Gendered and classed experiences of work–family conflict among lone mothers in Sweden

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ABSTRACT
Research on the relationship between lone motherhood and social class is indeed limited. Drawing on 39 in-depth interviews, the overall aim of this article is to increase knowledge of the ways that working conditions and access to economic resources impact on Swedish lone mothers’ opportunities to integrate paid work and family. One assumption is that lone mothers are guided by culturally shaped ideas about the proper way to be a mother, and that variance between mothers’ notions of good mothering and the means for their realization, i.e. sociological ambivalence, may give rise to conflicts and dilemmas. Results show that low incomes, non-standard hours and temporary employment reduced working-class mothers’ prospects of practising the kind of mothering they considered proper, creating dilemmas and high levels of conflict. Mothers could not always effectively use the rights granted to parents by the Swedish welfare state. The variances between notions about good mothering and the means for realizing them were not as big for middle-class mothers, thanks to greater access to economic capital and flexible working hours. Different opportunity structures hence significantly influenced lone mothers’ opportunity to combine paid work and caring commitments in ways they found appropriate.

RESUMEN
Las investigaciones sobre el vínculo entre ser madre soltera y la clase social son realmente escasas. Basándose en 39 entrevistas en profundidad, el objetivo general de este artículo es aumentar el conocimiento en relación a cómo las condiciones laborales y el acceso a recursos económicos impactan en las oportunidades de dichas madres, en Suecia, de integrar el trabajo remunerado y la familia. Una hipótesis es que las madres solteras se guían por ideas arraigadas culturalmente sobre la forma correcta de ser madre. Los resultados muestran que los bajos salarios, los horarios poco convencionales y los empleos temporales son factores que reducen las posibilidades de las madres de clase trabajadora de practicar el tipo de maternidad que consideran correcta, creando también dilemas y conflictos. Estas diferencias entre la idea de buena maternidad y las formas para llevarla a cabo no son tan grandes en el caso de las madres solteras de clase media, esto

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Background

The gendered nature of the struggle to integrate caring, family and paid work has been repeatedly demonstrated in the literature, i.e. mothers generally experience higher levels of work–family conflict compared to fathers (e.g. Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011; Öun, 2012; O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). Research, furthermore, suggests that difficulties with integrating paid work and other commitments may be detrimental to people’s physical and mental health (e.g. Blanchera & Aluja, 2012; Byron, 2005; Carlson et al., 2011; Mauno, Kinnunen, & Rantanen, 2011). Compared to the enormous body of literature addressing work–family integration, research on lone-parent families’ opportunities to cope is, however, surprisingly limited (Ciabattari, 2007; Gibson, 2012).

Studies which do examine lone mothers’ opportunities to balance paid work and family suggest that they face similar types of problems as mothers who share responsibilities with their partners, although levels of conflict tend to be higher (e.g. Albeida, Himmelweit, & Humphries, 2004; Bull & Mittelmark, 2009; Christopher, 2004; Gill & Davidson, 2001; Minnotte, 2012). Lone mothers are, however, not a homogenous category. A study by Rowlingson and McKay (2006) suggests that social class affects both the likelihood of becoming a lone mother and the experiences of lone motherhood. Research on the relationship between lone motherhood and social class is, however, sparse indeed.

This study adds to the literature by exploring how access to economic resources influences Swedish lone mothers’ possibility to reconcile paid work and caring commitments. As inequalities between lone mothers and dual-parent families have increased in Sweden, it is time to address this issue. The income level of nearly 3 out of 10 lone mothers is lower than 60% of the medium in Sweden, which is the EU’s at-risk-of-poverty measure (SOU, 2011:51, p. 117). Approximately half of all lone-mother families have difficulty making ends meet, and one-fifth depend on public assistance for their support (Social Insurance Report, 2010:10, p. 7; SOU, 2011:51, pp. 100–101, 118–120; Statistics Sweden, 2014). Hence, the economic transfer system, which is one pillar in Swedish family policy, has apparently not succeeded in reducing income differences between lone mother and dual-earner families. This implies that the goals of the Swedish family policy are not fully reached (Social Insurance Report, 2010:10, p. 7). Furthermore, the economic gap between higher- and lower-educated lone mothers is increasing (Social Insurance Report, 2009:4, pp. 5–6).

In Sweden, all mothers are expected to take up employment (Fritzell, 2011, p. 8); in fact, Swedish lone mothers work full-time to a larger degree than partnered mothers (SOU, 2011:51, pp. 115, 571). A second pillar in Swedish family policy therefore is the supply of services and benefits to allow high employment rates among all mothers. A generous parental leave, including a temporary leave to be taken when the child is sick, and parents’
right to a six-hour working day when their children are under the age of eight are measures to facilitate the reconciliation of paid work and family commitments. Furthermore, high-quality and fairly cheap child care services are available (all children are entitled to a day-care place from the age of one). This enables lone mothers to support themselves and their children by taking up paid jobs.

Having a paid job, then, is not the antithesis of ‘good mothering’ in Sweden. Rather, professional care (and parental sharing) has since long been a dominating care ideal, i.e. that children are best cared for by educated preschool teachers when parents are at work (Kremer, 2007, p. 74; Roman, 2008). However, a mother discourse emphasizing the significance of mothers’ accessibility and closeness to the child holds mothers responsible for making sure that they can successfully combine paid work and family (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001, pp. 411, 417).

Theoretical ideas

I use the concept of ‘sociological ambivalence’ to understand and explain the main finding in this study, i.e. that conflicts and dilemmas arise when there is a discrepancy between the culturally shaped ideal of a good mother and mothers’ opportunities to act as such (cf. Blair-Loy, 2001; Duncan & Edwards, 1997; Hennessy, 2009; Pfau-Effinger, 2004, p. 39 ff). This concept was first advanced by Merton and Barber (1963), and later used in research on family relations by Connidis and McMullin (2002) and Hillcoat-Nallètamby and Phillips (2011), among others. While there are several types of sociological ambivalence, this type is found in

the disjunction between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues for realizing these aspirations … It turns up when cultural values are internalized by those whose position in the social structure does not give them access to act in accordance with the values they have been taught to prize. (Merton & Barber, 1963, p. 98)

Care ideals are one example of cultural values that identify ‘appropriate care’, i.e. how much and what kind of care is ‘good enough’ (Kremer, 2007, p. 71). Conflict arises when parents’ opportunity structure prevent them from acting in harmony with their ethical ideas about caring (Duncan & Edwards, 1999, p. 119). This type of conflict is rarely highlighted in discussions on work–family integration, but I believe it is a ke to understanding the profound consequences the conflict between paid work and family can have. An individual’s opportunity structure is in its turn highly influenced by gender and social class. The main objective of this study is to explore lone mothers’ work–family reconciliation. It particularly focuses on how control over work and access to economic resources influence the possibilities to find solutions that fit their ideal of good caring (Kremer, 2007, p. 75). By control over work, I mean the degree to which employees can decide when, where and how much to work (cf. Moen, Kelly, & Lam, 2013). Access to economic resources refers to income.

Method

Recruitment and sample

This qualitative study recruited 39 lone mothers in various parts of Sweden. To be eligible for study participation, the mothers should (1) live with a dependent child up to 18 years of
age and bring up the child without a resident partner and (2) have the experience of combining paid work and family. We specifically aimed at reaching mothers with different socioeconomic backgrounds; i.e. working-class and middle-class mothers.

Several channels were used to contact interviewees. These include NGOs, preschools, unions and a website for parents. Written information about the research project was made available, and mothers who were interested in participating in the study were invited to contact the research team. If still interested after getting additional information about the study, mothers were contacted by phone and an interview was scheduled. The interviews, conducted in 2012, lasted on average for 2 hours.

**Data collection**

All interviews were face-to-face. Before starting the interview, informed consent was obtained verbally, and permission to record was requested. To take a closer look at the mothers’ own understandings and experiences of combining paid work with family responsibilities, and the social context in which these are shaped, we conducted thematic interviews (cf. Mason, 2002). A semi-structured interview guide was used, covering themes relating to paid work, caring, household finances, everyday life, work–family integration, social support networks, and the route into lone motherhood. To encourage the mothers to tell about their experiences in their own words, the opening interview questions that covered a specific theme were relatively broad (e.g. ‘Could you, please, tell me about your present job’, ‘Could you, please, tell me about your experiences of combining caring responsibilities with paid work.’). This way interview bias was minimized. Furthermore, the mothers were given the opportunity to comment on the transcribed interviews.

**Sample characteristics**

The participating mother had one, two or three children. They had different socioeconomic backgrounds. Using education and occupational position as proxies for social class (cf. Crompton, 2006), 25 mothers were categorized as middle class, of whom 24 had a graduate level. The 14 working-class mothers had compulsory or secondary school education (see Table 1). The salary level was largely commensurate with the mothers’ work position. Hence, only mothers with mid-level occupations earned over SEK 30,000 a month (approx. EUR 300). With a few exceptions, mothers with working-class occupations earned under SEK 23,000 a month (approx. EUR 230). Most of the mothers were born in Sweden by native parents. Four were born in another country, and six of the mothers were born in Sweden by migrant parents.

**Data analysis**

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was carried out in several steps, starting with notes taken immediately after the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and carefully read through a number of times by two researchers. Summaries of the interviews were then written down. Initial codes were generated from the data, e.g. how the mothers talked about the possibilities and obstacles they faced when trying to combine paid work and family. A number of categories and sub-categories were constructed (e.g.
Table 1. The participants’ assumed name, occupation, education and children’s age.

| Assumed name  | Occupation                  | Education     | Children’s age |
|---------------|----------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Agnes         | Research assistant         | Higher education | 10             |
| Anna          | Journalist, self-employed  | Higher education | 9, 13          |
| Britt-Marie   | Psychologist               | Higher education | 4              |
| Berit         | Medical doctor             | Higher education | 6              |
| Carin         | Manager                    | Higher education | 13             |
| Cecilia       | Musician                   | Higher education | 4, 5           |
| Frida         | Translator                 | Higher education | 9              |
| Gill          | Nurse, on disablement pension | Higher education | 4, 12         |
| Gunilla       | Preschool teacher          | Higher education | 9              |
| Ida           | Teacher                    | Higher education | 5              |
| Josefin       | System developer           | Higher education | 3, 6           |
| Jenny         | Web editor                 | Higher education | 6, 9, 12      |
| Liv           | University lecturer        | Higher education | 7, 10          |
| Marianne      | Nurse                      | Higher education | 2              |
| Nea           | Researcher                 | Higher education | 5              |
| Olga          | Civil servant              | Higher education | 17             |
| Olivia        | Union representative       | Lower education | 6              |
| Petra         | Manager, self-employed     | Higher education | 6, 9, 12      |
| Saga          | University lecturer        | Higher education | 7              |
| Ulla          | Nurse                      | Higher education | 2, 2           |
| Vera          | Project leader             | Higher education | 5, 7           |

Middle class

| Assumed name  | Occupation                  | Education     | Children’s age |
|---------------|----------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Andrea        | Shop assistant             | Lower education | 9              |
| Denise        | Assistant nurse            | Lower education | 6              |
| Elin          | Cleaner, student           | Lower education | 5, 9, 12      |
| Kristina      | Assistant nurse            | Lower education | 3, 12          |
| Louise        | Preschool carer            | Lower education | 4, 6, 11      |
| Moa           | Assistant nurse            | Lower education | 5              |
| Rakel         | Assistant nurse            | Lower education | 11, 15, 17    |
| Rose-Marie    | Cleaner                    | Lower education | 8              |
| Sanna         | Office assistant, unemployed| Lower education | 12             |
| Susanna       | Truck driver               | Lower education | 8              |
| Wilma         | Assistant nurse            | Lower education | 5              |
| Yasemin       | Restaurant worker          | Lower education | 5              |

Working class

*n = 25*  

*n = 14*
work–family conflict, type of conflict, coping strategies). Coding was done both according to the primary research questions and new questions emerging from the empirical material. The research software NVivo was used in this coding process. Themes were identified (e.g. the money–care dilemma), and systematic comparisons across mothers were made in order to look for patterns in the data, from which the significance of social class emerged as an important explaining factor. The themes emerged from the data, but theoretical ideas and concepts also played a role in the analysis (e.g. control over work, sociological ambivalence) (cf. Layder, 1998). The credibility of the study has gained from the fact that two researchers agreed on interpretations. In the few cases when interpretations slightly differed, they came to an agreement after talking them through. In the following text, excerpts from the interviews are used to illustrate important mechanisms or typical cases. Some information has been changed in order not to disclose the identities of the participating mothers, who have been given assumed names. The Regional Ethical Review Board has approved the study.

**Results**

Most of the mothers were divorced or separated; some had never cohabited with the father of their child, and others had become mothers through artificial insemination by donor. In most cases, they and their children had no, or little, contact with the fathers. In a few cases, the parents had alternating custody. This result section first discusses some shared experiences. After that, I examine the ways in which differences in working conditions and income influenced the mothers’ possibilities to reconcile paid work and family commitments.

**Contradictory expectations**

All mothers considered providing and caring for their children as two important parts of ‘good’ mothering. Having a paid job to support themselves and their children was thus central to all mothers. The price to pay for combining caring responsibilities and paid work could be high. Work requirements often conflicted with caring commitments. It was difficult both to find time for and to cope with everything that needed doing. The mothers reported that they can feel as though their whole ‘life is about logistics’ and that there is so ‘terribly much to do all the time’. This quote from the interview with Anna, a journalist and mother of two, pretty much encapsulates some of the difference between being a lone parent and sharing the responsibility with another person:

… that it always, always, always falls to me; everything that needs doing, everything for the whole week, making breakfast and getting them off to school, home, dinner, cleaning, laundry, cooking, organizing holidays, organizing travel, buying clothes, everything, everything, everything. (Anna, journalist)

The mothers were much concerned about right and proper ways to mother. They talked about the importance of spending time with their children and meeting their various needs. The mothers wanted to do the right thing, that is, to give ‘appropriate’ care. Regardless of education or socioeconomic background, good mothering was associated with phrases such as ‘being there for the children’, understanding the children and their needs. Even though the mothers tried wherever possible to adapt their work to their
children, their opportunities to act in accordance with their moral considerations varied greatly.

**The money–care dilemma**

The working-class mothers were mostly employed in low-paid female-dominated occupations such as assistant nurses, cleaners, restaurant workers and assistant preschool carers. Many worked evenings and/or weekends. Some worked nights. Several had temporary or hourly employment contracts. Some working-class mothers studied while working, to obtain a formal education in order to improve their labor market situation. One mother, formerly a cleaner, was studying full-time to become a nurse. In Sweden, student aid consisting of grants and loans is available (for everyone) to make this possible. Another working-class mother had lost her job shortly before the interview.

The working-class mothers generally had great difficulty combining paid work and family. Coordinating schedules was often hard, and the mothers frequently felt tremendously tired. Inflexible, physically strenuous jobs, non-standard working hours and insecure employment conditions are important explanations. Financial difficulties also profoundly affected the opportunities to balance paid work and family. They were the source of what I call the money–care dilemma, i.e. to make ends meet the mothers had to spend long hours at work, meaning less time to devote to their children. Using examples taken from the interviews, I will demonstrate below why and in what way non-standard working hours, temporary employment and limited economic resources left the working-class mothers facing this money–care dilemma.

Let us start by discussing Rakel’s situation. Rakel, a mother of 3 (their ages 11, 15 and 17 years), is a typical working-class mother in the sense that she worked non-standard, inflexible hours for a low wage. She was employed as an involuntary part-time assistant nurse (0.85 FTE). Being on a part-time contract was nevertheless a major problem for Rakel, who needed a full-time salary to provide for the family. To avoid what she called a ‘financial catastrophe’, she had managed to work extra hours. It was, however, far from easy to reconcile non-standard hours and a physically demanding job with caring responsibilities. Rakel explained that it ‘doesn’t really work’ to combine work and caring for the children, because ‘you never feel satisfied’. The responsibility to provide clashed with caring commitments:

… you never think that you have done the right thing and … decent. Because you feel that you prioritize your work. And you have to do that. So you always feel inadequate. You can never be a good enough mum, so to speak, because you can’t take full responsibility. You must always put some of the responsibility on the children. (Rakel, assistant nurse)

One of the reasons why Rakel felt inadequate as a mother was that her work schedule meant that she often had to leave her children home alone. When she worked early shifts, she left home before the children woke up. When she worked nights, the children had gone to bed, when she returned home. Furthermore, her demanding job made her feel so worn out after a day’s work that she would often go to bed before the children did:

I go to bed before the children because I’m so terribly tired. … So I say, ‘Mum is going to sleep now’. / … / Because I don’t have the energy. Or I try to put the youngest one to bed if it’s a good day. That is, I see to it that she goes to bed. Then I say, ‘Even if you’re still awake, I’m going to bed because I’m just too tired to carry on’.
The mothers described working non-standard hours as so tiring that it made it difficult to have the energy and strength they would like for looking after the children. For the mothers of small children, it also gave rise to huge problems with coordinating schedules. One reason was that few preschools in Sweden are open at those times (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013). They usually open between six and seven in the morning and close before six in the evening (Lorentzi, 2011). Therefore, the mothers who worked non-standard hours – with some exceptions – had to rely on informal solutions.

Several of the working-class mothers were, as previously mentioned, hourly employees or in temporary employment, sometimes with non-standard working hours as well. Based on their accounts, I will try to demonstrate how the type of employment can affect lone mothers’ opportunities to combine work and children. One of these mothers was Louise. She had three children and worked as an hourly employed preschool carer. Her employer would call in the morning if they were short of staff. Not knowing whether or when she was going to work was, according to Louise, problematic. It posed childcare problems as certain shifts began earlier or finished later than the opening and closing times of the youngest child’s preschool. Louise had to depend on her mother or sister stepping into the breach. At the time of the interview, Louise had been working practically full-time for an extended period. When asked how she managed to combine work and family, she said that it was difficult and that she often felt like she was drained of energy:

So I really don’t know how it works, but, as I said, it has to; you don’t really have a choice. There are plenty of times when you feel like: I can’t go on anymore; to hell with it all, I just can’t go on. (Louise, preschool carer)

Louise would like to work fewer hours in order to have more time for herself and her children but explained that she needs to earn ‘all the money [she] can get’ to make ends meet. Income insecurity was a big problem for the hourly employed mothers. Another financial problem was that the compensation for loss of earnings when staying at home with a sick child was typically much lower than the expected earnings that day. The reason is that the mothers’ yearly income was the basis of calculation. The loss of earning was a strain on their already stretched household funds. The mothers were therefore occasionally forced to act in ways they did not consider beneficial to the child. Felicia’s situation is instructive. Besides studying to become an assistant nurse, thereby improving her prospects of getting a permanent job, she worked as an on-call assistant nurse. Being constantly short of money, it was difficult for Felicia to stay at home on the days she had promised to work. She, therefore, at times left her sick son at the preschool:

… and [the child] was a bit poorly as well, but I felt that I needed to work, and I would work until, well, I would work until half past three, and then I felt like, oh God, OK, I have to do this; he has to be OK like. So it really is the worst … I didn’t want to become this kind of mother who leaves her child with a runny nose, but I often feel that I have to do that. (Felicia, assistant nurse)

Like Felicia in the above quote, several of the working-class mothers expressed feelings of guilt because their behaviour went against their ideas of good mothering. They wanted to provide ‘appropriate care’, which entailed staying at home when children are sick, but had frequently difficulties doing so because of a tight household budget.
Insecure employment reared its head when the children were sick. The mothers worried that they would not be hired again if they could not do a shift they had already agreed to:

Then you're being difficult all the same; you're being awkward all the same when you ring and they have to change something. ... And so I ring knowing that they are left without a driver for a truck; the truck is just standing there, and it's not so easy to find someone who can drive it.
(Susanna, truck driver)

Susanna the truck driver, quoted above, said that she would do anything to avoid making problems for her employer. That is why she had taken her sick child with her in the truck, even though it did not feel right:

Well, she wasn't that ill in the morning, but when we arrived in the town, she was wiped out and couldn't walk. I unloaded the goods, and the guy there said, 'You can borrow our car to go and buy some aspirin'. After that, I thought, 'It's not good that she has to experience this'.
(Susanna, truck driver)

As Susanna often worked non-standard hours, she found herself in a particularly vulnerable situation. The employer sometimes called her at short notice to ask her to take a morning shift that, however, began before the preschool was open:

And sometimes they call me and ask, 'Can you take a truck at five?' And who the heck do you call at half past four in the morning? Well, it is poor grandma then who has to get up at half past four to take care of [my child]. (Susanna, truck driver)

Without her mother's support, Susanna believed it would be impossible to continue as a truck driver. And in her opinion, this is precisely 'the problem with being a lone mother'. One is vulnerable and dependent on others, 'because otherwise life would never work; there is no way'. Several other mothers told us the same thing. They were completely reliant on help from their close relatives.

The above excerpts from the interviews suggest that limited control over work and access to economic resources profoundly circumscribed the mothers' opportunities to balance paid work and family commitments. It made it difficult to be there for their children in the way they wanted, to stay at home with sick children, to turn down offers of work and reduce their working hours. The money–care dilemma is well captured in the following quote from the interview with Yasemin, who had to work late evenings to make ends meet:

... on the one hand I want to work more because it means money, and on the other hand I must think of the child, who means even more than that. (Yasemin, restaurant worker)

Only one of the working-class mothers, the assistant night nurse, Moa, voluntarily worked part-time. She was able to do this thanks to the unsocial hours allowance for working nights. Some were involuntarily employed part-time. For financial reasons, they fought, like Rakel, to work more hours. The same thing applied to the hourly employed workers. Low incomes, in combination with non-standard and/or unpredictable working hours and inadequate job security, thus, significantly reduced the mothers' prospects of being the kind of mother they wished to be. This situation was characterized by a variance between culturally shaped aspirations and the social opportunities to realize them, i.e. sociological ambivalence. The mothers wanted to 'do the right thing', but to manage the household funds, they had to devote a lot of time and energy to paid work.
Flexible hours, blurred boundaries and work intensification

The opportunity structure for the 25 middle-class mothers typically differed from that for the working-class mothers in terms of working conditions. They were employed on permanent or long-term contracts as teachers, nurses, doctors, researchers, civil servants, managers, and the like. Two were self-employed. They typically worked day shifts and most were able to have flexible working hours. Thanks to greater access to economic capital, they mostly could afford to work part-time (their working hours typically amounted to between 30 and 34 hours a week). Some mothers had enough money to pay for some domestic services, such as babysitting and cleaning. At the same time, their experiences of combining work and children varied greatly. One group of middle-class mothers thought that, on the whole, it worked well. A common denominator was that they had a sense of controlling their work. They also typically felt positive about their household funds. To varying degrees, other mothers spoke of tight household funds and difficulty combining care responsibilities and work, even though these problems were rarely of the same magnitude as those expressed by the working-class mothers. The problems principally involved experiencing a lack of time and an excessive workload. Conflicting demands occasionally produced feelings of inadequacy comparable to those experienced by the working-class mothers:

It doesn’t feel ideal, you know. Nothing feels ideal. Family life doesn’t feel ideal, and it doesn’t feel ideal from a professional perspective. Because you always feel that you are torn and pressed for time, and you would want to kind of be in both places more, and of course this is not good. (Carin, medical doctor and mother of two)

The above excerpt suggests not only that Carin’s job sometimes encroached on her family life, but also that her caring responsibilities impinged upon her professional role. Whilst the working-class mothers mainly talked about a work-to-family conflict, their middle-class counterparts thus pointed out an inverse conflict.

The majority of the middle-class mothers with children under eight years old used their right to reduced working hours. Of those who worked full-time, despite being entitled to work part-time, only one person cited financial reasons. One important reason for working part-time was so that their children would not spend too long at preschool. This was, in turn, linked to considerations of what was best for the child and can therefore be associated with cultural ideals about mothering. Central to this is, as previously mentioned, spending lots of time with the children. Part-time work also made it easier to find time for and cope with the tasks that needed to be done. It was not just income from paid work that made part-time work possible. In several cases, their parents made financial contributions. Liv, for example, could afford to work half-time thanks to her father’s financial contributions:

I can make ends meet because my dad helps me…. It’s not possible to do it on a half-time midwife’s salary. That doesn’t even pay the bills. So my financial situation is good because [of the help from my father]. (Liv, nurse and mother of two)

Some mothers thus regularly received substantial amounts of money from their parents, although intergenerational financial transfers were not always as large as in the example above. Some working-class mothers also occasionally received money or loans from their parents, but the amounts were rather small.
Another way to adapt work to children was the opportunity to have flexible working hours and a flexible workplace. Especially the mothers of small children mentioned the positive aspects of being able to decide when and where to do their work. It enabled them to leave work early once a week or more in order to collect the children from preschool, and instead work longer on another day or take work home. In the quote below, Marianne, a researcher and mother of one, gives examples of the benefits of flexitime in the mornings:

… so it works very well. … If you have a two-year-old, yes, but some mornings everything is wrong; everything goes wrong and he is being really difficult and, like, screaming, and doesn’t want anything, and then sometimes it can take us an hour just to leave the house, and down to the preschool. That’s what feels so good, when I don’t need to stress, that I can take an extra half hour in the morning. (Marianne, researcher)

So that her son should not have to spend long hours in day care, Marianne usually arrived at the office around 8.30 a.m. and left around 3.30 p.m. As she was employed full-time, she worked an additional couple of hours at home when her child was asleep. In this way, Marianne managed to work full-time and still be the kind of mother she preferred to be (which entailed not letting her child spend long hours in childcare).

While the opportunity to influence when and where to do paid work was appreciated, some mothers, however, pointed out that they experienced the blurred boundaries between paid work and family as stressful. The interview with Klara, a university teacher, is telling. She said that she always had (paid) work to do at home and that she never felt that she was free from work. It could intrude on her life in an unwanted way, including in intimate situations with her children:

… so I don’t know how many times I’ve said it, you know, around bedtime, ‘Stop giving me grief now, I’ve got to work now, can you just stop it’, like. And it’s so awful that I say that to my child, when I really only should have time to read Bamse [a cartoon bear] and, and lie down together and cuddle for a while and say goodnight and, like, have that time. (Klara, university lecturer)

When the children were sick, it caused stress for the middle-class mothers as well. But while for the working-class mothers it was principally low earnings and insecure employment conditions that made it difficult to stay at home from work, in these cases it was more to do with the nature of the work itself. Britt-Marie, a psychologist with a two-year-old child, clarified some of the significance of this when she explained that when her child is sick, it ‘turns [her] life upside down’ because she cannot ‘work as [she] should’. Seeing as nobody else can do her job, her work piles up, which could also make it difficult to reduce her working hours. Britt-Marie had both the right and the finances to reduce her working hours. After a short period of part-time work following her maternity leave, she decided to return to full-time. The reason was that she found that she ended up doing the same amount of work as before anyway:

I worked six hours a day, but [the job] is not suited to that. The upshot was that I worked six hours a day but did eight hours’ work just to be able to go home at like three o’clock. (Britt-Marie, psychologist)

For the working-class mothers, low earnings and insecure employment conditions made it difficult to reduce working hours and stay at home with their sick children. The above
discussion reveals that the middle-class mothers sometimes encountered a similar problem, albeit for different reasons and with different consequences.

**Discussion**

The Swedish welfare state is often deemed advantageous to lone mothers (Hobson & Takahashi, 1997; Skevik, 2006). The results of this study complicate this picture by highlighting the difficulties that employed lone mothers come up against when trying to fulfill ideals connected to the care of children. For several decades, Swedish policy has strongly promoted shared parenting (together with professional care). This care ideal advises mothers and fathers to equally engage with their children (Forsberg, 2009, p. 11; cf. Kremer, 2007, p.73). While thus encouraging gender equality, this ideal tends to make invisible the social constraints facing lone mothers as it assumes a ‘dual earner/dual carer family model’. The results of this study shows how gendered notions of mothering clashed with the demands of working life regardless of the lone mothers’ education and profession (cf. Albeida et al., 2004; Björnberg, 1997; Christopher, 2004; Gill & Davidson, 2001; Minnotte, 2012). They also show that the mothers were highly reliant on help from their social networks despite the social services and benefits provided by the state. This finding resonates with research showing that lone mothers across different types of welfare state are dependent on informal care (Alsarve, 2015; Ciabattari, 2007; Gill & Davidson, 2001; Harmann, 2013; Herz & Ferguson, 1997; Kröger, 2010; Nelson, 2006; Millar & Ridge, 2009; Skinner & Finch, 2006).

Furthermore, the findings of this study problematize the tendency to conceive of lone mothers as a uniform social category. The mothers’ prospects of finding a solution that fitted their ideal of good caring were clearly influenced by social class (cf. Kremer, 2007, p. 75). Employment and working conditions functioned as central constraining mechanisms for working-class mothers in particular (cf. Ammons & Kelly, 2008; Campbell & Moen, 1992; Dodson, 2013; Fagan & Walthery, 2011; Minnotte, 2012). The working-class mothers were very much experiencing the consequences of so-called employer-friendly flexibility. This type of flexibility enables organizations of work to match the number of employees to the needs of the organization at any given time (Fleetwood, 2007) but caused the mothers in this study coordination problems, economic instability and a lack of control. The money–care dilemma, that was generated from low incomes, in combination with non-standard and/or unpredictable working hours and inadequate job security, significantly reduced the working-class mothers’ prospects of providing the kind care they wished to give (cf. Campbell & Moen, 1992; Minnotte, 2012). As a result, the working-class mothers spoke much about feelings of inadequacy and guilt. These kinds of feelings reduced the well-being of the mothers, which is in line with quantitative studies showing a correlation between access to economic resources and health among Swedish lone mothers (Fritzell, 2011, p. 45). This study adds to that research by shedding some light on how this correlation comes about.

The public childcare system’s lack of flexibility aggravated the problems (cf. Le Bihan, Martin, & Knijn, 2013, p. 175). In addition, the working-class mothers had difficulties to effectively benefit from some of the social rights provided by the Swedish welfare state. Hence, the situation in which the working-class mothers found themselves was clearly characterized by a discrepancy between culturally shaped ideas of
‘good’ mothering and the possibility to act in accordance to these ideas, that is, socio-logical ambivalence.

The flexibility that typically characterized the working lives of the middle-class mothers had similarities with what Fleetwood (2007) calls employee-friendly flexibility. They could decide to a considerable degree when and where to do their work and thus how to adapt their working hours to their children (cf. Hill et al., 2008; Peters, den Dulk, & van der Lippe, 2009). This made scheduling easier, reduced stress and increased their feelings of control over their everyday lives. In most cases, they had the financial freedom to reduce their working hours. They thus escaped some of the dilemmas facing the working-class mothers. At the same time, this study shows that work demands also created conflict in the lives of the middle-class mothers. Blurred boundaries between working life and family life could engender a feeling that their working life was interfering with their lives with their children. The distinction between ‘positive’ and ‘negative flexibility’ is useful in this context. The former refers to being able to use flexible working arrangements to suit one’s own needs, while the latter is more about how work can intrude on their private lives with overtime and increased workload (den Dulk, Bäck-Wiklund, Lewis, & Redai, 2011, p. 20). It is precisely this duality of flexibility that some middle-class mothers in this study expressed. On the one hand, there is the freedom to make their own decisions and adapt their working hours to their children. On the other hand, there is the feeling of never being free from work (Crompton, 2006; Peters et al., 2009).

How widely applicable the above-described patterns may be is not my central question. The principal aim has been to investigate in what way resources affect opportunities to combine work and family. It is nevertheless worth mentioning that the patterns found in this study are in keeping with the general pattern of the Swedish labour market where income and working conditions are clearly related to both class and gender. Thus, white-collar workers earn more than their blue-collar counterparts, and men more than women (Larsson, 2013), and highly educated lone parents have higher average incomes than those with little education (Social Insurance Report, 2014:11, p. 8). Furthermore, the number of lone mothers not on a permanent employment contract has become greater (SOU, 2011:51, p. 100). Temporary employment, including on-call positions, are also becoming more common among working-class women (Aronsson, Gustafsson, & Dallner, 2002, pp. 153–154, 171; Bergold & Vedin, 2015, p. 7). Similarly, it is more common for white-collar workers to have flexible working hours (Statistics Sweden, 2008, p. 9).

Conclusion

The results of this study dispute the rather over-optimistic image of the situation for lone mothers in Sweden. Swedish family policy does not seem to have succeeded in levelling inequalities between lone-parent and dual-earner families. Not only has the care ideal of shared parenting tended to make invisible the social constraints facing lone mothers as sole providers and carers, findings also show that lone mothers and working-class mothers, in particular, have difficulties to effectively benefit from some of the social rights provided by the Swedish welfare state. The results finally suggest that social class significantly influenced the lone mothers’ possibilities to reconcile paid work and family commitments. The trend towards growing flexibilization of the labour market is likely to increase these inequalities.
Notes

1. The economic transfer system is constituted by the provision of a universal child allowance, a means-tested housing allowance (of which lone mothers are the largest beneficiary group) and state support to lone mothers when the fathers are not able to pay child maintenance (Duvander, Ferrarini, & Johansson, 2015, p. 58). Need-based social assistance schemes are also available.
2. The latter use the term ‘structural ambivalence’.
3. In 2012, average earnings in Sweden were 29100 SEK (Larsson, 2013, p. 16).
4. One mother had been granted a sick leave pension.

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