The socioeconomics of single parenthood: reflections on the triple bind

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Single parents: evolving and changing

In affluent countries, single parents have long drawn attention, even fascination, from academia, in policy settings, among political actors and – with varying intensity across time and place – in public discourse.

The overarching history is well-known by now. When western countries designed and implemented the early components of their contemporary welfare states, single parents were largely sympathetic figures. They were women – unlucky women – lacking a breadwinner, usually due to death; they were in need of collective (external) support to enable them to raise their children without extreme hardship. In most cases, employment was viewed as unnecessary and undesirable; neither single mothers nor their married sisters were expected to work for pay. They were, in most cases, viewed as ‘deserving’ of public interventions – doubly so, in fact: they were not responsible for the onset of their ‘condition’ and (like most women) they were not expected to support themselves through market activity.

Now, of course, the demography of single parenting has changed. Across the rich countries, substantial percentages of single parents have never been partnered (however defined) and others, though once partnered, are separated or divorced. Thus, it is widely perceived – accurately, in fact – that large numbers of today’s single parents have become single as a result of choices made – their own choices and/or those of their children’s other parent. In addition, in all western countries, a decades-long (yet unfinished) gender revolution has dramatically changed women’s relationship to paid work. Today, women’s employment is generally seen as expected, necessary and ideally emancipatory. Feminists and other progressives in many
countries have fought to open labour markets to women of all classes; one part of that fight has included making employment conditions more compatible with parenting. Employment, though clearly onerous and difficult for many workers, is now overwhelmingly viewed as advantageous for both men and women.

So, ‘the single parent’ has changed markedly. The growth of the choice element vis-à-vis one’s family structure has eroded sympathy for single parents, and the gender revolution has introduced the expectation of employment. In short, as is often noted in affluent countries, single parents as a social category have shifted from ‘deserving’ to ‘undeserving’ – in the sense that it is no longer taken as a given that the state should assume the role of their sole, or even complementary, breadwinner.

Today, many single parents face criticism and blame and social policy designs often stigmatise them – sometimes intentionally. In some cases, such as the US in the 1980s and 1990s, single parents were openly demonised in public discourse – a trend only partly reversed after large numbers of low-income single parents in the US were pushed from social assistance into employment. In contrast, among those with more education and greater economic resources, single parenting is increasingly accepted as one family form among many. Nevertheless, across the high-income countries, vast numbers of single-parent families face challenges more prevalent and more severe than those experienced by their coupled counterparts – as this book makes amply clear.

**The research literature – so far**

There is by now a voluminous interdisciplinary research literature on single parents. While some studies have assessed the diverse and evolving pathways that ‘cause’ single parenting, most of the literature has set aside the factors that lead to single parenting – individually or in the aggregate – and has instead tackled questions about:

- the prevalence, characteristics and composition of single parents as a group;
- the economic difficulties faced by single-parent families, especially their elevated risk of being income poor;
- the consequences for children of living in (or having spent time in) single-parent families;
- the ways in which states mitigate or exacerbate the hardships faced by single parents and their children.
Much of the single-parent literature has focused on individual country cases and/or single points in time. But enabled by a multitude of data sources that have developed over the last four decades, a growing body of studies about single parents assesses variation across geography and/or over time. The comparative contributions within this literature have been invaluable in revealing that the answers to all of these questions (and more) are shaped by the settings in which they are asked. Extensive variation in the prevalence and composition of single parenting, in its consequences, poverty risks, and the nature and effectiveness of state interventions demonstrates that contexts, especially public institutions, matter – and they matter a lot.

The triple-bind analysis in a gendered framework

Despite the large literature that now exists, many aspects of single parenting call for further, and more thoughtful, study. The authors in this rich book have collectively pushed the literature forward.

Perhaps most fundamental, the profoundly gendered nature of single parenting is a theme that pervades this book. Despite the changes in single parenting that have unfolded over many decades – especially the transformed demography and the evolved expectation of paid work – one crucial factor has not changed: single parents everywhere are still overwhelmingly women, and this fact pervades all aspects of single parenting. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*

To the credit of this book, the gendered nature of single parenting is baked into its intellectual framework – that is, into the concept of the ‘triple bind’. The triple bind denotes that:

- Many single parents face resource deficits, notably but not exclusively in educational attainment.
- Most labour markets fail to adequately incorporate or reward single parents.
- Many social-protection systems insufficiently shield single parents and their children from hardship.

Each of these ‘binds’, which interact and combine in myriad ways, have elements that are themselves deeply gendered. Resources are not symmetrically available to, or accrued by, women and men – even less so by mothers and fathers. Gendered gaps in employment are multidimensional, complex and persistent. And many social policies privilege men (for example, veterans; industrial workers; full-time employees) even when their legal structures are officially gender
neutral, while others fail to accommodate the work of caring and domestic work, which in all countries remains disproportionately shouldered by women – most dramatically in the case of single parenting.

**Extending the study of single parenting**

In addition to keeping gender inequalities prominent throughout – a core feature of this book – the collected empirical contributions stretch research on single parents in a multitude of ways. In these brief reflections, my intention is not to summarise the findings reported across 19 diverse chapters, but rather to reflect on each of the four questions that have dominated the aforementioned single-parent literature and consider how this book helps to extend the knowledge base.

1. **Definitions matter; effective research requires disaggregating ‘single parents’**

In empirical research on single parents, it is common to treat parenthood as a binary state. Parents are coupled or they are not; children have (or live with) a single parent or they do not. Many researchers, especially those using quantitative designs, employ binary constructions – knowing, of course, that they are drawing distinctions that are, in reality, more complicated. Data limitations often force researchers to discard distinctions that they would otherwise incorporate.

Many studies have, of course, disaggregated single adults (including parents) by their prior statuses, dividing them into (for example) never-partnered, separated, divorced or widowed. Other research designs capture whether single parents live only with their children or co-reside with other adults.

Several studies included in this book disaggregate single parents more finely, allowing a more nuanced look at the diversity of single parenting – and, by extension, enabling more precise assessments of the lives of single parents, potential consequences for their children and the effectiveness of public policies. Zagel and Hübgen (Chapter Eight), for example, note that ‘single motherhood is rarely a uniform type of family, but rather a temporary status, which mothers enter and leave at very different points in their lives’ (p. 171). They use a simple proxy – the age of the youngest child, divided into five categories, from birth to early adulthood – to capture single mothers’ life stages.
The authors’ main contribution is to link their disaggregation to a comparative policy assessment. They argue that distinguishing among single mothers according to life stage ‘is both indicative of the different family–life realities of single motherhood and is assumed crucial for the eligibility of many policies’ (p. 176). A key finding – important, if not surprising – is that the strength and adequacy of welfare states’ support for single mothers vary according to which single mothers are considered. In short, some single mothers would ‘do well’ to live in some countries, while others would be better served elsewhere.

Working from the vantage point of children, Fransson and her colleagues (Chapter Seven) construct a typology of family structures that is (in my experience) novel. To capture diversity of family structures, they create five categories. Essentially, this typology picks up the varying combination of adults who the children of single parents encounter in their daily lives:

- children in single-parent families who reside only in that household;
- children in single-parent families who also have about equally shared residence with the other parent;
- children in step-families who reside only in that household;
- children in step-families who also have shared residence with the other parent;
- children in nonseparated families (as the main reference category).

Focusing on the Swedish case, Fransson et al. then assess a range of child wellbeing outcomes. Their findings – again, perhaps more importantly than surprisingly – indicate that the effects of living in single-parent (or other nontraditional) families vary across these family compositions. These findings have implications for social science research, for the design of psychosocial support systems and for public policies more generally.

2. Income matters; but research on single parenting must ‘go beyond income’

Scores of studies have considered the link between single parenting and family income. Much of this work is focused on income poverty: absolute, relative or both. In this literature, income is often disaggregated into its primary sources: earnings from waged work or self-employment, income from private transfers and public cash or near-cash transfers; these sources may be assessed gross or net of taxes, or both. Many researchers have analysed the relative contributions of
individual income sources to single parents’ total resources; others have considered income packages as wholes.

In recent years, social scientists have increasingly looked beyond income. A growing group of scholars has been analysing the complex interplay between income and material deprivation; others are assessing the joint distribution of income and wealth (including assets and liabilities). These emerging lines of work have been enabled by new data sources, including both new modules added to existing surveys and entirely new surveys.

Little existing research specifically focuses on material deprivation among single parents and their children. In Chapter Four, Treanor – using a standard index of deprivation – finds that single-parent families ‘experience exceedingly high levels of material deprivation compared to all other family formations’ (p. 98). Focusing on the case of Scotland, her work also reveals that material deprivation, while highly correlated with persistent poverty and maternal nonemployment, is in fact a distinct dimension – underscoring the value of treating it as an independent condition.

Other scholars have studied wealth disparities by income level, ‘race’ and even gender – but again, there is a near-total absence of research on the wealth holdings of single-parent families compared with families of other structures. Sierminska (Chapter Three) uses newly available household microdata to analyse wealth levels and composition across seven high-income countries, with a focus on disparities across family types. She finds that: ‘In all countries, single-parent wealth is at the lower end of the wealth distribution with a non-negligible share of negative and zero wealth’ (p. 58). Across her study countries, for example, the median (nonresidential) wealth of single-parent families is, overall, half or less that of coupled-parent families.

These studies together hint at the importance of going beyond income when assessing the wellbeing of single-parent families. Augmenting the study of single parents’ income with measures of their material deprivation or wealth – ideally, capturing all three simultaneously – produces a more meaningful and enduring portrait of single parents’ economic wellbeing.

3. Single parenting matters for children, but causal mechanisms remain poorly understood

A large and often-contested literature finds that the children of single parents, however defined, are more vulnerable to multiple risks (in
addition to poverty and deprivation) than children raised in couple-headed families. As synthesised in the introductory chapter in this book (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, Chapter One), a body of prior research finds that the children of single parents are more likely to have (or be judged as having) a range of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and educational deficits. Researchers in this field have grappled with two interrelated questions:

1. To what extent are the emotional, cognitive, behavioural and educational deficits (and the like) reported among children of single parents explained by their families’ economic or material conditions, versus living with (or being raised by) single parents per se?
2. Beyond their greater economic or material hardships, to what extent are single parents different from coupled parents, such that their effects on their children’s wellbeing operate independent of their partnership status?

This book includes several carefully designed studies that tackle the effects of single parenting on children. In my view, their findings indicate that most of these questions, despite the skill brought to bear on them, remain largely unanswered.

At least three contributions in this book find that children of single parents have various deficits compared with other children, but those deficits are explained by factors other than single parenting itself. In her study of children in Scotland, Treanor (Chapter Four) concludes that ‘it is not the state of lone parenthood that is negatively associated with child wellbeing, nor transitions in family formations, but the low levels of income and high levels of material deprivation they experience’ (p. 98). Similarly, Harkness and Salgado (Chapter Five) conclude that, for ‘cognitive attainment, differences between children in single-parent families and those who remain with both parents are largely a consequence of factors other than single parenthood. Differences in family characteristics, such as losses in income and poor maternal mental health, account for much of the observed gap’ (p. 121). Likewise, de Lange and Dronkers (Chapter Six) conclude that ‘children from single-parent families lag behind children with coupled parents at school [...] Important to note, however, is that the disadvantage of children growing up with a single parent can be explained by a lack of parental resources in the family: financial, cultural and social’ (p. 139). De Lange and Dronkers also report the intriguing finding that some of the effect of single parenting on children’s poorer school performance is explained by the fact that
children with single parents tend to be clustered in schools with other children from single-parent families, and that this concentration exerts its own negative effects.

Fransson and colleagues (Chapter Seven) reach a somewhat contrasting conclusion. They find that: ‘Compared with children in nonseparated families, children living full time with a single parent most often reported poor economic conditions, social relations and health outcomes’ (p. 159), and:

Interestingly, the estimates were not majorly affected when adjusting for parental socioeconomic resources (education and employment) or other parental factors. Furthermore, the impact of living arrangement was generally larger than that of parental characteristics, although parental variables per se showed several associations with the child’s material and health outcomes (but not with social relations). Thus, living arrangement seems to be a valuable study variable regarding the wellbeing of children. (p. 161)

In other words, Fransson and her colleagues find that the living arrangement itself does explain a substantial portion of children’s poorer outcomes in single-parent families. The authors note, however, that there are several possible selection effects operating – meaning that the diverse living arrangements captured in their study might actually contain persons with systematically different characteristics.

It seems reasonable to conclude that, overall, the causal mechanisms that link single parenting to wellbeing deficits in children have not yet been fully clarified. It may be that until researchers have the opportunity to randomly assign children to single versus coupled parents – a day that most researchers hope will never come – we may never fully disentangle the factors that cause children from different family types to be differentially rated and ranked. The studies in this book demonstrate the complexity of unpacking the relationship between single parenting and children’s wellbeing.

4. Cash transfers matter for single-parent families, but researchers and policy makers should devote more attention to other policy tools – especially tools that strengthen the quantity and quality of employment

Given the long-established finding that single-parent families are more likely to be income poor than are other families – a finding that holds
The socioeconomics of single parenthood

across all high-income countries – it is not surprising that multiple studies have found that cash transfers are crucial for reducing the prevalence and/or depth of single parents’ poverty. The importance of transfers as antipoverty policy is well-established. Nevertheless, many policy scholars continue to tackle thorny questions about optimal policy architecture (for example, benefit levels; eligibility frameworks; employment requirements), while others continue to assess fundamentally political questions about policy sustainability.

Several chapters in this book underscore the continued importance of state income supports for single parents in high-income countries. Bradshaw et al. (Chapter Fifteen) study the role of transfers across European Union member states, and find that ‘[c]hild poverty in single-parent families is reduced by social transfers in every EU country’ (p. 355). They also find that countries’ support for single parents and their children varies markedly across the EU countries – due, they argue, to varying political choices made at the country level. Morissens’ work (Chapter Sixteen) complements that of Bradshaw et al. She returns to the longstanding debate about universalism versus targeting, and concludes that: ‘Countries that combine (generous) universal benefits with supplementary family benefits towards single parents – based on their status, not their income – have the best results in terms of reducing poverty, and in this way offer these families a decent standard of living’ (p. 378). Cantillon et al. (Chapter Eighteen), who concur that transfers are crucial, raise some alarm bells, arguing that the antipoverty capacity of transfers has been eroded in recent years by a pattern of declining wage floors. Their work suggests that policy makers will be increasingly motivated (or forced) to ‘look beyond’ transfers in designing policy strategies to ensure the economic security of single-parent families.

Several studies in this book do just that – that is, broaden the analysis of policies aimed at shoring up the economic wellbeing of single-parent families, mainly by strengthening single parents’ attachment to, and success in, paid work. Horemans and Marx (Chapter Nine), for example, assess the impact of multiple policy indicators; they find that the availability of formal childcare and options for work-hour flexibility support the labour-force participation of single parents. Byun (Chapter Ten), in his study of single parents’ likelihood of reaching the middle class, analyses the effects of various institutions. One of his key findings is that parental leave matters; higher benefit levels facilitate single-parent families’ earning a middle-class income, but (as previous research finds) excessively long parental leave has harmful effects on single parents’ economic prospects.
Van Lancker (Chapter Eleven) also assesses formal childcare and parental-leave provisions. Like Byun, he finds that ‘the impact of parental-leave use on employment chances for single mothers is not unequivocally positive. In some countries, using full-time leave for a long period of time has a negative impact on the probability to be employed’ (p. 257). In contrast (and also in line with prior research), ‘[u]sing childcare is associated with higher employment probabilities across all countries, be it part time or full time’ (p. 258). Esser and Olsen (Chapter Thirteen) argue that effective job matching on job security and work–family balance is crucial for economic security, and that institutions can enhance or inhibit the matching process. They conclude that, for single parents, a range of institutions can aid matching – including stronger unions, more extensive active labour-market policies and family policies that promote equal sharing of paid and unpaid work.

The overarching message in these studies is clear: employment – especially secure, high-quality employment – is crucial for the economic wellbeing of single parents. A complex array of policies affects employment outcomes for all workers; some are especially effective in aiding single parents who aim to join, or remain in, employment. These chapters, and others in this book, indicate that work-related policies and programmes matter – and they matter a great deal. Nevertheless, much more research is needed to identify the components and architecture of the optimal policy package; that is, the mix of policies that most effectively and fairly secures the employment of single parents with the fewest unintended consequences. As always, parental leave remains a double-edged sword. Properly designed, parental-leave provisions can protect and strengthen women’s employment, reduce economic gender gaps and benefit children; poorly designed, they can worsen persistent gender gaps and create new forms of gender inequality.

Where do we go from here?

This book effectively updates and extends research on the socioeconomics of single parenting. What next? Where should researchers concerned with single parents go from here? I close my brief remarks by suggesting three future lines of analysis.

First, and this is perhaps overly obvious, much more research is needed on single parents in countries outside ‘the OECD world’. We now know a lot about single parents in rich countries, especially in rich western countries, but we know far too little about single parenting in
high-income countries in other parts of the world; we know even less about single parents in middle- and low-income countries. While data limitations remain severe, the availability of information is growing; researchers studying single parents would do well to extend their geographic reach and to incorporate more countries at lower levels of economic development.

Second, more theoretical and empirical work is needed that unpacks the link between two well-documented facts that should be (but rarely are) linked together. The first fact is that in all high-income countries, the majority of intact heterosexual couples (married or not) still ‘do gender’, meaning that they divide time and energy spent in paid and unpaid work along gender lines. This is especially true in couples with children. In all western countries in recent decades, mothers’ attachment to paid work has risen and fathers’ time spent on childcare has increased. But gender asymmetry, or ‘partial gender specialisation’, remains the dominant pattern. The second fact is that in all high-income countries, single parents are overwhelmingly women. While many children of single mothers have ample access to their fathers, large numbers do not. Many children of single parents have weak ties to their fathers; some are entirely fatherless.

In most high-income western countries, in mainstream political and policy discourse – feminist concerns aside – the first of these two facts rarely raises serious concerns. It is widely believed (or accepted) that men and women are fundamentally different: mothers are naturally drawn to childrearing while fathers are naturally pulled towards breadwinning. In policy circles, persistent gendered divisions of labour within intact couples are infrequently viewed as a problem – and even less frequently as a problem worthy of public intervention. At the same time, many policy makers express concerns about single parenting and the linked (perceived) problem of fatherlessness, especially among low-income children.

In my view, as long as so many heterosexual couples continue to ‘do gender’, it seems overdetermined that the majority of children of separated and divorced parents will reside without their fathers, and that many nonresident fathers will recede from their children’s lives. It is irrational to accept (and often celebrate) the gendering of family life within couples on the one hand, while expressing concern that many children of single mothers lack active fathers on the other. Researchers would do well to take a close look at this confluence of outcomes.

Third and finally, within the loose community of scholars studying single parents, there seems to be a strong consensus that single parents face challenges and that those challenges could and should be lessened
by effective public institutional interventions. But there seems to be little consensus as to what would be an ideal outcome.

Presumably, most people hope that single parents and their children will be economically secure, will live without material deprivation and will have equal and ample access to education, healthcare, employment and ultimately social inclusion. That said, what is the ideal end goal? What exactly should our policy interventions aspire to achieve? Should we aim to reduce the prevalence of single parenting? Should we not try to affect its prevalence, but aim instead to remove the risks and challenges associated with single parenting? Should we accept single parenting as a common family form, but aspire for a world in which single parents are as likely to be men as to be women? What should be the end goal? That question should be asked more often and more explicitly. Aiming to answer it would sharpen, focus and improve future research.

Notes

1 Material deprivation – related to, but distinct from, the concept of consumption – typically refers to the enforced inability to (rather than the choice to not) meet certain economic obligations and/or consume goods and services that most people (at least within one’s country) consider to be standard, desirable or necessary.

2 Feminists, of course, would disagree, usually understanding gender divisions at home to be socially constructed.