Managing uncertainty: Lone parents' time horizons and agency in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Objective: This article shows the analytical value of an approach that integrates theoretical elaborations about the temporal orientations of different types of agency (pragmatic, identity, and life course) and uncertainty management, to analyse how families dealt with the challenges emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background: The pandemic has been a major shock that has seriously challenged families' ability to adapt to sudden changes affecting multiple domains of life. Switzerland established a low-intensity lockdown in the spring of 2020, with social-distancing measures based on official recommendations. Changes in employment situations and school closures resulted in significant alterations to family life. This study examines how individuals with a trajectory of lone parenthood dealt with the increased uncertainties generated by this novel context.

Method: Empirical data stems from the fourth wave of fieldwork of the longitudinal project 'The multiple paths of lone parenthood', ongoing in French-speaking Switzerland since 2012–2013. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 participants between April and June 2020.

Results: The emergence of novel situations, the ambiguity of social-distancing measures, and the breakdown of routines accentuated pragmatic agency for most families. With the chronification of uncertainty, parents sought to regain identity agency by restabilising everyday routines. Uncertainty about future developments diminished life course agency, especially for parents in more insecure situations.

Conclusion: The study offers an original perspective on the challenges of living through increased uncertainty and changing environments triggered by the pandemic, by highlighting the relevance of temporalities for understanding agency within life course processes.

Key words: lone parenthood, lockdown, social distancing, resilience, life course, Switzerland

1. Introduction

The unexpected and rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major shock to individual and social life across the globe. The measures taken to deal with the public health crisis had severe consequences across multiple life-domains, including employment, family, education, training, social relationships, mobility, and health (Settersten et al. 2020). Such changes unravelled at a very quick pace, rupturing the organisation and everyday routines of most families, and requiring significant adaptation. Overnight, a number of novel situations emerged, which demanded decision-making based on limited and changing information and without reference to standards of appropriate conduct. The initial, sudden uncertainty generated by this context became long-lasting, as the pandemic unforeseeably extended over time. Individuals faced concerns about the development of the health situation and its broader, future consequences, at both personal and societal levels. All of these convulsions were likely sources of vulnerability during this period.

While the effects of the COVID pandemic have been universal in that they have touched the whole world's population, particular challenges have been specific to country, social structure, gender, and family type. Studies on family life during COVID have so far focused largely on the shifts in housework and childcare, and labour divisions in two-parent families (Craig & Churchill 2020; Hank & Steinbach 2020; Qian & Fuller 2020; Schieman et al. 2021; Shafer, Scheibling & Milkie 2020; Yavorsky, Qian & Sargent 2021), with little attention paid to family diversity (Craig & Churchill 2021). This research has drawn on quantitative data to identify patterns in the uses of time or perceptions of work–family conflict. However, we know less about the processes whereby families have adapted to sudden changes in their everyday organisation (Iztayeva 2021; Sánchez-Mira et al. 2021).

Studies have addressed perceptions of risk, subjective well-being, and mental health during the pandemic (Breznau 2021; Buyukkececi 2021; Kuhn et al. 2020; Ohlbrecht & Jellen 2021; Soiné et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2020), with some focusing on the specific role of economic uncertainty (Bakioğlu, Korkmaz & Ercan 2020; Godinic, Obrenovic & Khudaykulov 2020). There has also been some interest in the effects of COVID-induced uncertainty on fertility intentions (Guetto, Vignoli & Bazzani 2020; Luppi, Arpino & Rosina 2020) and sparse qualitative research has analysed the management of chronic uncertainty in family communications and decision-making processes during the pandemic (Hernandez & Colaner 2021).

This article applies an overarching theoretical framework that situates temporal orientations at the core of human agency processes (Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Hitlin & Elder 2007; Sánchez-Mira & Bernardi 2021), to address the question of how families have faced the uncertain environment triggered by the pandemic. We show the potential of analysing experiences of the pandemic through the lens of different forms of agency, defined as a function of the individual's temporal foci – their 'response to situational circumstances' (Hitlin & Elder 2007: 170). We integrate this theoretical framework with existing conceptualisations of uncertainty (Brashers 2001; Hernandez & Colaner 2021). Together, these two theoretical lenses offer an encompassing framework for studying the effects of the pandemic within a life course perspective. The article shows the analytical value of this approach by looking at the experiences of a sample of individuals with a trajectory of lone parenthood living in French-speaking Switzerland.

The Swiss context is relevant because the looser form of the lockdown and authorities' vague behavioural guidelines transferred a share of the decisional burden from the public officials onto individual citizens. Switzerland underwent a relatively mild form of lockdown in response to COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, with no strict home-confinement and a significant reliance on individual responsibility for social-distancing measures. Main alterations to family life involved changes in the employment situations and working conditions of adult household members, and the need to arrange home schooling and childcare due to school closures.

We draw on empirical data from the qualitative panel 'The multiple paths of lone parenthood', which has been following lone-parent families in French-speaking Switzerland since 2012–2013. The fourth wave of fieldwork was carried out during the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020, and included semi-structured interviews with the parents. Lone parents' experience is relevant given that, on the one hand, this population is generally characterised by their higher vulnerability and their reliance on social support (Ciabattari 2007; Cook 2012; Harknett 2006), which may have been depleted in the context of restricted social interactions. On the other hand, the critical transition to becoming the sole or primary caregiver (and, often, economic provider) for their children exposed these parents to shifting circumstances across the main domains of life, and shook their everyday organisations and expectations about the future. The families in our sample had all transitioned to lone parenthood before 2012–2013, and hence had long trajectories of coping with family-related stressors, which may have allowed them to build their resilience over time. This specificity of the sample offered a unique opportunity to analyse how these families faced the rupture of routines, and the emergence of novel and uncertain circumstances triggered by the pandemic.

The next two sections present the article's theoretical lenses and the specificities and timing of the restrictions implemented in Switzerland during the first wave of the COVID pandemic. We then introduce the empirical data sources and collection process. The findings are presented in the fifth section and discussed in the concluding section, where we also outline the study's limitations and suggest directions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a number of sudden and unexpected changes across multiple domains of life. People had little capacity for anticipation of or control over the development and timing of the consequences of this exogenous shock. Novel situations emerged – such as the need to decide about the limitations of one's social interactions, and forced cohabitation in confined spaces – in a context of uncertainty without recourse to authoritative guides to suitable behaviour. Established routines for everyday life broke down, as main life-domains were affected by social-distancing measures. The future became even more uncertain over time, as the pandemic spread throughout the world. Our research framework integrates theoretical developments about the temporal orientations of human agency (Hitlin & Elder 2007; Sánchez-Mira & Bernardi 2021) and perceptions of

uncertainty (Brashers 2001; Hernandez & Colaner 2021), to study how a sample of individuals with a trajectory of lone parenthood lived through the pandemic.

2.1 The temporal embeddedness of human agency

Hitlin and Elder's (2007) conceptualisation of human agency as embedded in temporal horizons offers an encompassing framework to understand these processes within a life course perspective. They argue that agency stems from the 'individual and external circumstances that direct one's attentional focus': Individuals shift their time horizons – their concentrated focus on a 'particular zone of temporal space' – as a response to the exigencies of situated interaction (Hitlin & Elder 2007: 175). Such shifts in an individual's temporal foci over closer or more distant objects have been defined by Sánchez-Mira and Bernardi (2021) as one of the three main properties characterising an actor's subjective experience of time within a life course framework: its telescopic nature. Some situations call for a focus on the immediate present, while others favour longer-term concerns. Hitlin and Elder (2007) distinguish between four variants of agency, depending on the salience of different time horizons: *existential, identity, pragmatic,* and *life course* agency.

Existential agency – one's ability to act, and the awareness of this ability – underlies the three remaining types. *Identity agency* refers to the 'habitual patterning of social behaviour', and involves established ways of acting and role enactment (Hitlin & Elder 2007: 178). In situations involving a great deal of taken-for-granted interactions and routine, the attentional focus shifts away from the problematic now, as past behaviour and experience guide role-based behaviours and free up mental space (Hitlin & Elder 2007). In contrast, *pragmatic agency* is exerted in circumstances that demand heightened attention to immediate surroundings, when 'habitual responses to patterned social actions break down' (Hitlin & Elder 2007: 178). In this type, the temporal horizon lies on the 'knife's edge' of the present moment – a focus that tends to be stronger within problematic situations, in which the habits involved in identity agency cannot operate and novel responses are called for. Finally, *life course* agency refers to the capacities of individuals 'to orient themselves toward long-term outcomes' (Hitlin & Elder 2007: 183). This type of agency alludes to the attempts to shape one's life trajectory, and involves a focus on the distal future.

We argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped a scenario of conditions influencing how these different agency types operate. The pandemic's initial exogenous shock disrupted individual and social life, breaking down habitual patterns of social interaction and generating novel and uncertain situations that demanded heightened decision-making about a problematic, immediate present (pragmatic agency). One way that people may have adapted to this new context was by rebuilding their habits and routines (identity agency). These processes may have resulted in increased stress, given that pragmatic agency demands more individual effort than identity agency because the former involves a more intense decision-making process. Also, constant changes in environmental circumstances – such as with the shifting restrictions requiring heightened attention and reorientation – may have also increased one's cognitive burden. While opening up opportunities for new experiences and patterns of organisation, rearrangements of everyday life certainly demand an engagement with one's own life conditions. Moreover, the uncertainty about future developments may have decreased individual capacities for building and engaging in long-

term plans (life course agency). There is much to be gained from integrating this framework and conceptual developments on uncertainty.

2.2 Managing uncertainty over time

With the pandemic, families must face the challenges involved in emerging situations and the need to reorganise everyday life, while managing the uncertainties produced by limited, ambiguous, and changing information about COVID-19, the lack of clear patterns for suitable behaviour, and the constant fluctuation of rules and restrictions over time. This may have had negative consequences on well-being, as prior research has shown uncertainty to be related to decreased mental health (Afifi, Felix & Afifi 2012; Bakioğlu, Korkmaz & Ercan 2020; Godinic, Obrenovic & Khudaykulov 2020). Uncertainty has been defined as existing 'when details of situations are ambiguous, complex, unpredictable, or probabilistic; when information is unavailable or inconsistent; and when people feel insecure in their own state of knowledge or the state of knowledge in general' (Brashers 2001: 478). Other definitions include conflicting or undifferentiated alternatives (Lipshitz & Strauss 1997).

This stream of literature has incorporated a temporal dimension, by distinguishing between experiences of uncertainty around an event with a limited duration and those that stretch over time and thus can be considered chronic (Brashers 2001) – as has been the case with the pandemic (Hernandez & Colaner 2021). This distinction between short- and long-term uncertainty alludes thus to the duration of the experience, while the life course literature has been concerned with how it is temporally orientated. In this sense, the notion of the 'shadows of the future' refers to the lack of clarity about future prospects (Bernardi, Huinink & Settersten 2019; Guetto, Vignoli & Bazzani 2020). These two temporal dimensions of uncertainty (duration and orientation) can be read through Sánchez-Mira and Bernardi's (2021) tripartite characterisation of relative time – the former relating to its elastic nature, and the latter to its telescopic. Accordingly, we propose to distinguish between a) transient and chronic uncertainty with respect to duration; and b) uncertainty about the immediate present and longer-term concerns, with respect to time horizons. These are analytical distinctions that partially overlap and interact with one another, but considering both aspects is useful for understanding how people have dealt with uncertainty during the pandemic.

Uncertainty reduction theory assumes that uncertainty is negative and undesirable and that individuals will therefore want to minimise it, making sense of the situation by increasing their information about it (Afifi 2010; Bradac 2001; Redmond 2015). In contrast, *uncertainty management theory* argues that reducing uncertainty is only one of several possible responses to circumstances marked by unpredictability, ambiguity or insufficient information, and that individuals may seek to manipulate or manage uncertainty in different ways (Brashers et al. 2000). Strategies can include seeking or avoiding information, reappraising or adapting to chronic uncertainty, eliciting social support, and balancing uncertainty management with other tasks (Babrow & Matthias 2009; Brashers 2001). From this perspective, uncertainty is an object of appraisal rather than a de-facto negative cognitive experience, and options for uncertainty management are diverse, including its acceptance of – and even appreciation for – the opportunities it offers (Brashers et al. 2000).

Integrating the uncertainty and agency literatures offers new ways of thinking about people's experiences of the pandemic. We conceptualise these interconnections in a tripartite way, which reflects analytical distinctions rather than separate processes occurring at distinct moments in time. First, we expect that, with the sudden onset of the pandemic and the social restrictions, pragmatic agency would have been accentuated by the rupture of routines and habits. In this early moment, uncertainty about the immediate present would have been intrinsic to the emergence of situations demanding novel responses. Second, after this initial shock, people would have sought to regain identity agency, through the implementation of new routines and habits, to reduce the cognitive burden of constant decision-making. In this second moment, as uncertainty gradually lost its transient character and became chronic, people would have attempted to manage it in different ways. Third, the prolongation of uncertainty over time may have shifted the focus from immediate to longer-term concerns, challenging life course agency. The uncertainty about the development of the pandemic may have decreased people's sense of control about their own lives and their ability to make plans for the future. This last point is supported by scholarly literature suggesting that dramatic events make the future appear more uncertain and malleable (Mische 2009), that economic insecurity tends to shift temporal orientations from the future in favour of the present or past (Fieulaine & Apostolidic 2015), and that individuals in secure situations are more likely to plan for the future (Hellevik & Settersten 2013).

2.3 Lone parents facing uncertainty: Vulnerability and resilience

Resilience can be defined as a dynamic process of positive adaptation in the face of adversity, including the 'protective factors, processes and mechanisms that contribute to a good outcome despite experiences with stressors that carry significant risks for mental ill health' (Hjemdal et al. 2006; as cited in Windle 2011: 156). More specifically, family resilience has been described as the 'processes by which families are able to adapt and function competently following exposure to significant adversity or crises' (Patterson 2002: 352). Hence, family resilience can be understood as a path that families develop over time in the face of stressors (Hawley & DeHaan 1996: 293).

The literature has analysed the transition to lone parenthood as a source of vulnerability, highlighting how the stressors associated with such transitions can have negative consequences for psychological well-being (Mackay 2003). At the same time, a dynamic understanding of resilience requires paying attention to the processes by which this is built over time.

Parents in our sample had transitioned to lone parenthood before 2012–2013, and hence had a long trajectory of coping with stressors. These families had been exposed to periods of heightened uncertainty following divorce, separation or bereavement, and hence the subsequent need to readapt their daily organisation across different life-domains. These prior pathways may have acted as protective factors against the increased uncertainty and breakdown of routines triggered by the COVID pandemic. In other words, lone parent's

past experiences of navigating uncertainty and adapting to family-related stressors may have contributed to their resilience in facing the consequences of the pandemic[1].

3.   Context

In Switzerland, the first detected case of COVID-19 was declared on 25 February 2020, marking the beginning of unprecedented measures to restrict private and public life to control the spread of the virus. While recommendations for social distancing and bans on major events were already issued in February and the border was partially closed on 13 March 2020, most country-wide restrictions were not established until 17 March, with the 'extraordinary situation' declaration of the Swiss Federal Council. This decision represented an exceptional resolution in a federal country wherein the governance of public health commonly falls to cantonal authorities.

The declaration entailed the closure of all educational establishments, including nurseries and day-care centres, as well as all non-essential establishments (e.g., retail outlets, bars, restaurants and other entertainment). During the school closures, a minimal childcare service was set up in schools and some day-care centres for children whose parents worked in essential sectors. Federal authorities did not impose an official state of lockdown, and even though people were advised to stay at home, the decision to follow this recommendation fell upon individuals. Home-based work was encouraged but not enforced, and people were free to move around outdoors without masks, conditioned upon respecting distances and gathering in groups of no more than five people.

Most of these measures were in place for six weeks, and restrictions were gradually lifted after 27 April 2020. Teaching in primary and lower secondary schools resumed in alternating groups on 11 May 2020. Classroom teaching in upper secondary and tertiary education was delayed and varied, notably between cantons and municipalities. Most non-essential commerce also reopened on 11 May, as did bars and restaurants (with certain restrictions). The state of necessity was lifted on 19 June 2020, and most of the remaining measures were lifted on 22 June.

Thereafter, differing sets of measures were implemented at various moments in time, along with the evolution of the health, political and social situations. Significant variability in social restrictions across territories has been evident, as cantons regained most of their responsibilities regarding public health matters and specific measures were implemented at the cantonal level. It was not until the summer 2020 that federal authorities made wearing a mask compulsory on public transports. Cantons established the obligation to wear a mask in shops, bars or restaurants at different moments (e.g., in Vaud, this measure was implemented on 8 July 2020, while in Valais on 31 August) and with specificities (e.g., in Geneva, masks were initially compulsory only for workers, and later also for clients; in Fribourg, masks were required in shops with 10 or more people). With the start of the school year, several cantons implemented mask wearing for students, teachers and other employees of educational institutions. On 2 September 2020, the Federal Council lifted the

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1   While we cannot examine this line of thinking conclusively without comparing the experiences of intact, two-parent families, we explore whether our interviews offer any evidence that would support it.

ban on events over 1000 people, but only 15 days later the canton of Vaud decided to prohibit meetings of more than 100 people. A paradigmatic example of the approach of Swiss authorities to social restrictions was the campaign launched on 24 September – the motto of which, *À vous d'agir* ('It's up to you to act'), insisted on the role of individual responsibility to face the pandemic situation.

Indeed, measures implemented in Switzerland were less restrictive of mobility than those in neighbouring countries, with greater reliance on recommendations than formal bans or interdictions, which left significant leeway to individual decision-making. This may have been experienced as a liberty or increased the decisional burden and sense of disorientation, especially during the initial period in which short-term uncertainty was highest. The lack of common references for what should constitute appropriate behaviour may have added to the uncertainty generated by the frequent changes to rules and recommendations, distinctively shaping Swiss families' experiences of the period.

4. Data and methods

We drew the data for this study from the fourth wave of the qualitative longitudinal research project 'The multiple paths of lone parenthood' which has been studying the life trajectories and experiences of lone-parent families in French-speaking Switzerland for almost a decade. The project initially interviewed forty parents who were in a situation of lone parenthood in 2012–2013 – that is, who had sole or primary physical custody of their children, mainly as a result of separation or divorce, but including exceptional cases of bereavement or where women had been lone parents since the transition to parenthood. The same parents have been followed up with at intervals of two to three years since that time, with the fourth wave of fieldwork taking place in spring 2020.

With the onset of the pandemic, we adapted the design for this fieldwork to study the effects of the partial lockdown on the lives of the families in our sample. The interviews were conducted between April and June 2020, when most restrictive measures were still in place or were gradually being lifted. In this fourth wave of the project, the remaining sample consisted of 26 parents (24 mothers and two fathers).

Participants had made the transition to lone parenthood between one and five years prior to 2012–2013, when the first wave of the project was conducted. Therefore, by the fourth wave much had happened in their lives. Most parents had been through more or less long periods of significant uncertainty following divorce, separation or bereavement, which demanded important adjustments in their everyday organisation, including the spheres of employment, childcare, residence, and leisure. Some parents had since re-partnered, which involved subsequent adaptations across these differing life-domains. As a consequence, our initial sample of lone parents transformed into a more heterogeneous group. The sample in the fourth wave included a few stepfamilies and blended families: three parents had re-partnered and had had another child (one cohabitating with the child's father; one having separated again since; another not residing with the child's father); three parents were cohabiting with new partners and the child(ren) from their previous partnerships; one parent was now cohabiting with the father of the child; seven had re-partnered, but were

not cohabiting; and thirteen were still lone parents who had not repartnered.[2] Therefore, at the fourth wave of the project, most of our sample (21 of 26) were still lone parents who were either not in a partnership or who were not cohabiting with their new partners.[3] There had also been some fluctuation in custody arrangements over time, but most parents (22 of 26) were still holding sole or primary custody of their children when the pandemic struck.[4]

The ages of the children also reflected complex family trajectories. They ranged from a four-month-old infant in one of our blended families to a 23-year-old, with a large majority (27 of 37) of the children being between 10 and 16 years old. Although the sampling at the outset of the project aimed to be representative of the socioeconomic distribution of Swiss society, participants of lower socioeconomic status were underrepresented; the majority of parents who remained in the sample in the fourth wave could be classified broadly as middle-class. The participants had all achieved mid-to-high educational levels, and were currently or recently employed in a skilled, white-collar occupation. The majority were professionals or administrative employees working in public administration, healthcare, education, or information and communication – all employment sectors that were sheltered from the worst effects of the pandemic. This would likely have shaped their perceptions of uncertainty during this period.

To comply with social-distancing measures, interviews were conducted using videoconferencing technology and, in two instances, by telephone. The interviews comprised two parts. The first set of questions addressed the changes participants had experienced since the previous wave of fieldwork (2018) on main life-domains – namely, employment and financial situation, custody and visiting rights, residential situation, health, relationship status and family composition, parent-child relations, and children's well-being. The second part of the interview addressed the effects of the pandemic on these same life-domains, with a specific focus on the reorganisation of daily life and the adaptations that had been made to deal with changes in employment, home-schooling, custody arrangements, relationships and health.[5] We also introduced a series of questions about how they had been informed about the evolution of the health situation and the restrictions, how they acted with respect to social-distancing rules and outdoor mobility, how they managed their children's social contacts, and whether they had established and enforced rules for social interaction and hygiene. We also asked about social support that had been given or received. Finally, we discussed their expectations for the future.

Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes, and were video- or audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and anonymised. Interviews were coded thematically using qualitative data-

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2   See online supplement for a summary of sample characteristics.

3   Although the inclusion of repartnered, cohabiting parents may introduce some heterogeneity into the current sample, these participants have in common with the remaining cases a period of lone parenthood in their trajectory. The experience of lone parenthood makes them comparable with the participants who are still lone parents according to many relevant characteristics, namely that they have custody of their children and hence the primary responsibility for their care and well-being. Also, since the main purpose of the article is to illustrate the value of the theoretical approach proposed for analysing how families have dealt with the pandemic, we believe that it is acceptable to keep these cases in the sample.

4   Only two had shared-custody arrangements, one had shifted primary custody of her older child to the father, and one was now cohabiting with the child's father. See online supplement for a summary of sample characteristics.

5   See online supplement for a summary of main changes triggered by the pandemic.

analysis software NVivo (12). An initial, line-by-line codification of the interviews served to identify relevant themes related to the types of agency and perceptions and management of uncertainty, on the basis of flexible, theoretically derived guidelines. Subsequently, the coding system was developed and refined through an iterative process whereby the codes were discussed among the authors and reformulated at different rounds. The final hierarchical coding was the basis for the analysis. Interview excerpts presented in the findings section were translated from French by the authors.

5. Findings

5.1 What is going on? Heightened uncertainty after the initial shock

The participants' accounts reflect a distinctive initial moment when the pandemic struck and the first measures were implemented. It was a shock that created a sudden and heightened level of uncertainty for these parents, related to the lack of information, the inability to understand what was going on, and the suddenness of the whole situation.

> *In the beginning, we didn't know anything at all.* (Martine, 4[6])
>
> *So uh... there was that, we didn't know what was happening to us.* (Anouk, 25)
>
> *There was a lot of uncertainty though.* (Béatrice, 8)
>
> *It was a bit, it was a bit complicated in the beginning because I didn't have... well, it kind of happened overnight.* (Arthur, 3)

This general uncertainty about the health situation and the lack of responses about what could constitute risky behaviour and its possible consequences generated feelings of fear and anxiety for many parents.

> *The fact of having no clear answer about much, it's, it's that what is unsettling I think [...] At some point, I had to tell myself 'Well, if you get sick, what do we do?' [...] And so, I didn't know to what extent the fact that him [child], he was between the two families, well between the two households, whether he was at risk or not. Uh... so I prayed that he wasn't.* (Martine, 4)
>
> *Arno [child] didn't have the right to go out because I was very afraid. He follows the hygiene instructions poorly, so every time every time he went out, I said to myself: 'Help! What is he going to bring me back?'* (Vivianne, 14)

During this initial period, some parents attempted to reduce uncertainty in order to minimise their anxiety, most commonly by avoiding information:

> *So at first I actually watched [the TV] very often and then uh really I... I waited for the news to see what was happening and then... up to a moment where I, there was a night where I felt really unwell, I was anxious and [...]. And so after that I told myself that I was going to stop and then after it was a little better.* (Elisa, 39)

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6   Numbers following the interviewee's pseudonyms correspond to the numbers identifying the participants in the table of the online supplement.

Other practices of uncertainty manipulation (Brashers 2001) included selectively choosing information sources, which served to minimise perceptions of contradictory information, in order to reduce anxiety:

I focused on one or two sources that I found reliable, reassuring and a little more consistent. (Aline, 20)

Our sample includes exceptional examples of denialism too, which involves drawing selectively from sources of information that confirm one's own beliefs:

I have been studying life sciences for 20 years every night, at home, privately, uh... I know that we are made up of a host of microbes [...]. And that we have lived in good harmony with microbes for millions of years and that if we try to disinfect everything, well we are completely against nature and we weaken. [...] they announce the number of deaths but they do not compare it with the number of deaths from the seasonal flu, for example. So, they tell a partial truth that is manipulative. (Judith, 15)

5.2 What should I do? Accentuated pragmatic agency and uncertainty chronification

As the pandemic extended in time, uncertainty may have been reduced in some senses, as parents felt that public knowledge about the illness was improving and that they now had a clearer idea about what could be and could not be done; at the same time, uncertainty appears to have increased in other respects, as new issues emerged for which no answer was available. These apparently contradictory developments are illustrated by Viviane's account:

And so... knowledge is, it's being accumulated and corroborated and put together to have a vision of the thing that is a little more informed and that, well, for the children, the relations with the children, how the children can be free or not.

Well, as long as we do not know what the immunological history is, and, and [...] and, and, Are the children carriers, vectors or... that they have asymptomatic pulmonary corona-pneumonia followed by possible infections uh not linkable to corona but which seem to be the consequences of it. And well, me, I am super reserved not because I am freaked out but simply we are in a state where we..., we do not have the knowledge. (Viviane, 14)

In this context, parents struggled to find the proper way to act in the face of a novel situation, in which their habitual responses to patterned behaviour could not operate. Uncertainty appeared to be becoming chronic for many parents, and hence pragmatic agency with respect to outdoor mobility and social contacts lingered over time:

Actually, I still have a hard time in completely having references about, today, about... how to behave really, and what is really dangerous. I took the bus or the tram this morning and so, well I put on a mask but let's say that, it's not obvious to, to know to what extent all this must be taken seriously. (Martine, 4)

The ambiguity of the social-restriction measures, their reliance on individual responsibility, the lack of homogeneity in their implementation, and their fluctuation over time, appear to be have contributed to this chronification.

It's this vagueness of never really knowing, in the end, but where do I stand in relation to that? [...] So, this, yes, still today, I wonder about my everyday actions. [...] 'Can I see my family?

How?' There, we, we..., I feel quite torn between the point of social contact and the protection messages which are not always that coherent. [...] The, the fact that it is, it is up to us to, to be our own cops, to set, to set our own constraints, without really knowing if we are right or not, without knowing if... were we not a little too paranoid, not enough, too much among friends. Well, there is, there is this right proximity or distance which has never been very clear. [...] Today, I still say to myself: [...] 'How am I going to do to find references that, that hold...?' (Martine, 4)

We have seen the different measures, between very strict and not at all strict, also in the shops, where there was a moment when there was the counting, the obligation to disinfect the hands and today there is not much of it anymore. (Gisela, 9)

Specifically, parents faced dilemmas about how to manage this uncertainty in parent–child relations: how to convey the gravity of the situation without transferring the anxiety, how to reassure the children without owning a sense of certainty themselves, and whether to be more or less strict in managing social contacts.

A little anxiety about going out, about taking risks and then transferring our anxiety to our children. How can we do to ... to show them that we are concerned and at the same time raising their awareness. (Leila, 19)

It was complicated to be in the unknown and then at the same time to have to reassure, that is, to set up a framework that we did not really have. (Martine, 4)

I am actually asking myself, 'Should I be more flexible or should I keep the framework?' (Elisa, 39)

5.3 Living with COVID: Adapting to uncertainty to regain identity agency

While the chronification of uncertainty hindered attempts to regain identity agency, other mechanisms favoured setting patterns for habitual behaviour. Despite the loose character of social restrictions and their enforcement in the Swiss context, they did play some role in guiding behaviour during the period:

So I was rather strict because I don't want to have any problems. When we were at the sports centre, there was already the police who came to check. So if I can avoid the police calling me to tell me that he's [child] too close to a friend or... So, yes, [I was] actually quite strict. (Sylvie, 1)

Perhaps more importantly, in the face of the ambiguity of social restrictions, parents would use other's behaviour to gauge the appropriateness of their own:

Then we have our neighbours [...], [they] were also quite strict about their confinement rules. So there were no children playing with other children, so there you go, things were respected like that. (Léonie, 24)

Many parents seemed to follow a similar pattern in dealing with social contacts and outdoor mobility over the period. For the first few weeks, they followed a strict home confinement and restricted all social contact for themselves and their children – either out of concern about getting the illness, or about transmitting it to others who were more at risk. After the initial shock, social interaction was gradually recovered; however, these behavioural changes were not necessarily the result of a reduction of the contextual uncertainty, but rather of the need to go back to some sense of normality. Regaining identity agency required an adaptation to uncertainty, and hence a shift of the attentional focus away

from the problematic now, to allow established ways of acting. These new ways of acting were defined relationally, often with neighbours and the parents of other children:

> *So, between neighbours, we were quite responsible. We told ourselves: 'The first 10 days, our kids don't play together. After 10 days, if everyone who is confined does not have the virus, they can play together outside'.* (Anouk, 25)

> *Especially since the neighbours in the [village of the canton of Vaud], they are great friends of her [child] and so, she saw them playing in the garden, because we did not allow them to see each other. Then, over time, we relaxed things a bit by saying: 'Well there you go, you see each other outside, in the gardens, uh...'. Then finally, we started drinking beers with the parents, but from a distance. [...] It became a bit more relaxed while paying attention.* (Natacha, 26)

5.4 A new normal? Regaining identity agency through the reorganization of everyday life

In the previous sections, we focused on perceptions of uncertainty about health risks and social-distancing measures as one main contributor to the accentuation of pragmatic agency. However, a second, crucial aspect that favoured it was the effect of social-distancing restrictions on the organisation of daily life. As a result of changes in employment situations and school closures, the routines of these families broke down, which represented a major upheaval to their everyday life:

> *How was I affected? Bah pfff.... I was affected because all habits stopped, eh! The children were no longer going to school. Me, I could no longer work, uh....* (Aline, 20)

> *So, at first, at first it was difficult [...], we were a little bit lost with respect to work. We didn't know how to organise ourselves, also with the school. That's very difficult because in fact we are told on a Friday uh... evening that on Monday there is no school.* (Tania, 16)

In this sense, pragmatic agency was also accentuated for most parents through the need to arrange the children's home-schooling and to reorganise their care, while articulating these demands with shifting employment conditions, which for many involved working from home[7]. Adjustments included reducing working hours, working around the children's needs, and drawing on social support. Most parents mentioned a period of adaptation, during which they actively sought to build new routines and habits that would structure their everyday lives. While regaining routine and structure did not reduce contextual uncertainty, it did buffer some of its effects by providing a refuge of certainty in everyday life. In this sense, regaining identity agency through the reorganisation of everyday life was crucial for a positive experience of the period for most parents:

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7   The pandemic and related restrictions affected the families in our sample in two main ways: 1) through changes in the employment situation or working conditions of parents; and 2) through school closures and the ensuing need to home-school children and reorganise their childcare. In our sample, 19 of the 26 parents experienced employment changes – primarily by moving from on-site to home-based work (14 parents), either completely or partially, or by significantly increasing their share of home-based work. Most parents in our sample (22 of 26) were required to home-school their children during at least part of the period of school closures, and were responsible for this due to exclusive or primary custody. We have analysed elsewhere (Sánchez-Mira et al. 2021) how parents adapted their everyday organisation patterns to deal with the changing demands of both domains.

So little by little, things fell into place and then after two weeks, well, we found a rhythm for everyone. So it worked, it worked well. (Paule, 28)

Things slowly became a bit more routine, yes, we created a special COVID routine which was rather quite positive. [...] So yes, the first days it was stressful but after, in the end, we managed, we managed to find routines, [...] which have worked well. (Céline, 29)

These renewed routines were also perceived positively by many parents because they offered opportunities to experience everyday time differently, leading some of them to question their previous organisation patterns. These experiences included having more time for oneself or enjoying quality time with the children, being in nature, doing sport or other leisure activities, and feeling less constrained by school or employment schedules. At the same time, many parents experienced more stress due to elevated work and family demands[8]. Other difficulties included the challenges of enacting simultaneously the role of parent and teacher, and providing structure and some sense of purpose to the children's time.

5.5 What next? Future time horizons and life course agency

The fieldwork was conducted as the first set of restrictions that followed the first wave of the pandemic was being lifted. Many children in these families were gradually resuming school, while parents were also recovering some of their previous work routines. This favoured a sense of return to 'normality' which was positively perceived by most parents. However, perceptions of uncertainty about the consequences the reopening held for the health situation remained:

Yes, I was mostly in favour [of the reopening of the schools], but without any guarantee of anything because between the issue of whether they [the children] were vectors or not [...] I think there is necessarily a risk but I told myself that getting back to normal life was even more important. (Martine, 4)

I'm not sure that this [the reopening of the schools] is of interest from the point of view [...] of the pandemic. On the other hand, from a psychological or social point of view, I think it's very good. I think we're all going to benefit from the fact that it's done little by little. (Leila, 19)

In fact, the chronification of uncertainty associated with the prolongation of the pandemic was reflected in the participants' concerns about the future. The type of long-term concerns ranged from the evolution of the general health situation and its repercussions on the economy, to worries about possible repercussions on their own jobs or financial situations. Many interviewees expressed difficulties in envisaging future developments and how they would endure if the pandemic were to extend over time:

And then, how we adults are also going to, we are going to have to live with this corona, its threat and what effects will it have on our social relations of bodily proximities uh, frankly, I have the impression that if we must continue to live in this non-proximity, it's going to be hard. (Vivianne, 14)

Me, I don't really see the end of it, obviously they are talking about a second wave so we always have a Damocles sword, we don't know what will happen. [...] We are asking ourselves a lot of

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8   This aspect has been addressed in detail in Sánchez-Mira et al. 2021.

questions after a month and a half. [...] But uh especially when you learn that it will last even longer for you. [...] How will it be.... (Olivier, 41)

I think it's a parenthesis [...]. And I think that we will know the repercussions only after. It's very hard to say uh... now, the repercussions are going to be these or those, or even to imagine the repercussions at all [...] I really think that we lived a particular parenthesis and that, that, it is time that will make us say to ourselves either: 'It was [...] six weeks, eight weeks' and then after we resumed our life and then we will just have this memory. Or [...] the repercussions at the societal, economic level will be such that it will not be just a parenthesis. [...] We are going to be affected anyway on a longer term. (Vanina 22)

While the excerpts cited above refer to a general sense of uncertainty, for those interviewees in more precarious situations, such as unemployment or social assistance (e.g., Martine, Antoinette), this translated into difficulties for projecting themselves into the future in more specific terms – notably, making career plans:

I have a lot of trouble projecting myself [...] into the future. I have a lot of trouble building a professional project. I had an idea just before the confinement to do an internship in an institution in the cultural sector with the aim of doing on-the-job training. [...] But all the institutions in the cultural sector closed. So... that cut off my wings a bit. (Martine, 4)

5.6 What's unique about lone parents?

One aspect that was specific to the situation of complex families during the partial lockdown was deciding how to deal with custody arrangements and residence alternation. This circumstance applied to 15 of the 26 families sampled, while 10 were already in sole-custody arrangements before the pandemic, and in one the child's parents were cohabiting.

In only seven cases, custody arrangements temporarily altered during the lockdown. Six involved an interruption of the visitation arrangements in place, while in the remaining case the custody arrangement was reversed (as the father temporarily held primary physical custody). Therefore, eight of 15 families continued to hold some sort of residence alternation during the partial lockdown.

The need to consider adjustments to custody arrangements contributed to a heightening of pragmatic agency to some extent for these parents; however, uncertainty related to this aspect was not central in the participant's accounts[9]. These findings must be understood in light of the comparatively mild restrictions on mobility in Switzerland during the pandemic's first wave. Had there been the strict home confinement implemented in other countries, maintaining child visitation and custody arrangements would have been more challenging.

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9   Decisions about changes to custody and visitation arrangements were reported to be consensual, and resulted less from externally imposed restrictions than from the parents' attempts to protect family members in the at-risk population (Alizée, Gisela, Rachel, Vanina) or a combination of factors in which COVID-related risks were not the most relevant (Aline, Anouk, Leila). Moreover, as we have shown elsewhere in more detail (Sánchez-Mira et al. 2021), interruptions of visitation arrangements did not appear to have fundamental implications for the parents' everyday organisation, presumably because parents with primary custody of their child(ren) were already mainly responsible for their everyday routines and supervision of schooling before the pandemic, so the other parent's subsidiary support in these tasks was not a major loss.

Secondly, the interviews offer some examples that would support the idea that prior experiences of uncertainty and adaptability to family-related stressors associated with a trajectory of lone parenthood may have made these parents more resilient to the consequences of the pandemic:

> *I say to myself: 'Yes, it is, it is particular also to be managing everything alone with your child or children'. Uh... but honestly, I've had a lot worse than that uh... having been through everything I've been through uh... that's easy. Well [laughs].* (Delia, 23)

> *Of course, it was a, a great upheaval also especially at the beginning but finally we ... I think that we, I adapted very quickly. [...] I think that I have a rather good capacity for adaptation.* (Céline, 29)

Delia's excerpt introduces another aspect that may have affected how uncertainty was managed, and whether this was experienced with more or less difficulty by lone parents given the absence of a partner with whom to share the burden of decision-making. The participants' accounts point in different directions in this respect, with some having experienced dealing with the situation alone as an advantage and others as a disadvantage.

> *You just have to properly give them a framework with the means at hand and it is not easy if you are alone.* (Martine, 4)

> *Because in the end when you are alone, you manage things like you want, you don't have someone with whom you have to systematically discuss, agree uh [...]. I have asked myself this question several times. [...] Is it more difficult alone or in a pair? Because for me, it was always more difficult as a pair.* (Paule, 28)

> *I actually told myself that it was somewhat relatively simple because I was alone with my son. [...] If there are also tensions with the spouse, with the people with whom we are, one needs to manage not only these tensions but also the tensions with the kids.* (Elisa, 39)

6. Discussion and conclusions

Drawing on theoretical elaborations on the temporal orientations of agency, this article has examined how a sample of individuals with a lone parenthood trajectory navigated the heightened uncertainty generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. We have shown how parents struggled to make sense of the new environment immediately after the initial shock. Pragmatic agency was accentuated with the breakdown of routines and the emergence of novel situations to which parents could not respond on the basis of patterned behaviour. Attempts to reduce uncertainty were combined with adaptations to it, as the ambiguity of the situation extended in time and people sought to regain identity agency. Most of our parents changed their behaviours – increasing their social contacts after the initial, stricter lockdown, despite the fact that objective risks and perceptions of uncertainty had not been substantially reduced. It would appear that pragmatic agentic behaviour cannot be sustained for an extended period due to its high cognitive and psychological burden. These findings appear consistent with uncertainty management theory, which argues that, if people cannot achieve predictability in their lives, they can change the way they make decisions – for instance, by planning for the more immediate future rather than for longer-term goals, by

searching for a 'good enough solution' while relying on limited information, or simply by ignoring uncertainty in their decision-making (Brashers 2001).

Different life-domains contributed differently to perceptions of uncertainty and the ability to regain identity agency. While the management of social contacts and outdoor mobility was generally a source of prolonged uncertainty and heightened pragmatic agency, the establishing of new routines and habits after a period of adaptation was crucial to regaining identity for most families. Rebuilding structure and routine may have acted as a buffer for the effects of the broader contextual uncertainty, as it offered a 'cocoon of certainty' (Merry 1995: 128; as cited in Brashers 2001), shielding individuals from the complexities and ambiguities of the surrounding circumstances.

Looking at uncertainty through the lens of relative time also provided interesting insights about these parents' experiences of the pandemic. Our findings reflect both the elastic and telescopic nature of uncertainty: how it went gradually from a temporary to a chronic condition, and how people's concerns shifted from the immediate present to longer-term horizons. Both temporal dimensions are tightly intertwined, as the realisation that uncertainty was there to stay ('we have to live with it') intersected with worries about the future ('for how long and with which consequences'). Most participants expressed concerns about the evolution of the general health and economic situation, but the chronification of uncertainty decreased life course agency more clearly for people who were in less secure situations individually. This is consistent with studies showing that people in more secure situations are more likely to plan for the future, but the opposite relation is true at the societal level: Those living in less secure conditions are more likely to do so (Hellevik & Settersten 2013).

Table 1 presents the interconnections between the dimensions of uncertainty and agency processes, and their effects on psychological well-being.

The latter point about the micro and macro dimensions of insecurity brings us to the specificities of the Swiss context, which could be characterised as comparatively secure. In fact, existing comparative research on the psychological consequences of the COVID pandemic has shown that risk perceptions and anxiety have been lower among more developed countries, those with stronger welfare states and faster public intervention (Breznau 2021; Buyukkececi 2021). While these studies may suggest decreased uncertainty in Switzerland, we also observed that the ambiguity of social-restriction measures, the reliance of the guidelines on individual responsibility and the lack of homogeneity in their implementation may have increased perceptions of uncertainty. Comparative research is warranted to test such hypotheses.

Table 1: Links between uncertainty, agency and cognitive and psychological burden in the COVID-19 pandemic context

Uncertainty	Agency	Cognitive and psychological burden
Sudden increased uncertainty following the pandemic's initial shock due to the lack of information and responses about what could constitute risky behaviour and its possible consequences	Accentuated *pragmatic agency* to face the challenges of a problematic immediate present, due to the need to manage social contacts and outdoor mobility in an uncertain context and the breakdown of routines that followed the impact of social restrictions on main life-domains	Increased burden due to the intensity of decision-making processes (frequent and all-pervasive)
Management of enduring uncertainty with the extension of the pandemic over time	Regaining *identity agency* through the implementation of new everyday habits and routines under uncertainty	Decreased burden due to the re-normalisation of the daily life and less intense decision-making processes
Long-term uncertainty about the future development of the pandemic and its societal and personal consequences	Decreased *life course agency* due to the challenges to biographic planning under uncertain future environmental conditions	Increased burden due to the difficulties of projecting oneself into the future and the barriers to the biographic development of the self and the children

Also relevant for our purposes here is what is unique about lone parents. Our evidence suggests that there are at least two aspects that may distinguish lone parents, and which deserve the attention of future research. First, the ecological communication perspective has highlighted the importance of looking at the role of relationships in uncertainty scenarios in which individuals face complex layers of information (Afifi & Afifi 2015; as cited in Hernandez & Colaner 2021). Relevant communication ecologies in disaster situations may include communication among nearby residents or within families (Spialek et al. 2019; as cited in Hernandez & Colaner 2021). These microlevel systems can shape how information obtained through the media or governmental agencies is interpreted and processed, just as they influence perceptions of risk and intentions to engage in protective behaviour (Hernandez & Colaner 2021). Moreover, family members constitute an essential source of social support during this kind of situation (Hernandez & Colaner 2021). Lone parents' circumstances are distinctive in this respect, as most faced the first period of

lockdown alone with their children in their homes[10]. From this theoretical perspective, one would have expected that the absence of a partner with whom to process the information, share decision-making, and manage the children would have rendered dealing with the situation more difficult. Some of the parents' accounts do point in this direction; however, others seemed to have had the opposite experience. Moreover, several parents mentioned discussing the situation with neighbours and reaching joint decisions – for instance, about the norms for social contact among their children. One may wonder whether what would have been the other parent's role in interpersonal 'disaster talk' (Houston 2018; as cited in Hernandez & Colaner 2021) was, in some of these families, compensated partially by neighbours. Exploring this aspect together with the differential role of social support for these parents would be highly relevant.

A second aspect of the lone parent's uniqueness concerns whether their prior trajectories of adaptability and dealing with uncertainty may have made them more resilient to the pandemic context. Participants in our study had in common a long trajectory of lone parenthood, having weathered the consequences of a critical life transition, forced to adjust to the shift away from the standard family form and to deal with the increased uncertainty and breakdown of everyday structuring associated with it. This trajectory may have made them more resilient in facing the challenges involved in navigating COVID-related uncertainty and adaptations to the breakdown of routines and habits. Indeed, we have shown some evidence to suggest this. Future research could explore both research avenues comparing the experiences of parents with shorter- and longer-term trajectories of lone parenthood with intact, stepfamilies, and blended two-parent families. Such research would benefit greatly from prospective data allowing examination of how resilience paths are built over time. Despite the fact that the analysis presented in this paper draws solely from interview material from the project's fourth wave, our future endeavours will use the biographical material obtained during the previous stages to contextualise the changes triggered by the pandemic within the parents' broader trajectories.

Our study has two main limitations. One concerns the composition of the sample, which does not represent the diversity of situations that may have affected lone parents in French-speaking Switzerland during the first wave of the pandemic in three main respects. First, we had only two fathers, which prevented us from exploring gender differences in the experiences of the period. Second, most parents in our sample were economically sheltered, being employed in skilled jobs that offered significant opportunities for home-based work. We had no front-line workers in unskilled jobs in our sample, who may have faced more uncertainty about their exposure to health hazards, and whose everyday routines may have been altered, at the same time, less fundamentally. We had only two cases of parents who either had lost their jobs due to the pandemic or who were already under social assistance before it struck. The remainder of the sample kept their jobs or were temporally on leave and expecting to resume work shortly. This bias in the sample composition is likely to have significantly affected our findings about uncertainty perceptions shaping life course agency – which, as we have seen, was most constrained for those in more precarious economic and employment situations. Third, most children in these families were 10–16 years old.

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10 As mentioned in the methodological section, most parents in our sample had not repartnered, and the majority of those who had did not co-reside with their new partners.

Managing uncertainty in parent—-child interactions, the regulation of the children's social contacts, and the reorganisation of everyday life is likely to have been experienced very differently depending on the age of the children, and our study captures less well the situations of those at younger ages. More research is needed to address agency and uncertainty management processes more comprehensively across the social spectrum.

A second main limitation concerns the timing of the fieldwork. It was conducted over a limited period, covering the phase when the most restrictive measures of the pandemic's first wave were gradually being lifted. For this reason, we captured only the initial moment of shock retrospectively, and hence we are limited in addressing the initial accentuation of pragmatic agency and the shift from transient to chronic uncertainty. Moreover, the interviews reflect some sense of return to normality characteristic of the period, and our perspective of the chronification of uncertainty is restricted in time. For these reasons, it would be of most interest to explore how these different aspects changed with the subsequent epidemic waves and the implementation of new and fluctuating sets of restrictions. It would be pertinent to examine whether perceptions of uncertainty and management strategies shifted as the pandemic extended over time, and how such prolongation may have been linked to changes in the temporal horizons of agency.

Despite its limitations, our study has offered an original perspective on the challenges of living through the pandemic, bridging the uncertainty and agency literatures within a life course framework. Our study emphasises the relevance of temporalities for understanding both uncertainty and agency within life course processes. We believe we have set a path for future studies on an enduring reality that is shaping our current lives, as well as our time horizons and future orientations.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix

Table A.1:   Sample characteristics and changes in main life domains triggered by the pandemic

Nº	Pseud.	Age of children	Type of job (last job if unemployed)	Employment situation (before COVID)*	Change in employment situation (with COVID)
1	Sylvie	10	Extra-curricular school service employee	Employed 40%	On leave due to COVID (service interrupted)
2	Antoinette	20 and 23	Social Worker	80% fixed-term contract (six months)	Fixed-term contract not renewed due to the pandemic
3	Arthur	10 and 12	Public administration professional	Employed 100%	Sick leave due to COVID (at-risk)
4	Martine	10 and 16	Social Worker	Unemployed and under social assistance	No change
8	Béatrice	14	Director of environmental sector organisation	Sick leave (previously 70%)	No change
9	Gisela	11 and 13	Consultant	Employed 80%	Home-based work
11	Marie-Jo	3 and 12	Executive Assistant in the education sector	Employed 90%	Home-based + on-site work
14	Viviane	14	Teacher	Employed 50%	Home-based work + sick leave
15	Judith	18 and 20	Project Manager in the IC sector	Employed 100%	Home-based work
16	Tania	9	Administrative Manager in public administration	Employed 100%	Home-based + on-site work
18	Rachel	16	IC sector professional	Employed 70%	Home-based work
19	Leila	4 and 12	Public service professional	Employed 90%	Home-based work
20	Aline	13 and 16	Psychotherapist	Self-employed	Interruption of activity due to sanitary measures
22	Vanina	16	Educator	Employed 90%	Home-based work
23	Delia	16	Dental Hygienist	Sick leave (previously employed with fluctuating %)	Inability to return to work due to COVID (at-risk)
24	Léonie	7	Director of Service in health sector	Employed 80%	On-site work
25	Anouk	11	Social Worker	Employed 80%	Home-based work + reduced hours

Table A.1:   Sample characteristics and changes in main life domains triggered by the pandemic (continued)

Nº	Pseud.	Age of children	Type of job (last job if unemployed)	Employment situation (before COVID)*	Change in employment situation (with COVID)
26	Natacha	12	Psychologist	Employed 80%	Home-based + on-site work
27	Alizée	newborn and 16	Secretary in healthcare sector	Employed 60%	Maternity leave + On-site work
28	Paule	13	Executive Assistant	Employed 90%	Home-based work
29	Céline	11 and 13	Psychiatric Nurse	Employed 90%	Home-based + on-site work
32	Sophie	16 and 18	Dean of education programme in the social sector	On sick leave (previously employed 100%)	No change
36	Alexandra	10	Teacher	Employed 63%	Home-based work
37	Sarah	15	Education sector professional	Several jobs amounting to almost 100%	Home-based work
39	Elisa	10	Educator	Employed 80%	Home-based work
41	Olivier	16	IC sector professional	Employed 90%	Sick leave due to COVID (at-risk)

Table A.1:   Sample characteristics and changes in main life domains triggered by the pandemic (continued)

Nº	Pseud.	Schooling situation during COVID	Relationship status	*De facto* physical custody (before COVID)	Changes in *de facto* physical custody (with COVID)	Social support with childcare or schooling (by whom)
1	Sylvie	Home-schooling	No partner	Sole custody	No change	No support
2	Antoinette	No home-schooling to manage (younger child not in school; older child's schooling interrupted)	No partner	Sole custody	No change	No support
3	Arthur	Home-schooling	No partner	Primary custody with visitation arrangements	No change	No support
4	Martine	Home-schooling	No partner	Formal shared custody of both children, but she sees little of the older child	No change	No support
8	Béatrice	Home-schooling	No partner	Sole custody	No change	Institutional (lunch for child at school twice a week)
9	Gisela	Home-schooling	Re-partnered, cohabiting	Primary custody with visitation arrangements	Interruption of visitation arrangements	Current partner, family, children's father
11	Marie-Jo	Home-schooling	Remarried, had a second child, and separated again	Sole custody of older child + primary custody of younger child with visitation arrangements	No change	Family
14	Viviane	Home-schooling	No partner	Sole custody	No change	Family
15	Judith	Home-schooling	No partner	Sole custody	No change	No support
16	Tania	Home-schooling + SAM	Re-partnered, not cohabiting	Primary custody with visitation arrangements	No change	Child's father
18	Rachel	Home-schooling	Re-partnered, not cohabiting	Primary custody with visitation arrangements	Interruption of visitation arrangements	No support
19	Leila	Home-schooling	Re-partnered, cohabiting, child with new partner	Primary custody for the other parent with visitation arrangements for older child	Interruption of visitation arrangements	No support - Loss of grandparent support
20	Aline	No home-schooling to manage (children temporarily with father)	Re-partnered, not cohabiting	Primary custody with visitation arrangements	Sole custody of other parent with visitation arrangements	No support

Table A.1:   Sample characteristics and changes in main life domains triggered by the pandemic (continued)

Nº	Pseud.	Schooling situation during COVID	Relationship status	*De facto* physical custody (before COVID)	Changes in *de facto* physical custody (with COVID)	Social support with childcare or schooling (by whom)
22	Vanina	Home-schooling	No partner	Primary custody with visitation arrangements	Interruption of visitation arrangements	No support
23	Delia	Home-schooling	No partner	Sole custody	No change	No support
24	Léonie	SAM	Re-partnered, cohabiting	Sole custody	No change	Current partner - loss of grandparent support
25	Anouk	Home-schooling	No partner	Primary custody with visitation arrangements	Interruption of visitation arrangements	No support
26	Natacha	Home-schooling + SAM	Re-partnered, not cohabitating	Shared custody	No changes	Current partner
27	Alizée	No home-schooling to manage (children not in education)	Re-partnered, had a second child with her new partner, not cohabitating	Primary custody with visitation arrangements	Interruption of visitation arrangements	No support
28	Paule	Home-schooling	Re-partnered, not cohabitating	Primary custody with visitation arrangements	No change	Child's father - loss of grandparent support
29	Céline	Home-schooling	Re-partnered, not cohabitating	Primary custody with visitation arrangements	No change	No support - loss of grandparent support
32	Sophie	Home-schooling	Re-partnered, not cohabitating	Primary custody with visitation arrangements	No change	No support
36	Alexandra	Home-schooling	Re-partnered with the child's father, cohabiting	Cohabitation with child's father - joint custody	No change	Current partner
37	Sarah	Home-schooling	Re-partnered, cohabiting	Sole custody	No change	No support
39	Elisa	Home-schooling	No partner	Sole custody	No change	Family (sporadic)
41	Olivier	Home-schooling	No partner	Sole custody	No change	No support

*Percentages are based on participant's self-definition, and thus the actual number of working hours may vary depending on the sector of activity.

Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Umgang mit Unsicherheiten: Zeithorizonte und *Agency* von Alleinerziehenden im Rahmen der Corona-Pandemie

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: In diesem Artikel wird der analytische Wert eines Konzeptes aufgezeigt, das die zeitlichen Orientierungen verschiedener Arten von *Agency* (pragmatische, identitäts- und lebenslaufbezogene) und Unsicherheitsmanagement zusammenführt, um den Umgang von Familien mit den durch die Corona-Pandemie entstandenen Herausforderungen zu analysieren.

Hintergrund: Die Pandemie war ein schweres Schockereignis, das die Fähigkeit von Familien, sich an plötzliche Veränderungen in zahlreichen Lebensbereichen anzupassen, ernsthaft auf die Probe gestellt hat. In der Schweiz wurde im Frühjahr 2020 ein "leichter Lockdown" eingeführt, der Abstandsregelungen auf Grundlage behördlicher Empfehlungen beinhaltete. Veränderungen in Beschäftigungsverhältnissen sowie Schulschließungen hatten maßgebliche Auswirkungen auf Familien. In dieser Studie wird untersucht, wie Alleinerziehende mit den gestiegenen Unsicherheiten im Zuge dieses neuen Kontexts umgegangen sind.

Methode: Die empirischen Daten stammen aus der vierten Welle der Feldforschung im Rahmen des Längsschnittprojektes 'The multiple paths of lone parenthood', das seit 2012–2013 im französischsprachigen Teil der Schweiz durchgeführt wird. Zwischen April und Juni 2020 wurden halbstrukturierte Interviews mit 26 TeilnehmerInnen geführt.

Ergebnisse: Die Entstehung neuer Situationen, die Uneindeutigkeit der Abstandsregelungen und der Zusammenbruch von Routinen bedeutete für die meisten Familien eine Verstärkung der pragmatischen *Agency*. Als Reaktion auf die chronifizierte Unsicherheit versuchten Eltern, ihre identitätsbezogene *Agency* durch die Wiederherstellung von Alltagsroutinen wiederzuerlangen. Unsicherheit über künftige Entwicklungen verringerte die lebenslaufbezogene *Agency*, insbesondere für Eltern in unsicheren Lebenslagen.

Schlussfolgerung: Die Studie bietet einen einzigartigen Einblick in die Schwierigkeiten, mit der gestiegenen Unsicherheit und den raschen Veränderungen umzugehen, die die Pandemie mit sich gebracht hat. Sie hebt dabei die Bedeutung der Temporalitäten für das Verständnis des *Agency*-Begriffs innerhalb von Lebenslaufprozessen hervor.

Schlagwörter: Alleinerziehende Elternschaft, Lockdown, Social Distancing, Resilienz, Lebenslauf, Schweiz

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