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# The triple bind of single-parent families

Resources, employment and  
policies to improve well-being

Edited by  
Rense Nieuwenhuis  
Laurie C. Maldonado

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# **THE TRIPLE BIND OF SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES**

Resources, employment and policies  
to improve wellbeing

Edited by Rense Nieuwenhuis  
and Laurie C. Maldonado



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## Social justice, single parents and their children

*Gideon Calder*

Single-parent families – as seen across this book – sit in complex, shifting social positions. This is partly a reflection of the sheer range of ways in which *any* form of household will be shaped by wider social and economic circumstances, and in turn affect the lives of those within it. In unequal societies, it will be unsurprising to find that in general, the different circumstances that families find themselves in have a bearing on the wealth, status, wellbeing and prospects of their members. Yet, it is also because of the particular connections between single parenthood and forms of disadvantage that we have pressing reasons to seek to lessen or mute the effects of these circumstances. In comparison with others, single parents are disadvantaged in terms of income, education, health prospects and career opportunities. Because the great majority are women, they face patterns of gender disadvantage. The children of single parents are more likely to live in poverty, and less likely to do well at school. Meanwhile, their parents' social position stems importantly from the ways in which dominant discourses around 'appropriate' parenting – and 'good' and 'bad' parents – continue to inform both how parents see themselves and how different types of parent are perceived in contemporary society. While the family is a pivotal focal point of social policy, it is rare that single-parent families are the primary beneficiaries of policy. More than that, single parents have tended to be constructed, through policy, in ways that themselves serve to reinforce certain disadvantageous aspects of their position: as dependent, undeserving, work-avoiding or a threat to social order (Barlow et al., 2002; Davies, 2012; Phoenix, 1996; Smith, 1999).

To identify and track the triple bind of inadequate resources, inadequate employment and inadequate policies is to begin to establish the quite specific ways in which the position of single parents raises questions of social justice. In some respects, these questions reflect familiar, well-aired themes: the fair distribution of resources in

society, the value of autonomy over one's living arrangements and life plans, the extent to which those in disadvantaged positions should be compensated and how the relative priority of ensuring that every child – regardless of background – has the opportunity to flourish. At the same time, addressing single parenthood touches on issues that are quite specific to it.

This chapter explores how single parents fit into current debates about social justice, the family and children. It begins by establishing key aspects of those debates. We then look successively at four distinct angles, each picking out a separate relationship and raising questions about fairness and social priorities:

1. The position of single parents in relation to other parents;
2. The position of single parents in relation to their children;
3. The position of children in relation to their single parents;
4. The position of children of single parents in relation to other children.

There are several reasons to split the discussion this way. One is that it serves to highlight that single parenthood is not a single thing, in social justice terms. Rather, it raises a cluster of issues, which need disentangling from one another. Another benefit of looking at these four angles separately is to allow for the possibility that exploring the issues under each heading may pull us in different – even contradictory – directions. A third is that it gives equal 'weight' to the respective positions of single parents and their children. So, it does not start out from an upfront assumption that single parenthood is primarily about parents, from the perspective of social justice. Rather, it gives their children equal billing. And a fourth is that it allows us to explore different dimensions of what Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, in a prominent recent analysis of relevant terrain, call '**familial relationship goods**' (Brighouse & Swift, 2014; Calder, 2016a). These are a kind of aggregate of different factors contributing to a flourishing human life, both as child and parent. The notion helps develop an account of both why family relationships are valuable and why (for example) we might have good reasons to promote or protect them. For some – including Brighouse and Swift – the family is *uniquely* valuable: it offers us goods that are unavailable (or at least less available) elsewhere. Family relationships, it can be argued, are not like other kinds of relationship, and give access to things that themselves are specific and distinct. For good or bad, and usually both, family relations of whatever form have a distinct and deep effect

on the current wellbeing and future prospects of family members. And this in turn is a key reason why the family matters, in terms of social justice.

## **Families, single-parent families and social justice**

We have seen that there are various facets and levels to the relationship between the family and questions of social justice. But what are those questions? Four are core (for a wider picture of the landscape see Archard, 2010, Chapter Five; Calder, 2016b, Chapter Two):

1. How much, and in what ways, should families be subsidised by the state?
2. What are the acceptable forms of family?
3. What is the appropriate scope of family autonomy?
4. To what extent should family background be allowed to shape children's life chances?

These are briefly discussed in turn below.

### ***1. How much, and in what ways, should families be subsidised by the state?***

In contemporary liberal democracies as elsewhere, parents are directly supported, financially and in kind, for rearing children. This itself is a vital part of ongoing socioeconomic security (the future taxes paid by current children being crucial to the maintenance of the welfare system). On the other hand, the costs of this support are borne by taxpayers, regardless of whether they have children or have played any role in rearing them.

### ***2. What are the acceptable forms of family?***

Given that families may be constituted in a great variety of ways, any society will place constraints on what counts as a family in terms of number of parents, the relationship between members (biological, adoptive, reconstituted), whether members need to cohabit and so on. Laws and policies will serve to promote or incentivise some family forms over others. Some will be prohibited (polygamous parenting being a customary example).

### ***3. What is the appropriate scope of family autonomy?***

Family autonomy refers to the entitlement of parents (in cohabiting families) and sometimes their children (especially once adults) to make decisions about what happens to family members. All societies grant this to an extent, and for many parents it is a fundamental part of what makes being a parent valuable. But there are limits, by any reckoning, to what parents may legitimately do to and for their children – placed, for example, by laws on abuse and neglect.

### ***4. To what extent should family background be allowed to shape children's life chances?***

Families play a key role in the transmission of unfair and unearned advantage and disadvantage. The nature and position of the family a child is born into makes a substantial difference to their life chances. This is largely due to the uneven distribution of parental spending power and economic capital, but is a symptom too of the effects of family autonomy: of the ways in which parents' choices affect children's outcomes, and how different kinds of capital (economic, social and cultural) are handed down.

While there is a growing specific literature on families and social justice (see, for example, Archard, 2003, 2010; Brighouse & Swift, 2014; Calder, 2016b; Clayton, 2006; Okin, 1989), there is proportionately very little discussion therein of the place of single-parent families – particularly striking, given their sheer number (as much as one quarter of all families with children in the US, UK, Sweden and Denmark; see Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, Chapter One in this book). Partially, this reflects the core issues at stake in that literature – the nature of many of which may not obviously seem to vary according to the number of parents in a family – or indeed, their age or gender. The legitimate scope of parental choice over the direction of their children's lives seems affected only by who counts as a parent, and not by how many parents there are. And the extent to which the children of better-off parents should rightfully stand to benefit from the sheer luck of having been born into more privileged circumstances than others seems affected by how much economic, social and cultural capital parents have at their disposal, rather than the number of parents involved.

Meanwhile in the public discourse on single-parent families, it is questions 1 and 2 that predominate. Thus, with regard to question 2:

any longitudinal monitor of the coverage of single mothers in the popular media would find regular reference over the decades to whether this is an appropriate way in which to bring up children – along with recurring linkages of single mothers to social problems, identification of single-parent families as themselves aberrant and problematic and the mother as irresponsible or negligent (Duncan & Edwards, 1999; Lewis, 2001; Chambers, 2001, 2012). To an important extent, such discourse reflects qualms about the appropriateness of family arrangements. Thus, the spread of ‘alternative’ family forms may be deemed definitively bad in itself, or inextricably linked to consequences that themselves are definitively bad. But frequently, a heightened sense that single-parent families are morally problematic will have been prompted, fuelled or magnified by factors relating to question 1. So, what focuses the attention of discourse about single-parent families, and what maximises its public audience, is typically a neighbouring concern about the allocation of resources.

At any rate, all four questions matter to, and capture enduring dimensions of, normative discussions of single-parent families. The shape of those discussions depends, in part, on which aspect of family relations is currently in focus.

### **Single parents in relation to other parents**

Evidence in other chapters in this book confirms that single-parent families tend to be worse off than coupled-parent families. What do they have less of? The following lists are not exhaustive, but they are illustrative. Single parents have lower levels of income (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, Chapter One; Treanor, Chapter Four; Cantillon et al., Chapter Eighteen) and wealth (Sierminska, Chapter Three), and are at greater risk of poverty (Härkönen, Chapter Two; Treanor, Chapter Four; Horemans & Marx, Chapter Nine; Bradshaw et al., Chapter Fifteen) and material deprivation (Treanor, Chapter Four). We can also expect single parents to have poorer health (Nieuwenhuis et al., Chapter Fourteen); reduced career opportunities (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, Chapter One; Van Lancker, Chapter Eleven); a less optimal work–family balance (Esser & Olsen, Chapter Thirteen); lower levels of education (Härkönen, Chapter Two), less flexibility over the use of their time (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, Chapter One) and less opportunity to care for family members (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, Chapter One), as well as to be harder hit by high childcare costs (Van Lancker, Chapter Eleven). Much of this is inflected by patterns of gender disadvantage, as the great majority of single parents are women

(Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, Chapter One; Van Lancker, Chapter Eleven; Zagel & Hübgen, Chapter Eight). Relations of cause and effect here may be complex, circular or simply obscure. There is evidence both that lower socioeconomic wellbeing leads to single parenthood and that single parenthood leads to lower socioeconomic wellbeing. Moreover, there is evidence that the disadvantaged economic position of single-parent families – rather than the composition of the family itself – lies at the root of the cluster of other disadvantages they are more likely to be subject to (Treanor, 2016, Chapter Four in this book).

Disadvantage and injustice are, of course, conceptually distinct. On any familiar understanding of social justice, a just society would involve *some* variation in people's access to resources and advantage. Not all parents would have an identical package, because they would differ in their circumstances, line of work, preferences, needs and in other respects that seem relevant to how resources are distributed. But, of course, what counts as fair distribution is deeply contested. Here, notions of luck, responsibility and desert (that is, what people deserve) provide a helpful line of approach. If people's circumstances differ, a common understanding has it that how they came to be in those circumstances is crucial. Much of familiar thinking on these lines invokes something like the political philosopher Ronald Dworkin's distinction between **brute luck** (simple chance) and **option luck**, which refers to chance outcomes stemming from autonomous choices (Dworkin, 2000). So, a (drastic) case of bad brute luck would be being hit by a falling meteorite. If I put all my money on red and the roulette wheel comes up black, this is bad option luck. For luck egalitarians like Dworkin, justice requires that we compensate people for the effects of brute luck, but not for those of option luck. So, what would matter in our context is whether single parents' position is the result of genuine choice, or is visited upon them by circumstances beyond their control. Those opting for single parenthood as a 'lifestyle choice' (Davies et al., 1993) could be regarded as having knowingly entered into their own disadvantageous position. Those whose single parenthood is visited upon them by factors beyond their control would be entitled to compensation.

This stance does clearly resonate with a version of conventional moral wisdom. Three separate lines of objection to it are perhaps particularly salient, among many possible others. One is that it operates on the basis of simplistic and deeply controversial assumptions about the scope of genuine choice. To assume that single parents have, as a rule, freely chosen their position from a range of lifestyle options – or

even that, as a rule, they think that single parenting is preferable to co-parenting – requires at best a partial reading of the aforementioned complex causal mesh. The line between brute and option luck will often be obscure, in terms of not only the metaphysics of free will but also the everyday diagnosis of causes and effects in our intricate social lives. The demographic patterns of single parenthood suggest that the line is especially difficult to draw in this case. A second objection will focus on the assumption that single parenthood itself should be classed as a misfortune in the first place. There is nothing *inherent* about the disadvantage it brings, it can be argued. For it to be seen that way depends on decisions about the distribution of resources in society, alongside dominant assumptions about appropriate family forms, both which are contingent and up for revision.

The third objection centers on what counts as activity deserving of advantage – and, to some extent, works against the grain of the first. Childcare remains drastically undervalued as work, in terms of its contribution to the economy and to the sustainability of social practices and institutions (Asher, 2012; Folbre, 2008; Hochschild and Machung, 2012). Simultaneously, it has until recently played only a marginal role (at most) in the design of theories of social justice (Kittay, 1999; Tronto, 1994). Among the many side effects of this, a crucial element in the present context is an arguable warping of the discourse of desert. Successive approaches in social policy have seen work as the solution to welfare dependency, and defined dependency precisely so that single parents will fall into the category of dependents. Care work has been seen in terms of avoidance of the labour market. But the unpaid nature of domestic care work does not mean that it is unproductive labour. And indeed, the choice to be a single parent is often fully rational (Duncan & Edwards, 1999) – stemming, for example, from the desire to escape an abusive or loveless relationship – and also, moreover, a vital contribution to the economy rather than a burden imposed on it (Smith, 1999). Consider the scale of the costs that would be imposed on the state care system were the bulk of single parents to forsake their commitment. Single parents, as we have seen (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, Chapter One in this book), find their time squeezed both in terms of the time to earn wages and the time to care.

So even in this short, partial discussion of possible framings of the issues, we find a clear basis on which to argue that single parents are not only disadvantaged but also unjustly so – both because, in many cases, their circumstances cannot be clearly identified as a matter of ‘option luck’, and because their deliberate contributions to society are taken for granted or insufficiently valued.

## Single parents in relation to their children

Is there something unjust in the relationship of single parents to their children, from the point of view of the parents? To get a handle on this question, it helps to start from what is putatively valuable about the parental role. To put this another way: if, as demographic evidence suggests, most adults see themselves as having an interest in being a parent, what exactly might that interest consist of? Here, we need to make some basic anthropological claims. For most people, as Brighouse and Swift put it, ‘intimate relationships with others are essential for their lives to have meaning’ (2014, p. 87). The parent–child relationship can be seen as one quite distinct version of meaning-bestowing intimacy. Various factors make it so. There is an imbalance of power and standing involved (children do not choose to be in it, and are in normal circumstances ‘stuck’ with being on the receiving end of parental decisions). There is an inherent paternalism to the relationship: parenting will mean making decisions deemed in the child’s best interest irrespective of the wishes of the child, such that failing to do this can mean failing as a parent. The parental role is uniquely formative on how the child develops, in terms of their capacities, values and worldview. And it involves a kind of intimate sharing that does not arise in relationships between adults – characterised by open, spontaneous expression of feelings on the part of the child, and a careful management of the parental response. So, as Brighouse and Swift conclude, ‘It’s because of *what* children need from their parents that adults have such a weighty interest in giving it to them’ (2014, p. 92). Details about this list of features or what it omits may be quibbled about. But what is important for our purposes here is that none of these features cashes out in significantly different ways for a single parent.

As a result, it may be arguable that, for all the costs of being a single parent, there is a potential gain in this specific sense. Many of the goods of parenting flow just as strongly, or more so, when the role is carried out solo. In the right circumstances, single parenthood might in principle bring more of what is distinctly valuable about parenthood than a co-parenting role. A simple deficit model, based on the presumption of lack stemming from the absence of a parenting partner, would miss this point. There is no reliable inference from the burgeoning evidence on impaired access to resources and to social advantage that single parents are necessarily deprived *as parents*.

Yet on reflection, from the chapters of this book, there are certain key senses in which we can infer just this. For even bracketing

questions of income, we find a squeeze on working single parents' *time to parent* (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, Chapter One). Time is one resource which, *prima facie*, working single parents have less of – or rather, less control over the management of their time – simply because of the lack of a division of parental labour. This feeds into a lack of autonomy. Privileged parents may not fully exploit the potential goods of parenting, and may not place high value on them. A proportion, indeed, has always spent considerable resources avoiding intimacy with their children, by employing domestic help or sending them to boarding school. These are markers of status. But the typical condition of the single parent is characterised by less choice in these matters (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, Chapter One). Indeed, this is a definitive effect of the triple bind. For a single parent to earn sufficient income to avoid the risk of disadvantage on that front, they are likely to put themselves in the position where they must, of necessity, enlist help with childcare or housework in order to fulfil their working role. If they do this, they are constrained in terms of domestic time in general and time spent experiencing the goods of parenting in particular. But this is to depict the middle-class segment of the single-parent spectrum, and to model a kind of trade-off between increased income and diminished parenting time. In fact, all single parents face 'a particularly sharp trade-off between employment and family' (Daly & Kelly, 2015, p. 182). A single parent on a zero-hours contract will be denied autonomy over parenting time at the same time as earning low and precarious wages. Here, there is no compensating upside. It is the worst of both worlds.

The contours of disadvantage here are intricate, and demanding to address. Can any society ensure some kind of perfect equality of access to the goods of parenting? No. But we can move far closer to something like it than is evidenced in current typical policy provisions across Europe.

### **Children in relation to their single parents**

Not all people want to have children, and however strong the dominant ideological messages in terms of the expectancy that they do so, compulsory childrearing is not a policy anywhere. But should all children want to have parents? Is not having a parent at all a disadvantage? Is having two better than having one? If co-parenting remains a 'default' model and norm, this does not by itself answer the question of how many parents is best. Would a child benefit from having four parents? Is there an optimal number of parents, from the

point of view of a child, any more than there is an optimal number of children, from the point of view of a parent? Such questions come into sharpest focus when we look at the placement of looked-after children, and the assessment of their needs. Here, orthodoxy has shifted and become markedly more liberal. In many countries, equality legislation makes it illegal to deny the right to adopt to single people or same-sex couples. Rather, children are placed with parents on a bespoke basis, according to discretionary judgements about the needs of the child and the circumstances of the would-be adopter. This might sound both fair and a way of prioritising the interests of the child, whose parents are profiled, means-tested and interviewed before any match is approved.

Of course, children who have been taken into care are in an exceptional position. Most children do not become paired up with a parent via this route. And very few people, if any, have ever suggested that it should be the norm. Even so, such procedures help focus attention on whether and how questions of social justice apply to the children living in different forms of family. What is crucial is not so much how many parents one has as a child, but how well-placed they are to meet the interests of children. Let's put those interests in as brief – and hopefully, non-contentious – a way as possible.

Children need the wherewithal to develop physically, cognitively and emotionally. They also need the opportunity to enjoy their childhood as a thing in itself, rather than simply as a stage on the way to the achievement of adulthood – childhood being importantly distinct from adulthood as a way of being (Lister, 2016). If the interests of children are paramount in the parenting relationship, then we should judge the quality of the relationship between children and their parents according to the meeting of these interests. Crucial to this, on a widely accepted understanding, is a secure, enduring attachment to a limited number of parents (Bowlby, 1988). A secure attachment does not, of course, guarantee a flourishing childhood – but it increases the probability of it. On this basis, it can be seen as a necessary, even if not a sufficient, condition for such flourishing.

Neither one nor two parents is a guarantee of the security of an attachment, and no threat to such security is exclusive to either family form. For children with divorced parents, it is the *conflict* surrounding the process of separation that seems most detrimental – with the experience of conflict in general being harmful to children's interests (Harkness & Salgado, Chapter Five in this book; Harold & Sellers, 2016; Holland, 2016). Those children – like those of a parent who has lost their partner through bereavement – are in a substantively different

position to those of a mother who gave birth single and has opted to remain so. As child psychologist Susan Golombok puts it, 'it is not so much the absence of a parent but the difficulties that come with it that lead to adverse outcomes for the child' (Golombok, 2000, p. 13). This is not to rule out that, in terms of probabilities, a child's interests will be better served by having two parents; nor is it to claim that number of parents makes no difference. But it puts a very firm brake on any assumption that having only one parent should be regarded as a *necessary* disadvantage, let alone an injustice. Flux and interruption in the parenting relationship do pose threats to children's interests. While no number of parents provides insurance against them, single-parent families are especially likely to have experienced discontinuities in the parent-child relationship.

This lack of permanence carries its own complex implications from the point of view of social justice. Taking a life-course perspective (Treanor, Chapter Four; Zagel & Hübgen, Chapter Eight in this book) serves to highlight that single parenthood is often a phase, rather than a definitive state. In the UK, the average length of time spent as a single family is five years (Skew, 2009). Harmful effects of flux will impact differently depending on the period of childhood in which they occur (see Harkness & Salgado, Chapter Five in this book). Neglectful coupled parenting in the early years will put a child's interests in greater jeopardy than dedicated and responsive single parenting throughout. Policy cannot eliminate such jeopardy. But rather than promoting coupled parenting to an extent that exacerbates the risks of single parenting (whether by, for example, increasing stigma, squeezing resources or reinforcing barriers to inclusion), an approach prioritising the child's interests would focus on how, given diverse family forms, we can best support the attachments that each of those forms provides.

Question 4, on the family and social justice, raises the issue of how patterns of advantage and disadvantage are transmitted via the family unit. While this book offers a great deal of evidence that the children of single parents are at a disadvantage (see next section), there is very little to be said for any claim that being parented by a single person is *by itself* a form of injustice. What parents do with their children is more important than who parents are (Sylva et al., 2004, p. 1). And while – as regularly reinforced through this book – single parents are more likely than their coupled counterparts to be subject to certain pressures and constraints, those constraints are not intrinsic to single parenthood. They, for sure, may be addressed by policy. There is a strong social justice case for doing so.

## Children of single parents in relation to other children

Our last angle promises a starker picture. While the effects on children of how parent–child relationships play out within single–parent families are difficult to isolate or generalise about, the comparison of those children’s position with those in coupled–parent families comes more easily. This book reverberates with instances and aspects of the disadvantages faced by children in single–parent families. They are more likely to be materially worse off, simply insofar as their parents are more likely to be materially worse off (Treanor, Chapter Four; Horemans & Marx, Chapter Nine; Bradshaw et al., Chapter Fifteen). We can expect the children of single parents to achieve less well at school (Harkness & Salgado, Chapter Five; de Lange & Dronkers, Chapter Six), to experience a deficit in emotional wellbeing (Harkness & Salgado, Chapter Five) and to have less solid social relations (Fransson et al., Chapter Seven). Children do not choose their circumstances – the basic elements of which, by any interpretation, would count as brute luck. There is a strong *prima facie* case for regarding children in single–parent families as victims of social injustice, and thus for making a priority of compensating them for the disadvantages they face.

It emerges in Chapter Four, alongside other work by Treanor (2016), that material deprivation outweighs number of parents in determining children’s horizons for flourishing, so that the increased likelihood that single parents will live in poverty has a greater effect on their children’s wellbeing than their singleness. The children of wealthy single parents are advantaged over the children of co–parents living in poverty. Again, this is a matter of pressures and constraints circumstantial to single parenthood taking their toll, rather than single parenthood itself. The toll itself can be unpacked in different ways. There is well–established evidence of the relationship between household income and children’s physical, cognitive and emotional development, indicated by markers from birthweight to engagement in school to behavioural problems (Stewart, 2016, pp. 9–10). Such effects are more likely to be felt by children in single–parent families simply insofar as they are more likely to have a lower income. To put it the other way around, poverty has a clear impact on a child’s outcomes, regardless of family structure (Holland, 2016, p. 15). Those impacts are felt not only in terms of hampered life chances or damage to future prospects but also in the ‘now’ of childhood. For example, research has shown that children aware of parental stresses caused by socioeconomic hardship (worrying about the bills; struggling to provide what other parents view as normal) are less likely to share their own hardships with a parent

(such as reporting being bullied at school) for fear of adding to their burdens (Oliver & Candappa, 2007). While income is not the only factor at work, it is a crucial part of the story.

Because these factors bite so hard on children's wellbeing and life chances, there is a strong case for concluding that it is in looking from this fourth angle that we find the most urgent connection between single-parent families and social injustice. While debates about single parents may be framed around the extent to which they are responsible for their own disadvantaged state, this framing does not transfer across to children. To be an infant raised by a single parent is not by any reckoning a 'lifestyle choice'. Children choose neither their parents nor the socioeconomic circumstances of their upbringing. While there is a great deal of evidence that single parents place a particularly high priority on promoting the wellbeing and life chances of their children (Barlow et al., 2002; Duncan & Edwards, 1999; Standing, 1999), this does not – as we are consistently reminded through the chapters of this book – prevent other factors from positioning those children at an unearned disadvantage.

We can frame the injustice here in individualised terms. If every child matters and each child counts equally, then every life disadvantaged in these ways is its own injustice. This explains the readiness and regularity with which politicians decry the stubborn influence on life chances of the circumstances of birth and upbringing (Calder, 2016c). But the frequent hollowness of such rhetoric should not distract from the urgency, in policy terms, of addressing these patterns of childhood inequality. That urgency is just as clear when we come at things from the point of view of the common good. Because children are a public good (Olsaretti, 2013), we all have a stake in their interests being met – especially, though not only, those interests tied closest to the types of adults they go on to become. All of us benefit from the emergence of fresh generations of physically, cognitively and emotionally developed citizens. All of us stand to suffer if that emergence is blocked or made erratic by avoidable disadvantages experienced by single-parent families.

## Conclusion

This chapter has aimed not to propose or defend a particular theory of social justice, but to unpack different ways in which questions of social justice apply to single-parent families. Issues and themes emerge at a series of different facets and levels – and we will not do justice to them, or indeed find space to mention them all, in any treatment of

this length. Even so, part of the value of addressing the issues from that series of four angles is to highlight the complex, pressing nature of the challenges at stake. Four observations are worth making, by way of a conclusion. One is that the justice claims we encounter encompass aspects of both redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1997); that is, the injuries attaching to the triple bind of single-parent families come in both economic and cultural forms. Another is that the interests of parents and children do not always coincide. So, when we speak of single-parent families, we must bear in mind that each family is made up of individuals, as well as having a shared identity. A third is that among all the costs of single parenthood, we should accommodate the positives and avoid the assumption of a deficit model. Parenting is a privilege as well as being demanding. A childhood spent in a single-parent family is as rich and precious as any other. And the last is that the issues and priorities raised here are, if not perennial, then certainly hardwearing. Although the world has shifted significantly in the past few decades, in key respects it stays strikingly constant. Writing on the US context over twenty years ago, Hanson et al. (2016, p. 21) identified a pressing need to ‘modify family policy to reflect both dual and single-parent families as legitimate structures’, and noted that, in then-current writing on single parents, ‘the role of economics is underplayed’ (p. 18). Our discussion throughout this chapter, and more widely in this book, bears those two statements out. Pursuing social justice for single parents and their children still requires a stress on both of those factors.

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