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Family lives during the COVID-19 pandemic in European societies: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

Objective: This chapter introduces the reader to the Special Issue "Family Lives during the COVID-19 Pandemic in European Societies".

Background: This Special Issue analyses how families, parents, and children have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they have been coping with its related challenges in different societal contexts.

Method: The studies collected in this Special Issue are based on qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches and data that have been gathered during 2020 in a range of European countries. It covers the first lockdown period, the reopening phases, and the months thereafter.

Results: The 20 contributions of this Special Issue show that families shouldered large responsibilities during the pandemic. While the pandemic did not lead to radical shifts in gendered care patterns, mothers and fathers experienced the pandemic differently, with mothers reporting higher levels of stress. Moreover, there was great heterogeneity in how different types of families and children were affected by the pandemic. Single parents and parents and children in low-income households were most strongly affected in their social and economic wellbeing. Social and economic distress are strongly interwoven, and the developments during the pandemic aggravated existing social disparities.

Conclusion: This Special Issue underlines the importance of the family for the functioning of societies during times of crisis. It also shows that policy makers often adopted a too narrow view of what constitutes a family and did not adequately address family diversity in their decision making. This Special Issue furthermore emphasized that there is a danger that the pandemic will increase disparities between families. Thus, parents and their children need adequate support measures that are tailored to their needs, and that are designed to alleviate these social, economic and educational disparities.

Key words: COVID-19, family lives, work-family balance, gender roles, social inequality, parent-child relations, well-being, family dissolution, post-divorce families, intergenerational relations

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1. Introduction and motivation for this Special Issue

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe for the first time in spring 2020, most governments reacted by implementing coercive measures, which included the closure of child care and education institutions, as well as playgrounds, and the discontinuation of organized leisure activities for children and youth. Social distancing rules required parents to reduce the level of contact between their children and the children's grandparents, which resulted in a decline in grandparental child care support. At the same time, the pandemic led to a sharp rise in the number of parents working remotely (home office). Some workers became unemployed or were placed in a short-time work arrangement, while others experienced wage cuts. Meanwhile, many self-employed individuals had to worry about a lack of business. Frontline workers, particularly in the area of health care, were placed in new and risky situations. Country-wide lockdowns had immediate repercussions for the social and economic well-being of parents and families, as nearly all of the measures that were implemented had an impact on how people met their family obligations, lived their family lives, and sustained their family relations. Thus, the lockdowns affected the organization of children's and parents' everyday activities, caused parents' obligations to multiply, put new strains on the compatibility of work and family life, and greatly affected family and intergenerational relationships. At the societal level, the pandemic made starkly visible how important day care institutions, schools, and after-school activities are for the functioning of societies, and for the well-being of families and children. The pandemic also led to families shouldering large care burdens, as they were tasked with ensuring that the schooling and education of their children continued, despite the adverse conditions.

For social science research, the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a novel and unique case for studying how individuals react to extreme conditions. At a stunning speed, new data have been collected on how the pandemic has affected different facets of social life, including employment, well-being, gender and family relations. Several funding agencies have quickly developed new programs, and numerous journals have accelerated their publication processes for COVID-19-related studies, and devoted special issues or special sections to this topic.[1]

The aim of this Special Issue is to provide an overview that focuses on the experiences of families during the pandemic. It includes the work of researchers who have investigated family lives and family issues in an era of uncertainty and upheaval, exploring fundamental issues like family diversity, work-family balance, gender roles, social inequality, parent-child relations, family dissolution, and intergenerational relations. The studies in this Special Issue draw on existing theoretical concepts, and test them with data collected during the pandemic. These studies focus on the first year of the pandemic, and are based on data that have been gathered during 2020. These data cover the onset of the pandemic – including the first major and so far most coercive lockdown period – as well

1 For example, European Societies (Grasso et al., 2021), Family Process (Lebow, 2020), Family Relations , Gender, Work, & Organization (Özkazanç-Pan & Pullen, 2020), International Journal of Educational Development (Reuge et al., 2021), Developmental Psychology (Weeland, Keijsers, & Branje, 2021), Journal of Social and Personal Relationships (Bevan & Lannutti, 2021), Journal of Family Communication (Mikucki-Enyart & Maguire, 2021).

as the months thereafter. Thus, these data capture the extraordinary circumstances of the first lockdowns in many European countries, but also the reopening phases, as well as the subsequent lockdowns that have been imposed in numerous regions.

The Special Issue has several goals. It aims to provide insights into how families, parents, and children have been affected, and how they have been coping with the pandemic and its related challenges in different societal contexts. It goes beyond national boundaries by including studies from a range of European countries. Moreover, it cuts across methodological boundaries, and provides novel empirical evidence from qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies.

2. Content of this Special Issue

The Special Issue comprises 20 contributions organized according to five different thematic areas: (1) family lives, work-family balance, and gender roles; (2) social inequality, economic hardship, and labor market participation; (3) parent-child relationships and well-being; (4) post-divorce families; and (5) intergenerational ties.

Section I explores how the pandemic affected work-family balance and gender roles. The first two contributions in this section shed light on the specific experiences of mothers and fathers who had a newborn child during the coronavirus crisis, while the other two articles look at the gendered division of care from a more general perspective.

Paula Pustułka and Marta Buler focus their attention on intergenerational relations in Poland during the transition to first-time motherhood. They argue that the pandemic changed the scope of family solidarity, and consequently increased the vulnerability of first-time mothers, as they had limited opportunities to access assistance from other close family members during the lockdowns. Based on a qualitative longitudinal study with intergenerational family triads (a first-time mother, her mother, and her grandmother), they show that the pandemic often exacerbated a first-time mother's sense of having lost control over her life. For these women, the transition to motherhood was characterized by uncertainty, and called into question common family practices of togetherness. Due to social distancing rules, close family members (such as their own mothers) often could not support these first-time mothers in the period immediately after childbirth. Furthermore, relatives and family members could not attend normatively desirable solidarity-affirming events, such as christenings. The effects of these preventive measures have led to questions being raised about how family members' competing needs should be addressed, as the socio-spatial distancing and isolation rules made it impossible for kin groups to both reduce risks to seniors while also providing hands-on support to first-time mothers. The article sheds new light on the question of how family solidarity can change in times of crisis, and demonstrates that the pandemic greatly limited the capacity of families to provide direct intergenerational support. However, the authors also conclude that the pandemic did not change affectual and consensual solidarities.

Alix Sponton also investigates the transition to parenthood, but from the perspective of French men. This qualitative longitudinal study explores how men who became a father to a newborn during the 2020 lockdown in France reacted to taking a longer period of leave

than they had expected, and whether the lockdown gave them the opportunity to get more involved with their newborn child. Even though the stay-at-home orders put pressure on all fathers to assume caregiving responsibilities, as receiving help from the extended family was impossible, the study shows that a father's level of engagement with his newborn child was strongly related to his internalization of gender norms. Traditional fathers emphasized the mother's primary responsibility for child care, and took on routine child care tasks only if their partner was unable to perform them while recovering from the birth. In contrast, egalitarian fathers seized the opportunity to get more involved in their child's life, and became highly involved in child care. This contribution points to the strong relationship between material constraints and individual gender beliefs, and argues against the assumption that the lockdowns have led to profound changes in norm-related behaviors.

Tabea Naujoks, Michaela Kreyenfeld, and Sandra Dummert focus on the gendered division of care in Germany. Whereas the prior studies focused on the time period immediately after childbirth, this analysis was expanded to cover couples with children below age 12. Based on data from IAB-HOPP, which is a representative survey administered by the Institute for Employment Research, evidence for the period from May to October 2020 was generated. A major finding from this investigation is that, contrary to prior expectations, the gendered division of care did not become more unequal during the pandemic than it was prior to the pandemic. However, the authors uncovered differences by population subgroup. In particular, they show that short-time work, which is a very common employment arrangement in Germany, supported paternal involvement during the pandemic. Thus, the results indicate that welfare state measures played a crucial role in buffering some of the adverse effects of the pandemic.

Caroline Berghammer corroborates some of the previous results with her findings based on data from Austria. Like in Germany, the gendered division of child care tends to be unequal in Austria, with women shouldering the lion's share of the tasks. The author presents evidence that this was the case during different phases of the pandemic, from May 2020 until February 2021. The patterns are also found to be very similar for child care and housework. The study shows that that the division of household labor was fairly equal in only one-third of the couples; whereas in about 55 percent of the couples, the mother was doing most of the child care and household chores; and in roughly 15 percent of the couples, the father was performing most of these tasks. Working from home was found to be a facilitator of paternal involvement. The findings also indicate that men's non- or part-time employment, which became more prevalent during the pandemic, led to an increase in the share of child care done by fathers. The author concludes that although child care patterns continue to be gendered, the COVID-19-related changes "elicited less-traditional couple arrangements" in some cases.

Lena Hipp and Markus Konrad also focus on gendered patterns of behavior during the coronavirus pandemic. For their analysis, they drew on a unique dataset that they compiled on open source software developers in 37 countries across the globe. These data were combined with detailed information on the lockdown measures in the different countries. Using this approach, the authors were able to examine whether stricter policies had gendered effects on the productivity of the software developers (measured by the number of uploaded software packages). While the results show that the developers'

productivity generally increased during the pandemic, they also indicate that women's productivity only increased if schools remained open. Although the investigation was done on a very specific population, it nevertheless draws attention to the possible gendered effects of certain lockdown measures.

Section II raises the question of whether social inequalities and economic hardship increased after the onset of the pandemic. It also provides evidence on changes in fathers' and mothers' employment patterns by comparing them before and during the pandemic.

Veronika Knize, Lina Tobler, Bernhard Christoph, Lukas Fervers, and Marita Jacob use data from IAB-HOPP to examine changes in working hours in Germany by comparing people's pre-pandemic working hours with their working hours at four points in time during the pandemic (ranging from May to August 2020). The study reports large gender differences in maternal and paternal working time. Working hours were significantly lower in the first wave of data collection (May 2020) than they were before the pandemic. The scale of the reduction in working hours was similar for mothers and fathers. What is more surprising is, however, the finding that mothers were able to return to their pre-pandemic working hours faster than fathers. Thus, the study's results challenge the assumption that women's employment patterns were more affected by the pandemic than men's.

A similar conclusion is reached based on Austrian data in an analysis conducted by *Nadia Steiber, Christina Siegert, and Stefan Vogtenhuber*. The study shows a slight increase in unemployment and a drastic increase in short-time work during the pandemic. Fathers and mothers were found to be affected in a similar manner, and no large differences between childless women and mothers were observed. Like in Germany, some of the adverse employment effects of the pandemic that have been documented for other countries, such as the U.S., were buffered by the short-time work program in Austria. However, the results of a further investigation reveal that many families experienced income losses due to the pandemic. In particular, single mothers were found to be severely affected by a decline in income. Consequently, the women in this group were also greatly concerned about their financial situation. In addition, couples in which both partners were low educated faced elevated financial risks. The study concludes by underlining that poverty risks in general, but also social disparities in these risks, may have been aggravated during the pandemic.

Claire Cameron, Margaret O'Brien, Lydia Whitaker, Katie Hollingworth, and Hanan Hauari address the issue of social inequality by drawing on evidence from a mixed-methods approach. They used an assets approach to explore how parents and parents-to-be dealt with the coronavirus pandemic in an East London borough (Tower Hamlets) with a highly unequal and ethnically diverse population. Based on a community survey, qualitative interviews, and community assets mapping, they show that the pandemic deepened income precarity, and particularly food insecurity. Having poor quality housing and crowded living conditions had strong negative effects on families, which were exacerbated by the reduction in community services at critical points in the families' lives, such as the birth of a child. The authors point to the importance of local social work and access to community assets, such as health care and other care services, during lockdowns, and during the pandemic in general. They also highlight the role of material assets (income) in family well-being, and thus call for policies aimed at ensuring

employment and income security. However, they also emphasize that levels of informal support and of familial assets (such as relationship quality, home care) remained high throughout the pandemic.

Section III zooms in on parent-child relationships and family and child well-being during the pandemic. It sheds light on the challenges that parents, and their children faced in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic, and provides differentiated views based on the accounts of parents and professionals.

The first paper in this section is a study by *Ariane Pailhé, Lidia Panico, Anne Solaz, and the Sapris team*, who use data from a large-scale French survey of parents of children who were born in 2011. The interviews were conducted in France in May and June 2020, when these children were around nine years old. The survey includes questions on the overall experience of the lockdown for the parents, and on the effects of the pandemic on both parent-child and sibling relationships. In addition, the determinants of the children's emotional problems, operationalized through the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), were examined. The highly educated mothers surveyed reported having more positive family relationships and experiencing fewer strains during the pandemic. However, a large share of the differences by education was shown to be mediated by the employment and the financial situation of the household. Restricted housing space was also identified as an important determinant of "negative lockdown experiences." Parents having to perform onsite work (as opposed to telework) appeared to be a strong predictor for poor sibling relationships, as well as for poor parent-child relationships. Another highly important finding of this study is that economic hardship was clearly negatively correlated with the children having increased emotional and behavioral problems. This observation resonates with the results of the study by Steiber et al. (see above), who emphasized that an increase in poverty and economic hardship may have repercussions for child development.

Jianghong Li, Mareike Bünning, Till Kaiser, and Lena Hipp use a representative panel survey for Germany to investigate the well-being of parents during the pandemic from a gender perspective. The first wave of these data were collected between March and April 2020, and thus during the first lockdown, when day care centers and schools were closed nationwide. Another three waves were added that cover the period until April 2021. Thus, the study was able to examine changes across the course of the pandemic. The sample included parents with minor children. The main outcome variable was parental and psychological distress. The study found that parenting stress was greatly elevated during the first lockdown, but declined thereafter. In addition, differences by gender were uncovered, with mothers reporting higher levels of parenting stress than fathers. Parental distress was shown to be particularly high for single parents during the pandemic.

Basha Vicari, Gundula Zoch, and Ann-Christin Bächmann complement the investigation on parental distress with an analysis examining parental life satisfaction based on data from the German National Educational Panel Study for the first months of the pandemic. The authors found that compared to the pre-pandemic period, mothers experienced a more rapid and pronounced decline in life satisfaction than fathers. They also showed that institutional factors matter, as parents who had priority access to child care during the lockdown reported higher life satisfaction than parents who had to take care of their children themselves. The results also suggest that working mothers had a

particularly heavy burden during the pandemic. Overall, the authors emphasize that families need a reliable child care infrastructure that enables them to reconcile work and family life during times of crisis, including pandemics.

Alexandra N. Langmeyer, Angelika Guglhör-Rudan, Ursula Winklhofer, Sophia Chabursky, Thorsten Naab, and Ulrich Pötter use a mixed-methods approach to unravel the determinants of child and family well-being during the pandemic. The quantitative study was conducted between April and May 2020, and focused on mothers' experiences of conflict and "family chaos" during the pandemic, as well as on child-well-being. While Bächman et al. (see above) reported that access to emergency care increased parental life satisfaction, they also found that mothers who were classified as frontline workers were more likely to experience their family life as chaotic and full of conflict. Having children of kindergarten age was also a strong predictor of these experiences. A concerning finding of this investigation is that having a disadvantaged housing situation translated into poor child well-being. Single motherhood was also shown to be a strong predictor of low child well-being. Overall, the study's results confirm that there were large disparities in child and family well-being during the pandemic. The qualitative investigations also include reports from the children themselves, which showed that the pandemic had adverse effects on them, but also that they developed coping strategies to deal with the situation.

Ulrike Zartler, Vera Dafert, and Petra Dirnberger study parents' assessments of the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on their children based on repeated interviews and diary entries of parents of kindergarten and school-aged children, which were collected in Austria between March and December 2020. The study covers an extended period, ranging from the first week of the first lockdown in spring 2020, to the reopening phase, and to the second country-wide lockdown in winter 2020. The qualitative longitudinal study showed that parents reported only a few positive effects of the pandemic, and emphasized its harmful effects on their children's emotional, physical, and social well-being, as well as on their educational performance. The respondents experienced a wide range of challenges in accompanying and guiding their children through the pandemic. The study also demonstrated that parents were very creative and effective in developing strategies to deal with these challenges, and in adapting these strategies over time in response to the rapidly changing circumstances in the different phase of the pandemic. However, the longitudinal analysis showed that parents' capacities for adequately dealing with all of their children's needs decreased over time. This points to the importance of providing sufficient support measures to prevent lockdowns from having long-term detrimental consequences for families and children.

Susanne Witte and Heinz Kindler approach this issue from a different perspective by targeting a specific population who were at particularly high risk of being negatively affected by the pandemic. They investigated families in Germany who were in contact with child protective services during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. Based on input from child protection case workers, the authors identified a range of problems faced by families with multiple challenges. Although various issues of concern, like increased parental conflict, media use, and alcohol consumption, were reported; some families were able to establish routines, to employ their capacities, and to activate resources. However, the children's difficulties at school seemed to increase due to insufficient homeschooling conditions. The results point to a bifurcation between families who were able to use their

resources to deal with the adversities they faced during the pandemic, and families whose problems were exacerbated during this period.

Section IV looks at the experiences of post-divorce families. Many of the measures implemented during the pandemic were designed for nuclear families, and disregarded the specific needs of post-separation families. The situations of these families were made worse by the lack of political concern about how the social distancing measures imposed during the pandemic would impact families who had to organize shared physical custody arrangements or contact schedules for different sets of children in different households; who experienced custody disputes; or who were undergoing high-conflict divorces.

The first paper in this section by *Laura Merla and Sarah Murru* adopts a qualitative approach to investigate the impact of the spring 2020 lockdown in Italy on families who have shared physical custody arrangements. Based on semi-structured interviews with parents, and on a description of the lockdown as a "challenge-trial," the authors showed how deeply the COVID-19 social distancing measures affected the division of parental involvement in divorced families, and demonstrate how the lockdown required parents to reflect on and reorganize their tasks and positions. To address these issues, the authors present a novel typology of custody re-organization during lockdown. They point out that custody arrangements should focus on family practices during the daytime, instead of concentrating solely on sleepovers, noting fathers did not automatically assume a larger share of care tasks when they had their children stay with them overnight during the lockdown. Instead, other family members (e.g., grandmothers, relatives) often had to take on the fathers' tasks. Against this background, the authors argue that any model that tries to ensure gender equality in shared parenting arrangements must take into account dimensions beyond sleepovers. The authors also draw attention to sibling relationships in shared custody arrangements, observing that the practice of "splitting siblings" across households increased during the lockdown.

Núria Sánchez-Mira, Benjamin Moles-Kalt, and Laura Bernardi analyze how lone parents in French-speaking Switzerland dealt with the increased uncertainties during the Covid-19 pandemic. They ground their study in the theoretical integration of the temporal orientations of different types of agency and uncertainty management. The results point to the restabilizing potential of everyday routines. In a situation characterized by chronic uncertainty, routines allowed these parents to make sense of the novel situation, to reduce their ambiguity and uncertainty, and to regain their identity. Moreover, communicating about the situation and engaging in shared decision-making with their social networks appeared to be of particular importance to single parents. The study also showed how uncertainty developed gradually from a temporary to a chronic condition in the course of the pandemic, leading to an increased long-term orientation toward feeling anxious and worrying about the future.

Inge Pasteels investigates the impact of the Covid-19-related social distancing measures on the family lives of adolescents and young adults whose parents had been through a high-conflict divorce in Belgium. She argues in her contribution that the government tailored the rules for preventive measures during the second wave of the pandemic with traditional nuclear families in mind, while neglecting other family types and their needs. The study illustrates how the pandemic affected contact frequencies and parent-child relations in these families, as well as relationships with other household members, like

(step-)siblings or the parents' new partners. Families had to negotiate their own rules; and thus had to designate who would be in close contact with whom, and who would be in and out of the family system. The need for such complex negotiations had the potential to increase conflict levels. The author identifies a high potential for ambiguity, and describes how family boundaries were constructed when forced to choose a reduced number of "cuddle contact" persons in an already conflict-laden family environment. Overall, the study shows how the political focus on one type of family neglects other constellations, and adds further complications to the lives of complex families, as little or no attention is paid to their specific situations.

The final section ***Section V*** complements the investigations on families and children by adopting an intergenerational perspective. The contributions point to the challenges associated with maintaining intergenerational relationships during the pandemic, but also to the strengths and supportive potential of these relationships.

Jorik Vergauwen, Katrijn Delaruelle, Pearl Dykstra, Piet Bracke, and Dimitri Mortelmans present results for 26 European countries based on data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). The investigation focused on respondents aged 65 and older, and examined whether the relationships between these elderly individuals with their adult children deteriorated during the pandemic in 2020. The results show that intergenerational relations (operationalized over frequency of contact) remained fairly stable over time. The large number of countries covered in this survey also enabled the researchers to examine the effects of national Covid-19 measures on intergenerational relationships. Against expectations, the findings indicate that stringent social distancing measures generally did not reduce contact between adult children and their parents. Like for other aspects of family life, large differences in the quality of these relationships across population subgroups were uncovered. Men, less educated individuals, and residents of nursing homes reported a decline in contact with their children. Again, these findings support the claim that the pandemic has aggravated social disparities.

Sara Eldén, Terese Anving, and Linn Alenius Wallin investigate how intergenerational care practices have evolved during the pandemic in Sweden. They found that although the strong Swedish welfare state provides affordable care services for all, the social distancing measures that separated the generations still affected care practices. The study drew on the results of qualitative interviews and a diary interview method used with grandparents and adult children, and of a "draw-your-day" method and a concentric circles of closeness approach used with grandchildren. The data were collected shortly before and during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. The findings indicate that there were high levels of reciprocity, but also that there were very high levels of complexity and variation in intergenerational care patterns. The results of these detailed analyses show how families negotiated distance and risk, and oscillated between worry and relief during the pandemic. As co-presence was under threat, new and creative ways of facilitating interconnectedness and relational participation had to be developed.

Grit Höppner, Anna Wanka, and Cordula Endter explore intergenerational relations during the pandemic in Germany. They looked at how, and through which social practices, family and age were being (un)done, and how these practices affected intergenerational relations. The study was based on longitudinal research carried out

between March 2020 and February 2021 by means of qualitative interviews with individuals representing different ages, households, and care constellations. The authors challenge the assumption that institutionalized ageism affects older and younger generations in particular ways, noting that different generations were attributed salient roles during the pandemic (older people as risk groups, younger people as "silent transmitters"). The study showed that age-based institutional measures intended to stop the spread of virus had a negative impact on intergenerational relations, as older adults were being excluded from their families. The authors underline the potential of a longitudinal "linking ages" approach for studying intergenerational family relations in times of crisis.

3 Conclusion

This Special Issue pursues several main objectives in its attempt to analyze family lives during the COVID-19 pandemic in European societies. First, it goes beyond national boundaries. Many of the contributions in this Special Issue cover the situation in Germany and Austria, but other countries, including Belgium, Italy, France, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, are also investigated in individual country studies. Furthermore, two of the studies include evidence for a large number of countries, allowing us to investigate how families have been coping with the ongoing pandemic, and how country-specific lockdown measures and societal contexts have affected behavior and well-being. Second, the Special Issue embraces a wide range of methodical approaches, and includes qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies: nine articles are based on a qualitative approach, nine rely on quantitative datasets, and two use a mixed-methods design. Thus, it cuts across methodological boundaries, and provides novel empirical evidence from different perspectives on similar themes.

To some extent, the pandemic highlighted well-known disparities. For example, the unequal division of child care and housework, which was a heavily debated issue before the pandemic, was also very evident during the pandemic. Furthermore, single motherhood, low education, low income, and a lack of inclusion in family ties and social networks continue to be important risk factors for social disadvantage, and for low levels of parental and child well-being. While some disparities have clearly been exacerbated in the course of the pandemic, others have changed to a lesser extent. The evidence for Germany and Austria, which are known to be rather traditional countries, does not show that there were any major changes in gendered care patterns in the course of the pandemic. Moreover, the studies included in this volume do not support the claim that women reduced their paid working hours significantly more than men in the course of the pandemic. Thus, the hypothesis that the pandemic led to a "re-traditionalization" of gendered care and employment patterns could not be confirmed. Nevertheless, men and women experienced the pandemic differently, with mothers reporting higher levels of stress as a result of the pandemic. It is possible the "mental load" related to the logistics of organizing child care, homeschooling, and related matters fell squarely on the shoulders of women during the pandemic.

While the pandemic did not lead to radical shifts in the gendered care patterns, we found increases in disparities across families, particularly increases in economic disparities, and in their detrimental effects on children. Several studies included in this special issue showed that there were strong relationships between economic hardship and increases in emotional and behavioral problems among children living in economically disadvantaged families. Negative outcomes for children should be at the center of policy measures aimed at reducing the devastating impact of the pandemic on families. The results further underline the fundamental importance of educational institutions and reliable child care infrastructure, both to support children's development, and to meet parents' needs to reconcile work and family life during the pandemic.

The contributions in this Special Issue also highlight that the traditional notion of the nuclear family – composed of a couple living with their children in the same household – is an inadequate basis for policy-making. Post-separation families were often left alone to grapple with the consequences of policy measures that were designed based on the assumption that family life does not extend beyond household boundaries. In hindsight, it appears that policy-makers had failed to reflect the complexity of family structures and family lives, and did not show an awareness of the diversity of contemporary family forms. In a similar vein, inter-generational relationships that extend across household boundaries, such as relations between children and their aged parents, were at risk during the pandemic. While the contributions in this Special Issue show that emotional ties have remained strong throughout the pandemic, there have been exceptions, as certain groups (such as people in nursing homes and less educated and divorced older men) have been negatively affected by the pandemic.

Overall, the Special Issue provides insights into how parents and children have fared, and how they have been coping with the ongoing pandemic and its related challenges in different societal contexts. The pandemic has highlighted that schools, day care centers, and even leisure activities (sports clubs, music lessons, etc.) are crucial for the well-being of parents and children. Families shouldered large care responsibilities during the lockdowns and during the periods when their children had to quarantine. They supported their children's schooling while also creating a nurturing family environment, and thus took on major educational obligations that usually are fulfilled by the state. Although the COVID-19 crisis underlines the importance of the family for the functioning of societies, it also highlights the effects on social inequality and family well-being when the state suddenly pulls out of its responsibilities. Many families experienced elevated levels of stress and exhaustion during the pandemic. It has also become evident that social and economic distress are strongly interwoven, and that the developments during the pandemic aggravated existing social disparities. The groups who were already at a disadvantage before the pandemic – such as lone-parent families, families with low incomes, and families with limited housing space – were most strongly affected.

At the onset of the pandemic, most European countries were overwhelmed by the need to impose heavy restrictions, like country-wide lockdowns, in response to a type of health threat that few people alive today have ever experienced before. In early 2020, it was hard to imagine that the challenges associated with the pandemic would persist in European societies for a long period of time. When we finalized this introduction (in January 2022), Europe was in the middle of a new COVID-19 wave induced by the

Omicron variant. Although there is a glimmer of hope that the new variant will pose a less severe health threat than prior variants, it is clear that our societies have been deeply shattered by the experience of the pandemic, as many people are left feeling that future developments are highly uncertain. However, the long duration of the pandemic has also provided opportunities to learn from past experiences. In a summary of the measures imposed in reaction to the Spanish Flu in 1918, Spinney (2017, p. 97) concluded that "school-age children represented ideal vectors of infections" and that the "closing of schools was therefore a knee-jerk reaction" to combat the pandemic. During this COVID-19 pandemic, policy-makers have become more alert to the needs of families and children over time. Whereas schools and day care centers were indeed closed in a "knee-jerk reaction" in most countries during the first lockdown in 2020, many national governments and local actors have realized that such coercive measures may have had unexpected and unprecedented effects on child outcomes, and on educational disparities. Thus, policy-makers have prioritized keeping schools and day care centers open. However, some of the studies in this Special Issue have shown that the first lockdown and the quarantines have already aggravated social disparities. To reduce the chances that the disruptions caused by the pandemic will have long-term detrimental social and economic consequences, parents and their children will need adequate support measures that are tailored to their needs, and that are designed to alleviate these disparities.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Familienleben während der COVID-19 Pandemie in europäischen Gesellschaften: Einleitung zum Special Issue

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Dieser Beitrag leitet in das Special Issue "Family Lives during the COVID-19 Pandemic in European Societies" ein.

Hintergrund: Ziel dieses Special Issues ist es zu untersuchen, wie Familien, Eltern und Kinder durch die COVID-19 Pandemie in den unterschiedlichen Ländern beeinflusst worden sind und mit den Herausforderungen der Pandemie umgegangen sind.

Methode: Die Beiträge in diesem Special Issue basieren auf qualitativen, quantitativen und mixed-methods Ansätzen. Die Daten wurden im Jahr 2020 in einer Vielzahl von europäischen Ländern gesammelt. Sie umfassen die Zeit des ersten Lockdowns, die Phase der Lockerungen sowie die darauffolgenden Monate.

Ergebnisse: Die 20 Beiträge in diesem Special Issue zeigen, welche enormen Aufgaben Familie während der Pandemie geschultert haben. Obwohl die Pandemie nicht zu radikalen Veränderungen in der geschlechtlichen Arbeitsteilung geführt hat, haben Mütter und Väter die Pandemie zum Teil unterschiedlich erlebt, d.h. Mütter berichten eine höhere Stressbelastung als Väter. Darüber hinaus zeigt sich, dass Familien und Kinder sehr unterschiedlich von der Pandemie betroffen waren. Alleinerziehende und Eltern und Kindern in Haushalten mit niedrigem Einkommen waren besonders stark von finanziellen Einbußen und einem Rückgang ihres sozialen Wohlbefindens betroffen. Soziale und ökonomische Verwerfungen sind eng verquickt, und insgesamt haben sich die ökonomischen und sozialen Unterschiede zwischen Familien und Kindern während der Pandemie verschärft.

Schlussfolgerung: Dieses Special Issue unterstreicht die Wichtigkeit von Familie für die Funktionalität von Gesellschaften in Krisenzeiten. Es zeigt auch auf, dass von der Politik während der Pandemie oft eine zu eingeschränkte Definition von Familien zu Grunde gelegt wurde, das die Diversität von Familie nicht hinreichend widerspiegelt. Die Befunde dieses Special Issues zeigen darüber hinaus, dass die Gefahr besteht, dass die Pandemie die ökonomischen und sozialen Unterschiede zwischen den Familien vergrößert hat. Daraus folgt, dass Eltern und Kinder adäquate Unterstützungsmaßnahmen brauchen, die an ihre speziellen Bedürfnissen angepasst sind und darauf abzielen, die sozialen, ökonomischen und Bildungsunterschiede zu reduzieren.

Schlagwörter: COVID-19, Familienleben, work-family balance, Geschlechterrollen, soziale Ungleichheit, Eltern-Kind-Beziehungen, Wohlbefinden, Trennung und Scheidung, Nachtrennungsfamilien, intergenerationale Beziehungen

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