Transitions to solo parenthood: perspectives from a qualitative study[1]

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Abstract:

Understanding what solo parent experiences are like is a challenging task in an era of multiplication of family forms and related legislations regulating the care and responsibilities of children. Official statistics on lone parent households hardly reflect a composite reality of households between which children circulate and in which co-residence with biological and non-biological parents change during the life course. On the basis of an ongoing explorative qualitative study in Switzerland, we focus on the transition to solo parenthood as reported by individuals perceiving themselves as raising their children as solo parents. We analyze the way in which individuals who became parents in a couple context talk about the onset of their solo parenthood (by separation, divorce, or widowhood). We also analyze the narratives of the transition to solo parenthood by individuals who experienced parenthood alone from the early months of pregnancy (parenthood by contraceptive failure, because of the other parent's denial of parenthood, fecundation by anonymous donor). We pay attention to the perceived markers of the transition to solo parenthood. We conclude that objective markers are not sufficient to define the experience of raising children alone and that a number of subjective markers are necessary to understand the process underlying the transition. All the more so since the entry into solo parenthood involves an array of dimensions and is often characterized by a considerable amount of ambivalence. Though our findings are preliminary, they have important implications for our measurements and understanding of solo parenthood and of family diversity.

Introduction

The rise of solo parents households is part of the growing diversification of household types or living arrangements of families that we are witnessing in Europe in the last 40 years.

[1] This publication benefited from the support of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: life course perspectives, which is financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The authors are grateful to the Swiss National Science Foundation for its financial assistance. We also would like to thanks Nasser Tafferant and Anne Dupanloup for their work in the field and all the parents who have agreed to share with us part of their life experience and perspectives for their precious time and kind availability.

In Europe the share of single parent households (children under 18) ranges from 5-7% in countries like Greece, Spain, Romania, and Slovakia to 20-23% in countries like Estonia, Latvia, Ireland, and United Kingdom. The average is 13.6 (Iacouvu and Skew 2011, data from 2008). In Switzerland the last available census data (year 2000) indicate that the share of households with children under 16, who are raised by one parent, only is around 12 % (Bühler and Heye 2005). The large majority of these situations are lived by women (80-85%)[2].

Solo parents households are not easily and univocally identifiable since their definition varies from country to country and from data source to data source. We know that estimates of the prevalence of solo parenthood are affected by how it is measured as much as this is true for cohabitation (Letablier 2010). The most comprehensive definition include in the category those households where one parent co-reside with his, and more often her, children and bear the financial responsibility for the children alone, irrespective of whether other adults co-reside in the household. Surveys often have more restrictive distinctions, which exclude situations where the parent resides with his/her children and a new partner or with his/her children and their grandparents or other family or unrelated adults. Other criteria, which may vary are the children's age (some data sources limit at age 16, or 18, or 25 to qualify a household as solo parents household).

These households are a quite heterogeneous group and much of their diversity depends on the way solo parenthood is produced. The most common reasons to end up being a solo parent are divorce or separation, widowhood, pregnancy or adoption by individuals not in couple. While widowhood was the privileged path to solo parenthood in the past, growing union instability and break-ups are currently the primary cause for parents to raise children alone for some time in their life. The number of individuals who make solo parenthood a planned choice is relatively small (add ref). There are fundamental differences between single parents who have never been in a union and solo parents who exit from a cohabiting or married relationship, this latter group being the one that has increased in the most rapid way in the last 30 years. The former are generally less educated, younger and more often on social assistance than the latter group (Kiernan, et al 2004).

[2] These figures refer to the prevalence of solo parents in the population at any given point in time. Yet, if one would have data from a longitudinal perspective and could calculate the percentage of individuals who have ever been single parents this percentage would be certainly higher, meaning that this condition is experienced and relevant for a larger share of the population.

Despite they represent a minority of households researchers are interested in solo parent households mainly for two reasons. One the one hand, solo parent households are considered families "at risks" and they are often mentioned when talking about family risks (Létablier 2010). On the other hand they are an alternative living arrangement increasingly contributing to the family diversity, which characterize contemporary family. Indeed solo parents are less and less identifiable with marginal groups of the population and they challenge the image of the bi-parental nuclear family and the norms of appropriate parenthood.

Almost all our knowledge about solo parents in Europe rests on analysis of nationally representative, large-scale surveys. These studies show that single parents are different from other parents in terms of socio economic and health characteristics. Solo parents have higher risk of negative outcomes (poverty, unemployment, health) than parents in couple - This is particularly true for solo mothers, less for solo fathers. They are much more likely to be welfare recipients, benefit from social housing and of health insurance public coverage (add ref). Children in solo parent families have a much higher risk of living in poverty or social exclusion than dependent children in two adult families. Around half of solo parent households with dependent children were at risk compared to only about one fifth of households with two adults and two dependent children (Eurostat 2013). Lack of resources (financial but also psychological and social resources) and a limited capacity to recover from stresses in other life domains (work in particular) are factors of solo parents vulnerability.

Besides material and health deprivation, solo parents interest family researchers as they still represents a non–normative way of being parents that affects a growing number of children at least during part of their childhood. Solo parenthood is non-normative not only because it represents a minority of parents (yet a rapidly growing minority). It is non-normative also from the point of view of shared norms about parenthood in Europe, which still largely indicate the two-parents-and-children nuclear family household as preferable and more appropriate form of parenthood. Last it is non-normative because being a solo parent is only rarely a planned way to parenthood[3], more often it is an unexpected or unintended transition.

[3] The exception are women chosing to have children alone but they are are rare among solo parents.

In this paper we focus on the transition to solo parenthood and its boundaries from a life course perspective. In the life course tradition, transitions are defined as period of rapid change in the life course when individuals redefine one or more of their social roles and pass from one phase to another. Transitions may represent a turning point in life when they challenge and redefine future expectations and trajectories in fundamental ways. The process is not necessarily uni-dimensional and unidirectional and a qualitative study is crucial to point out the challenges of identifying ways to model and measure solo parenthood trajectories appropriately and improve the quality of our data about this increasingly important family form. At what point can we consider solo parents as such? Is at separation due to discord, at formal residential separation, at the moment when the financial and legal responsibilities for children are assigned to one parent? Through this examination of the transition into solo parenthood, we aim at contributing to the understanding of what events and circumstances can be best be considered as defining the onset of solo parenthood.[4]

We adopt a qualitative approach interviewing women and men with a relatively recent experience of solo parenthood and with full custody of their young children. Qualitative studies are critically important to formulate new hypotheses, models, and improve theories about new family forms.

Background and significance

Research dealing with solo parenthood in demography concentrated on them as a rising form of household and as a population subject to various form of risks, particularly economic and health risks. More recently and thank to the availability of panel data, more has been done to identify pathways to and out of solo parenthood, to consider the union trajectories of individual before and after solo parenthood as related to this experience (Bastin 2013, Schnor 2013). Most of these studies need to identify a date of entry into solo parenthood.

The onset of solo parenthood is likely to be a complex process, which lead us to questions the validity of dates given in survey data. Given the importance in demographic analyses of the timing and sequencing of events, both as independent and dependent variables, it is important to understand how the transition to and out of solo parenthood is defined and experienced.

[4] . Similar questions can be asked for the definition of the end of the solo parenthood state and constitute our next investigation

The boundaries between couple parenthood and solo parenthood may be much blurrier than is generally assumed. [5]

We still know too little about the factors involved into the entry into solo parenthood in the recent years and how people involved in it experience this life transition. The existing qualitative studies on solo parents have mostly focused on teenager mother of disadvantaged background whose child's father never got really involved (Duncan 2007, Edin & Kefalas, 2011, Phoenix 1991, Coleman and Cater 2006, Edin and Kefalas 2005). These studies highlight that aside with material difficulties, single mothers hold a very positive attitude towards motherhood and that they consider their experience as a turning point in life that allowed them to take a different direction, including go back to education and work. Despite the growing recognition that solo parenthood concerns a much more varied population than low educated adolescent mothers, very little qualitative research examines the transition to solo parenthood for individuals with different trajectories and backgrounds.

The project we draw on for this presentation is still on going. Taking a life course perspective, we are interested in what resources are challenged and created during the transition and the duration of solo parenthood, and which are the specific vulnerabilities and resilience opportunities faced by individuals while they experience solo parenthood.
The project has mixed method longitudinal design, where the quantitative part, based on data from the third cohort of the Swiss Household Panel[6], will describe and analyze trajectories in and out single parenthood as well as analyze specificities of solo parents in comparison to non parents and cohabiting or married parents with similar characteristics. We are guided by several questions: What are the pertinent criteria to measure and model solo parenthood and its boundaries? How do family trajectories look like in terms of onset, duration, and recurrence of solo parenthood during the life course? What are the interrelations between family trajectories, health, professional, and relational outcomes? How do individual resources shape and are shaped by the transition to solo parenthood? Which kind of resources (health, financial, social)?

[5] In this regard, solo parenthood endings may also be blurred, not unidirectional and often involves ambivalence and gradual entry into a new relationship.
[6] The III cohort is the 2013 cohort of the Panel, which will be submitted a retrospective life course calendar including partnrships, residence and fertility histories.

The qualitative component, whose first wave is still on going (follow up interviews are foreseen in 2014, 2016 and 2018)[7], tackles on the objective and subjective adjustments solo parents face. How do they organize their working and caring time? How do they address social institutions? How does their social networks react to this change? How do they experience their other social identities interact with that of being a parent? We are also interested in the process of subjective adaptation to one's own state as solo parents. Such process takes time, is often non-linear and marked by ambiguity and ambivalence. Ambiguity is evident in the roles (especially the role of parent and partner) and ambivalence in the wishes (concerning the solo parent status).

In this paper we draw on the qualitative part of the project and we restrict our attention to the transition to solo parenthood. Are respondents able to date the begin of their experience ans do they do so according to shared markers? If not what are the relevant markers they mention? In particular we draw on semi-structured interviews in order to show the challenges in defining the beginning of a solo parent status.

Data and methods

We analyze the life course of individuals living as solo parents at the moment we met them and whose entry to the single parent state fits one of these the following patterns. The first pattern is solo parenthood as the consequence of a union break-up or partner death. In these cases parenthood was experienced in partnership and it was followed either by separation, a divorce, or widowhood. When the other parent is alive, we cared to include both cases those who are in contact with the other parent on a regular basis and those who have only occasional or no contact with the other parent either because of conflict or because of important geographical distance. The important aspect here is that parenthood was a couple experience at first. The second pattern is solo parenthood, which began without a couple perspective (contraceptive failure with occasional partner, partner does not accept to be a parent from the very start, conception through a donor) are the most common paths to this kind of solo parenthood. Also in these cases the other parent, when present and informed, may

[7] The total number envisaged is 40 cases in this first wave and another 20 to be added starting with wave 2 in 2014. These latter will be respondents of the Swiss Household Panel in a solo parent household situation in 2013 and who will have agreed to participate to a qualitative survey. The reason of this mixed mode of recruitment is that we would like to be able to « fill in » our sample with the inclusion of a variety of different cases. Ideally respondents who have filled out a life calendar module for the Panel study could be filtered according to specific life trajectories and experience of solo parenthood we may have missed with the snowballing. Another reason to se panel respondents is that we want to capture separation happened in the inter-wave period and try to interview both members of a previous couple.

wish to have some contact with the child or not. The transition to solo parenthood is relatively different in these two groups. In the former case the previous bi-parental experience has to be unmade; in the latter case parenthood belong to the individual, and has to be constructed as such from the beginning.

The respondents all live in urban settings of the two Swiss cantons of Geneva and Vaud. Data collection is still on going and so is this description of the sample. The 35 respondents we have interviewed or fixed an appointment with so far were recruited through personal contacts, association mailing lists, and flyers in public places. Entering the field was as it often happens a gradual process of gaining confidence in the community. Flyers and mailing lists did not produce as many results before we did enter in contact with the associations and before the word spread among solo parents own contacts. The recruitment is therefore a multiple entries snowball sampling, at least partially: so far 35% of the respondents were referred from the pool of previous participants. Snowballing is of course not random, but it has the potential to reach out on individuals who would not otherwise be willing to answer to a survey call for participants by anonymous phone calls or mails.

The respondents were self-identifying as parents who are raising their children alone. We also limited as much as possible the interviews to parents who experienced a relatively recent transition to solo parenthood (mostly 1 to 5 years) and had children aged between 0 and 10 years and who have legal full custody of their children[8]. These choices were made after a pilot study with larger inclusion criteria. Recent transitions are justified by the fact that we have a longitudinal set up for our study which enable us to follow the evolution of the solo parents in the medium run. The focus on younger children is justified by the fact that these are the children who still requires a relatively high amount of care and whose presence in the household structure the time use and resources available to the parent. We did not include cases in which the child custody was shared between the two parents equally since co-parenthood implies a different kind of relationship among parents and parents and children and we wanted to limit to solo parents situations.

[8] There are two exceptions with adolescent children. One is a case in which the children are partially handicapped and need constant supervision. They are as resource-intensive if not even more as younger children would be for the caring parent. The other one is a case when the children were aged 4 and 10 at separation and we though instructive to have an account of their adaptation thereafter.

The interviews are extensive, on average they last 1 and half hours. The sensitive nature of the topic made them at times also emotionally intensive interviews for both respondent and interviewer[9]. The interviewing team is composed of the author of this paper and three senior researchers, all having extensive experience in qualitative data collection and analysis. The team meets regularly to regulate the interview guideline with the experience gained in the field, to discuss specific cases and situations, which challenge our questions and methods, and in order to maintain the project coherence during data collection.

The interview content begins with a sketch on the life course trajectory in different domains (union, family, education and employment). We then ask to place parenthood and the transition to solo parenthood in this life course picture; we probe for the evolution of the relationship with the other parent (when appropriate) and of his/her relationship with the child/ren; the relationship of the child/ren with the respective parents' families; the current legal arrangements for the child/children; the possible employment adjustments related solo parenthood; the institutional role and support in the transition and currently; the daily life organization, the child care arrangements; the perceived advantages and disadvantages of solo parenthood; the partnership situation at the moment of the interview and family currently and in perspective; the current social network configuration and support.

We used a semi-structured interview guideline, which is a good compromise between having systematic information on topical issues and pursuing additional lines of investigation when the case justifies it. The openness also allows exploring the justifications for given behavioral pattern, meanings attributed to choices, perceptions and expectations. All these elements are crucial to understand family related processes described by statistical analyses.

The interview includes a more structured part composed of a network chart and a network grid (Bernardi 2011, Bernardi et al , Hollstein..), which are completed at the end of the interview. We included these instruments in order to be able to estimate the perceived social support and needs of solo parents, the network of important people and the perceived place of the other parent in it. We also use a life calendar instrument (developed by LIVES and included in the third wave of the Swiss Household Panel in the field in the Fall 2013) as

[9] In one case after 2 hours of a very interesting interview the respondent asked to withdraw from the study, with the motivation that she was not through her situation emotionally. We of course respected her will and she is not among the cases listed in this paper nor in the database of the project

support for the life course narrative and will be systematically completed by respondents in a later time of the project.

The data collection is on-going a the moment of writing and for this paper we are able to analyze only a limited number of interviews (19). In table 1 in annex there is a short description of the main characteristics of the cases included in this subsample[10]. What is worth noting here is that 12 respondents are solo parents after having been parents in a couple while 7 have been solo parents from the start (only 1 of them went for assisted reproduction while the remaining 6 were more to face pregnancy issued by an occasional relationship or men who did not want to engage in fatherhood when informed about the pregnancy). The two male respondents who have their children custody, both reported having been physically aggressed by their partner.

Analyses are interpretative and based on comparisons of individual cases and cross cases thematic coding [11]. Coding implies selecting and grouping data (interview extracts), developing categories of concepts or actions by grouping codes, and identifying a range of variation for such categories. For instance, the category of perceived disadvantages of solo parenthood includes interviews extracts where respondents mention her perception of material, psychological, relational disadvantages of her status. At the moment of writing, we have just proceeded by coding by key topics derived from the interview questions (top down). Analyses are at a preliminary stage and the coding evolving. In perspective the current coding scheme will be integrated by open coding of data which are not in the initial research questions but that emerge as crucial to understand solo parenthood experiences (open coding or bottom up coding).

Therefore the following sections have to be considered more as a series of suggestive paths of investigation than as conclusive findings. Despite results are tentative, we find important to present and discuss them at this stage to nourish the back and forth procedure of data collection and analysis typical of an explorative qualitative approach.

Preliminary findings

[10] We included all those interviews that were transcribed at the moment of analyzing for this paper; more interviews have been realized and transcribed in the last few weeks.
[11] The Hyperresearch 3.5.2 for qualitative analyses is the software support for data management and the coding process.

Objective Markers of the transition to solo parenthood

How do our respondents define the start of solo parenthood? We asked solo parents to describe us how raising their children alone (as the recruitment call stated) came about. Typically, narratives include a series of circumstances around these transitions, none of which is sufficient, and a gradual process in which parenthood becomes gradually a solo journey. The markers of this journey are multiple and may include residential and legal separation, the harshening of the relationship between the parents, or the interruption of visits and financial support by the non-custodial parent. More often respondents do not give a precise date as to when solo parenthood began. They usually indicate a more or less long period. Some are used to tell their story to friends, family, lawyers, social assistant and judges and it is obvious that there is a 'story' built around the experience. Nevertheless, independently of the factual evidence, their stories are extremely rich in terms of transition markers.

When a date is given, often it is linked to an objective marker, a pivotal episode or step that varies from case to case. Such event or step may be residential separation, legal separation, or the stated withdrawal of the other parent to engage both as partner and as parent.

Case 1, (residential separation): Françoise was married with the father of her two children and they all lived together as a nuclear family until the relationship with her husband deteriorated. She says having lost confidence in her partner as a consequence of his hiding the actual financial situation of their household (debts) and his infidelity. As a consequence she decided to leave their common apartment with the two children after 13 years of marriage. After her moving out, things got in the hands of lawyers and the divorce followed two years later: "*I was turning apart from my husband, from both sides there were large gaps and so (…) the decision was not taken today for tomorrow. I have been telling to myself 'what am I doing?' I was a little bit… I said 'no, one cannot do that like this', but I saw that problems were coming more and more. So I wanted to leave before that it would get worse and worse"* (Françoise, 40, 2 children aged 4 and 10 at separation).

Case 2, Antoinette (legal separation): Antoinette was housewife or jobbed occasionally during her union, until she searched for a 100% job to leave it soon after and go back to education. This decision accelerated the crisis in her marriage. After a few years of wavering to hold the marriage together, (" *I knew already that there was something that did not work, but putting words on it (...), I knew it did not work but I did not have the courage of leaving (…).*") Antoinette went for a conflict-full separation procedure. The separation was formalized one year later and it is this official date that Antoinette quotes as the beginning of her solo parenthood when asked about it. (Antoinette, 42, 2 children with handicap of 13 and 16).

Case 3, (statement of withdrawal of the other parent): Elise realizes she would have been alone in raising the child during pregnancy already. She had just quitted a one-week long

relationship, when she realized to be pregnant. Incapable to decide for an abortion alone, she informed the father. His ready answer in favor of keeping the pregnancy going, let her try to live together with him for a while "to assume my behavior". The couple did not work out but she still hopes to share with him the burden, given that they decided together. When she asked him how he did want to organize his father visits *"as a first reaction he answered ' I want to see him everyday' and I told him 'ok, be consequent with your choice then' and the next day he called me and proposed to be back together. I refused since I had tried already, it was to complicated (...) I said no and he replied that he was not interested ' I do not want to engage'. For me it was hard since I only then realized that I would have been alone to raise him"* (Elise, 40, 1 child of 3)

In other cases, respondents seem to shift the beginning of their solo parent state according to context of what is being said. Lucie explains how her thinking about what solo parenthood is has grown gradually out of her experience. In her interview and somewhat contradictory she states that it is the father absence to define solo parenthood and at the same time that it does not matter whether he is there or not until he is not legally related to the child.

Case 4: Lucie has been engaged through a traditional marriage to the father of the child, an acquaintance since their common childhood in Africa. Students in Switzerland, they form a couple a few months after living together with their siblings and they have a customary marriage after 3 years with the project of adding on it a civil marriage. Meantime she fell pregnant and since she felt that her husband disregarded their relationship to the point that during the last month of pregnancy Lucie moved back to her father's place, in the same city. Despite the residential separation, she had not yet made steps to end the marriage *"I still had the attitude 'he is my husband and that is my child (...) I stopped it when I saw him with this girl".* She asked for end the customary marriage engagement when she got confirmation from her social networks that her husband was dating other women. She realized she is a solo parent a year after birth. When asked about her status of solo parent, she would answer "*I would say that from the moment in which the father was and is absent... (...).until I fill out institutional forms one is labeled solo parent in there. Until there is no shared custody, one stays solo parent. Until there is no shared authority on the child one is solo parent. It is not so much the fact that he is there but the important thing is that in some official document his responsibility is engaged at the same title than mine. And this not the case". (*Lucie, 30, separated, 1 child of 3).

In all these cases one could ask respondents to state the moment in which their solo parenthood started, and they will probably give a date in terms of month a year. Yet, one question which stays open is the extent to which their statement would correspond to the one by the other parent and the potential mismatch in calculating average durations of trajectories of solo parents and non-custodial parents in the same population. One way around such problem would be to ask them about the date of the residential separation or of the legal separation. Yet, often the reality within household is already that of a solo parent household and legally married couples of parents are living apart as the next cases will show.

Subjective markers of the transition to solo parenthood

Residential and legal separations are not necessarily the only markers of the beginning of solo parenthood. They may also be not necessary ones. Although the end of the partnership is usually marked by one of the two parents moving out of a common household or at least by a residential separation, this is not always the case.

Case 4, (living together, apart): Arthur has the custody of his two daughters of 4 and 6 (they were 2 and 4 when the parents wanted to split). When his wife left the apartment, he started to the paper work for a formal separation, which was not ready when she decided to move in again after a 6-month period. *R: The lawyer said, she has the right to come back home. So she came back but meanwhile she had started a new life, I have to say that I was alone to care for the children, there was absolutely no love anymore. So it was extremely difficult when she came back, just impossible to live it (…). It was difficult in relation to the children, because I prepared them, I told them, I explained to them, but the fact that they saw her coming back it was difficult, in the sense that they thought ` ah here they come back together` (*Arthur, separated, 2 children)

Arthur's wife used to bring her lovers at home and left Arthur caring for the children as if she was not there. The tension between them rose to the point that she tried to stub Arthur in front of the children. Only at that point, legal measures could be taken to oblige the mother to leave the common household. The transition situation Arthur described can be described as a living together apart. What is relevant for us here is that in such situation only one parent actually cares for the child or children, sharing with solo parents the actual responsibility and daily organizational issues they face.

Arthur case is rather dramatic. Yet, several among our solo parents refer about a feeling of having been raising their child or children alone while still in a relationship. This being solo parent even before the couple break down is a perception expressed by the two solo fathers we interviewed so far. *"Caring for the house, I used to do it before (separation); managing who would care for the child, I used to it before. And now… for instance, who was supposed to care for the child was a Chinese puzzle, because she (the wife) did not want that my parents would take her, she did not want that this or that person would take her, and so on. And when I found myself alone, for me it was a thousand times easier".* (Olivier, separated, 1 child)

On the opposite side we find situations in which no legal separation has been pronounced, the respondent is still married with the father of the children. Since she is used to often live apart together due to the husband seasonal occupation, the transition to solo parenthood for her starts with the resolution to leave the country of common residence and go back to Switzerland.

Case 6, (married, but feeling solo parent since ever): Susan lives as solo parent her daily life since a year, but the separation from her husband has not yet been formalized. She worked and lived for 10 years in the African continent and met there the father of her children who was and is still seasonally working with private tourists. After a five-year relationship they had the first unplanned child and then a second intended one, as a couple. Susan felt that their relationship was not working anymore and she came back to Switzerland with the children to have her mother's help for childcare. At the moment of the interview she has not started any formal separation from her husband yet. In addition due to administrative complications her children do not have official documents neither as foreigners nor as Swiss nationals, and this despite they attend school regularly as residents on the Swiss territory. Yet, Susan felt solo parent much before leaving the common household, given that she was most of the time alone and alone being in charge of the children. *"I: there is a number of women who told us that they felt solo parent also before separating... R: yes indeed (...) it was me who raised the (child), since he (the husband) he was as seasonal worker at the beginning and afterword he changed job, he changed country, so in general it was me who raised him, I always had to adapt (...), since I had the children I worked part time and put on me all the rest"* (Susan, married, 2 children)

Is solo parenthood a clear-cut condition?

We pointed out a the fact that markers are multiple, that respondents may choose one or the other depending on their parental and relational history, and that factual markers may not correspond with the lived experience of parenting alone. Here we would like to add a last element of complexity. In some cases respondents do not manage to define their status univocally. On the one hand they answered out call for interview as solo parents ("monoparentalité") , on the other hand they attach a strong meaning to the relationship with the other parent. They express a considerable amount of ambivalence in this respect:

Case 7, (unclear about her relationship with the other parent): Beatrice decided to move out of the common household and separate from the father of her child after his depression and their financial problems grew to unbearable dimensions for her. They did not make any step toward divorce despite a few years have elapsed since separation "I: *so neither me nor him want to waste money on that (formal divorce). I personally prefer to pay music classes for my son. We will see in the next times, I do not know, maybe he wants to remarry, since over there (Africa) they are rather traditionalist and if he wants to start a new life, he is almost obliged*

*to divorce. So will see. But at the moment we are in a phase when we climb back the hill again, so I am not sure if he is in a phase where he would feel the need to divorce, I do not know. And it is also true that it is rather vague between us, to tell the truth. Because we separated when we still loved each other, so I do not know. But it is true that I do not plan to leave again with him (to Africa)" (*Béatrice, separated, 1 child)

Case 8 (for the father of the child she is a stable extra-marital relationship): after her divorce Alexandra met Edouard a professional who lived with his wife and children. Alexandra moved to be closer to him and kept on being his lover, regularly spending holidays with him. Their 13 years secret relationship got to an end when she fell pregnant. She kept the child despite the father initially tried to convince her to abort and refused to recognize him or see it. After 2 years of separation, Alexandra and Eduard starts seeing each other again and the man started to spend time with his child introducing him to his official family (Alexandra on the contrary does not have access to them until now). *"From my side, I have always considered him as my partner and introduced him as such to my family, to my friends, and to others; in his circles, it is rather the opposite… I stay the illegitimate, the forbidden, etc.".* Alexandra lives as a solo parent her daily life but at the same time she is in a sort of LAT relationship with the father of her child being conscious of the inner contradiction of her situation. *"Again there is a rather fundamental contradiction given that it is not long that I felt ready to live with Edouard not like a fusion-like couple, but like we had already discussed for years... we would need a duplex or an apartment with two entries so that we can be separate and together when we want"* (Alexandra, divorced from a different man than the father of the child, 1 child).

Discussion

Solo parenthood is an important form of doing and being a family, sometimes a transitory period in family development, sometimes a long term alternative form of parenthood. This paper draws on the first qualitative interviews of a larger ongoing project on solo parenthood in Switzerland. The aim of the paper was to study the way in which men and women, defining themselves as raising their children alone, talk about their transition to solo parenthood, including what they feel being the significant markers of such transition, whether they could date them and how consistently so. We use this information to gain insight into the issue of measuring solo parenthood, a task already complicated in current secondary data by an heterogeneity of possible definitions and their arbitrariness. We point out at at least two limitations of the current practices.

First, we show the limitation of a residential criterion to delimit the experience of solo parents. Current statistics are based on residential criteria of the nuclear one-parent family: solo parents are defined as parent-child/ren living in the absence of the other parent, with variations concerning the presence of other adults in the household, including a successive

partner, relatives or unrelated other adults and concerning the age of the dependent children (16, 18, 25). This definitions are more useful for counting aggregated population data (or in order to have a gross estimation[12] about who is entitled to receive child allowances, child alimony, social support entitlements, etc..) than for measuring individual solo parenthood trajectories or for understanding its implications as a life course experience. On the one hand our respondents point out that the informal and legal arrangements with the other parent related to the visiting rights are a major part of their experience of solo parenthood. On the other hand subjective markers seem to be more appropriate in this sense to capture the meaning and the effect of solo parenthood in the life course of individuals and their social environment. Social isolation, sense of being the only responsible for the child, and financial burden may began before physical separation of the partners. Residential separation may not mean the begin of a solo parent status when the relationship is not resolved.

Second, our findings call into question the assumption made by researchers that there is a precise onset of solo parenthood. Our interview suggest that many current solo parents who were in a couple take some time to resolve the ending of the relationship with the other parent. Cohabitation may not be coincident with a partnership and with co-parenting (e.g. Arthur) and residential separation may not be coincident with the partnership's end (e.g. Béatrice). The findings suggest also that it may be difficult to describe the status of a relationship. Those who were not in a couple at parenthood can be ambivalent with regard to their partnership status with the other parent (e.g. Alexandra). The transition to solo parenthood is often a gradual and ambivalent, multidimensional and non uni-directional transition. The first characteristic makes it hard for respondents to give a date for it. The second characteristic makes it hard to identify which is the relevant marker. The third characteristics increases the risk that retrospective data miss separations followed by reconciliation or include into a current relationship what had started as an actual solo parenthood. The gradual evolution from couple to solo parenthood or from a pregnancy with a potential future partner and father to a solo parenthood represent a few analytic challenges. Demographers have often the need to assume that there is a clear distinction between being single and being in a partnership, and even more so, in presence of a pregnancy or a child. As we have seen this is not always the case. What are the consequences and why do we care? For instance if we were to study solo parenthood together with non custodial parenthood we may

[12] Strictly speaking administrative criteria are based on the budget available to solo parents rather than on residential criteria on whch statistics are based.

find mismatches in the declarations of men and women concerning the start of their respective new situation (some may think of themselves as in a partnership and some already as apart). These challenges are not unique to solo parenthood and are intimately related to similar blurry frontiers and definition of cohabitation and LAT relationships (Manning and Smock 2005, Binstock and Thornton 2003).

In the next analyses we will address the topic of the meaning of solo parenthood in the context of the life course. We purposefully did not ask solo parents to define their status or the meaning that it has to them in an abstract manner. We will rather reconstruct the role that solo parenthood has played in their life trajectory by analyzing the reported perceptions of what the advantages and the disadvantages related to solo parenthood are; what parents had to learn in this new situation; what their partnership and working perspectives are, and to which extent they are hindered by their parental role and responsibilities. We know that on average solo parents spells last 6 years (in France). During this time there are certainly changes in circumstances and perspectives. The panel design we envisage in the larger project shall be able to let track some of those changes.

Our results are only tentative at this stage and they are not representative of the national population; we provide in-depth insights on the experience of the transition to solo parenthood of a small group of individuals. A more representative sample may provide an even larger range of important markers of the transition to solo parenthood. What we plan is to complete the current sample to include a few more men, widows, and solo parents who made a deliberate decision to enter parenthood alone. Nonetheless we believe that our findings have a few important indications about how to conceptualize and analyze solo parenthood. By pointing out at the complexities associated with studying solo parenthood, we hope to contribute to inform future data collection and empirical evaluation of these families.

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Table 1. Sample selected characteristics

Pseudo name	sex	age at interview (2012-13)	Civil status at interview	number of childre n	age children at interview (2012-2013)	education level	income level	solo parenthood following couple parenthood	respondent's origin	other parent origin
Alexandra	w	45	divorced (but not from the father of her child)	1	3	high	low	n	Foreigner (EU)	Swiss
Sarah	w	32	divorced	1	8	high	middle low	y	Swiss	Swiss
Léa	w	31	divorced	1	3	high	middle low	y	Swiss	Foreigner (South America
Elisa	w	40	single (attempt to live together after pregnancy)	1	3	high	middle low	n	Swiss	Foreigner (EU)
Lucie	w	30	separated (married according to africantraditions, not officialized in Switzerland)	1	3	high	low	n	Foreigner (Africa)	Foreigner (Africa)
Olivier	m	49	separated	1	10	low	middle low	y	Swiss	Swiss
Barbara	w	37	widow (suicide)	2	8 and 5	low	middle low	y	Swiss (second gen EU)	Swiss
Vivianne	w	49	single (after cohabitation)	1	7	high	middle	y	Swiss	Swiss
Antoinette	w	41	divorced	2	13 - 16 (with handicap)	high	middle	y	Foreigner (Africa)	Swiss
Arthur	m	31	separated	2	5 and 3	middle	middle	y	Swiss	Foreigner (Asia)
Sylvie	w	37	single (after cohabitation)	1	3	middle	low	n	Swiss	Foreigner (Asia)
Susan	w	36	married	2	5 and 7	high	middle	y	Foreigner (EU)	Foreigner (EU)
Marie-Jo	w	37	separeted	1	5	high	middle	y	Foreigner (Africa)	Swiss
Lucienne	w	45	divorced (but not from the father of her child)	1	4	high	middle	n (donor insemination)	Swiss	NA
Flore	w	31	single (attempt to live together after parenthood)	1	7	low	low	n	Swiss	Swiss
Tania	w	28	single (after cohabitation)	1	2	low	low	n	Foreigner (EU)	Swiss
Françoise	w	40	divorced	2	8 and 14	middle	high	y	Swiss	Swiss
Béatrice	w	42	separated	1	6	high	middle	y	Swiss	Foreigner (Africa)