

[Review] Martina Klett-Davies (2007) Going it alone: lone motherhood in late modernity

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Klett-Davies, M. (2007) *Going it alone: Lone motherhood in late modernity*. Hampshire: Ashgate publishing Ltd: pps 166 £55.00 hbk

Review by Tamsin Hinton-Smith, Department of Sociology, University of Sussex

This book provides insight into the lives of lone mothers in contemporary Britain and Germany, investigating how individuals negotiate full-time mothering, state benefits, poverty, paid work and stigmatisation. Bringing debates up-to-date, it is a valuable addition to existing literature. Straddling theory and empirical research, it introduces primary data and locates the position of lone mothers within wider discourses. The cross-cultural perspective illuminates nuances of each national context including local labour markets, childcare facilities and infrastructure. Pitched at a stimulating yet accessible level, this is essential reading for scholars of lone parenthood at all levels, also providing valuable insight for those engaged with social exclusion, participation, welfare states, the family and gender roles in late modernity, from a range of disciplinary perspectives.

Drawing on interviews with 70 never married, welfare dependent lone mothers in London, East and West Berlin, the book illuminates demographic characteristics of each society, including national patterns in lone parents' number of children, level of education and type of work. A grounded theory approach informs three central questions around how lone mothers negotiate their lives as mothers and dependents, whether their circumstances can be experienced as liberating, and to what extent individualisation can explain state-dependent lone motherhood. Lone motherhood is located in the context

of dominant academic and political discourses, including 'social problem,' 'alternative lifestyle,' and 'social threat' discourses and their implications.

Chapter Three explores individualisation thesis and critiques, drawing on Beck and Giddens' perspectives on late modernity, and suggesting that in late modernity's context of unstable relationships, children can represent an alternative to loneliness. Chapter Four locates the positioning of lone mothers in the British and German welfare states in the context of historical government policy, exploring how gendered concepts of caring are embedded in institutions informing social policy, including each country's childcare provision, and the role of Nazism, World War Two, Soviet values and reunification upon German family values. It is suggested that although the German welfare state more effectively alleviates poverty (British never-married lone mothers are twice as at risk of poverty as Germans), the British system is more advantageous for workless lone mothers in that benefits are not earnings-related and status-conserving. The author asserts that lone mothers do not behave economically rationally to maximise benefits. Social expectations, moral obligations, local labour markets, class, qualifications, ethnicity, discourses and possibilities all play a role, as is explored in six ensuing chapters of presentation of the research data.

Chapter Five considers what it means to be a good mother and good worker, and how the two collide, presenting collated data along relevant themes including barriers to employment, childcare, expectations and perspectives on motherhood. The chapter purports that lone mothers need to justify their state dependency through discerning barriers to employment because they perceive pressure to be in paid work although this may

contradict their ideals of early motherhood. The research found that half of London mothers, but none in Berlin, cited failure to earn enough money to compensate for childcare costs and loss of benefits as a barrier to employment – they were caught in a poverty trap. London lone mothers were more likely to worry about the difficulty of finding flexible work, perhaps demonstrating how deeply internalised women’s family obligations are. Berlin mothers were far more likely to have educational qualifications, children of unemployed mothers in East Berlin frequently attending full-time daycare, potentially encouraging mothers’ educational engagement.

In chapter six, Antonovsky’s Sense of coherence (SOC) concept is borrowed from the Sociology of health’s explanation of health in terms of success in coping with stressors. It is argued that lone mothers with a low SOC perceive most aspects of their lives as unmanageable, providing the basis for a three type categorisation of coping strategies of welfare dependent lone mothers into ‘strugglers’ (pessimists), ‘copers’ (pragmatists) and ‘pioneers’ (optimists). The author considers how different types evaluate various aspects of their circumstances including paid employment and relative deprivation. The following three chapters present in depth data including biographies and quotes from women in each of the three groups.

Klett-Davies concludes that despite differences, in both reunited Germany and the UK, lone mothers are positioned as dependents. Even well qualified full-time working lone mothers remain dependents through their reliance on social assistance. She surmises that ‘pioneer’ lone mothers fit best with the concept of individualisation, and that for middle class East Berlin lone mothers pursuing education, state benefits have become a resource for active creation

of an individual's biography – from constraint to choice. Some women lacking educational qualifications prefer lone motherhood to low-skilled, low-paid work, while those in other circumstances welcome it as a career break. It is put forward that in the context of an agenda valorising paid work and devaluing domestic and caring work, not to participate in paid employment is both traditional and emancipatory. Paradoxically, the 'radical feminist' viewpoint can also be informed by the traditional view of the homemaker. Some women become lone mothers through separating from partners who are not traditional enough in fulfilling the provider role. However it is argued that in post-industrialist 'Zwei-Drittel-Gesellschaft' (Two-thirds Society), where only two-thirds of society are needed to satisfy market demand and there is hence simply not enough work for everybody, mothers and fathers who prefer to look after their children full-time or part-time should have that choice.

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