JFR JOURNAL OF FAMILY RESEARCH

Responsible mothers? Feeding children in difficult times

Radka Dudová[1]

[1] Czech Academy of Sciences

Address correspondence to: Radka Dudová, Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Sociology, Jilská 1, 110 00, Prague (the Czech Republic). Email: radka.dudova@soc.cas.cz

Abstract

Objective: Based on a qualitative research project focusing on single mothers during the COVID-19 crisis, this article explores the social norms that govern the narratives and practices of foodwork by poor and marginalised mothers and analyses the notion of lived maternal responsibility.

Background: Even though the norms and cultural expectations surrounding motherhood vary widely between cultures and communities, there is typically one dominant ideology of good motherhood. However, it is unclear whether its norms apply to all mothers in the same way. Moreover, its relationship to neoliberal ideology is not clearly defined.

Method: This article draws on a longitudinal qualitative study of 32 single mothers with children under 13 conducted shortly before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Czechia. The analysis implemented constructivist grounded theory and focused on foodwork as it was described by the participants.

Results: The mothers constructed their own understanding of maternal responsibility as they accepted, challenged and negotiated the norms of neo-liberal ideology and the ideals of good motherhood. Beyond the responsibilisation discourses, we view responsibility as a response to vulnerability and a need motivated by the ethics of care.

Conclusion: The expectations of neoliberal ideology, intensive motherhood ideology and the ethics of care cannot be empirically separated. The multi-layered responsibility model captures the interlocking of the three levels of responsibility in mothers' lived experiences.

Key words: foodwork, intensive motherhood, single mothers, COVID-19 pandemic, ethics of care

1. Introduction

Motherhood is subject to cultural expectations and social norms and associated with moral judgements, and mothers, as moral subjects, are constructed as individually responsible for the wellbeing and development of their children (McCarthy et al., 2000). Even though the norms and cultural expectations of motherhood vary widely between cultures and communities, there is typically one dominant ideology of good motherhood—a set of beliefs outlining the expectations for mothers and how they should parent and raise their children should they wish to be perceived as good mothers (Williamson et al., 2023). The motherhood ideology dominant in contemporary economically affluent societies has been conceptualised as 'intensive motherhood' (Arendell, 2000). A scoping review of research published from 2001 to 2021 by Schmidt et al. (2023) identified five main social norms of contemporary motherhood in industrialised societies: being attentive to the child, securing the child's successful development, integrating employment into mothering, being in control and being content with the mothering role.

Although there is evidence of these norms spreading across various socioeconomic and ethnic groups (Ennis, 2014), there is a lack of agreement regarding whether they apply to all groups of mothers in the same ways. Research shows that motherhood norms take different forms in different cultural and institutional settings (Loyal et al., 2017; Murray, 2015) and that their exact content differs depending on what socio-demographic category a mother belongs to (Christopher, 2012; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Moreover, some of the social norms of motherhood have been questioned and challenged, as they contradict the neoliberal demands placed on women to be self-responsible adult workers (Schmidt et al., 2023).

In the current article, I aim to explore the manifestations of parenting norms in the narratives of poor single mothers in Czechia during the crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic. I focus on the issue of feeding children, as one of the most important mothering activities and one bound by norms and filled with meaning (Karademir-Hazır, 2021; Parsons et al., 2024). What norms of proper parenting do poor single mothers reflect in their parenting practices, specifically foodwork? How do they cope with the neoliberal demand for individual responsibility and self-reliance on one hand and the norms of good motherhood, which stipulate that they put their children first, on the other? According to their stories, are these demands mutually compatible, and if not, how do mothers perceive and resolve this conflict?

Based on the answers to these questions, I aim to expand on previous research in the following ways: First, by exploring the stories of poor and disadvantaged single mothers about feeding their families during a period of crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, my analysis reveals the practices and meanings of foodwork in times of austerity, as well as the norms that govern these practices and possibilities to challenge these norms.

Second, by focusing on the experiences of marginalised, low-income single mothers, this study shows how the experiences of motherhood are shaped by intersecting identities in systems of oppression. The empirical analysis shows that the burdens faced by marginalised mothers translate into specific mothering practices that, seemingly, do not meet the dominant standards of good motherhood, despite being at least equally child centred, labour intensive and temporally and emotionally extensive. In particular, this study responds to the call to re-evaluate theories that focus on the experiences of white, partnered, middle-class women while marginalising the voices of women of colour, those living in alternative family settings, and those from poor socioeconomic backgrounds (Collins, 2016).

Third, by analysing the boundaries of being a good mother for this specific group of women, I develop a multi-layered concept of maternal responsibility and show how different types of responsibility are negotiated, clash or reinforce one another in the lived experiences of mothers. Using foodwork, I show how disadvantaged mothers deploy their agency and re-constitute positive maternal identity in the face of adversity and pervasive and contradictory normative expectations.

2. Background

2.1 Motherhood ideology and norms

Motherhood ideology can be defined as a set of cultural beliefs, narratives, social norms and values that define and prescribe the role, responsibilities and behaviours expected of mothers. It shapes how motherhood is perceived and experienced, influencing individual choices, societal expectations and institutional structures (see Hays, 1996). In consequence, it reinforces social structures and individual roles and identities, perpetuating power dynamics (see Althusser, 2010). Social norms then can be defined as specific informal rules that stem from that ideology and govern behaviour in groups and societies. According to McCarthy et al. (2000), the overall moral imperative concerning parenthood is that parents must take responsibility for children in their care and, therefore, seek to put the needs of children first. Observing this imperative is key in sustaining a moral identity as a parent, regardless of cultural context and individual conditions.

The motherhood ideology dominant in contemporary economically affluent societies has been conceptualised, in the constructivist feminist literature, as 'intensive motherhood' (Arendell, 2000). According to it, motherhood should be exclusive, fully child centered, emotionally involving, extremely time consuming, and financially expensive (Hays, 1996). There are, however, conceptualisations of motherhood ideologies that develop and/or question the hegemony and uniformity of intensive motherhood. The social norms of motherhood may have very different meanings for different groups of mothers. They may be linked to different capabilities to perform motherhood and elicit a range of responses from mothers (Schmidt et al., 2023). Women with low incomes and those in disadvantageous positions experience pressure to conform to dominant motherhood norms despite their socioeconomic constraints. This pressure can lead to feelings of inadequacy and stress, which can adversely affect their emotional and physical well-being. Despite this, they often embrace some intensive mothering ideals as a way to assert their identity and defend their parenting choices, even in the absence of adequate social support (Elliott et al., 2015).

Randles (2021) pointed out that marginalised mothers must develop specific creative activities and strategies to provide for their children's basic needs. Randles theorised this as 'inventive mothering', which includes, for example, the rational consideration of how to use existing scarce resources and maintaining notions of security amid precarity. Therefore, motherhood, for marginalised women, represents more work—the meeting of basic needs, which, in addition to physical work, also demands exhausting mental, emotional and moral work.

2.2 Motherhood and neoliberal ideology

There is an ongoing discussion in the literature on motherhood regarding the relationship between contemporary motherhood norms and the values of neoliberalism. According to Miller and Rose (2008), neoliberalism has been globally dominant since the 1970s. It is characterised by the values of competition, individualism, self-reliance, personal responsibility and meritocracy (Amable, 2011). It is grounded in the belief that the market can function as an appropriate guide—an ethic—for all human action (Harvey, 2007). Neoliberal subjects are supposed to be autonomous and responsible individuals (Miller & Rose, 2008). While the ethical principles of neoliberalism most strongly pertain to the myth of ideal worker, as described by Acker (2006) or Beckman and Mazmanian (2020), they also shape the image of good parent, especially in the emphasis on individual responsibility (Murphy, 2000) and status safeguarding (Milkie & Warner, 2014). Schmidt et al. (2023) note that contemporary motherhood norms and the resulting practices among mothers are focused on maintaining women's economic productivity, pursuing self-improvement, attaining self-responsibility and self-control as good citizens, and producing children who are self-optimised future citizens.

However, at least some motherhood norms contradict the neoliberal demands on women to be self-responsible adult workers (Schmidt et al., 2023). Sharon Hays asserts that women adhere to intensive motherhood in resistance to neoliberalism, that is, to ensure 'sustainable human ties, free of competition and selfish individualism, that are meant to preserve us ... from an unbearable moral solitude' (1996, p. 175). Autret et al. (2024) called for exploring the possibility that by adhering to the ideology of intensive

motherhood, women attempt to counter the primacy of paid work, capital accumulation and the commodification of care and thus better cultivate family and community bonds. From this perspective, adopting the values and norms of good motherhood could stand in direct opposition to the neoliberal values of autonomy, self-reliance and individualism.

2.3 Responsibility

The notion of responsibility could elucidate the relationship between neoliberal ideology and motherhood norms. Trnka and Trundle (2017) argued that the term 'responsibility' has been colonised in public life and political rhetoric by neoliberal discourses of responsibilisation. In the Foucauldian tradition, responsibilisation is seen as a key element of new forms of self-governance and subjectivisation. Neoliberal governmentality creates self-governing subjects in the form of autonomous and responsible individuals who are freely choosing how to behave and act (Miller & Rose, 2008).

In contrast, feminist scholars elaborating the 'ethics of care' have framed responsibility as a key element of caring practices (Held, 2005; Tronto, 1998). Responsibilities that are accepted or deflected by the caregiver in response to another person's needs or concerns have been emphasised (Tronto, 1993). To respond to the need and dependency of the other, the caregiver must suspend her own plans and projects and be led by altruism (Kittay, 1999). Responsibilities are rooted in the human condition of vulnerability. According to van Nistelrooij and Visse (2019), one becomes responsible for something or someone by receiving a call. This call appears in a relational practice with someone who is in need of care. Accepting caring responsibilities, then, may lead to further marginalisation and loss of power, and caring responsibilities are distributed unequally. Tronto (1990) used the term of 'privileged irresponsibility' (Zembylas et al., 2014). Still, responsibility for another (a child, a dependent, a sick person, or an elderly person) is deeply moral and can be rewarding. Within the practices of care, 'much more is given and received that transcends anyone's responsibility' (van Nistelrooij & Visse, 2019, p. 284).

It is difficult to establish to what extent the norms of good motherhood correspond to the neoliberal trend of personal responsibilisation and to what extent they delineate the caring relationship of an adult towards a child, which is inherently responsible. The maternal practice of feeding children represents a maternal practice for which this unclear boundary may become visible.

2.4 Feeding children

Maternal foodwork, or feeding work (DeVault, 1991), is the labour mothers perform to feed a family. It entails planning meals, shopping, cooking and cleaning up, as well as creating mealtime rituals and supervising children's eating habits to ensure a healthy diet. Feeding children is more than just an existential need; it is a fundamental part of mothering practices and influenced by a range of social norms, beliefs and expert discourses. Family meals, in particular, and the need to increase their frequency have been the subject of much consideration, analysis and media attention (Kinser, 2017). Food, especially inappropriate feeding practices, are construed as risks in contemporary neoliberal discourses on motherhood. 'Feeding risk discourses' are thus characterised by implicit links to morality (Burrows, 2009).

According to Parsons, Harman and Cappellini (2024), maternal foodwork and the norms surrounding it are classed: while upper- and middle-class mothers' foodwork is intended to invest in their children by supporting and facilitating their acquisition of cultural capital, such as culinary or health capital, working-class understandings of good mothering are oriented towards a different ethical value system: while the importance of healthy food is recognised, foodwork tends to be concentrated on food that is filling and that children will enjoy. This is done to avoid waste (Backett-Milburn et al., 2010) but also to manifest love and nurturing (Lareau, 2011). While all parents tend to internalise the dominant discourse on healthy and varied feeding, the interpretations of key notions, such as those of home-made or nutritious food, and day-to-day practices reveal class-cultural patterning (Karademir-Hazır, 2021). Low-income and marginalised mothers are likelier than middle-class mothers to face negative bias in their encounters with health professionals, as well as questions about the adequacy of their family foodwork (Elliott & Bowen, 2018). When dealing with food scarcity, mothers must be inventive and search for and combine various strategies to provide food for their families—stretching food, budgeting, sacrificing their own needs, finding

alternative sources of food and money and protecting children from stigma and their families from state surveillance (Elliott et al., 2021; Parsons et al., 2024).

Neoliberal approaches to addressing food insecurity often pinpoint individual shortcomings, such as perceived deficiencies in budget management or food choices. They overlook broader structural challenges, including low wages, precarious employment, insufficient and costly housing and reductions in social welfare support (Graham et al., 2018). Moreover, feelings of shame and personal inadequacy conceal the realities of food insecurity from public scrutiny. The experience of food scarcity elicits intense emotions, with parents often experiencing guilt because of their inability to adequately provide for their families (van der Horst et al., 2014), developing strategies such as passing (as a normal parent) and hiding their households' food insecurity. Consequently, food insecurity in affluent countries remains hidden 'in plain sight' (Graham et al., 2018). This invisibility consequently hinders families' access to support and impedes political efforts to address this issue (ibid).

2.5 Single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic

The economic crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated food insecurity, even in affluent countries. A Canadian study by Men and Tarasuk (2021) discovered a link between job and food insecurity: one-quarter of respondents who were not working or were afraid of losing theirs job due to anti-COVID-19 measures experienced food insecurity, which was strongly associated with pandemic-related disruptions.

Like foodwork, food scarcity is gendered. During crises, such as the global pandemic, care work, which also entails feeding families, disproportionately falls on females and mothers (Wilson & Yochim, 2017). Barnes and Schrager (2024) showed that in the UK, the closure of schools during national lockdowns triggered a crisis, as vulnerable children were left without access to free school meal programs, as the government failed to offer an adequate alternative.

In most sociogeographic contexts, families of single parents were already more vulnerable than two-parent families before the pandemic. Existing evidence indicates that the challenges that single parents faced prior to the pandemic were generally magnified after the arrival of COVID-19. Single parents were hit harder by the pandemic in terms of, for example, economic problems, unemployment, work-life balance and loneliness (e.g., Langenkamp et al., 2022; Parolin & Lee, 2022; Yerkes et al., 2022). Single mothers had to simultaneously provide economic income for their households and take care of their children. During the pandemic, they could not rely on public institutions or informal support networks (Collins et al., 2021; Salin et al., 2023). During the pandemic lockdowns, the excessive intensity of caregiving demands, combined with the need to continue working, resulted in not only job losses and reduced working hours (Collins et al., 2020) but also overload, stress and a decrease in the quality of their relationships with their children (Soskolne & Herbst-Debby, 2023). When effective policies were not in place, economic and labour market instability led to increased poverty among families headed by single mothers (Parolin & Lee, 2022; Salin et al., 2023). Significantly, single mothers described their inability to manage both as a personal failing, not a structural problem (Hertz et al., 2020: 22).

Households with dependent children led by a single parent represent 23% of all families with dependent children in Czechia; 87% of them are headed by a single mother (CZSO, 2021). In Czechia, households headed by a single mother were already among the poorest before the COVID-19 pandemic (CZSO, 2020). Although single mothers are certainly not a homogenous group, they share some disadvantages and risks regardless of their other characteristics. The long-term closure of schools, including kindergartens[1], and the pressure to minimise social contact, even with one's closest relatives, brought about a critical increase in the volume of childcare and limited paid work opportunities. Furthermore, the industries and jobs in which single mothers are overrepresented were significantly restricted by anti-pandemic measures (see Spurný, 2021). Moreover, single mothers are overrepresented in insecure jobs that were prone to layoffs (Dudová, 2020). Generally, single mothers had few financial reserves and narrow social support networks before the pandemic (ibid).

Parents of children under 13, during the first lockdown, and under 10, during subsequent lockdowns, who had to remain at home during school closures could receive a replacement income contribution. At first, only those with a standard employment contract were entitled to it. In response to criticism from the

1 Schools were closed for a total of 20 weeks for children in kindergarten, 25 weeks for children in Grades One and Two, 35 weeks for children in Grades Three through Five and 44 weeks for children in the Second Grade of elementary school.

nongovernmental sector, this support was extended to the self-employed and, eventually, workers on short-term contracts with earnings above €400 per month (ceiling for full taxation and insurance contributions). However, most caregivers working on short-term contracts were not affected by this extension, because they had strategically combined short-term contracts so as not to exceed this ceiling (Hašková & Dudová, 2017). The single parents who lost their jobs were thus dependent on their savings, the help of family and friends and state welfare benefits. During 2020 and 2021, they faced a significant deterioration of their economic situations (STEM, 2021). As of 15 April 2020, 31% of households with children were living below the poverty threshold (defined as 60% of the median income after adjusting for monthly inflation), as compared to 13% before the pandemic. Single mothers were the group most affected by the pandemic, with 64% of them living below the poverty line (adjusted for monthly inflation; PAQ, 2021). Some of them contacted charities that offered help, some took formal or informal loans and some suffered in terms of food and health due to stress (STEM, 2021). According to the CZSO (2024), 27% of single-parent households experienced material deprivation, as compared to 5% of two-parent families). About 14% of single-parent households could not afford to eat meat every second day and likely faced some kind of food scarcity.

3. Method

To gain insights into how marginalised mothers reflected social norms of mothering during the COVID-19 crisis and how they constructed and experienced their parental responsibility amidst neoliberal demands for individual responsibility and self-reliance and the dominant norms of proper motherhood, I use a qualitative research methodology. I focus on their narratives of practices of feeding children, as I consider maternal foodwork a crucial dimension of mothering that is strongly imbued with values and moral discourses.

3.1 Data

The research presented in this article draws on individual and group interviews with single mothers raising children under 13, which were conducted shortly before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Czechia. First, six focus group interviews were conducted in three Czech regions in the early spring of 2020, just prior to the launch of anti-pandemic measures, with 48 women. The women who participated in the focus groups lived alone with their children and were clients of the NGO Aperio[2], which provides support to parents. These women had varying levels of education, diverse job positions and economic status. The topics discussed in the groups related to the women's current jobs and their satisfaction with them; barriers and opportunities, including work–life balance, experiences with prejudice and discrimination in the labour market; income and economic situation; self-confidence and strategies for success. Then, with Aperio's consent and that of the selected respondents, I conducted individual telephone interviews with 17 women participating in the group interviews. In the first phase, I contacted women who had at least one child under 12 and were employed. The interviews took place in May–June 2020, lasting between 20 and 40 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. In this round of data collection, women were asked about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected them and their families, specifically their work and economic situations, how they dealt with childcare and home education, how they coped with the situation and where they could find help and support. I addressed these women again in December 2020, after the end of the second wave of the pandemic, and in November 2021. I added two unemployed mothers from the original sample to these rounds of interviews. The interviews were repeated with 15 women in 2020 and 14 in 2021. Similar questions were asked as in the previous round of interviews, with more of a focus on long-term crisis management.

In accordance with the principle of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2008), I recruited a second subset of single mothers (N = 15) via a social media announcement to develop and refine tentative categories. I targeted those who suffered important economic hardships during the pandemic, interviewing them just after the third lockdown in March 2021 and reinterviewing them in November 2022 (N = 9), using the same set of questions as with the first subset. This sample of women had lower qualification levels, were typically

2 See: https://www.aperio.cz/en/about-us

out of employment and lived in disadvantaged regions of Czechia (for more information on participants, see the table in the Appendix).

Fourteen of the participants were unemployed at the time of the final interview, and ten were working in fixed-term or short-term employment. They all lived alone with their children, except Laura, who shared a household with her mother. The fathers of the children were present in their lives to various degree, and the amount of child support they paid typically did not cover a substantive part of the households' living costs. In general, the poorer a mother was, the less help she obtained from the children's father. Not all participants faced food scarcity, but most did for at least some period during the observed years.

The interviews were conducted via telephone due to COVID-19 restrictions and some participants' lack of means of online communication. Despite this, the interviews were sufficiently rich, likely because they were repeated two or three times, which allowed for a relationship of trust to be established between the interviewer and participants. Moreover, the sensitivity of the topic may have contributed to openness among the participants during the telephone interviews because socioeconomic differences were not apparent over the telephone; thus, the participants were sure of their anonymity and were sometimes able to engage in routine care activity (such as preparing lunch or driving to school) during the interview (see Trier-Bieniek, 2012; ANON). Most of the participants took part in two or three rounds of interviewing; however, some were contacted only once. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the course of the interviews. They could interrupt the interview at any time and cancel their participation. The participants verbally consented to an anonymised form of the interview being used for research purposes. The participants obtained a monetary reward for their time. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, pseudo-anonymised, coded and analysed together in a single file using Atlas.ti. Because the narratives were repeated in the main categories, we can assume that these categories were saturated.

3.2 Analysis

The analysis was conducted using the constructivist grounded theory developed by Charmaz (2006). The analysis procedure involved a detailed and repeated reading of the material, followed by a coding process using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. Coding the interview transcriptions led to the thematic categorisation of relevant parts of the texts. In the first stage of open coding, I focused on actions and potential theoretical cues, such as dealing with hunger or feeling gratitude. In the second stage of re-focused coding, I identified the codes that were recurring or particularly significant in terms of illuminating the studied phenomenon, such as emotional work or autonomy (Charmaz, 2008). The analysis focused primarily on foodwork, or the participants' accounts of how they acquired food for their families or the money to buy food; what meanings they attached to different types of food and food-related activities; how they coped with food insecurity and how food insecurity was reflected in their daily practices, maternal attitudes and identities. I focused on narratives of situations in which the participants faced food scarcity, and I analysed their stories of foodwork in these situations. As such, the interviews themselves represented foodwork, as the money the participants received for the interview was often used to buy food or meet other needs that would otherwise have been neglected (see also Randles, 2021). Together, the significant categories identified in the data formed an analytical story (Charmaz, 2006) or group narrative (Hallberg, 2006)—a theoretical, interpretative narrative based on individual participants' stories that has explanatory and predictive power. This approach employs abstraction by weaving conceptualisation into description. The analytical story of the process of maternal foodwork in difficult times helps us understand the meanings and identity negotiations attached to it. This understanding sheds light on the interplay between neoliberal moral discourses, ideals of good motherhood and the ethics of care in the mothers´ narratives and allows us to examine, in depth, the notion of maternal responsibility.

4. Findings

4.1 'An empty fridge': Food scarcity in a society of abundance

Finding food or money for food, planning and cooking represented one of the main areas on which the research participants focused in their narratives. The norms of proper child nutrition that the interviewed mothers reflected included 1) sufficient filling food; 2) healthy food, specifically meat, fruit and vegetables, and especially, 3) at least one hot meal per day (compare Parsons et al., 2024). Under normal conditions, school cafeterias in Czechia help mothers meet these requirements. Our participants considered the meals there to be of good quality, and many of them participated in programs that provided these meals for free. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, school canteens were closed for several months.

Although Czechia is a country with a relatively low level of income poverty and a developed welfare state (see The World Bank, 2024), experiences of food scarcity were surprisingly common in single mothers' narratives from 2020 to 2022. Alena had, at some point in Autumn 2020, an 'empty fridge. Everything was empty in the cupboard.' Eva wondered, 'What should I give them to eat', and Kveta had to decide whether 'to pay the rent or to feed the children or to buy what they need for school'. To a greater extent, this concerned those who found themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation resulting from the intersection of low qualifications, living in a disadvantaged region, having young children or having a non-majority ethnicity. For others, food scarcity related specifically to the COVID-19 pandemic, when their incomes dropped significantly. During the pandemic lockdowns, their food expenses increased due to the constant presence of children at home and the unavailability of school state-subsidised lunches. Moreover, ordering groceries online was more expensive than local shopping during sales: 'They were terribly hungry ... I usually tried to cook for two days, but it was all eaten in one day anyway' (Aneta).

When the anti-pandemic measures ended, the situations of some of the participants improved. For others—those who could not find paid work due to their low qualifications, their poor health or their children's young ages—the situations worsened, exacerbated by inflation and cost increases following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Therefore, although these women lived in a society of abundance, they, at least temporarily, did not have enough to eat or were dependent on the cheapest low-quality food. They expressed anguish combined with anger when they were not able to provide adequate food, as well as guilt when they felt they could not meet the classed normative expectations regarding feeding children.

4.2 'I have to think about it constantly': Mental and emotional labour

Regarding food insecurity during or after the pandemic, mothers invested immense energy in securing food for their families. Obtaining food required a great deal of creativity and invention. The interviewed mothers typically combined several resources, either financial or in kind—social benefits, paid work, help from relatives or friends and help from charitable organisations. They also combined various strategies, such as self-restricted eating, producing their own food, stretching food, finding discounts, prioritising food over other expenses and cutting back on other living expenses. In April 2021, Barbora described a combination of tactics she used to obtain money: 'I also donate plasma for money. I would never have done this before. I know it is bad for my body, but now, I have to because these 700 Crowns are exactly our electricity bill.'

Getting food for the family required exhaustive mental labour exceeding the typical maternal load. In addition to mental labour, food insecurity required a specific kind of expertise of the women: 'I'm thinking all the time that I need to save however and wherever I can' (Blanka). The participants mastered the art of cooking with minimal costs, deciding which payments were a priority and which could be deferred for some time or stretching food for the longest possible time until their next pay checks. They also needed to learn how the welfare system functions, specifically the benefits they were entitled to and their conditions and how to behave and argue to earn them. Describing the difficulties she faced when applying for housing benefits, Klara concluded, 'It's very much numbers and counting and dates and stuff. That's a problem for me. I have to know what to pay, where, [and] when, and it's very difficult (...) And the system; nobody knows how it works at all.' The cognitive work associated with poverty could be so exhausting that the women no longer had the capacity for anything else, such as finding longer-term solutions: 'And I guess it's completely

beyond me. I really live from day to day. I don't know what's going to happen. The main thing is to have something to eat and a place to live tomorrow' (Klara).

The participants who were constantly uncertain about whether they would be able to buy food had to manage intense negative emotions, such as the fear of the future: 'You really worry every month if you're going to get over, if there's going to be food at all, if you're going to pay everything' (Romana). Dealing with the welfare authorities required resilience to stress and was a source of anxiety. The participants reported that they attempted not to let these negative emotions take hold of them and, especially, not to show them in front of their children: 'I think I have already set it up in my head so that the child doesn't feel that things are going wrong' (Blanka). Thus, they performed very specific and intense emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003). This labour was based on expert knowledge, according to which a mother's insecurity and stress can negatively affect their child's psychological well-being and, subsequently, their further development. The mothers who found themselves in material distress not only had to focus on how to survive and feed their children but also strove to provide their children with the best conditions for development and required managing their own emotions.

4.3 'I can do without food': Mothers' hunger and intensive parenting

In their narratives, the women emphasised that rather than not feeding their children, they preferred not to eat themselves or eat only the cheapest and nutritionally poor foods. Thus, in their stories, child-centredness, as Hays describes (1996), was more than abandoning a career and sacrificing leisure time. As Elliott et al. (2021) point out, several studies have documented how mothers sacrifice to feed their children, with negative consequences for their own health and well-being. The participants reported that they attempted to ensure quality food for their children, such as fruits, vegetables, dairy products and meat. As they relied on school lunches, after schools were closed during the pandemic lockdowns, the women felt they had to prepare quality meals for their children at home:

Well... you can cut back. When (my son) is eating in the kindergarten, so I can eat less, I take just an instant soup or something, and the kid has a good quality meal in the kindergarten. But when he had to stay at home, I could not skimp on meals, so it cost a pretty penny. (Laura)

The emphasis on quality food reflects the norms of maternal foodwork: it is not sufficient to feed the children; it is necessary to feed the children in the right way. Kinser (2017), in her analysis of feeding discourses in the US, showed how the debates surrounding family food moralise regarding maternal feeding work and encourage mother blaming. Gillies, Edwards and Horsley (2016) argue that the use of knowledge derived from natural sciences and its combination with social psychology (i.e., scientific advice and instructions regarding how parents should behave and interact with children and what to feed them to help their brains develop) also contributes to the stigmatisation of poor parents. In emphasising the need for quality and healthy food for children, the research participants, such as Alena, proved that they internalised these moral discourses:

I think that a healthy lifestyle is important, healthy food and not just any ... (kind of food). Even [with] the chemically boxed milk, you see it immediately. The children behave differently, they lose the capacity to concentrate, and they don't do well in school. (Alena)

The moral norms of foodwork present in the mothers' narratives thus presented a mix of classed normative expectations regarding feeding children and norms stemming from public discourses created by doctors and nutritionists. As mentioned above, Alena did not want to feed her child 'chemically boxed milk', even when she had an 'empty fridge'. The correct feeding of the children was, for these women, a self-sacrificial endeavour that directly threatened their health but could also be a source of pride and self-confidence.

4.4 'I won't play the poor': Moral work and the maternal self

Murphy (2000) shows how when their actions do not coincide with normative expectations, recommendations or the prevailing parenting ideology, women undertake moral work that may include redefining the self, reconciling expectations and reality and maintaining and restoring internal subjective stability. Single mothers actively constructed their identities as parents, used excuses and justifications

when accounting for their decisions and policed themselves against social norms (see Ryan et al., 2010). One of the moral work strategies observed in women´s narratives was 'prioritising time over money':

I have different priorities. I'm really happy that I can spend time with my boy, that I can attend to him, and I'll just say ... The boy was born in 2015; I returned to work in 2019 and in between, I simply did not buy anything new. Maybe shoes, but nothing else. I have different priorities. (Anna)

The women emphasised their own frugality and self-sacrifice, putting the needs of their children before their own, and upheld austerity as a general value in bringing up their children. They questioned the neoliberal pressure on consumption and placed the time spent with their children above the buying of services and things, including food, for themselves. Another common moral work strategy observed in the interviews was contrasting. The participants compared themselves to other mothers and emphasised the moral value of their own actions, in contrast to the actions of others. In their narratives, they compared themselves to mothers in similar situations of disadvantage who did not follow the imperative to subordinate everything to the interests of the children (see McCarthy et al., 2000), such as Alena:

I see it, actually, when I go to that (food bank). I see other single mothers, some of them are really much worse off. But, then again, you can also see that she smokes one cigarette after another, right? Or she drives a car, for example. I could never afford that.

Another moral work strategy identified in the narratives was the redefinition of the situation. When mothers were unable to fully protect their children from poverty, they redefined this situation in positive terms. Due to a lack of money, their children could learn to be modest. Edita taught her son to buy food at a discount: 'This is even good for something. When we do our groceries, he sees that I look at the tags, and I teach him that he has to choose what is the cheapest.'

In the context of the neoliberal economic system, however, these strategies of moral work could be counterproductive in the long term and lead to further precarisation and the reproduction of lower social status in the next generation. The values the mothers instilled in their children, such as frugality, lower aspirations, loyalty and self-sufficiency, correspond to the working-class ethos (Karademir-Hazır, 2021; Lareau, 2011). Moreover, when the mothers presented their situation in positive terms, they could not receive sufficient help. Laura, for example, restricted herself from food when her job was halted but did not feel morally entitled to ask for help: 'If I needed it, maybe (my colleagues) would help me out financially. ... But I say, well, I don't feel like... I have hands and legs, so why should I... play the poor [person] more than I really am.'

4.5 'I have to manage by myself': Neoliberal norms of autonomy

Like Laura, the other interviewed women accepted the obligation to cope with their situations alone. Even when schools and childcare centres were closed and they were unable to find a job during pandemic lockdowns and experienced food scarcity, they emphasised their sole individual responsibility to care for and feed their children. They repetitively used phrases such as 'I have to face it' (Anna), 'We had to manage somehow' (Barbora) and 'We have to (deal with it); there is nothing else left to do' (Blanka and Ilona). Accepting one's own responsibility, regardless of context and structural constraints, is part of neoliberal governmentality (Rose et al., 2006).

The participants still expected at least some assistance and support from the welfare state. The welfare state offices were, however, where the mothers typically encountered stigmatisation and deprecation. Welfare state representatives made it clear to them that they were to blame for their bad individual decisions and, therefore, that they should bear the consequences: 'They told me that they cannot help me, that it was my own doing, so I have to deal with it by myself' (Beata). While applying for social support, they had to strike a balance between proving that they needed help and not being seen as irresponsible mothers who could not feed their children. The support they received was typically not sufficient to cover all the family's basic needs and was accompanied by judgement, shaming and increased surveillance:

The officer, when she looked at my living costs, asked me, 'And why do you have the internet at home?' Was she even serious? When my daughter had online school, how else would she do it? (Eva)

By accessing government assistance programs, the research participants highlighted the limitations of the neoliberal state's emphasis on personal independence. Their engagement with these systems exposed the contradictions of neoliberal policies, which cut social services while expecting individuals to thrive without support. They pushed against stigma by embracing alternative narratives and challenging heteronormative family values. They all insisted on the close relationships between them and their children

being the ultimate source of meaning, making it 'the last remaining irrevocable, unexchangeable primary relationship' (Beck, 1992: 118).

(My son) gives me the most strength; if I didn't have him, I don't know where I would get the strength to continue, not to give up completely. In fact, he's my guide, he's the best thing that has ever happened to me, he's my continuation and it is simply my role to prepare him for that life and somehow try to raise him as well as possible, and that's what I'm trying to do. (Edita)

Moreover, many of our research participants, even when they claimed to be individually responsible, relied on extended family, friends and community-based organisations for help with childcare, emotional support and financial assistance. These collective practices counter the neoliberal ideal of the self-sufficient individual and highlight the importance of interdependence and care (see also Skeggs, 2011).

4.6 'It was such a relief': Spaces of care

The participants recounted that they were able to find ways to feed their families only when they gathered the courage to ask for help. Some of them could rely on the support of their families and friends: Blanka's mother worked in a canteen and regularly brought leftovers to her daughter; Blanka was happy that she could provide her child with a warm meal every day. Alena's friend helped her with childcare and lent her money when she did not have enough to eat. Others had to reach out to strangers for help: in her most critical moment, Klara decided to turn to a charity organisation, a social worker employed by an NGO and her GP, despite her feelings of shame:

I used to hide it all inside myself. To manage everything by myself, to smile and not to show. But after I asked for help, I found out that it helps a lot to just tell someone so that they can give me some advice and tell me what to do. (Klara)

During the pandemic, charitable institutions represented a functional alternative to the welfare state, which failed in the case of mothers without standard employment contracts. Charities provided sufficient assistance without stigmatisation and excessive verification of entitlement: 'It was enough just to prove that I have sole custody of a child' (Alena). Additionally, they offered positive emotional support for the mothers. Most of the interviewed mothers who lacked other informal sources of support admitted that they would not have survived the COVID-19 pandemic without help from one or more charity programs:

There was a moment when I thought that I couldn't do it anymore and that I wouldn't manage. They (a charitable project) helped me both psychologically and with financial support. I made a lot of new friends, and a lot of unknown people helped me because I was not able to pay for food while out on sick leave. So, it was wonderful when the doorbell rang and they brought me bags full of food. (Liba)

Liba's story shows that at least during the COVID-19 pandemic, the charities represented a space of solidarity and care (in geographic and symbolic terms) that went beyond monetary support. The charities worked on different principles than the welfare state system, which incorporated neoliberal values by surveilling and educating women and conditioning the assistance on integrating paid work, regardless of the structures that limited them. When interacting with charities and their representatives, the participants experienced the recognition and valuation of care, inter-relatedness and community. These organisations opened the door to an alternative understanding of responsibility—responsibility as care, interdependence and meeting someone's needs. They were spaces in which people could exercise sociality, reciprocity and care while being respected (Skeggs, 2011), instead of being objects of the moral gaze.

5. Discussion: Meanings of responsibility

The narratives of single mothers experiencing food scarcity in times of crisis allowed us to observe how these women understood and negotiated responsibility in their everyday thinking about and practices of foodwork. They were objects of responsibilisation which is a part of neoliberal forms of governance that are portrayed as enabling individuals' independence and empowerment (Miller & Rose, 2008; Trnka & Trundle, 2014). When recounting their foodwork during times of crisis, they emphasised the values of independence, self-reliance and success in supporting one's family without the help of others. They also acknowledged the norm of the responsible mother as being primarily responsible for the upbringing of a child (see Güney-Frahm, 2020). The women endorsed the norms of autonomy, independence and

responsibility for one's fate, together with child-centeredness, self-sacrifice and maternal gender essentialism. Neoliberal understandings of individual responsibility and the ideology of good motherhood were intertwined in their narratives. Sometimes, they reinforced and complemented one another, such as in the case of investing in healthy food for the child instead of buying enough food for oneself, and at other times, they were in opposition, such as spending more time with their children, which hindered them from engaging in paid work activities so that they could afford more expensive food.

Positioned at the intersection of various axes of disadvantage and in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, disadvantaged mothers could not meet all these expectations. Sometimes, they sought creative strategies via which to do so. At some points, they questioned and challenged neoliberal norms and ideals of good motherhood. When they failed to meet expectations, they performed moral work that legitimised their choices and allowed them to maintain a positive self-image. In general, however, the participants attempted to show, through their narratives, that in their family foodwork, they aimed to conform to the ideals of being a responsible mother and a responsible neoliberal citizen.

Yet we can identify another layer of responsibility in the single mothers' narratives. They did not place their children's needs and interests ahead of their own, including the need for high-quality food, simply to conform with the neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility or norms of good motherhood. They cared for and about their children, focused on their well-being, responded to their needs, protected them from stigma and tried their best to create a good environment despite disadvantageous structural conditions. In their actions, the mothers were guided by the ethics of care, which understands responsibility as a response to the needs and vulnerabilities of the other (Kittay, 1999), as 'responding to the call' of the dependent and vulnerable (van Nistelrooij & Visse, 2019). Caring for their children was not only their duty but also a source of meaning, strength and self-esteem. Their foodwork can be conceptualised as foodcare, demonstrating its wider significance within the broader network of care relationships that are vital to the continuing sustainable existence of our economy and ecology (Parsons et al., 2024). The participants experienced motherhood as an unprecedented connection to a loved one, providing them with an anchor in the world and a positive self-image. Accepting this kind of responsibility provided them with unexpected resources (see van Nistelrooij & Visse, 2019).

Having accepted this type of responsibility, they realised that they could not fulfil this calling alone, without help, solidarity, community and connection. Even while rhetorically adhering to the neoliberal norms of independence and autonomy, they expected that the community would help them with some aspects of reproductive work in their disadvantaged situations. They felt shame while claiming welfare benefits or asking charities for help but also relief, pride and joy in their connections with others while receiving support. In essence, the single mothers´ narratives revealed the flaws in neoliberal assumptions about self-sufficiency and autonomy, demonstrating that survival and well-being are deeply embedded in social relationships and mutual support. Their lived experiences challenge the myth that individuals can succeed in isolation and highlight the necessity of collective responsibility (see also Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020).

6. Conclusion: A multi-layered responsibility

Based on the narratives of single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic, I propose the concept of a multi-layered responsibility. What leads women to continue to care for their children, even in extremely adverse conditions; to fulfil their basic needs and support them and to put their children's interests before their own to the point of self-sacrifice is not merely an acceptance of responsibilisation as both an external and internalised normative pressure. It is not only the effect of social norms and expectations that determine what it means to be a responsible citizen or mother. Below these layers of responsibilisation lies responsibility as a response to vulnerability. These layers are interlocked and difficult to differentiate, but each draws on different sources and can have different consequences. Unlike responsibility-as-neoliberal subjectivation and responsibility-as-maternal determinism, responsibility-as-response-to-a-need calls for solidarity and connection to others and can empower mothers and provide them with unexpected resources.

The concept of multi-layered responsibility helps explain how the norms of good motherhood interact with the neoliberal demands of autonomy and individual responsibility. In the areas in which these two sets of normative expectations come to conflict, a space opens in which mothers can redefine the maternal responsibility based on the ethics of care, community and the unique relationship between a caring adult

and a child. This concept can also shed light on the relationship between healthy maternal practices, which are responsive to children´s needs, and intensive mothering practices, which can have detrimental impact on children and mothers (see, e.g., McGregor, 2022; Rizzo et al., 2013). Hays (1996) and Ennis (2014) imply that intensive motherhood is simply a question of the degree of maternal involvement, a balance or a boundary between good enough and more. We could argue that what mothers do for their children based on an ethics of care, in response to their vulnerability and needs, represents necessary and good maternal practices. In practice, this boundary is never clear, as the expectations of neoliberal ideology, motherhood ideology, and the ethics of care cannot be empirically separated. Mothers are simultaneously exposed to and must react to the discourses surrounding both neoliberalism and intensive mothering, and they respond to the vulnerability and needs of their children, which are also socially constructed to some extent. These three concepts of responsibility constitute three frames that enable the interpretation of the same experience from different perspectives. For example, feeding children fresh vegetables can be understood as a mother's attempt to maximise the health and cognitive development of her children and this ensure their later success in the neoliberal labour market; or as a reaction to expert-created norms regarding how a responsible mother should perform foodwork; or a practice led by the children´s need for healthy food in order to grow and strive. These three layers of lived responsibility are intertwined in this single experience. In the literature on parenting, these three perspectives do not typically communicate with one another, but they are all relevant to understanding the experiences and attitudes of mothers (or parents in general). Based on an examination of the experiences of Czech single mothers, it seems beneficial to think of them as interlocking layers of lived responsibility.

The analysis of the narratives of Czech single mothers during and after the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a collective story of foodwork in precarious economic conditions and the meanings connected to it. It showed how women developed inventive strategies and engaged in mental, emotional and moral labour to meet the basic needs of their children, protect them from stigma and enhance their own sense of a positive identity. They constructed their own understandings of responsibility as they accepted, challenged and negotiated the norms of neo-liberal ideology and the hegemonic ideals of good motherhood. Beyond the notions of a responsible neoliberal citizen and the responsible mother, responsibility is also motivated by the ethics of care. Nevertheless, like the other responsibility layers and, especially, in connection with them, this responsibility-as-response-to-need can become a trap (see also Tronto, 1990). Mothers have little option to refuse this call, and although accepting it can empower them, it also places huge demands on them and deepens their disadvantageous position. For this responsibility to have a positive impact on the lives of marginalised women, we need a change in values and the distribution, recognition and valuation of reproductive work.

In this research project, I used a qualitative approach and limited the research scope to a specific cultural and historical context. The experience of foodwork, as narrated by Czech single mothers during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, may not be the same as that of other mothers at various intersections of disadvantage, locations and contexts. Nonetheless, lived responsibility as function of three levels of responsibility (as neoliberal subjectivation, as maternal determinism stemming from the dominant ideology of good motherhood, and as a response to child's needs) can be useful in explaining the experiences of mothering in other contexts. Moreover, my research offers insights into how the ideals of intensive motherhood influence the lives of those who do not have the means to fulfil them and the sources they have at their disposal when facing these expectations. These insights may be valuable for further research on care values and practices. Further research could expand this knowledge to other cultural contexts and groups of parents, including fathers, and include other maternal practices beyond foodwork.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the research participants for their openness and the trust with which they shared their experiences and reflections. The data collection was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (grant Gendering the pandemic: redefinition of care as a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis? (nr.21-13587S)). The work on the article was supported by the NPO "Systemic Risk Institute" no. LX22NPO5101, funded by European Union—Next Generation EU (Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, NPO: EXCELES). The research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, nr. of the decision SOU297_1/2024.

Data availability statement

The study data cannot be stored in a repository due to the protection of respondents as the qualitative interviews could not be fully anonymised and they contain sensitive personal data. The participants did not agree to the use of the data for other purposes. The metadata can be found here: https://archivdv.soc.cas.cz/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.14473/CSDA/IASMGP. For more information, contact the author of the article.

References

Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & Society, 20*(4): 441-464. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206289499

Althusser, L. (2010). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)(1970). In I. Szeman & T. Kaposy (Eds.), Cultural theory: An Anthology (pp. 204-222). Wiley-Blackwell.

Amable, B. (2011). Morals and politics in the ideology of neo-liberalism. *Socio-Economic Review, 9*(1): 3-30. https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwq015

Arendell, T. (2000). Conceiving and investigating motherhood: The decade's scholarship. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*(4): 1192-1207. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01192.x

Autret, M., van Eeden-Moorefield, B., Lee, S., & Khaw, L. (2024). Examining ideology and agency within intensive motherhood literature. *Feminism & Psychology, 34*(1): 47-65. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535231184719

Barnes, C., & Schrager, B. (2024). Precarious foodscapes: Life, caring, digitization, and labor in the face of deepening food crises. *Food, Culture and Society, 00*(00): 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2024.2306432

Beck, U. (1992). Risk society: Towards a new modernity. Sage.

Beckman, C. M., & Mazmanian, M. (2020). Dreams of the overworked: Living, working, and parenting in the digital age. Stanford University Press.

Burrows, L. (2009). "This is how 'we' do it": Pedagogising families in obesity discourse. Childrenz Issues: *Journal of the Children's Issues Centre, 13*(1): 9-12. https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.797428991494555

Charmaz, K. (2008). Grounded theory as an emergent method. Handbook of emergent methods, 3, 155-170.

Christopher, K. (2012). Extensive mothering: Employed mothers' constructions of the good mother. *Gender and Society, 26*(1): 73-96. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243211427700

Collins, C., Landivar, L. C., Ruppanner, L., & Scarborough, W. J. (2020). COVID-19 and the gender gap in work hours. *Gender, Work and Organization, 28*(S1): 101-112. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12506

Collins, C., Ruppanner, L., Christin Landivar, L., & Scarborough, W. J. (2021). The gendered consequences of a weak infrastructure of care: School reopening plans and parents' employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Gender & Society, 35*(2): 180-193. https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211001300

Collins, P. H. (2016). Shifting the center: Race, class, and feminist theorizing about motherhood. In E. N. Glenn, G. Chang & L. R. Forcey (Eds.), Mothering (pp. 45-65). Routledge.

CZSO. (2021). Population Census 2021. https://vdb.czso.cz/vdbvo2/faces/cs/index.jsf?page=vystup-objekt&z=T&f=TABULKA&katalog=34115&pvo=SLD21SP042x&str=v71#w= [retrieved April 24, 2024]

CZSO. (2024). Podklad k tiskové konferenci ČSÚ s výsledky šetření Životní podmínky 2023. https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/prezentace_a_tiskove_konference_zivotni_uroven_spotreba_domacnosti [retrieved October 21, 2024]

DeVault, M. L. (1991). Feeding the family: The social organization of caring as gendered work. University of Chicago Press.

Dudová, R. (2020). Analýza postavení sólo matek na pracovním trhu podle šetření EU-SILC 2018. https://aperio.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Analyza_solo_matky_na_pracovnim_trhu_201124.pdf [retrieved May28, 2025]

Elliott, S., & Bowen, S. (2018). Defending motherhood: Morality, responsibility, and double binds in feeding children. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 80*(2): 499-520. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12465

Elliott, S., Powell, R., & Brenton, J. (2015). Being a good mom: Low-income, black single mothers negotiate intensive mothering. *Journal of Family Issues, 36*(3): 351-370. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X13490279

Elliott, S., Satterfield, S. J., Solorzano, G., Bowen, S., Hardison-Moody, A., & Williams, L. (2021). Disenfranchised: How lower income mothers navigated the social safety net during the COVID-19 pandemic. Socius, 7. https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211031690

Ennis, L. R. (2014). Intensive mothering: Revisiting the issue today. In L. R. Ennis (Ed.), Intensive mothering: The cultural contradictions of modern motherhood (pp. 1-24). Demeter Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1rrd8rb.4 [retrieved May28, 2025]

Graham, R., Hodgetts, D., Stolte, O., & Chamberlain, K. (2018). Hiding in plain sight: Experiences of food insecurity and rationing in New Zealand. *Food, Culture and Society, 21*(3): 384-401. https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2018.1451043

Güney-Frahm, I. (2020). Neoliberal motherhood during the pandemic: Some reflections. *Gender, Work and Organization, 27*(5): 847-856. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12485

Harvey, D. (2007). A brief history of neoliberalism. Oxford University Press.

Hašková, H., & Dudová, R. (2017). Precarious work and care responsibilities in the economic crisis. *European Journal of Industrial Relations, 17*(1): 1-17. https://doi.org/0.1177/0959680116672279

Hays, S. (1996). The cultural contradictions of motherhood. Yale University Press.

Held, V. (2005). The ethics of care. personal, political, and global. Oxford University Press.

Hochschild, A. R. (2003). The commercialisation of intimate life. the notes from home and work. University of California Press.

Karademir-Hazır, I. (2021). How (not) to feed young children: A class-cultural analysis of food parenting practices. *British Journal of Sociology, 72*(5): 1200-1213. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12900

Kinser, A. E. (2017). Fixing food to fix families: Feeding risk discourse and the family meal. *Women's Studies in Communication, 40*(1): 29-47. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2016.1207001

Kittay, E. F. (1999). Love´s labour. Essays on women, equality and dependency. Routledge.

Langenkamp, A., Cano, T., & Czymara, C. S. (2022). My home is my castle? The role of living arrangements on experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from Germany. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6(January): 1-14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.785201

Lareau, A. (2011). Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life, with an update a decade later. In Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life, with an update a decade later. University of California Press.

Loyal, D., Sutter Dallay, A.-L., & Rascle, N. (2017). Intensive mothering ideology in France: *A pilot study*. *L'Encéphale, 43*(6): 564-569. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.encep.2017.08.002

McCarthy, J. R., Edwards, R., & Gillies, V. (2000). Moral tales of the child and the adult: Narratives of contemporary family lives under changing circumstances. *Sociology, 34*(4): 785-803. https://doi.org/10.1177/S003803850000047X

McGregor, C. M. (2022). Intensive Mothering Attitudes and Children's Executive Function: The Role of Parenting Stress. Doctoral Dissertation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. http://hdl.handle.net/10919/109098

Men, F., & Tarasuk, V. (2021). Food insecurity amid the COVID-19 pandemic: Food charity, government assistance and employment. *Canadian Public Policy / Analyse de Politiques, 47*(2): 202-230. https://doi.org/10.3138/CPP.2021-001

Milkie, M. A., & Warner, C. W. (2014). Status safeguarging: Mothers´work to secure children´s place in the social hierarchy. In L. R. Ennis (Ed.), Intensive mothering: The cultural contradictions of modern motherhood. Demeter Press.

Miller, P., & Rose, N. (2008). Governing the present: Administering economic, social and personal life. Polity.

Murphy, E. (2000). Risk, responsibility and rhetoric in infant feeding. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 29*(3): 291-325. https://doi.org/10.1177/08912410012902392

Murray, M. (2015). Back to work? childcare negotiations and intensive mothering in Santiago de Chile. *Journal of Family Issues, 36*(9): 1171-1191. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14533543

Parolin, Z., & Lee, E. K. (2022). Economic precarity among single parents in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 702*(1): 206-223. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162221122682

Parsons, E., Harman, V., & Cappellini, B. (2024). Foodwork and foodcare in hard times: Mothering, value, and values. Gender, Work and Organization, 31, 937-953. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12630

PAQ (2021). Život k nezaplacení. Jak se vyvíjí příjmová chudoba domácností. https://data.irozhlas.cz/zivot/ekonomicke-dopady/ [retrieved April 24, 2024]

Randles, J. (2021). "Willing to do anything for my kids": Inventive mothering, diapers, and the inequalities of carework. *American Sociological Review, 86*(1): 35-59. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122420977480

Rizzo, K. M., Schiffrin, H. H., & Liss, M. (2013). Insight into the parenthood paradox: Mental health outcomes of intensive mothering. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 22*(5): 614-620. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-012-9615-z

Romagnoli, A., & Wall, G. (2012). 'I know I'm a good mom': Young, low-income mothers' experiences with risk perception, intensive parenting ideology and parenting education programmes. *Health, Risk & Society, 14*(3): 273-289. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698575.2012.662634

Rose, N., O´Malley, P., & Valverde, M. (2006). Governmentality. *Annual Review of Law and Social Sciences*, 2(December): 83-104. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.lawsocsci.2.081805.105900

Ryan, K., Bissell, P., & Alexander, J. (2010). Moral work in women's narratives of breastfeeding. Social Science and Medicine, 70(6): 951-958. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.11.023

Salin, M., Hakovirta, M., Kaittila, A., & Raivio, J. (2023). Single earners and carers during lockdown: Everyday challenges faced by Finnish single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 43(13-14): 146-160. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-03-2023-0051

Schmidt, E. M., Décieux, F., Zartler, U., & Schnor, C. (2023). What makes a good mother? Two decades of research reflecting social norms of motherhood. *Journal of Family Theory and Review, 15*(1): 57-77. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12488

Skeggs, B. (2011). Imagining personhood differently: Person value and autonomist working-class value practices. *Sociological Review, 59*(3): 496-513. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.02018.x

Soskolne, V., & Herbst-Debby, A. (2023). Health and psychological distress implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for single mothers in Israel. *Journal of Family Studies, 29*(4): 1628-1644. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2022.2068452

Spurný, M. (2021). Prekarizovaná práce mezi zaměstnanci v ČR v letech 2008-2018. *Fórum Sociální Politiky, 15*(1): 7-14.

STEM. (2021). Situace samoživitelů a samoživitelek v době koronavirové krize. https://www.stem.cz/situace-samozivitelu-a-samozivitelek-v-koronavirove-krizi/#more-6310 [retrieved February 24, 2024]

Trier-Bieniek, A. (2012). Framing the telephone interview as a participant-centred tool for qualitative research: A methodological discussion. *Qualitative Research, 12*(6): 630-644. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112439005

Trnka, S., & Trundle, C. (2014). Competing responsibilities: Moving beyond neoliberal responsibilisation. *Anthropological Forum, 24*(2): 136-153. https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2013.879051

Trnka, S., & Trundle, C. (2017). Competing responsibilities: The ethics and politics of contemporary life. Duke University Press Books.

Tronto, J. (1990). Chilly racists. Paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, August 30–September 2.

Tronto, J. C. (1993). Moral Boundaries: a political argument for an ethic of care. Routledge.

Tronto, J. C. (1998). *An ethic of care. Generations, 22*(3): 15-21. https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/44875693

van der Horst, H., Pascucci, S., & Bol, W. (2014). The "dark side" of food banks? Exploring emotional responses of food bank receivers in the Netherlands. *British Food Journal, 116*(9): 1506-1520. https://doi.org/10.1108/BFJ-02-2014-0081

van Nistelrooij, I., & Visse, M. (2019). Me? The invisible call of responsibility and its promise for care ethics: *A phenomenological view. Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy, 22*(2): 275-285. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-018-9873-7

Williamson, T., Wagstaff, D. L., Goodwin, J., & Smith, N. (2023). Mothering ideology: a qualitative exploration of mothers' perceptions of navigating motherhood pressures and partner relationships. *Sex Roles, 88*(1-2): 101-117. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-022-01345-7

Wilson, J. A., & Yochim, E. C. (2017). Mothering through precarity. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131701

The World Bank. (2024). The World Bank data. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.LMIC.GP?locations=CZ [retrieved January 21, 2025]

Yerkes, M. A., Remery, C., André, S., Salin, M., Hakovirta, M., & van Gerven, M. (2022). Unequal but balanced: Highly educated mothers' perceptions of work–life balance during the COVID-19 lockdown in Finland and the Netherlands. *Journal of European Social Policy, 32*(4): 376-392. https://doi.org/10.1177/09589287221080411

Zembylas, M., Bozalek, V., & Shefer, T. (2014). Tronto's notion of privileged irresponsibility and the reconceptualisation of care: Implications for critical pedagogies of emotion in higher education. *Gender and Education, 26*(3), 200–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2014.901718

Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Verantwortungsvolle Mütter? Kinderernährung in schwierigen Zeiten

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Basierend auf einem qualitativen Forschungsprojekt über alleinerziehende Mütter während der COVID-19-Krise untersucht dieser Artikel die sozialen Normen, welche die Erzählungen und Praktiken der „Foodwork" armer und marginalisierter Mütter bestimmen, und analysiert das Konzept gelebter mütterlicher Verantwortung.

Hintergrund: Obwohl sich die Normen und kulturellen Erwartungen in Bezug auf Mutterschaft zwischen Kulturen und Gemeinschaften stark unterscheiden, dominiert in der Regel eine Ideologie der „guten Mutterschaft". Es ist jedoch unklar, ob deren Normen für alle Mütter gleichermaßen gelten. Zudem ist das Verhältnis dieser Ideologie zum Neoliberalismus nicht klar definiert.

Methode: Der Artikel basiert auf einer longitudinalen qualitativen Studie mit 32 alleinerziehenden Müttern von Kindern unter 13 Jahren, die kurz vor und während der COVID-19-Pandemie in Tschechien durchgeführt wurde. Die Analyse folgt dem Ansatz der konstruktivistischen Grounded Theory und konzentriert sich auf „Foodwork" in den Darstellungen der Teilnehmerinnen.

Ergebnisse: Die Mütter entwickelten ihr eigenes Verständnis von mütterlicher Verantwortung, indem sie die Normen neoliberaler Ideologie und die Ideale guter Mutterschaft akzeptierten, in Frage stellten und aushandelten. Jenseits der Diskurse der Verantwortlichmachung wird Verantwortung hier als Reaktion auf Verletzlichkeit und als durch die Ethik der Fürsorge motiviertes Bedürfnis verstanden.

Schlussfolgerung: Die Erwartungen neoliberaler Ideologie, der Ideologie intensiver Mutterschaft und der Ethik der Fürsorge lassen sich empirisch nicht klar voneinander trennen. Das Modell der mehrschichtigen Verantwortung erfasst das Zusammenspiel dieser drei Verantwortungsebenen in den gelebten Erfahrungen der Mütter.

Schlagwörter: Foodwork, intensive Mutterschaft, alleinerziehende Mütter, COVID-19-Pandemie, Ethik der Fürsorge

JFR – Journal of Family Research, 2025, vol. 37, pp. 163–180

doi: https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-1093

Submitted: April 23, 2024
Accepted: May 26, 2025
Published online: June 03, 2025

Radka Dudová: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1359-7710