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LONE PARENTHOOD AND EMPLOYMENT TRAJECTORIES: A LONGITUDINAL MIXED-METHOD STUDY

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Abstract

This study explores heterogeneity in employment trajectories occurring before, during, and after the transition to lone parenthood (LP) in a life-course perspective. Lone mothers are usually both primary caregivers and breadwinners: The transition into LP leads to an increase in economic and care needs that may compromise work-family balance and condition labor-market participation. Our mixed-method approach combines biographical calendars (SHP data, N=462) and semistructured interviews (N=38) of lone mothers residing in Switzerland. Using sequence and cluster analysis, we reconstruct employment trajectories around the transition to LP and estimate the probability of specific patterns by individual and household characteristics that help or hinder labor-market participation. We then contrast these results with findings from a content analysis of narrative interviews focusing on values and norms concerning work and care. We identify five employment patterns characterized by either an increase in labor supply (especially for those with more/older children) or by stability in or out of the labor market (for highly educated or younger mothers respectively). The analyses of the narratives provide insights on how employment opportunities and decisions differ by entry mode into LP, the postseparation relationship with the children's father, and the ability to mobilize individual, social and institutional resources. Our findings suggest that effective policies encouraging lone mothers' labor-market participation should consider their normative priorities when facing work and care trade-offs and the availability of informal and formal support, which ultimately shapes their work-related decisions.

Keywords

Employment | lone parenthood | mixed-method | sequence analysis | Switzerland

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1. Introduction

The primary reason why parents have raised children alone in the last 30 years has been ever growing union instability (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). The most common pathways into lone parenthood (henceforth LP) in the 21st century are divorce and separation, while widowhood, pregnancy, or adoption by unpartnered individuals have diminished in importance. Consequently, the share of population experiencing lone parenthood is growing and becoming increasingly heterogeneous, while the duration of LP is falling on average (Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2018). Despite its relative diffusion, LP remains a predictor of poverty, fragmented work histories, and poor health (D. Brady, Finnigan, & Hübgen, 2017, p. 20; Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Struffolino, Bernardi, & Voorpostel, 2016). Moreover, transitions to LP increase the risk of vulnerability and social exclusion for all household members, including children (Hansen, Jürgens, Strand, & Voges, 2006).

LP is a gendered phenomenon. A large majority of lone parents are women, who are greatly disadvantaged when gender gaps in care and the labor market are combined with poor family-work reconciliation policies (Hübgen, 2018; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). In most countries, legislative and social norms about parenthood mean mothers are the main caregivers. When women have children, they are more likely to experience interrupted work histories than men and childless women; consequently, they are more frequently secondary earners in couples than men. Women in general, and particularly mothers, are financially vulnerable in separation or divorce (Fisher & Low, 2015; Mortelmans & Defever, 2018) and they rely on social assistance more often than men (Kessler, Potarca, & Bernardi, 2018). This disadvantage persists despite being in employment. In general, re-partnering reduces economic risks for more recent cohorts (Jenkins, 2008; Tach & Eads, 2015).

The effects of transitions to LP on labor market participation should therefore be considered together with the increase in care needs and economic resources within the household. Existing research on lone mothers' labor market participation is mostly based on cross-sectional analyses, which show heterogeneities by country (i) in the likelihood of lone parents being employed compared to coupled mothers (Looze, 2014; Western, Bloome, & Percheski, 2008), (ii) in responsiveness to incentives for lone mothers to move from welfare into work (Athreya, Reilly, & Simpson, 2014), and (iii) in the timing of transitions in and out of the labor market after LP (Stewart, 2009). A few longitudinal studies consider how labor

market trajectories before, during, and after LP differ depending on individual and household characteristics (Struffolino & Mortelmans, 2018; Zagel, 2013). However, they cannot determine the mechanisms connecting objective constraints/resources to more subjective accounts of how norms and values regarding work and care may influence lone mothers' employment trajectories.

We fill this gap by adopting a life-course perspective and a mixed-method analytical approach. We do so by, first, reconstructing trajectories of lone parents' labor market participation surrounding this family transition and identifying typical patterns. We then estimate the probability of different patterns by individual and household characteristics that help or hinder labor market participation. We finally contrast these results with the findings of the content analysis of narrative interviews focusing on lone parents' employment decisions in relation to values and norms concerning work and care.

The paper focuses on Switzerland, where the intact nuclear family is both ideologically and statistically dominant (Struffolino & Bernardi, 2016) and where historically gendered social norms concerning breadwinner and family caregiver roles are combined with comparatively limited public support for families (Le Goff & Levy, 2016) and particularly for families deviating from the "nuclear family norm" (Rossier, Sauvain-Dugerdil, & Bernardi, 2018). The analyses draw from the Swiss Household Panel (biographical calendars 2001 and 2013) and from unique longitudinal qualitative data on a group of lone parents living in the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

2. Explaining labor market participation around the transition to lone motherhood

The situation of lone parents regarding labor market participation is distinctive. Theoretically, this population challenges the classic economic approach to the division of labor within the family (Becker, 1981), because lone parents cannot share day-to-day care and breadwinner responsibilities with a partner. The work-family balance is typically a gendered phenomenon. Women are also generally disadvantaged on the labor market in terms of employment stability, prestige, and income (European Commission, 2016; ILO, 2017). However, for coupled women, these disadvantages might be ameliorated by pooling resources within the household. By contrast, lone mothers' finances depend more on women's labor

supply and child maintenance payments. The former depends on their childcare needs and the accessibility (availability and costs) of external childcare.

In recent decades, several demographic, social, and ideational processes have increased women's labor market participation in general. The empirical evidence on lone parents' labor market participation largely focuses on the prevalence of unemployment and poverty and on how to avoid welfare dependency (Daly, 2018). Lone mothers are overrepresented among individuals at risk of poverty. Several European countries (Switzerland included) have addressed this issue by implementing so called *work first* policies (or activation policies) targeting lone mothers specifically: these policies imply welfare to be conditioned on labor market participation, being based on the assumption that paid work is the primary way out of poverty. Evidence on the effectiveness of such measures is inconclusive (Blau et al., 2004; Daly, 2011; Doiron, 2004; Hennessy, 2005). Interestingly, even when welfare benefits are conspicuous, only “recent” lone mothers gain and improve their financial situation, while side effects of these policies emerge for “persistent” lone mothers, who cannot overcome the employment barriers (Mogstad & Pronzato, 2012).

The increasing heterogeneity in birth cohorts, education, and age distributions of lone parents (Bernardi, Mortelmans, & Larenza, 2018; OECD, 2014) is likely to be reflected in the different labor-market-participation pathways and in the different motivations and rationales underpinning them. Moreover, a differentiated opportunity structure among lone mothers depending on individual and household characteristics might lead to increasing within-group inequality over the life course. However, researchers have not extensively studied the effects of the increasing heterogeneity in lone-parent characteristics. Moreover, the existing longitudinal studies only consider how labor market trajectories during the transition to LP are influenced by individual and household characteristics or how they differ across welfare states (Struffolino & Mortelmans, 2018; Zagel, 2013). Yet, differences in the mechanisms behind labor market participation strategies cannot be identified by survey data. This data can neither reveal subjective motivations over time nor scrutinize the mechanisms enabling individuals to overcome objective constraints or activate resources. We fill this gap adopting a longitudinal mixed-method approach.

2.1 Obstacles to lone mothers' labor market participation

Two mechanisms can influence lone mothers' labor market attachment. First, the decrease in disposable income resulting from the transition to LP (Jarvis & Jenkins, 1999; Kalmijn, Loeve, & Manting, 2007; Mortelmans & Defever, 2018) should push lone parents to increase their labor supply. Second, lone parents face competing resource demands due to the dual responsibility of being the main breadwinner and the primary caregiver. Lone parents may have to either reduce their labor force participation or increase it, depending on their opportunities to externalize childcare and the associated costs, the value of their skills on the labor market, and the economic support they can obtain from the nonresident parent or from public benefits. While lone parents' labor market value is strongly associated with both their education level at the beginning of LP and their employment history, childcare options depend on informal support networks and the availability of formal childcare.

Lone parents' labor market participation may be hindered in two ways (Haux, 2013). On the one hand, when LP occurs at an earlier age, individuals who did not complete formal education could be excluded from the labor market or may end up in low income jobs due to their lower qualifications and employability. Hence, very young lone parents often find themselves in a spiral of cumulative disadvantages that affects life domains beyond employment; this makes it even harder for them to subsequently improve their qualification level (Jaehrling, Kalina, & Mesaros, 2014). On the other hand, structural features of the household—such as the number and age of children—might be crucial in prompting lone parents to give up paid employment and perform childcare as their main occupation (Collins, Gray, Purdon, & McGee, 2006). The conditional probability of working versus staying home associated with individual and household characteristics differs considerably across countries (Haux, 2013). This indicates that, on the one hand, constraints on work are influenced by care and labor market policies, social support, individual financial needs, and personal investment in training and employment. On the other hand, individual strategies can be influenced by country-specific sets of norms and values.

Individual characteristics. Education and age at the transition to LP relate to labor market participation patterns in different ways. Higher education levels generally correspond to stronger labor market attachment (Eurostat, 2017). Women who choose to temporarily leave the labor market after having children or who substantially reduce their labor supply due to adequate income from the partner may have to reconsider this after separation. Similarly,

women who have been lone parents since the transition to motherhood may have to reconsider their engagement with paid work. In both cases, women with relatively low education levels might have to reduce their labor supply because they cannot afford full-time childcare due to insufficient earnings. Alternatively, they could simply drop out of the workforce because of the low opportunity costs. In contrast, having at least some college education is generally associated with stronger labor market attachment: After the transition to LP, these mothers can either increase their labor supply or work in more flexible jobs (e.g., part-time work) when generous and regular child maintenance support from the father makes up for the reduced income.

Age at LP is likely to interact differently with changing labor supply decisions because it correlates with seniority in the labor market. On the one hand, young lone parents might have to postpone skill acquisition and risk never catching up (Jaehrling et al., 2012): This may hinder access to well-paid jobs or flexible working hours. On the other hand, being young might represent a comparative advantage for those re-entering education.

Household characteristics. The more the labor market structure is gendered, the fewer opportunities for family-work reconciliation will exist (Flückiger, 1998). This is especially true if childcare cannot be outsourced due to poor welfare state provision or high costs. Therefore, the presence of more than one child, and at least one very young child, is an additional constraint for all women irrespective of their education.

Norms and values. Adjustments in labor supply may be influenced by cultural expectations regarding women's work-family balance (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Krüger & Levy, 2001). Gendered norms about motherhood combined with work-first policies emphasizing the value of personal autonomy and financial independence set contradictory expectations for women (Campbell, Thomson, Fenton, & Gibson, 2016). Low-income lone mothers are encouraged to work, while middle-class mothers are generally encouraged to limit workforce participation in the interests of their children (see Hennessy [2015] for a review).

To the best of our knowledge, no empirical evidence exists that adopts this composite perspective on the factors shaping labor market participation of lone mothers in Switzerland.

3. The Swiss case

In Switzerland, around 15.2% of children under the age of 18 live in one-parent households (OECD 2011 on 2007 data), and around 14% of households with children under 25 are lone parent households (SFSO, 2015). The great majority of these households (84%) is headed by a mother (SFSO, 2017) and lone mothers have the full physical custody of the children (Recksiedler & Bernardi, 2017).¹ Lone parent household's income is far lower than other households' income—the only household group that does worse is individuals aged over 65 and living alone (SFSO data 1998–2009) This is partially explained by the gendered structure of the labor market and the disadvantages for employed women (Branger, Gazareth, & Schön-Bühlmann, 2003; Flückiger, 1998). Women's labor market participation is higher in Switzerland than in other European countries (OECD StatExtract, 2015), but they are mostly concentrated in part-time jobs. The labor market activity rate for women in Switzerland has increased in recent years (from 68% in 1991 to 79% in 2014), but differences between men and women persist in this respect and in pay gaps, which have even increased over time (Bühlmann et al., 2012).

Switzerland is an ideal context in which to disentangle the relationship between the transition to LP and employment because of its public policy context, which may affect employed parents around this transition. On the one hand, unemployment benefits are more generous in Switzerland than in other OECD countries (OECD, 2015). Similarly, social assistance is also more generous in relative terms but access may differ depending on canton-specific regulations (Obinger, 1999). On the other hand, work-family reconciliation policies are poorer here compared to other Western welfare states. Existing studies show poor availability of childcare services across the country (e.g. Bertozzi et al., 2005).

Against this backdrop, individuals' professional trajectories are less vulnerable to the scarring effects of unemployment than in other contexts: Longer job-search periods may reduce the risk of having to accept low-quality and unstable temporary jobs in short term rather than better opportunities in the long term. However, despite the dramatic increase in the use of non-family daycare in the last decade, it is still difficult for both parents to work full-time (Schmid, Kriesi, & Buchmann, 2011). In fact, despite the relatively low and progressive taxation, public childcare for working parents are inadequate (e.g., low intensity and coverage and difficult access), especially for single-earner households (Wall & Escobedo, 2013). As a consequence, the use of non-institutional childcare (both formal and informal) is widespread especially for

0-3 year-old children (SFSO, 2017). Lone parents with poor networks and few economic resources might face additional obstacles when having to combine work and care.

Finally, residential mobility may also be potentially difficult for lone parents, due to the federal nature of the welfare state, whereby policies that are crucial for lone parents are administered at cantonal level (e.g. children's allowances, taxation rules, social assistance, and childcare). Advances of maintenance payments represent a typical example of policy targeted to lone parents that differs across cantons in terms of benefit duration, amount and eligibility criteria. Such factors may lead mothers to adjust their labor market participation for example in case of short benefit duration (Larenza, forthcoming).

In summary, lone mothers face a difficult dilemma: being a working-lone-mother without much public support, or being unemployed and/or relying on social assistance. Therefore, lone parents—depending on their labor market status—may find it preferable to reduce or pause their labor force participation in the short run to cope with time and other pressures related to the LP transition. This short-term strategy reduces care costs, but can lead to negative outcomes in the long run. It can result in skills and employability depreciation and in a decline in motivation to work, with a consequent undermining of chances to earn sufficient income in the long run, when children's financial needs increase (e.g., costs for extra-school activities or investments in higher education).

4. Data and methods

4.1 The mixed-method design

The analyses rely on two complementary data sources. We first use a representative sample of lone parents interviewed in the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) to capture employment patterns around the transition to LP. We identify the relative importance of individual and household characteristics and of the timing at entry into LP on such transition. Second, we explore how lone parents' perspectives shape their employment trajectories before, during, and after the transition to LP using rich biographical interviews from the LIVES qualitative panel on lone parents residing in the French-speaking part of Switzerland (NCCR LIVES, 2018). The subjective narratives concern how the transition to LP calls into question respondents' roles as workers and parents; the women interviewed came from different social backgrounds and had different family histories. The narratives show how these women evaluated the opportunities and costs of alternative pathways. Although the respondents in the qualitative study are not

directly drawn from the SHP, the data analysis and the results of the qualitative and quantitative analyses are interpreted in relation to each other.

4.2 Quantitative data

The SHP has collected longitudinal sociodemographic information and data on the living conditions of a representative sample of the Swiss population from 1999. The 2001 and 2013 waves include retrospective biographical calendars relating to different life domains, such as individual employment and family trajectories for all household members. This enabled us to identify the subsample of women who had ever been lone mothers (due to separation/divorce, widowhood, or being nonpartnered at childbirth). We further selected the women who were 18–54 year-old and were living with at least one child under age 18 when they experienced the transition to LP. The final sample consists of 478 women (4.2% of the initial 2001 and 2013 samples pooled).

4.3 Qualitative data

The first wave of the LIVES qualitative panel (2012-2013) contains 38 interviews with lone mothers who had sole physical custody of at least one child between ages 0 and 13 at the time of the first interview. The majority of the children were between 0 and 7 years old (one child was 13, one 11, and one 9). 31 mothers agreed to be re-interviewed in 2015. The semistructured interview guidelines included a life calendar similar to the one filled by the SHP interviewees; the narrative reconstruction of educational, residential, employment, and family trajectories; information on the current relationship with the noncustodial parent (negotiations over custody and child maintenance); individuals' social networks; and access to various kinds of institutional and informal support.

Individuals were recruited through a multiple-entry snowball approach and following a purposive sampling scheme aimed at maximizing the variability in education levels and patterns of entry into LP. The research design particularly focused on the presence of very young children, who require more care than adolescents. For 36 mothers out of 38 the transition to LP occurred between 0 to 7 years prior to the first interview. The time period ranged from entry into LP until 2015 for 6 years on average (min. 2 and max. 16); this sample was thus comparable to the subsample of the SHP used in the previous analytical step.

To protect participants' identities their real names together with the names of the people they mentioned were substituted with pseudonyms and all the pieces of information that might lead to their identification were anonymized across waves. Specifically, a protocol was created by the research team (and constantly updated during the data collection phase) to set up common rules on how to anonymize: places and dates of birth, work places and place of education (for those who were studying).

4.4 Analytical step 1: identifying typical employment trajectories before, during, and after the transition to LP

Instead of considering single and isolated points in time, we rely on the theoretical and methodological framework of sequence analysis to consider longitudinal employment patterns as a whole (Abbot, 1995). In other words, we do not simply estimate the timing or the probability of specific transitions between states (e.g., from employment to unemployment), but look at “process outcomes” (Abbott, 2016), which are career configurations conceptualized as the succession of different spells as they unfold over time.

For this purpose, we reconstructed individual employment sequences starting two years before and ending eight years after the transition to LP and coded each year according to the labor market situation (part-time or full-time employment, unemployment, or inactivity). We then clustered sequences to detect typical patterns representing different labor market participation trajectories around the transition to LP. The clustering procedure on sequences implies the computation of a pairwise dissimilarity matrix. The latter is calculated on the basis of a distance measure between couples of sequences. We used a measure recently introduced by Elzinga and Studer (2015) called the *subsequence vector representation-based metric* (SVR) to maximize the sensitivity to differences in the order of states (Studer & Ritschard, 2016). In the SVR, each matched subsequence (i.e., the portion that is the same in the two sequences) is weighted by its length—or a transformation of it—and the duration of each overlap between subsequences is taken into account. We tuned *subsequence length weight*=1 and *spell duration weight*=2 (testing for different options led to substantially consistent results). Individual sequences were then clustered in order to maximize internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity by using the partitioning-around-medoids method (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 2005). Medoids are representative sequences that have the smallest dissimilarity to the other sequences of the cluster they belong to. The corresponding algorithm aims to

achieve a global optimization. We applied the average silhouette width (ASW) criterion for detecting the number of clusters that fulfill these requirements by measuring the coherence of the assignment of each sequence to a cluster. ASW can vary between -1 and +1 (min./max. coherence). A five-cluster solution returned an ASW value of 0.54.

4.5 Analytical step 2: estimating the probability of experiencing a specific employment trajectory around the transition to LP

In this step, we considered the association between individual and household characteristics and the different employment trajectories represented by the 5 clusters. We estimated a multinomial logistic regression model where the dependent variable is the cluster membership. The model includes: gender, education (up to lower secondary, upper secondary, or tertiary), and age of the woman when the transition to LP occurred (18–24, 25–30, 31–40, or 41–54); number of children under 18 living in the household (1, 2, or 3+), and the age of the youngest child (0–2, 3–5, 6–10, or 11–18). All the variables refer to when the transition occurred. The model includes controls for the type of entry into LP (unpartnered when having first child, separation, or widowhood); year of the transition to LP (up to 1979, 1980–1989, 1990–1995, or 1996–2005); nationality at birth (Swiss or other); wave (2001 or 2013). The extent to which type of entry into LP can be predicted varies. Entry mode into LP affects individuals' ability to adjust labor market participation and the direction of such adjustments. Moreover, LP has likely become less stigmatized over time and because of increasing female labor market participation. Finally, coming from an immigrant background (and having obtained educational qualifications in a foreign country) may be an obstacle in the labor market and can be a proxy for a lack of support from family of origin. Unfortunately, variables for other factors that might have been important to control for are not available in SHP (for example, social support with care or the receipt of regular child maintenance support from the other parent). Results will be presented as adjusted predictions at group specific means (Long & Freese, 2014 - full model available in the Appendix, Table A2).

4.6 Analytical step 3: Content analysis of the qualitative interviews

Each interview lasted between 1 and 3 hours and was taped and fully transcribed. Qualitative materials include field notes and comprehensive case summaries. This paper

concentrates on reconstructing employment changes around the transition to parenthood and the rationale for such changes, with special attention paid to the parental biography. We contrasted information obtained in interviews with a variety of women. These women's life histories are characterized by different pathways into LP, heterogeneous employment trajectories, and varying ages at the transition to LP as well as educational backgrounds. This comparison of a broad range of women sheds light on how they reconcile multiple—potentially conflicting roles by re-arranging employment trajectories according to individual and household characteristics. Specifically, the interviews were coded to capture the motivation to take paid work before and after LP (desire and identity related to profession, financial and psychological need to work, evaluation of opportunities and alternative work arrangements), the possible trade-offs and compatibilities with parenting, factors like the accessibility of public support, the regularity of maintenance payments from the father, uncertainties related to custody, support from the social network including a new partner, as well as the health of the lone mother, her child/ren, or their father.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the independent variables relative to both the quantitative and the qualitative samples. The right column shows that the distribution of the interviewees according to the major variable of interest for the quantitative analyses matches the distribution of the qualitative sample relatively well. This is useful for triangulating the results from the two data sources. Two differences between the samples have to be highlighted. First, women in the qualitative sample had experienced LP for 4 years on average prior to the interview in 2013 (the median duration was 4 years, the shortest was pregnant at the interview, the longest was 14 years). This choice was deliberate, because we wanted their retrospective account of the transition to LP to be relatively close to the time of the interview. Second, women with lower secondary education are underrepresented in the qualitative sample. Sampling individuals belonging to disadvantaged groups is a very well-known issue in qualitative data collection (Abrams, 2010; Penrod, Preston, Cain, & Starks, 2003). As a matter of fact, given the association between low education and higher exposure to the risk of unemployment, poverty, and difficulties to combine work and care due to observable and unobservable individual characteristics, our results can be interpreted as conservative with respect to our outcome of interest.

Table 1: Distribution of the main independent variables across the quantitative and qualitative samples

	SHP 2010 & 2013	Qualitative interviews (% and N)	
<i>Education</i>			
Lower secondary	41.9	7.9	3
Upper secondary	45.6	44.7	17
Tertiary	12.6	47.4	18
<i>Age when becoming LP</i>			
18-24	11.6	5.3	2
25-30	26.8	26.3	10
31-40	44.1	57.9	22
41-54	17.5	10.5	4
<i>Number of children when becoming LP</i>			
1	52.2	60.5	23
2	35.0	34.2	13
3+	12.9	5.3	2 ^(a)
<i>Age of the youngest child when becoming LP</i>			
0-2	37.5	71.0	27
3-5	19.7	23.7	9
6-10	26.3	5.3	2
11-18	16.5	0.0	0
<i>Type of entry into LP</i>			
Unpartnered when having first child	23.3	18.4	7
Separation	68.0	76.3	29
Widowhood	8.7	5.3	2
<i>Year when becoming LP</i>			
Up to 1979	26.4	0.0	0
1980-1989	26.5	0.0	0
1990-1995	18.4	0.0	0
1996-2005	28.7	5.3	2
2006-2013		94.7	36
<i>Nationality at birth</i>			
Swiss	83.6	76.3	29 ^(b)
Other	16.4	23.7	9
<i>N</i>	<i>462</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>38</i>

SHP data: biographical calendar 2001 and 2013 (weighted); NCCR LIVES, wave 1 (2013). (a) In one case the mother had two children from a previous relationship. (b) Six women migrated to Switzerland at the latest at the age 15 and in most cases obtained the Swiss naturalization.

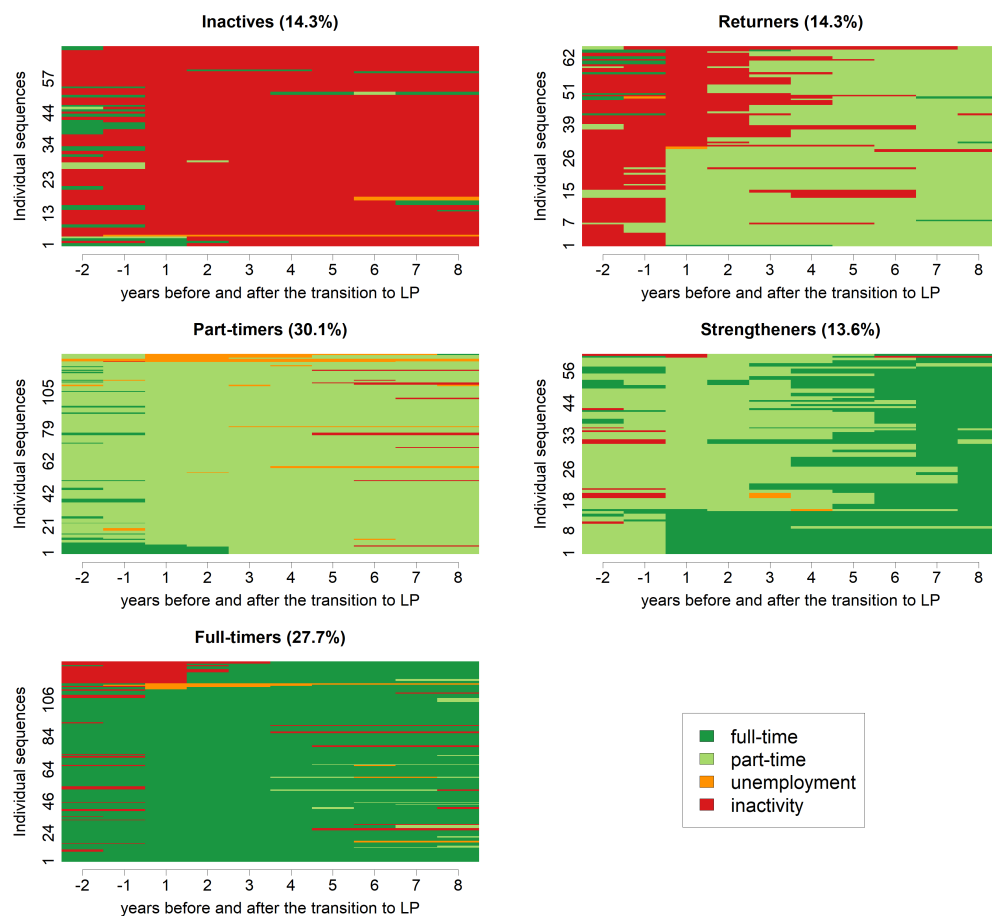
5. Results

5.1 Employment trajectories around the transition to lone motherhood

Figure 1 displays the five clusters, which represent different typical labor market participation patterns 2 years before and 8 years after the transition to LP. Each subplot contains individual sequences. Almost 80% of lone mothers in the sample belong to one of three clusters that are strongly characterized by stability in one single state: *inactives*, *part-timers*, and *full-timers*. In effect, most of the individuals who were assigned to the clusters do not change their

labor supply after the transition to LP: the vast majority maintains steady attachment (24.7% in part-time and 40.8 in full-time jobs), and overall almost one fourth of the individuals increase their working hours over time.

The remaining 23% of lone mothers were allocated to the two remaining clusters, namely the *returners* and the *strengtheners*. These trajectories show a progressive shift from inactivity to part-time employment and from part-time to full-time employment respectively. Right after the transition to LP, patterns change as lone mothers increase their labor supply. Interestingly, only 12% of the individuals in the sample were permanently out of the labor force, meaning that they had a weak or no attachment to the labor market even before the transition to LP. Some of these lone mothers may have been young when LP occurred, so that inactivity might actually conceal time spent in education. The distribution of lone mothers across clusters according to a number of key individual and household characteristics is displayed in Table A1 (Appendix).



SHP data, 2001 and 2013. N=462. Sequences in each cluster are sorted by the employment status at the time of the transition to LP (time t_1).

Figure 1: Individual employment trajectories around the transition to lp: 5-cluster solution.

5.2 *The role of individual and household characteristics for employment trajectories*

The descriptive multinomial logistic regression includes the main effects of the aforementioned individual and household characteristics (Table A2 in the Appendix). Overall, due to the small sample size, statistical significance is hardly reached and results from multinomial logistic regression are generally too complex to be presented effectively. In Table A2, the exponentiated coefficients for the main effects are positive and significant for the likelihood to be a *returner* vs *full-timer* for women with upper vs. lower secondary education and for those who have 2 or more children instead of 1 at the moment of the transition to lone parenthood. The presence of a 3-5 vs. 0-2 year-old child when the transition occurred decrease the probability of being *full-timer* vs. *inactive*, while being the youngest child 6-10 year-old increase the probability of being *straighter* vs. *full-timer*. To our descriptive purposes, we prefer presenting results as in Figure 2 by estimating predictions of cluster membership according to the two most common type of entry into LP and individual/household characteristics that hold all other independent variables at their group specific means (MEMs). MEMs reflect the probability of being in each cluster for “average profiles,” e.g., for an average, moderately educated woman who entered into LP through separation.

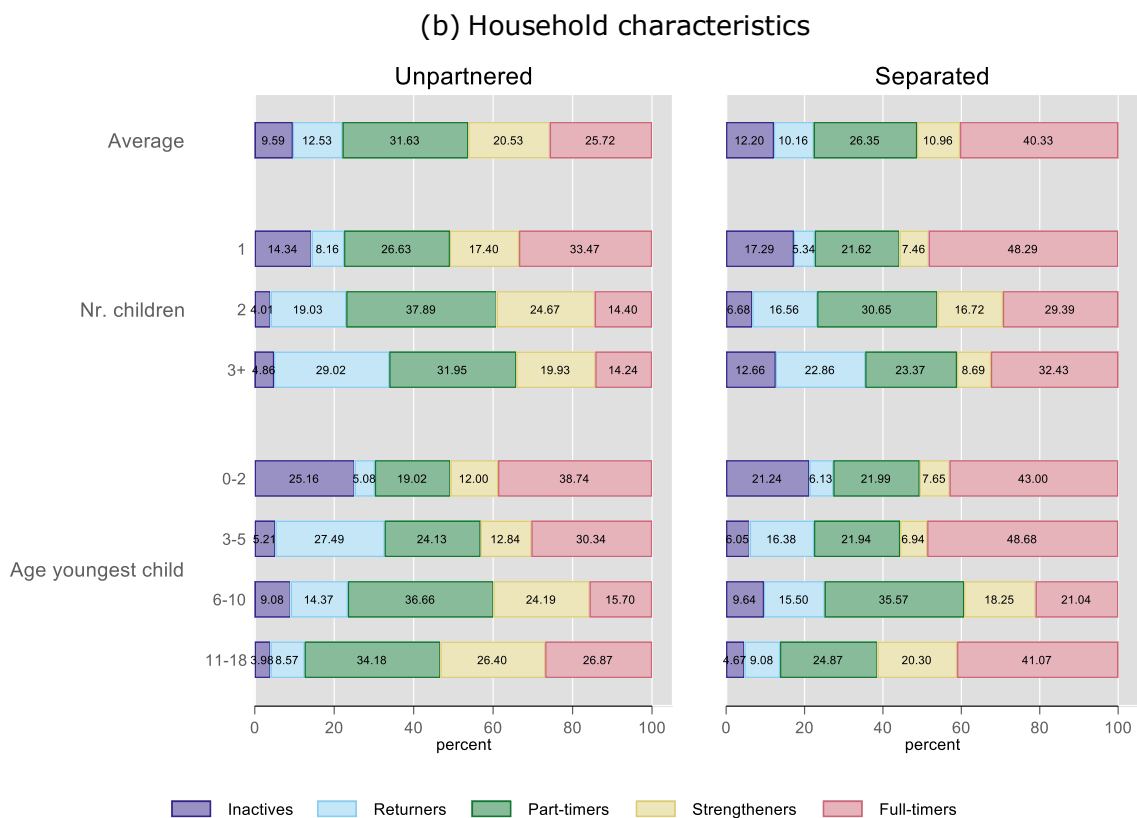
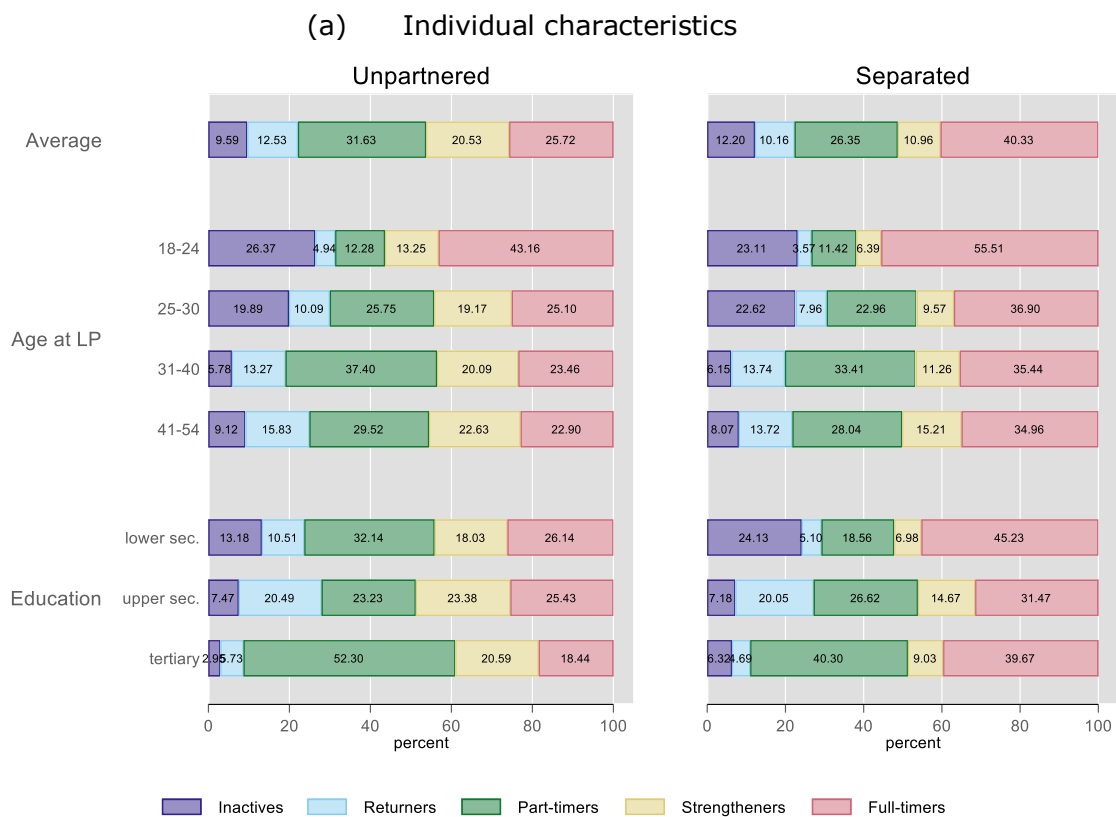
Mothers who were single at LP are on average more likely to be *part-timers* and *strengtheners* than separated mothers, who are conversely more likely to be *full-timers* (see Plot (a)). A younger age (18–24) at the transition to LP corresponds to a relatively higher likelihood of being among the *inactives* or *full-timers* for both single (26 and 46 percent) and separated mothers (23 and 55 percent). Being older is associated with a much lower probability of being *inactives*. By contrast, singles have a higher likelihood of being in long-lasting part-time work and being a *strengtheners*. Tertiary education is associated with long-term part-time work especially for singles at LP (52 percent), while highly educated mothers who are separated are equally distributed among the two stable clusters in full-time and part-time employment (both 40 percent). Interestingly, lower secondary education is particularly associated with permanent inactivity for separated and single lone mothers (24 vs. 13 percent), who are in turn more likely to be *part-timers* and *strengtheners* (32 vs. 18 percent). Having an upper secondary education puts mothers in an intermediate position where probabilities of being in the five clusters are more equal.

For both single and separated lone mothers, Plot (b) shows that the presence of more than one child in the household is associated with a decrease in inactivity and full-time

employment patterns (from approximately 15 to 8 percent on average for *inactives* and from 40 to 23 on average for *full-timers*) and with a corresponding increase in being *returners* (especially when children are 3+) and *part-timers*. When they have at least 2 dependent children, the likelihood of being a *full-timer* decreases more for single than for separated lone mothers (around -19 vs. -10 percentage points). Single mothers are in fact generally more likely to be *strengtheners* than *full-timers*.

Finally, the older the youngest child in the household, the higher the marginal probability of being *part-timers* and *strengtheners*, and, conversely, the lower the probability of being in the *inactives*, *returners* and *full-timers* clusters. This general trend applied to both single and separated lone mothers, with permanent *full-time* pattern being generally prevalent for the former and *part-time* pattern for the latter. However, when lone mothers have children over 11 (i.e., more autonomous children), they are more likely to be engaged in long-lasting full-time careers.

Employment opportunities arise and decisions are made at the intersection of individual and household characteristics; however family and relational histories, which are closely linked to norms and societal expectations, also play a role here. Our quantitative results cannot provide insights into how these dimensions influence employment, only a close look at the subjective narratives on how these dynamics evolved around the transition to LP can suggest possible paths through which individuals' opportunity structures are created.



SHP data; 2001 and 2013 (weighted). Estimates from model in Table A2 in the Appendix.

Figure 2: Adjusted predictions (percentage points) at group specific means for assignment to the clusters by type of entry into lp.

5.3 *A qualitative account of what shaped lone mothers' labor market participation*

We used interviewees' narratives on their different employment pathways to explore respondents' perspectives on how their employment options and decisions have been crucially shaped by a range of factors: the *type of entry into LP*, the *relationship with the father of the children* (when he is present), other *developments* during and after the transition (e.g., health), and the possibility to *mobilize resources*, both accumulated (e.g., education, housing) and transient (e.g. social and institutional support) resources. The 38 interviewees were grouped by their employment patterns: those with little variation in employment before and after the transition to LP (*relatively stable working arrangements*) and those presenting either a gradual or sudden need for a change in working arrangements (*increasing working hours*).

Relatively stable employment statuses across LP

Inactives. Two interviewees were not regularly employed before becoming mothers and did not change their status thereafter. They have received social benefits since becoming lone parents after a separation or divorce in their late-20s/early-30s and have low education levels and very young children. Pilar, who migrated to Switzerland as a teenager, worked occasionally until she married at 20. She separated at 25 with two young children (aged 1 and 5), negotiated the divorce agreement badly and without real legal support (the father had shared physical custody, which allowed him to avoid financial obligations for his children, but he did not respect this), and received social housing and minimal cash benefits. The children's father did not exercise his visiting rights on a regular basis. She had not been able to develop a useful social network, nor did she anticipate finding a new partner anytime soon despite her young age. The only occasional support she gets is from her sister, who takes the children occasionally for a few hours. She has no support for labor market reintegration and no access to affordable childcare; this translates into little time and resources for work or training.

Part-timers. These women have either tertiary education or an upper secondary professional diploma, which is highly valued in Switzerland and can give access to well-paid jobs. Their main income sources are employment, child maintenance payments, a widow's pension, temporary or lump-sum social benefits, or a combination of several of these sources. Two major life-course configurations exist among part-timers. The most common one applies to women who have a stable, adequate income, which may include child maintenance from the father; these individuals may also be able to count on social support and appropriate child care. Part-time is an ideal working arrangement for these mothers to fulfill their double role, and it

is the arrangement preferred by the majority of mothers in Switzerland in general, whether they are part of a couple or not (OFS, 2017). For example, Natasha was 26 at the transition to LP, and worked part-time (50%) and studied while in a couple. She separated when her child was 10 months old. She only finished her tertiary education later and increased her part-time hours (60% of full-time hours and then 80%) as the child grew: for her, this was the right balance to combine caregiving and income-earning. She has access to welfare benefits (including a scholarship to finish her studies) a supportive and stable social environment, with neighbors ready to provide emergency care, a good relationship with the child's father and a well-functioning arrangement for visitation and child maintenance. Unlike Natasha, many women face significant obstacles to improving their financial situation after separation. These belong to a second subgroup of part-timers. In their case, they cannot increase their labor supply because they cannot easily change their employment conditions, or because they would lose income in the process (e.g., increase of childcare costs following the progressive income rule, going over the income threshold for social benefits). Vivianne was 42 when she became mother of her first and only child from a non-cohabiting and open relationship. The relationship rapidly deteriorated with the birth of the child, the father refused to pay child maintenance, and he is rarely involved in childcare. She is socially isolated (when she got cancer when her child was three, she did not know who to talk to about it) which contributes to her partial dependence on his support. Her child has a disability that makes it difficult for her to leave him with a neglectful father or non-specialized educators, resulting in additional stress. Vivianne works as a professor at between 50% and 65% of full-time hours on contracts that are often temporary: In her area (art) it seems difficult to increase hours or get a stable job. She often thought she would end up on welfare. However, given her temporary contracts, she finds it difficult to obtain social benefits or tax reductions in line with her real financial situation.

Full-timers. As with part-timers, permanent full-timers have different underlying rationales. The crucial difference in their working biographies is the combination of their education and social resources with the type of entry into LP. Most of these women are separated and cannot count on much support from the child/ren's father. Unlike the *inactives*, they can aspire to satisfying and decently paid jobs, but they may have limited time for childcare when they have young children and adequate salaries. They deal with this by sacrificing time for themselves. Antoniette is a foreign woman who, after having two children and realizing her relationship was deteriorating, went back to college. Once she and her husband broke up, Antoniette found a job and supported herself and the children with no

economic or practical help from the father. She receives support with childcare from her sister, but she had to litigate with her ex-husband's family to avoid being thrown out of her apartment. Gisela is German, she worked full-time before meeting her partner and had two children. She soon realized that his unreliability and alcohol problems would persist and decided to leave him when the children were very young (3 and 1 years of age). Flexible working arrangements helped her organize care. As she does not have an agreement with the children's father, she cannot claim maintenance unless she takes legal action. This would be expensive and she additionally fears that going to court would discourage the father from visiting the children or end up with him claiming full custody. This ultimately had negative consequences for her health and her job: It took her six months to get back to work after she was fired. In both cases, education and continuous engagement with employment have been crucial for these two women when coping with separation and LP.

The second category of *full-timers* have high education levels, successful full-time careers, and high incomes before parenthood. For example, Dorothea had her first child with a cohabiting partner, whom she separated from during pregnancy. The man was violent and was legally prevented from approaching the child and her mother. She never received financial support from him but was able to adopt a second child alone. Dorothea always outsourced care when the child was in pre-school and had the flexibility she needed to cope with emergency situations. For example, when her adolescent son had an accident, she was able to work from the hospital during almost the entire month of hospitalization.

Increasing working hours after LP

Returners. Most of these women withdrew temporarily from the workforce to devote time to their young children. After union dissolution, they re-entered the labor market. In some cases, the fact that children were not entitled to maintenance because of the lack of recognition from the other parent according to Swiss law influenced the mothers' decisions. Françoise (aged 36 at the transition to LP) had a professional diploma as a medical assistant. She interrupted her part time work (40% of full-time) when she became mother of two children, who were 4 and 6 when she separated. She then worked at 80% of full-time hours during the two years of uncertain and conflict-filled negotiations on maintenance and custody with the children's father to ensure family life standards. Martine also followed a quite traditional "Swiss mother" life-course trajectory, although she was in a legal partnership with a woman. When her partner gave birth to their first child and pursued her professional career, Martine

worked only occasionally on small freelance assignments. When she gave birth to their second child, Martine gave up working almost entirely. Therefore, when she separated, Martine was financially more vulnerable than her partner and could not claim maintenance for her biological child because there was no legal parent-child relationship between him and her ex-partner. In addition, she did not claim the alimony envisaged in the partnership contract because of the possible negative effects on the relationship with her ex-partner and the prospect of losing contact with her nonbiological child. Martine remained unemployed until she could take a part-time temporary job in her field. Béatrice became a lone parent at 37. She left Switzerland to go to Africa to complete her studies, where she got married and had a child. She obtained her master's degree after becoming a mother and stayed with her husband until it became clear that she could not find a job there. After her husband experienced depression, she separated from him and returned to Switzerland, where she has enjoyed family support while on welfare; she has strategically resisted job offers proposed by welfare authorities that she did not consider in line with her career aspirations. She has often preferred temporary contracts consistent with her field of studies, alternating between part-time and full-time work (sometime combining several contracts and training up to more than 100%). When the child was 8 years old, she moved to a different city. The enormous efforts she has made since LP to both provide for her child and pursue longer term labor market involvement were possible due to her determination and ability to capitalize on her investment in higher education. Yet, Béatrice faced harsh criticism from relatives and friends who reproach her for having imposed major life changes on her child every three years.

Strengtheners. These lone mother biographies are characterized by irregular or no engagement with the child/ren's fathers, stable working trajectories, and the possibility to adjust labor supply to meet care needs. This is illustrated in the case of Vanina. She used to work full-time before the birth of the child and was in a long-term relationship. Her partner was ambivalent about parenthood and did not take responsibility for the child despite officially acknowledging fatherhood. The couple broke up when the child was 3 years old. After two years as a single mother and with no regular payments or care from the father, she went back to work full-time. This was possible thanks to some help from her parents and the father's family and came at the costs of her personal life. Although the father started to pay some maintenance and meet the child more frequently when the child turned 9, Vanina had decided not to rely on this change and has kept her full-time job even though this means she has to sacrifice leisure time.

Turning points. There is a minority of employment trajectories that could not be identified as a separate cluster in the quantitative analytical step, which had the aim of identify the most common patterns in the data. The unpredictable and radical changes throughout the professional careers of lone mothers, were blended across the clusters as shown in Figure 1. And yet, sudden turning points in the employment trajectories are important indications of the nonnormative character of parenting alone. The advantage of a mixed-methods design relies on allowing us to identify those patterns whose specificity is lost in the quantitative analysis but which are crucial to detect substantive biographical contingencies with high explanatory power.

Sarah initially had a well-paid, full-time job as a teacher, and she had a partner who became the father of her child. After some time, she realized that her ideal of family had not materialized, as her husband was not able to play his role as a father. Sometime after ending the relationship, Sarah decided to quit her job and go back to university to study what she had always wanted to. This was a risky decision, as she lived on a small scholarship and had no certainty on whether she would succeed in her professional career after obtaining the degree. Sarah's narrative challenges the normative expectations of being a "good mother": her decision was grounded in her own will to "follow her dreams" rather than being unsatisfied in a comfortable financial position in a stable and well-paid job. Léa took a similar decision and left a stable but tough job to go back to university. Her decision was based on her will to build a potentially better future for herself and her child (this contrasts with Sarah's "self-interest") as well as on both the practical impossibility of working nightshifts (incompatible with childcare) and normative considerations (a reliance on her family for childcare help is regularly sanctioned through negative remarks).

6. Discussion and concluding remarks

This paper considers the structural and individual factors shaping employment patterns around the transition to lone parenthood by adopting a life-course perspective and a mixed-method approach. We used biographical calendars to trace mothers' employment histories in the years surrounding the transition to lone parenthood and semistructured interviews to shed light on the rationales behind different employment patterns.

We identified multiple longitudinal labor market participation pathways followed by lone mothers before, during, and after this family transition. Some trajectories are characterized by stability in one employment state, some by long-lasting transitions between states. This heterogeneity corresponds to how individuals respond to the challenges LP poses to women's roles in the labor market and as caregivers. Our results show that mothers with individual resources that are valuable on the labor market (i.e., high education) maintained arrangements that either allowed them to perform the dual role of worker and caregiver or paid for childcare in the Swiss context of weak welfare support and high childcare costs. The qualitative interviews, however, suggest that lone mothers with high education might still find it difficult to maintain high labor market attachment (or increase/strengthen it) depending on the occupational sector (e.g., arts or cultural management). Mothers who increased their labor supply or maintained part-time work are mostly those who had a greater need for income due to the presence of more than one child or who had lower care needs (given the older age of the child/ren). However, as emerges from the interviews, when mothers are more aware of the opportunities to combine different types of welfare support, they might decide not to increase their labor supply even when they have young/multiple young children.

The qualitative accounts highlighted why individual and household characteristics represent resources or obstacles for labor supply decisions around LP. Almost all lone mothers clearly connected their employment pathways and other pre- and posttransition processes depending, for example, on the type of transition to LP, the informal or legal negotiations for child custody and maintenance, or the institutional and informal support they could mobilize, including those coming from a new partner relationship. Some of the findings call into question the role of the non-resident partner in child care. When mothers are uncertain about the regularity and length of the father's visits, they find it difficult to organize their own working (and life) schedule to the point that it is difficult for them to negotiate better arrangements with employers or to find a job. Many lone mothers problematize the importance of their role in guaranteeing the father-child relationship despite (and sometimes against) the father's own will. Such beliefs may trigger two risks related to their own financial situation and therefore their employment choices. First, mothers are more likely to be vulnerable in the personal relationship with the noncustodial parent at the moment of separation: they might accept unfavorable post-separation maintenance arrangements in exchange for the noncustodial parent's commitment to child custody. Second, lone mothers could retreat from claiming rights or avoid complaining about fathers' failure to respect the formal agreement and legal

obligations. In both cases, even if mothers believe that part-time work would be a more suitable arrangement, they need to increase their labor supply (ideally up to full-time) to make ends meet. In case of unemployment or if work “does not pay,” poverty risk increases, and when work arrangements do not correspond to beliefs, stress might increase with severe consequences for mental and physical health.

The findings of the present study suggest several directions for future research. The case of Switzerland is illustrative: Because of the combination of generous social assistance with poor work-family reconciliation policies, the overlap between employment and welfare trajectories may be particularly interesting to analyze directly. However, because of the recruitment strategy for the qualitative sample and very limited information on welfare support in the SHP data, these dimensions could not be fully considered here. As an example, we could not explore the differences across urban/rural areas across the Swiss regions that differ not just in the prevalence of lone parenthood (SFSO, 2017) but also in terms of welfare systems: we might expect being relatively simpler facing the transition to lone parenthood where this is a more common family form and where public policies are more open to support them. The increasing availability of combined administrative data and survey data will enable better analyses of these joint dynamics even on small groups of individuals residing in different areas. Secondly, our focus on mothers meant we could not incorporate the perspective of non-resident parents on maintenance and care agreements. These elements are identified by lone mothers as crucial when taking decisions on their work careers. As a possible extension, researchers could analyze the narratives of non-resident parents to consider how conflicts between ex-partners emerge and are interpreted from both sides. This would allow a greater understanding of processes shaping mothers’ employment.

More generally, our findings on the heterogeneity of employment trajectories call for more attention to within-group differences rather than focusing exclusively on the divide between lone and coupled mothers. This is because of the changes in the population experiencing LP. By showing the multiplicity of factors shaping lone mothers’ decisions on their careers, this work feeds into the literature on the usefulness of active labor market policies in tackling poverty risk among poor lone mothers with little labor market attachment (e.g., Brady & Cook, 2015; Ellwood, 2000; Gregg et al., 2009). Such policies currently represent one of the most common types of intervention in favor of such mothers and their appropriateness is often debated (Campbell et al., 2016). Therefore, this work speaks to existing literature (e.g. Millar & Ridge, 2009) in urging consideration of at least two points.

First, simply compelling these mothers to increase their labor supply in exchange for social support may be at odds with their possibilities to do so. Specifically, by ignoring issues such as the commitment of the non-custodial parent towards the children, these policies may treat different situations similarly and lead to inequalities. If a mother receives regular support from the non-custodial parent, she will be able to increase her participation in the labor market to improve her household's financial situation. When this is not the case, increasing labor market supply may just not be feasible even if social benefits are provided to incentivize it. If the lone mother does not receive or cannot claim maintenance support, she may not be able to afford work-related expenses, including childcare. In turn, without external care support, she may have less time to devote to paid work, especially if she is socially isolated.² Likewise, the lack of formal and informal support with childcare may prevent such mothers from increasing their time in paid work irrespective of the normative emphasis placed by work-first policies on personal autonomy and financial independence through paid work (Campbell et al., 2016).

In this respect, the mixed-method design is particularly useful for uncovering the relationship between the meanings associated with care, work, and formal/informal support for women who come from different backgrounds and who experience LP at different life-course stages. Such meanings constitute a hierarchy of priorities shaping their employment decisions: This is crucial for understanding the implications of nonnormative family transitions for trajectories in other domains.

7. Notes

¹ Changes in the law in 2017 impose shared physical custody (defined as spending at least 30% of the time in the other parent's household) as the first option explored in case of separation or divorce. In 2013 shared physical custody interested 4% of toddlers and 10% of primary school children (Recksiedler & Bernardi, 2017).

² In our qualitative sample fathers are rarely both highly involved in childcare and remit maintenance payments. Of course, the presence of at least one of these forms of support can be understood as necessary to leave lone mothers more leverage to combine work and care. However, this is never sufficient in itself to actually improve employment prospects: in the few cases of fathers' involvement, lone mothers also benefited by other forms of support that complemented those provided by the non-custodial father.

8. References

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APPENDIX*Table A1: Cluster composition. Column percentages.*

	Cluster					Tot.
	Inactives	Returners	Part-timers	Strengtheners	Full-timers	
<i>Age when becoming LP</i>						
18-24	19.5	4.8	5.4	6.9	18.0	11.6
25-30	42.2	21.0	22.9	23.9	25.8	26.6
31-40	24.8	52.1	54.1	46.8	40.9	44.4
41-54	13.5	22.1	17.5	22.4	15.2	17.4
<i>Education</i>						
Lower secondary	62.7	24.6	37.1	34.0	47.3	42.0
Upper secondary	30.7	69.5	42.0	54.3	39.4	44.8
Tertiary	6.6	5.9	20.9	11.7	13.4	13.2
<i>Age of the youngest child when becoming LP</i>						
0-2	59.4	21.3	32.6	23.4	44.1	37.5
3-5	10.5	31.1	17.1	11.9	24.1	19.6
6-10	23.1	32.7	33.1	39.0	14.8	26.5
11-18	7.1	14.9	17.2	25.7	17.1	16.4
<i>Number of children when becoming LP</i>						
1	66.2	27.6	48.1	42.2	63.7	52.2
2	20.5	47.8	40.4	47.4	27.3	35.2
3+	13.4	24.6	11.5	10.4	9.0	12.7
<i>Type of entry into LP</i>						
LP at first birth	20.0	25.2	25.9	35.3	19.1	24.0
Separation	68.9	59.7	63.2	58.7	76.7	67.2
Widowhood	11.1	15.1	11.0	6.0	4.2	8.8
<i>N.</i>	66	66	139	63	128	462

Source: SHP data, biographical calendar 2001 and 2013. Authors' calculations.

Table A2: Multinomial logistic regression models predicting the assignment to the five clusters. Exponentiated coefficients and standard errors in parentheses

	Full-timers vs.:			
	Inactives	Returners	Part-timers	Strengtheners
<i>Age when becoming LP (ref. 18-24)</i>				
25-30	1.765 [0.842]	1.792 [1.324]	2.003 [1.312]	1.219 [0.926]
31-40	0.575 [0.328]	1.505 [1.111]	1.49 [1.004]	0.513 [0.451]
41-54	1.075 [0.821]	1.691 [1.546]	0.82 [0.656]	0.331 [0.360]
<i>Education (ref. Lower secondary)</i>				
Upper secondary	0.85 [0.350]	2.181* [0.842]	0.86 [0.327]	1.748 [0.737]
Tertiary	0.479 [0.312]	0.749 [0.495]	1.67 [0.815]	1.331 [0.749]
<i>Age of the younger child when becoming LP (ref 0-2)</i>				
3-5	0.311* [0.169]	1.24 [0.594]	0.572 [0.245]	0.577 [0.356]
6-10	1.092 [0.601]	2.042 [1.083]	2.441 [1.136]	4.489* [3.120]
11+	0.289 [0.226]	0.614 [0.420]	1.249 [0.762]	3.333 [2.540]
<i>Number of children when becoming LP (ref. 1)</i>				
2	2.178 [1.148]	2.513* [1.169]	1.033 [0.413]	1.921 [0.863]
3+	3.029 [1.775]	3.559* [2.003]	0.777 [0.396]	1.162 [0.781]
<i>Mode of entry into LP (ref. LP at first birth)</i>				
Separation	0.977 [0.469]	0.413 [0.205]	0.417* [0.185]	0.354 [0.188]
Widowhood	6.739* [5.405]	1.457 [1.122]	1.759 [1.253]	0.709 [0.642]
<i>Nationality at birth (ref. Swiss)</i>				
Other	1.485 [0.608]	0.173* [0.125]	0.321* [0.162]	0.702 [0.354]
<i>Year when becoming LP (ref. Up to 1979)</i>				
1980-1989	0.521 [0.220]	1.066 [0.527]	1.957 [0.893]	1.38 [0.759]
1990-1995	0.858 [0.434]	1.084 [0.671]	1.982 [1.023]	3.719* [2.176]
1996-2005	0.534 [0.324]	2.399 [1.277]	8.878*** [4.231]	4.400* [2.586]
<i>Wave (ref. 2001)</i>				
2013	0.390* [0.170]	1.102 [0.522]	1.811 [0.816]	1.055 [0.556]
<i>N</i>	462	462	462	462

Source: SHP data, biographical calendar 2001 and 2013 (weighted). Authors' calculations.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.