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Buschmeyer, Anna; Zerle-Elsäßer, Claudia

2024

https://doi.org/10.25595/2880

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Buschmeyer, Anna; Zerle-Elsäßer, Claudia: *Doing Family under Difficult Conditions : Getrenntlebende und alleinerziehende Eltern in der Corona-Pandemie*, in: Open Gender Journal, Jg. 8 (2024) Nr: 1, 1–23. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/2880.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.17169/OGJ.2024.235

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FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

OPEN GENDER JOURNAL

Doing Family under Difficult Conditions. Separated and Single Parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Anna Buschmeyer (buschmeyer@dji.de)
Claudia Zerle-Elsäßer (zerle@dji.de)

Abstract: In the Corona pandemic families were suffering a lot from restrictions. Schools and other institutional childcare were closed and many parents had to work from home. This was particularly challenging for single parents reconciling work and family life and we will focus on this group. In our qualitative longitudinal research project "Mothers and Fathers in the Corona Pandemic" we conducted three waves of interviews with 11–20 (partly single) fathers and mothers. Our leading question was "How did single parents manage the challenges of the pandemic?" Our analysis focuses on the role of ex-partners and further supporting networks. We see how the quality of these supporting structures can influence stress for single parents. We also analyse how stereotypes of fatherhood and motherhood influence the stress single parents faced and show that especially traditional concepts of motherhood could lead to a breakdown of their own health and emotional system.

Keywords: Single Parents, COVID 19, Family, Motherhood, Fatherhood

Submitted: 15. März 2023
Accepted: 13. Mai 2024
Published: 25. Juni 2024

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17169/ogj.2024.235

Research support: The project "Mothers and Fathers in the Corona Pandemic" (*Mütter und Väter in der Corona-Pandemie*) was institutionally funded by the German Youth Institute.

This article was edited by Gabriele Jähnert and Käthe von Bose.

BerlinUP Journals

This work was published in Open Gender Journal (ISSN: 2512-5192) at Berlin Universities Publishing Journals and is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

Anna Buschmeyer and Claudia Zerle-Elsäßer

Doing Family under Difficult Conditions. Separated and Single Parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

During the pandemic years of 2020–2022, families were among the groups suffering significantly under the restrictions put in place to reduce risks of COVID-19 infections. Especially during the two lockdowns in Germany (March–May 2020 and December 2020–March 2021), almost all childcare institutions and schools were closed or offered only little support. During the first lockdown in spring 2020, about 11 million children in Germany under the age of 12 were affected by these measures (Bujard et al. 2020), and students had to organize their distance learning and school days by themselves, most supported only by their parents. During the second lockdown, most schooling happened via video conferences and in the form of homework, which required a lot of (technical, pedagogical, and psychological) support by adults. At the same time, many parents had to work from home. Studies show that between 29.5% (Möhring et al. 2020) and 53% (Cohen/Oppermann/Anders 2020) of German parents with children of different ages worked from home. Combining working from home with childcare/home-schooling duties was especially difficult for those parents with intense work loads and/or small children. The situation was even worse for single parents who had nobody available to look after their children while they were working.

In this paper, we will focus on the latter group. In our qualitative longitudinal research project "Mothers and Fathers during the COVID-19 Pandemic", we conducted interviews with 20 fathers and mothers, seven of which were single parents in different constellations (six mothers and one father, either with or without contact to their former partners, single or in new intimate relationships or patchwork constellations). It is a major contribution of our study that we were able to conduct interviews at three different points in time, namely in summer 2020, in winter 2021 and in early summer 2022.

State of the Art: Families and Single Parents during the Pandemic

During the first lockdown and the first wave of the pandemic, a lot of research analyzed how families were suffering under and dealing with the contact restrictions, distance learning, working from home, etc. This data can give us a good overview over the situation. In the following stages of the pandemic, new data got rarer, and data from the first lockdown became out of date rather soon as circumstances changed significantly. Despite this, we will first give an overview over the state of the art of research on families, especially single parents' families, during the pandemic.

During the first lockdown in Germany (from the middle of March until the end of April/beginning of May 2020), 90% of children were mainly in the care of their parents (Langmeyer et al. 2020; Möhring et al. 2020). This meant a double burden for many parents, because they needed to continue their paid work – mostly from home – while also looking after their children at the same time. While couples could, at least theoretically, share these responsibilities between them, reconciling home schooling, childcare, and paid work was a bigger challenge particularly for separated or single parents. For these and also for parents with few financial/spatial resources and a lower level of education, the situation was therefore especially challenging (Zinn/Bayer 2020; Dullien/Kohlrausch 2021; Kohlrausch/Zucco 2020; Möhring et al. 2020; Arntz/Ben Yahmed/Berlingieri 2020). A British study showed that single parents reported depression more frequently and assumed that the pandemic had had a negative impact on the mental health of their children more often than in other family constellations (Clery/Dewar 2022).

Rosanna Hertz and Faith Ferguson (1998) described long before the pandemic how single mothers as "Single Mothers by Choice" build up "strategic villages", that is a network of people who support them in care work and help improve their possibilities of finding a job. In June 2020, Rosanna Hertz, Jane Mattes, and Alexandria Shook (2021) conducted an international online survey with 722 single mothers by choice and examined how these mothers were experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic and how their networks ("villages") had changed because of it. They distinguish between mothers who live with other adults in the household and those who live with their children only. Their results suggest that mothers living alone with their children heavily relied on support from others, primarily their families of origin. Some mothers (8%) thus increased their household size for the periods of the lockdowns, for example by moving in with their own parents (Hertz/Mattes/Shook 2021, 2033). Still, almost 63% of mot-

hers living alone reported that they had had no other childcare support during the first lockdown and had felt isolated (Hertz/Mattes/Shook 2021, 2032f.), and 58% of mothers living alone reported that their productivity in paid work had decreased.

A qualitative study by Laura Merla und Sarah Murru (2021) shows how the lockdown brought changes in care arrangements for separated parents in Italy. Although most Italian parents have joint custody after separation, only less than 3% of children live in an approximate 50/50 arrangement with both parents. As in other countries, Italian women/mothers took on the bulk of the additional care work during the pandemic. In addition, the lockdown made it more difficult for children to switch between different households, which often meant that they stayed more with their mothers (Merla/Murru 2021, 6). In cases where fathers took over more than before, this was often because the parents divided the children among themselves to better use the spatial and temporal resources available to them. Besides the assumption that fathers who are involved in childcare and also take the children overnight contribute to more gender equity, the authors point out that in some cases, it is not the fathers but their new partners, their grandmothers, daughters, or other women who take on a major part in the care work for these separated fathers' children.

These findings show that the situation of one-parent families is only partly comparable to families with more parents. Our qualitative empirical data as we will discuss it in this paper provides insights into the topic of separated parents during the pandemic.

Theoretical Background

Family as a concept is not easy to define. What is a family, what characterizes it, and how does it develop and evolve? Whereas in conventional family research, it was often assumed that the family had a clearly defined structure (that is, that the nuclear family consists of a father, a mother and their (biological) children), current research shows that families (and family life) are much more heterogeneous, diverse, and thus more complex (see, for Germany, Buschmeyer/Zerle-Elsäßer 2020; Peukert et al. 2020). Meanwhile, almost 20% of underage children in Germany grow up in households with only one parent (Statistisches Bundesamt 2018). In 80% of these families, the children live mainly with their mothers (Walper/Entleitner-Phleps/Witte 2019) but have contact with the respective other parent in different ways. Stepfamilies now account for 10% to 14% of families with underage children (Heintz-Martin/Entleitner-Phleps/Langmeyer 2015;

Steinbach 2008). These numbers may also include some of the at least 14,000[1] children growing up with same-sex parents or in other "rainbow constellations" (Statistisches Bundesamt 2017, 140). Of these children, 43% were born into the current relationship and 46% came from previous opposite-sex relationships (Rupp/Dürnberger 2010). This is visible in sociopolitical family concepts: All parties represented in the German Bundestag – with the exception of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) – define family first and foremost as a context of shared care that is not restricted to household boundaries (Schmincke 2020).

This very broad understanding of family is at the same time not always taken seriously for political regulations and decisions, and it might make them much more complicated, as the pandemic has shown. At least in part, a simplified image of families as living together in one household dominated political measures, and in the beginning of the pandemic, only members of a family that lived together in a household were allowed to see each other in person. This regulation ignored that there are families with one parent only or with (co-) parents, grandparents, and other care-takers, all possibly living in different households. We therefore observe the widening of the concept of family in theory and, simultaneously, a limiting of the concept when it comes to political practice.

We try to catch up with this opening of boundaries and therefore understand, as Karin Jurczyk and Barbara Thiessen put it, "family as care relationships between generations in private contexts that are based on commitment" (Jurczyk/Thiessen 2020, 123). We use the concept of Doing Family as a theoretical-praxeological basis for taking a closer look into the everyday practices of families after separation during the pandemic. Doing Family is based on the assumption that family is not something people have but something they construct by doing (Jurczyk 2014). This happens in joint action, in mutual reference to each other, through the creation of social bonds through processes of inclusion and exclusion (Nelson 2006), affective elements of family ("We-Ness", Galvin 2006; "Feeling Family", Nay 2017), caring for and about each other, and the symbolically charged representation as family ("Displaying Family", Finch 2007). These mechanisms can be summarized as one of the two dimensions of Doing Family, the creation of community. In this understanding, different people are involved in the production of family, with (biological) kinship not necessarily as its basis. The second dimension of the concept of Doing Family is balance management, that is all the (care) work that

1 These figures are somewhat older and are based on estimates, as these types of families are not recorded in a standardized way. Using slightly different calculations, Germany's Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth estimates a number of 15,000 children for 2020 (BMFSFJ 2021). However, the actual number is probably higher, because LGBT* people living alone are not included, even if they have children.

is necessary to keep the family going in its everyday duties and to balance paid and care work needs.

For the following analyses, we take a closer look at everyday practices of Doing Family in regard to both dimensions. On the one hand, this is a matter of examining how families in which the parents do not live in a joint household managed to reconcile care and paid work during the pandemic and across household boundaries. We therefore focus on arrangements with ex-partners and on wider care networks. On the other hand, we analyze our data with reference to the processes of inclusion and exclusion and pose the question of who is included in Doing Family; more precisely, we ask who is relied on to fulfill everyday care tasks and who is not. We expect that this question is closely related to the role concepts that the surveyed mothers and fathers have internalized, that is motherhood and femininity as the idea of a mother as the prior caregiver in a family, fatherhood and masculinity as the idea of the male breadwinner who financially supports the family, which allows for easier delegation of care duties. These concepts were part of our interview questions and are used to describe our interviewees in detail.

Research Project and Methods

In the following, we will present analyses and results from the project "Mothers and Fathers during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Reconciling Homeschooling, Childcare and Paid Work"[2]. This was funded by the German Youth Institute (DJI) as a qualitative longitudinal study with three waves of interviews. In the first wave, in late summer 2020, we conducted 20 interviews, five of them with fathers and 15 with mothers. All participants had at least one child under the age of 12 (first recruiting requirement). Related to our special research interest, all fathers and six mothers were working in a higher leading position (second recruiting requirement) and one father and seven mothers were living apart from their children's respective other parent (third recruiting requirement). In a second wave, in early spring 2021, we could interview 19 of the participants again. In a third wave, conducted in early summer 2022, we interviewed eleven parents – four fathers and seven mothers.

The problem-based interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes each (Witzel/Reiter 2012). We conducted and recorded them via telephones or videoconference tools and had them transcribed afterwards. Transcripts were pro-

2 "Mütter und Väter während der Corona-Pandemie. Vereinbarkeit von Homeschooling, Kinderbetreuung und Erwerbsarbeit"

cessed in MAXQDA for content analysis, both in comparison to each other and to the different waves for the same interviewee.

In the beginning of each interview, we asked for some details about the interviewee's family and employment situation before we started with our research question. For the first wave, this main question was how participants had managed to combine employment and family needs during the first lockdown and the following months. With this open stimulus, participants could decide themselves which fields (family, employment, care work, etc.) they saw as important and wanted to talk about. In the second wave, we asked how they had experienced the months since the last interview, and we returned to important aspects that they had mentioned in their first interview. In this way, second-wave interviews are a little less comparable to each other. Nonetheless, all interviews included the topics of everyday family life, aspects of care work, sharing responsibilities with the partner/ex-partner, and paid work/experiences. In the third wave, we focused on narratives on the pandemic as a whole and on perspectives and changes for the future. In addition, we asked participants to tell us more about their ideals of fatherhood and motherhood in order for us to better understand the potential action-guiding orientations behind their practices.

The following table provides an overview of the single-parent interviewees that we analyzed for this paper.

Table 1: Brief overview of interviewees

Pseudonym	**Age of the child(ren)**	**Status with ex-partner/new relationship**
Christian Cleber	7	Dual residence New partner becomes "stepmother" during the pandemic; daughter temporarily mainly with him but usually, the child is with the mother every other week; network of many grandparents
Gabi Gutenberg	5	Dual residence Lived together with ex-husband at the beginning of the pandemic, then in two apartments close to each other; son spends 50% of his time with the father
Renate Römer	10 and 12	Dual residence Many conflicts with ex-partner; during the first lockdown, children mainly with her; usually, the father has the children every other week
Frauke Freitag (2 interviews only)	6 and 8	Maternal residence, frequent contact to non-resident father New partner is seen by the children as (step)father, three adults as a team; usually, the children are with the father every other week and part of the holidays

Pseudonym	Age of the child(ren)	Status with ex-partner/new relationship
Klara Kaufmann	9 and 12	Maternal residence, frequent contact to non-resident father Father with problematic new relationship and living situation; children are with the father every other weekend
Elisa Engelmann	8	Single parent, no contact to non-resident father Strong support by family members who live in the same building or on the same street
Olga Ohlberg	4	Single parent, no contact to non-resident father Father absconded for a long time during the pandemic; daughter with grandparents on 3 to 4 days/week
Ursula Uppenberg[3]	4	Maternal residence, infrequent contact to non-resident father

These selected cases are described in more detail below, based on the participants' self-reported ideals of motherhood or fatherhood. We asked about this explicitly in the third wave because after wave one and two, we had been under the impression that these ideals might influence how parents experienced the pandemic and, in particular, what proportion of care work they took on in the family. Based on these detailed case descriptions, our aim is to analyze how Doing Family – balance management in particular but also the involvement of (other) people – was experienced during the pandemic and across household boundaries.

Christian Cleber: The Reliable Networker

Christian Cleber is the only separated father that we interviewed. He has a seven-year-old daughter who mainly lived with him and his new girlfriend during the first months of the pandemic. His ex-wife had started a new job and had to move to another country in the German-speaking area for some months, which meant that she could look after her daughter only every other weekend. Christian Cleber's ideal of fatherhood refers to being the "reliable rock" for his daughter at all times. Therefore, he built a network for the everyday care tasks during the pandemic, made of several family members. His construction of fatherhood was challenged by his separation and is now all the more important for him to restore.

3 As the interviews with this interviewee were not very productive, we did not analyze them in depth and did not conduct a third interview.

> "Ultimately, I just want to give my child the confidence that there is someone there, that he is there, that he supports me no matter what happens, that he shows me my limits if he has to, but otherwise, he also helps me develop. I think that's really important." (CC3_107)[4]

Throughout all three interviews with Christian Cleber, it becomes apparent that he sees himself responsible for coordinating the supporting network around his child. He seems relatively uninvolved, for example, in providing his daughter with food, and he also has the attitude that his child should complete many tasks (such as doing homework) independently on her own. The various women in his family are responsible for the actual care work. His large network enables him to concentrate on his paid work as a leading manager in a large company. The burden on him is small compared to that of the separated mothers that we interviewed.

Gabi Gutenberg: Organized and Independent

At the beginning of the pandemic, Gabi Gutenberg was still living in the same household as her ex-partner, even though they had already separated. Despite the separation, they tried to live together with their five-year-old son for another year. However, at the end of the first lockdown, they ended this arrangement early on. The long-term closeness had finally driven them apart, and there were disputes about the division of care work. In the third interview, when both parents had moved to another city (still living close to each other), their arrangement seemed to be working well.

Gabi Gutenberg's ideal of motherhood is characterized by boundaries that she had not experienced before becoming a mother. She refers primarily to her career and the possibilities of combining self-employed work and motherhood. Her ideal is crystallized in her description of the role model she wants to be for her son:

> "I already have the feeling that I can set a good example for my son, that a woman can work and achieve something and have a voice, but at the same time can also be a mother and spend time with him and be available for emotional things and so on. So I'm actually very happy with that." (GG3_161)

Gabi Gutenberg emphasizes two key elements of motherhood for her: being professionally committed and spending enough time with her child as part of an intimate relationship in which she is available for her son. The latter aspect she calls "being a mother". She achieves both of these aspects through the alterna-

4 All quotes from the interviews are our translations from German.

ting model; her son is with his father every other week. She uses the child-free weeks to work for an enormous amount of time. This allows her to spend time with her son very flexibly during the weeks he is with her.

In the third interview in particular, Gabi Gutenberg describes how she struggles in her job by repeatedly having to negotiate with her colleagues (especially the male ones) that she is not available for appointments at certain times because spending time with her son takes priority. She reports that before the pandemic, she tended to act in such a way that the reconciliation of family and work issues was her personal problem. Through her experiences during the lockdown and her, as she says, increasingly feminist attitude, she now sees the social aspects of the issue and is no longer willing to "hide" from her colleagues that she has care duties. Instead, she is now making this issue public in the company's shared calendar.

Renate Römer: The Lone Warrior

Renate Römer has two kids, ten and twelve years old, and lives in a shared parenting arrangement with herself in major responsibility for the children and their homeschooling during the first and second lockdowns. She presents herself as a highly autonomous person. She has had many conflicts with her ex-partner and does not rely on him or any other support network. These conflicts and the idea of being solely responsible for the children put an extreme strain on her, evident in the first two interviews. She perceives independence as a high good, which she also wants to exemplify to her children. This corresponds with her ideal of motherhood, of which she says:

> "That you make it so that the children don't have to hide and can be honest, feel comfortable and learn independence in a safe environment. Yes. So that they feel safe, but are still free, yes." (RR3_131)

She thus takes care of her children's well-being first and foremost and reports that she relies less on the expertise of doctors than on what she reads herself. This is exemplified in relation to her children's ADHD diagnoses[5] or even her suspected Long-COVID disease, which she says she cures with a trip to the high mountains. She regrets that she has not yet sufficiently succeeded in raising her younger son to be as independent as she expects her children to be. This can be seen in the story of her own COVID infection. She was very ill for a few days and isolated herself from the children. Especially for the younger son, this seemed to

5 She herself was not diagnosed with ADHD until adulthood and therefore thinks that no one can assess and influence her children's behaviour as well as she can.

have been a very bad experience. In her eyes, her son does not (yet) correspond to her idea of autonomy and independence.

Klara Kaufmann: A Mother with a Guilty Conscience

Klara Kaufmann is a mother of two sons, who are nine and twelve years old. Her ex-husband takes care of the children on an irregular basis. During lockdowns and homeschooling, it was mainly her who was responsible. Klara Kaufmann's clarifies her concept of motherhood in the following quote:

> "I really wished I had more time, I had more money, maybe only a part-time job and I could devote more time to my children and also help and support them." (KK3_139)

Klara Kaufmann represents a separated mother whose ideal was to be a part-time working mother in a relationship. After separation, she now finds herself as a breadwinning single mother who is torn between providing for the family financially and with other resources and her care-duties regarding her two schoolchildren. She went through the pandemic more or less alone, working full time to earn a living and maintain the status she would like to have for herself and the children. The demand that the children attend school ('Gymnasium') and that they are provided an appealing and tidy environment at home (appropriate rooms, clothing, food, etc.) means an extremely high challenge for her as a single mother in an expensive city. She feels responsible for this alone, as she feels that she cannot rely on her ex-partner, who lives in "disorderly circumstances" and is "partly homeless". However, full-time employment – in her eyes – leaves a "good mother" little time for supporting her children, and Klara Kaufmann feels guilty about this, for example in regard to the fact that her son had to repeat a school year due to learning gaps caused by the pandemic.

Elisa Engelmann: Embedded in a Family Network

Elisa Engelmann has always been a single mother without contact to her child's father, but she lives in a close-knit community with numerous relatives, including her parents. They support each other and form a large network. During lockdowns, her son had the opportunity to play on the street with friends and relatives, and the adults supported each other, for example, with shopping. However, she is solely responsible for the homeschooling and direct care of her son.

> "And I realize that the more tense I am, the more it affects him, too, then he gets more stressed and things like that. And that's something where I say: I hope that when the situation calms down, my head will also calm down more." (EE3_165)

However, she is confident that many things will improve for her, as she managed to finish her dissertation and was offered a permanent job after many years of uncertainty. Her tension is therefore directly related to her professional situation, which provides her with relevant purpose in life and she sees as an essential element of motherhood. As a single mother, she wants to be responsible for her own income and pursue a demanding job.

Frauke Freitag: Caring and Exhausted

Frauke Freitag has two sons, who were six and eight years old at the time of the first interview. She has been separated from the children's father since the younger child was about six months old. She has a good relationship with her ex-partner; the children are usually with him every other weekend and half of the holidays. They continued with this during the first lockdown, with the children's father also being available for emergencies. When she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, she asked him to take care of the children for a few extra days, which he did. Frauke Freitag found a new partner shortly after the separation, whom the children now also address as "daddy" and recognize as their (step)father. Her ex-husband also has a new partner, who is involved in looking after and caring for the children. Overall, the arrangement seems to work well; she describes the (four) parents as a "team". As she works as a freelance coach for children and young people, the pandemic was very hard for her. Most of her courses in kindergartens and similar facilities could not take place, which posed a massive financial threat to her newly established business. Having to pay back financial support for COVID-19 put her under great strain. As it was not possible to conduct a third interview with Frauke Freitag, we do not have explicit statements from her about her ideals of motherhood. From the two available interviews, it is only possible to deduce the extent to which she sees herself – despite working as a team with the other parents – as primarily responsible for the care work and partly also for the income. She has a very close relationship with her children and was very responsive to the children's needs when organizing their daily routines during the lockdown.

Olga Ohlberg: Between Closeness and Autonomy

Olga Ohlberg separated from her daughter's father when her daughter was two years old. At the time of the first interview, her daughter was four. During the pandemic, her ex-partner left for a long time to be in his country of origin in Africa, meaning that she was mainly responsible for their child, who sees her father very irregularly. For Olga Ohlberg's ideal of motherhood, it is important that she has a close, friendly, and trusting relationship with her daughter; something she never had with her own parents. To this, she states:

> "I think I manage quite well because it is simply nice when my daughter, sometimes very often in a row or also on her own, simply without me saying it first, just says how much she loves me. And that's something I don't know from my family of origin. So this extremely good relationship level between mother and daughter, that's what I wanted to do differently and that's what I'm trying to do, so simply also, yes, to have an explicitly cordial relationship, to have a good bond." (OO3_137).

Next to this very strong bond, autonomy is another topic in her construction of motherhood. The relationship between mother and daughter is very close, but sometimes, Olga Ohlberg worries that it might be too close. On the other hand, she brought her daughter to her parents for three days every week during the two lockdowns and had her looked after there. She was thus able to work a lot these days and had evenings off, while on the other days she could spend time with her daughter. She sometimes feels ambivalent about this arrangement, searching for a balance between closeness, independence and autonomy.

Having presented our participants in detail, we will now start with our analysis in regard to the question of how single/separated parents managed the challenges of balance management during the pandemic and how a network across household boundaries could support them. We do this in two ways: First, we look at ex-partners' supportive or non-supportive roles in these constellations. Second, we analyze further networks of kinship, involving relatives, neighbors, and friends. Both these aspects are strongly connected to the ideals of motherhood and fatherhood as we will show in our analysis.

Analysis

Overview

To start with our analysis, we want to shortly look back at what the most difficult challenges for parents, especially for single parents, were during the lockdowns and the times when schools were closed. One of the main burdens was to balance paid work and childcare. Interviewee Klara Kaufmann, employed full-time with two school-age children, describes a typical daily routine during the second lockdown like this:

> 6–8 a.m.: Undisturbed home office
> 8–12 a.m.: Older son's online lessons, while also home office and supporting younger son
> 12 p.m.: Lunch together
> 1–4 p.m.: Simultaneously older son's homework, younger son's worksheets, home office
> 4 p.m.: "Evening off" from paid work, supervising older son's homework, younger son has to be looked after
> 9 p.m.: "Done" with everything/everyone

At first glance, this daily routine may give the impression that working from home could be used as a means of reconciliation, but home office and homework at the same time leads to mental stress. Even preparing lunch can get difficult, and Klara Kaufmann describes herself as extremely exhausted:

> "I just notice that this exhaustion is of course already there at six in the morning / and you just don't have any time, and you have to be 100% concentrated, even after work, to then explain some French grammar or whatever, and of course that wears you out." (KK2_46)

This exhaustion was reported by almost all separated parents, especially in the second interviews. It can be explained by the fact that there were quite often no breaks for them, unless the dual-residence model worked so well that the parents could be without their children for longer periods at a time.

Frauke Freitag reports that her children needed her support in doing their school duties more or less all the time:

> "We sat together at the dining table every day, but I couldn't leave the dining table. The moment I left, they didn't do anything anymore. So I basically sat at the dining table with my children for four hours every day and did lessons. But the older one had big problems with concentration and time, and then he had days [...] when he sat until 2 pm, 3 pm. And he

> still couldn't finish his work. Yes. But I just realized, wow, I almost went crazy there. [...] And that fully determined our everyday life." (FF2_54)

Frauke Freitag describes the challenge of being solely responsible for her children's school work in addition to the responsibilities of providing an income, taking care of the household, and doing care work. This leads to a role conflict; she neither wants to take on the role of her children's teacher nor does she have the necessary equipment or education to do so. Her children notice this and do not accept her as a teacher, which results in a frustrating situation for everyone.

Doing Family Across Household Boundaries: Supportive and Non-Supportive Ex-Partners and Care-Networks

The relationship with the ex-partner, and especially the quality of this relationship, is of particular importance for the burden on separated parents. This factor differs between the situations of our interviewees and causes them different levels of stress. We see differences between parents who have a good relationship with the ex-partner (parents as a team), those who often have conflicts with each other (parents in conflict) and those who do not have contact with the other parent (single parents). The boundaries are not always clear-cut, and there are different grades of the respective extremes. In addition to the relationship with the ex-partner, the availability of care networks or their collapse are also influencing the stress level caused by the pandemic. Before 2020, all respondents used to rely on institutional childcare, and many of them organized a private care network – especially with their own parents – to reconcile paid work with family. These options and resources then were shut down or forbidden during the lockdowns. However, the single parents in our sample relatively quickly disregarded no-contact rules in relation to the children's grandparents when living in close contact with them, as the following shows.

Christian Cleber, whose seven-year-old daughter lives in a dual-residence arrangement, describes:

> "My ex-wife asked us if we could make it possible for her to go [to another province] for a longer period of time and then only come back every other weekend [...], but for [our daughter] to live with us completely. And that was really a challenge. [My new partner and I] looked each other in the eyes and said: Come on, we'll do it. We wanted to support my ex-wife as much as possible, because we also have a good relationship." (CC1_5)

We interpreted "maximum support" and "having a good relationship" as the basis for "parents as a team". Christian Cleber's concept of fatherhood allows

his ex-wife to rely on him but also makes it possible for him to rely on others, as his care network also includes his new partner as well as three pairs of grandparents (his own parents, his ex-wife's parents, and his new partner's parents). During both lockdowns, he separated paid work and childcare/homeschooling as often as possible, which is in line with his fatherhood ideals of being a reliable organizer for his daughter's care network. He worked in the office as much as he could and scheduled homeschooling on his (few) work days with shorter hours. When he was in the office, his new partner or his mother took care of the daughter's homeschooling. In the second lockdown, the daughter spent even more time with her grandparents, and he worked from home occasionally, taking care of his daughter's school affairs. Christian Cleber thus used a very distinctive and optimized family support network from the very beginning in order to reconcile work with family life, and, at the same time, he disregarded pandemic regulations, which actually stipulated that grandparents should not be involved in childcare in order to protect them from possible infection. Separating from his ex-partner and starting a new relationship led to an expansion of his family (which meant an increase in support), which enabled him to continue his career almost without restrictions and to have time for leisure activities with and without his daughter.

We see two dimensions of doing family across household boundaries. He sees himself (and his new girlfriend) still as a family with his ex-wife. Furthermore, his extended family takes over care work in the households of his parents and the other (step-)grandparents, establishing a large family network. Unfortunately, Christian Cleber is the only separated father in our sample, so we cannot present a comparison with other separated fathers. However, his interview is not particularly different from interviews with the non-separated fathers. It reminds us of how common it still seems to be for fathers to rely on others (women) when it comes to care work.

In the case of single mother Elisa Engelmann, we can also find an extended care network, which produces a strong family connection. She lives on the same street as her parents, her brother as well as a number of aunts, uncles, and cousins. This network allowed her to combine work requirements with the challenges of being a single mother – even though relying on such networks was particularly forbidden during the lockdowns. But, unlike Christian Cleber, she is not only responsible for organizing the network but also for daily care routines and homeschooling. This makes everyday organization much more difficult.

Gabi Gutenberg is also a good example of a parent with a well-organized network – with her son's father and care-relationships outside the family. After the difficult time of the separation, she and her ex-husband found an arrange-

ment in which they fight for their right to spend (enough) time with their son, as both parents do not want to spend less time with him than the other parent. Furthermore, neighbors also play a major role in providing mutual support during the various lockdowns, which can thus be included in the "care community family" in the sense of Doing Family or as "the villages" mentioned above. Gabi Guttenberg reports:

> "We gave up after about a week and within our house / the second tenant in our house, they also have two small children, then understood us as a house community, so to speak. We let the children play with each other and also took turns looking after them, so that we had a bit of breathing space, because the children were then either with the neighbors or with us." (GG1_45)

These examples show how the (single) parents were forced ("gave up") to circumvent the contact restrictions to some extent if they wanted to make it somehow possible to combine paid and care work. This is quite different for Renate Römer. She also shares physical custody for her children as well as splits care work in a dual-residence arrangement, which she and her ex-partner practice in an alternating 50/50 model. She is without her children every other week. But in her first two interviews, she talks about the intense conflicts with her ex-partner and says that she can hardly enjoy the free time, instead constantly worrying about her children. About her ex-partner, she says:

> "We can't stand each other, we still can't stand each other. [...] It's very difficult, it was very difficult before because my ex-husband will never forgive me for leaving him. I have a new boyfriend and for him, it's still as if I were cheating on him. It's quite bad. For example, the children don't even dare to tell him when we do something with [my new partner]." (RR1_32)

These conflicts put a strain not only on Renate Römer's relationship with her ex-partner but also on the children's relationship with their father, who is still very hurt by the breakup. As a result, the children are not honest with him when they do not tell him about the mother's new partner. Renate Römer finds it very difficult to let her children go, and she does not perceive the free time this arrangement gives her as a relief. Accordingly, she also sees only herself – and nobody else – as responsible for and capable of properly supporting her children in homeschooling and caring for them. During the weeks when classes took place in school, the children stayed with their father; Renate Römer took over those weeks when the children did not go to school but needed to be supervised at

home.[6] This arrangement was very demanding for her and only succeeded because she took the children with her to her office and looked after them there, teaching them and providing them with food during her workday. Nevertheless, Renate Römer preferred this to relying on the father – or anyone else. She did not even involve her own parents, as many other single parents illegally did at that time, and consequently paid a high price: the stress lead to physical symptoms – a dead tooth in particular – as she recounts in the second interview.

In the three cases of Christian Cleber, Gabi Gutenberg, and Renate Römer, the formal conditions are the same (the dual-residence model). However, it becomes apparent that the practical implementation and the emotional dimension of the respective history of separation lead to very different practices and stress scenarios. We could also say that Doing Family across household boundaries works differently well, depending on the quality of the relationship with the ex-partner and the willingness and opportunity to rely on a care network, which at the same time means breaking pandemic rules and possibly exposing themselves, their children, or especially their grandparents to an increased risk of infection. Those parents who still feel they are a family (despite no longer being a couple) manage the sharing of care work much more easily; those single parents with a strong support network can concentrate on paid work more than those struggling alone. But of course, actually utilizing these networks was banned in order to minimize contacts. Political measures, which had to constantly adapt, may have paid too little attention to the needs of families who were ultimately only able to help themselves by breaking the rules.

Frauke Freitag, Olga Ohlberg, and Klara Kaufmann take care of their children in the (maternal) residence model. However, we find different arrangements depending on the contact frequency and the relationship quality in regard to the children's fathers. Frauke Freitag lives with a new partner whom the children address as "daddy" in a stepfamily constellation. She says that all three parents see themselves "as a team" and support each other in looking after the children.

However, Frauke Freitag is also the example that shows that sometimes, networks do not function reliably. In these cases, it is striking how the long duration of the restrictions, especially the second lockdown in the winter of 2020/2021, was a test of endurance. During the first interview, Frauke Freitag showed great optimism, even though her business (courses in kindergartens) had come to a standstill as a result of the pandemic. Despite great financial burdens, she was convinced that she could maintain her family life with the team of three to four

6 For a longer period during the pandemic, children in Germany were supposed to go to school only for specific, alternating weeks in order to keep groups in the classroom smaller.

parents. During the first phase, she demonstrated a cross-household family concept by saying:

> "But on the other hand, yes, we always say we can manage everything together." (FF1_80)

During the second lockdown and in the second interview, it becomes clear that this construct did not hold, due to various strokes of fate, such as as her ex-husband's new partner's cancer diagnosis, which limited the four parents' care arrangement enormously. In order to not endanger his partner with exposure to viruses and especially COVID-19, the biological father can now only rarely see his children. At the same time, Frauke Freitag's new partner loses his job and can no longer contribute to the family income. She herself also hardly earns anything anymore because she is still not allowed to do her courses and, after a nervous breakdown, she is not even able to offer them on a regular basis in autumn 2020 when she is allowed to again. The enormous strain on anyone involved shows, among other things, in the fact that her relationship almost falls apart under all the pressure. Frauke Freitag reports in the second interview that the past months were hard and she was at her wits' end:

> "Yes, in January, our relationship was on the brink of breaking apart." (FF2_34)

Her concern that the relationship might fail presents a view opposite from her attitude in the first interview. At the time of the second interview, in early spring, Frauke Freitag explains that things changed only in the past week: on the advice of a teacher, she had decided to at least take the children to emergency care at school[7] in order to find some breathing space. The big financial worries will not be off the table this fast, but there are already fewer conflicts about schooling and she has the feeling that her relationship with her partner is stabilizing again.[8]

The example shows how fragile existing networks can be and what consequences changes in this system can have. In addition to the financial effects of the pandemic, the psychological burdens, which in turn can lead to issues like loss of work, cannot be compensated for by potential support payments.

This again contrasts with Olga Ohlberg's narrative. Her ex-partner has never taken care of their daughter on a regular basis. In the first interview, she still

7 After a few weeks of hard lockdowns, and especially during the second lockdown, there was the option of placing children in emergency care. Initially, this was only possible for parents in so-called system-relevant professions. Later, as in the case of the Freitag family here, this service was also available for special stress situations. For many parents, it was a relief to have their children cared for there, but schooling often did not work well because there were no lessons.

8 Unfortunately, we could not reach Frauke Freitag for a third interview, so it remains unclear whether the situation got easier toward the end of the pandemic.

reports that there was (rare) contact in the past, but this always upset her well-proven care arrangement. At the time of the second interview, there is not contact anymore, as the father has become unreachable, living in his home country. Olga Ohlberg seems to be quite happy about this because she can live with her daughter according to her wishes and does not have to make compromises or accept a way of living that differs a lot from her own (parents in conflict). At the same time, she is worried that the father will reappear at some point and her daughter will no longer know him but still have to spend time with him. This could challenge the very close bond between mother and daughter, which is an essential element of Olga Olberg's concept of motherhood. This also shows her compassion for her daughter, whom she does not want be forced to spend time with a father she does not know. Here, too, the difficult relationship with the ex-partner appears as an additional burden as Doing Family across household boundaries is not working with her ex-partner, as they do not seem to see each other as part of the same family anymore. On the other hand, this works very well with other networks. Olga Ohlberg describes very good and supporting relationships with neighbors, especially with her landlord, who lives in the same building as her. During the first lockdown, the relationship intensifies; he becomes a "substitute grandpa" for her daughter (OO1_49). Furthermore, after a few weeks of isolation, she starts taking her daughter to her parents from Sundays to Wednesdays so that she can work longer hours on these days and have some time for herself. She explains that in the beginning, she was afraid of being stopped by the police, because in-person contact with grandparents was not allowed. But later, she reintroduces this care arrangement, which she feels was positive for both sides, in the second lockdown. She reports:

> "And from January, I have to say, I enjoyed simply having three evenings to myself. So because it is of course already exhausting (laughs), I may not say that / well I don't want to say it so loud, I also say it with a laughing and a crying eye, that I also simply enjoy the three evenings for myself, simply to do what I want in the evening [...]." (OO2_21)

The fact that Olga Ohlberg is hesitant to admit that she enjoyed the time for herself shows that she perceives herself as privileged. This draws attention to her concept of motherhood of a strong single mother and to the fact that no breaks were provided for parents in the pandemic, but that the constant (excessive) demand they were faced with was taken for granted.

While these past cases show how much support such networks can provide – as long as they are stable – Klara Kaufmann gives another example of a mother without any network. She has little contact with her ex-partner, but the children see him regularly on full-day visits. In this case, too, the mother has come

to terms without her ex-partner, and the father does not provide much support. According to her concept of motherhood that focuses on independence, Klara Kaufmann does not expect or demand any support from her ex-partner. He lives in rather disorderly circumstances, without his own home and in an unclear relationship with a new partner. This way of life does not fit Klara Kaufmann's ideals of motherhood/parenthood, which include an appropriate living environment and close and caring relationships with the children. As she receives no other support from family or friends (or school), Klara Kaufmann is left alone with all aspects of childcare.

Conclusion

With our research, we focused on different aspects of Doing Family for single and separated parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. We will now bring these aspects together and discuss how Doing Family across household boundaries could support parents in times such as the pandemic and beyond.

We wanted to show how it was possible for single parents to balance unpaid care work and paid work, how they managed different demands on a practical everyday level, and whom they included in these practices in order to get things done. The cases we discussed revealed that this was actually only possible for single parents if they had either a supportive arrangement with their ex-partners or access to a support network – or both. We saw how important family relationships (based on biological relation or not, including the ex-partner or not) are in such exceptional situations. The fact that non-kinship relationships were often conceptualized as family ("substitute grandpa", "third brother") shows how family terms are used as a frame of reference to describe close care relationships and thus Do Family across kinship boundaries. Where these networks were non-existent – or not used due to pandemic restrictions – balance management only worked at the expense of mental and physical health. These findings show how important such networks were during the pandemic. This indicates that also in non-pandemic times, care work should not only be organized within nuclear families. If these kinds of care networks function well, they can provide essential support. They can even create free spaces that are not so easily found in couple-parent families.

Corresponding ideals and guiding principles of family have been included in the political programs of German political parties in theory, but the pandemic has shown that they are not yet fully considered in the practical implementation of political measures.

In presenting the different cases, we saw how much different ideals of motherhood and fatherhood influenced how the pandemic was experienced. While Christian Cleber, the only father in our sample, established a broad support network without hesitation and pursued his paid employment without feeling guilty, Renate Römer struggled through all the challenging waves of the pandemic virtually alone. She could only carry out care work in parallel with paid work, and by the end of the second lockdown, she was physically and mentally exhausted. This is directly linked to gendered stereotypes of parenthood, which is why we aim to contribute to the question of why the distribution of care work in post-separation families is highly gendered, even during a pandemic. We found that predominant concepts of a caring mother and a nurturing father guided the distribution of additional care work in nearly all of our single-parent or step-family constellations. Whether one relies on an existing support network, and if so, whether one does so with good or bad conscience, depended on gender in all the cases we observed. Olga Ohlberg for example used her network, but did so feeling guilty, which shows that motherhood still implies more care responsibility than fatherhood. On the other hand, it still seems to fit in concepts of fatherhood more to leave children with others (women) who take care of them as it does with motherhood. These cultural concepts rely on the ideal of a mother who will put their children first anyway, and therefore forget about her career or self-care. This is what makes it so difficult for mothers to ask for help and use their support networks and is one reason why the COVID-19 pandemic both exposed and cemented persistent gender inequalities and gendered care regimes. Future research could start from here and examine how reflecting on and breaking up these stereotypes can make reconciliation of paid work and family needs less stressful for all parents.

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