The Triple Bind of Single-Parent Families

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Published by Bristol University Press

Nieuwenhuis, Rense and Laurie C. Maldonado.

Bristol University Press, 2018.
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Conclusion

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Single parents face a triple bind of inadequate resources, employment and policies, which in combination complicate their lives. Single parents’ resources are at a greater risk to be inadequate to provide for themselves and their families, related to disadvantages in education, work experience and, of course, having only one earner and carer in the household. As single-parent households are often headed by women, these disadvantages are to an important extent gendered. The majority of single parents are working, and often full time. Yet, for many, such employment is grossly inadequate. Single parents are often in jobs with low wages, facing gendered pay gaps, weaker employment protections and little flexibility to balance work and family responsibilities. Inadequate policies further confound the situation: cash transfers that are too low or poorly designed; an overly strong assumption that facilitating employment will be a sufficient road to wellbeing; quality childcare that is unaffordable or inaccessible; parental leave that is unpaid or gender biased; and – perhaps the most crippling of all – a lacking social safety net that fails to protect families when they need it the most.

The triple bind has gender ‘baked in’, in the words of Gornick (Chapter Twenty, p. 439), and is ‘remorselessly comparative’, to use the words of Bradshaw et al. (Chapter Fifteen, p. 337). This book developed the concept of the ‘triple bind’, brought together expert scholars and set out to make five contributions to the literature on single parents:

1. to analyse single parents as a diverse group;
2. to analyse the context in which single parents’ resources affect their wellbeing;
3. to account for the very important role of employment – and its limitations;
4. to move beyond cash transfers to policies that tackle inequality before redistribution;
5. to assess multiple dimensions of wellbeing – including poverty; good-quality jobs; the middle class; wealth, health and children’s development and performance in school – and reflect on social justice.

**Assessing the triple bind framework**

The triple bind regards single parents as a diverse group. Family transitions, changes in work intensity and patterns of transient, recurrent or persistent poverty matter for the wellbeing of children growing up with a single parent (Treonor, Chapter Four). The timing of moving into or out of single parenthood matters (Harkness & Salgado, Chapter Five), and different stages of single parents’ life course interact with social policy design (Zagel & Hübgen, Chapter Eight). With respect to education – a key resource in the triple bind – Härkönen (Chapter Two) showed how single parenthood is more common among the lower educated, and that lower-educated single parents have elevated poverty risks compared to higher-educated single parents. However, the poverty risks of particularly the lower-educated single parents varied substantially across countries, suggesting that factors other than educational resources play a more substantial role. Indeed, Härkönen concluded that the educational gradient in single parenthood was hardly the ‘smoking gun’ (p. 43) explaining the elevated poverty risks of single parents.

It is undeniable that employment is important to help prevent households from being poor. However, the institutional context of employment – the labour-market policies, collective bargaining and organisations that contribute to jobs with adequate wages – is also key. Horemans and Marx (Chapter Nine, p. 215) demonstrate that ‘simply looking at the impact of policies on the post-transfer income position of single parents, assuming the pre-distribution situation as given, overlooks the point that the pretransfer position is also determined by these same policies’.

Finally, Nieuwenhuis, Tøge and Palme (Chapter Fourteen) found that active labour-market policies and childcare improved the health of single parents by both facilitating their employment and increasing the health benefits of employment. Yet, jobless single parents experienced poorer health – particularly in societies with extensive activation and employment-facilitating policies – and redistributive policies, such as child benefits and generous social assistance, were positively associated with the health of the jobless single parents. Without linking this policy analysis to a focus on employment, it could not have been
shown that activating policies operate through different mechanisms than redistributive policies.

Each of these examples, like many other chapters in this book, illustrate the complex interplay between resources, employment and policy. Cantillon, Collado and Van Mechelen (Chapter Eighteen) even presented inadequate minimum wages as a driving force of inadequate social assistance for jobless single parents. If parts of the triple bind are taken in isolation rather than as a whole, we miss an important part of the picture. If we instead consider the interplay among the three, we can better understand and more effectively respond to the complexity of challenges that single parents face.

**Future research on single-parent families**

The life-course perspective developed by Zagel and Hübgen (Chapter Eight) calls for a more detailed analysis of social policy to address how the needs of single parents – as well as their policy eligibility – depend on the interplay between policy design and changes over single parents’ life course. More generally, the details of policy design matter for single parents, including the duration of parental leave in relation to future employment (for example, Van Lancker, Chapter Eleven), means-testing strategies that restrict single parents’ capability to accumulate much-needed savings (Sierminska, Chapter Three) and targeted or universal policy eligibility (Morissens, Chapter Sixteen). Duvander and Korsell (Chapter Twelve) mentioned the ease with which parental-leave rights can be transferred between parents in Sweden, which points towards the importance of future work to examine issues of accessibility, uptake of social policies and the quality of governance. Yet, examining such levels of detail – particularly in comparative analyses – remains a challenge for future research.

Conventional surveys based on sampling frames of households tend to lag behind the reality of increasing family diversity and complexity. Bradshaw, Keung and Chzhen (Chapter Fifteen) suggested an improved identification of single parents in multigenerational households, and Gornick (Chapter Twenty) argued for capturing the complex patterns and diversity of single-parent families. Larger sample sizes would facilitate such fine-grained analyses, but better measurements are required as well. The importance of shared residence (Fransson, Läftman, Östberg & Bergström, Chapter Seven), and more generally the increased levels of involvement among fathers after separation, suggest the need for measurements of the household members’ ties to people outside the household. Currently, very little information is available
about what monetary (other than formal child support and alimony) or nonmonetary contributions nonresident parents might make to the single-parent household or his/her child(ren). Future availability of longitudinal microdata for comparative analyses would allow to build on analyses such as those by Treanor (Chapter Four) and Harkness and Salgado (Chapter Five), which point towards the heterogeneity of single-parent families and transitions into and out of single parenthood. More generally, longitudinal data would contribute to making causal inferences, as well as analysing the life courses of single parents.

Gornick (Chapter Twenty, p. 446) already commented on the need to go beyond the OECD – an argument to which we fully subscribe. There is ongoing debate about whether incorporating middle- and low-income countries in welfare-state analyses requires theories based on concepts beyond family, market and state (on which also the triple bind is based) (Wood & Gough, 2006), or whether similar policies help improve, for instance, working conditions around the globe (Heymann & Earle, 2009). It thus remains to be seen whether changing the geographical scope requires broadening the triple bind framework to include a special role for civil society or how single parents are perceived around the world, such as stigma (see Duncan and Edwards, 1997). We further suggest including subnational regions in future work – including cities, provinces, urban and rural areas and states (for example, see Parolin, 2017) – to examine local variation in the (in)adequacy of single parents’ resources, employment and policies.

Five lessons on what really matters for single-parent families

1. Inequality matters for diverse aspects of single parents’ wellbeing

Socioeconomic inequality and the consequences of single parenthood are intertwined. As discussed by Gornick (Chapter Twenty), the causal mechanisms between single parenting and children’s outcomes remain poorly understood; after accounting for (inequality in) parental education and employment, Fransson and colleagues (Chapter Seven) found that children growing up with a single parent still have lower wellbeing compared to children growing up with coupled parents. Yet, other studies found that more detailed controls for socioeconomic resources could explain a relevant share of the disadvantage of children growing up with a single parent with respect to wellbeing (Treanor, Chapter Four), school performance (de Lange & Dronkers, Chapter Six) and cognitive development, but less so for emotional wellbeing.
Conclusion

(Harkness & Salgado, Chapter Five). Poverty of children growing up with a single parent was found to be particularly high in societies where a low level of education posed a particular risk for poverty for all families with children (Härkönen, Chapter Two), and socioeconomic inequality in education, employment and poverty was found to resonate in a health penalty for single parents (Nieuwenhuis, Tøge & Palme, Chapter Fourteen). All in all, our interpretation of this evidence is that socioeconomic disadvantage of single parents may not be able to fully explain their disadvantaged wellbeing, nor that of their children. However, addressing socioeconomic inequality greatly improves the wellbeing of single parents and their families.

2. Policies that benefit all families matter just as well for single-parent families

Given Härkönen’s (Chapter Two) finding that single parents’ poverty risks were predominantly shaped by the overall educational gradient in poverty in a society, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the policies and institutions that benefit all family forms also reach single parents. Indeed, many of the redistributive policies discussed by Bradshaw, Keung and Chzhen (Chapter Fifteen), such as social assistance, housing benefits and family benefits, can be important for all kinds of families – including single parents. Esser and Olsen (Chapter Thirteen) found that labour-market conditions and institutions – a low unemployment rate; longer unemployment-benefit duration; union density, active labour-market programmes and dual-earner–carer support – provide the capability for both single and coupled parents to obtain positive job matching with respect to job security and dual-earner policies to support work–family balance for all. Van Lancker (Chapter Eleven) found that single parents not only benefit from parental leave and childcare services but also do so in a similar manner as coupled parents (for example, Gornick & Meyers, 2003); both using paid leave and childcare are associated with later-in-life employment, but the implications of paid leave can be more complicated, as very long periods of leave can increase the distance of the mother from the labour market. An explanation for these common policy outcomes could be that, for many, these outcomes are already formed prior to becoming a single parent.

This is not to say that policies specifically tailored to the position of single parents are not important. For instance, child support policies are distinctive to the position of single parents (Meyer et al., 2011), and Morissens (Chapter Sixteen) found the best outcomes to be the result
of a combination of universal benefits for all families and supplemental benefits for single-parent families. Yet, this is an important lesson: universal policy approaches should not be overlooked.

3. Gender, involved fathers and support for shared parenting matter

Single parenthood is strongly gendered, with the large majority of single-parent families headed by mothers. Yet, to use the words of Eydal and Rostgaard on fatherhood, ‘what is constructed can be transformed’ (2014, p. 395). Indeed, in select countries things may have started to change. In the Swedish context, Duvander and Korsell (Chapter Twelve) challenge the very notion of single parents, because of the strong norms and practices of both parents taking part in their children’s lives – whether or not the parents are together. This can partly be attributed to policies that support individual rights, gender equality in care and work and shared parenting. Indeed, they find that in Sweden, separated fathers use parental leave to care for their children – albeit less so than coupled fathers. The importance of fathers’ involvement was demonstrated by Fransson and colleagues (Chapter Seven), who showed that in terms of child wellbeing, shared parenting in Sweden is on par with coupled-parent households. These findings, combined with the experience of Nordic countries effectively stimulating paternity leave by granting reserved (‘use it or lose it’) months of parental leave to fathers, suggest to us the importance of fathers taking parental leave early in their children’s lives, including when parents have not (yet) separated. In many countries, this will require a change in norms, as well as a substantial change in the policies facilitating and stimulating fathers taking parental leave. Eydal (Chapter Seventeen) described income-support policies as lagging behind changing families in Iceland. Unlike parental leave, to which both parents are entitled, income support is still only received by one parent, including in the case of shared residence after separation. In various scenarios such as these, one can see how this might elevate tension between parents and sometimes pit parents against each other.

Taken together, the second and third lessons resonate with Cooke’s (forthcoming) argument that single parents tend to do better in societies characterised by low inequality of class and of gender.

4. Investments in employment matter to support inclusive societies

Two interpretations of the social investment perspective were presented in Chapter One. One was that social investment supports policies
that invest in people’s skills to improve their self-reliance through employment, including reducing mismatch between their skills and demand for labour. Inclusive societies allow all to participate in paid work or education, with quality jobs, no poverty or material deprivation and limited inequality. Examples of social investment policies are work–family reconciliation policies and active labour-market programmes. While these programmes have been found effective for the general population, a second, critical, perspective was presented raising concerns on whether such activating policies further marginalise vulnerable groups such as single parents.

The evidence presented in this book takes away some of these concerns – at least with respect to single parents. Activating family policies as paid, medium-term parental leave and childcare were found to be effective in stimulating the employment of single parents (Van Lancker, Chapter Eleven). Not only was employment stimulated but also earnings poverty was reduced, and the likelihood of acquiring a middle-class wage for single-parent families increased via institutional conditions that provided employment incentives and reduced barriers to do so (Horemans & Marx, Chapter Nine; Byun, Chapter Ten). Active labour-market policies were found to facilitate single parents to find employment that matches their preferences for job security (Esser & Olsen, Chapter Thirteen). Nieuwenhuis, Tøge and Palme (Chapter Fourteen) found more single-parent employment and better health outcomes associated with this employment in countries with stronger social investment efforts.

5. Reasons for concern remain, and they matter

Despite the many innovative solutions to effectively support single parents’ wellbeing seen throughout this book, the continued need for redistributive policies to provide income support is crucial. Bradshaw, Keung and Chzhen (Chapter Fifteen) showed that sizeable shares of single parents’ household incomes were comprised of various types of benefits, such as housing, family and in-work benefits. With respect to family benefits, this holds even for single parents with average earnings. In the times of Great Recession, they argued, a ‘shift in social expenditure away from families with children’ was observed (p. 345), resulting in increased child poverty rates. Employment is important for income and wellbeing; however, a job is not always sufficient to stay out of poverty (Horemans & Marx, Chapter Nine). Along with the rise of inequality in the labour market and increased pressure on welfare-state budgets, it is not surprising that scholars of the welfare
state raise their concerns. In this book, this was most forcefully done by Cantillon, Collado and Van Mechelen (Chapter Eighteen), who argued that welfare states are ‘running harder to stand still’ (p. 411) and that inadequate levels of minimum income protection are of a structural nature, driven by falling gross minimum wages.

The late Atkinson (2015) argued not only for the importance of redistribution but also that because the limits of redistributive capacity are within sight, solutions have to be designed to reduce (wage) inequality in the labour market – the source of many currently observed trends in inequality.

Conclusion

This book opened with a traditional discourse on the nuclear family as the only way to achieve wellbeing and happiness, and contrasted this with a position on family diversity arguing that ‘conformity with the traditional pattern certainly is no guarantee of the happiest results’ (Myrdal and Klein, 1956, p. 126). In this light, it is worth reflecting on the virtue of individuals having the option to exit an undesirable relationship. As Calder (Chapter Nineteen, p. 427) argued in his perspective on social justice, there is ‘nothing inherent about the disadvantage [single parenthood] brings … For it to be seen that way depends on decisions about the distribution of resources in society, alongside dominant assumptions about appropriate family forms, both of which are contingent and up for revision’. The empirical evidence in this book demonstrates that, in fact, the majority of single parents are doing well in many respects, while immediately acknowledging that many still face challenges and risks of impaired wellbeing. For them, it is important to rethink our institutions – to ensure adequate resources, employment and policies to guarantee and improve the wellbeing of single parents and their families. Single parents do better in societies with institutions that support equality of gender and equality of class. Just like everyone else.

Note

1 Maldonado was supported by Fonds National Recherche de la Luxembourg, AFR PhD grant #4039120. Nieuwenhuis was supported by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (Forte), grant #2015–00921.
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