I. Interview with work-family and gender scholar Dr. Laurie C. Maldonado

In each newsletter, we plan to feature an interview with one of our SIG members about their current and future work. This newsletter interview is with Dr. Laurie C. Maldonado who is a scholar on single-parent families in the US and across countries. She is affiliated with LIS Data Center and the Stone Center for Socio-Economic Inequalities at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

You recently co-edited a book entitled The Triple Bind of Single-Parent Families with Rense Nieuwenhuis. What do you view as some of the most important lessons work-family scholars can learn from this book?

Yes, we’re thrilled that The triple bind of single-parent families came out March 2018! I think it is a very important book as it contributes to what we know really matters for single-parent families. It’s free and available through open access, thanks to Knowledge Unlatched! You can download a copy here: http://oapen.org/search?identifier=643492

Triple Bind has chapters from a great cast of scholars (!!!). These scholars have put forth their excellent latest research on single-parent families. The research covers 40 countries including the United States. The book is about how single parents face a triple bind of inadequate resources, employment, and policies which combined, challenge single parents’ capability to provide for themselves and their children.

Single-parent families have limited resources with only one earner and caregiver in the household. Many single parents work in full-time employment; however, often their employment is inadequate with low wages, without employment protections, and little flexibility for work-family balance. Policies are too often inadequate in supporting single-parent families —such as low amounts of cash transfers, unaffordable child care, unpaid parental leave, and an inadequate safety net that prevents families from poverty.
Here are 5 takeaways for work-family scholars:

**Policies that benefit all families, benefit single-parent families.** This is such an important point, that policies that support gender and equality for all families also benefit single-parent families. Wim van Lancker finds that single parents benefit from child care and paid parental leave, and do so in the same manner as coupled parents. Leave that is too long is not beneficial to single or coupled mothers’ employment. Ann Morissens finds that child benefits that provide both universal benefits for all families and supplemental benefits for single-parent families have the best outcomes.

**Gender, shared parenting is important.** The triple bind of single-parent families is very gendered: the majority of single parents are mothers, and these mothers face penalties involved with single parenthood. The book supports to involve both mothers and fathers in taking part of their children’s lives. Recently, co-parenting is becoming much more common, and even the norm in Sweden. Ann-Zofie Duvander and Nicklas Korsell describe Swedish paid parental leave policy of 8 months for each parent and policy that incentivizes separated parents to share leave. Fathers who separated before their child turned 1, on average take around 70 days of parental leave before their child turns eight. Emma Fransson and colleagues show that shared parenting in Sweden is on par with coupled-parenting in terms of child wellbeing.

**Investments in employment matter.** Employment is important for single parents; however, only if it is supported through a host of employment protections and supports. Ingrid Esser and Karen Olsen show that a low unemployment rate, longer unemployment-benefit duration, union density, active labour-market policies, and dual-earner–carer support provide the capability for both single and coupled parents to obtain positive job matching. Job security and dual-earner policies support work–family balance for all.

**Inequality matters for single-parent families.** Single parents and their children have greater risks of poverty as compared to coupled parents. However, it matters a great deal where a single parent lives; poverty risks are greater in countries with inadequate social policy. Tackle socioeconomic inequality –and this will greatly improve the wellbeing of single-parent families.

**Single-parent families remain a concern.** The book certainly raises alarm bells of concern about the wellbeing of single-parent families. This is especially the case with decreasing minimum income protections and minimum wages.

We think the triple bind framework is useful for work-family scholars and others to examine the interplay of resources, employment, and policy to support the wellbeing of single-parent families.

We are really looking forward to a critique of the book with Wim van Lancker, Janet Gornick, Heather Boushey, and Philip Cohen at WFRN Conference in DC. Come join us for our ‘author meets readers’ session!
Please tell us about one of your current projects regarding gender and work-family (i.e., something not currently published).

I’m really excited about what I’m working on right now, it’s about “going global” for single-parent families. Most of the comparative research on single-parent families is focused on Europe and the U.S., as is the case with Triple Bind. Whereas, this current project “goes global” to include 45 diverse countries which will bring new and important insights to the field. For instance, and this is only a descriptive finding, the United States has the highest percentage of single-parent families in relative poverty of the 45 countries. More than 1 in 3 single-parent families is poor in the US. Not only does the US stand out as the “Worst-Off” for single parents in high-income countries, but among many middle-income countries as well; including South Africa, China, Panama, and Brazil. An important insight is that all 45 countries redistribute income through taxes and transfers to reduce poverty, to varying degrees, some countries are more effective than others. I’m enthusiastic about this global work, as we can continue to test policies and determine the degree to which certain policies are important “everywhere” – across many countries.

I’m pleased to present “going global” joint work with Rense Nieuwenhuis and Jody Heymann on a panel at WFRN 2018 in DC. We use multi-level models to rigorously examine the parental leave for both parents to reduce poverty for single-parent and coupled-parent families. We use household-level data from the Luxembourg Income Study database and country-level policy indicators from the WORLD Policy Analysis Center. Paid maternity leave significantly reduced poverty for single-parent families only, the model did not find evidence to support that maternity leave alone was significant in reducing poverty for all families. A bonus for fathers benefits two-parent families more so than single-parent families.

How has cross-national research shaped how you think about gender and work-family issues?

There is great value in cross-national research as it examines the role of institutions and policies, the “context” in which gender and social policies intersect. Quantitative methods can account for individual and household characteristics as well as institution and policy factors, to help explain the wellbeing of single-parent families.

Cross-national research has certainly broadened my own experience of gender and work-family issues. Besides the research, I have had the opportunity to present my work internationally in Luxembourg, Belgium, Denmark, U.K., Portugal, and Iceland. I was able to build collaborations with leading scholars in my field. It has expanded my view of single-parent families in the U.S. In the U.S., single mothers are often blamed for their own circumstances and offered little support, whereas in Nordic countries, or for instance Iceland, “independent mothers” are seen in a much more positive light and more supported by a gender-egalitarian policies and programs. I was introduced to alternative models and policies that support gender equality, diverse families and shared parenting. I look forward to continuing studying, learning, and contributing to cross-national research.
What do you view as the most promising directions for future research on gender and work-family?

There are many promising directions for future research on gender and work-family that pertain to single-parent families. Single-parent families are changing and evolving and there is much interesting research that lies ahead. For me, the most promising research is on shared parenting. Going back to Ann-Zofie and Nicklas’ work in Triple Bind, Sweden is a good example. Sweden has a high prevalence of co-parenting relationship that balance both parents being involved as providers and caregivers of their family. Swedish parents are each granted 8 months of paid leave to use before the child reaches 8 years old. If parents separate, they have the option to work together to share the leave. The policy is simple: when the parents agree they simply register online with an electronic signature and the paid leave can be transferred to either parent; when parents don’t agree, they lose the benefit to share leave. This poses an alternative model to the child support system that can pit separated parents against each other, versus a model that encourages parents to work together in benefit of their children.

Thank you for this opportunity to share about the work-family research and what it means to me. I love what I do! I’m delighted to be an Early Career Fellow and part of the Work and Family Researchers Network. I look forward to the research and making more connections with work-family scholars.

II. Call for Future Newsletter Submissions

- Please submit items for our next newsletter. The deadline for submissions is June 15, 2018. We would love to share your recent publications (books and articles) and recent successes (promotions, honors, and so forth) with other SIG members.

- We would also love to hear about any upcoming work-family and gender related conferences or special issues of journals.

- If you’d like to write an essay for a future newsletter, please contact us with your idea! Send ideas to Krista Lynn Minotte at krista.minotte@und.edu

III. Recent publications by Work-Family and Gender SIG members


IV. Recent successes of work-family and gender SIG members

- Dr. Elizabeth Johns and Dr. Kimberly Johnson were chosen for a Social Security Policy Innovation Challenge Award from AARP. They were chosen, with four other research teams, in a national competition to propose new policy solutions to strengthen the Social Security program. Their proposal was titled “A revised minimum benefit to better meet the adequacy and equity standards of Social Security.” More details about the Innovation challenge and all challenge awardees can be found at https://www.aarp.org/ppi/info-2018/policy-innovation-challenge-awardees.html