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**Normativity, Emotions and the legitimization of life conduct.
A heuristics for research on single parent families on welfare**

The TISSA Call for Papers highlights the existential consequences of the current economic configuration for dependent workers and unemployed people. The economic pressure especially on lower income groups aggravates a post-welfarist situation in which managerialist reforms in social services go along with a responsabilisation of their users (e.g. articles in Duyvendak, Knijn & Kremer 2006). In the context of labour market policies, this means a pedagogisation of interventions, as the life conduct of unemployed people and especially their aspirations become a focus of measures against unemployment (and often against the unemployed). In Germany, one of the groups most severely affected by these developments are single parent families on welfare¹, that is either without a job or not earning enough to sustain themselves through wage labour. The normative issue at stake here is that people are withheld the opportunity of “enjoying an individual life in a manner one has reason to value” (TISSA Call for Papers). This formula neatly encapsulates the goal of social work interventions as well as a central problem for pedagogy in general: The relation between individual needs, desires or life plans and what is not only subjectively but *reasonably* valuable.

My dissertation project aims at the ways and contexts in which single parents legitimise certain forms of life conduct. It focuses on their normative-emotional responses to changing institutional demands, requiring a new balance between being a parent and being a worker. In doing so, it follows the concept of “lay normativity” (Sayer 2005, 5ff.) in assuming that the important questions concerning the conduct of everyday life are normative questions: They are questions about what is valuable and what constitutes a ‘good life’. The assumption is that legitimations and rationales of life conduct always already mediate between (socially formed) needs and desires and the reasons for what one values, which are normative in nature. As the state of research shows (e.g. Brand 2006, Fegert & Ziegenhain 2003, Schneider et al. 2001), single parents (mostly mothers²) on

¹ In 2005, 16% of all children in Germany lived with single parents (BMAS 2008, 9). This family structure generates the lowest income in comparison to all other familial forms (BMAS 2008, 90) and has the highest poverty risk (BMAS 2008, 92). In 2010, more than half of the ‘communities of need’ receiving welfare are single parents (BA 2010, 6). They are also receiving welfare for a longer period of time than other household forms (Graf & Rudolph 2009).

² In Germany, 94.7% of single parents on welfare are women (BA 2010, 6).

welfare are not distinguished by common features that would allow to conceptualise them as a homogenous group. Nevertheless, they are subject to moral ascriptions, especially in the context of labour market and employment policies. These interpellations in turn (re)produce “gendered moral rationalities” (Simon & Duncan 1999).

These ‘rationalities’ are not to be understood as merely cognitive. A starting point for my dissertation project is the assumption that emotions are not ‘blind’, biologically conditioned responses to external stimuli, but possess their own kind of rationality; they are value judgements (cf. Nussbaum 2001). Thus, emotions are a form of reflexivity, which constitutes a central aim of pedagogy in general as it is imperative in giving reasons for one’s life choices that are intelligible to others. It should also constitute the starting point for social work interventions that need to respect the ‘autonomy of life praxis’ (Sünker 1989, 164). The research heuristics proposed for the dissertation project aims at uncovering the “mundane reflexivity” (Sayer 2005, 29) actors exercise in everyday life. The overarching research interest is to identify in the argumentatively reconstructed life praxis of single parents an emancipatory potential defying or eluding a socio-pedagogical integration. This kind of integration is always framed by welfare state arrangements, which at the same time enable and absorb subjectivity. The strengthening of said potential for subjectivity constitutes a proper goal for critical social work.

Interviews guided by a field manual will be conducted with single parents building on a quantitative study (Ziegler, Seelmeyer & Otto 2010) that (among other things) identified domains of life conduct central to single parents and ‘communities of need’: the question whether or not to take up work, the gendered division of labour, child-rearing, relations to others, recourse to support structures (especially day care for children) and contact to state institutions. These dimensions can also said to be pivotal to labour market policy and social work interventions.

The main research questions are:

- Which are the main patterns of legitimating different ways of conducting one’s life in regard to taking up work, the gendered division of labour, child-rearing, relations to others, recourse to support structures and contact to state institutions?
- Which is the role of the (ever changing) demands, rationales and modes of subjectivisation put forward by institutions of moral regulation (such as social work) in the formation of these patterns?
- Do single parents utilise justifications strategically when dealing with state institutions? Which moral rationales do they estimate are likely to be accepted?
- What is the role of discursively conveyed imputations of ‘inferior’/ immoral ways of conducting one’s life in legitimations of life conduct?

The qualitative survey aims at patterns of legitimation situated in the life praxis of the respondents. It aims to be a substantial contribution to the question of how (moral) understandings of self and world shape aspirations and dispositions for action. The paper proposed for the TiSSA Pre-Conference will present the method(ological) outline for the interviews and their interpretation. The complex theoretical layout of the dissertation project incorporating educational science, sociology,

the psychology of emotions, philosophy and political science necessitates a thorough discussion of the operationalisation of the concepts and their interdependencies.

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