Single parents in Germany: the career of a topic in social research and policy

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Single parents as a ‘growth factor’ in a shrinking family sector¹

For several decades now, single/lone parent families (typically with a female parent/lone mother) have been a stable growth factor in all economically developed countries, because their number and share of overall family households are inexorably moving upwards. In Germany, their number virtually exploded in the 1990s (upon unification with the former GDR): starting out in 1991 with 1.48 million single-parent households throughout Germany, they accounted for 1.95 million households in 1999. Their growth has been fuelled not just by the constantly rising number of separations and divorces: a similar surge derives from those women who, in spite of being pregnant, do not marry their partners/fathers of their children. Meanwhile, one in three lone parents is a genuine single, i.e. has never been married (in Eastern Germany this group is even more numerous); 42% are divorced, 14.5% are separated, and only 10% are widowed.

Single parents are particularly vulnerable in economic terms and for this reason stand out – nationally as well as internationally – among the poor and poverty-prone population as the one group where most of the children grow up in actual poverty. For this reason, the category has caught the attention of researchers studying family lifestyles for being a social ‘risk group’ on the one hand and a ‘marker of social change’ on the other, mostly among those who do sociological family studies, but also among practitioners of developmental and educational research (from the child’s point of view) and, not least, as a sideline of those who study divorce and its consequences. Poverty researchers themselves have, with great precision, developed the themes of economic disadvantages and vulnerability suffered by that type of family. Added to the overall effort is a host of scientific analyses that study the single mothers’ labour participation rate and schemes to integrate them in the labour market.

From there it is only a small step to the numerous studies that either prepare, accompany or evaluate social programmes which focus (especially in the United Kingdom and in the US since the mid 1990s) on the hiatus that interrupted decades of social welfare policies designed to help lone mothers (‘welfare mothers’) and families without a breadwinner by means of financial or in-kind benefits such as food stamps. A large number of similar policy-based studies has been proliferating around the new design of core elements in British social policy since New Labour took over in 1997, effectively representing the philosophy of a welfare state that emphasises activation over alimony and selling the concept under the historically attractive ‘New Deal’ trademark. Known as a ‘New Deal for Lone Parents’, part of the new social policy aims specifically at the group of single mothers, and concentrates its activation efforts on integrating them in the labour market, in response to the prevailing situation where lone mothers show a very low labour participation rate and – mirroring that – a high dependence on social welfare.² The same idea, i.e. labour market integration, drives the programmes for social welfare recipients in the US, which have been run by the individual states since the reform of the mid-1990s. While the programmes are bolstered by a harsh system of sanctions (such as strict time limits for individual welfare claims regardless

¹ In the public and scientific debate, this concept is used to describe the polarisation between a ‘family sector’ (lifestyles that include children) and a ‘non-family sector’ which is characterised as privileged and growing in scope. In this view, parents of children who ‘have left the nest’ are considered to be ‘spouses without children’ and thus included in the ‘non-family sector’. This exaggerates the actual situation, in view of the fact that – to name but one factor – due to the enormous rise in life expectancy the family phase of young adults living jointly with and in the home of their parents is inexorably gaining weight.

² The labour participation rate varies considerably between ‘socio-moral’ and ethnic strata. In 1991, it was lowest among lone mothers of Indian and Pakistani background (24%) and highest among black women (56%); at 38%, the integration of ‘white’ women is also rather low (see Duncan & Edwards 1999: 5).
of persisting need), they nevertheless offer a spectrum of assistance for people to get into work that ranges from child care to psychosocial counselling to schemes to acquire qualifications. As the ‘evaluation culture’ has made greater strides in the US and UK than in Germany, in-depth studies are available for most of those programmes regarding their implementation and effect.

**German deficits in research and knowledge**

In Germany, social programmes have rarely been the subject of evaluation. Consequently, there is little empirical evidence available on their impact, but rather more in the way of normative and ideologically stamped judgements. This applies, i.a., to the diverse assortment of measures at municipal level in the Federal Republic of Germany which attempt to integrate social welfare recipients into the primary and secondary labour market and channel some 300,000 people a year temporarily into subsidised employment. So far, it has not been possible to check the sustainability and effectiveness of such integration tools on the basis of transparent data and an inter-municipal comparison: a practice that made Peter Bartelheimer (2001: 156 ff) compare municipal labour market policy to ‘a blind flight without the instruments’. Among the participants in municipal ‘workfare’ schemes are a substantial number of single parents who are to be helped to exit from social welfare. Whether their integration in the labour market works better or worse than that of other target groups can, however, not be clarified on the basis of available information and data.

We should also give mention to another example, which makes special reference to the (financial) life situation of single parents in Germany, because it excellently illustrates the continuing ‘family-centred’ colouring of all family-related social policy. Thus we have little solid data on the effect of the Erziehungsgeld (child-raising allowance) introduced in 1986: from its very introduction and regardless of the many changes in the design of these ‘mother’s wages’, a large percentage of eligible mothers has been claiming the benefit – in spite of its low amount that clearly fails to secure them anything like subsistence-level livelihood. In 2000, for 93% of all couples, at least one parent obtained the child-raising allowance during the first six months after birth. This social and family policy tool – further supported by an Erziehungsurlaub (child-raising leave, known as Elternzeit, i.e. parental timeout) since 1998, which guarantees the return to the workplace held at the start of the maternity protection period under labour law – is mentioned here because it creates a subsistence-level financial situation for single mothers with small children (below the age of three) that sets them only just above the poverty threshold. Unlike other types of income, the child-raising allowance is not credited against Sozialhilfe (social assistance), so that single

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3 No data at a federal scale are available on the share of single parents participating in the indeterminable variety of schemes; even at community level it is a rare municipality that reports on the family circumstances of participants. However, from a range of model projects that are determinate in number but have never become the rule in the Federal Republic as a whole, mostly in the field of subsidised low-wage work, we do know that half or even more of the women (who typically constituted the majority of participants in the model projects) were lone mothers.

4 Introduction of the ‘child-raising allowance’ was a key women’s and family policy project during the first four-year-term of the liberal-conservative (Kohl) era, which lasted for 16 years (from 1982 to 1998). It marked the launch of a social policy that remunerates the invisable family work (‘care work’) contributed by women. Other steps along this line were the crediting of child-rearing periods to the calculation of old-age pensions, followed ten years later by the introduction of the Pflegegeld (nursing allowance), a – similarly low – wage that recognises the work which care-giving family members extend to (typically elderly) adults by including such care work into the macroeconomic money circuit and thus translating it into money and material terms. Initially, the child-raising allowance was paid for a year, a period which was later extended, in two steps taken at an interval of several years, to two years, although subject to certain family income thresholds. Since coming into office in 1998, the Red-Green government has given flexibility to some aspects of the child-raising allowance: thus, the period of payment may be budgeted, i.e. fixed at a higher amount when limited to one year, or it may be drawn in part by both mother and father simultaneously up to the child’s eighth year of age. Recently it has become possible to draw the allowance while being gainfully employed for up to 30 hours a week. The new scheme of 1998 is being systematically evaluated but so far no published results have been available.
mothers of small children are paid the full social assistance rates for themselves and their child(ren), as well as the state’s child-raising allowance; with this they achieve a (net) income that is at least just above the income obtained by women working full-time in low-wage sectors (retailing, catering, etc.). Of the recipients of child-raising allowances, 10.9% were single parents (in 2000).

Whether and how a mother’s decision to care for her small child for a maximum of three years based on a state alimony affects her life planning, whether the subsidised child-raising period (parental timeout) will lead to a weight shift between, on the one hand, the value of ‘being a good mother and enjoying her time with the baby’, and, on the other hand, the idea of ‘pursuing her career’, and finally, what will be the practical impact of her maternal ‘timeout’ on her future job development – these are issues on which no reliable empirical analysis (based on the control group design) is available in Germany. Yet, we do have a multitude of indications that point to the child-raising allowance having, over the past 20 years, clearly reduced the labour force participation rate of mothers with small children, a rate that had already been relatively low – compared to other European countries, especially the UK, France and Scandinavia. Contrary to the European trend which shows a growth in the participation of such mothers and which in general also applies to Germany, the participation rate for mothers with small children (up to 3 years old) in Eastern and Western Germany began to dwindle in the mid-1990s (as compared to the 1980s, previous to the introduction of the subsidy); to 6% in the ‘old’ (Western) FRG, as against 44% who had taken ‘child-raising leave’ (now ‘parental timeout’) and 50% who were not gainfully employed at all (Klar & Sardei-Biermann 1996: 142). In 1984, the situation had differed in as much as fully 37% of lone mothers with small children were gainfully employed, a figure that rose to 41% among never-married mothers (Neubauer 1988: 137). It has also been found that women who go on child-raising leave encounter considerable barriers in their job integration and development which simply do not exist for childless women or women who take only a short break from their employment. Single mothers are much more frequently found in jobs characterised by limited work contracts, varying working hours, shift work or seasonal work than other types of working mothers (Engelbrech & Jungkunz 2001).

The impression that the introduction of the child-raising allowance, and its associated option for single mothers to supplement their social assistance by an additional income by way of a minor part-time job, had subsequently ‘enticed’ young women into the status of non-gainfully employed single parent recipient of social assistance (as has been implied by theories popular in the US that blame faulty incentives provided by social welfare transfer payments for ‘welfare mothers’) is strengthened in view of the growth in the number of single parents in Germany and the share of women on social assistance among their number: between 1985 and 1989, the share of single mothers receiving social assistance rose from 17.5% to 21.6%; and it continued to grow over the next five years, by about 1% a year, and at a more moderate rate of less than one percentage point annually, since 1995.

Progress of research into single parenting

With single parents inexorably advancing in importance as much as in numbers, as against an overall shrinkage of the family sector within German society, a short sketch is given below of the responses elicited from sociology and politics that are faced with this dynamic reality.

With a view to systematising the debate on single parents (i.e. lone mothers) and single parenting, Duncan and Edwards (1999) proposed a scheme of four fields which allows us to sort out (in spite of multiple overlappings) both the public-political and the scientific discourse:

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5 Both studies are based on broad-scale surveys carried out by the German Youth Institute.
Discourses on lone mothers and single parenting

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<th>Projecting a social threat: Lone mothers:</th>
<th>Constituting a social problem: Lone mothers:</th>
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<tr>
<td>– destroy society and family values,</td>
<td>– are victims and need help,</td>
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<td>– are the result of social assistance</td>
<td>– are disadvantaged economically as well</td>
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<td>benefits,</td>
<td>as socially. Reasons:</td>
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<td>– are a consequence of feminism,</td>
<td>o poverty: they want to work but are</td>
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<td>– give birth to children in order to</td>
<td>caught in the poverty trap: child</td>
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<td>obtain public and housing assistance,</td>
<td>care either is non-available or</td>
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<td>– are promiscuous,</td>
<td>cannot be financed,</td>
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<td>– through missing fathers:</td>
<td>o lack of support because they lack</td>
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<td>o boys become delinquent,</td>
<td>the father in his role of</td>
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<td>o girls become promiscuous.</td>
<td>breadwinner and mentor.</td>
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<th>Liberation from patriarchy: Lone mothers:</th>
<th>Expressing a lifestyle change: Lone mothers:</th>
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<td>– refuse to be controlled by a male,</td>
<td>– opt for a certain family type,</td>
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<tr>
<td>– perceive financial and emotional</td>
<td>– point to the future course of society,</td>
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<td>advantages in their chosen lifestyle,</td>
<td>– indicate that the traditional family</td>
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<td>– have problems in finding a new man.</td>
<td>belongs to the past</td>
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<td>– with men no longer able to fulfil the</td>
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<td>family breadwinner role, women no longer</td>
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<td>need them for economic survival,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>– are entitled to a job and separation from</td>
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<td>the male.</td>
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**Single parenting as a ‘social problem’**

German research into the issue of single parenting initially was firmly anchored in the ‘social problem’ paradigm: a deficit-focused view that compared single parents (as ‘incomplete families’ caused by calamitous developments without faults of their own) with ‘standard’ families and empathically ascribed a whole range of dysfunctionalities (at the economic as well as the emotional and socialisational level) to them, which were then qualified as a process of ‘disadvantaging’ these lone mothers as a result of which they needed help from the social welfare state and other charitable institutions. The borderline to the ‘social threat’ paradigm (i.e. the moral devaluation of the ‘single mother’ lifestyle due to its undermining of traditional family values) was hardly ever crossed, which may have been due to the fact that – until the late 1960s – the stock of single parents was largely made up of World War II widows (perceived as leading a pitiable life) who, driven by low pensions, were typically forced to work and had to leave their ‘latchkey children’ to their own devices. Nevertheless, the ‘social threat’ paradigm can still be found in undertones of the public-popular and political as well as scientific discourse on single parenting (Fegert 2001: 50 f).6

**Single parenting as a ‘social threat’**

The paradigm of the ‘social threat’ which is supposed to emanate from the single parent lifestyle took root particularly in the US (as well as the UK and Australia), most recently expressing itself in the American welfare reform of the mid 1990s. Explanations are manifold, including the racist colouring of the poverty problem that prevails in the US as a consequence of the special disadvantage suffered by the non-white population. On this

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6 Psychotherapeutic research on single parenting includes research designs and theses that distinctly cross the borderline from the ‘social problem’ paradigm to the ‘social threat’ proposition (cf. Franz et al. 1999).
socio-psychological basis, the normative argument of the ‘undeserving poor’ has survived the slave-based society of the 19th century and been promulgated right into the 20th and 21st centuries.

American research into single parenting certainly reflects some of the scathing criticism that is being levelled against the anti-poverty programmes established during the ‘Great Society’ era of Kennedy and Johnson, bolstered by Charles Murray’s exhaustively documented study Losing Ground (1995), and that focuses on the core argument that instead of fighting poverty the welfare programmes rather cemented it by way of the ‘poverty trap’. This view has much greater prevalence among the American public and politics than in scientific research. Although researchers in the US too were for a long time cast in the ‘social problem’ mould, still their research was much broader and deeper than the efforts of their German peers. They experienced their shift towards the ‘lifestyle change’ paradigm and away from the deficit angle about a decade earlier (already in the 1970s) than their counterparts did in the FRG.

**Single parenting as a lifestyle change**

Research adhering to the ‘lifestyle change’ paradigm tends to distance itself from any negatively tinted normative bias and balances on a middle course detached alike from pity and moral condemnation. It accords equal attention to the positive sides and resources offered by the lifestyle/life phase as much as to its risks and burdens. It investigates the strategies used to handle not just separation and divorce but also the long-term condition of ‘living on one’s own and assuming responsibility’, and, more recently, has been exploring arrangements of how single parents relate to the life and development of their own children, and how separated/divorced fathers/mothers and their new partners are made to involve themselves in the responsibility for child-raising, all seen against the ‘lifestyle change’ paradigm. Other avenues of study explored by researchers are an investigation of the quality and quantity of inclusion that single parents are granted in social networks (where former studies had concentrated on their social isolation) and their utilisation of professional and neighbourhood assistance.

**Single parents – an extremely heterogeneous group**

The first study which grappled with such issues appears to have been an evaluation of the (above-mentioned) DJI survey of single parent families in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1980s (Neubauer 1988). Based on a large-scale and standardised representative poll, it produced a highly differentiated picture of the difficult, but also positive, aspects of life with children but without a (co-responsible) life partner. It also systematically underlined the differentiations existing within the ‘statistical category’ of single parents: clear structural differences were discovered between never-married, separated, divorced and widowed single parents both in terms of their labour market integration and (seen complementarily) in terms of their proneness to unemployment. Similar differential patterns could be found with regard to material parameters (e.g. income and housing situation): unwedded lone mothers (who were on average younger) generally led a more precarious life than members of the other groups of single parents.

Such examples of social differentiations between single parents have since been explored in greater depth and detail in many a study, much of it supported by data drawn from qualitative surveys. Looking back on the wealth of information gained since then, we may compile their differentiations into the following core insight: that there is a manifest heterogeneity of life situations sprouting in the category of single parents. Accordingly, the most recent (and suitably broad-ranged) empirical studies on the situation of single parents in Germany have placed considerable argumentative attention on this differentiation (Schneider et al. 2001). A current representative study from Thuringia (Brand & Hammer 2002) similarly emphasises the structural heterogeneity: according to its data, a third of the single parents are well-off in terms of material criteria and subjective well-being, whereas two out of three are
encumbered by a set of problems that varies depending on the life phase and age: unsatisfactory job situation, problematic family situation (felt especially by older women who are either separated or divorced), single parents who are unable to find a practicable solution to ensure care of their small children, and lone parents who suffer from serious deficits of inclusion in social networks.

Requirements of socio-political support: identifying target groups with need for special assistance

Considering the structural heterogeneity of the single-parent category, it is obvious that any social policy programme which aims at effectiveness and precision necessarily must be focussed on subcategories that can be identified as 'problem or risk groups' by means of clear-cut criteria. These would include single parents receiving social assistance, yet even that subgroup is greatly fissured by differences in life situations and outlooks: for some, getting social assistance for the first one or two years of the child's life is just a planned transition stage in a more or less clearly envisaged life/career path (cf. Leibfried et al. 1995); others fail to reconnect to their former job because of passing through a long 'child-raising' stage; and others again have dropped out of or never started any job training (due, e.g., to their teenage pregnancy) and thus share the aggravated labour market risks borne by low-qualified workers.

An entirely different approach to the formation of subcategories among single parents with special assistance needs is gained when we are confronted with specific 'high-risk groups': a single parent faced with a child's retarded development, a mother's need for psychiatric treatment (e.g. against depression) or another high-risk situation confronting a youthful mother who cannot fall back on the support of her own family – circumstances that call for secondary preventive intervention (such as maternal behaviour training or interventions by networked youth services) (Fegert 2001).

In addition to such needs which can be accurately identified for specific groups, needs also arise from the perspective of single parents in terms of child-care facilities and organisation of state schools. Nevertheless, these latter needs are essentially identical to those arising for standard families with children and working mothers.

‘A family like any other family’: single parenting as a quasi normal decision

Researchers investigating the subject from the lifestyle change aspect have not only harvested a rich analytical yield regarding the differentiation of life situations among single parents, but have also monitored the normalisation of this lifestyle and thus fostered its public acceptance. Since the 1980s their research has been finding that former consistent and massive discrimination against single parents, in these single parents' own opinion, has subsided, although it is still virulent in specific areas (Neubauer et al. 1989). Underlying this transition to a conventional and routine family form (‘we are a family like any other family’) is an increase in the self-confidence and self-assurance of single mothers who – in contrast to their predecessors 20 or 30 years ago – no longer shamefacedly withdraw from public life trying to cope with their delicate situation in quiet and solitary privacy.

Single parenting as ‘liberation’ from patriarchy

The growing assertiveness of single mothers has left its traces in the public discourse through the ‘single parenting as a liberation (from patriarchy)’ model. Among German social research in this field, it was chiefly a study by the German Youth Institute (Heiliger 1991) which, supported by the empirical base of a qualitative survey of more than 100 single mothers, produced a counter-profile to the image of the lone (in all aspects of the word) mother, abandoned, left on the shelf, sad, depressive and poor, exchanging it for the self-chosen lifestyle of a single mother and child. More strikingly than in previous work, the study
emphasised the positive aspects and options, indeed frequently experienced as ‘liberating’, available to women living with children but without husband, in terms of flexibility in time management, child raising and monetary questions. The majority of researchers, however, rejected this view as excessively feminist and declined to pursue it any further. The study was even misread as a manifesto advocating ‘fatherless’ pregnancy and the intentional raising of children without a father, and critics armed themselves with a large bundle of empirical works that had failed to discover any group of single mothers evincing such ideas. Heiliger’s study, however, simply describes, albeit with an intentionally sharp tongue yet carefully in line with the available empirical data, the liberating experience of women who escaped from highly conflict-prone marriages or similar relationships.

The latest survey of single parents that can justly claim to be ‘representative’ of Germany as a whole (Schneider et al. 2001) confirms the genuine importance and quantitative weight that this perceptional and behavioural pattern has for separated and divorced single parents: the largest subgroup (43%) were those who themselves terminated their marriage/relationship because they wished to escape the escalating level of conflict; those who were left by their partner (28%) or separated by mutual consent (29%) made up the rest.

Nevertheless, the ‘single parenting as a liberation’ model plays a rather peripheral role in the relevant research work and public debate in Germany, chiefly as a contrast and demarcation seized on by empirically based research and ‘serious’ discourses that purport to be ‘unideological’. In actual fact, however, studies such as that done by Heiliger have contributed to highlighting a key aspect that had been present, albeit at a subliminal level only, in the research modelled on the lifestyle change paradigm as well as in the trend towards normalising single parenting. With future lifestyle research into single parenting ever more intent and set on going beyond the ‘objective-material’ aspects of a given lifestyle and applying themselves to the strategies used to cope with such a lifestyle and identifying their origins and successes, researchers will be increasingly unable to ignore the issue of the extent and load-carrying capacity imposed by the biographical decisions that play a key role in the lifestyle choice.

Other DJI research on the subject

The DJI Family Survey is a representative panel poll carried out in all of Germany (cf. the contribution of Marbach to this volume). Preliminary results from the third wave of this survey (in 2000) have forced us to revise previous findings that had pointed to a rather slow rate of change towards pluralisation of family lifestyles: In 1988, 83% of the children in the Länder of the FRG were born in wedlock and spent their entire childhood in a regular family. In 2000, the figure was down to 77%. In Eastern Germany (the former GDR), 75% of all children in 1988 had grown up in and at the age of 18 were still living with their married and unseparated parents; 12 years later (one decade after unification), that figure was down to 46%; ‘Here, the normality concept applies only to every second child’ (Alt 2003: 240). The children of single parents have assumed a key role in quantitative terms: by 2000, some 10% of the children in the West and 20% of those in the East lived permanently with a single parent – a doubling of figures in Western Germany and a tripling in the East, all just within a dozen years. No other lifestyle has ever achieved such an explosive rate of growth.

With such a diagnosis, our research on the stability of families in an era of change, while always empirically based, is approaching the various theses that propound an ‘erosion’ of the traditional family, but lack empirical support: the continuity of long-term and self-propelling trends has turned into a new quality. This will necessarily impact on many social policy rules which still work on the premise of a ‘normal’ family based on the concept of marriage providing nurture and nourishment.

Even outside the survey, family research at the German Youth Institute has always accorded some attention to single parenting: drawing on a line of comparative DJI studies (set in a Western and Central European context) of life situations and lifestyles of families, Sass and Jaeckel (1996) produced a study in which they devoted one chapter to comparing the life
situations of single parents in Western and Eastern Germany (the regions discussed in the study), as well as in Poland, Russia and Hungary. Upon examination of the assessment given by single parents of their life situation it was found that those of Western Germany described their own situation with the greatest self-confidence. A majority of those polled valued the advantages of single parenting very highly in all aspects under consideration: the opportunity for a woman to arrange her life on her own without the need to take care of a man/husband in addition to the child, to raise the child(ren) in line with her own ideas and to establish a network of friends of her own. These findings provide an impressive confirmation – at an international level – of the qualitative results contained in Heiliger’s above-mentioned study.

**Outlook: single parents and poverty**

This paper started out with the thesis that single parents are a group that is especially hit by and prone to poverty. If we deduce that all beneficiaries of social assistance are necessarily poor, then, in view of the fact that 28.7% of all lone parent households obtained social assistance in 1998, they would necessarily have to be deemed ‘poor’. Until the change of government in 1998, poverty research (a field that had gained in both breadth and depth only in the 1990s thanks to initiatives launched by the major welfare associations and trade unions which prepared their own poverty reports) was faced with the official government position that there was ‘no poverty’ in Germany because social assistance (as the last safety net) was specially designed to fight poverty and secure a dignified livelihood. It was only in a few Länder (such as the City-State of Hamburg which participated in an EU programme to combat poverty) that poverty found its way into the media public as well as onto the political agenda as a political and social problem. At the federal level, the blockade raised against putting poverty on the political agenda was quickly felled once the red/green government took office in 1998 and lost no time commissioning an official Poverty and Wealth Report.

Since then and in the public perception, the poverty discussion has been focusing on the unacceptably high level of child poverty, subsumed under the formula of ‘children as a poverty risk’. This formula, however, ignores the most crucial risk factor of poverty: the ‘single parent’ family lifestyle. After all, a majority of the million or so minor children in Germany who depend on social assistance live with single parents, even though this family type makes up only one fifth of all households containing minors. Two-parent families with children are less dependent on social assistance than the average of households. We could thus say that the ‘couple family’ is more likely to protect its children from poverty. This ‘protective factor’ weakens only when the family grows to three or more children, who in turn become more prone to poverty. Next to the single parents, it is primarily migrant families who, as recipients of social assistance, are seen as ‘poor’.

It was the social reporting, and its findings, which ultimately led to the formulation of single parents being the ‘central problem group’ in terms of poverty risk and dependence on social assistance (e.g. in the first Poverty Report of the German government, published by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in 2001). Such a finding in a scientific document developed in close proximity to politics triggers an obligation to act as well as a process to reconsider the effectiveness of instruments previously used to understand, prevent and combat poverty. With this, research issues will attain the agenda of scientific projects which extend the spectrum of lifestyle research towards interaction between ‘individual and institution’, i.e. in our case between single parent and state support system, and trace the outcome of such interaction. Such issues were covered by a supplement to the DJI Family Survey that concentrated on ‘families in precarious life situations’, the results of which are currently prepared for publication. The same direction governs the remit given to the DJI project (begun in 2002) which provides the context for my contribution.

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7 This project is entitled ‘Development of municipal strategies to prevent poverty among single parents’ and is carried our in close co-operation with the City of Nuremberg.
In international comparative poverty studies, poverty is defined as 50% or 60% of the family equivalent income (in line with the approach investigating the material and financial resources of households), because poverty concepts need to relate to the average level of a given sociocultural lifestyle. In a comparison of EU member states (at 1996 level), Germany comes off rather badly in terms of the poverty risk of single parent households: Denmark, as the ‘most successful’ country, manages to slash the poverty rate of single parents after receipt of state transfer payments down to 3%, whereas in Germany the ‘after-transfers’ rate is substantially above 30% – a figure that is emulated only by the United Kingdom (Martin & Vion 2002: 17).

Against the background of such findings, countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and (with considerable caution) Germany have placed the perspective of labour market integration on the political agenda as a key strategy to overcome poverty (rather than using a strategy of increasing transfer payments). Yet, any attempt to make such a strategy effectual quickly makes it clear that integrating women (and especially lone mothers) into the labour market is tied to structural prerequisites that go beyond the practical problems which arise from the perspective of gainful employment: they range from a suitable qualification profile that is currently in demand on the labour market, to child-care, from a bridgeable distance between the workplace and the typical housing quarters of single parents, to the successful ascendancy over separation/divorce and its aftermath. In order to be effective, strategies need to address (and urgently find a solution for) the problem that women are ‘doubly socialised’ by being assigned responsibility for the devalued and mostly invisible (‘grey’) care work rendered by them.

Merely declaiming that men and women are equal and that both could and should be gainfully employed will not suffice to replace the family provider model, deeply rooted as it is in institutions, cultures and mentalities, by a ‘dual earners’ model. Rather, it is necessary to develop and provide suitable solutions at societal level for the spectrum of (child-related) care and child-raising work – and the success achieved by the Scandinavian countries (exemplified by Denmark in the EU comparison) in containing poverty among single parents makes it clear that the path taken by these countries is both practicable and effective. They combine access to the labour market, as a civil right not just for problem groups but for every man and every woman, with an extensive tax-financed system of professional care, even though such work constitutes a highly segregated labour market reserved to women.

The above should not be read as an entreaty to take the ‘Scandinavian road’. If we wish to overcome also in affluent countries the poverty of single parents who make up an ever greater part of the family sector, we need to understand most clearly: demanding that single mothers (or, by extension, all women of working age) enter the labour market while further privatising their burden cannot work for as long as they are required to bear an ever greater share of the care and child-raising work, simply because such a burden cannot – in the long run – be borne by a single person. Once the small private networks begin to fail to deliver the assistance required to relieve gainfully employed mothers (without any equally responsible partner) so that they can be ‘released into the labour market’, the strategic modules for labour market integration (counselling, qualification, labour market exchange) need to be supplemented by a strategy to place the care work under the responsibility of the community (cf. Knijn 2003; Lewis 2003).

At a smaller scale and at community level, the Nuremberg project to prevent poverty among single parents aims to achieve such an integration through supportive labour market and care work elements. Yet, it will take a plenitude of socially innovative research and practical work until a coherent and practicable course is found that will be able to depose the ‘provider model’ throughout society and establish a new balance of income from work and transfers as well as relieve the burden of care work in the family in a manner that will sustainably ensure a secure livelihood for single parents.
References


