system and our social location.

**Understanding our privileges** constitutes a good start.



# Ideology and parenting

---



Interacting with parents and their challenges is **not value free**.

# Liberal individualism

---



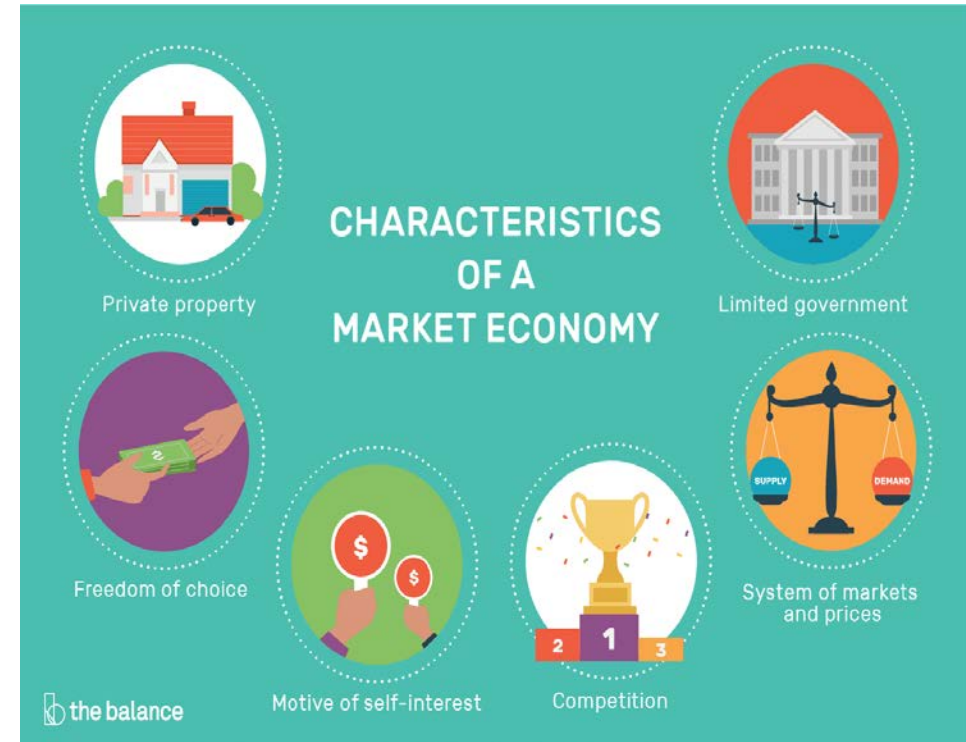
The liberal individualist view elevates **fairness** as the central feature of justice.

Fairness reflected in **freedom** and **equal distribution of goods**.

# Market individualist

---

The market individualist view of justice emphasizes that **people are entitled in relationship to their efforts.** The justice of competition.



# Radical/Transformative Perspective

---

The radical perspective, **considers justice in relationship to the needs of various individuals, emphasizing a more collectivist or cooperative vision of society.**

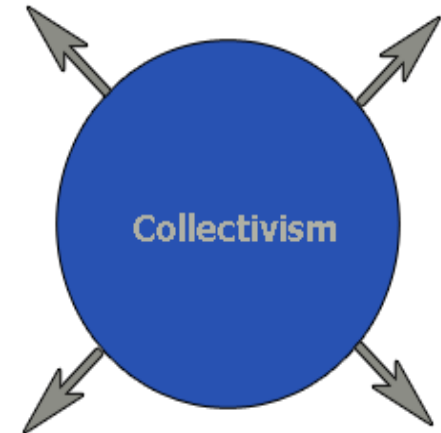
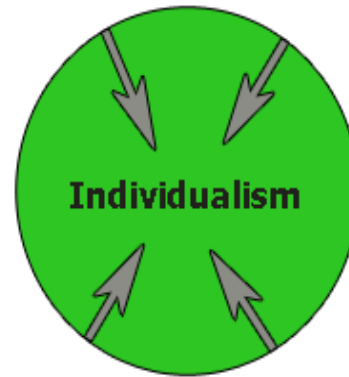


Image idea from [paradigm-shift-21st-century.nl](http://paradigm-shift-21st-century.nl)

# Which train are we on?

---



# Half-full or half-empty cabin?

<b>Moving from a deficit approach to an asset approach</b>	
<b>Where we are now – the deficit approach</b>	<b>Where an asset way of thinking takes us</b>
Start with deficiencies and needs in the community	Start with the assets in the community
Respond to problems	Identify opportunities and strengths
Provide services to users	Invest in people as citizens
Emphasise the role of agencies	Emphasise the role of civil society
Focus on individuals	Focus on communities/ neighbourhoods and the common good
See people as clients and consumers receiving services	See people as citizens and co-producers with something to offer
Treat people as passive and done-to	Help people to take control of their lives
'Fix people'	Support people to develop their potential
Implement programmes as the answer	See people as the answer

From 'A glass half full?'



# Parent-professional relationship derailed

---

Parents as **passive recipients** of  
'expert' knowledge

Parents **adapt** to the 'expert's' plan

Parents as **objects** of their  
'rehabilitation'

Parents are **thought about**

Parents are **'othered'** and **'silenced'**



# On the **right track** with parents

---

- Equity
- Engagement
- Access
- Inclusion
- Rights
- Voice
- Reclaimed Citizenship



# Light at the end of the tunnel

---

The importance of hope,  
utopia, dialogue, reciprocity  
and collectivity.



# Of joining dots and hyperlinks

---

**Strengths-based** approach

**Can-succeed** mentality

**Label-free** relationships

Doing things **with parents** not for them

Parents' **rights**

**Flexibility and responsiveness**, allowing parents to participate on their own terms

Focus on **personal growth** as well as **skills** learnt



# Support

---

Long-term **personalised support**

Promotion of stable, **long term support networks**, such as opportunities for parents to establish and develop supportive ties with neighbours and friends.

Facilitation of participation and belonging in the community by engaging parents in **activities outside the family home**.

Provision of opportunities for parents to develop friendships through **parent-to-parent support groups**



# Context/s

---

The **socio-economic and community context** of each parent.

**Families' living arrangements.** How this influences parent access to support

**Different family constellations,** parent networks and relationships

**Parents' life experiences** and the impact of these on current behaviour.



# Active participation

---

Parents participate in **setting the agenda** for working together

Be ready to **learn from parents**

Take into account the **parents' views** about support and whether or not it brings out the best in their parenting

**family-centred focus** so that the interests of both parents and children are served, prioritising preventative work over crisis intervention



# Evidence is key

---

Family support practices that are supported by **evidence**

Sound working knowledge of current **evidence informed research**





---

Thanks!

