

# **Does Lone Motherhood Indeed Decrease Women's Subjective Well-Being?**

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## **Abstract**

This paper contributes to the discussion on the effects of single motherhood on happiness. We use a mixed-method approach. First, based on in-depth interviews with lone mothers who gave birth out of wedlock, we explore mechanisms through which children may influence mothers' subjective well-being. In the second step we analyze panel survey data to quantify this influence.

Our results leave no doubt that raising a child outside marriage poses many challenges, but at the same time parenthood has some positive influence on lone mother's life. Our qualitative evidence shows that children are a central point in unmarried women's life, and that many lifetime decisions are taken with consideration of the child's welfare, including escaping from pathological relationships. Our quantitative evidence shows that although the general level of happiness among unmarried women is lower than among their married counterparts, raising a child does not have a detrimental effect on their subjective well-being.

## **Background**

Becoming a parent is related to both strains and rewards. Raising children requires financial expenditures as well as incurs indirect costs by affecting professional career of a person who is the main care provider (Gustafsson, 2001, Hotz et al., 1997; Taniguchi, 1999). Parenthood may also result in emotional distress as it leads to an increase in time conflict and poses psychological strain on parents (McLanahan and Adams 1987, Pailhe and Solaz 2009). While married parents may share the financial and emotional effort with their spouses, most lone parents – usually women – cannot benefit from their partners' support. Women, who enter motherhood and raise children alone are therefore particularly vulnerable to the risk of poverty and must cope with tensions resulting from the double burden of breadwinning and care provision (Christopher et al. 2003; Casper, et al. 1994; Mejer and Siermann, 2000). Their situation may be particularly difficult in societies which do not support raising children outside marriage and where the welfare state support for parents - and especially for lone parents - is limited.

Interestingly, empirical research does not provide strong and unequivocal evidence that giving birth out-of-wedlock has a detrimental effect on subjective well-being of the mother. On the one hand, some quantitative studies indicate that lone motherhood is negatively associated with mothers' mental health (e.g. Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003; Hope et al. 1999; Cairney et al. 2003). On the other hand, there are studies that show no significant relationship (McLanahan and Adams 1987; Burton 1998; Kandel, Davies and Raveis 1985).

Recent qualitative research casts further doubts on the common opinion that having a child out-of-wedlock brings nothing but disadvantage to young women. For example, Edin and Kefalas (2005) provide evidence that single mothers "seldom view an out-of-wedlock birth as a mark of personal failure". Their study, albeit conducted among women in poor neighborhoods, shows that being a mother might actually raise young women's self-esteem and improve their social status. This holds true especially for women whose prospects in other spheres of life, including educational and occupational career, are very limited. Likewise, some other qualitative studies confirm that a sense of parental responsibility may provide young women in lower social strata with motivation to adopt a healthier life style and take attempts towards achieving economic independence (Duncan 2007; Stauber 2010).

Measurement of subjective well-being might be one of the reasons for the inconsistency of the reviewed empirical findings. It is notable that most quantitative studies have so far focused on the risk of depression, anxiety or psychosomatic illness, while qualitative studies refer to a more global concept of subjective well-being and provide evidence for selected social groups such as the poor. Another reason for a lack of consistency of empirical findings is that most available quantitative studies measure

the relationship between lone parenthood and well-being describe statistical association rather than causal effects. As Davies et al. (1997) show, higher rates of depression among single mothers are due, in part, to a greater susceptibility of these women to the adverse childhood experiences, which translate into higher risk of poor mental health in adult life. Women whose childhood was marked by harmful experiences are at the same time overrepresented among single mothers who gave birth while unwed.

This paper contributes to the available evidence on the effects of lone motherhood on subjective well-being. We implement a mixed-method approach to explore whether giving birth by a single woman indeed decreases her life-satisfaction. First, we use qualitative data in order to better understand the mechanisms through which parenthood affects subjective well-being of lonely mothers. Second, we perform quantitative analyses on a representative sample of women. The analytical approach adopted allows us to account for selection of lonely mothers who gave birth out of wedlock to the group of women raised in adverse social environment who are more susceptible to experience mental health problems or low satisfaction with life.

For our analyses we selected Poland. We consider this country an interesting case study specifically for this research purpose for two reasons. First, the number of unwed mothers, which used to be rather low, is increasing not only due to increasing number of divorces but also due to increasing non-marital childbearing rates (Szukalski 2010). Second, unlike in some Western European countries, lone mothers in Poland receive very limited support from the welfare state (Kotowska et al. 2008; Piętka 2010). In particular, social benefits to lonely mothers are means-tested, very low and granted only to those who do not receive alimonies from the father of the child. Consequently Poland is characterized by a very low level of child maintenance payments (OECD 2008). Third, Poles are strongly attached to Catholic values and hence the acceptance for nonmarital childbearing is still relatively low. Given these unfavorable conditions, the data for Poland provide a good opportunity for a “conservative test” of the effects of becoming a single mother on well-being.

## **Data and method**

A particular strength of our research lies in its **methodology which combines qualitative and quantitative approaches (methodological triangulation)**. This mixed-method approach is advocated with an increasing frequency in population studies (e.g. Bernardi and Hutter 2007, Hantrais 2005, Knodel 1997, Obermeyer 1997, Randal and Koppenhaver 2004) as well as in social research in general (e.g. Bryman 1988, Giele and Elder 1998, Sale et al. 2002) as it allows for formulating more valid and deeper interpretations of social phenomena.

Qualitative approach is interpretative and explorative in its nature and – most importantly – it is process-oriented, which means that it is primarily interested in mechanisms and dynamics of the events and actions (Maxwell 1996). Therefore, **qualitative approach is implemented in the first step of this study and aims to explore the mechanisms through which children affect lone mothers' subjective well-being.**

To this end, we analyze semi-structured interviews with 19 women. Our interviewees are 26 to 42 years old, they come from different cities and small towns in Poland and differ in respect to their current marital status. All of them, however, share some common characteristics: they are all mothers, they had not been married before they gave birth to their first child, and they left or were left by their child's father (during the pregnancy or some time after child's birth) and consequently experienced periods, when they raised their child alone.

The women were recruited (snowball method) and interviewed in 2011 (May – July). The interviews were semi-structured and problem-centered. There were two general aims of each interview: to explore how a respondent arrived at her current family situation and to establish how this influenced her happiness and life-satisfaction. Naturally, an emphasis was put on a history of lone-motherhood.

We analyzed the data using a bottom-up coding procedure, modeled on “grounded theory” approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss 1987). We identified all passages where any relation to childbearing and lone motherhood was made and coded them for any consequences that these events might have had for women's life. A special attention was paid to affective dimension: what positive and negative aspects are recognized by the interviewees? Our aim was to identify mechanism through which women's experiences related to childbearing and to lone motherhood might have influenced their current life satisfaction.

**In the second step we shifted to representative survey data, to establish the effects of becoming a lonely mother on women's subjective well-being in a quantitative manner.** The data used for quantitative study comes from Social Diagnosis which is a national panel survey, conducted every two years since 2003. It covers information from a variety of areas, such as income and living conditions in the household, education and labor market participation as well as health and well-being of household members. Altogether, in all five waves, 38.731 face-to-face interviews have been conducted with household members aged 16 or more (Czapiński and Panek, 2009).

The dependent variable in our quantitative analyses is the level of happiness derived from a single-item question: “Taking all things together, would you say you are very happy, quite happy, somewhat happy or not at all happy?”, with responses coded on a four point scale. Our key explanatory

variable is the number of children of the respondent interacted with her civil status. Among our control variables we included respondent's age and its square, education attainment, labor market status, self-rated health, as well as self-rated material standard of living. Our analysis was conducted on a sample of 3759 women, who entered the survey at the age 18-35, i.e. in the childbearing and childrearing age.

Our analytical approach relies on methods, which remove a bias caused by a selection of women who gave birth out-of-wedlock to the pool of miserable individuals. This was achieved by using several independent analytical methods. First, we estimated a fixed-effects ordered probit model. Two different estimators were applied for this purpose: the estimator proposed by Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters (2004) and the recently developed "Blow-Up and Cluster" (BUC) estimator (Baetschmann et al 2011). They allow to estimate parameters of an ordered logit model accounting for all observed and unobserved time-invariant characteristics of analysed individuals allowing at the same time to model the ordinal nature of the dependent variable. The disadvantage of this approach, typical of all fixed-effects models, is, however, that it yields less efficient estimates than a random-effects model as it is based solely on the variation of respondent's characteristics across time. Therefore, in the second step we estimated a correlated random-effects model. This model makes use not only of the within-person variation across time but also of the variation across individuals. Furthermore, unlike the standard random-effects models it accounts for unobserved characteristics by decomposing the unmeasured time-invariant individual effect into a random effect, uncorrelated with explanatory variables, and the mean values of the time-varying regressors that are expected to be correlated with individual random effects (Mundlak 1978).

### **Preliminary findings**

Our qualitative data revealed numerous negative consequences of lone motherhood. The women speak of – often very painful – experiences related to termination of their relationship with child's father. They emphasize a hardship of being a lone mother, with no partner to support them emotionally and financially. Also a topic of social exclusion and stigmatization of lone mothers appears in some interviews. Nevertheless, there are also positive aspects.

First of all, our interviewees – with just a few exceptions – admit that their child's father was far from ideal. Not only were there cases of disagreements or fights, but also of infidelity, alcohol or drugs abuse or even domestic violence. More than a half of our respondents were abandoned by or separated from the child's father during the pregnancy and it allowed them to escape an unhappy and sometimes a highly pathological relationship. Some women explain in the interviews that they made a deliberate decision to break with their partner for the child's good. Being responsible for their offspring, made

them also more cautious when getting involved with a new partner. Second, even though some women suffered from social exclusion, other enjoyed generous support from their family and friends. This support could have been missing if a woman was childless. Finally, regardless all difficulties and problems, the women quite unequivocally emphasize that a child is the greatest source of joy and happiness in their life.

Our quantitative analyses reveal that the effect of parenthood on subjective well-being of mothers is either positive or insignificant depending on the specification of our model. Importantly, no significant difference in the direction of this effect is observed between married and single mothers. Hence, although women raising their children on their own do not receive emotional and financial support from a partner, still having a dependent child does not have a detrimental effect on their well-being.

To conclude, our results indicate that without any doubt unmarried mothers constitute a disadvantaged group, and raising a child outside marriage clearly poses many challenges. Nevertheless, the birth of the child and motherhood increases the subjective well-being of single mothers. From our qualitative interviews it seems that children are a central point in unmarried women's life and many important lifetime decisions, such as ending a relationship or starting a new one are taken with consideration of the child's (future) welfare. Noteworthy, this result complements previous qualitative findings conducted in the US where it has been found that for young lone mothers a child can be a source of motivation to finish education, start work, and – in general – to improve her status. Our findings show that in some cases a child may also give women strength to escape a pathological relationship and save her from additions or violence. Our quantitative evidence supports rather than rejects qualitative results – although the general level of happiness among unmarried women is lower than among their married counterparts, raising a child has no negative impact on the women's subjective well-being. It seems that the benefits described in the qualitative research on subjective well-being among lone mothers may “tip the scales”.

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