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Subjective Well-Being? Evidence from  
Qualitative and Quantitative Research**

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# Does Lone Motherhood Decrease Women's Subjective Well-Being? Evidence from Qualitative and Quantitative Research

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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 mothers who gave birth while single, we explore mechanisms through which children may influence mothers' subjective well-being. In a second step, we analyze panel survey data to quantify this influence. Our results leave no doubt that, while raising a child outside of marriage poses many challenges, parenthood has some positive influence on a lone mother's life. Our qualitative evidence shows that children are a central point in an unmarried woman's life, and that many life 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 negative impact on their subjective well-being.

Keywords: nonmarital childbearing, single motherhood, happiness, well-being, methodological triangulation, mixed methods

JEL: J12, J13, J17

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Becoming a parent brings with it both pressures and rewards. On the one hand, having children may enrich the parents' self-image and contribute to their psychological growth (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003), broaden their social network (Gallagher and Gerstel 2001), provide them with opportunities to engage in loving and caring behaviors, increase their social status and self-esteem, and give them a sense of achievement (Hoffman and Hoffman 1973; Trommsdorff and Nauck 2005). On the other hand, raising children involves financial expenditures and imposes certain demands on parents' time and energy. Parents may feel overloaded with housework and other repetitive tasks (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003), and may be forced to curb their social activities (Munch, McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1997). Childrearing also leads to tensions between work and family, and often affects the professional career of the person who is the main care provider (Gustafsson 2001; Hotz, Klerman and Willis 1997; Taniguchi 1999). Consequently, parenthood may increase adults' happiness, but it may also elevate anxiety and increase psychological distress.

Childrearing may have negative consequences, particularly for the psychological well-being of single parents. While married parents generally share the financial and emotional effort of bringing up a child with their spouse, most lone parents – usually women – do not receive support from the child's father or his family. Lone mothers are therefore particularly vulnerable to the risk of falling into poverty, and must cope with tensions resulting from the double burden of breadwinning and care provision (Casper, McLanahan and Garfinkel 1994; Christopher et al. 2002; Mejer and Siermann 2000). Because they have more duties to juggle than most married mothers, lone mothers are more apt to limit their participation in social activities (Cairney et al. 2003). The subjective well-being of lone mothers may be particularly affected in societies in which the level of acceptance for raising children outside marriage is low, and in which welfare state support for parents - and especially for lone parents - is limited.

The situation of single mothers has been intensively researched, especially in the United States. Empirical research does not, however, provide unequivocal evidence that giving birth has a detrimental effect on the subjective well-being of unpartnered women. The major discrepancy in the findings lies between quantitative and qualitative studies. The former have consistently shown that, compared to married mothers, lone mothers are more likely to experience psychological distress or depression (Avison and Davies 2005; Cairney et al. 2003; Cunningham and Knoester 2007; Demo and Acock 1996; Evenson and Simon 2005; McLanahan and Adams 1987; McLanahan 1983; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003), to report lower self-efficacy (McLanahan 1983; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003) and self-esteem (Demo and Acock 1996; McLanahan 1983), and to be less hopeful (McLanahan 1983) and less happy (Demo and Acock 1996). The elevated level of psychological distress among single mothers was found to be largely caused by financial hardship (Hope, Power and Rodgers 1999), as well as by greater exposure relative to married mothers to other stressful life events, such as caregiver pressures or work-family tensions (Avison, Ali and Walters 2007; Cairney et al. 2003; Dziak, Janzen and Muhajarine 2010).

In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative studies have painted a less negative picture of lone motherhood, and have consistently shown that there are positive as well as negative aspects to raising a child as a single parent. For instance, single mothers who have been interviewed in qualitative studies have expressed very positive attitudes about motherhood, and have said that “motherhood made them feel stronger, more competent, more connected to family and society and more responsible” (Duncan 2007:316). These studies, though usually conducted among very young women from poor neighborhoods, have shown that single mothers “seldom view an out-of-wedlock birth as a mark of personal failure” (Edin and Kefalas 2005), but rather as a turning point in their lives. Despite the fact that the experience of daily hardship in raising a child on their own is clearly visible in their narratives (struggling with financial difficulties, time constraints, or social stigma), the single mothers interviewed described how motherhood brought a sense of purpose to their lives (SmithBattle 2000:35), increased their self-esteem and social status (Bell et al. 2004; Edin and Kefalas 2005), and gave them an impetus

to change their lives for better; i.e., to take up education or employment (Duncan 2007) (Phoenix 1991), abandon abusive behaviors (SmithBattle 2000), escape from an unhappy parental home, gain independence and a new identity, as well as to “create a loving family of one’s own” (Coleman and Cater 2006).

In general, qualitative studies provide information about both the positive and negative aspects of lone motherhood, but they do not tell us which ones dominate, or what the overall impact of childbirth is on the subjective well-being of a single mother. Hence, the observed discrepancy between qualitative and quantitative findings might be spurious. There are, however, several other aspects of these studies that might lead to inconsistencies, such as the measurement of subjective well-being. It is notable that most quantitative studies have so far focused on the risk of depression, anxiety, or psychosomatic illness, while qualitative studies have referred to a more general concept of subjective well-being. Another reason for a lack of consistency of empirical findings has been the differences in the populations under study. While quantitative studies gathered information on women from a variety of social backgrounds and controlled for observed differences in social status, the qualitative studies provided evidence for selected, often disadvantaged, social groups. Furthermore, quantitative studies usually defined lone mothers as non-cohabiting women with children who were either never married or were previously married, whereas most qualitative studies focused mainly on the first group, excluding the divorced and widowed women. Most importantly, however, the discrepancy in the empirical findings might be due to the different analytical approaches adopted by quantitative and qualitative researchers. While the latter generally adopt a life-course perspective and look into the mechanisms of how having a child changed women’s lives, the former usually use cross-sectional data and compare the subjective well-being of single and married mothers.

Such a cross-sectional approach may lead to very misleading results. There are at least two reasons why single mothers may feel more depressed or less happy than married mothers, and neither of them is related to motherhood itself. First, single women do not have a partner,

and having a partner is an important determinant of psychological well-being, regardless of whether or not a person has a child (Dolan, Peasgood and White 2008). Despite this fact, previous studies did not allow for separating the effect of being single from the effect of having a child. Second, higher rates of depression among single mothers may be due in part to a selection of particularly vulnerable women into the group of single mothers. It has been demonstrated in the literature that women with adverse childhood experiences, and who are, therefore, susceptible to depression, are overrepresented among lone mothers (Davies, Avison and McAlpine 1997; Lipman et al. 2010). Overall, the available quantitative studies only provided information that showed that, compared to married mothers, single mothers are more depressed or less satisfied with life, but they did not tell us whether the lives of single mothers would have been better if they had not given birth to a child. In other words, the majority of available quantitative studies measured a statistical association between lone parenthood and subjective well-being, but did not provide information on the effects that childbearing and childrearing have on the subjective well-being of women with no partner.

This paper aims at re-evaluating the effects of parenthood on the subjective well-being of single mothers. Unlike the majority of available studies, which used either qualitative or quantitative data, we apply both approaches in one research context. This allows us to paint a more comprehensive picture of the effects of having a child on the subjective well-being of an unpartnered woman. The qualitative analyses explore the positive and negative aspects of lone motherhood. The quantitative study seeks to pinpoint which aspects of lone motherhood – positive or negative - predominate in a representative sample of women, and, hence, to assess the general impact of having a child on the subjective well-being of single mothers.

In our study, we have moved beyond the shortcomings of the empirical research conducted on this topic so far, which we enumerated above. First, we do not restrict our analysis to some selected symptoms of depression, but instead refer to a more general concept of subjective well-being: i.e., self-rated happiness. This measure is used in our qualitative as well as

our quantitative analyses. Second, in both types of analyses, we are consistent with respect to the population under study. Namely, we focus on lone mothers who were never married, separating them from those who raise their children on their own due to divorce or their husband's death. We do not restrict our sample to teenage women from poor neighborhoods, as has often been the case in qualitative studies on this topic. Instead, we study women from various social backgrounds, which allows us to gain a wider perspective on the role of childbearing in lone mothers' lives. Third and perhaps most important, in our quantitative analyses we use panel data and econometric techniques that eliminate bias from selection of women who are "innately unhappy" (due to childhood experiences or personality traits) into the group of lone mothers. In contrast to the available quantitative studies, which compared the subjective well-being of married and single mothers and investigated the associations based on cross-sectional data, we use longitudinal data to investigate how the arrival of a child affects the subjective well-being of women with different marital and partnership statuses.

Our study is conducted in the context of Poland. We consider this country to be an interesting case study for this type of research for two reasons. First, because the Poles tend to have strong Catholic values, the degree of acceptance of nonmarital childbearing is still relatively low. Second, unlike in some Western European countries, lone mothers in Poland receive very limited support from the welfare state (Kotowska et al. 2008; Piętka 2009). Given these unfavorable conditions, the data for Poland provide a favorable context for a "conservative test" of the effects of having a child on the subjective well-being of an unpartnered woman.

We start with a brief description of the institutional and cultural context of single motherhood in Poland. We then present our data and analytical strategy and describe our empirical findings. The paper closes with a short summary of our major results, and with suggestions for further research.



## **II. THE INSTITUTIONAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT IN POLAND**

It is difficult to establish what percentage of births in Poland are to unpartnered women. The proportion of out-of-wedlock births is currently about 20% (Eurostat 2010), but there are no data on how many of these births are to couples in informal unions, and how many occur are to women who are not in a stable relationship. Childbearing in the Polish context is clearly connected to marriage. Cohabitation is infrequent, and it is a prelude to marriage rather than a family arrangement which would be perceived as appropriate for parenthood (Mynarska and Matysiak 2010). Moreover, even those women who conceive a child while unmarried tend to arrange a wedding while they are pregnant, although this tendency has declined in recent years (Baranowska 2011). As a result, women who give birth out of wedlock and remain unmarried are a minority in Poland, and unpartnered mothers constitute only a segment of this group.

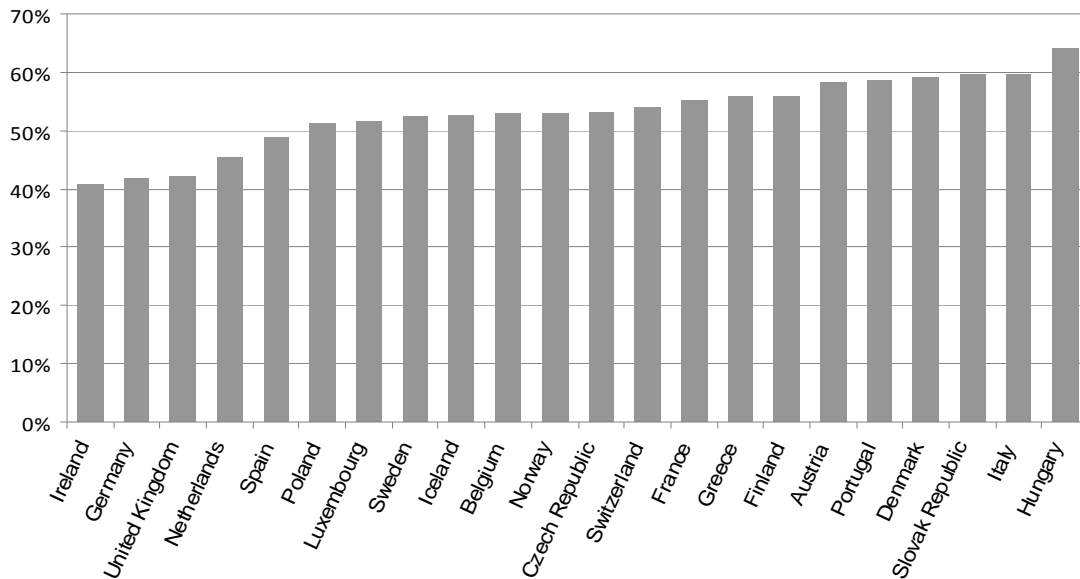
The well-being of any marginal group depends to a large extent on whether society accepts or stigmatizes such a minority. Hence, the country-specific social and cultural setting may shape the ways lone mothers interact with the local societal environment, and whether they receive support in raising their children. In Poland, the cultural conditions are greatly influenced by the Roman Catholic religion, which affects social norms and attitudes with regard to family formation. According to data from the International Social Survey Program (2008), over 90% of Poles were raised in the Catholic religion (compared with an average of 49% in other EU member states). In addition, 87% of Poles stated that they believe in God, compared with less than 60% of respondents in 12 out of 19 European countries. The social attitudes towards family formation patterns are consistent with Catholic beliefs. These beliefs are – at least partially – responsible for the strong link between childbearing and marriage noted above. The data from the International Social Survey Program showed that over 70% of Poles agreed with the statement that people who want to have children should marry, compared to an average of 48% in other European countries. Low levels of acceptance for single motherhood were also found by (Chapple 2009), who showed that only 3% of Poles disagreed with the statement that a child

needs both a father and a mother (compared to 17% in continental Europe and about 31% in the Nordic and Anglophone countries).

Not only the cultural attitudes, but also the institutional arrangements in Poland are unsupportive of lone mothers. In general, family policies and state support for lone parents can play an important role in alleviating the economic consequences of single motherhood. However, Poland is characterized by a rather low level of support for families in general, including lone parents. Financial transfers are means-tested and provided only to families with the greatest need (Kotowska et al. 2008). Furthermore, the level of cash payments is quite low in Poland relative to other countries. For instance, the average child maintenance payment per sole parent family in Poland amounts to 166.8 USD (measured in purchasing power parity), compared to 436.3 USD in the U.S. (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2008). The limited welfare state support for lone parents has serious consequences for the financial standing of these families. According to OECD statistics, the average disposable income of a household in Poland led by a single parent is 51% of the income of a childless couple (Figure 1). This means that welfare support performs very poorly in eliminating the income gap between single parents and childless couples. What emerges from the cross-country comparison is that the association between lone parenthood and low income is quite strong in Poland.

Not only is financial support for parents low in Poland, but public childcare provision is very poor. Among the OECD countries, Poland has one of the lowest enrolment rates in crèches (7.9%) and the lowest enrolment rate in kindergartens (47.3%) (OECD Family Database 2008). Even though single mothers are granted some additional points when applying for a place in public childcare, only around 20% of children aged 0-6 raised by single mothers attend public childcare in Poland (authors' calculations based on data from European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions).

Figure 1 Household disposable income of single mothers relative to couples with a working-age head of household without children, mid 2000s.



Source: OECD (2008)

In sum, in Catholic Poland, raising children is regarded as the domain of married couples, which might result in the stigmatization of lone mothers, and to an erosion of their self-esteem. Bearing a child out of wedlock is not socially accepted, and lone parenthood is not institutionally supported. Cash maintenance payments for lone parents are low and public childcare provision is poor. Thus, the specific cultural and institutional context of Poland should qualify this case study as a “conservative test” for examining the impact of having a child on the subjective well-being of unpartnered women.

### III. DATA AND METHODS

#### *QUALITATIVE STUDY*

Our first research goal is to explore the positive and negative aspects of lone motherhood. Qualitative methodology is best suited here, as it is explorative and process-oriented, and because it enables us to investigate people’s subjective perspectives on matters of

interests (Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Flick 2002; Maxwell 1996). Hence, qualitative methodology will allow us to reconstruct women's perceptions of how giving birth while single has impacted their life.

Our qualitative data come from semi-structured face-to-face interviews which were conducted in 2011 within the research project "Family change and subjective well-being" (FAMWELL), which was financed by the National Centre of Research and Development. The aim of the project is to explore new and currently rare family developments in Poland. In particular, the project seeks to investigate what paths lead some individuals to experience certain life circumstances (e.g., lone motherhood), and to study how these circumstances affect individuals' subjective well-being. Within this project, we conducted 35 interviews with women who experienced an extramarital birth. The interviews were conducted in cooperation with TNS OBOP research agency. The agency recruited the respondents using a snowball method: in several locations in Poland (three voivodeships, three town or cities in each of them) the network of the agency pollsters was used to snowball for women, who were 25-39 of age and who have ever experienced an extramarital birth. Out of the 35 women recruited, 16 were cohabiting with their child's father at the time of the interview, and they were excluded from the analyses. Another three women were raising their child with the child's father for a prolonged period of time, and they were also dropped from the sample. This left us with a final sample of 16 women. None of these women was married before giving birth. In 12 cases, their relationship with the child's father ended during the pregnancy. The remaining four women had separated from the child's father at some point after the birth of the child (1-4 years), but we decided to include them in the sample because all of them reported very serious problems in their relationships during the pregnancy. Even though the final termination of the relationship took place later, they felt like they were "single mothers" from the very beginning. Eight women in the sample were in a relationship with a new partner at the time of the interview, while the other eight were single. They all, however, experienced periods in which they were raising their child without any support from a partner at the early stages of the child's life.

Our interviewees are 26 to 38 years old, and their main characteristics are presented in the table below. Importantly, we did not limit our sample to teenage mothers, nor did we select women from any particular city, neighborhood, or social group. The study was conducted in several locations in Poland: in large cities as well as in small towns. We looked for women from different social backgrounds and with different educational levels.

Table 1. The structure of sample for qualitative analyses

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
Age	Under 30	3
	30-34	9
	35-39	4
Parity	1	13
	2	2
	3	1
Age at first birth	19	2
	20-24	8
	25-29	3
	30-34	3
Marital status	Single (never married)	8
	Cohabiting with a new partner (never married)	4
	Married with a new partner	4
City of residence – number of citizens	Warsaw	4
	Over 100,000	8
	50,000-100,000	1
	Under 10,000	3
Educational level	Tertiary education completed (MA or BA)	2
	Secondary general	5
	Secondary professional	8
	Primary	1

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from in-depth interviews.

The heterogeneity of the sample is apparent if we additionally consider occupations of the respondents. We interviewed shop assistants, a cleaner, a hairdresser, an employee of the wholesale poultry, but also a sales agent, an insurance agent, an accountant, a social worker, an assistant at the law firm as well as several office workers.

The interviews were semi-structured and problem-centered. The interview guideline was designed in the way that should allow us to reconstruct a history of how the woman became a lone mother, and to explore how this event influenced her life and general well-being.

Specifically, in each interview the woman was asked to provide a history of her life events, together with a description of her desires and intentions related to family formation. She was also asked to discuss the factors that – in her opinion – encouraged or discouraged the realization of her intentions, and to imagine what her life would have looked like if she had ended up in a more “traditional” family arrangement. Finally, the interview subject was asked some general questions on life satisfaction in various life spheres.

We analyzed the data using a bottom-up coding procedure, modeled on the “grounded theory” approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987). First, we identified all of the passages in which any reference to childbearing and lone motherhood was made. Next, we coded this material (open and axial coding; Strauss and Corbin 1998) to identify the conditions, the context, and the consequences of lone motherhood. Special attention was paid to the affective dimension: What positive and negative aspects related to single motherhood are recognized by the interviewees?

#### *QUANTITATIVE DATA*

In a second step, we turned to quantitative methods to estimate the general impact of giving birth to a child on the subjective well-being of the unpartnered woman. To this end, we used data from Social Diagnosis, which is a national representative longitudinal survey established by the Council of Social Monitoring in 2000. Its subsequent waves took place in 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, and 2011. This survey represents a unique source of panel micro-data in Poland, as it covers a variety of areas, including household income and living conditions, education, labor market participation, and the health and the subjective well-being of household members. Altogether, in all six waves, 65,282 face-to-face interviews were conducted with household members aged 16 or older (Czapiński and Panek, 2011). To the best of our knowledge, Social Diagnosis is the largest and most comprehensive panel survey carried out in Central and Eastern Europe that includes questions on happiness (Filer and Hanousek 2002).

For our analysis, we selected women who entered the survey at ages 18-35; i.e., at childbearing and childrearing ages. This gave us a sample of 27,251 female observations.

In our study, we measure subjective well-being with self-rated 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. In the context of this study, this measure has the advantage of brevity. It was adapted from the World Value Survey, and a similar question is also included in other large cross-national or country-specific surveys. Table 2 presents the distribution of this variable in the sample selected for our analyses.

Table 2 Distribution of subjective well-being among women with and without children, by marital status

	married, no children	married, with children	single, non- cohabiting no children	single, non- cohabiting with children	previously married, non- cohabiting, no children	previously married, non- cohabiting, with children	Total
not at all happy	7	79	176	14	16	13	305
somewhat happy	150	1340	2265	168	94	194	4211
quite happy	1244	8346	8950	419	103	318	19380
very happy	344	1353	1572	52	8	26	3355
Total	1745	11118	12963	653	221	551	27251

Source: Authors' calculations on Social Diagnosis., 2003-2011.

Our main explanatory variable was created through an interaction of the fact of having a child with a woman's marital status. Women's marital status was grouped into three categories: the first comprises women who were single, non-cohabiting, and never married at the time of the interview; the second encompasses married women; and the third covers previously married non-cohabiting women (i.e., divorced, separated, and widowed). Cohabiting women were dropped from our analysis, as we recorded only 87 of them in our panel sample. Among our control variables, we included a set of observed person-specific characteristics, such as the

respondent's age, educational attainment (including participation in education), and self-rated health and self-rated income level, as well as the age of the youngest child.

#### *ECONOMETRIC SPECIFICATION*

We modeled the respondent's self-rated happiness at any point in time  $t$  as a function of our key explanatory variables (fact of having a child interacted with a woman's marital status –  $child\_mstat$ ) at time  $t$ , a set of the observed individual-level characteristics measured in the survey at time  $t$  ( $obs\_characteristics$ ), as well as unobserved individual time-invariant traits  $u_i$ . Additionally, respondent's subjective well-being was subject to random error  $\varepsilon_{it}$ , which may capture random, idiosyncratic influences, such as good weather on the day of the interview or an exceptionally good mood of the respondent. Hence, the model can be written in the following way:

$$happiness_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times child\_mstat_t + \beta_2 \times obs\_characteristics_{it} + u_i + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

The most common approach to controlling for individual-specific unobserved characteristics with the panel data at hand is to estimate fixed-effects or random-effects models. Fixed-effects models are based on the variation of the respondent's characteristics across time (in contrast to random-effects models, which also use variation across individuals). Fixed-effects estimates remove the potential bias resulting from the selection of "intrinsically (un)happy" individuals into the group of parents (unlike random-effects models, which control for unobserved factors only if these factors are not correlated with other explanatory variables). The disadvantage of the fixed-effects approach is that it produces less efficient estimates than random-effects models, and accommodating it to models with dependent variables measured on an ordinal scale is problematic. In some situations, if the scale of the dependent ordinal variable is relatively long and approximates interval data, a linear regression may yield results similar to those of an ordered probit or logit regression (Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters 2004). Hence, ignoring the ordinal nature of data and estimating fixed-effects OLS models could provide a solution to this problem. However, because in our case the dependent variable has only four



categories, using the linear specification is questionable, as it might severely bias our estimates (for a discussion on this topic, see Baetschmann et al. 2011; Geishecker and Riedl 2010). The most simple alternative approach to this problem is to recode the ordinal dependent variable into a binary indicator, and then to apply the conditional logit estimator proposed by Chamberlain (1980). Dichotomization has two specific drawbacks, however. First, it requires an arbitrary assumption; i.e., a choice of a threshold above which the dependent binary variable takes the value one. Second, it implies a loss of a great deal of information.

In this paper, we employed three other independent analytical methods that account for unobserved time-constant characteristics of individuals. The first and the second approaches were to estimate a fixed-effects ordered logit model using two different estimators: namely, the FCF estimator proposed by Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters (2004), and the “Blow-Up and Cluster” (BUC) estimator recently developed by Baetschmann et al. (2011). Both of these estimators are based on the concept of dichotomization proposed by Chamberlain (1980), but allow for a better exploitation of the information present in the dependent variable. The third approach was to estimate a correlated random-effects ordered probit model, which draws on the approach proposed by Mundlak (1978).

The FCF estimator is probably the best known tool used for estimating the fixed-effects ordered logit models. It dichotomizes the dependent variable separately for each individual at its mean value. Its disadvantage is, however, that it yields inconsistent estimates on panel data with a small number of waves (Baetschmann et al. 2011). Since we have five panel waves at our disposal, we decided to also use the recently developed BUC estimator. Unlike the FCF estimator, it does not dichotomize the dependent variable at one a priori defined point, but performs a series of dichotomizations at each possible point, and then estimates the resulting fixed-effects logits jointly. The estimates produced in this way were shown to be less sensitive to the number of panel waves (Baetschmann et al. 2011).

The third approach we used to account for unobserved individual characteristics was to estimate the correlated random-effects ordered probit model. It decomposes the unobserved time-constant individual effect  $u_i$  into a random effect, which is uncorrelated with the explanatory variables and the mean values of the time-varying regressors that are expected to be correlated with the individual random effects (Mundlak 1978). The estimates produced by this method are least sensitive to the number of panel waves, and are more robust to the incidental parameter problem (Greene and Hensher 2010).

## **IV. EMIRICAL RESULTS**

### *QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE*

The interviewed women mentioned a number of positive and negative aspects of lone motherhood. The negative aspects were mainly related to the painful separation from the child's father, which in some cases took place after conception, or to the financial or organizational difficulties associated with managing on their own. However, when it came to motherhood itself, the interviewed women consistently expressed very positive emotions. Furthermore, like other qualitative studies, our findings showed that motherhood motivated the interviewed women to take actions which they said were for the good of the child, but which had positive consequences for the women as well. Below, we present a more detailed discussion of our qualitative findings, starting with the negative aspects of lone motherhood.

### *NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF LONE MOTHERHOOD*

For the vast majority of the interviewed women, the termination of the relationship with the child's father took place during the pregnancy (12 out of 16 cases). This was the first painful experience related to the pregnancy that the women had to go through. Women who were left by the child's father – sometimes after they had been together for several years – said they were completely “terrified.” They felt betrayed and abandoned. Even when it was the woman's

decision to leave her partner, this choice was usually made to protect the child from violence, alcohol, or drugs; and was still associated with a wide range of negative emotions.

Clearly, the negative emotions of our respondents were directed towards the former partner and not towards becoming a mother. Nevertheless, these painful experiences decreased the women's level of happiness with pregnancy and childbearing, especially since in the vast majority of cases the pregnancy had not been planned (only two women described their pregnancy as "intended"). The separation from the partner occurred when he was needed the most. The respondents did not mention any joy and excitement related to pregnancy. Instead, they repeatedly emphasized that they "had no choice and had to manage" on their own.

The perception that lone motherhood is far more demanding than raising a child with a partner was identified as one of the main negative aspects of lone motherhood. More than a half of the respondents emphasized that raising a child without a partner's support had been "very tiring" and stressful. They felt overwhelmed by childbearing responsibilities. Anna, who was left by her partner when she was pregnant described her experience as follows:

*"I had always been independent and I had never needed anyone (...) when a baby was born I realized that the second person, this partner, was very much needed after all, that I would not manage on my own with everything." (Anna, a child at 28)*

The respondents emphasized that they lacked not only practical help, but also emotional support from a partner. Lone motherhood was associated with feelings of loneliness and seclusion. These emotions are not specific to lone motherhood, and can be felt by single childless women as well. But our respondents clearly found raising a child more emotionally strenuous because of the lack of a partner. As one of the respondents explained it:

*"I missed having a man who would support me, give me his shoulder to lean on; who would say 'come on, don't break down' when my child was - I don't know - in the hospital with bronchitis or something like that. Somebody to give me his shoulder to cry on." (Beata, a child at 19)*

Single motherhood is also demanding financially. "Two salaries are better than one," so the respondents naturally noted that their material situation would have been better with a partner's income. Some of them admitted that it is extremely difficult to live and raise a child on one salary only. Three women said that they would have not managed to provide for their child without financial support from their parents. Three others admitted that becoming a lone mother in young age interfered with their plans to continue their education, and hence jeopardized their chances of getting a more highly paid job. In general, the financial hardships associated with lone motherhood are mentioned in 10 interviews.

The final negative aspect of lone motherhood identified by the respondents is related to the social perception of single mothers. This topic was discussed in 12 interviews. For two women, the social stigmatization of lone motherhood took an extreme form: they were rejected by their family and acquaintances, and, facing condemnation in their social environment, they left their home community and moved to a bigger city to start a new life. In other cases, the degree of social disapproval was not as strong, but the respondents spoke of having problems or "unpleasant situations" at church or at school. They felt uncomfortable when they had to answer questions about the child's father, even among friends. They felt "ashamed" and "worse." Six respondents said explicitly that being a single mother makes them less attractive for new partners. They said they believe that men are not interested in "raising another man's child," and that a woman with an illegitimate child is seen as handicapped. One respondent explained:

*"I'm an old maid with a child. I am seen as something second-best. Exactly the way I see divorced men, they are second-best, there is something wrong with them. And that's how people see me. I'm a single and with a child, so there is something wrong with me". (Barbara, a child at 33)*

Despite these negative aspects related to lone motherhood, the respondents also mentioned a number of positive consequences stemming from becoming a single mother.

*LONE MOTHERHOOD – NOT JUST A BAD THING*

The first positive consequence of becoming a mother is that the interviewed women decided to take steps which they had been afraid of before the pregnancy, but which clearly made their lives for better. One of these decisions was to separate from the child's father. Although it was an emotionally painful experience, as we showed in the previous section, in many cases it allowed the women to exit a highly unsatisfactory or even pathological relationship. This applies to 11 women, and for five of them, becoming a mother ended a relationship with an abusive partner who used alcohol or drugs, or who was violent. In two cases, the partner abandoned the pregnant woman, while in three others, our respondents decided to leave for the sake of their future child. As one woman explained it:

*"If I hadn't got pregnant, I would have probably got stuck in this relationship longer, but then I had to care for a child (...) I would not let my child be given a beer instead of a cocoa for breakfast... or see her father drinking a glass of vodka, no way." (Renata, a child at 21)*

Another respondent with a similar history gave almost the same account::

*"The man I used to be with, he had problems with alcohol and drugs. It was the reason why I left him. I didn't think only about myself – but about the child, too. I had to start thinking... I had been hesitating before, I had wanted to leave him, but you know... love is blind. And it could be said that M. [a daughter] simply pushed me to do it." (Kamila, a child at 27)*

Naturally, not all 11 cases of unsatisfactory relationships included violence or alcohol. In all of them, however, the women were of the opinion that they would have suffered in their relationship with the child's father. They would have felt "emotionally exhausted," "unhappy," or "mistreated." While they acknowledge the hardship of lone motherhood, they unanimously stated that it is better to live without a partner than to have a partner like the one they got pregnant with. One respondent said:

*"There was a time when it was nice. We could count on each other, as it usually is at the beginning. But the magic disappeared, a fairy tale ended and I said I wanted to be alone, because this way it would be better for me and for my child". (Julia, a child at 24)*

Renata observed, somewhat brutally:

*"Maybe one day my son will feel that he lacks a father. But if he was to have an idiot for a father, then it is better for him not to have a father at all." (Renata, a child at 21)*

Bad experiences with the child's father had two other positive outcomes for our respondents. First, the women seemed to be more careful in their current relationships. Because of their responsibilities as a mother, they felt they could not enter a new relationship hastily. Instead, they said, they have to be certain that their future partner will be, above all, a good father for their child. Statements of this kind are found in nine interviews. Second, the women who left their abusive partners expressed feelings of pride and accomplishment. The decision made them feel stronger and more in control of their life. Karolina, for example, expressed this feeling in the following way:

*"It is my achievement that I managed to leave this guy. For the previous four years I had been thinking about it, imagining it, but I had never thought I would have enough courage to do it (...) But I found courage and I am very happy and very proud". (Karolina, a child at 21)*

Receiving social support from family members and friends is another aspect that can alleviate some of the negative consequences of lone motherhood. Even though some women suffered from social disapproval or rejection, 10 respondents received generous support, including financial support, help with childcare, the offer of a place to stay, and emotional support. Being able to rely on people other than their partner was perceived as very positive. The best example is the case of Aneta, who reported that would not have survived the past five years without her parents' help. They supported her when she was left by her partner one month before the delivery. As she described it:

*“My parents rose to the challenge right away. They prepared a room for me – because there had been none, as I had planned to live elsewhere [with ex-partner]. They started to buy things, to bring them home. They kept me busy, so I didn’t think too much about all that had happened.”*

The parents had also supported her financially since her child was born, covering all child-related expenses. At one point in the interview she said: *“My parents should get some prize.”*

Above all, however, the interviewed women expressed positive emotions while speaking about motherhood itself. In 11 interviews, the respondents recurrently emphasized that their child brings them joy and the motivation to live, and even “gives me energy.”

Naturally, such declarations are not specific to single mothers. Similar answers could be found in interviews with cohabiting or married mothers. But it is important to note that all the hardships associated with raising a child alone had not diminished the women’s feelings of satisfaction with their child. Indeed, their child was the main source of happiness and satisfaction in the respondents’ lives.

Moreover, for a woman who experiences lone motherhood, her child might be particularly important. The child is the central person in her life, the key person she loves and the main source of affection. This is clearly visible in Kamila’s observations:

*“I’m very happy that I have her [a daughter]. Even though she came to this world in these circumstances, I simply know that it would have been really bad without her! She is so much fun and I’m getting older and if I didn’t have her, I don’t know if I would have anybody to love now.”*  
*(Kamila, a child at 27)*

In the interview with Magda, one more aspect is revealed. For single mothers, a child is likely to be the only source of support in the future. Our respondent explained it as follows:

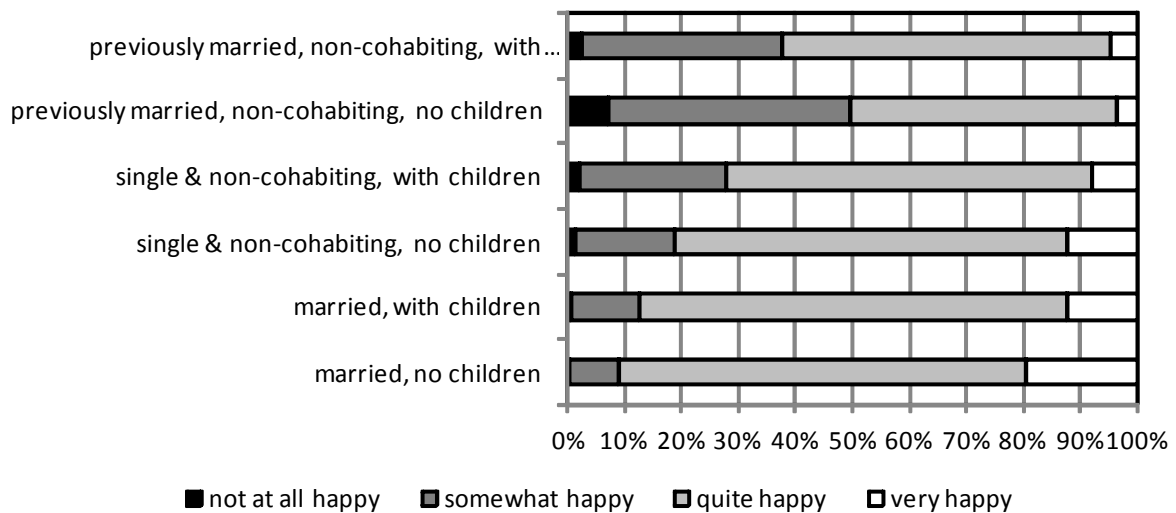
*“Even if I don’t enter any new relationship, I still have a child. And when I am old, maybe she won’t turn her back on her mother, maybe she will help.”* *(Dagmara, a child at 31)*

All in all, a child is perceived as a natural remedy for all the problems that the respondents have experienced; “the most wonderful” and “the most positive” element of their lives. As one woman puts it, “a child’s love compensates for everything.”

*FROM QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS TO REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE*

The analysis of the interviews gave us important insights into how childbearing shapes life satisfaction and the subjective well-being of women who raise a child alone. Overall, we found numerous negative aspects, but also a number of positive aspects of lone motherhood. Nonetheless, qualitative methodology does not enable us to establish which of them dominate in women’s lives, and which have a stronger impact on the well-being of single mothers. To address these issues, we performed quantitative analyses on a representative sample.

Figure 2. Self-rated happiness by marital and child status, descriptive findings



Source: Authors’ calculations on Social Diagnosis.

The first descriptive insight into our quantitative data produced two important findings (Figure 2). First, in line with the majority of the quantitative studies on the topic, our analysis showed that single mothers are indeed less happy than married mothers. It is apparent, however, that this difference is largely due to differences in partnership status, as married women are generally happier than other groups of women, regardless of whether they have children. Second, lone mothers turn out to be somewhat less happy than single women without



children. It is notable, however, that lone mothers may differ from single childless women in our sample with respect to their socioeconomic status, labor market situations, and health or psychological predispositions.

Therefore, in the second step, we ran our multivariate analyses as described in the method section. Our results are displayed in Table 3. They show that, after controlling for a set of observed and unobserved but time-invariant confounding factors, the negative relationship between single motherhood and happiness is no longer present in our data. It is, however, to be noted that we found somewhat different effects of lone motherhood on subjective well-being, depending on the method used. Both fixed-effects models which apply the FCF or the BUC estimator yielded positive but insignificant effects of the child on the subjective well-being of single mothers. In the correlated random-effects ordered probit model with the Mundlak correction term, the size of the effect was also positive and similarly large, but was significant. These differences in the significance of the effect across model specifications are consistent with what is known about fixed-effects and random-effects models. As the former are based on the variation of respondents' characteristics across time, they yield less efficient estimates (i.e., they are characterized by greater variance) than the random-effects models, which use both variation across individuals and across time. In any case, we did not find evidence which would suggest that, among single women, raising a child outside marriage contributes negatively to overall life satisfaction.

Although we are mainly interested in the effects of having children among single women, we also analyzed the influence of parenthood among the currently and previously married women. Interestingly, we found more or less the same pattern as among single women. Depending on the specification, a child affects positively or has no impact on the subjective well-being of these two groups of women. The FCF estimate of the effect of parenthood among married mothers is the only exception here – it is negative, but very small and insignificant.

Table 3 Determinants of happiness among women in Poland.

	Fixed-effects ordered logit model with FCF estimator (Ferrer-i-Carbonell & Frijters 2004)		Fixed-effects ordered logit model with BUC estimator (Baetschmann et al. 2011)		Correlated random-effects ordered probit model with a Mundlak correction term	
	coef.	s.e.	coef.	s.e.	coef.	s.e.
Age	0.047**	(0.022)	0.044**	(0.022)	-0.012***	(0.003)
education (low = ref.)						
in education	-0.131	(0.141)	-0.145	(0.145)	-0.055	(0.072)
medium	0.072	(0.152)	0.133	(0.154)	0.148**	(0.073)
high	-0.043	(0.269)	-0.056	(0.257)	0.107	(0.127)
satisfaction with health	0.432***	(0.044)	0.455***	(0.048)	0.228***	(0.021)
satisfaction with income	0.536***	(0.041)	0.532***	(0.043)	0.280***	(0.019)
labor market situation (employed = ref.)						
unemployed	-0.437***	(0.146)	-0.454***	(0.146)	-0.207***	(0.072)
inactive	-0.006	(0.125)	-0.024	(0.131)	-0.038	(0.062)
partners employment (not employed = ref.)						
employed	0.179	(0.174)	0.133	(0.172)	0.147*	(0.086)
family formation status (single, no children = ref.)						
married, no children	0.986***	(0.309)	1.046***	(0.314)	0.519***	(0.143)
married, with children	0.896***	(0.313)	1.106***	(0.319)	0.656***	(0.152)
single & non-cohabiting, with children	0.483	(0.406)	0.470	(0.420)	0.339*	(0.199)
previously married, non-cohabiting, no children	-1.487*	(0.866)	-1.398*	(0.832)	-0.559	(0.358)
previously married, non-cohabiting, with children	-0.158	(0.485)	0.008	(0.486)	0.136	(0.226)
age of children in years (child aged up to 1 year=ref.)						
child aged 1-3	-0.454***	(0.160)	-0.435***	(0.168)	-0.229***	(0.081)

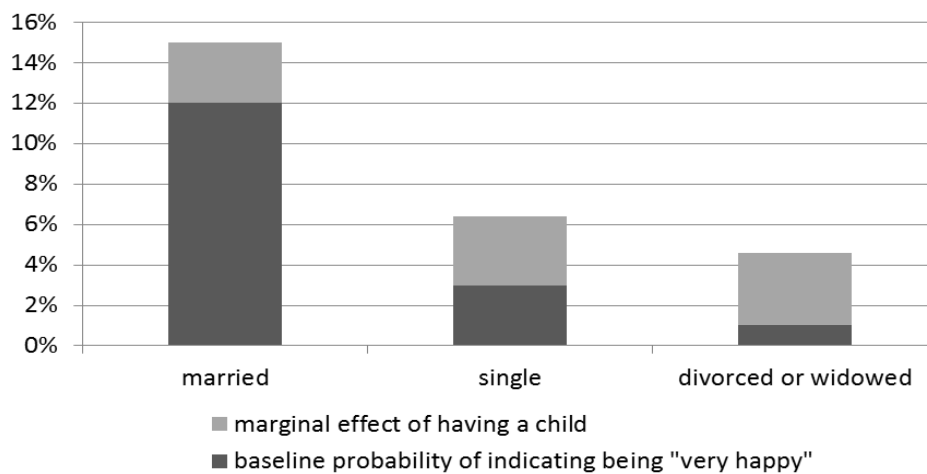
child aged 3-6	-0.552***	(0.200)	-0.559***	(0.213)	-0.252***	(0.095)
child aged over 6	-0.313	(0.244)	-0.287	(0.256)	-0.050	(0.111)
Rho					0.274***	(0.019)
Log likelihood	-1200.8		-1318.9		-10751.5	
N	3941		4395		15246	

Source: authors' estimates based on Social Diagnosis, significance levels: +  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

The results from the models presented in Table 3 show whether in general the effect of parenthood among single women is positive or negative, but they do not allow us to infer the magnitude of the effects of interest. Therefore, we computed the marginal effects of having a child for three groups of women: married, single, and previously married. They showed a change in the probability of describing oneself as “very happy” after a change in motherhood status from childless to a mother. They were estimated for a reference person aged 27 who completed upper secondary education, is satisfied with her health, is quite satisfied with her material standard of living, is employed, has a working partner (if she has a partner), and has no children. The marginal effects were estimated based on the correlated random-effects model .

In line with the description of the results from the estimated panel data models, Figure 3 shows that married women are clearly most happy, regardless whether they have children or not. Single women score much lower on the happiness scale, and the previously married fare the worst, net of all the characteristics we controlled for in our models. However, the impact of having children on subjective well-being is positive, not only among married women, but also among single women, as well as among the previously married. Moreover, the magnitude of this effect is similar across these three groups, and amounts to about three percentage points.

Figure 3 The marginal effects of children on happiness of women according to their marital status.



Source: authors' estimates based on Social Diagnosis.

## **V. SUMMARY**

This paper contributes to the literature on the effects of a having a child on the subjective well-being of a single, non-cohabiting woman. This literature to date on this subject has pursued two separate strands. The quantitative studies have compared the magnitude of selected symptoms of (un)happiness among married and lone mothers, pinpointing the disadvantage of the latter group. Meanwhile, the qualitative research found that raising a child had numerous positive consequences for the single mothers' well-being. Consequently, it was difficult to draw coherent conclusions about the effects of motherhood on single women's subjective well-being from the available qualitative and quantitative studies. This paper discussed the reasons for the discrepancies between the qualitative and quantitative evidence, and proposed an analytical approach which integrates the two previously separately employed approaches with the goal of re-evaluating the effects of parenthood on the subjective well-being of single mothers.

The methodological approach we used has several advantages over the studies conducted so far in terms of its comprehensiveness, consistency, and ability to reveal causal relationships. First, the greater comprehensiveness was achieved through the methodological triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods. The former allowed us to explore the positive and negative aspects of lone motherhood. The latter made it possible to evaluate which aspects of lone motherhood – positive or negative – predominate, and, consequently, to assess the general impact of having a child on the subjective well-being of single mothers. Second, the greater consistency was achieved through the implementation of uniform concepts and definitions of subjective well-being, lone motherhood, or the reference population, which is usually not the case in separate studies. Third, the important advantage of the quantitative part of our study is that it is closer to revealing causal relationships than the majority of the available quantitative studies on the topic. Specifically, the implementation of fixed-effects models on panel data allowed us to analyze how the arrival of a child affects woman's subjective well-being, net of the time-constant unobserved characteristics of women. It thus enabled us to control for

the selection of “innately unhappy” women into the group of lone mothers. This selection effect is not accounted for in the majority of available quantitative studies on the topic, which simply compare the subjective well-being of single and married mothers, and hence mix up the effect of motherhood, partnership status, and intrinsic happiness.

Our findings confirmed the disadvantaged position of single mothers found in other quantitative studies, but they did not provide any evidence for the claim that it is the arrival of a child that leads to a decline in single mothers’ subjective well-being. Instead, they paint a multi-faceted picture of single motherhood. On the one hand, in our in-depth interviews, women highlighted many negative aspects of lone motherhood, such as organizational and financial pressures, lack of partner support, and social disapproval of bearing and rearing a child out of wedlock. The negative emotions were, however, mainly expressed in reference to external circumstances, such as ex-partners, the social environment, and economic conditions. Despite these negative aspects, single motherhood was found to evoke many positive feelings, especially related to motherhood itself. Despite all of the difficulties and problems – or maybe because of them – the child is moved to the absolute center of the woman’s universe. Her child is the main focus of her love, the brightest aspect of her life, and her greatest source of joy and happiness. Lone motherhood appeared in our qualitative interviews to also have other positive consequences for women’s lives. It gave women the power to make decisions they had not been able to make before pregnancy. Specifically, being responsible for the child’s well-being helped the analyzed women escape unhappy and pathological relationships, and made them more cautious and demanding when getting involved with a new partner. This finding complements previous qualitative studies that have found that becoming a lone mother might move a woman’s life onto a better track: it may, for example, motivate her to complete her education, become more independent, or escape a pathological environment (Coleman and Cater 2006; Duncan 2007; SmithBattle 2000, 2008).

Our quantitative findings showed that the positive aspects of lone motherhood at least counterbalance, if not outweigh, its negative consequences, after accounting for differences in women's educational attainment, labor market status, self-rated health, material standard of living, and time-invariant, woman-specific unobserved characteristics. Depending on the specification of our models, we found that the arrival of a child either has no impact or even increases the subjective well-being of single mothers. Similar findings were achieved for married women. All in all, we found no evidence to support the claim that the lives of women who became single mothers would have turned out better if they had not given birth and had not decided to raise the child out of wedlock. These findings are in contrast with the majority of quantitative research on the topic, which failed to control for the selection of "innately unhappy" women into the group of lone mothers.

We believe that our findings have important implications for the academic and political discourse on the socioeconomic consequences of single motherhood. Single motherhood, particularly among young people, has often been regarded as one of the most severe social problems, a symptom of the decline of marriage and of the weakening role of "family values;" a marker of a lack of responsibility and a route to social exclusion. This perception has been strengthened by the erroneous findings of quantitative studies, which usually demonstrated a substantial gap in the well-being of single and married mothers, without looking at how becoming a mother itself shapes women's lives. Our findings illustrate that children are a focal point in an unmarried woman's life, and that many important life decisions are made more responsibly for the sake of the child. Motherhood empowers single mothers, increases their sense of responsibility, and allows them to escape pathological environments. Hence, in line with Graham and McDermott (2005) and Duncan (2007), lone motherhood emerges in our study as a route to social inclusion, rather than to exclusion. It is rather the wider social environment that erects barriers for single women with children, such as social disapproval, lack of support, or financial pressure.

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