

## **REPARTNERING MOTHERS: DOING FAMILY AFTER THE TRANSITION TO LONE PARENTHOOD**

### **Theme, theory and research aim**

Living sometime over one's life as a lone parent is arguably a common experience to many mothers in Western societies. However, we know that the transition to lone parenthood does not necessarily imply entering a new life-long phase as repartnering can occur after sometime. Having said that, lone mothers do not have the same chances to repartner and repartnering may imply different meanings and new family arrangements to the mothers who experience this new phase.

Current research on repartnering among lone mothers has mainly attempted to disclose patterns of repartnering in relation to lone mothers' demographic characteristics - such as the duration of lone parenthood, the age at divorce or separation and the mode of entry into lone parenthood - and socio-economic circumstances (Le Bourdais, Desrosiers and Laplante, 1995; Dewilde and Uunk, 2008, Ermish and Francesconi, 2000; Skew, 2009). Advantages of repartnering for lone mothers - such as increased happiness (for e.g. Demo and Acock, 1996) – have also been investigated.

Nevertheless, little is known about what happens to the family once mothers repartner and especially what role the new partner plays in it. This implies finding out how lone mothers "do family" in the context of the new relationship and what kind of support they actually receive from their partners, including the extent to which the new partner takes up parenting tasks. The few works looking at the above mostly conceive repartnering as either re-cohabiting or remarrying (Furstenberg and Winquist Nord, 1985; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1994) and overlook a less normative form of repartnering such as LAT. This is understandable as it is hard to identify less normative forms of repartnering, especially in cross-sectional studies and quantitative surveys. However, this is problematic as these relationships are becoming more and more common (Levin, 2004). Ultimately, the exclusive focus on the most normative cases of repartnering conceals a more nuanced set of arrangements as to the way lone mothers "do family" and new partners interact with their children.

This work aims at exploring meanings and practices of repartnering in lone mothers' families in French speaking Switzerland, both in the case of co-resident and distant partners (LAT relationships).

### **Methods**

This work is carried out in the frame of a Swiss National Science Foundation project including a qualitative panel. Two waves of semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2012/2013 and 2015 with a group of 38 lone mothers living in the Cantons of Vaud and Geneva, the most urbanized area in French speaking Switzerland.

These mothers were alone (i.e. had a dependent child at home but no other co-resident adult) at the time of the first interview and were selected according to a set of criteria. First, they had

experienced a relatively recent transition to lone parenthood (1 to 5 years before the interview). This allowed to have people who could easily recall the experience of the transition to lone parenthood which was instrumental to our life-course approach. Second, they were raising up to three children, whereby the youngest was aged up to 12 (and most of the children were aged under 9) at the time of the first interview. This was done in order to look at how mothers cope with children having intensive care needs. Third, they had full custody of their children at the time of the first interview, in order to isolate the most critical cases.

A heterogeneous purposive sampling was built to cover various socio-economic conditions and modes of entry into lone parenthood. Specifically, some of the mothers had lost their partner through separation, divorce or death. Some others had been alone since before the birth of the child. A whole variety of situations were also included as to the relationship between the mother and the absent parent. Sometimes the latter is still available and enjoys their parental rights, sometimes they are reluctant to offer any help or just show up irregularly.

Participants were recruited with the help of local associations, personal contacts of the interviewers, contact boxes at kindergartens, flyers distribution in public spaces and subsequent snowballing through a few interviewees. Limited snowballing allowed to avoid having too many people from the same socio-economic background and not to have too many respondents coming from the associations.

Through the help of a topic guide the following themes were explored in both waves: life course of the lone mother in various domains<sup>1</sup>, everyday life as a lone mother<sup>2</sup> and life as a woman (including the possibility of having a new partner). At the time of the second interview more than ten mothers had repartnered either by starting a new cohabitation or with a LAT relationship. The decision to repartner and its implications on the various life domains were elicited throughout the interview. Mothers were invited to explain the meanings of any decision and to provide their views on the circumstances narrated.

### **Preliminary results**

New partners can be instrumental in sharing costs and providing material resources as well as emotional support and sharing parenting tasks with biological mothers. However, various combinations of new partners' roles and residential arrangements (co-habitant and LAT) are possible. More importantly, the intensity of the support received by the mother is not necessarily related to the new residential arrangement. In other words, a new cohabitation does not necessarily imply shared parenting and a LAT relationship can include intense support with parenting tasks.

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<sup>1</sup> Residency, studies and career, relationships and children, health.

<sup>2</sup> Including the relationship with the other parent - whenever appropriate - , the relationship with other kins, legal and informal custody arrangements with children, employment adjustments, institutional support and daily life organization.

This work shows how important it is to look at how families "do family" rather than purely assuming that changes in family dynamics - including parenting practices - necessarily follow changes in family structure such as new cohabitations or remarriages. Changes in family life may be more nuanced. This work confirms that parenting trajectories and partnering trajectories do not necessarily evolve simultaneously (Bernardi and Larenza, forthcoming).

Furthermore, lone mothers do not necessarily want to recreate the traditional family - as previous works have showed (Nelson, 2006) - with the new partner and can take a LAT relationship as a long-term partnership option. This is not only the case with mothers from the highest social classes but can also concern mothers from the lower classes. When the mothers' life course is analysed, a whole array of justifications comes to the surface and allows to say that social class is not the only important factor when it comes to choose between a new co-habitation and a LAT relationship.

As to the method, this work shows the potential of repeated interviews in detecting and understanding changes in parenting and partnering over lone mothers' life course, especially for the less normative ones. It proves particularly useful to understand mothers' intentions and meanings around repartnering in relation to past events which occurred across the various life domains.

### **Main references**

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**Annex \_Sample characteristics at first interview**

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<b>Sample size</b>	38
<b>Average age</b>	39
<b>Civil status</b>	
Divorced	8
Separated	8
Single	19
Widow	2
Civil partnership (PACS)	1
<b>Entry into lone parenthood</b>	
Lone mother after couple	28
Began as lone mother	10
<b>Number of children</b>	
1	22*
2	14
3	2
<b>Education level</b>	
High (at least Bachelor degree)	23
Low (below Bachelor degree)	15
<b>Income level</b>	
High	3
Medium	18
Low	17

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\*One respondent was pregnant at the time of the first interview