

## Rural Milieu-Structures – The influence of ‘fate’ in Ostvorpommern

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In 2006, the fact that in Eastern Germany an increasing proportion of people is living in precarity made headlines. The living environment of this milieu was depicted appealing to the audience: The precariat was described as unemployed and unambitious, without thirst for knowledge and education and also indifferent towards politics.

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In the social sciences, researchers have identified ‘milieus which lack tradition’ and contrasted them with ‘traditional milieus’. The ‘milieus which lack tradition’ are “less qualified, less self-confident and typically more passive” (Vester, Hofmann et al. 1995) than the ‘traditional (working class) milieus’.

Traditional industrial and agricultural working class milieus are recognized through their transgenerational passing on of virtues such as affinity to education, orderliness, frugality and adaptability. While historical studies of rural social conditions examined both, the class position of the poor as well as the rural lower classes (Bohler 1995), the „actual“ milieu research neglected the ‘milieus which lack tradition’.

Even though the discussion about new forms of social cleavages (Kronauer 1997) became a topic for German social scientists in the 1990s again, the empirical description of “continuously poor positions” remains underrepresented, as long as they are not directly connected to the receiving of social welfare benefits or unemployment compensations (Arbeitslosengeld II; abbr.: ALG II) (Olk, Mädje et al. 2004), 104). In addition, poverty-research is focusing more on the odds of ending the dependency on welfare (or the temporal limitations of poverty) than on a deeper understanding of ‘milieus of poverty and the lower classes’. However, in their research results the scientists from the University of Halle state that coping with the problems that come with poverty (‘typical coping strategies’) can be aggravated by milieu-specific patterns (ibidem, 136).

This is where the present paper – a short sketch – picks up. The question at hand is how the term ‘lack of tradition’ can be further qualified.

Ostvorpommern as region of analysis<sup>1</sup>

The field research for this paper was conducted in a selected area of Ostvorpommern. This area is rural with a structure aligned with agriculture and without any touristically established coastal regions. In December 2004, Ostvorpommern had 111,056 inhabitants, 3,874 persons were receiving welfare payments. The density of social welfare benefits was slightly lower than the average of the federal state (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern). For the survey period, Ostvorpommern has an unemployment rate of

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<sup>1</sup> The empirical part of this paper is the result of the research findings of a project, funded by German Research Foundation (DFG) „Armutsdynamik im ländlichen Raum Mecklenburg-Vorpommerns“ (“The dynamics of poverty in the rural areas of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern”). Doris Rentzsch was in charge of the collection of the quantitative data; Olaf Jürgens was responsible for the analysis. Vera Sparschuh designed the study and collected the data for the qualitative part. The analysis and evaluation concerning the transgenerational passing on of poverty were discussed in Ralf Bohnsacks research workshop at the Free University Berlin; I want to thank Ralf Bohnsack and Birgit Storr for their valuable advice.

about 24 percent, however, it is considerably higher (more than 30 percent) for some of the boroughs in the administrative district.<sup>2</sup>

The history of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern is a history of a society that developed from a manorial to a predominantly agrarian-industrial structured society. Therefore it is complicated to draw analogies to the few existing studies of rural poverty. However, one can find helpful insights in the classical analyses of Max Weber. Weber examined the labor relations and the social position of the farm laborers living east of the Elbe and depicts in great detail how the internal differentiation of the working- and living conditions and the migration movements in Mecklenburg, in Alt-, Vor-, and Hinterpommern, in West and East Prussia as well as in Silesia were influenced by the changing constitution of labor (Weber 1988 ; Weber 1997).

Starting with the „Bauernlegen“ and continuing through the attempts of an agrarian reform in the 19th century, in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern the land was no longer divided into smaller sections. (Brunner 1996; Vonderach 2004). The late attempts to reintroduce a peasant economy were overrun by historical events. After the world wars, the land reform of 1945 created indeed around 78,000 new farmer jobs. However, in 1952 the collectivization of agriculture started, slightly later industrial production methods were introduced. (Brunner 1996, p 66/67). The rural area of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern therefore has a particular „history of wageworkers“. It is less proprietorship than employment which has structured and is still structuring the rural domain. Therefore it was extremely vulnerable to the shifts accompanying the regime change in 1990, since after the annulment of the cooperatives there was almost no chance to go back to one's own farm and to return to an economic system of one's own.

Against this backdrop one has to evaluate the distinctive features of the rural *system transformation* after 1990. This transformation took place in a sparsely populated area – less than 100 inhabitants per square kilometer – which at the same time had a disproportionately high portion (over 25 percent) of people that were employed in the agricultural sector (Nagel and Stuhler 1997). Not only individual people but whole groups were confronted with unemployment and the resulting higher risk of falling into poverty. In the Eastern German agricultural sector, 4 out of 5 jobs were affected by this since 1990 (Elder and Meier 1997; Zierold 1997). Fock and Kowatsch point to the fact that in economically underdeveloped and peripherally located Vorpommern a production structure that was cost efficient and capable of competing has in fact developed. However, it is capable of operating with only a few employees (Fock and Kowatsch 2002). Considering these facts it is safe to assume that the poverty risk in Ostvorpommern is entailed by its transformation history. And in addition: The fall of the iron curtain dates back 20 years, therefore observations about how especially the rural areas were affected by this upheaval can now be systematized.

### **Milieu in „dynamic analysis“**

In his developmental outline of a „*dynamical conception of Milieu in empirical analysis*“ Ralf Bohnsack brings up the following question: Does the distinction between „objective life position“ and „subjective life position“ not in fact determine a priori which „objective reality“ can be experienced subjectively? (Bohnsack 1998) From this it follows that in milieu research one should solely focus on the experiences of the person being

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<sup>2</sup> See the „Sozialstrukturatlas Landkreis Ostvorpommern“ (Gemeinschaftsprojekt Landkreis Ostvorpommern und Universität Greifswald/Institut für Geographie und Geologie) alternatively the data of the Sozialagentur: [www.sozialagentur-ostvorpommern.de](http://www.sozialagentur-ostvorpommern.de).

investigated.<sup>3</sup> In the domain investigated in this article the implementation of this approach leads to the family-milieu. Within the framework of a research approach that compasses three generations, this study will follow the work of Hildenbrand and Jahn (Hildenbrand and Jahn 1988; Hildenbrand 2003). Following Gurwitsch, family will be understood as „the place of unquestioned milieu-like context“ (1988, S. 205).

Do family milieus change in the face of long term unemployment and dependency on state support? To answer this question, an action-guiding body of knowledge (i.e. tacit structures) that could be responsible for how poverty is dealt with is reconstructed.

How are these experiences acted out in everyday life and how does experience with poverty meet existing attitudes towards life? To get a full picture of the familial integration, the preceding as well as the subsequent generations are taken into account.

The terms 'poverty' and 'generation' mark the theoretical background of the analysis: Poverty positions are linked to unemployment and social welfare payments as well as to a marginal income ("working poor") and the resulting deficient life chances. The term generation relates to family generations (Rosenthal 2000; Lüscher and Liegle 2003). Three generations are being investigated. The *focus generation* (born between 1950 and 1965) is at the center of the analysis. Participants in the study were chosen based on incidences of unemployment and situations of deprivation since 1990. At the fall of the iron curtain, these persons were between 24 and 39 years old; when the data was collected they were between 40 and 55 years old. They grew up in Ostvorpommern (part of former East Germany/GDR), graduation from high school, apprenticeship. The seniors in this group have over 15 years of work experience in the GDR. For most of these people, in 1989 the standard GDR employment biography ends. Instead, a stage of changing employment or further training begins; unemployment, unemployment benefits, social welfare benefits, and, since 2005, ALGII.

The *parent generation* (parents of the focus generation) was born between 1920 and 1935. They have lived to see the end of the Nazi regime, some of them have experienced replacement. They have experienced the recommencement after 1945 and have built a new life in the GDR. Because of collectivization and mechanization, rural life was changing significantly during the life course of this generation. At the time the survey was conducted this generation had already left professional life.

In 1989 the *children generation* (children of the focus generation) is still young, at the time of the survey they are between 15 and 35 years old. Many of them are unemployed themselves, the younger children have never seen their parents having a structured everyday work life, but instead witnessed their unemployment and dependency on social welfare.

The survey consists of individual interviews.<sup>4</sup> The evaluation was undertaken with the analysis technique of the documentary method (Bohnsack 2003). To make the current perspectives and orientations of the interviewee allegeable, their experiences are reconstructed (Nohl 2006). Starting from the literal meaning of a narrative the documentary content is constructed. This targets experiences from the „collective history of socialization“, which arise from their milieu-specific relationships. Milieu-specific frames (can be used synonymously to the term habitus) are incorporated into collective bodies of know-

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<sup>3</sup> An overview of the socio-scientific milieu-research and its different conceptualisations would lead too far. Instead I want to point to a book edited by Ulf Matthiesen as well as to a „classic“ by Richard Grathoff Grathoff, R. (1989).

<sup>4</sup> 33 interviews were conducted; 27 in seven families.

ledge which are "*inscribed into the modus operandi of physical and linguistic practices*" (Bohnsack and Marotzki 1998), S. 40/132).<sup>5</sup>

### Case study of the Wunder family

At the time the interview was conducted Mrs. Wunder (focus generation) is 53 years old. She grew up in a village in the central region of Ostvorpommern, which is relatively far from the coast. She has attended school for eight years. Right after leaving school she was educated to be a salesperson. She has had four children, the youngest of them still living in her household. For both, Mrs. Wunder and her husband it is the second marriage. Both have children from their first marriages as well as a common child. The family lives in a provincial modern style housing block from the 1980s. In the meantime the family has moved to and fro several rented apartments. The house in which they initially lived and which belonged to Mrs. Wunder's second husband has been sold after a legal dispute with the husband's family.

Mrs. Wunder's father, like many other people, came to the area after the end of the war (coming from "Hinterpommern", the family was expelled from there in 1946). He found a job in a carpentry shop in a town close to the village in 1947. The mother lived in the village with the family the parents ran their small 'Wirtschaft' (garden, even two little fields, cattle) and, from time to time, worked at bigger farms. In the grandparent generation of Mrs. Wunder's family the clan is quite sizable (both grandparents have six and seven siblings, respectively). However, Mrs. Wunder's parents each have only one sibling. The parents got married in 1953, Mrs. Wunder, their (only) daughter, is born the same year.

After 1990 Mrs. Wunder (focus generation) has not been able to find a regular job. However she has participated in several qualifications. At the time the first interview was conducted she was receiving ALG II. At the same time she is having her first "Additional work compensation" (Mehraufwandsentschädung), i.e. a 1,50 €-Job (additional income per hour). In the introductory narrative she directly starts speaking about her current situation.

Mrs. Wunder asserts that she cannot enforce her claim to unemployment benefits, because her active periods are too short. She also says she is missing the structuring effect work has on everyday life. ALG II is the last stop other welfare measures are not accessible anymore. She does not even mention a permanent position. She is aware of her situation and wants to get out of it. At the same time she is aware to the fact that this is no longer possible. This quote is about the connection between regular work and alms, i.e. financial dependency. Work is only reasonable if it enables one to buy independence. Mrs. Wunder knows that the opportunities to find a job that asks for only little qualifications are sparse. Therefore she has relied on the official welfare structure since the reunification. However, it would be wrong to conclude that she does not want to work: Yet, she is missing work less for its content than for the structure and safety an employment has to offer. After 1990 she has "become used" to unemployment bene-

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<sup>5</sup> In practical research *immanent* and *documentary meaning* is distinguished according to Karl Mannheim. While in the 'immanent meaning', intentions, motives, and certainties are captured, the documentary meaning „reconstructs the depicted experiences as a document of a certain orientation" (Nohl, p. 8ff). To capture the immanent meaning the material (the transcribed interview) is first structured thematically (formulating interpretation), in the reflecting/documentary interpretation the goal is to reconstruct the frame-work of orientation. At this juncture a comparative sequence analysis is conducted: the analysis should not only use the knowledge of the interpreting person but also the horizon of comparison from other interviews (ibidem, p 13) – in this analysis it is the case of the family or a comparison within the focus generation.

fits or other changing welfare measures. With the introduction of ALG and, before, the currency changeover to the Euro, this situation is changing. The material coverage has become smaller.

When I visited Mrs. Wunder for the first time, this changeover had just occurred. She seems willing to adjust to the new structure; she has sought advice on how much ALG II support her family is entitled to for instance. Here Mrs. Wunder shows how her attitude towards life is shaped by rural frugality: Since the money does not suffice she tries to economize, e.g. by saving energy. It comes as a shock when she realizes she has to pay back the surplus to the Welfare Agency. It is less the dependency on transfer payments itself than the loss of the last freedom she had in the framework of state welfare that becomes a problem for Mrs. Wunder. The money the state pays here is nothing more than pittance. She has reached a point where she experiences self-determination as completely defensive. Ultimately this means that even fundamental (rural) virtues are not worthwhile any longer.

At first sight, it seems almost logical that Mrs. Wunder would end up in her current situation, receiving ALG II: She has completed only eight years of schooling and a low level of further qualifications. In addition she is missing autonomy<sup>6</sup>, which is partly due to the social safety net of the GDR which cushioned problematic life stages (e.g. divorce etc.). Therefore the acceptance of the welfare supply which started in 1990 seems plausible, and the lot of unemployment – especially when taking into consideration the difficult situation on the regional job market – seems bound to occur.

Yet it is worthwhile to take a closer look. How does this lot look in the light of the biographical and familial context as a whole? What does Mrs. Wunder's current situation mean, what kind of progress is still possible? Is the further descent inevitable, what opportunities do Mrs. Wunder's children have? In the following these questions will be discussed taking into consideration the embedment of Frau Wunder in the three-generations-context. Even though modest living arrangements prevail in this family, so far there have been no incidences of unemployment. How can the dependency on 'alms' be integrated into the family history and how are the further developments of the family influenced by that?

Parallel to becoming dependent on welfare measurements the family has to move from their privately owned<sup>7</sup> home to a rented apartment.

When choosing the first apartment it was underestimated how fast the child would grow. It seems as if Mrs. Wunder was not able to anticipate the fact that children grow (even though she already has four children). On the one hand Mrs. Wunder is lamenting that she is not in the position to structure her own life. On the other hand it becomes clear that she does not recognize possible contingencies, i.e. she does not take the opportunity to use the biographical knowledge she has accumulated throughout her life: the biographical course of events appear as fateful.

After moving to the second apartment there is yet another unexpected influence: the neighbors. That Mrs. Wunder always had to clean the hallway for them is one of the reasons for discord. Furthermore it plays a role that the neighbors' son is not behaving like an ordinary child; it is pointed out that Nazi-songs were sung. In this construction of the background Mrs. Wunder is using elements of distinction: She is setting up bounda-

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<sup>6</sup> The connection between heteronomy and rurality should be discussed separately. In occidental culture it is the medieval city in which autonomous structures are created (Max Weber) – are rurality and heteronomous structures therefore genuinely connected?

<sup>7</sup> The house actually belonged to Mrs. Wunder's mother in law.

ries against people not cleaning the hallways: she herself has “always” done it. She holds cleanliness in high regard. In addition her children have to meet high expectations. When she is citing the example of the neighbors’ son who is not able to fulfill those expectations, she is implicitly setting her own son in contrast. She stresses her own orientation towards orderliness and high upbringing standards, demarcating herself from her neighbors. This contains the cue that she and her family have not yet reached the bottom.

But she and her family are victims. On the one hand they are victims of the attacks coming from the “very bottom”, on the other hand they are being harassed by the landlord. At the same time this hints at a dilemma: Even though they do not perceive themselves as having reached the bottom of society they are treated by the landlord as such. Possible reasons the landlord could have for this – may they be warranted or unwarranted – are not mentioned. Instead, the explosion of the washing machine, an event that is beyond Mrs. Wunder’s power, is put center stage. The explosion of the washing machine appears as a focusing metaphor<sup>8</sup>. On the one hand – until the day of the interview – she does not understand the technical aspect of the incident.<sup>9</sup> She vaguely refers to it as the „explosion“, and therefore it obtains almost mythical qualities. However, to find out who is liable for the defect, the incident must be clarified accurately. By mystifying the event Mrs. Wunder shows a resigned attitude and an established belief of always being the victim. In addition it stays diffuse if it is „sad enough“ the son has not paid enough attention or that one cannot leave a child alone with a washing machine. Here it shows that she has still not gotten things straight. But, given the fact that she believes herself and her family to be victims of fate, this is not necessary. The explosion is a metaphor for events which descend on them from ‘above’, completely out of their control.

In the interviews, the family members repeatedly fall back on constructs such as „destiny“ or „capitulation“. At first sight, this suggests an affinity to the results of the Marienthal-study (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld et al. 1975). In the case of Marienthal however – as well as in other studies on unemployment – it is the biographical event of being unemployed that is seen as “fate” by the person concerned. In the case of the Wunder family, this study detected a familial habitus: life itself is seen as a chain of fateful events, the whole family shows an all-embracing ‘orientation towards fate’. The case study of this family documents that the interviewees experience their life not *explicitly* as fate, but it is possible to reconstruct this attitudes from the narrated code of practice. This ‘frame of victimization’ is cast on different events: In the interview, Mrs. Wunder is telling about a long illness of her husband. In her narrative, he is victimized by the doctors and, according to her, due to this he is neither able to get a new degree nor is he able to work.<sup>10</sup>

Mrs. Wunder also tells another story: Since after mid-month they usually run out of money, she and her family are living off eggs. Only by coincidence it occurs to them that they can market the eggs as well. Again, this is described as a fateful coincidence: To use the eggs as a mean to survive is seen as „luck“. So there are not only negative but also positive courses of fate. However, in both cases inscrutable powers are at work.

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<sup>8</sup> Focusing metaphors are sections in the course of conversations that were especially dense, cf. the correspondent keyword in „Hauptbegriffe qualitativer Sozialforschung“.

<sup>9</sup> Mr. Wunder is also telling *his* „story of the washing machine“. On the one hand he is giving a more accurate description of the technical details, on the other hand however the cause of the accident however is structured downright conspiracist – this “miracle” had to happen to “get rid of” the landlord.

<sup>10</sup> It is also mentioned briefly that the family pays visits to a miracle healer who is supposed to „talk off“ illnesses. This fact is yet another evidence of the families’ mythical belief in fate.

Further, the comparative analysis of mother (parent generation) and daughter shows how the habitus of fate is passed on from generation to generation. It is also possible to reconstruct the importance of fate for the life of the parents. In their case, it is rooted in rural traditions (small house, garden, animal husbandry)<sup>11</sup> and the associated attitude towards life.

The life story of the daughter is a break-out from the parent's way of life. The daughter is living a „workmanly life“ (Engler 1999)<sup>12</sup>, gets divorced and accepts the alcoholism of the men. The mother criticizes a lack of continuity in her daughter's life. The first marriage was difficult, and therefore she often had to look after her grandchildren so they could escape the noise and quarrel of the parental apartment. The youngest child from the first marriage even grew up at her grandparents' house. Together with the grandparents the granddaughter had requested a transfer of custody. The grandmother tries to explain the inability of her daughter by referring to her daughter's illness and the deficits of her partner. She portrays the daughter as a child; her problems are depicted as being caused by several external influences. The daughter would not be unemployed and out of money had she not fallen for her second husband, who until recently had a drinking problem. If she was on her own she would be better off. The daughter is not autonomous the parents do not accept her way of life. She is hanging on to the fateful attitude towards life that her parents have as well, but the context has changed. She is not living in the given village frame, but she also does not have an opposing plan for her life. Her parents even deny that she is capable of such a thing.

It is obvious to discuss this type of orientation towards fate in the contemporary historical context. In the outwardly well planned GDR, passivity and lack of planning were possible because of the existing safety nets. The rapid changing of village life after 1945 encouraged contradictions. These contradictions manifest in the discontinuity of the focus generation's way of life compared to the parent generation's way of life of the Wunder family. The place and time boundedness crumbles after 1945. A rural life emerges which is barely rurally structured. Nevertheless the care system of the GDR allows for areas of freedom: frequent changing of jobs and interruptions because of binge drinking were present in rural everyday life. The rural resignation to one's fate was integrated into a political system which encouraged a reactive attitude towards life. Components of the habitus which was passed down from generation to generation therefore only become problematic after 1990. This is especially true for the lack of life planning which is based in a habitus that confides in fateful powers.

In the third generation of this family we are once again confronted with the habitus of fate. At the same time, its meaning changes once again. While Mrs. Wunder's sons from her first marriage are in a vicious cycle of unemployment/changing jobs her daughter from her first marriage that moved to her grandparents' house by her own choice is now successful: born in 1976 she finishes school in 1992 and gets an apprenticeship in the region. She is doing well in her job and goes to the old Western German states to work there for two years. She later returns because the grandparents need help, upon her return she gets promoted at her job.

The story of her leaving her home can be interpreted as a story of metamorphosis. Her first marriage failed because she had certain expectations of a partnership

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<sup>11</sup> The grandfather of this family came to Ostvorpommern as a displaced person. In this generation, almost all families had this background.

<sup>12</sup> Here I am referring to the terminology of Wolfgang Engler, who calls the GDR a „workmanly society“ („arbeiterliche Gesellschaft“). While Engler is talking about the „secret“ power of the workers (p 84), „workmanly“ could also mean a leveling of society.

which were not fulfilled. Because she feels strongly attached to her husband she is not able to free herself. Only as the separation also becomes geographical is she able to succeed. The geographical separation is also easier because she meets another man on a spontaneous trip to the Rhineland. He impresses her because he orders a coke at their first date therefore she knows he is not an alcoholic. This first meeting is also fatefully mystified, especially in respect to first sympathies, e.g. the drinking. She is a consistent anti-alcoholic. This fateful belief gets her far: She has cut the cord to her parents and family and is now able to judge them from without. In her opinion everything is doable when one works hard enough. She proved that not only in her job but also when leaving her home.

### Family traditions across three generations

The study of the Wunder family<sup>13</sup> proves the existence and significance of family traditions in the so called 'milieu which lacks tradition'. It should be clear how the changing social context is treated within the existing traditions. It only makes sense to talk of 'the ending of tradition' if that means that traditions and lifestyles are developing inconsistently throughout the generations. The rural 'harmony' in the sense of a reciprocal relatedness is revoked. Our example illustrated especially how rural traditions are not prepared for confronting unemployment and the related demands.

For the focus generation it can be proved that the German reunification notably affected their biographies: Not only was it the onset of their unemployment experiences but also the collapse of a life system which was grounded in assessable and reliable structures which could guarantee the most important life functions. The perspective of the children however is especially critical, since per se they did not get any 'survival strategies' to take with them from their families. The older children that grew up in the house of their parents tend to keep the helplessness of the parent generation. In this respect the tendencies of consolidation in this milieu stated in the literature were validated. However, these tendencies should not be understood as a 'loss of tradition', but as a *persistence* of traditions in changing times and contexts. In the case of this family it is especially interesting that the inherited traditions can go with both, stagnation as well as development. As was shown in this article, the general resignation to fate was passed on to the granddaughter. Nevertheless, under the given conditions she is successful.

Unemployment is not a collective experience but interrupts the biography of a family member and furthermore the continuity of the whole family. In the case of Mrs. Wunder, only an increasing deprivation 15 years after the reunification gets her to fully grasp this experience. Hildebrand and Jahn point to the fact that *„identity securing milieus and continuity are increasingly replaced with identity formations which are based on self-definition“*. (Hildenbrand/Jahn, ibidem 205). From this material it should be made clear that at the time the survey was conducted the Wunder family is blundering into this process more and more. Whereas the overarching family issues are illnesses and fateful subjection, the focus generation faces a conflict: On the one hand their family denies that they are able to be autonomous, on the other hand they are required to make decisions and be active because of their ALG II situation. The orientation towards fate is increasingly becoming a problem. Further it shows - because the dependency on welfare payments has become normal due to a constantly high unemployment rate in

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13 Six interviews belonged to the case study of this family. Different gender- and generation perspectives within the family are collected. A comparison across cases that comprises other families was published in Vera Sparschuh: Auf dem Land und im Norden – ländliche Peripherie als Armutsregion?



Mecklenburg-Vorpommern – that in a lot of cases the parents of the focus generation, their siblings<sup>14</sup> as well as the children generation are mutually affected.

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14 The grandparents are overall better off because their long employment biographies ensure them a pension - even though in the rural area this is often is only a small amount of money.

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