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Unsettled Scripts: Intimacy Narratives of Heterosexual Single Mothers

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Summary

Drawing on contemporary theories of intimacy, this study explores the intimacy narratives and practices of single mothers at a time of, it is argued, social and cultural change in terms of intimacy. Narrative interviews of twenty-four single mothers draw out layers of personal, social and cultural complexity in terms of understanding, experiencing and making choices about intimacy in their everyday lives. The concept of 'intimacy scripts' (developed from Simon and Gagnon, 1973) is deployed to explore how single mothers develop blueprints for their intimate lives, drawing on a range of cultural, social and personal possibilities for intimate practices. This process is viewed within a wider context of gendered power relations and material constraints. Participants were often affected by stigmatizing depictions of single mothers and resisted these through their narratives which tended to emphasize how they had not chosen single motherhood. Indeed the transition to single motherhood was often experienced as traumatic, marked by shame, disappointment and loss. Perceptions of increased fluidity and the possibility for experimentation around intimacy are discernible, chiming with individualisation theorists (Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). However, basic economic survival often took precedence over the reflexive organisation of intimate lives (Jamieson, 1998). Intimacy narratives were unsettled, in turn depicting opportunities for intimate experimentations and invoking nostalgia for more traditional intimate forms, demonstrating ambivalence and liminality. Heteronormative ideals of coupledom, romance and traditional family remained aspirational for many, although the importance of equality in relationships was also highlighted. Yet many participants struggled to find suitable male partners and were aware of inequalities and the risks associated with re-partnering, often based on negative experiences. Intimate choices were shaped and constrained by socio-economic positioning; the protection of dependents; maintenance of their family unit; continuing gendered expectations and the ongoing centrality of heteronormative romantic couple-centred intimate practices.

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CHAPTER ONE Introduction

Overview of Thesis

This thesis comprises a Sociological study of intimacy as experienced and related in the narratives of single mothers. It takes as its starting point recent theories of intimacy based on detraditionalization which suggest that we live in an era marked by change in intimate practices (Giddens, 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995 and Bauman, 2003). These perspectives tend to highlight increased choice, reflexivity, fluidity, diversity, risk, experimentation and egalitarianism in contemporary intimate lives and are questioned and challenged in the course of the thesis. The thesis draws on findings from empirical research which seeks to capture ways in which intimacy is narrated through narrative interviews of twenty-four single mothers complemented by semi-structured interview questions. A narrative focus comprises a valuable way to capture personal and cultural transitions and the ever shifting landscapes of intimacy.

It is suggested that changes may be underway in terms of the way stories are told and in particular the relating of stories of sex and intimacy (Plummer,1995) and so the narratives themselves comprise another main focus for the research. The term 'Intimacy narratives' refers to the stories participants tell about their intimate lives and the thesis begins by exploring how these intimacy narratives are constructed. It notes that narration of intimate lives interlinks with material circumstances and wider perceptions of single motherhood in multifarious ways. Participants' stories of relationship breakdown, surviving and coping as a single mother are discussed as these afforded a framework for discussing what intimate possibilities were available to them, underlining ways in which choices around intimacy are constrained. This lends credence to Jamieson's (1998) observation that economic survival is likely to take precedence over the reflexive organisation of intimate lives. The intimacy narratives tended to draw on archetypal forms, broadly following 'redemption' and contamination' sequences (McAdams and Bowman, 2001) which convey life getting worse or better.

The concept of 'intimacy scripts' developed from Simon and Gagnon (1973) enables an understanding of how participants develop blueprints for their intimate lives, following or diverging from a range of culturally and socially prescribed possibilities for intimate practices alongside their personal realm of fantasy and desire. Participants tended to occupy variable positions in relation to intimacy, drawing on cultural narratives of

romance, increased equality and the desirability of equal relationships alongside nostalgia for traditional family forms and the perceived stability of relationships in previous generations. This process of moving between different positions or 'intimacy scripts' is referred to here as 'scriptual liminality'.

The thesis moves on to explore single mothers' practices of intimacy in their everyday lives, the idea of everyday life enabling a lens onto experiences, practices and understandings of these which may generally be viewed as mundane and not worthy of attention (Bennett and Silva, 2004). The study finds that single mothers' personal landscapes of intimacy shifted significantly through the process of becoming a single mother. It highlights the prioritisation and centrality of relationships with children, the increased significance of friendship, experimentations with intimacy and, for some, the decentering of couple relationships. It argues that despite some evidence of experimentation with intimate practices, choices are often constrained by material circumstances, lack of resources, gendered expectations around motherhood and deeply ingrained gendered notions of 'normal' and desirable ways of conducting sexual and intimate lives (intimacy scripts). The thesis finally attends to single motherhood as 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963), exploring perceptions of stigma and ways in which stigmatised versions of single motherhood are alternately resisted and reproduced. Narratives are often overlaid with shame and pride, attempting to construct positive versions of single motherhood and rejecting - yet also at times reinforcing – negative stereotypes of single mothers. In some isolated cases, single motherhood is reclaimed as a valid heterosexual identity and choice, an alternative to the traditional patriarchal family form and mode of relating. It therefore contains the possibility of forming an alternative intimate identity for heterosexual women, unconstrained by gendered roles. However, the thesis argues that ultimately, despite traces of gender equality as a perceived ideal, heteronormative romantic couple-centred intimate practices still retain a hold as an ideal standard against which the situation of single motherhood, alternative practices of intimacy and intimate identities are judged.

The topic

This research aims to capture the complexity of British single mothers' intimate lives through their narratives of intimacy. It elicits the experiences of a generational cohort of women in a particular situation at a historical moment of, it is argued, social, historical and cultural change in terms of gender, family and intimacy. The term 'intimacy' encompasses broad domains of personal life which include (but are not limited to)

family practices and care, physical proximity, sex and sexual relationships, emotional connection, communication and relating and the provision of emotional and practical support to others. Intimacy involves multiple roles, practices and understandings. In the past two decades, there has been a growing body of work relating to the interconnecting spheres of family and intimacy. Smart sees this as necessary in the light of recent social changes: '*Higher rates of divorce, increasing cohabitation, the increase in so-called 'reconstituted families' and other related trends have social consequences which start to demand analysis and understanding*' (Smart, 1999, p.4). The thesis develops the concept of '*intimacy scripts*,' building on Simon and Gagnon's (1973) concept of '*sexual scripts*'. Intimacy scripts are viewed as resources which individuals use to construct their intimate lives by offering a range of potential culturally and socially acceptable paths to follow. The thesis captures single mothers' intimacy scripts through their narratives, within their specific contexts and set against a wider backdrop of unsettled intimacies and gendered power relations.

The research topic stemmed from personal experiences alongside the intellectual insights gained from a Women's Studies MA research project on contemporary experiences of motherhood and an introduction to research into intimacy being conducted at the time[1]. I had never anticipated becoming a single mother, instead assuming that I would fall in love when 'the one' came along, get married and raise a family – following an anticipated intimacy script based on the trajectory of my parents (with the corollary in light of women's changed expectations that I would work rather than be a full-time mum). I became a full-time mother of three and following the breakdown of my marriage, found myself with primary responsibility for the care and provision for my children. Needing to claim benefits for a short period of time, struggling to pay bills and provide decent meals for my children and threatened with homelessness, I gained first-hand experience of the deprivation, vulnerability and uncertainty often involved in becoming a lone parent[2] (Smart, 2000). In addition, there was the 'emotion work' (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; Hochschild, 1983) of helping my children come to terms with the situation, while recovering from the fall-out of my marriage and coping with depression myself. I found myself affected by the negative views and low social status of single mothers, whose category I found myself in; the identity of being a 'single mother on benefits living on a council estate' being generally derided in popular culture and public discourse and seen as the ultimate failure (or so it

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[1] Sasha Roseneil (University of Cambridge Gender Studies Seminars, 2005-6)
[2] Single parent families have a much higher risk of living in poverty than children in a couple. Around 41% of children in single parent families are poor compared to 20% of couple families: Households below average income, An analysis of the income distribution 1994/95 – 2009/10. Department for Work and Pensions, 2011.

felt). Through a feminist critical stance, I realised that being a single woman capable of surviving without a male head of household would inevitably seem threatening for those who saw traditional male-headed patriarchal families as the ideal. Moreover, being a 'single' (sexually available) woman does not fit with archetypal notions of the ideal pure, asexual, selfless mother (Rich, 1977).

I prioritised financial and emotional survival of my children and myself but, in time, it became apparent that if I was to have needs for sexual and emotional intimacy met I would have to start again, having questioned everything I had assumed before about marriage being the primary model for relationships. Dating as a separated woman with children was a new and interesting experience. Simultaneously I began to develop meaningful friendships with other women in similar positions who had an insight into what I was going through and fascinating, often painful stories of their own to tell. These friendships were more central and emotionally rewarding than romantic encounters which were peripheral. I noticed a subtle shift in previous friendships and relations with family members and also how the emotional bonds with my children were stronger, more egalitarian and central, based on our shared experiences. My personal experiences chimed with contemporaneous theories of intimacy. Commentators such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) highlight the demise of the centrality of the couple relationship, suggesting that parent-child bonds rather than romantic ties now provide the '*ultimate guarantee of permanence providing an anchor for one's life*' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 73). In turn, Roseneil argues that there has been a decentring of sexual / love relationships within individuals' life narratives and an increase in experimenting beyond heteronormative boundaries, for example by prioritising friendship over couple relationships (Roseneil, 2004).

In the intellectual context of the developing field of intimacy, the stories heterosexual single mothers have to tell about their experiences form a relevant topic for research on many levels. Firstly, while there is a substantial body of work which investigates lone parenthood in the UK, studies have tended to focus primarily on issues around work, welfare, care and broader policy contexts (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Ford and Millar, 1998; Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998; Klett-Davies, 2007; Millar and Rowlingson, 2001) rather than offering focussed research into their intimate lives. Secondly, single mothers are at a transitional period of their lives, usually temporary[3], and so they are at a time where they can reflect on their previous intimate lives and what they ideally want. The situation of caring for dependents, often in difficult

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[3] The average duration for single parenthood is 5 years: Skew, A., Berrington, A., Falkingham, J. (2008) 'Leaving Lone Parenthood: Analysis of the re-partnering patterns of lone mothers in the UK.

circumstances, raises crucial questions over the ability to freely choose which path to follow. Despite these constraints, as female heads of households, single mothers may have opportunities to exercise agency in their personal lives and to experiment. Thirdly, those who had recently come out of long-term relationships and had started dating and forming new friendships were likely to have insights into ways in which intimacy and relationships between men and women may have changed over the past generation. I selected to interview women who had grown up between the 1960s and 1980s, a time of increasing equality for women in the public sphere, with an interest in exploring how far increasing equalities had imported into women's intimate lives.

I sought to relate these individual stories to the wider cultural and historical context, often seen as a period of transformation in terms of intimacy and gender roles. A rising divorce rate and changed economic circumstances of women have, as some see it, signalled the decline of patriarchy in Western societies (Giddens, 1992; Therbon, 2004). However, the predominance of the theoretical focus on social change, highlighting increased egalitarianism and choices around intimacy, has tended to neglect the experiences of those who have caring responsibilities to negotiate. The study aims to further understanding of contemporary intimate practices by gaining insights into single mothers' diverse understandings and experiences of intimacy in their specific cultural milieus, exploring how they position themselves within wider social changes. Narrative interviews provide insights into their intimate practices and ways in which these may change through choices, circumstances, normalised expectations or resistances to conventional intimacy scripts. Within their 'complex webs of relationships' (May, 2004) and caught up in the process of cultural and personal transitions, single mothers may experience profound change and challenge in their intimate lives, moving through shifting and multiple identities as mothers, parenting partners, lovers, friends, girlfriends, daughters, colleagues and so on. The thesis explores how single mothers themselves conceptualise, make sense of and shape the intimate realm of their existence and to what extent - within social, cultural and economic constraints - they find new ways of being, practicing intimacy, resisting and challenging heteronormative conceptions of intimacy and creating new intimacy scripts.

Context

Social, political and legal changes over the past generation in terms of intimacy include an increasing commitment to sexual equality, the 'sexual revolution,' the introduction of the contraceptive Pill, an increase in divorce, more people living alone[4] and the rise in

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[4] See Jamison, L. and Simpson, R. (2013) *Living Alone: Globalization, identity and belonging*. New York:

lone parent families (although this has stabilized at approximately one in four families over the last decade)[5]. Commentators such as Weeks (2007) see much to celebrate in the increased freedom and diversity in intimate lives, suggesting that it is people rather than politicians who lead the way in instigating positive change. Yet, moral conservatism manifested in ongoing 'family values' debates and concerns regarding single mothers in public debate and discourse (Durham, 1991; Mann and Roseneil, 1999) means that certain groups are subject to scrutiny and judgement regarding their sexual and intimate lives.

Linked to changes in intimacy over the past generation (from the 1960s onwards) is the movement towards gender equality, spearheaded by the second-wave feminist movement. While the term 'feminism' covers a very broad range of political and intellectual positions, Jagger and Wright (1999) provide the following broad definition of feminism and its shared concerns:

> *'The chief concern of feminists, whatever their theoretical affiliation, is with gender-inflected inequalities and power imbalances. Their broad aims are to describe, expose, challenge and redress them in all areas of social life, and to reveal their basis in patriarchal heterosexist conceptions of gender and sexual difference that are socially constructed rather than biologically or naturally given'.* (Jagger and Wright, 1999, p.4)

In the UK, feminism has enabled changes in public life such as the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act (1975), Equal Pay Act (1970) and the establishment of the Equal Opportunities Commission (1972). It engendered social changes such as married women and mothers entering the labour market in greater numbers (Lewis, 2001). In my mother's generation (in the early 1970s) it was still the norm to stay at home as a 'housewife' and exclusively manage domestic and caring responsibilities (Oakley, 1974) while their husbands engaged in paid work as the family's 'breadwinners' (Lewis, 2001). However, inequalities still persist: women are still underrepresented in political and public life[6]; there is still a significant full-time pay gap in Britain[7]; women are still sexualised and objectified in our culture (Walters, 2010); many women across Europe and globally are the victims of physical, psychological violence and exploitation and caring responsibilities are still not fully shared between

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Palgrave Macmillan.

[5] Office for National Statistics, 'Families and Households 2012'.

[6] Sex and Power, Report 2013, Centre for Women & Democracy on behalf of the Counting Women In coalition (CfWD, the Electoral Reform Society, the Fawcett Society, the Hansard Society and Unlock Democracy). It was generously funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

[7] http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/maternity-and-paternity-rights/ (Accessed March 31, 2013).

men and women (Council of Europe, 2009[8], Lewis, 2001). As the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Commission summarizes, '*women continue to earn less, decide less and count less than men*' (Council of Europe, 2012[9]). In the UK women hold less than a third of senior employment positions, are paid significantly less and are under-represented in political life (Equality and Human Right Commission, 2010[10]). Motherhood negatively impacts on women's long-term employment prospects and earning potential, termed 'the motherhood penalty'[11]. Increased participation in the labour market has not meant a commensurate increase in support for domestic and caring lives with women disproportionately carrying this burden, often working a 'double-shift' (Hochschild, 1990) to manage paid and unpaid work. Nine out of ten single parents are women and they comprise one of the poorest groups in society, with this trend set to continue under current UK Government austerity measures (Fawcett Society, 2012[12]). Domestic violence is still common with one in four women in the UK experiencing violence from a partner in their lifetime[13] - single mothers are four times more likely to be victims[14]. So while there may have been some equality achievements in public life, many gendered inequalities in the realm of personal lives remain.

An example of continued sexism in our culture is to be found in stereotyped representations of single mothers, often associated with a perceived decline in 'family values' over the last generation. Land and Lewis (1998) note that this 'moral panic' about single mothers is specific to English speaking societies. Yet the average span of lone parenthood is five years with the majority repartnering[15] and so it is not usually a permanent situation. While media representations focus on perceived problems of young mothers, the average age of single mothers is 38.1[16] and while single mothers' choices are seen negatively, women seldom choose to parent alone (Gillies, 2007). They usually become a single parent through separation or divorce (although it can also be argued that the choice to parent alone is justifiable, especially in cases where children are exposed to abusive environments). There is often outrage at the perceived

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[8] 119th Session of the Committee of Ministers (Madrid, 12 May 2009) Declaration: Making gender equality a
   Reality.
[9] Secretary General Thorbjorn Jagland, Open Speech for new Gender Equality Commision, Council of Europe,
   (Accessed June 20, 2012).
[10] http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/human-rights/human-rights-celebrations/international-womens-day-
   2011/how-fair-is-britain-for-women/economic-participation (Accessed June 20, 2012)
[11] http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/maternity-and-paternity-rights/ (Accessed March 31, 2013)
[12] Fawcett Society: The Impact of Austerity on Women, March 2012.
[13] Walby, S. and Allen, J. (2004), Domestic violence, assault and stalking: findings from the British Crime Survey,
   Home Office, Research Study No. 276
[14] Walby, S. and Allen, J. (2004), Domestic violence, assault and stalking: findings from the British Crime Survey,
   Home Office, Research Study No. 276
[15] Skew, A., Berrington, A., Falkingham, J. (2008) 'Leaving Lone Parenthood: Analysis of the re-partnering
   patterns of lone mothers in the UK.
[16] Lone parents with dependent children, January 2012, Office for National Statistics.

disproportionate access to resources through the Welfare state, yet single mothers and their children are likely to live in poverty (Gillies, 2007).

Theorists have linked negative depictions and concerns about 'family values' debate as part of a broader backlash against feminism, often blamed for the demise of the male breadwinner male headed family with women in the role of dependent domestic service-provider and primary carer (Lewis, 2001; Roseneil and Mann, 1999), regardless of other economic factors such as the decline in manufacturing, rise of service industries, part-time working and improved access to education for women. This 'family values' commentary became prevalent in British politics in the 1980s - traceable back to the 1960s with concerns about the impact of 'sexual permissiveness' (Durham, 1991) – and is frequently linked to a perceived threat to patriarchal values:

> *'Contemporary changes are perceived as a threat to the social order, and women's gains and the possibility of women's autonomy are perceived as a threat to men and (patriarchal) masculinities. Moreover, these changes are frequently blamed on feminism without taking into account the accompanying social and economic change that facilitated such transformations'.* (Jagger and Wright, 1999, p.4)

Women are blamed for selfishly pursuing self-fulfilment at the expense of families while emasculating men and stripping them of their traditional breadwinning role (Lewis, 2001). The control of women's sexuality is identified as key for proponents of 'family values,' with the emphasis on the '*confinement of sexuality to the permanent married heterosexual unit*' (Fox-Harding, 1999, p.119). Single mothers, operating outside the authority of a male head of household, are often positioned as a threat to the social order; labelled as irresponsible, promiscuous and exhibiting a desire for unrestrained procreation, along with a refusal to provide a 'civilizing force' for men through conventional domesticity (Mann and Roseneil, 1999). Yet, although many assumptions and judgements are made about single mothers as women and as parents, their actual everyday intimate practices and understandings have not tended to be the focus of investigation. This research aims to fill that gap in knowledge, drawing on the narratives single mothers construct to make sense of their experiences.

Research questions

How do single mothers construct narratives around intimate relationships?

This question relates to how heterosexual single mothers construct narratives of intimacy. Building on theories of intimacy in contemporary social life, it considers how

single mothers, within their specific social and cultural milieus, draw on wider cultural narratives about how intimate lives should be lived. It explores how these cultural narratives in turn impact on single mothers' understandings and practices of intimacy. Capturing their narratives provides an opportunity to identify the extent to which participants adhere to or draw on conventional cultural narratives in terms of the way in which they tell their stories or whether it is possible to perceive new, more fluid ways of telling about intimate lives (Plummer, 1995).

What do single mothers' narratives tell us about their choice-making around intimate practices?

By reflecting on their experiences, participants provide insights into the ways in which they practice and make choices about intimacy and what choices are available to them. Becoming a single mother may provide opportunities for reflection and re-evaluation of intimate lives. Intimate lives may also alter dramatically through circumstances and necessity. While theorists have emphasised choices about intimacy as an integral part of being a modern, reflexive subject (Giddens, 1992), others have emphasised gendered inequalities (Jamieson, 1998) and the socio-economic realities experienced by mothers in marginalised positions (Gillies, 2007) which may constrain the choices which are available to them. Theories of 'sexual scripts' (Gagnon and Simon, 1973), developed here as 'intimacy scripts,' highlight the significance of normative social and cultural blueprints in shaping ideas of what is normal and acceptable. Public discourses regarding single mothers tends to portray single mothers as deliberately choosing to reject the fathers of their children, although the temporary nature of single motherhood and high level of re-partnering would suggest that finding a romantic / life partner remains the preferred choice. This may be in part informed by a pragmatic need for support and companionship (Duncan, 2011b). It may also be influenced by popular romantic discourses (Evans, 2003) or by negative rhetoric around single mothers with the emphasis on the need for father figures. For some single mothers, re-partnering may not be possible or desirable. For others, becoming single and sexually available may represent an opportunity to rework traditional intimacy scripts, to experiment and explore alternative practices.

What does this contribute to understandings about intimacy in contemporary culture?

Single mothers' narratives, alongside semi-structured questions, are designed to draw out understandings and perspectives relating to their generational cohort as well as specific contexts. They enable exploration of the extent to which participants perceive that intimacy has changed over the past generation in line with theorists of

detraditionalization (Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). Single mothers may feel that more opportunities and choices around intimacy have opened up or they may be acutely aware of ways in which relationships have changed very little, for example through the persistence of gender inequalities. The thesis considers research findings in the light of recent theorizing around intimacy in terms of their relevance to the diverse experiences of single mothers. It captures everyday lived experiences, understandings and choice making around intimacy to provide insights into the complexities of single mothers' intimate lives.

Contribution to knowledge

The thesis introduces the concept of 'intimacy scripts,' based on Simon and Gagnon's (1973) concept of 'sexual scripts' but broadening the term to encompass a range of intimacies beyond sex and sexual relationships. Intimacy scripts are viewed as resources which individuals use to construct their intimate lives by offering a range of possibilities and pathways. They entail a continual process of developing blueprints for intimacy and of reproducing or remaking scripts. Central to understandings of intimacy are culturally endorsed 'traditional' intimacy scripts linked to the life course; this involves growing up, dating, falling in love with a member of the opposite sex and entering into a life-long, cohabiting monogamous relationship, getting married, having children and living in a conventional nuclear family for the majority of their adult life. Intimacy scripts draw on:

(1) **wider 'cultural narratives'** (such as romance) and shared understandings of appropriate intimate behaviours which are inflected by gender;

(2) **'social scripts'** stemming from interactions with others in specific contexts and

(3) **'personal scripts'** of fantasies, desires and expectations.

Individuals are therefore influenced by cultural norms in the creation of intimacy scripts but also shape them, at times diverging from these norms and beginning to imagine alternatives. The study identifies the complexity of this process, with participants often alternating between competing versions of intimacy. This state is referred to as 'scriptual liminality': the word '*liminal*' from the Latin *limen* meaning, 'shore' or 'threshold'[17] with liminality signifying the broader area between two different states - this reflects the suggestion of being 'caught between' different ways of seeing. It has been employed in Anthropology (Turner, 1967) to denote in-between periods for individuals and cultures which may involve a temporary suspension, questioning and testing of norms and limits. 'Liminality' has also been used in narrative research to

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[17] The Concise Oxford Dictionary of current English. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 7th Ed.

convey difficulties in narrativizing experiences of disruption and restoring order (Becker, 1997). While there was some aspiration, among my participants, towards more 'progressive' modes of intimacy (Duncan, 2011a, 2011b), 'traditional' intimacy scripts remained a central frame of reference (Simon and Gagnon, 1999) against which intimate lives were measured. Nostalgia for perceptions of 'the way things were' often shaped ideals and fantasies of 'how things should be'.

The thesis captures ways in which single mothers narrativize their experiences of intimacy – often relating narratives of relationship breakdown and the transition to single motherhood as 'contamination narrative sequences' (McAdams and Bowman, 2001), followed by depictions of 'survival' (Plummer, 1995) and in some cases 'becoming' in re-finding a sense of personhood, often lost through negative relationships. A sense of 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963) is linked to the stigmatisation of single mothers. The thesis also offers an in-depth account of ways in which participants practiced intimacy in their everyday lives. Available intimate choices were often shaped and constrained by material circumstances, alongside the prioritisation of responsibilities for children and the continuing centrality of conventional romantic couple-centred heteronormative practices. Heteronormative ideals of coupledom, romance and traditional family remained aspirational for many, although the importance of equality in relationships was also highlighted. Yet many participants struggled to find suitable male partners and were aware of potential inequalities and risks associated with re-partnering.

Structure of the thesis:

Theoretical Perspectives

This chapter provides an overview of key theories and studies relating to intimacy in contemporary life. It firstly outlines theories of the detraditionalization of intimacy, linked to individualization, which have underpinned much research in this area and provide an important framework and contextualization. Theorists have argued that intimacy has undergone a radical transformation (Giddens, 1992), marked by increased choice, flexibility and egalitarianism, which harbouring potential for positive social effects (Giddens, 1992; Jordan, 2004). Others are concerned with the lack of social support for lasting love relationships in the context of individualization, where the concept of love has an increasing significance but complex labour markets lead to fragmented existences (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) while others focus on the increasingly transient nature of intimacy in a culture shaped by consumerism (Bauman, 2003).

Notions of individualization have provided a framework for studies exploring intimate practices beyond the family or conjugal couple (Roseneil, 2004). Such studies highlight the diversity and complexity of contemporary relationship practices, necessitating a rethinking of theoretical frameworks and recognition of the limitations of a simplistic focus on 'the couple' or 'the family' (Smart, 2007). Nevertheless, detraditionalization theorists tend to exaggerate the division between past and present, setting up a polarised dichotomy with one seen in idealized terms, set against its negative opposite (Jamieson, 1998). Empirical studies highlight that it is imperative to observe intergenerational continuities and to capture complexities in norms and practices of intimacy (Gabb, 2010; Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010). It is vital to acknowledge continuing gendered inequalities (Jamieson, 1998), recognizing that intimacy is not always experienced as benign (Smart, 2007). Positions which assume the autonomy of individuals in their choice making do not take the care of dependents into account (Fineman, 2004; Kittay, 1999), especially pertinent in the exploration of single mothers' experiences. Neither should the power of normative expectations, informed by popular discourses of heterosexual romance be underestimated (Evans, 2003). Indeed, negative depictions in popular culture of single women (Kaufman, 2008) and single mothers in particular (Carabine, 1996) may serve to heighten the appeal of romantic heterosexual relationships for single mothers. While studies have tended to assume the centrality of heterosexual romantic relationships, heterosexuality is rarely sufficiently problematized or investigated in its own right but it is an explicit aspect of this work (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010).

Methodology and methods

This chapter introduces the epistemological and methodological aspects of this study. The study is located within the tradition of qualitative research and informed by feminist methodology. Discussing the practical aspects of conducting the research, it explicates the choice of narrative interview, selected in order to capture complexity of single mothers' lives, to enable them to shape their own stories and to capture their perceptions of socio-cultural transitions. Unstructured narratives were supplemented with semi-structured interview questions. The sample and recruitment of twenty-four single mothers between the ages of thirty and fifty-five is then discussed. A single mother is defined firstly as someone who is caring for children in a different household to that of their father and secondly, who identifies as a single mother.

Narrative is discussed as a tool for exploring transition and making sense of disruption in lives. Becker (1997) argues that Western stories tend to be linear, moving from

chaos to order, restoring understandings of the self and the world and regaining a sense of normalcy. She asks whether this may change as lives become increasingly fragmented and less coherent - relevant to exploring accounts of contemporary intimacy in the light of change. She highlights the performative nature of narrative telling, seen as an empowering, active process of identity construction. This can be linked to Giddens' (1991) notion of the reflexive project of self. However, as Plummer (2001) argues, narrative telling takes place in cultural contexts, drawing on wider cultural narratives. The chapter outlines the approach to truth, reliability and validity; the analytical procedures; the interview process and ethical considerations. It concludes with reflections about the role of the researcher and experience of conducting the interviews.

Transitional moments: intimacy scripts, continuity and change

This chapter explores themes of change and continuity in terms of intimacy. Participants' narratives relate transitions in individual lives which often draw on recognizable genres of contamination, survival and becoming, interspersed with other cultural narratives from popular and archetypal sources. Single mothers undergo complex and unsettling transitions in their personal lives and understandings, intersecting with uncertain transitions in the wider socio-cultural setting. Narratives are linked to wider cultural narratives of social change, exploring how far single mothers have experienced or perceive greater equality in relationships. It highlights the unsettledness within and between their intimacy scripts, with conflicts between the desire for egalitarian relationships and the realities of often having experienced inequalities. At the same time there is often a longing for the certainty of traditional gendered roles and for a return to more stable, committed, enduring relationships perceived as a feature of intimacy in previous generations.

Nostalgia for perceived past stability is present in these narratives, alongside experimentation in the present. These narratives of contemporary intimate lives fall short of the dramatic transformations predicted by theorists. There is no clear divide between past and present, with inter-generational continuities and the transmission of normative understandings about heterosexual intimacy. Notions of 'traditional family values', romance and coupledom as the ideal are present in participants' accounts of their hopes and desires for the future, shaping their intimacy scripts.

Everyday intimacies: single mothers' intimate practices

This chapter explores in more detail the patterning of intimacy in everyday life. Firstly it explores intimacy between single mothers and their children. Children assumed a

central role and are the most meaningful and valued relationship in many participants' lives. These relationships are experienced as especially intense in instances where there are few other resources available for contact and support from others. At times this is a concern, with participants commenting that children are not a substitute for couple relationships.

For many participants, friends became increasingly central to their lives, offering emotional and practical support. Friendships are often formed with other single mothers and local parents who are more likely to sympathize with their situations. Friendships take on a heightened status, idealized as the pinnacle of intimate connection as opposed to insecure and unfulfilling heterosexual relationships. For others, there are limited opportunities and resources to make friends and there may be multiple barriers to intimacy leading to social isolation.

Becoming single for some represented an opportunity to experiment with relationships. Several participants engaged in internet dating, others had been introduced to prospective romantic or sexual partners through friends. Some experienced a range of sexual partners, in stark contrast to others who did not have opportunities for sexual relations. Others chose casual sex or long-term sexual arrangements rather than seeking one romantic relationship, not wishing to re-partner due to bad experiences, wanting to maintain stability for their children by keeping their sex lives separate or wanting to experience sexual pleasure missing in previous partnerships. Experiments also included sexual relationships with people from different racial backgrounds and exploring and adjusting sexuality and sexual identities.

Ambivalence flows through these accounts. Romantic partnerships often did not play as central a role as previously in participants' lives but still often provided a focus and fantasy for idealized intimacy scripts. Participants tended to idealize egalitarian relationships based on emotional connection, while at times demonstrating nostalgia for traditional, patriarchal family.

Being a single mother: pride, shame and respectability

This chapter focuses on complexities surrounding the identity of the 'single mother'. Single motherhood is explored as a problematic, stigmatized identity, often inflected with shame and pride. Shame is linked closely to negative representations and stereotypes of single motherhood circulated by the media. In a neo-liberal context, single motherhood has consistently been linked to societal breakdown and crime, with (unfounded) assumptions that children are worse off without fathers (Gillies, 2007); that

single mothers access an unfair share of resources, are promiscuous and deliberately fail to control their fertility. Duncan and Edwards (1999) identify this 'social threat' discourse in relation to single mothers which, according to these accounts, remains highly prevalent. The majority of participants had experienced stigma, and in some cases discrimination, and were acutely aware of negative stereotypes and their potentially harmful effects, if not on themselves then on their children and others. Being a single woman in itself is often experienced as a problematic heterosexual identity, with women cast as failures for not being in a relationship with a man (Kaufman, 2008). In many of these narrative accounts there is a sense of 'hiddenness' about the hardships and difficulties experienced and participants convey a need to maintain an impression of respectability (Skeggs, 1997) for the outside world, to demonstrate that they are not too far apart from heteronormativity. Goffman's (1963) work provides insights into the management of stigmatized identities. There are moments of resistance to negative depictions and discourses, through participants dismissing, rejecting and replacing them with more positive, pride based narratives.

Narratives tend to emphasize that single motherhood was not a choice and that the difficulties and complexities associated with parenting alone are underappreciated – however, participants had found ways to survive, overcome adversity and in some cases begin to realize their potential, their narratives reflecting to an extent modernist narratives of '*suffering, surviving and surpassing*' (Plummer, 1995). A minority of accounts highlighted the possibility of constructing single motherhood as a positive identity, rejecting the notion of 'compulsory couplehood' as the only source of intimate fulfillment.

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of key studies and theoretical perspectives relating to intimacy in contemporary life. In the past two decades it has become an increasingly significant field of sociological research. Indeed an 'intimate turn' has been noted (Gabb, 2010). With a reframing of intimacy beyond the family, everyday relationships and affective interactions in social life, it now '*denotes an emergent intellectual framework around the detraditionalization of interpersonal exchanges and kin formation*' (Gabb, 2010, p.2). The chapter focuses firstly on theories of the detraditionalization of intimacy, linked to individualisation, as they have provided an important touchstone for research in this area, enabling theoretical contextualization and an emergent framework for empirical research as well as a platform for debate (Smart, 2007). It then explores a range of critiques of detraditionalization theories of intimacy, along with findings from empirical research and further contextualisation around single motherhood, thus enabling a more nuanced theoretical framework.

Theorists have in turn taken optimistic and pessimistic stances (Jamieson, 1998) to what is depicted as a dramatic 'transformation of intimacy' (Giddens, 1992) in the context of detraditionalization and increased individualisation towards the end of the twentieth century in Western culture. In this vision individuals are seen as the primary unit of reproduction, self-reflexively constructing personal biographies and pioneering new identities and intimate lives (Giddens, 1991). Optimistic accounts, including those of Giddens (1992) and Jordan (2004), emphasise the potential democratising effects of contemporary relationships founded in egalitarianism and choice, while also indicating the potential for increased risk. In contrast, Bauman (2003) rails against an individualistic, consumerist culture characterised by a loosening of social bonds and increasing fluidity, fragility and insecurity in intimate lives - a state encapsulated in the term 'liquid love' (Bauman, 2003).

These theories, while providing an important starting point for research into intimacy in contemporary life, are critiqued firstly for overstating the division between past and present, running the risk of overstating and overgeneralising the 'transformation of intimacy'. Such theories do not tend to be empirically based (Smart, 2007) and so do not fully take into account the complexities of intimate lives as lived in specific contexts, shaped by socio-economic circumstances (Gabb, 2010). By ignoring wider structural factors and social relations, theories overemphasise change over continuities, choices

over ongoing constraints often experienced in everyday intimate lives. I argue that they have less application to those, such as single mothers, who have limited material resources as day-to-day survival is likely to take precedence over self-reflexivity (Jamieson, 1998). Crucially, continuing gendered power relations and inequalities are not fully taken into account and ways in which families and relationships may be experienced in negative terms are occluded (Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 1992, 1999). The emphasis on individual choice-making further excludes the experiences of many women as it derives from a limited Enlightenment conception of subjectivity as a 'rational, autonomous man' who acts primarily through self-interest (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Fineman, 2004; Skeggs, 1997, 2004). Women tend to have more caring responsibilities and, it is argued, more relational understandings and experiences of selfhood and intimate life (Gilligan, 1984; Kittay, 1999). Furthermore, the emphasis on 'the individual' precludes different classed understandings and experiences (Gillies, 2007). Neither is heterosexuality sufficiently problematized (Carabine, 1996; Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010; Jackson, 1999; Van Every, 1996) in much of the work of dominant intimacy theorists, with an implicit assumption that the heterosexual couple forms the primary and normative unit for intimacy. While this study focuses primarily on the experiences of heterosexual single mothers, this is not viewed as an invisible, unproblematic category (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010; Jackson, 1999; Van Every, 1996). The concept of 'normalising judgement' (Carabine, 1996; Foucault, 1977) enables an understanding of heterosexual hierarchies where single mothers and others who do not conform to the heteronormative married couple ideal are considered as deviant. Examples of ways in which single mothers have been cast as abnormal and deviant with the 'moral decline' argument in British politics and media over the past two decades are presented. The final section considers current approaches to researching intimacy. Given the current diversity of intimate forms and practices, Smart (2007) advocates a move away from fixed notions of 'the family', 'kin' and relationships and towards a more open conception of 'personal life'. She suggests that attending to life stories will enhance understanding by capturing the shifting meanings and processes of intimate lives in their specific social and historical locations, a position which underpins the research approach undertaken here.

The transformation of intimacy?

Giddens (1992) takes a broadly optimistic view of the changing landscape of intimacy and its possibilities in the social conditions of 'high modernity' (discussing the late 20th century). He identifies a fundamental shift in the separation of sex from procreation,

termed 'plastic sexuality' and viewed as essentially liberating (Giddens, 1991). In the light of this and the simultaneous movement towards gender equality, he argues that a more democratic way of conducting relationships is emerging in the form of the 'pure relationship'. This is developed through 'confluent love' based on reciprocal pleasure but the 'pure relationship' is contingent, '*continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it*' (Giddens, 1992, p. 58). This is understood as part of wider processes of individualisation and detraditionalization, whereby traditional frameworks and understandings have been eroded. Instead autonomous individuals reflexively make their own choices about how to conduct their lives. Fixed traditions have gradually become replaced with an 'ethical framework for democratic personal order' in which in sexual relationships and other personal domains conform to an egalitarian model. This new form of relationship involves mutual disclosure and negotiation, envisioned as having a beneficial, democratising impact on society as a whole.

Central to the process of reflexive identity construction is the creation and maintenance of a coherent narrative of self. Relationships, specifically the 'pure relationship,' are seen as a highly significant to this process. Giddens highlights a new plurality of choice in terms of choosing partners, with reference to the introduction of relationship counselling services and computer dating, as examples of a departure from the '*traditional ways of doing things*' (Ibid, p.87). While Giddens is predominantly optimistic about the possibilities afforded by these new forms of relating, he acknowledges inherent risks of increased choice, flexibility and mobility in relationships, which constitute new challenges for modern day individuals. Potential risks and dangers are associated with increased opportunities and open modes of being in relationships, precipitating increased anxiety for individuals (Giddens, 1991, pp.12-13).

However, Giddens remains optimistic overall in terms of the potential for the majority of individuals to enjoy the positive benefits of new forms of intimacy while acknowledging that increasing choices around intimacy are not necessarily open to everyone (Giddens, 1991, p.82). Nevertheless, he insists – as I see it, unrealistically - that even those in economically underprivileged situations experience the possibilities opened up by the changing landscape of social conditions and engage in reflexive processes. He provides an example of a black woman heading a single parent household as someone who will be aware of the changing position of women likely to explore new forms of intimacy:

> *'A black woman heading a single-parent household, however constricted and arduous her life, will nevertheless know about factors altering the position of women in general, and her own activities will almost certainly be modified by that knowledge. Given the inchoate nature of her social circumstances, she is virtually obliged to explore novel modes of activity, with regard to her children, sexual relations and friendships. Such an exploration, although it might not be discursively articulated as such, implies a reflexive shaping of self-identity'.*
> (Giddens, 1991, p.86)

This generalising account demonstrates this theory does not take into full consideration complexities surrounding the lives of single mothers and other disadvantaged groups. It fails to recognise the significance of material circumstances, local contexts, cultural influences, behavioural norms and regulatory discourses in shaping choices. Such theories ignore the relevance of lived experience – maybe not all women have had access to / experience of egalitarian relationships. Indeed they may have been exposed to violence and other forms of abuse (The British Crime Survey found that single parents were over three times more likely to have experienced domestic violence than women in other types of household[18]). Where individuals are focused on survival, this is not likely to enable the exploring 'novel' ways of relating (Jamieson, 1998). Neither does this account sufficiently consider the challenges of those with dependents (Fineman, 2004). There is a tendency to impose a standardized conception of white male western identity and values on all sections of the population, assuming a 'rational economic man' model who makes decisions based purely on self-interest (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). This construct of subjectivity is limited when considering the realities of experience for single mothers.

Echoing Giddens, Jordan argues for the development of more equal partnerships as a potentially transformative, positive model of democracy, negotiation and mutuality. Democratic modes of conducting personal lives are linked to the development of greater equality, particularly between the sexes, and a new culture of 'self-development, mobility and choice' (Jordan, 2004, p.187). He emphasizes increased flux in the shifting nature of contemporary life, with individuals '*living for shorter spans in smaller units with chosen others, and grouping themselves in collectives which select through members' preferences and the subscriptions they charge, rather than through birth, proximity or nationality'* (Jordan, 2004, p. 28). There is again a tendency

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[18] Walby, S. and Allen, J. (2004), Domestic violence, assault and stalking: findings from the British Crime Survey, Home Office, Research Study No. 276.

to universalize a narrow version of intimacy, ignoring specific classed, raced, local contexts. In certain contexts birth, proximity and nationality may well be highly significant bases for forming and maintaining intimacies.

Jordan argues that, while choices in relationships are made at the individual level of 'couples,' the narratives of the 'voyage of self-discovery' and 'quest to find a soul mate' are embedded in popular culture and public consciousness, the '*very stuff of popular dramas and novels*' (Jordan, 2004, p.57). This is relevant to this study, highlighting the significance of the cultural milieu in which we live and its influence on our 'intimacy scripts' and choices, although it leads to the question of whether these narratives are specific to late twentieth century popular culture – 'quest,' 'voyage' and 'romantic' narratives could be said to be archetypal in Western culture (McAdams, 1993).

Jordan concedes that despite the 'transformative potential' of personal relationships, they have failed to move beyond individualistic self-interests within immediate family settings towards a more egalitarian world vision. Indeed, the values of equality and autonomy in the private sphere can contribute to wider inequalities and exploitations. While individual couples make choices for themselves and their children, there is no framework for considering the impact on the wider social world. Thereby, for example, parents will choose private education to benefit their children and their projects of self by giving them an advantage over others in the labour market or might exploit others in the form of domestic labour (Jordan, 2004, p.76). There is not enough recognition in Jordan's work, however, of ongoing inequalities and ways in which personal relationships and family life can themselves be hierarchical and exploitative (Evans, 2003; Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 2007). Nevertheless, in line with the perspective adopted here, he states that the ability to live as autonomous individuals is reliant on access to the necessary resources. He also suggests that traditional ideals may continue to influence intimate lives alongside newer forms of 'negotiated intimacy,' linking these to class in suggesting that working class people may retain some traditional modes of intimacy. It is essential to recognise the presence of continuities and that certain traditional understandings may be retained in specific contexts.

Yet Jordan ultimately uphold political goals of standardizing equal autonomy and individualised projects of self, thereby devaluing different modes of intimacy in diverse settings – he compares the success of 'mainstream individuals' (presumably middle-class) in managing their lives to the failure of 'poor people' (presumably working-class). While Jordan concludes that, '*Despite the optimistic enthusiasm of theorists like Giddens and Beck, a new politics of discursive negotiation has not engaged the*

majority' (ibid, p.199), he still envisions the possibilities of transformation through harnessing the potential for mutuality modelled in contemporary (middle-class) personal relationships. While he argues that the autonomous, individualised self, which provides the basis for intimacy, is not always accessible, the concept ultimately remains largely unproblematized and universalized. Issues around class will be explored further (see section on 'Class').

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) echo Giddens' emphasis on choice and multiple possibilities in individual biographies. They also view current changes as largely a result of women's emancipation but are less uncritically optimistic. They argue that due to men and women's individual life biographies increasingly being centred on the demands of the labour market, rather than maintaining the gendered division of labour between work and home, there arises a conflict between work and relationship demands. Due to the atomization of people in individual life trajectories, with contemporary labour markets requiring adaptability, flexibility and mobility, a yearning for love and stable relationships to counteract this instability and uncertainty is created. Therefore while young people may reject 'traditional' family and relationship forms they still seek emotional commitment to provide meaning in their lives (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p.16).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim describe a 'new era' characterized by fundamental changes to intimate lives, with the emergence of multiple choices and experimentation emerging from individual biographies in the absence of the traditional structures and certainties provided by religion. They argue against seeing this individualisation process in simplistic terms as a sign of egocentric, selfish behaviour; rather it is suggested that people are pioneers, 'agents of a deeper transformation' (ibid, p.4): '*Women and men are currently compulsively on the search for the right way to live, trying out cohabitation, divorce or contractual marriage, struggling to coordinate family and career, love and marriage, 'new' motherhood and fatherhood, friendship and acquaintance*' (Ibid, p.2).

Individualisation is understood as having contradictory consequences, a heightened need for close relationships reflecting the unreliability of following an individualised trajectory. Individuals rather invest their hope in love, which becomes the '*central pivot giving meaning to lives*' (Ibid, p.2). This perceived centrality of romantic love is presented as a modern phenomenon, pertinent to post-industrialised societies. It draws on Romanticism, emphasising that in an era marked by technological advances and rationalism it provides a means of transcendence and authenticity, becoming

equivalent to religion in secular times: *'A lot of people speak of love and family as earlier centuries spoke of God. The longing for salvation and affection, the fuss made over them, the unrealistic pop-song truisms hidden deep in our hearts – all this smacks of religiosity, of a hope of transcendence in everyday life'* (Ibid, p.11). Marriage is portrayed as a matter of purely voluntary choice, rather than based on economic arrangements. This brings new challenges; in the absence of traditional guidelines, individuals must now define and navigate love themselves.

Individuals are immersed in a culture seemingly obsessed by idealistic images of romantic love, along with expert guidance and advice on how to conduct relationships. It is essential, for the purposes of this study, to recognise that individuals do not live out their intimate lives and make choices in a cultural vacuum but are influenced by such ideals, images and expectations. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim suggest that expectations of love as a deep, emotional bond in this cultural milieu are increasingly high, meaning that relationships are seen as being over as soon as feelings of love are in decline. This may contribute to high levels of relationship breakdown and divorce, alongside continued tensions between the sexes as they adjust to new roles and attempt to find new ways of conducting relationships in the absence of traditions (Ibid, p.178).

While romantic love relationships are seen as increasingly unstable and vulnerable to volatility and deterioration, children are seen as '*the last remaining, irrevocable, unique primary love object'* (Ibid, p.37). Relationships with children provide a way of experiencing physical and emotional closeness while counteracting the risk of adult relationships against a backdrop where romantic partnerships are often temporary. This insight is pertinent to this study as single mothers may well see children as 'primary love objects' in the absence of live-in partners or where previous relationships have been emotionally unfulfilling.

Despite uncertainties inherent in a detraditionalized society, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim do not support traditionalists who advocate a return to previous nuclear family structures, in order to undo the emancipation of women and return them to primarily domestic roles. Rather, they maintain that, despite its insecurities, 'love' is possible in modern life - operating on a sensuous, intuitive level. They can here be critiqued for their tendency to use the language of romanticism uncritically and create a binary divide between the 'traditional past' and 'romantic present' which undermines potential continuities in terms of traditional understandings.

Bauman's (2003) work takes a pessimistic view of contemporary intimacy, seeing personal relationships as increasingly fragile in a world of increasing

commercialization, technology and market processes, a world characterized by 'rampant individualism' (Bauman, 2003, p.viii). He argues that relationships are seen in terms of investments, encounters are often fleeting and virtual and 'networks' are seen as more important than personal relationships. This loosening of bonds is believed to have a detrimental effect on individuals who are evermore insecure and struggling to fully commit to another. Fear of commitment is linked to what Bauman describes as the '*liquid modern world that abhors everything that is solid and durable*' (Ibid, p.29). Bauman positions personal relationships as intrinsic to our culture and being increasingly attended to, spoken and written about but insists that they are not necessarily improving. Rather, relationships are becoming increasingly transient, encapsulated in subtly changing language around intimacy whereby words such as 'partnership' and 'relationship' are replaced by 'network' and 'connection'. This is linked to an increase of relationship experts in the popular press who highlight the importance of being able to exit relationships. It is also linked to technological advances and the increase of online communication, with online dating seen as the epitome of modern relationships. However, the existence of online dating does not necessarily indicate that the importance of relationships, partnerships or commitment is in decline; its popularity may indicate the continued importance of seeking partnerships, albeit with the use of technology. Indeed, dating sites emphasise their good record in leading to marriage in advertising campaigns[19], suggesting that around 17% of married people meet their spouses online.[20] There is no real sense in which networks and different ways of connecting with others are replacing meaningful personal relationships and that they cannot co-exist.

Bauman describes a range of modern day relationships as indicative of the general degradation of human relationships in 'liquid society'. These include one night stands, which he suggests are 'halfway houses' to 'proper' relationships with a future (Ibid., p.10); 'top pocket relationships,' a relationship you 'bring out when you need it' (p.21) and 'semi-detached couples' (p.36) (presumably referring to 'living apart together' couples). A vogue in Paris of wife swapping is invoked as further evidence of loosening ties of marital commitment (although it could be argued that extra-marital activity in France has long been socially accepted). These are examples of a certain theoretical naïveté with the assumption of a prior moral golden age during which extra-marital sexual activity was non-existent. Research suggests that non-traditional forms of intimacy do not preclude ideals of commitment (Duncan and Phillips, 2010). In line with

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[19] For example, see match.com (Accessed 12.01.13)
[20] MBA programs.org Infographic 2012 (Accessed 12.01.13)

commentators on 'moral decline,' Bauman also positions the growth of co-habitation as linked to deterioration in moral standards, although these relationships may well be grounded in commitment.

Current relationship practices are seen as based on a pervasive consumerist mentality, whereby everything is disposable. People are portrayed as primarily looking for the fulfilment of desire and 'no strings attached' short-term relationships which can be quickly exchanged for new, more satisfying options. For Bauman, sex has become separated from love, echoing Giddens (1992): '*Sex is now expected to be self-sustained and self-sufficient*' and *'to be judged solely by the satisfaction it may bring on its own*' (ibid, p.45). Indeed, the choice about whether to have children is now more difficult than ever as it is down to individual choice rather than being a cultural imperative. The costs of raising children have to be taken into consideration, along with the risk of becoming economically dependent and sacrificing career and consumerist goals. The choice to have children is seen as the antithesis of a liquid society because of the accompanying need for commitment. However, evidence suggests that people in contemporary society still gravitate towards having children, getting married or finding committed relationships and forming meaningful bonds through families or friendship groups (Duncan and Phillips, 2008; Gabb, 2010; Roseneil, 2005). People in the UK are still making commitments, primarily choosing to be in families and getting married (Duncan, 2011b). Bauman understates the complexities of the choice-making process around intimacy highlighted by empirical research. The assumption is that humans are passive recipients of consumerism, thinking self-interestedly in the short-term and purchasing disposable goods. While the prevalence of consumerism may well have powerful effects on people, the simplistic conflation of the purchase of goods and relationships is overstated. Rather, in line with Evans' (2003) critique of 'romance', 'ideal' heterosexual love and commitment are some of the most powerful and pervasive consumerist images being sold. It is surely in the interests of a consumer culture to sell the ideal of the monogamous couple living an idealised lifestyle and choosing to have children, with the accompanying purchase of goods this entails.

Bauman tends towards an uncritical romanticization of traditional family life and relationships, assuming the monogamous, heteronormative procreation-focussed couple to be the ideal. He explicitly defends 'Victorian values', ignoring ways in which the patriarchal norms and values associated with this era were oppressive (Smart, 1992). His account minimises positive factors such as increasing equal opportunities for women and the rise of more flexible working practices to accommodate family life, focussing solely on an assumed moral decline. Evidence suggests that even where

increased mobility and flexibility is required in the labour market, people still find ways to instigate and sustain meaningful attachments (Holmes, 2008). To simply cast all non-'traditional' family and relationship forms as signalling moral decline is historically inaccurate, given that the romantic, couple-centred nuclear family is a relatively recent historical phenomenon (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Kaufman, 2008; Lewis, 2001).

Having outlined various approaches to detraditionalization, this chapter now focuses on challenges to this broad group of theorists, including perspectives which focus on gender, heterosexuality and class. These approaches help to build a fuller, more nuanced picture of intimacy in contemporary life than overstated positions of optimism and pessimism (Jamieson, 1998). Detraditionalization theorists tend to focus on a narrow section of society - white, middle-class and heterosexual - without sufficiently problematizing the ideal of the autonomous individual. While Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) highlight the significance of children, the realities of caring responsibilities are neglected. As Lewis (2001) contends, there have been various trends over the past twenty years, including more single people (up 5% between 2001 and 2011)[21], the rise of cohabitation (which in 2012 had doubled since 1996 and is the fastest growing family type in the UK)[22] and decline in marriage. Nevertheless, the past decade has only seen a slight decrease in marriage (which decreased 4% between 2001 and 2011)[23] and there was a concurrent decline in divorce rates (3% between 2005 and 2011)[24]. Lone parenthood too has levelled out in the past decade[25]. British people are still predominantly seeking relationships, making commitments, choosing to be in families and getting married. Yet there is much to explore in the contemporary landscape of intimacy including changing cultural attitudes; an increase in household diversity; reconstituted families; new technologies; changing labour markets and the impact of a current fragile economic climate in Western societies. The changing position of women over last generation in public life has undoubtedly affected family life with a decline in the traditional 'breadwinner' model (Lewis, 2001) and so men and women are in the process of adapting to different roles. While I contend that a dramatic 'transformation' of intimacy is an overstatement, in many ways intimacy in contemporary life is unsettled and in a state of flux and transition and so these theories remain an important touchstone for empirical research. I now turn to an exploration of

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[21] Office for National Statistics Census data, 2011, (Accessed 12-01-2013).
[22] Office for National Statistics 'Families and Households, 2012', (Accessed 12-01-2013).
[23] Office for National Statistics Census data, 2011, (Accessed 12-01-2013).
[24] Office for National Statistics 'Divorces in England and Wales, 2011', (Accessed 12-01-2013).
[25] Office for National Statistics 'Families and Households 2012', (Accessed 12-01-2013).

critiques, developments and further implications of detraditionalization theories for intimacy research, beginning with a discussion of change and continuities.

Change and continuities

A major critique of detraditionalization theories is the tendency to create a binary opposition between past and present. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have a tendency in their work to romanticize modern day love, which is seen as having cast off all traditional constraints. Likewise, the binary opposition between an 'ideal past' and 'morally redundant present' in Bauman's work is misplaced. There is naiveté in the assumption that many of the relationship forms he mentions simply did not exist prior to a somewhat ill-defined modern era; it does not follow that because there are more possibilities, in terms of communication technology, that people are less inclined to seek out long-term commitments. This position ignores abuses of power which may occur in traditional patriarchal arrangements. Jordan (2004) also criticises Bauman's implicit romanticization of past traditional and communal forms of life with their contingencies of birth, coercion, violence, bigotry and patriarchy (Jordan, 2004, p. 27), arguing that there is no obvious connection between the past and a specifically ethical way of relating to others. Jamieson (1998) critiques this romanticization of the past from a feminist perspective, referring to the double standard in sexual conduct of middle-class, white men in the Victorian era. She sees this romanticization as part of a cultural tendency towards nostalgia, in response to unsettledness and perceptions of change in relationships, marriage and conventional family patterns. This tendency towards nostalgia is relevant here as it may shape single mothers' 'intimacy scripts'.

Another key critique of detraditionalization theories is that they do not tend to be empirically based, leading to over-generalisations (Jamieson, 1998). Jamieson, for example, undertook a comprehensive literature review in order to assess how far 'disclosing intimacy,' the practice of talking, sharing and mutual disclosure within the 'pure relationship' was part of the current landscape of intimacy. She found little evidence to support the idea that it had become a central feature of relationships, concluding that while there was a greater emphasis on '*knowing and understanding'* than in earlier decades, *'love, practical caring and sharing remain as or more important in many types of personal relationship*' (Jamieson, 1998, p.160). As Smart observes, there has been a growing gap between theory and contextualized studies: '*There is such a lack of congruence between the depiction of contemporary family life in the work of individualisation theorists and the kinds of lives being represented in local and more closely specified studies of families, kinship and friendship networks'* (Smart,

2007, p.17). An example of relevant empirical work is Gabb's intergenerational study of intimacy in families (2010), where she identifies the need for a pluralistic rather than the uniform approach inherent in detraditionalization theories. She also underscores the importance of attending to structural factors and broader social relations which shape intimate life and create continuities:

> *'In the detraditionalization and democratization theses, a model of mutuality and reciprocity is presupposed as fundamental to new formations of individualized intimacy. But as empirical work has shown, the reality is that structural factors cannot be erased from families as individual family members live within the context of broader social relations that work continually to reinstate hierarchical structures'.* (Gabb, 2010, p.115)

Gabb's work captures nuanced, complex experiences of intimacy in families, shaped by a range of factors including socio-economic contexts, living with disability, ethnic-cultural backgrounds and membership of religious communities. She provides an example of the significance of extended kin for an Indian-Asian family where keeping in touch was an emotional and time commitment which shaped everyday family life. Also noted are faith-related moral discourses which contribute to defining and structuring family intimacy. One family's moral framework derived from their belonging to a church community which structured their family life in a comparable way with the democratic model advanced in Giddens' work. Critically, it was not individualisation but community belonging that shaped their democratic principles (Gabb, 2010, p.130). Insights into the multi-layered complexities which shape intimate practices and understandings challenge more generalizing theories which lack contextualization.

Duncan's (2011a) study, comparing data from the 1950s to 2006, rejects the assertion that contemporary personal lives are radically different from those in the past. While it was possible to trace some 'improvements' in personal life such as increased acceptance of homosexuality and improved sex education, changes are seen as 'improvised developments' as opposed to radical transformations. In neither generational cohort did people act according to a rational individualizing position but they tended to act pragmatically, adapting to circumstances by improving from past practices with some taking up more 'traditional' or 'progressive' positions than others. Such studies challenge the polarisation of 'change' and 'continuity,' indicating that past and present are much more intertwined than the transformation thesis would suggest.

Plummer (2003) adopts a balanced approach, offering a modified view of changing intimate landscapes by stressing that most of us simultaneously inhabit traditional,

modern and postmodern worlds (Plummer, 2003, p.8). He argues that for those who are older, living in tightly-knit communities, those in developing countries or who participate in strongly patriarchal or religious social orders, tradition is more likely to retain its hold. He argues that the challenge is to '*embrace aspects of tradition, the modern, and the postmodern*' (Plummer, 2003, p.16). Taking a global sweep of intimacy in contemporary life, he focuses the discussion on phenomena which have potential for shaping and redefining intimacies for current and future generations, such as the proliferation of the media and its influence on daily lives; the digitalizing of intimacies and role of cyberspace in shaping and enabling intimacies; new technologies of contraception and reproduction; the commodification of various aspects of intimate lives and globalization. He recognizes that the consequences of these forces are likely to be uneven and unpredictable (Ibid. p.31). While Plummer states that his interest lies in exploring what he sees as the positive possibilities afforded by new intimate citizenships, he acknowledges '*the darker side of modernity*' (p.30), including the persistence, at a global level, of gendered inequalities and exploitation. Intimate citizenship is not conceived as a monolithic, rigid concept but as a project involving '*public discourse on the personal life*' (Ibid. p.68), moving beyond the public / private dichotomy. Story-telling is viewed as crucial aspect to opening dialogue about what intimacies are possible, how intimate lives can or should be lived, the ethical boundaries of intimate life and what intimate identities are included or excluded.

Choices versus constraints

Plummer (2003) notes that the proliferation of choice highlighted in detraditionalization theories, does not mean 'anything goes' or 'free' choices. Rather, it should be recognized that choices are socially patterned and often market-driven. Of particular relevance when considering single mothers, are the specific contexts and locations in which individuals are operating, recognizing that not everyone has the social or economic freedom to make individualised choices. Jamieson (1998) critiques the lack of attention to the social, material circumstances of individuals in their socio-historical context, recognizing that for many people survival takes priority over time and energy devoted to self-reflexivity, and that life chances are constrained by economic circumstances: '*…for growing numbers the self-reflexive 'who am I?' questioning must compete with more pressing considerations such as where the next bed and meal is going to come from'* (Jamieson, 1998, p.41). Class and experiences of material disadvantage are considered more fully in the section on 'Class' (this chapter). Constraints operate on a number of levels including material, social and cultural and so choice-making about intimacy is likely to be complex.

Duncan and Edwards (1999) provide insights in terms of how lone mothers make situated choices about caring and work, drawing on normalised gendered discourses within very specific socio-geographical spheres in their study of '*gendered moral rationalities*' (see the 'Post-structural Approaches' section, this chapter for discussion of 'discourse'). Various key discourses relating to lone mothers shaped and informed single mothers' identities and choices. These included 'the social threat discourse,' reflecting the popularist New Right, 'family values' position where single mothers are portrayed as formative members of an underclass, choosing not to work but instead to live on benefits at the expense of the state. They are depicted as sexually promiscuous, having children outside wedlock with no suitable father figure. In contrast, the third, 'social problem discourse' positions lone mothers as victims who are economically and socially disadvantaged, caught in a poverty trap and in need of help. The 'lifestyle change' discourse chimes with detraditionalization theories, where single mothers are seen as making one choice out of many possible family forms. Finally, the 'escaping patriarchy' discourse positions single mothers as liberated female heads of households, free from the control of a man. In addition to locating themselves within these dominant discourses of lone motherhood, participants in Duncan and Edwards (1999) study made choices in line with the norms of their communities and what they believe to be appropriate for women in terms of their caring responsibilities (employing 'gendered moral rationalities'). For example, lone mothers may be primarily orientated towards motherhood or towards careers or find ways to combine them. The identification of these discourses surrounding single mothers is also relevant to ascertaining ways in which they may make choices about intimacy in their local contexts, shaping notions of whether they should be in a couple relationship with a father figure or whether it is socially acceptable to explore alternative intimate forms.

Duncan critiques detraditionalization theories for presenting agency as '*a primarily discursive and reflexive process where people freely create their personal lives in an open social world divorced from tradition*' (Duncan, 2011b, p.1). He suggests that decisions about personal life are made pragmatically, through non-reflexive, habitual and at times unconscious processes which are inevitably influenced by existing traditions and sanctioned social relationships and institutions through the internalisation of hegemonic norms. The notion of 'bricolage' is put forward as a possibility to explain these pragmatic processes whereby people '*consciously and unconsciously draw on existing social and cultural arrangements – existing institutions, styles of thinking, social norms and sanctioned social relationships – to 'patch' or 'piece together' institutions in response to changing situations*' (Duncan, 2011b, p.7). In intimate life,

this may involve adaptation of existing traditions and norms of marriage, romantic love and commitment for those who choose to live together in unmarried co-habitation or to live apart, in order to legitimise and maintain their arrangement. In this way, Duncan argues, *"traditional' meanings leak into supposedly 'modern' practices'* (Duncan, 2011b, p.9). Single mothers may well internalise hegemonic norms and adhere to traditional meanings, despite their current circumstances.

Gross (2005), writing from the U.S. context, similarly argues that traditional meanings continue to influence choices. He distinguishes between 'regulative traditions' which impose sanctions of those not following the norms of their community and 'meaning-constitutive traditions' which are passed down through the generations and which permeate shared frameworks of understanding: '*Meaning-constitutive traditions establish limits on what may be expressed to oneself and others in a situation, influencing the thinkability of particular acts and projects. They provide agents with the semiotic resources out of which their meaningful actions, including all instances of meaningful novelty, must be painstakingly built up*' (Gross, 2005, p.296). In terms of intimacy, while there may not now be social sanctions in terms of stigma for those who do not marry, marriage remains normative. Even while marriage may have declined as a regulative tradition, lifelong marriage is still seen as the ideal way to organise intimate life. Gross argues therefore that even where there is a decline in the regulative power of traditions or they are modified across generations, it does not mean that '*reflexivity, understood as unbounded agency and creativity, has rushed in to fill the void*' (Ibid. p.288). Certain traditional meaning such as 'romantic love' which originated in Medieval Europe continue to infuse cultural imaginations and shape ideas of ideal couplehood. Gross argues that '*these forms of indebtedness to tradition impose cultural constraints on intimate practices that theorists of detraditionalization have largely ignored*' (ibid. p.288). As with this thesis, Gross does not suggest that there are no changes at all but recommends a more balanced view than drawing on a limited conception of humanity, assuming individuals to have a '*fully autonomous conscience*' (Ibid, p.306) in making choices about intimacy.

Scripts

The concept of social, sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon, 1973) is employed here in order to understand choice making processes as informed by the wider culture. Scripts are seen as continually developing, dynamic cultural blueprints around which

individuals base their social and sexual behaviour. Simon and Gagnon (1999) define scripts as a metaphor for understanding the production of social behaviour. Rather than determining behaviour, scripts are understood as resources which individuals use to construct lives by offering a range of possibilities for what path to choose. Individuals learn the range of selves they are expected to be through scripts and they may adhere to, negotiate or remake these scripts. This process involves reconciling wider, more abstract cultural scenarios with narratives of individuals in their specific social contexts and also their internal (intrapsychic) world of desires, fantasies and expectations (which I refer to as 'personal scripts'). While the concept of 'scripts' does not offer a wider analysis of structural constraints on individuals, it is a helpful way of understanding the limitations on what is culturally available in terms of intimate behaviours. As Jackson and Scott (2007) argue, in terms of sexual lives, scripts are *'improvisations on the sexual themes available to us through our culture and experience'* (Jackson and Scott, 2007, p.170). Gagnon and Simon's template for understanding choices and behaviour, allows for ways in which we are culturally and socially shaped while enabling a conception of a creative social actor who in turn shapes their social milieu:

> *'The possibility of a lack of congruence between the abstract scenario and the concrete situation must be resolved by the creation of interpersonal scripts. This is a process that transforms the social actor from being exclusively an actor to being a partial scriptwriter or adapter shaping the materials of relevant cultural scenarios into scripts for behaviour in particular contexts. Interpersonal scripting is the mechanism through which appropriate identities are made congruent with desired expectations.'* (Simon and Gagnon, 1999, p.29)

Three interrelated but distinct dimensions of sexual scripting are identified – cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). 'Cultural scenarios' or 'cultural narratives' are constructed around sexuality and these circulate within society, providing guides for sexual conduct. An example would include public debates about sexual morality (often highlighting single parenthood in the UK) which may well be highly gendered (Laumann and Gagnon, 1995). Cultural narratives form part of a repertoire of resources on which people draw to make sense of their own sexual (and / or intimate) lives and there are many competing available cultural narratives. 'Interpersonal scripting' emerges from and is deployed within everyday interaction in specific contexts. Social actors may co-construct scripts in relationships and everyday intimate practices, although this does not necessarily imply equal participation in a mutually agreed script, especially where gendered dynamics come into play (Laumann and Gagnon, 1995). 'Intrapsychic scripting' occurs at the level of individual desires and

thoughts through internal reflexive processes of self (conversations with ourselves) where we construct fantasies and/or reflect on sexual encounters. Scripts therefore emerge, evolve and are sustained culturally and interpersonally as well as through individual biographies: *'Individuals acquire, through a process of acculturation that lasts from birth to death, patterns of sexual conduct that are appropriate to that culture (including those patterns that are thought to deviate from the norms of the culture)'* (Laumann and Gagnon, 1995, p.188).

The appropriateness of social, sexual scripts varies according to individuals' primary identity or 'master status' (Simon and Gagnon, 1999) whether this reflects gender, class, marital status, race or religious affiliation. Age and stage in the life course is also a significant factor: '*Conceptualisations of life-cycle stages are implicit in the multiple roles most people are expected to play*' (Simon and Gagnon, 1999). Sexual scripts are not organised in isolation, detached from other aspects of life but may well be married to social expectations linked to stages in the life course and so some individuals may seek to follow conventional paths of falling in love, getting married and starting a family: '*For some individuals the sequence of life-cycle based cultural scenarios continues to organize interpersonal sexual scripts in ways that facilitate the harmonizing of sexual commitments with more public role commitments. For such individuals, cultural scenarios covering conventional family careers serve as the organizing principle of sexual careers; for them, family careers, sexual careers, and the definition of life-cycle stages tend to coincide*' (Simon and Gagnon, 1999, p.34). However, and of significance to this research, in a time of change and increasing complexity around family life, relationships and sexuality this may not necessarily occur in the anticipated way:

> *'Such a congruence of scripts and identities were once mandated by the institutional order. For increasing numbers this coincidence fails to occur, or, when it occurs, does so with the kinds of strain that undermine stability. The dramatic recent changes in patterns of sexual behaviours reflect not only profound change in the requirements and meanings attached to the sexual, but equally profound changes in the ordering of family careers and in the definition of the life cycle itself'.* (Simon and Gagnon, 1999, p. 34)

In complex, 'postparadigmatic societies' (Simon and Gagnon, 1999), where there are fewer shared meanings, greater demands are placed on the social actor to make sense of available possibilities and choices. This can potentially lead to experiences of personal anxiety (*anomie*). Where cultural narratives begin to lose their coercive power to structure behaviour (such as the cultural narrative of the importance of the married

nuclear family, for example) they may still retain an important point of reference. Individuals may respond to the uncertainty change engenders through restorative interpersonal behaviour, attempting to restore a sense of cohesion:

> *'The cultural scenario that loses its coercive powers also loses its predictability and frequently becomes merely a legitimating reference or explanation. The failure of the coercive powers of cultural scenarios occasions anomie, personal alienation and uncertainty. Much of the passionate intensity associated with anomic behaviour might best be interpreted as restorative efforts, often desperate efforts at effecting a restoration of a more cohesive self, reinforced by effective social ties'.* (Simon and Gagnon, 1999, p.30)

The concept of scripting, while allowing for individual agency, enables an understanding of the interplay between individuals, their social contexts and the wider cultural milieu. Cultural narratives are not necessarily adhered to - they may be adapted or resisted – but they have a role to play in shaping choices and behaviour. This engenders a more nuanced approach to understanding intimate lives, moving away from a sole reliance of individual reflexivity towards recognition of the social and cultural forces which at least partially shape them. While the participants in this study may indeed be dealing with an increasingly complex socio-cultural landscape of intimacy, they are also likely to draw on legitimizing cultural narratives (scripts) which carry norms and values to guide their choices and behaviour around intimacy. I therefore employ the notion of 'intimacy scripts' to describe this process.

Gendered inequalities

In terms of choices over intimacy, heterosexual women's ability to choose democratic intimate relationships can be questioned in the light of ongoing gendered inequalities. Indeed the difficulty for women in selecting suitable, egalitarian partners has been highlighted (Kaufman, 2008). The 'transformation of intimacy' thesis emphasises an egalitarian ideal in relationships which is not adequately evidenced and fails to fully take into account ongoing gendered inequalities: *'Giddens' vision of a possible future draws selectively from the range of available evidence and only briefly discusses aspects of the wider context which perpetuate inequalities between men and women'* (Jamieson, 1998, p.40).

The assumed freedom of individuals to walk away from unsatisfactory relationships is challenged in the work of Smart (2007):

'The popular insistence on good-quality relationships, combined with the casual presumption that there are quick and easy exits from poor relationships, can create an impression that difficulties can be overcome by moving on. The individualisation thesis has contributed to this by seeming to suggest that individuals can simply walk away from unsatisfactory relationships, giving rise to the idea that people are no longer prepared to endure or work through negative relationships'. (Smart, 2007, p.133)

Smart suggests poor relationships are characterized by feelings of shame and anxiety which interlink with class position, gender and social vulnerability. She questions the normalizing assumption that families are 'healing' and 'supportive' units, asserting rather that power inequalities and negative emotions should be taken into account as '*an essential corrective to the growth in nostalgia about families in the past*' (ibid, p.155). Smart instead focuses on experiences of 'disrespect' within families and partnerships where there is little or no space for democracy or recognition of the personhood of the other. In this way, family units can be seen as sustaining wider gendered inequalities in contemporary life (Smart, 2007).

Evans (2003) critiques the continuing ideologies of love and romance, arguing that optimistic theories of intimacy, such as Giddens', tend to underplay continuing class and gender inequalities embedded in societal structures and manifested in personal relationships. Commentators have challenged the widely held cultural assumption that the sexualised romantic couple forms the ideal basis for family life (Evans, 2003; Fineman, 2004). However, normative ideologies and expectations surrounding gender and the family are perpetuated through cultural discourses and internalised, impacting on the personal expectations, identities and choices (Duncan, 2011b; Gross, 2005; Wallbank, 2002). As Jackson (1999) contends, the continued prevalence of love and romance in our culture, and high expectations that this generates, are indicative of a continued search for romantic fulfilment and meeting an ideal partner as opposed to expecting a temporary, contingent 'pure relationship' form:

'Higher divorce rates, adultery and serial monogamy may indicate a continued search for romantic fulfilment rather than the abandonment of that quest. It may be the case that women are expecting more out of heterosexual relationships and are less likely to remain in them if these expectations are not realized. This does not mean, however, that in their search for the 'pure relationship' they regard their love for their partner as contingent and conditional at the outset, or that they have ceased to entertain romantic hopes'. (Jackson, 1999, p.121)

Caring versus autonomous selves

Continued gendered inequalities are particularly apparent in the way childcare continues to be seen primarily as the responsibility of women in western societies, despite the demise of the post-war breadwinner family model (Lewis, 2001). Concepts of responsibility, autonomy, dependency and choice are relevant here. As Fineman (2004) argues, the market and the state depend on the caretaking work of mainly women but women continue to be treated by governments as autonomous individuals, free to enter the labour market unencumbered by caring responsibilities. In terms of intimacy, lone mothers with caring responsibilities cannot be seen purely in terms of autonomous individuals with freedom of choice in terms of how to either enter the labour market or organize their personal lives as both the needs of dependents and economic circumstances are likely to dictate what life choices are available to them. Smart (2000) highlights the structural disadvantages for women who are primarily mothers and carers, arguing that mothers experience a lowered status as citizens in a society which denigrates those who become economically dependent on others (even though in the breadwinner model the male is dependent on the invisible support of his wife). She outlines material difficulties the gendered division of labour can entail for women in the UK. These basic disadvantages and low status, she goes on to argue, can lead post-divorce mothers to experience a loss of identity and self-esteem as well as leaving them economically vulnerable:

> *'…he still accrues the benefits of apparent self-sufficiency and self-reliance in the public sphere. He is also likely to regard himself as a citizen with rights. The mother, on the other hand is, by virtue of her position as carer, unlikely readily to avail herself of the cultural capital embedded in this notion of the good citizen. She is unlikely to have a well-paid, secure job; indeed, she may not be in the labour market at all. The organisation of the benefits system, in combination with low pay for women, may mean that she cannot hope to become a self-sufficient, independent citizen for several years. She will therefore not enjoy the self-confidence which comes from being regarded as a full citizen nor is she likely to see herself as the holder of rights'.* (Smart, 2000, p.104)

Kittay (1999) questions the negative formulation of 'dependency' within theories of equality. She argues that equality is conceptualized as the inclusion of women into an association of equals, thereby accorded the rights and privileges of that group. This conception is seen as masking '*dependencies that often mark the closest human ties*'

(Kittay, 1999, p.14), obscuring the needs of dependents and those, usually women, responsible for them. These positions highlight ways in which the liberal conception of autonomous, rational beings have been privileged over relational, connected ways of being and relates to the notion of an 'ethics of care'. Gilligan (1982) outlines an 'ethics of care' stemming from a female personality based on relationality and connectedness and which grounds ethical decision making processes, as opposed to abstract concepts of justice based on masculine personality traits grounded in autonomy. This approach can be critiqued for its tendency to essentialize female experience and personality traits and assuming women are heterosexual with children. However, Gilligan argues against the separation and over-determination of certain character traits as 'masculine' and 'feminine' which lead to stereotypes and the privileging of traits typically associated with masculinity, envisaging instead a more balanced model of adult personality which overcomes reductive binary oppositions such as love and work, reason and emotion. She argues instead for more interdependent ways of being (Gilligan, 1982, p.17).

Class

Skeggs (2004) argues that in theories of individualisation, class is rendered invisible. Once the individual is seen as the unit of reproduction, detached from societal structures, class and experiences of classed identities and lives are depicted as outdated and irrelevant in a modern world: *'By showing how individuals reflexively construct their biographies and identities, Beck and Giddens suggest an erosion of class identities in 'late modernity'. They see class not as a modern identity, but a traditional ascriptive one, which has no place in a dynamic, reflexive and globalized world'* (Skeggs, 2004, p.52). She draws on Savage (2000) who argues that what these theorists interpreted as the decline of class cultures and the rise of individualisation would be better understood as shift from working-class to middle-class modes of being, as touched on earlier in this chapter. Critiquing the work of Giddens, Skeggs argues that the self is seen as a neutral concept which is not classed, raced or gendered. Individuals are seen as constructing individualised biographies in a separate sphere to the material world, regardless of their access to resources. This means that power relations which privilege some (middle-class) groups and marginalise and exclude others are hidden and inequalities reproduced. Ultimately such theories support the interests of the powerful and privileged, a group to which the theorists themselves belong:

> *'The self appears in Giddens as a neutral concept available to all, rather than an inscription, a position of personhood produced to retain the interests of a privileged few, requiring for its constitution the exclusion of others. The method of constructing a biography is seen to be a neutral method, something that one just does rather than something dependent upon access to discourse and resources. Like Beck, Giddens relies completely on everybody having equal access to the resources by which the self can be known, assessed and narrated… their sociology can be viewed as part of a symbolic struggle for the authorization of their experience and perspectives'.* (Skeggs, 2004, p.53)

Skeggs emphasises the danger of portraying the middle-class self as normal, universal and inevitable, especially given the high profile and influence of Giddens' 'The Third Way' (1998) which shaped neo-liberal policies of the Clinton and Blair administrations. Those who fail to live up to the middle-class ideal of autonomous individuality and mobility are categorized as excluded outcasts, epitomized, in her view, by the New Labour agenda on social exclusion[26]. Rather than addressing underlying structural inequalities and material need, disadvantage is seen as a 'personal development' issue, a failure which can be overcome if 'the excluded' adopt the right sort of selfhood. This model of 'the individual' is located in discourses of Enlightenment rationality, which created an exclusive, politically privileged and essentially male category, defined in opposition to women who are seen as lacking in rational self-control (Skeggs, 2004, p.56).

Gillies (2007), in her study of working-class mothers, traces the realities of personal and material effects on working-class lives of policies based on individualisation theories. These rationalize material inequality and seek to regulate those who do not conform to the dominant value system. In this way, the New Labour government's concept of exclusion shared similarities with New Right 'underclass' discourse. Even though the word 'class' was not overtly used, judgements were made about those who were materially disadvantaged with the effect of stigmatising lives:

> *'A prevailing silence on class as a social and structural phenomena leads to a personalization of poverty and pejorative judgments against the poor, who are more likely to avoid public recognition of their identity. Unlike other social categories, class is bound up with shame and stigma and operates underneath the surface of social life producing and shaping lives.'* (Gillies, 2007, p.25)

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[26] See Kenway, P. and Palmer, G. (2006) *Social exclusion: Some possible broader areas of concern*, New Policy Institute, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

In this milieu, Gillies argues, parents are expected to raise middle-class children in order to maintain the security and stability of society. Those working-class parents who do not conform to this standard are pathologised as a threat to society. As childcare is still overwhelmingly seen as the responsibility of women, working class women in particular become a target of negative representations and scapegoating:

> *'Over the last few decades, attention and concern has focused on a particular sort of mother. She is portrayed as irresponsible, immature, immoral and a potential threat to the security and stability of society as a whole. While this type of mother is accused of bad parenting, it is her status as poor and marginalized that sees her located at the centre of society's ills. From New Right to New Labour, tabloids to the broadsheets and daytime television to documentaries, working-class mothers who do not conform to the standards grounded in middle-class privilege are vilified and blamed.'* (Gillies, 2007, p.1)

Gillies and Skeggs locate the origins of the pathologising of the working-classes which cast them as deviant and threatening within nineteenth century ideologies. Skeggs traces how they have consistently been classified as '*dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary, pathological and without respect*' (Skeggs, 1997, p.3). Concepts of 'respectability' are seen as key mechanisms by which some groups became pathologised and through which the concept 'class' emerges. To be without respect means to be lacking in social value or legitimacy; the negative representation of single mothers in UK political and media spheres is a prime example of ongoing reproductions of classed identities which Skeggs identifies. Middle-class identities are defined in opposition to working-class identities, seen as 'other' and lacking in respectability. For Skeggs, it is primarily women who have been observed and judged in terms of their sexual respectability (Skeggs, 1997, p.121).

Working-class women and single mothers in particular in Western culture, it is argued, have long been vilified as embodying unregulated female sexuality with the potential to disrupt the social order. Skeggs observes ways in which working-class women are still represented through their 'deviant' sexuality, noting a fashion spread in a UK edition of Marie-Claire entitled 'council estate slags'. Drawing on Foucault (1979), Skeggs views respectability as a regulatory strategy operating through self-regulation and surveillance. In her study of a group of working-class women, Skeggs found that the participants were constantly aware of the judgements of real and imagined others especially in terms of their reputation or control over their sexuality:

> *'Sexuality is still organised through gender, race and class but is far less obviously externally regulated. Self-monitoring and regulation occur through reputation. Proving and maintaining respectability involves taking responsibility for the control of overt sexual display. Producing oneself as respectable becomes the means by which internal regulation and the specific policing of bodies occurs.'* (Skeggs, 1997, p.130)

Respectability, according to Skeggs, is conferred through marital status and the avoidance of reputational labels. She found that her working class participants were more confident about their caring selves, seen as a respectable, safe identity in opposition to themselves as single and sexed. Their role as wives, mothers and carers was key to developing positive identities which they observed in themselves and others while conversely to be single or 'left on the shelf' was seen as a shame-inducing sign of failure (Skeggs, 1997, p.5), relevant to this study of single mothers who may derive positive identities from mothering while at the same time being cast as irresponsible failures through being single.

Gillies' (2007) study of the experiences of working-class mothers draws out the discrepancy between lives as represented and as lived. She problematizes the notion of choice within the limited conception of subjectivity posited by individualisation theories, emphasising how material constraints restrict such women's choices, shaping their life experiences and day-to-day realities. For example, she found that far from choosing to become single mothers, leaving a violent partner is often pursued as a last resort because of the associated deprivation and stigmatization. Given the choice, her participants would have preferred to parent with a supportive partner but this option was simply not available to them, because of the behaviour or lack of responsibility of their children's father. Claiming state benefits was often the only option available to them and so they acted responsibly in the interests of their children and the necessity of protecting and supporting them (Gillies, 2007, p.47).

Gillies identified that experiences of working-class women in terms of their intimate lives challenge notions of the individualized self. She observed relational experiences of self in the reciprocal, supportive and interdependent networks operating in the lives of working-class parents in contrast to more individualised, instrumental social networks of middle-class parents: *'For these working-class mothers close social relationships carry enormous significance. Many rely on, and are relied upon, by family members and friends for emotional, practical and financial support. This kind of interdependency is experienced and articulated in terms of crucial and much valued*

attachments. Longstanding and much trusted friends are often defined as family, with the word symbolizing mutual commitment and loyalty' (Gillies, 2007, p.72).

Heterosexuality

Detraditionalization theories tend to implicitly assume the normativity of heterosexual coupledom as an unproblematic category and primary unit for intimate relations. As Jackson (2005) contends, heterosexuality should not be seen in simplistic terms as a sexual category but as social, shaping gendered norms, practices and relations and delimiting what is 'normal':

> *'Heterosexuality is the key site of intersection between gender and sexuality, and one that reveals the interconnections between sexual and non-sexual aspects of social life. As an institution, heterosexuality includes non-sexual elements implicated in ordering wider gender relations and ordered by them… While heterosexual desires, practices, and relations are socially defined as "normal" and normative, serving to marginalise other sexualities as abnormal and deviant, the coercive power of compulsory heterosexuality derives from its institutionalization as more than merely a sexual relation.'* (Jackson, 2005, pp.17 - 18)

'Compulsory heterosexuality,' a term coined by Rich (1980), is defined as an institution which holds coercive power in reproducing unequal gendered power relations. Marginalising other sexualities which do not conform to its normative standards, it creates and sustains unequal, hierarchal relationships between men and women. Challenging and resisting heteronormativity is therefore seen as crucial to feminism and this has informed my decision to focus specifically on heterosexual women in this study:

> *'To name oneself as heterosexual is to make visible an identity which is generally taken for granted as a normal fact of life. This can be a means of problematizing heterosexuality and challenging its privileged status, but for women being heterosexual is by no means a situation of unproblematic privilege. Heterosexual feminists may benefit from appearing 'normal' and unthreatening, but heterosexuality as an institution entails a hierarchical relation between (social) men and (social) women. It is women's subordination within institutionalized heterosexuality which is the starting point for feminist analysis. It is resistance to this subordination which is the foundation of feminist politics'.* (Jackson, 1999, p.131)

As Hockey, Meah and Robinson (2010) argue, heterosexuality has become an invisible, unproblematic and assumed category which is seldom prioritized in analysis: *'...the concept of heterosexuality, as an identity category, achieves dominance by virtue of its invisibility and, like whiteness, able-bodiedness and masculinity, is unmarked. It is precisely it's taken for grantedness which constitutes a barrier to reflexivity on the part of everyday people living out their heterosexual lives'* (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010, p.20). Their cross generational research reveals the pervasiveness of hegemonic heterosexuality as a normative category. It is nonetheless not inevitable but is often resisted: '*Across the sample, within families and within individual life stories, there are examples of not only conformity and reproduction, but also resistance and a failure to live up to hegemonic heterosexuality*' (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010, p.21). However, their participants' accounts highlighted the idealized 'imagined world' of heterosexuality (Ibid, p.40) which shapes understanding, expectations and behaviour. This imagined world can come into conflict with real-life negative experiences of heterosexual relations such as date and marital rape, violence, betrayal, emotional abuse and rejection. This creates discrepancies between expectations and experiences of hegemonic heterosexuality. Heterosexual single mothers may experience these discrepancies in their intimate lives, especially as many are likely to have experienced abuse. Negative experiences could well trigger a sense of loss and disappointment, in a cultural milieu which idealises love and romance (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Evans, 2003) and creates an expectation of a life trajectory (intimacy script) involving romance, marriage, children and lifelong partnership.

Hockey et al (2010) discuss how understandings of normative sexual behaviour are culturally and historically specific, having changed over time and across generations, but that they continue to provide a regulatory framework:

> *'In spite of these changes, however, it becomes clear from the data provided by our participants that while the institution of heterosexuality may have undergone challenges from feminists and has metamorphosed over the last century, it remains dominant, pervasive and a taken-for-granted residual category within our culture'.* (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010, pp.180- 181)

However, this study identified a profound shift for the youngest generation interviewed (born in the late 1980s / 1990s) in terms of sexual freedom and accompanying heightened risk and choices and an inability to understand what they should be doing in the absence of a 'metanarrative' which shaped the normative expectations and experiences of their parents' generation. This finding fits broadly with speculations of

detraditionalization theories, suggesting a shift between generations in the way that heterosexual relations are perceived and experienced and the challenge and risk involved of negotiating choices in terms of intimate practices. It is therefore pertinent when considering participants in my study as their age range covers a broad period (born between 1955 and 1980):

> *'These data reveal a sense of dissatisfaction being experienced by young people as they engage in an emotional struggle to reconcile their sexual practices and behaviour with what they feel they ought to be doing. In the absence of a metanarrative around heterosexuality, they appear not to know what to expect, or how they and 'it' should be... While participants from the older generation struggled with issues around accessing sexual knowledge and the freedom to practice their sexuality, such freedoms could present problems for young people'.* (Ibid, pp.83 – 84)

Van Every (1996) notes the hierarchies within the often taken-for-granted and unproblematized category of heterosexuality, where marriage is the hegemonic form which is privileged accordingly. Therefore while 'wife' is seen as an acceptable heterosexual identity, single mothers are cast as deviant. It is also expected within heteronormativity that mothers should be within a heterosexual relationship. Van Every draws on Roseneil and Mann (1994) who link this to concerns about lone mothers, which they argue draw on a distinctly anti-feminist undercurrent:

> *'In Western societies the hegemonic construction of 'natural' motherhood includes a heterosexual relationship… Roseneil and Mann (1994) have argued that the recent concern about lone mothers could be interpreted as an attempt to reinforce the hegemony of this notion in the face of feminist contestation of it'.* (Van Every, 1996, p.46)

It is relevant to explore how far single mothers recognise, resist or challenge heteronormative intimacy scripts in terms of relationship expectations and practices, whether they challenge the hegemony of gendered balances of power in heterosexual relationships and whether they resist or reproduce an assumed centrality of coupledom in their lives.

Post-structural approaches

It is important here to recognise the influence of post-structuralism, particularly in the work of Foucault and Butler, on work on sex, sexuality, gender and that focussing on single mothers. Post-structural approaches, along with feminism, challenge limited

western notions of fixed, stable categories and identities. Mind/ body dualism, one of the central tenets of western thought, has tended to relegate women to the body while privileging the male mind and feminists have noted the possibilities inherent in post-structuralism to deconstruct such categories: '*That women are sex, that they represent the body side of the mind / body dualism is one of the central tenets of the Western canon. Foucault's approach deconstructs this dualism, redefining sexuality and its truth. Feminists have used his redefinition to question the association of woman with the body and sex*' (Hekman,1996, p.4). Post-structural thinkers such as Foucault highlight the constructed nature of identities and draw attention to ways in which power operates through discourse to regulate behaviour and reproduce inequalities. Discourse can broadly be defined as 'a group of statements identified as belonging to a single discursive formation' (Smart, 2002, p.40). They have also been described as '*ways of seeing the world*' (Sutherland, 2004). For the purposes of this study, they contain and transmit common-sense assumptions and conventions in language as outcomes of power relations and so become '*a means of legitimizing existing social relations and differences of power, simply through the recurrence of ordinary, familiar ways of behaving which take this take this relation and power difference for granted*' (Fairclough, 2001, p.2). Discourses relating to motherhood, heterosexuality and appropriate femininity serve to shape single mothers' understandings and choices, although the realm of discourse also contains possibilities for creativity and resistance (Fairclough, 2001; Foucault, 1976, p.96).

Foucault's conception of 'normalisation' is helpful in elucidating the way in which power operates through the regulation and supervision of behaviour in institutions through discursive practices and by individuals through internalisation (self-surveillance). Foucault sees normalisation as a form of constant supervision and punishment, a '*perpetual penalty… it traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions, compares, differentiates, hierarchises, homogenises, excludes*' (Foucault, 1977, p.183). As opposed to external coercion, this process of normalisation takes the form of 'self-surveillance' through a continual gaze individuals exercise on themselves.

Foucault's work has been employed by feminists in critiquing ideologies and practices of femininity, especially in the way that women internalise notions of femininity. This is viewed as a process of subordination aimed at turning women into the compliant companions of men and reproducing power relations: '*…the disciplinary practices of femininity produce a 'subjected and practised', an inferiorized body, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system*

of sexual subordination. This system aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men just as surely as the army aims to turn its raw recruits into soldiers' (Weitz, 2003, p.37). The notion of the *'normalising judgement'* (Foucault, 1977, p.177) is applicable in considering ways in which single mothers themselves may internalise cultural and /or local notions of acceptable femininity, motherhood and sexual behaviour and conform to normative expectations with regards to their relationship practices. For Carabine (1996), the concept of normalisation enables enhanced understandings of the discursive, regulatory processes involved in the normalisation of marriage, heterosexuality and the family. Crucially, single mothers are cast as falling outside what is deemed to be 'normal' and 'natural':

> *'Applying the normalising judgement means that it is commonly felt that it is 'normal' to be heterosexual and that it is 'abnormal' to be lesbian or homosexual; similarly, that it is 'normal' for women and men to get married or to live in a monogamous relationship; or that it is 'natural' and 'normal' for women to be mothers, albeit in certain contexts. By the same token, it is considered 'natural' for children to have both a male and female parent – father and mother. A single parent and same-sex parents are usually considered to be deviant and not 'normal'.* (Carabine, 1996, p.61)

As Carabine argues, normalising judgements can have very real material effects on those, such as single mothers, who do not fall within the rigid confines of acceptable (hetero)sexuality. An example provided is the effect of British Prime Minister Thatcher suggesting that young girls were deliberately getting pregnant to obtain council housing which directly led to the removal of local authorities' obligations to prioritise single parents: *'As well as defining acceptable and unacceptable sexuality, social policy has a related regulatory function. It is through social policy that acceptable sexuality is regulated, being rewarded or privileged – as in the case of ideal heterosexuality – or penalised, when women fail to conform or fall outside the 'norm'* (Carabine, 1996, p.63). Social policy can have a regulatory function to uphold acceptable sexuality through privileging or penalising specific groups depending on their relationship status, for example through tax and social security systems. A current example is the re-introduction of tax allowance for married couples alongside declining social support for single parent families in the context of austerity.

Smart draws on post-structuralism in her study of the regulation of reproduction in nineteenth-century Britain (1992), elucidating ways in which the category of 'woman' has been constructed through discourse as problematic, especially in relation to female

sexuality. She refers to '*ways in which discourses of law, medicine and social science interweave to bring into being the problematic feminine subject who is constantly in need of regulation*' (Smart, 1992, p. 7) and suggests that this process is ongoing: *'The construction of women's bodies as unruly and as a continual source of potential disruption to the social order has given rise to more and more sophisticated and flexible mechanisms for imposing restraint and achieving desired docility*' (Smart, 1992, p. 31).

Butler's post-structural work is highly significant to feminist analyses, destabilizing fixed notions of gender, sexuality and indeed sex itself (Butler, 1990). Butler utilizes De Beauvoir's insight that '*one is not born but becomes a woman*' (De Beauvoir, 1968), drawing attention to ways in which ideas about 'women' and 'sex' are constructed to seem normal, natural and biologically determined. Instead, she envisages the possibility of a fluid conception of gendered subjectivity which is constantly in flux. Gender is conceived primarily as performed within the confines of regulatory practice and discourse (Butler, 1990). Single parents and same sex parents are considered in this framework as deviant, not adhering to 'normal,' acceptable or appropriate sexuality – normality is for women and men to be married and live in a monogamous heterosexual relationship. Reproduction is normative within patriarchal structures and compulsory heterosexuality. It is therefore more culturally acceptable for some women - in appropriate sexual circumstances - rather than others to be mothers. Butler considers the construction of those who choose to have children without a father as lacking: '*For a woman who is a single mother and has her child without a man, is the father still there, a spectral "position" or "place" that remains unfulfilled, or is there no such "place" or "position"? Is the father absent, or does this child have no father, no position, and no inhabitant?*' (Butler, 2000, p.288).

Utilizing the conception of normalisation, Butler argues that counter-heteronormative practices invite moral condemnation akin to the revulsion provoked by incest, here explicitly linking this to the condemnation of single mothers:

> *'Consider that the horror of incest, the moral revulsion it compels in some, is not that far afield from the same horror and revulsion felt toward lesbian and gay sex, and is not unrelated to the intense moral condemnation towards voluntary single parenting, or gay parenting, or parenting arrangements with more than two adults involved (practices that can be used as evidence to support a claim to remove a child from the custody of the parent in several states in the United States). These various modes in which the oedipal mandate fails to produce normative family all risk entering into the metonymy of that moralized sexual*

> *horror that is perhaps most fundamentally associated with incest'.* (Butler, 2000, p. 289)

While post structural approaches have influenced feminist work (Hekman, 1996), Foucault has also been critiqued for the absence of women within his analysis, his failure to recognise the significance of gender and the tendency towards relativism with his definition of 'power' as an omnipresent, abstract concept which is impossible to transform (Harstock, 1987). However, Hekman (1996) stresses parallels with feminist thinking, especially regarding the construction of gender and sexuality and suggests that the strategy of focussing on specific instances of the way in which power operates comprises a valid political goal: '*Our task, he argues, should not be to formulate global systemic theory but to analyse the specificity of mechanisms of power, to locate the connections and extensions, to build, little by little, a strategic knowledge*' (Hekman, 1996, p.11). This potentially enables recognition of varied and multiple forms of oppression and opens up the possibility for local resistances.

Wallbank (2001) adopts a Foucauldian approach in her study of single mothers, identifying possibilities for resistance to regulatory discourses and practices, which enable the vision of a subject who is '*a thinking and emotional person capable of understanding that she is both the source and site of contesting discourses*' (Wallbank, 2001, p.15). Wallbank suggests that Foucault's work opens of possibility of resisting regulatory discourses and constructing alternative subjectivities, which she sees as central to the feminist project. As Foucault contends, '*Where there is power, there is resistance'* (Foucault, 1976, p.95).

As touched on previously, it is relevant to explore how far single mothers exercise resistance or internalise cultural norms with regards to intimacy. As well as being oppressed at structural socio-economic and cultural levels, they may have experienced oppression at the micro-level of intimate and familial relationships and these different levels of oppression are likely to be bound up with dominant gendered discourses regarding normalcy, ideal femininity and motherhood. For the purposes of this study, Foucault's ideas are considered relevant (although limited) when analysing the intimate lives of single mothers as it is important to recognise wider structural as well as discursive constraints. I will now move onto outlining the socio-political context of this study where discourses about single mothers are often linked to moral decline.

Single mothers and 'moral decline'

Rising rates of divorce, co-habitation, increasing rates of birth 'outside wedlock' and lone parent families have come to symbolise moral disintegration in the UK, particularly in media and political spheres. Single mothers, stereotyped as unfit parents, have become an enduring symbol of moral and social decline and are, as Jamieson highlights, often pathologised:

> *'By the late twentieth century, alongside the story of the virtues of the 'sensitive mother,' there are stories of the deficiencies of single mothers or motherhood without fatherhood (Lewis, 1986). This is a long-running refrain which was well established in the 1950s. Bowlby, for example, identified single mothers as 'pathologically disturbed' (Harey and Crow, 1991; Riley, 1983). The pathologising of single mothers as intrinsically unfit parents, also reasserts the importance of fathers'.* (Jamieson, 1998, p.48)

The linkage between single motherhood and moral disintegration was initiated by New Right commentators in the late 1980s and 1990s who blamed lone mothers for the rise in what was termed 'the underclass' (Murray, 1990, 1994). In these influential debates, the increase in lone-mother families was seen as a '*symptom and self-perpetuating cause of social disorde*r' (Jamieson, 1998), especially with regards to links made between lone mother parenting and/or the absence of a male role model and crime. Smart demonstrates ways in which single mothers are portrayed as actively contributing to the moral breakdown of society, for example in the conflation of lone motherhood and crime: '*Thus, it is argued, women cause crime by rejecting men as potential breadwinners and thus blocking young men's transition into responsible adulthood*' (Smart, 1999, p.4-5). As Smart (1999) argues, studies have tended to be used to support populist political positionings which associate changes in family structures with social decline:

> *'…empirical studies which map change without offering a wider analysis within which to understand shifts and transformations can easily be taken up and used as data in support of highly ideological or crudely partisan / political positions. This tendency has been accelerated by the fact that those most vociferous in offering explanations for change have been seen as synonymous with decline and degeneration.'* (Smart, 1999, p.4)

As Gillies (2007) notes, it has been well established that it is poverty rather than family form which is the main link with crime. High levels of single parent families living in poverty tends to distort statistics and policy-makers tend to commission research that supports popularist, 'common-sense' assumptions that deviance stems from family forms, rather than developing understandings based on sound empirical evidence:

> *'Delinquency could easily be linked to any number of life variables, including gender, race, neighbourhood, unemployment, etc., but a preoccupation with family relationships reflects a 'commonsense' view that deviancy is rooted in upbringing. As a result, policy-makers commission research to establish the family practices associated with crime but avoid seeking any detailed understanding of the behaviours in question'.* (Gillies, 2007, p.6)

Discourses of moral decline associated with single parents are seen as rooted in the nineteenth-century amid fears of '*the social consequences of an emerging urban mass*' (Gillies, 2007, p.2) and the threat to the interests of the wealthy by those defined as '*degenerate', 'feeble-minded' and 'morally corrupt*' (Ibid. p.2). Children from non-traditional family backgrounds were evaluated against fixed notion of normality and such families were deemed to be in need of regulation. According to Gillies, this process gained new momentum in the UK through a 'New Right' political backlash against the challenge to patriarchal values towards the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries:

> *'At the heart of the New Right critique was the challenge to patriarchal values embodied by changing family structures, which were seen as undermining the foundation of society. Women were seen as increasingly placing their own needs above those of their children and husbands, facilitated by the availability of welfare support enabling them to live independently. Women's liberation and welfare benefits were also seen as undermining men's incentive to work and provide for their families, encouraging them to abandon their domestic responsibilities'.* (Ibid, p.5)

Gillies argues that these concerns and anxieties focussing on single parent families continued under the New Labour government '*despite a pervasive liberal rhetoric in the UK acknowledging and embracing increasing plurality and diversity in family forms*' (Ibid, p.45). Public and political concerns about family breakdown relating to costs to the exchequer and assumed negative social consequences maintained a high profile. Single mothers on benefits, as ever, remained the main target and focus. While there was increased recognition of alternative family forms, heterosexual marriage was still

promoted by the government as the best option for children. A continued belief in lone motherhood as a lifestyle choice in contrast with what Gillies describes as a neo-liberal '*male-orientated valorization of participation in the labour marke*t' (Ibid, p.46) underpinned the emphasis on getting lone mothers 'back to work' and a withdrawal of state support, despite the ongoing deprivation of single parent families struggling to survive on welfare benefits.

Single mothers in the UK have been portrayed by politicians and the tabloid press as workshy, irresponsible and unfit parents raising future generations of criminals, also as sexually deviant, a threat to society and the institution of marriage (Carabine, 2001; Gillies, 2007; Lewis, 2001). As noted by Smart (1992, 1999), Skeggs (1997) and Gillies (2007), single mothers in our culture have long been vilified as dangerous, embodying unregulated female sexuality. These discourses have been prevalent in political campaigning in recent years with political parties competing to establish themselves as 'pro-family' and 'pro-marriage' and it is easy to find examples within the British media. Moral panics (Land and Lewis, 1998; Thompson, 2001) regarding single mothers often converge on a single notorious case or sensational story in the media; in the early 1990s the case of the murder of a young child, James Bulgar was used as a political and media platform to highlight concerns about family breakdown (Mann and Roseneil, 1999). More recent examples in the UK include single mother Karen Matthews who kidnapped her daughter or the case of 'Baby P' who was abused by his mother's partner (Duncan-Smith, 2008). Politicians use these cases to further arguments about the perceived disintegration of morality and family values. As Mann and Roseneil (1999) argue, the solution – whether implicit or explicit – is conveyed as '*the reconstitution of the nuclear family and the reassertion of the power and role of the father within it*' (Mann and Roseneil, 1999, p.101). These same public discourses have remained largely unchanged apart from occasional variations in terminology over the past two decades. Duncan-Smith, currently Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, highlighted exceptional examples of single mothers to illustrate his campaign on 'Broken Britain,' arguing in line with the 'underclass' discourse that the state should not support 'problem families' (particularly those headed by single women). Depictions of single mothers often contain overt references to their sexuality, for example specifying the numbers of fathers of their children as in this example:

> *'The story of Karen Matthews and her attempted kidnap of her own daughter has caused horror among people across the country. It is as though a door on to another world has opened slightly and the rest of Britain can peer in. What they see is a saga of abuse, at the heart of which is a woman, mother to seven*

children by six fathers, sustained on various benefits, her rent paid and never having held a job in her life. Worse still was the comment from many of her neighbours (before her involvement in the kidnap was known) that this lifestyle was considered normal. You could almost sense a shudder go down the collective spine of the nation… Britain is witnessing a growth in an underclass whose lifestyles affect everyone… Two-thirds are occupied by lone parents, lone men or lone women. On such estates, few children see a positive father figure, with young men having children by different mothers, with the state covering the cost.' (Duncan-Smith, 2008)

Following the formation of the Coalition Government in 2010 these arguments escalated, leading up to the re-introduction of the married tax break to reward marriage alongside an emphasis on tackling 'problem families'. As Mann and Roseneil (1999) remind us, 'moral panics' about juvenile delinquency have been frequent since the 1960s and from the late 1980s linked explicitly to family breakdown and negative discourses about single mothers. Duncan-Smith, speaking at a conference in 2012[27], argued that couples should be rewarded for staying together, getting and remaining married with reference to the poor outcomes of children from single parent families. He therefore establishes that he believes it is the type of family which is responsible for children's upbringing as opposed to other factors, reflected in policy with the re-introduction of a Married Tax Allowance[28]. This contradicts evidence which has consistently identified that it is not family type but family function and poverty which cause poor outcomes for children (Gillies, 2007)[29].

In British tabloids, attention continues to overtly focus on the sexual irresponsibility of single mothers, seen as lacking of control over their fertility and sexuality and/ or deliberately choosing their 'lifestyle' in order to gain unfair access to resources. This is typically part of an explicit backlash against feminism linked to the rise in female employment and sexual liberation and reflects (and feeds into) anxieties about the perceived decline in patriarchy. Typical headlines include '*growth of man-free families who rely on state handouts*' (*Daily Mail online*, March 2010) or '*Half of single mothers never live with partner after being enticed by benefits lifestyle choice*' (*Daily Mail online*, February 2010). These lines of argument are encapsulated in an article by Phillips

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[27] Conservative Party Conference:
  http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2012/10/Iain_Duncan_Smith_Conference_2012.aspx
  (Accessed 12-01-2013)

[28] http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/incometax/married-allow.htm (Accessed 12.09.13)

[29] Parental separation by itself is not considered predictive of poor outcomes in children. Parental conflict has been identified as a key mediating variable in producing negative outcomes in children. Family functioning has a greater impact that family structure in contributing to child outcomes: Mooney, A., Oliver, C., Smith, M. (2009) *Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's wellbeing.* Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

(2011), challenging a suggestion by Prime Minister David Cameron that 'absent fathers' should also be held responsible for family breakdown. She advocates the reintroduction of the traditional gendered 'bargain' (Stacey, 1998) whereby women serviced men's practical and sexual needs in exchange for protection and financial support, with men being reassured as to the paternity of their children and faithfulness of their partner. In other words, women should be sexually controlled by men and financially dependent on them (the only alternative presented as dependency on the state):

> *'Most pertinently, it totally ignores the fact that there is another feckless actor in this dysfunctional family drama — the mother, who may be having children by a series of different men. In line with politically correct thinking, Mr Cameron presents such girls or women as the hapless victims of predatory males. But that is just plain wrong. For at the most fundamental level, this whole process is driven by women and girls. In those far-off days before the sexual revolution, relations between the sexes were based on a kind of unspoken bargain. Women needed the father of their children to stick around while they grew up, in return for which a woman gave a solemn undertaking to be faithful to this one man. For his part, the father's interests were served by being offered not just a permanent sexual relationship but a guarantee from the trust placed in his wife that the children were, indeed, his… With the combination of the sexual revolution, the Pill and the welfare state, however, women's interests changed. Suddenly they were being told sex outside marriage was fine, unmarried motherhood was fine — and crucially, that the welfare state would provide them with the means to live without male support'.* (Phillips, 2011)

Comments from the readership of such articles condemning single mothers reflect depictions of them as being lazy, irresponsible, demonstrating uncontrolled sexuality and fertility and creating social instability and breakdown, thereby rejuvenating the 'underclass' discourse (Murray, 1994). This demonstrates the powerful hold such discourses still have in the public consciousness in the UK, possibly exacerbated in a challenging economic climate where public resources are under threat:

> *'Every woman, other than those who have suffered rape, have the choice as to whether to become pregnant. Men can be blamed for many things but this is not one of them. This is a problem created by women and should be solved by women without any form of taxpayer support. Such 'families' produce the most criminals, the least ambitious children and those who take from society rather*

than contribute. They are nothing more than baby factories spawning future
benefits claimants'. (Member of public, *Daily Mail* online forum, 2010)

A recent variation on the 'underclass' discourse lies in the construct of 'troubled
families'. A UK Government 'troubled families' unit was set up in response to UK riots
in 2011 to tackle so-called 'problem families'. The unit's leader, Casey, announced
through the press that the state must urge mothers with large families to take
responsibility for their fertility and to stop having children with abusive partners, thereby
reproducing social problems (*Daily Telegraph online*, July 2012).[30] These attitudes infer
that single mothers deliberately set out to have poor relationships with abusive
partners, underlining assumptions that they are promiscuous and irresponsible.
Families who refuse help are threatened with sanctions such as losing social housing,
having their children put into care or Anti-Social Behaviour Orders which, if breached,
can lead to prison. In a climate of austerity, with cuts in state benefits, tax credits and a
social housing shortage, this approach is likely to have a severe, detrimental impact on
the lives of single mothers and their children who are already often struggling to
survive. In this challenging economic context, it is likely that single mothers will feel
increasingly stigmatised and marginalised. This may in turn impact on their ability to
make choices about their intimate lives.

This section has explored ways in which normative ideologies and expectations
surrounding gender and the family are perpetuated through political and cultural
discourses. As Wallbank argues, these can be internalised, impacting on the personal
expectations and identities of single mothers (Wallbank, 2001). These issues raise
questions about far single mothers feel able to see themselves as sexual beings,
whether these possibilities are viewed in a positive or negative light, as liberated or
promiscuous, or whether they see themselves primarily as mothers who are
unconcerned with sexual exploration. These questions feed into the concern with single
mothers' identities and the way in which their identities and life narratives are
constructed in relation to dominant discourses and cultural narratives.

Increasing diversity: beyond the heteronormative couple

Despite the continued prevalence of moral conservatism in relation to intimacy, as
explored in the previous section, paradoxically there seems to have been a
contemporaneous proliferation of intimate forms and ways of practicing intimacy.
Indeed, Weeks (2007) finds much to celebrate in the development of a more liberal
culture which contains more positive attitudes towards different sexualities and

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[30] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9416535/Problem-families-have-too-many-children.html.

relationships. He maintains that these changes are driven by minority groups despite government approaches which attempt to uphold heteronormativity (Weeks, 2007). Contradictory strands of liberalism and conservatism, diversity and tradition, change and continuities, or in Evans' (1993) terms 'plurality' and 'normality,' in discourses of intimate life seem to have become entrenched, creating cultural conflicts and tensions to be navigated in the contemporary landscape of intimacy. Evans observes this paradox in the increase in pluralism and challenging of boundaries in terms of intimacy and the family, at the height of New Right campaigning with its highly popularised, fixed notion of traditional family forms and 'normality': *'For many people, most particularly perhaps women and what are described as sexual minorities, this new pluralism has liberating possibilities, for it does extend the boundaries of what is acceptable, even if normality remains as rigidly fixed as ever'* (Evans, 1993, p. 6). It is relevant to explore how these cultural conflicts are played out in terms of single mothers' intimate lives, testing the possibilities presented by diverse ways of 'doing intimacy' but at the same time potentially constrained by the imposition of cultural boundaries and normalising judgements about their sexual behaviour.

Roseneil and Budgeon's work on friendship (2004) focuses on the transitional nature of relationships in contemporary life, examining the increasing fluidity and 'queering' of relationships, thus challenging heteronormative practices. Building on notions of 'families of choice' (Weeks et al, 2001; Weston, 1997) and 'elective affinities' (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998), Roseneil argues that the heterosexual love relationship has become increasingly decentred within individual life narratives, and that there is increased experimenting (queering) beyond 'heteronormative conjugality' with an increased importance now placed on friendship in emotional lives. Following Giddens, this is seen as part of the process of individualisation and the undermining of a traditional order:

> *'In the West, at the start of the 21st C, more and more people are spending longer periods of their lives outside the conventional family unit. Processes of individualisation are challenging the romantic, heterosexual couple and the modern family formation it has supported. The normative grip of the sexual and gender order that has underpinned the modern family is weakening. In this context, much that matters to people in their personal lives increasingly takes place beyond the boundaries of 'the family,' between partners who are not living together 'as family,' and within networks of friends'.* (Roseneil, 2005, p. 241)

She concludes that the concept of family, suggesting clear boundaries, is less useful for understanding how people live out personal relationships than networks and flows

of intimacy and care. This is relevant here as personal support networks and friendship - as opposed to heterosexual couple relationships - may be vitally significant for single mothers. However, it is subject to similar critiques of individualisation theories in that it is important not to overstate or generalise change – blood ties may still be extremely important to many social groups. Recent intergenerational research on intimacy in families (Gabb, 2010) is a reminder of the continued importance of 'the couple' relationship to many individuals as an aspiration and ideal, despite the heightened cultural prevalence of friendship. While adult-sexual couple relationships may be seen as more transient in individual biographies and the notion of friendship has an increasing discursive power, invoked to describe more enduring ties, the idea or rhetoric of friendship is also applied in many cases to partners to emphasise the strength of the bond. Gabb also notes how these cultural and discursive shifts are captured in narratives:

> *'Notwithstanding the plurality among relationships, the endorsement of friendship does not necessarily obfuscate the ideal of the couple as the enduring adult relationship. Data indicate that the invocation of the friendship rhetoric to describe the couple relationship suggests two things: first, that for many people 'couplehood' has retained its primary status as an ideal to which adults should aspire; second, cultural narratives, which cite friendship as the reliable relationship, may have influenced how individuals discursively represent their lives above and beyond any social shift in the affective patterning of behaviour'.* (Gabb, 2010, p.114)

Alongside this interest in new forms of intimacy, there has been an emergent interest in the experience of those who remain single[31]. Kaufman's (2008) study offers a response to growing number of one-person households and growing proportion of single women, attributed to rising divorce rates, the growing professionalization of women and dissatisfaction with following a 'husband-baby-home' trajectory. The study was based on an analysis of letters from French women sent to *Marie-Claire* magazine about their experiences of single life. Kaufman argues that despite the increased autonomy that remaining single can afford women, there is still an attraction to traditional models of intimacy and to romantic notions of meeting 'the one' with women's fantasy lives often dominated by variations of a fairytale prince, dominant in popular culture, who they are fated to meet and who will rescue them[32]: '*Many women are still waiting for love to*

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[31] Jamieson. L. and Simpson, R. (2013) *Living Alone: Globalization, Identity and Belonging*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
[32] Also observed in the notion of 'the Cinderella complex': Dowling, C. (1982) *The Cinderella Complex: women's*

designate the chosen one: 'Mr Right,' 'the only man for me' or 'Prince Charming'
(Kaufman, 2008, p.47). He links this to wider social changes, suggesting that while the
idea of 'the couple' is becoming more flexible and living alone is part of a major
historical trend, there is a concurrent backlash due to uncertain economic futures and
welfare regimes. This comprises a recentering of 'the family' and an attitude of pity for
single women who in previous eras may also been seen as liberated and highly
competent: *'People who are not in relationships are no longer seen in the way they
were seen in the 1970s and 1980s: the 'single woman' we feel so sorry for have
replaced the 'superwomen,' the 'new single women' and other unmarried women'*
(Kaufman, 2008, p.22).

Kaufman argues that these social tensions lead to experiences of a 'divided self' [33]
between that of a modern individual following an autonomous, individualised trajectory
and a conflicting desire to conform to sociocultural norms for women and follow a
traditional 'husband-baby-home' trajectory. He identifies stigma associated with
diverging from this norm, describing it as 'society's accusing finger' (Kaufman, 2008,
p.25), positioning single women as emotionally frigid, abnormal, undesirable and
outside the conventional ideal with their status continually called into question. It is
seen as unsurprising that women long for stability against a backdrop of increased
complexity and choice in terms of identity. Marriage and the family are seen as offering
foundations and boundaries to stabilize identities, even though these concepts are in
themselves historically relative, complex and precarious:

> *'The modern individual, who can be seen as an open and complex system (and
> one which is becoming more and more open and complex) is attempting to
> stabilize and fence in his or her identity; individuals need an anchoring point
> and boundaries or fads that make them settle down or make them change…*
>
> *The hotchpotch known as the institution of marriage once more succeeds in
> absorbing everything: all devouring and foundational passion, calm tenderness
> (in which the conflicts are rarely serious), domesticated sexuality and the
> economic interests of the household business (personal and collective), the
> need to fence identity in within the family home, and the culture of sensibility
> within the world of intimacy. The family is an anomalous and unstable
> gathering, but it also brings these things together in the name of something that
> has not changed for 100 years: the loving couple'. (Kaufman, 2008, p.51)*

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fear of independence. Glasgow: Fontana.
[33] From Laing, R.D. (1960) *The Divided Self: an existential study in sanity and madness*. London: Penguin.

Kaufman argues that the turn of the millennium saw a proliferation of choice and openness over ways of conducting intimate lives with the normalisation of internet and speed dating and positive depictions of singledom in contemporary culture, with examples given of American TV sitcom 'Friends' and the fictional character 'Bridget Jones'[34]. However, he suggests that the increased pessimism and increased awareness of risk brought about by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and subsequent uncertainty reinforced the need for security and norms and romantic myths about 'the one' were perpetuated. These undoubtedly are fascinating observations regarding shifting subjectivities, although I would argue that these myths in popular culture never disappeared and the examples provided, along with similar examples such as 'Sex and the City'[35] have tended to follow the romantic narrative arc of finding 'the one'.

Kaufman highlights the revolutionary potential for pioneering new intimate practices including alternative, fluid forms of conjugality (living apart together, long distance or visiting relationships being examples) (Holmes, 2008; Phillips and Duncan, 2010) or autonomous existences which challenge the primacy of the family and the couple. However, he suggests that even while women challenge and threaten the social order by subverting norms, they are rarely aware of this revolutionary potential, instead occupying a position of despair and anxiety ridden internal conflict - interesting to consider in the analysis of single mothers' intimacy narratives:

> *'Even the most active autonomous women are not very sure what they are doing. They are in the eye of the cyclone of individualisation, but they have no desire to be there and do not understand the whirlwind that is sweeping them away. They form an unwitting avante-garde, and are footing the bill for a transitional period which has yet to identify where the new boundaries of private life lie (and which is a long way from doing so). They are condemned to live in a conflict-ridden and unstable in-between period'.* (Kaufman, 2008, p.178)

Budgeon (2008), in contrast, suggests a more positive outlook for single women; some participants in her research were able to construct singleness as a positive identity, even though they were marginalised and at variance with dominant social expectations. Employing a 'distancing' strategy, participants were able to critique and question coupledom and the myth of romantic love. They inhabited an 'outsider' status, living outside heteronormativity, which '*resulted in a subject position from which individuals could critically reflect on their own experiences*' (p.312). Nevertheless, even though

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[34] Fielding, H. (1996) *Bridget Jones's Diary: A Novel*. London: Picador
[35] Bushnell, C. (1996), *Sex and the City*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.

participants highlighted advantages to being single as opposed to being in a couple in their narratives, such as independence, autonomy, choice and self-fulfilment, most did not rule out (re)partnering in the future. Yet, the experience of being single and the questioning it entailed did open up the possibility of managing intimate lives outside heteronormative practices in the future – for example, refusing cohabitation, living apart together, focussing on ties with friends and choosing emotional but not sexual fidelity. These practices were often linked to a desire to balance autonomy and intimacy but there was ambivalence about whether this was achievable based on past experiences: *'The ambivalence came from trying to reconcile an imagined ideal of balancing autonomy and intimacy with the knowledge of how past relationships had not delivered this'* (Budgeon, 2008, p.317). What is clear, despite the possibility of constructing positive identities, is that single women are seen as threatening to society in their refusal of gendered heteronorms and therefore unrestrained sexuality. This observation may be even more applicable to single mothers, assumed to be desperate for the support of a man, promiscuous and predatory or simply refusing to live in accordance with 'family values':

> *'By refusing the conventions of marital vows and family life, single women have presented a challenge to patriarchy and a disruption to gender norms. Their refusal to be contained within a committed relationship presents danger in the form of the single woman as 'femme' fatale' or the female predator. She is a threat because she refuses to make herself available to dominant conventions of heterosexuality yet is also threatening because she is available and, therefore, must be looking for a man'.* (Budgeon, 2008, p.309)

Reconceptualising intimacy

In the light of the surge of interest in intimacies in Sociology, Smart (2007) argues for a new conceptual field of personal life to encompass what has traditionally been known as 'sociology of the family' or 'sociology of kinship' and recent topics related to intimacy such as friendship, same-sex intimacies and cross-cultural relationships. This, she argues, removes the conceptual and methodological dominance of 'the family' when researching different kinds of relationships, which may or may not include biological or co-residential relationships: *'The family' does not need to be 'automatically the centrepiece against which other forms of relationship must be measured, or in whose long shadow all research is carried out'* (Smart, 2007, p.6). The idea of 'personal life' moves away from the reliance on the notion of the autonomous individual, instead emphasizing humans as social beings who live their lives in connection with others.

While persons are capable of agency and self-reflection, this is seen as a highly contextualized process: '*To live a personal life is to have agency and make choices, but the personhood implicit in the concept requires the presence of others to respond to and to contextualize those actions and choices. Personal life is a reflexive state, but it is not private and it is lived out in relation to one's class position, ethnicity, gender and so on.*' (Smart, 2007, p.28)

This approach is significant in resisting limited and limiting associations of 'the family' with a fixed, static and stereotyped image of '*the idealized white, nuclear heterosexual families of Western cultures in the 1950s*' (Smart, 2007, p.7). Morgan's (1996) concept of 'family practices' moves away from the position of seeing families in terms of structures but as created through activities and practices, whether material, verbal or emotional, in everyday life. This allows for more fluid, less hierarchical conceptions of family and intimacy, focusing on how people 'do family' in contemporary everyday life. Yet I would argue that the idea of 'family' and the desire to be in a family continues to be a fundamental aspect of our culture and continues to provide a touchstone for intimate life, shaping intimacy scripts. While sociologists have observed shifts in practices of intimacy and families such as some loosening of connections (Gabb, 2010), increasing emotional significance of friendship (Roseneil, 2005) and networks of intimacy (Jamieson, 1998), it is recognised that the idea of 'family' has retained its status in terms of cultural, political and personal imaginaries: '*While the empirical status of 'the family' has been called into question… its significance in the cultural imaginary and on the political agenda is, if anything, gaining increasing prominence*' (Gabb, 2010, p.111).

Gabb emphasises the continuing importance of intergenerational, parent-child relationships, despite some loosening of family ties and structures in terms of adult relationships. She sees families as '*social and affective units that are created through the processes of relationality…*' (Gabb, 2010, p.16). It is important to recognize the significance these social and affective units may hold for single mothers, even where adult sexual relationships are transient, unconventional or non-cohabiting. Gabb reminds us to attend to ways in which family life is practiced, how units are sustained in everyday life, positing that 'transformation of intimacy' theories can still provide a relevant framework for this endeavour. In terms of approaching intimacy as a topic of investigation, Gabb's work suggests that due to the plurality of experiences, it is impossible to adopt a rigid, uniform position. Instead, a more flexible approach is required to interpret the multiple and fluid meanings, understanding and practices of family and intimacy in everyday lives:

'It is evident that there are many different networks of support and intimate relationships both within and beyond 'the family' and these are experienced in ways that resist uniform interpretation. Some look inwards to family members and beyond to extended kin. Others turn to different relational connections which take a variety of affective forms, including friendship networks, faith-based communities and (in some cases) pets. All of these were identified by participants, to a lesser or greater extent, as repositories for and sources of intimacy. These multifarious affective strategies not only demonstrate the need for a pluralistic approach, they problematize what constitutes intimacy and an intimate relationship'. (Gabb, 2010, p.115)

Conclusion

This chapter explored some of the key literature in the sociology of intimacy, particularly in relation to theoretical debates about detraditionalization and individualisation. Theorists have argued that intimacy has undergone a transformation (Giddens, 2004), marked by increased choice, flexibility, egalitarianism and democratic relationships which, some argue, harbour the potential for positive social effects (Giddens, 1994; Jordan, 2004). Other theorists are concerned with the lack of social support for lasting love relationships, even while the concept of love has an increasing social significance (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) while others focus on the fluid, transient nature of intimacy in a culture shaped by consumerism (Bauman, 2003).

Critiques of detraditionalization theories argue that they overstate the division between past and present, setting up a polarised dichotomy with one seen in idealized terms, set against its darker opposite (Jamieson, 1998). While such theories have provided stimuli and a framework for empirical research and rejuvenated interest in this area (Smart, 2007), localized, contextualized accounts provide more nuanced and complex perspectives on intimate practices in contemporary life (Gabb, 2010). In terms of choice-making, it is essential to recognize socio-economic constraints on individuals. It is also vital to recognize continuing gendered inequalities in intimate relationships (Jamieson, 1998), recognizing that intimacy is not always experienced as benign (Smart, 2007) and to acknowledge the 'darker side' of intimacy (Plummer, 2003). Positions which assume the autonomy of individuals in their choice-making fail to take the care of dependents into account (Fineman, 2004; Kittay, 2004), pertinent to the exploration of single mothers' experiences. Finally the power of normative expectations informed by popular discourses of heterosexual romance (Evans, 2003) should not be underestimated as influencing choices and aspirations in intimate lives.

Studies have tended to assume the centrality of heterosexual romantic relationships; however heterosexuality is rarely sufficiently problematized or investigated in its own right (Hockey, Mead and Robinson, 2007; Jackson, 1999) and so critical approaches to heterosexuality inform this work. Detraditionalization theories provide a framework for studies which explore intimate practices beyond the family or conjugal couple (Roseneil, 2004) and have emphasized the increasing significance of parent-child relations in a context where adult sexual relationships may be more transient (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Empirical studies have highlighted diversity and complexity in current relationship practices (for example, Gabb, 2010; Holmes, 2008; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004), necessitating a rethinking of theoretical frameworks, recognizing the limitations of a simplistic focus on 'the couple' or 'the family' (Smart, 2007).

While it is essential to seek out more fluid frameworks to best capture the diversity of intimate practices, there is a concurrent need to recognize inter-generational continuation of meaning and practices (Duncan, 2011a and b; Gabb, 2010; Gross, 2005; Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010). Heteronormative intimacy scripts (Gagnon and Simon, 1973) and 'normalising discourses' (Carabine, 1996; Foucault, 1977) hold an enduring power. While there may be a broader spectrum of intimate possibilities to draw on, an enduring emotional, personal and cultural appeal of popular, romantic notions of the couple (Evans, 2003) and the traditional family should not be understated. Attending to narratives of single mothers is likely to draw out these layers of personal, social and cultural complexity in terms of experiencing and making sense of intimate practices in their everyday lives.

CHAPTER THREE Methodology and methods

Introduction

This chapter begins by discussing feminist epistemology and feminist standpoint methodology which underpins the methodological approach of this research. A feminist position has guided methodology, methods and research techniques as well as supplying an analytical lens. Considering a range of issues, it discusses concerns around subjectivity and the influence of postmodern and post-structuralist thought on feminist epistemology. It goes on to explicate the choice of qualitative research and explores the choice of narrative interviewing for this research topic. Issues regarding reliability, validity and truth are discussed. In the methods section, recruitment, interviewing scheduling and ethical considerations are outlined. The chapter ends with reflections on the research process and experience of the researcher with the objective of being as transparent and reflexive as possible about the research process, in line with feminist thought (Harding, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1993).

Feminist epistemology

This is a feminist piece of research in that women's experiences are central and valued as a source of knowledge (Harding, 1987; Harstock, 1983; Oakley, 1981, 2005; The Personal Narratives Group, 1989). As The Personal Narratives Group argued, '*Traditionally, knowledge, truth and reality have been constructed as if men's experiences were normative, as if being human meant being male*' (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p.3). Feminist research centres on women's experiences, thereby challenging the limiting horizons of an intellectual heritage previously dominated by male voices and perspectives. The impetus for this research was developed from my conversations with other women about our personal lives, alongside feminist theorizing. This reflects that the study is not a detached intellectual endeavour. As Jagger argues, western epistemology has tended to see the presence of emotion in the research process as '*impeding observation or knowledge*' (Jagger, 1989, p.139). This is based on a cultural suspicion of emotional life which fails to recognise its inevitability and also its importance as a resource in research, reflecting the human experience more fully: '*This derogatory western attitude towards emotion, like the earlier western contempt for sensory observation, fails to recognise that emotion, like sensory perception, is necessary to human survival*' (Jagger, 1989, p.139).

The centralisation of women's experience draws on feminist standpoint methodology which challenges the silencing and devaluation of women's experiences and voices (Harding, 1987; Harstock, 1983). Feminist standpoint theory involves the validation of women's

experiences, including everyday domestic experience, which had often been dismissed as meaningless and irrelevant. Its goal is defined as '*searching for common threads which connect the diverse experiences of women*' (Harstock, 1983, p.124). This position places women's voices and experiences at the centre of knowledge production, in order to privilege knowledge previously marginalised and ignored, leading to a partial, distorted understanding of social life (Harding, 1987). There are a number of popular and 'official' versions of who single mothers are, what their lives are like, how they lead their intimate lives and care for their children (discussed in the previous chapter). Bringing single mothers' own experiences into view exposes these derogatory and limited perspectives as inadequate, instead providing an insight into the nuanced, contextualised complexity and flux of these lives in process. Women's experiences, perspectives and aspects of their intimate everyday lives are explored and legitimised. These would not have been deemed worthy of scrutiny in what feminists have termed 'male-orientated' research (Oakley, 2005, p.189) due to its emphasis on normative male realms of experience and the dominance of male sociologists within academia. For Oakley this means that Sociology as a discipline can be described as sexist: '*By 'male oriented,' I mean that it exhibits a focus on, or a direction towards, the interests and activities of men in a gender-differentiated society*' (Oakley, 2005, p. 189). The intention here is to emphasise the sense that single mothers make of their own experiences, in contrast to limited dominant ideologies and cultural representations of single motherhood. Ignoring lived experiences and the everyday lives of women, in this case those of single mothers, means an incomplete picture of social life. In terms of research into intimacy, for example, the experiences of women who are caring for dependents are often neglected. As Harding argues:

> '*Defining what is in need of scientific explanation only from the perspective of bourgeois, white men's experiences leads to partial and even perverse understandings of social life. One distinctive feature of feminist research is that it generates its problematics from the perspective of women's experiences… only partial and distorted understandings of ourselves and the world around us can be produced in a culture which systematically silences and devalues the voices of women'.* (Harding, 1987, p.7)

Adopting a feminist standpoint approach has entailed dealing with a number of complex issues and critiques. The approach has attracted criticism for its emphasis on experience and assumption of a knowing subject with a 'stable coherent self' (Flax, 1990, p.41). Feminist commentators have problematised the liberal notion of selfhood, the rational 'Enlightenment self', or the universalised, gender-neutral, asocial self, premised on male assumptions and experience. However, feminists, influenced by a postmodernist rejection of the concept of a pre-discursive subject can begin to redress this balance by '*analysing*

the ways gender enters into and partially constitutes both the self and our ideas about it' (Flax, 1990 p. 229). One of the potential dangers identified with standpoint is a tendency towards universalism and essentialism, unproblematically putting 'women' into the same category and assuming a degree of sameness. Butler's (1990) work which problematizes the notion of gender has influenced feminist thought, arguing that fixed, rigid and simplistic identity categories such as 'woman' do not take into account the particular contexts from which women are operating and ways in which race, class and sexuality intersect with gender in specific contexts. This insight is useful for a standpoint approach as it highlights the importance of taking specific contexts into account.

Attending to differences enables an emphasis on the plurality of women's experiences and multiple standpoints: '*the pluralization of feminist standpoints recognizes differences among material experiences of women across history, race, class and culture*' (Hirschmann, 2004, p.320). There is a need to recognize historical and social diversity amongst women in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and class, so as not to exclude their unique standpoints and insights into oppression (Hill Collins, 2004). In terms of research practice this means addressing specific contexts from which particular groups of women are speaking. My research is contextualized and attends to the differences between participants, acknowledging the multiplicity and diversity of women's standpoints. Feminist thinkers have envisioned a way in which one standpoint need not necessarily claim privilege over another: '*Women's standpoint is not an ossified truth that some feminist academicians have chiselled in stone for all women to begin to worship; rather it is a kaleidoscope of truths, continually shaping and reshaping each other, as more and different women begin to work and think together*' (Tong, 1998, p. 193). This position does not fully overcome the tendency to universalize 'women' and may be viewed as unrealistically utopian. However, it moves towards exploring the many realities, situations, possibilities and constraints that define and shape women's diverse experiences. Standpoint theorists emphasize the possibility of finding common threads of experience between women and it is likely that a group of 'women' who identify themselves as such will find both commonality and differences; those sharing the situation of being a single mother in the early twenty-first century in Britain are likely to share some commonalities. The thesis does not however attempt to make broad generalizations about women's (or even single mothers') lives. As Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) have argued, '*there is a critical difference between building limited generalizations about women's social existence (based on specific histories, experiences, cultures, localities and relationships) and making universal generalizations about 'women' (based on prior theory)*' (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p.6).

While standpoint theorists argue for identifying and redressing gendered power imbalances, commentators following Butler (1990) have problematized the category of 'woman' as the subject of feminism. However, a concern with completely rejecting the category of 'women' is the potential for de-politicisation of their issues and concerns as a group. An important question feminists have engaged in, therefore, is how far it is necessary to accept an Enlightenment conception of the fixed, unified, autonomous and stable self in order to engage in political action or resistance. Flax asks whether we can envision a fluid, multi-centred subjectivity that can engage in political struggle. She argues that '*it is possible to imagine subjectivities whose desires for multiplicity can impel them toward emancipatory action. These subjectivities would be 'fluid rather than solid, contextual rather than universal, and process oriented rather than topographical*' (Flax, 1993, p. 92). Lloyd develops the idea that there is a need to reconceptualise the notion of subjectivity and the assumed need for a stable, coherent, unified subject for engagement in political action, emphasising that this ideal is a political construction stemming from liberal feminism and the drive towards equality which imports a liberal conception of self, personhood or subjectivity. It is recognised that the self is constantly shifting and so draws on the notion of the '*self-in-process*' (Lloyd, 2005) which is relevant to narrative research in seeking to capture changing constructions, understandings and identities. I therefore adopt a pragmatic approach (Stanley and Wise, 1990), between the positions of traditional standpoint and postmodernist feminism – acknowledging the constructed nature of knowledge while maintaining the significance of shared social, material and cultural constraints. I argue that women still have much to gain from coming together, discussing and working through experiences of being women under ongoing conditions of patriarchy, particularly in the case of single mothers, with many still facing very real economic, social and cultural inequalities and constraints. Women may find constructive ways forward, challenging power relations at a micro-level of discursive practices as well as through direct political action. The category 'single mothers,' often surrounded by negative discourses, can usefully be 'deconstructed' and shown to encompass a myriad of different experiences and contexts. Yet there is much to be gained, personally and politically from sharing experiences, challenging dominant and reductive cultural narratives and refusing to remain in silent, marginalised positions. Women's conversations and personal narratives are the starting point for my research, are seen as a site at which identities are potentially challenged and reworked. Rather than attempting a generalising account of women's lives, this study attempts to capture complexities of their sense making processes through narrative in highly contextualised situations and concrete realities. It aims to be sensitive towards differences between participants in terms of their identities, circumstances and material situations but without precluding possibilities of common ground between women.

While this study recognises the influence of post-structuralism which enable insights into ways in which participants draw on available cultural resources and discourses, it does not see subjects as solely constituted through discourse. Rather it recognises the embodied, concrete, material reality of lived experiences and women's agency in negotiating and resisting conflicting discourses and making choices. It values accounts based on concrete experiences as containing more validity than those based on conjecture, rigid ideologies and partial, popularist political positionings, thereby disrupting existing hierarchies of knowledge and power. It attends to the different levels and modes of gendered constraint which emerge, including both material and discursive forms.

Notions of 'reality', is another key issue related to feminist standpoint positions (Haraway, 2004; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). While this research is not based on a 'foundationalist' position which sees valid knowledge as that which accurately mirrors reality, it does view the narratives of single mothers as providing a more accurate reflection of their social reality than the claims of those with no experience of seeing the world from their perspective. The study may be viewed as accessing two different but complimentary modes of knowledge: 1). Representations of experience through narratives which is inevitably constrained by the discursive resources available to participants and 2). Knowledge about how everyday gendered intimate lives are lived within specific contexts. This may be seen as 'situated knowledge' which comes with the recognition that truths and reality are socially constituted (Haraway, 2004) but acknowledges the very real effects that structural gendered inequalities can have (Stanley and Wise, 1993). In summary, '*taking a standpoint means being able to produce the best current understanding of how knowledge of gender is interrelated with women's experiences and the realities of gender*' (Haraway, 2004; Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002).

Discursive representations and everyday material realities are not seen as polarised but rather as complementary. Hirschmann (2004) advocates attending to both the material and discursive and the ways in which they interface, recognising how material conditions construct and shape discourse and also ways in which discourse '*sets the terms for the construction of material reality*' (Hirschmann, 2004, p.324). In a very stark way, touched on in Chapter 2, discourses surrounding single motherhood are linked to political decision making and resource allocation and therefore impinge directly on their lived realities. Feminist standpoint and postmodern perspectives are here complimentary, recognising the historical and cultural contingency of experience, observing various layers of patriarchy which shape women's experiences and recognising identity as '*socially constructed by particular historical and cultural contexts*' (Hirschmann, 2004, p.323).

Jackson (2005) provides a helpful model which informs the analytical lens of this research, highlighting the intersecting ways in which the socio-cultural order is constructed, shaping subjectivities as well as being shaped by everyday practices. She argues that it is essential to appreciate '*the variety of social and cultural structures and practices at work in the maintenance of the current gendered, and heterosexual order*' (Jackson, 2005, p. 16). This includes attending to cultural realms of discourse, the symbolic and representation but recognising that there is '*that is not all there is to the social*' (Ibid, p.18); it is imperative not to neglect structural aspects and situated social practices. She identifies four intersecting facets of social construction that can be deployed within a wider material feminist analysis. These complement the notion of 'scripts' which also contains intersecting levels of cultural, social and personal:

(1) **The structural** – gender is constructed as a hierarchical social division and heterosexuality is institutionalized, e.g. by marriage, the law and the state;

(2) **The level of meaning**, encompassing the discursive construction of gender and sexuality and the meanings negotiated in everyday social interaction;

(3) **The level of routine, everyday social practices** through which gender and sexuality are constantly constituted within localized contexts; and

(4) **The level of subjectivity**. (Adapted from Jackson, 2005, pp.18-19)

This research touches on all of these levels: while primarily focussing on the (second) cultural level of constructed, gendered meanings of intimacy, it also explores the (third) level of routine, everyday social practices of intimacy within localized contexts as well as referring to personal, subjective dimensions of experience. Although it does not offer a broader analysis of structural factors such as class, it recognises the broader socio-economic context and the impact on participants' material circumstances, locating the study in the wider context of unequal gendered power relations.

Conversations between myself and other women formed a starting point for this research. In line with feminist methodology, barriers between 'researcher' and 'the researched' were challenged throughout the research process. I was open about my own situation during the recruitment process which helped to break down barriers and provide relaxed and empathetic interview encounters. In line with Oakley's framework for feminist research (Oakley, 1981) this enabled a high level of rapport, reciprocity and, as far as possible, a non-hierarchical research relationship. During the narrative interview process it also enabled me to prompt and draw out pertinent themes and aspects of experience through identification with and recognition of the stories being told (Oakley, 1981). Inevitably the research process triggered reflection on my own experiences and research interviews often

ended with a mutual sharing and led to ongoing conversations. This approach is in direct contrast to the scientific notion of the researcher as detached and objective, referred to by Stanley and Wise (1993) as 'hygienic research' which comprises a failure to recognise the importance of the researcher's presence (Stanley and Wise, 1993, p.161).

Another aspect of feminist standpoint theory is the potential for consciousness-raising; there is an accompanying emphasis on participants collaborating, having a greater sense of ownership of the research process and access to research findings. The concept of 'feminist consciousness' is viewed as a tool in examining the way in which women perceive their own lives and position themselves: '"*Feminist consciousness" makes available to us a previously untapped store of knowledge about what it is to be a woman, what the social world looks like to women, how it is constructed and negotiated by women*' (Stanley, 1983, p.120). A potential critique of the notion of feminist research as consciousness-raising may be that by making feminists the spokespeople for women's experiences, the feminist perspective becomes dominant and potentially marginalises and excludes many women who do not wish to be defined in these terms. However, a feminist framework enables recognition of shared situations, often stemming from wider structural gendered inequalities - such as differences in pay and parenting expectations (discussed in Chapter 1). As Maynard notes, while women's experiences are an essential starting point and resource for feminist research, inevitably an analytical framework is required in order to contribute meaningfully to knowledge and understanding: '*Feminism has an obligation to go beyond citing experience in order to make connections which may not be visible from the purely experiential level alone*' (Maynard, 1994). This involves an acceptance that a feminist analysis may not necessarily sit comfortably with the way individual participants see themselves and their experience: '*The uncovering of women's oppression requires attention to systems of relationships in which individuals are embedded and whose boundaries go beyond the individual and her realm of vision* (Personal Narratives Group, p.6). It should also be recognised that women's narratives can reproduce gendered inequalities as much as they might resist them or produce counter narratives which consciously challenge the existing order (Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

For the purposes of this study, 'feminist consciousness' is part of the process of exploring ways in which women perceive their own lives and position themselves as women in their gendered social worlds. While not seeking to impose a particular agenda on research participants, it is hoped that participating in the research provided an empowering experience for single mothers by giving them a voice, validating their experiences and providing an opportunity to explore how far they recognise, question, resist or challenge dominant gendered cultural narratives. If research can open up opportunities and sites for

women to revisit, examine and reconstruct their own lives in order to make sense of them and if in so doing, become more aware of oppressive structures and discourses, then this can only be positive. It may well be that some women more than others find that material constraints restrict their ability to make choices about how to live their lives but this does not mean they are without agency. While some women of my generation may baulk at the idea of feminist consciousness raising, women in previous group interviews on motherhood spoke positively about how it had given them an opportunity to get things into perspective and they appreciated being given a voice to experiences which would in the normal course of life be ignored or seen as 'ordinary' and therefore not worth discussing (Morris, 2004). Single mothers' stories are rarely heard in public or academic domains and so this imbalance needs to be redressed if greater understanding and even transformation of their situations is to occur. In this sense the research is potentially transformative, aimed at moving knowledge and understanding forwards. It therefore constitutes feminist research which ultimately displaces the concept of the dispassionate, neutral, expert researcher in search of universalising theories, instead exploring women's nuanced, contextualised experiences in all their diversity.

Qualitative research and the narrative approach

A qualitative approach was selected as the most appropriate framework to answer the research questions. In order to capture the complexity of single mothers' intimate lives including their choice making processes; the way in which they see themselves as intimate beings; their specific historical and socio-cultural contexts; the interplay between personal and social intimate transitions and the way in which they constructed and presented their experiences, a qualitative approach was adopted. While quantitative research would enable a larger scale project generating generalizable statistics, it would provide only a limited snapshot of single mothers' lives, occluding the ways in which they are in flux and transition and the multi-layered experiences of intimacy and construction of intimate selves and lives. Qualitative research enables the researcher to conduct in-depth investigation which gets closer to the everyday social world and the perspective of the participants. The choice of a qualitative approach was also guided by my ontological worldview, firstly in that truth is seen as contingent, context dependent and complex and secondly through my political and epistemological commitment to feminism and the importance of allowing women's experiences and voices to emerge. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) provide a helpful definition of qualitative research which stands in contrast to quantitative emphases on measurement, causality and objective reality:

'The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning.' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.10)

Narrative research has a long tradition within Sociology which has been well documented (Plummer, 2001). Recently, narrative methods have been widely used within Social Sciences, Health and Education, suggesting a 'narrative turn' (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000, p. 8). Goodson and Sikes (2001) outline the following attributes of life history methodology, an approach which provides a clear rationale for my choice of methodology:

(1) 'It explicitly recognizes that lives are not hermeneutically compartmentalized into, for example, the person we are at work (the professional self) and who we are at home (parent/child/partner selves), and that, consequently, anything which happens to us in one area of our lives potentially impacts upon and has implications for other areas too.

(2) It acknowledges that there is a crucial interactive relationship between individuals' lives, their perceptions and experiences, and historical and social contexts and events.

(3) It provides evidence to show how individuals negotiate their identities and, consequently, experience, create and make sense of the rules and roles of the social worlds in which they live.' (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p. 2)

Feminist researchers have long employed narrative research, beginning with the conviction that '*women's experiences were inherently valuable and needed to be recorded*' (Berger Gluck and Patai, 1991, p. 1). Narrative research enables a contextualised exploration of women's processes of personal transition and the negotiation, construction and representation of identities. Furthermore, it enables a challenging of dominant cultural narratives, providing a lens on experiences within context. For the Personal Narratives Group, women's narratives represent an opportunity to expose and begin to challenge unequal gendered power relations which impact on women's lives and identities:

'If women's personal narratives both present and interpret the impact of gender roles on women's lives, they are especially suitable documents for illuminating several aspects of gender relations: the construction of a gendered self-identity, the

relationship between the individual and society in the creation and perpetuation of gender norms, and the dynamics of power relations between women and men'. (The Personal Narrative Group, 1989)

In order to study the interweaving of everyday intimacies with the realm of cultural narratives, and individual biographies with wider social changes, Smart recommends the narrative approach adopted here. She observes its potential to capture fluidity and complexity of shifting lives, histories and webs of relationships, identifying the meanings of these for individuals. Smart suggests that Sociology has not fully grasped the significance of individual life stories, responding by emphasizing their value in enhancing understandings of personal life:

'…as social and cultural historians have shown, a few lives – purposively selected – can capture a complex picture of social change and connections with networks of kin; the stories, whether they feature employment, migration or other large-scale movements, can be located in an understanding of local and dominant economic systems at the same time as they are situated in time. But perhaps more significantly, they can offer the experience of living through certain times; they can deal with the meanings that individuals attribute to events and relationships and they can explain, to a degree, motivations, desires and aspirations… The biographical turn has particular salience for understanding family relationships'. (Smart, 2007, p.42)

Narrative interviewing was therefore selected as the most appropriate method in order to capture the life transitions, identity construction in process and an interweaving of personal narratives with social change. Rich, detailed and multi-layered data gathered through unstructured narratives and supplemented by semi-structured interview questions offers an ideal basis for addressing the research questions. This methodological framework enables explorations of processes of transition for single mothers who have often experienced relationship breakdown and/or divorce. Some may be coping with the 'after effects' of living with domestic violence and other forms of abuse. As Smart and Neale's study of divorced women (1999) suggests, they may well be engaged in rediscovering a sense of selfhood. As discussed, single motherhood is likely to be experienced as a temporary rupture in the life course, providing a moment to re-evaluate intimacy, a process ideally captured through narrative. Narrative research has identified narrative strategies for making sense of lives in transition, such as '*redemption'* and '*contamination'* sequences in psychological readings of narratives:

'In conclusion, we view redemption and contamination sequences as narrative strategies for making sense of perceived transitions in life. This sense-making

contributes to the construction of identity in adolescence and adulthood, as people
attempt to integrate disparate elements of their lives into life stories'.
(McAdams and Bowman, 2001)

Researchers have utilised narrative techniques to explore lives disrupted by, for example, illness. For Riessman (1993), narrative interviewing provides an ideal method for capturing disruption in lives, for example of those affected by illness and / or divorce, as it can enable the reconstitution of a sense of self and reality, illuminating the performative aspects of this process and the complexities around identity, language and meaning making. There can therefore be a therapeutic quality to telling personal narratives, enabling tellers to make sense of their experiences. Becker (1997) sees narrative as a primary path for coming to terms with disruption, arguing that due to the prevalence of the Western paradigm of predictability, order and linearity, people organise stories of disruption into linear, ordered accounts which tend to move from chaos to order. This action enables the restoration of understandings of the self and the world:

> *'In all societies, the course of life is structured by expectations about each phase of life,*
> *and meaning is assigned to specific life events and the roles that accompany them.*
> *When expectations about the course of life are not met, people experience inner chaos*
> *and disruption. Such disruptions represent loss of the future. Restoring order to life*
> *necessitates reworking understandings of the self and the world, redefining the*
> *disruption and life itself'.* (Becker, 1997, p. 4)

In contrast, Frank (1995) argues that in some cases '*the wounded storyteller*' produces chaos narratives whose plots imagine '*life never getting better*' (Frank, 1995, p.97) as opposed to restitution or redemption narratives. Narrators who have experienced trauma respond to and narrate their experiences in different ways. With the 'chaos narrative', there is often a 'hole' or wound in the narrative which cannot be filled in as the experience is too painful to tell; '*The story traces the edge of a wound that can only   be told around. Words suggest its rawness, but that wound is so much of the body, its insults, agonies and losses, that words necessarily fail*' (Frank, 1995, p.98). One response is to assume the position of a witness who offers a testimony; the process of finding a voice and taking on the moral responsibility of being useful to others who may suffer in silence is seen as part of the healing process. Testimony can also help to make sense of suffering: '*…suffering comes to understand itself by hearing its own testimony*' (Frank, 1995, p.169).

Narrative telling is also a creative and political act; the process of people taking control of their narratives and identities in what they choose to represent is an action which requires agency: '*Narratives, the stories that people tell about themselves, reflect people's experience, as they see it and as they wish to have others see it*' (Becker, 1997, p. 25). Phoenix (2008,) in a similar vein, advocates an exploration of how people 'do' narrative as it '*...enables attention on how people build their narratives and the performative work done by the narratives. This allows insights into the dilemmas and troubled subject positions speakers negotiate as they tell their stories*' (Phoenix, 2008, p.54).

Capturing transitions in terms of identity, narrative interviewing allows an exploration of the processes involved in choice making and the complexities of lived experience. For single mothers, while they possess agency, their choices are also likely to be constrained by material circumstances, caring responsibilities and the desire for normalcy. As Becker suggests, '*...when disruption occurs, the temporary or permanent destruction of people's sense of "fit" with society calls into question their personhood, their sense of identity, and their sense of normalcy*' (Becker, 1997, p. 30). An example, pertinent to single mothers, is the attempt to reconcile their experiences and expectations of intimacy with cultural ideals (i.e. being part of a married couple) present in normative intimacy scripts. The process of regaining and representing a sense of selfhood is potentially problematic for single mothers. Therefore exploring how they construct and represent their lives through narratives at this juncture in their lives is key to this research.

Commentators have highlighted the function of narrative for making sense of life events and circumstances as people engage in the process of creating and recreating realities, meanings and identities, referred to as '*identity work*' (Plummer, 1995; Becker, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 2001). This research provides an opportunity to explore the impact of single motherhood on the identities of women as they come to terms with their changed status as heterosexual women. The employment of narrative techniques enables valuable insights into how single mothers negotiate conflicting discourses and ideologies; the significance of intimate relationships; how they position themselves, formulate identities, make choices and ultimately construct their own meanings around intimacy. Focussing on the process of identity construction moves away from an idea of narrative research as that which focuses solely on 'events' towards attending to the meanings of life events for participants. Narrative telling is approached here as an active process of identity construction which is often creative and political, rather than a passive relating of facts. The process of storytelling has been recognised by commentators from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds as synonymous with identity formation, especially in psychoanalysis and

psychology where the therapeutic quality of narrative telling is highlighted. For McAdams, the life story and a person's identity are inseparable and the continual making of a 'personal myth' is an essential part of being human:

> *'If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to see in all its particulars the narrative of the self – the personal myth – that I have tacitly, even unconsciously composed over the course of my years. It is a story I continue to revise, and tell to myself (and sometimes to others) as I go on living'. [Emphasis in original]* (McAdams, 1993, p. 11)

McAdams traces ways in which individuals draw on myths and archetypes in constructing their own personal myths, to make sense of their lives when moving through different phases of the life course. This process should not be confused with deception or delusion but rather entails drawing on familiar cultural resources available such as, for example, narratives embedded in fairy tales, novels and TV shows. Individuals utilise recognisable narrative structures, genres, plots and characters. Narratives are often infused with the familiar narrative structure of 'journeying' and / or discovering the hero within (McAdams, 1993, p.12).

As Plummer notes, narrating experience does not take place in isolation but within the context of a culture and the interplay between the individual's identity construction and meaning making and the wider cultural narratives available is relevant here:

> *'We can say that people turn themselves into socially organized biographical objects. The 'life' now becomes clusters of stories, about our pasts, presents and futures. We come 'to story' our lives through the culture we live in, and we use this very culture as a way of 'writing' into ourselves who we are'. [Emphasis in original]* (Plummer, 2001, p.43)

Narrative telling is considered as a powerful activity, constitutive of social reality and engaged in by active agents. Commentators have highlighted the transformative potential of narrative – not just for the individual concerned but for the social world. Tierney (1995) highlights this transformative possibility of narrative:

> '*The life history not only represents the memory of an individual, it also produces identity. The challenge to us as researchers is to ensure that individuals are not the object of our discourses, but rather the agents of complex, partial, and contradictory identities that help transform the worlds they and we inhabit'.* (Tierney, 1995, p.262)

The notion of individualisation also relates to the process of identity construction through narrative. As discussed, Giddens sees the individual's sense of self as reflexively organised in continually revised biographical narratives. In an age of modernity, individuals are constantly presented with lifestyle choices which they must navigate their way through (Giddens, 1992). For some theorists, narrative research is the ideal way to engage with and capture the process of the modernist subjectivity, the 'reflexive project of the self': *'The idea that individuals do (increasingly) embody agency is inherent in the contemporary ideas of 'individualisation' and 'reflexivity,' ideas which thus seem to be awaiting their appropriate methods of research'* (Rustion, 2000, p. 46). While the theory of individualisation has some applicability in terms of the ongoing process of narrative revision and the contribution of narrative in building meaning in social life, more careful consideration of what is meant by the 'self' is required and especially how notions of the self may be gendered (explored in Chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter). While I see single mothers as agents, making choices and shaping their lives, there are also a variety of external gendered constraints on single mothers' choice-making, especially in view of the need to prioritise the needs of dependents. Choice making is approached as an extremely complex process, contingent on both material and discursive contexts. Specific material circumstances may be reflected in the way in which participants tell their narratives. Squires (2008) contends that the ways in which stories are told are strongly determined by their material circumstances. She found that in her research on HIV, interviewees tended to tell longer and more complex stories in conditions where they had access to support such as through support groups, family members, medical treatment, employment and training. Interviewees with little support, in contrast, were less likely to talk about HIV at length (Squires, 2008, p.56). This insight underpins the interrelatedness of the material and discursive. Attending to the context in which narratives are told is therefore essential to generating meaningful knowledge and understanding. Narrative analysis in this research attends to 'what' single mothers say about their intimacy lives, 'how' they tell their stories and the context in which they are told.

Narrative method and social change

This study is set against what has been described as a background of social and cultural flux and considers how single mothers make sense of and respond to these wider changes in the contexts of their own lives. The telling of their stories is viewed as the product of a culture, as much as an individual activity. The exchange of narratives involves complex social processes. As Plummer argues, *'It is quite mistaken to see life histories as thoroughly individualistic – lives move persistently through history and structure'* (Plummer, 2001, p.41). Narratives are not fixed but historically and contextually grounded – different narratives are produced at different moments and in different locations and contexts. The

use of narrative in this research aims to tease out single mothers' relationship to the culture they find themselves in where they are often the subject of negative discourses, seen as epitomising and even instigating social trends of 'family breakdown'. However, single mothers may well see their lives in more individual terms rather than as part of a wider social movement. Indeed they are as likely to subscribe to popular 'family values' discourses as not and their narratives may therefore be predicated on these cultural positionings. It is recognised that while 'single mothers' have a collective label, there is much diversity in this group in terms of age, background, educational level, working patterns, financial circumstances, ethnicity, disability, number and age of children and the amount of support they have access to. As reflected here, single parent families are extremely diverse in terms of caring arrangements, with some families completely isolated in their communities and at the other end of the spectrum, equally sharing childcare with the children's father and with access to extended family and community support. It should therefore be emphasised that there are a multiplicity of single mothers' stories to be told. It must also be recognised that the narratives produced in a research context will differ from those told in everyday life and that their meanings are continually changing and being revised over the life course and in different contexts:

> *'The meanings of stories are never fixed but emerge out of a ceaselessly changing stream of historically grounded interactions between producers and readers in shifting <u>contexts</u>. They may of course become habitualized and stable; but always and everywhere the meaning of stories shifts and sways in the contexts to which they are linked'.* (Plummer, 2001, p.43)

Nevertheless, the varied contexts and the shifting nature of narrative does not rule out the importance of the experiences being related and the possibility of common ground between women of this particular generational cohort who share a particular situation. Participants may be aware of growing up in a specific generation marked by widespread change with regards to marriage, relationships, childcare and intimacy. They may share a sense of differentiation between themselves and their parents along with uncertainty about the way forward in terms of managing family commitments, intimate needs and individualised life goals. That said, while some mothers may embrace an uncertain future where, as proponents of individualisation would argue, they have more freedom to map out their chosen trajectories, others' narratives may gravitate towards a romanticised, nostalgic view of the past and attempts to recapture this. Narrative has the potential to open up these conflicts on an individual and cohort basis, providing a snapshot of the issues, experiences and identity forming processes of a specific, if diverse, group.

Narrative structure

This study resists the notion that in order to be meaningful and valid as knowledge, narratives should have a clear, consistent and coherent structure. While earlier narrative research focussed on the importance of structure, emphasising the importance of coherence, more recent researcher insights challenge these assumptions as limited and limiting:

> *'Some have argued that coherence should be the criterion – the narrative must hang together – but what does this mean? Does coherence depend on temporal ordering, or can a narrative be organized in other ways? Must there be a neat beginning, middle and end? As narrative researchers, we can limit our interpretive horizons when we carry the criteria of logical consistency too far'.* (Riessman, 2008, p.82)

The study does not make judgements about the quality of narratives based on reductive notions of narrative structure. Rather, it focuses on the complexity, contradictions, uncertainties and omissions as much as overarching structure. These narratives reflect complex and often difficult, painful intimate lives with participants drawing on a range of often contradictory cultural resources in order to portray, represent and understand them. They are stories-in-process and are therefore unlikely to have neat beginnings, middles and ends. As Wetherell (2005) contends, it is important to attend to incoherence and ways in which '*personal standpoints are built from often deeply contradictory and fragmented patchworks of cultural resources*' (Wetherell, 2005, quoted in Phoenix, 2008, p.170). Nevertheless, participants are likely to be influenced by and draw on well-rehearsed, archetypal stories drawn from popular sources. Plummer argues that dominant stories (meta-narratives) may be losing their hold on people's consciousness, and so it is highly relevant to observe their presence in the narratives of single mothers. If romantic paradigms have lost their relevance to lived experience, do other narrative possibilities and constructions open up? In the absence of meaningful archetypes on which to base narratives of intimacy, do these narratives become unstructured and chaotic?

> *'Modernist stories of sexual suffering and sexual surviving have been strikingly well rehearsed over the last decades of the twentieth century. They are stories with driving, coherent and linear plots – of suffering, of coming out, of survival – which ultimately fit into major archetypal forms of story telling; journeys, homes, consummation. They fit into the narrative plots of both the great literature of the distant past and the trashy Hollywood tales of redemption that have swamped this century... We may be entering a*

shifting historical period where some of the old stories are partially and slowly losing their obdurate grip upon the narrative world'. (Plummer, 1995, p.131)

For Becker (1997), the overarching Western paradigm of predictability and order leads to an emphasis on linearity within narratives. She suggests that people organise stories disruption into linear accounts which move from chaos towards order, arguing that this individualized way of thinking about the world is a relatively recent phenomenon stemming from the nineteenth century where, *'... the individualized life course emerged as the basic code for constructing experience in Western Societies. The contemporary Western conception of the life course as predictable, knowable, and continuous is thus a relatively recent phenomenon'* (Becker, 1997, p.7). However, she argues that this way of viewing the life course may be shifting with the binary logic which sees order as good and chaos as bad being challenged in contemporary thought (Becker, 1997, p.6). She refers to 'chaos theory' (Hayles, 1991) in the context of postmodernist thought, as celebrating unpredictability, nonlinearity and chaos as sources of new information and speculates as to whether this shifting paradigm means that the way in which people tell stories in daily life will change, conceding that it takes time for new ways of thinking to take hold and that the paradigm of order is highly pervasive.

Becker critiques the tendency in our society to see the life course and narratives as being shaped individually rather than culturally: '*Western thought has been concerned with development throughout life as an individual process rather than one which is culturally shaped'* (Becker, 1997, p.26). This is relevant to my research which attends to a range of cultural narratives and discourses which are drawn on by single mothers in order to make sense of their intimate lives. As Becker argues, people draw on 'cultural templates' which are extremely powerful guides to what is normal, encompassing moral discourses and belief systems in a close parallel to the notion of 'scripts'. However at certain junctures, these can become disrupted through changes in life situations, especially in cases of embodied emotional distress, and may call its categories of normalcy into question (ibid, p.15). When cultural belief systems are disrupted, people may react by either longing for normalcy or beginning to question and resist the status quo, seeking a 'moralizing antidote' to mediate the experience of becoming marginalized and in conflict with the social order:

'*By mapping culture, moral discourses help people to make sense of their world. Inability to live out moral discourses forces people to tease apart the different dimensions of phenomena they previously took for granted. People's narratives reflect the struggle to rethink those discourses after disruption, to encompass their own experience'.* (Ibid, p.17)

I have aimed to explore, rather than impose, narrative structure in participant's stories and to be aware of how far narratives are fixed and ordered or fluid and chaotic, noting instances where the narratives challenge chronological linear sequence; refuse the search for the self; embrace, resist or create new cultural templates (or scripts) by which to lead their intimate lives. A pertinent question raised here, which lies beyond the scope of this thesis, is whether if intimate lives in contemporary western culture are changing, are their accompanying narratives and to what extent? People may conversely be tempted to hold steadfastly to the status quo, draw on familiar genres and maintain linear, orderly depictions of their lives through their life narratives in order to make sense of their experiences.

Validity, reliability and bias

Potential criticisms of qualitative methodologies pertain to validity, reliability and the potential for bias. Criticisms are likely to come from those operating within more positivistic frameworks or applying the scientific standards of quantitative methodology. It has been questioned whether these standards of measurement are applicable to qualitative research, with the suggestion of alternative criteria for evaluating such work:

> *'Biographical research was alleged to be wanting when measured against criteria of reliability and validity: life stories perhaps provided insights, sources for possible hypotheses before the formulation of 'real' objective research…The study of life stories has often taken traditional criteria at least as a starting reference point. However, many writers do argue that the attempt to recognize the meanings given to the social world by individuals requires rather different criteria. For example, Hatch and Wisniewski argue that 'truth' and related epistemological issues can be seen in ways that go beyond the standardized notions of reliability, validity and generalizability. They also give a range of alternatives used by writers, including adequacy, aesthetic finality, accessibility, authenticity, credibility, explanatory power, persuasiveness, coherence, plausibility, trustworthiness, epistemological validity and verisimilitude and so on'.*
> (Roberts, 2002, p. 6)

Other commentators argue that it is possible to redefine the notion of validity when utilising these techniques. Plummer defines a method as valid if it produces the kind of data that is required by the research question; therefore if research is seeking to elucidate subjective experiences as opposed to classifying, cataloguing and standardizing, a narrative approach can be seen as the most valid method available (Plummer, 2001, p.155).

Furthermore, allowing freedom and flexibility within the interview process can potentially enable a higher level of insight into experiences: 'O*ral history interviews provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women's experiences of themselves in their worlds. The spontaneous exchange within an interview offers possibilities of freedom and flexibility for researchers and narrators alike*' (Anderson and Jack, 1991, p. 11). Elliott (2005) highlights that in practice, life history methods, including narrative interviewing, are able to capture highly complex processes as well as providing concrete insights into lived experience. She gives the example of educational research which, through the use of narrative, provided more in-depth insights than quantitative work into the same topic. Crucially, a narrative approach provides a sense of the processes, changes and experiences that have taken place over a lifetime and which inform experiences in the present rather than simply giving a snapshot of an individual or group in one moment.

For Riessman (1993), validity stems from the rigour of data analysis. Riessman highlights four approaches to validation in narrative work: (1). **Persuasiveness**: whether the interpretation is reasonable and convincing, although this relies on literary practices and reader response and meanings of texts change; (2). **Correspondence**: Informants are considered as co-authors so work is taken back to the individuals studied for validation; (3). **Coherence**: Narratives are interpreted at a global, local and thematic level. 'Global' relates the overall goals a narrator is trying to accomplish and their beliefs and values, 'local' coherence attends to the structure of particular narratives and 'thematic' coherence pertains to the recurrent, unifying theme (and this approach has provided a guide for data analysis in this study); (4). **Pragmatic use**: Here, the study becomes the basis for others' work, through making the methods and interpretations transparent and seeing the investigator as based in a community of research (Riessman, 1993, p.258).

I do not see validity in scientific terms, as the purpose of my approach is not to gain a reliable, accurate historical account or objective truth but rather to capture a particular perspective at a particular moment in time. It is important to acknowledge the constructed nature of reality and to recognise that '*human stories are not static; meanings of experiences shift as consciousness changes'* (Riessman, 1993, p. 259). Plummer (2001) likewise sees narratives as flow of actions between tellers, coaxers, texts, readers and contexts than stories that carry a set of 'facts' – although some approaches may seek verifiable, historical accuracy. Investigating not only the content of a narrative and the information conveyed but its complex meanings, its relation to the social milieu in which it is told and the way in which it is represented – 'doing narrative' is the concern here. Plummer similarly sees narratives as 'topics to be investigated in their own right' rather than simply

as resources and he warns against what he describes as a 'naïve' understanding of truth: *'We have become the sexual story tellers in a sexual story telling society. If I once thought, naively, that all these sexual stories may be seen as signs of the truth, this has long since ceased being my view... For instead of taking all these dazzling stories... as givens – as providing rays of real truth on sexual lives – <u>sexual stories can be seen as issues to be investigated in their own right. T</u>hey become topics to investigate, not merely resources to draw upon'* [emphasis in original] (Plummer, 1995, p. 5).

I recognise that there is potential for 'bias' in terms of participants wanting to please the researcher or presenting the self falsely and the researcher being too directive, possibly allowing prejudices, assumptions, preconceptions and political, theoretical orientations to influence the research (Bryman, 2012, p.389). However, as previously discussed, within a feminist framework the idea of a detached, dispassionate, neutral researcher is seen as a myth in itself, often based on the experiences of white, middle class males (Harding, 1987; Oakley, 2005). Rather, feminist standpoint theorists emphasise the importance of attending critically and reflexively to the process of knowledge production and the power relations within it, ensuring this is a transparent aspect of the research (Harding, 1993). Plummer, echoing feminist researchers (Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1993), argues that a manufactured situation where a stance of scientific 'neutrality' was adopted would actually be less likely to come close to any truths:

> '*A close examination of all bias in research could only be possible if researcher and informant were mechanical robots. To purge research of all these 'sources of bias' is to purge research of human life… Any 'truth' found in such a disembodied, neutralized context would be a very odd one indeed. It is precisely through these 'sources of bias' that a 'truth' comes to be assembled'.* (Plummer, 2001, p.157 – 8)

Research Design

The sample

The research involved twenty-four interviews with heterosexual single mothers aged between 30 and 55, living in a variety of locations in the South-East of England. For the purposes of this study, I defined a single mother as someone who is not in a relationship with the father of her children and who identifies as a single mother. Childcare may be shared with the children's biological or step-father and some may be shared with a current partner. In some cases, parents may be separated but still living in the same household and the mother may identify as a lone parent, although this did not apply to any of my participants. In other cases, the mother may have a live-in partner but sees herself as a single parent as she does not share childcare responsibilities. While the word 'lone' is often

used, it connotes that the parenting is solely down to one individual. When setting out to conduct fieldwork I considered that this view of single parents may well be challenged as those defined as 'lone' parents may be well supported by family members, friends and their local communities and the family home may be shared by others for some or all of the time. However, the mothers in this sample did tend to carry out the vast majority of childcare and domestic responsibilities, although several had co-parenting arrangements in place with the fathers. I was particularly interested in capturing the experiences of women who are 'single' - which might be socially interpreted as 'sexually available' – and also mothers in order to reveal the cultural complexities around these identities. Acknowledging complexities and fluid, shifting situations, the study focuses primarily on those who self-define as single mothers. The aim was not to recruit a representative sample in order to produce generalizable findings but to explore a range of experiences within this generational cohort, considering differences in terms of material circumstances and social backgrounds.

The study specifically set out to examine the experiences of heterosexual women; usually deemed to be a 'normal,' taken-for-granted, unproblematic category (Jackson, 2005; Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2007; Van Every, 1996). The intention, in line with the theoretical framework (see the section on 'Heterosexuality' in Chapter 2 for more details) was to make this category visible and to problematize it as an institution which contains its own hierarchies (Van Every, 1996). This entails the continued subordination of women, casting them in limited and restrictive gendered roles (Jackson, 1999; Rich, 1980, Van Every, 1996). However, it should be acknowledged that as a category, heterosexuality is not clear-cut and contains much diversity of experience and blurring of boundaries; some participants disclosed bisexual and lesbian experiences in the course of the interviews and one, it transpired, now identified as gay although the majority of her intimate experiences had been lived out as a heterosexual woman and so she contributed valid narrations of her experiences as both a heterosexual and gay woman to the research.

The age of participants was fairly evenly spread with five in their early forties, five in their early thirties, four in their late thirties, four in their mid-forties and four in their early fifties and three in their late forties. There was a wide spectrum in terms of the ages of children who ranged between two and in their late-twenties; participants had between one and five children. In terms of employment status, the majority (nine) were unemployed or full-time carers, seven were full-time employed with thee in professional roles; seven were part-time employed with four in professional roles (making a total of seven participants in professional roles) and two were in voluntary roles (although classed as unemployed). I enquired about the participants' social background (prompting 'middle-class or working class', for example, when asked for clarification). Interestingly, many participants were unsure or preferred not

to say; often this was due to an uncertainty around class status. Some, while having been born into a working-class background were now in full-time and/or professional roles while others while having grown up in a relatively affluent setting were now unemployed and in some cases living in a derived area and so did not relate to being middle-class. In two cases there was a suspicion and / or rejection of the concept of class, possibly through a fear of being labelled or judged. The sample was not diverse in terms of race; one participant is from a mixed race background and one from a White European background with the majority comprised of White British participants. Although two women from Afro-Caribbean and one woman from a Black British ethnicity were initially recruited, it was difficult to organise interviews, one due to work commitments and the others due to communication difficulties, and so they were eventually abandoned. Two of these participants were living in deprived social housing areas on the outskirts of a city; there may have been trust issues due to ethnic and cultural differences, the participants might not have been comfortable with me coming to their homes or it might have been difficult to travel across the city and organise childcare. I took the decision not to pursue these participants further as I did not want to put them under pressure. All participants had become single mothers through relationship breakdown, although many reasons for relationship breakdowns were given. Two of the participants had been abandoned by the fathers of their child in pregnancy and three had escaped from violent relationships for their and their children's safety (eight participants had experienced physical and / or emotional abuse from the fathers of their children). One participant identified as a Widow, although the bereavement had taken place following a separation. Features of this sample are summarised in the grid below (Figure 1):

Participant	Route to single motherhood	Age (or approximate)	Number and approximate age of children	Occupation	Social background (if known)	Housing / Location	Relationship status
1	Escape from domestic abuse	45	2 (teenager / under 25)	Full-time professional	Working-class	Rural	In a relationship - boyfriend
2	Abandoned during pregnancy	43	1 (9)	Unemployed, re-training	Middle-class	Suburban	Single (Occasional dating)
3	Relationship breakdown	50	3 (2 under 10, 1 teenager)	Unemployed, part-time volunteer	Working-class	Urban (gentrified inner-city)	In a relationship - boyfriend
4	Escape from domestic abuse	Late forties	2 (under 10), 2 estranged	Unemployed	Working-class	Urban	Single

5	Relationship breakdown	55	1 (under 16)	Full-time employed	Working-class	Unknown	Single
6	Domestic violence, separation and bereavement	Mid-forties	2 (under 10)	Unemployed, part-time volunteer	Working-class	Urban	Casual relationship
7	Escape from domestic abuse	34	3 (under 10)	Unemployed	N/A	Urban (Gentrified inner-city)	Single
8	Relationship breakdown	Late forties	5 (between 9 and 30)	Unemployed	Working-class	Urban	Dating
9	Relationships breakdown	Early forties	2 (1 under 16, 1 under 20)	Part-time professional	N/A	Suburban	In a relationship - partner
10	Relationship breakdown	31	1 (under 10)	Unemployed, in part-time study	N/A	Urban	Single
11	Relationship breakdown	33	1 (under 10)	Full-time employed	N/A	Urban, social housing	Single
12	Relationship breakdown	50	3 (between 10 and 22)	Full-time professional	Working-class	Suburban	Dating
13	Separation	33	2 (under 16)	Full-time professional	Middle-class	Rural	Single
14	Relationship breakdown	37	1 (under 10)	Full-time employed	N/A	Suburban	In a relationship – partner
15	Abandonment during pregnancy	Early forties	1 (under 16)	Full-time professional	Middle-class	Suburban	Dating
16	Separation	49	1 (under 16)	Full-time employed	N/A	Urban	Single
17	Unplanned pregnancy	49	1 (under 10)	Unemployed	Middle-class	Suburban	Dating
18	Relationship breakdown	42	2 (under 10)	Full-time employed	Middle-class	Suburban	Single
19	Relationship breakdown	39	2 (under 12)	Full-time professional	N/A	Suburban	Dating
20	Relationship breakdown	42	1 (under 16)	Part-time professional	Middle-class	Urban	Dating
21	Relationship breakdown	33	1 (under 10)	Part-time professional	N/A	Unknown	In a relationship – living with partner
22	Abandonment	39	2 (under 6)	Unemployed	N/A	Urban, social housing	Single
23	Relationship breakdown, illness	Mid-forties	2 (under 12)	Unemployed	Middle-class	Urban, social housing	Single

| 24 | Relationship breakdown | 55 | 2 (under 25) | Full-time employed | N/A | Suburban | In a relationship - boyfriend |

(Figure 1: Sample grid)

Recruitment process

An overarching purposive sampling strategy was adopted in order to capture a specific group of participants – heterosexual single mothers aged between 30 and 55. A variety of strategies were employed to recruit research participants: An invitation was posted on a local lone parent online network; the research was introduced to single parent volunteers and those on a locally run course for unemployed lone mothers; colleagues and social contacts of the researcher were approached; flyers were distributed at local schools, community and children's centres in a variety of settings and a snowballing technique was employed to enable further participants to be recruited. Bryman describes this method of snowball sampling, '*With this approach to sampling, the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others*' (Bryman, 2012, p.422). Some participants were also recruited opportunistically (Bryman, 2012) through local schools, social and work contacts. While this sample does not claim to be representative and a basis for generalisability, the aim is to produce in-depth qualitative data which reflect the participants' social contexts. The most successful techniques were those when participants were approached face to face, possibly due to the sensitive nature of the topic area. The fact that I was an insider, also being a single mother helped to break down any initial barriers. Participants were therefore largely self-selecting, although I endeavoured to ensure that single mothers from a variety of backgrounds and circumstances were represented in the sample, including professional women, non-professional working women and full-time parents.

The interviews

The overall approach to interviewing was guided by feminist insights into the need to resist (male-orientated) traditional interview criteria premised on the interview as a one-way process of extracting information from the interviewee, seeing interviewees as an objectified functions of data and seeing interviews as having no personal meaning as social interactions (Oakley, 1981). In this framework, interviewees are seen very much as subordinates and as an instrumental means-to-an-end. Rather a reciprocal, non-hierarchical interview relationship was sought which did not shy away from personal involvement. This interview relationship tended to begin during the initial conversations prior to recruitment and was based on the shared status and experiences as single mothers,

often accompanied by a genuine interest in the topic area from participants. In terms of the interview structure, the interviews entailed four main sections: An introductory section; the narrative section; a follow-up section and a semi-structured section. The interviews began with clarifying what the research was about, going through the participant information and consent forms (see section on 'Ethical considerations'), answering any questions, defining what I meant by intimacy and asking some generic questions in order to put participants at ease. This included asking some basic details about their lives, situations and children which helped to build context. This section also contributed to building genuine rapport with participants, identified as an important feature of feminist research (Oakley, 1981). It was during this phase that I started the digital recording device, to enable participants to begin to feel comfortable with being recorded and while inevitably putting on the recorder can feel slightly awkward, participants did soon relax. Initial 'introductory questions' (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009), sometimes led straight into participants telling their stories unprompted. Usually, I prompted participants to tell their story from whatever point they felt it began utilising open 'tell me…' questions. In a few cases, participants were unsure about where their story began and so I would prompt them to tell me how they became a single mother. The narrative section of the interview was unstructured, as I allowed participants to tell their stories with little or no interruption from myself unless to clarify a point, or occasionally to encourage the participants to expand on an interesting train of thought which related to my theoretical framework. Here I employed 'probing' questions to encourage participants to say more on the topic (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). Following this open narrative section, I asked further probing questions based on what the participant had said bearing my research questions in mind. 'Interpretative' questions enabled me to put forward tentative interpretations to the participants and seek their responses (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). I then asked a number of semi-structured questions to elicit further material in order to address the research questions and provide additional context. In some cases, semi-structured question led to narrative responses as participants continued telling their stories. The Interview Schedule is available in Appendix 1.

In terms of the interview setting, I gave participants the option of being interviewed in their own homes where they might feel more safe and comfortable. I was also aware that it might be difficult for single mothers to travel, given their childcare responsibilities and numerous time demands. Approximately one-third of participants chose this option and just over a third chose to travel to my home which was a more neutral setting for them, away from other family members and distractions. The home setting lent an informal, friendly tone to the interviews, refreshments were provided and the interviews usually began with informal chatting about our children, work and lives in general. This often felt very close to a situation

where I would normally talk with other single parents, in a home setting and in a spirit of openness and sharing of experience. I was also open to the possibility of meeting in an alternative neutral environment of participants' choice and the remaining participants chose this option. Where interviews took place in a home environment they tended to be longer and more in-depth. This is likely to be due to a better opportunity to build genuine rapport (Oakley, 1981) and less pressure of time – alternative settings were usually chosen to fit round work and childcare responsibilities and so were more time-bound. The main drawback of interviewing in a home setting were the chances of interruption from younger children and the risk of being overheard by family members. Usually it was possible to organise interviews when single mothers were alone but where, for example, one single mother who was working full-time could only meet at her home in the evening and her children were struggling to sleep and disturbed us on several occasions, curious about the stranger in their home. The interview had to be paused several times while the participant settled her children. On another occasion a young child was in the same room and frequently wanted attention from her mother so the recorder was paused while she attended to her child's needs. While this inevitably had some impact on the flow of narratives, it did also help to build rapport – having been in the situation of caring for young children I was sympathetic to the continual need to parent. It also further replicated numerous occasions where I and my friends would attempt to share and discuss our experiences while tending to our children and so did not feel as awkward as it might have for another researcher who did not have such experiences. Opportunities to talk about experiences often take on a sense of urgency, particularly for single mothers who seldom have this opportunity and so overall, these conditions did not negatively impact on the quality of the data. There was an instance in which a participant's older child was in the house and on a few occasions, the participant lowered their voice. It is conceivable that certain elements of their story were missed out or diluted. Some participants revealed that their children did not know the details of their parent's relationship breakdown, they may not have known the extent of abuse and also at times participants wanted to keep their sexual lives separate from their parenting lives so there was much sensitivity surrounding various topics. As a researcher, it sometimes felt uncomfortable being in the position of confidante and this came with an additional sense of responsibility for data and identity protection. The final slight drawback of interviewing in participant's homes was that, especially where we had never met in person before, there was often an anxiety about whether the house was tidy and my entry was often accompanied by apologies. This did at times make me feel I was imposing as I realised that participants had often gone to some trouble to prepare for my visit and felt self-conscious. I related to this need to present an orderly, well-tended environment to visitors and to 'cover up' what can be the chaos of coping with single parenthood, juggling a

number of responsibilities and young children. Ribbens (1994) noted that being a housekeeper is intrinsically linked with being a good mother for some women. I did my best to put participants at ease, complementing them on their homes and children and reassuring them (truthfully) that my house was much messier. In some ways this was another source of building genuine rapport through instantly recognising the similar challenges we faced. Again, my own status as a single parent with empathy for the daily realities, had a positive impact on the research relationship. In many cases this was a relationship which continued beyond the interview – I stayed in touch with several participants and in a few cases it developed into a friendship or helped to consolidate a pre-existing friendship. This was of course carefully managed, I would not wish to impose myself unwanted on participants and so the impetus tended to come from them but as previously mentioned I did not shy away from personal involvement (Oakley, 1981), especially after sharing such intense experiences.

Participants were aware they were speaking to another single mother who was likely to empathise with the kinds of story being told. This is likely to have enabled the level of disclosure and the quality and detail of responses. However, at times there was a sense that participants were speaking to a wider audience, especially for example, when giving opinions about domestic violence or negative representations of single mothers. There was a sense in which participants wanted to convey the realities of the experience, the everyday lived experience, material struggles and lack of choice as opposed to popular representations. This may have stemmed from awareness that this research data might reach the public domain and so was a potential vehicle for enabling a political voice as well as an opportunity to tell their unique story to an empathetic listener. The interview perhaps entailed an opportunity to be heard on both personal and political levels – while the stories were ultimately personal, 'single mothers' as a group have been politicized in recent history and so their 'personal' stories were inevitably political, even if sub-consciously so.

The interviews were an intense experience for myself and the participants: Participants had often not told their story to anyone previously and so they were often disclosing and relating extremely difficult experiences for the first time. This meant that it could be challenging to listen to some of the experiences and at certain points the interviews felt emotionally charged. At the same time there was a strong sense of it being a privilege to have the opportunity to listen to these stories and gain unique insights into what participants had experienced and how they represented and made sense of these experiences. Participants responded positively to the experience of taking part in the research as it gave them a chance to be heard and for their stories to be valued.

Data analysis

I employed a multi-layered strategy (Riessman, 1993), analysing the data in three stages at structural, thematic and discursive levels. This model enables the approach of seeking an in-depth understanding of the intimate lives of single mothers, the ways in which they construct their identities, and their intimacy scripts. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) provide a model for the classification of modes of reading narrative: *Holistic-content analysis* focuses on the content of whole narratives, identifying major themes; *Holistic-form analysis* focuses on the overall form of the narrative, in terms of its structure or plot; Categorical-content analysis is in line with what is usually described as 'content analysis,' generating categorizable themes (regardless of the context of the narrative as a whole) and Categorical-form analysis investigates formal aspects of separate sections of the whole narrative, for example through closely analysing texts at a linguistic or discourse level. However, these authors recognise that '*form is not always easily separated from the content of the story*' (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998), noting that the word 'idea' refers to both content and form in classical Greek and so interpretation is not necessarily so clear-cut. I adopted a combination of holistic-form and holistic-content analysis. The first stage (categorizable as holistic-form) involved looking at the overall structure of the narratives and observing whether they drew on specific, recognisable genres and to what extent they shared common features. It was observed that narratives were often made up of a series of smaller stand-alone (micro) narratives which recounted illustrative events in the participants' lives. The second stage (holistic-content) identified broad common themes within and across the narratives as a whole. This stage incorporated content analysis, drawing out themes from both narrative and semi-structured data responses. The final stage entailed attending to the discursive resources participants drew on in shaping their narratives. This stage may constitute categorical-form analysis but precluded a systematic analysis at the level of language. It was rather, guided by a feminist critical lens and interested in how cultural narratives shaped personal narratives and the implicit power relations involved. Despite this seemingly simple model, the process of analysis was very complex and often started within the interview itself, reflecting with the participants on their narratives and exploring emergent themes. The process of listening and transcribing the data contributed to the analysis, provoking reflection and enabling early identification of narrative structures, potential themes and discourses. The process was not purely inductive or deductive, guided by the insight that these dichotomised models provide an '*inadequate description of how research is conducted and knowledge produced*' (Stanley and Wise, 1990). Awareness of pre-existing theories on intimacy as well as a critical feminist lens guided the analysis, however I was open to identifying themes and insights generated by

the data. These were not always expected and were then elucidated through further exploratory reading and reflection.

Stories were often told in an episodic way and narratives tended to be made up of smaller, stand-alone narratives which I have preserved where possible within the thesis for illustrative purposes and termed 'micro-narratives' – these often exemplify aspects of the overall narrative being told. This episodic telling may relate to Plummer's (1995) insight that stories and their genres emerge at specific historical moments which enable them to come into being. Apart from many (stereotyped) public stories about single mothers (discussed in Chapter 2), there are not currently many forums in which their own personal stories can be heard[36]. Participants' narratives may therefore have been drawn from a variety of sources rather than relying on a specific genre, for example a repertoire of stories, some possibly pre-rehearsed and used in other contexts. They are also likely to have been shaped by the stories and genres available in the wider culture (McAdams, 1993; Plummer, 1995). Hence the stories often seemed slightly disjointed in form as well as content. However there was a strong sense of narrators as far as possible - within the limitations of the discursive resources available to them - testifying to and making sense of often painful and complex life experiences and it is hoped that the analysis reflects this complexity, rather than reducing them to over-simplified categories.

Ethical considerations

A feminist approach takes ethics very seriously and the process of research is seen as requiring a sense of responsibility, reflexivity and awareness of the dynamics of power inherent in research. I was aware of the potential for imbalance of power between myself and the participants and this was partly mitigated against through breaking down barriers between researched and researcher (Oakley, 1981). I was open about my own status as a single mother and about experiences of single motherhood and allowed for reciprocity in my willingness to answer questions (Oakley, 1981). Nevertheless, my position as an educated, middle-class doctoral researcher representing a university is likely to have created some barriers between myself and some of the participants, perhaps reflected in the discomfort of some when they were asked about their social background. The sample lacking in ethnic diversity may also have been a result of me being a white middle-class person from an academic background who may have been perceived as unlikely to sympathise with or represent their interests. It is impossible to completely mitigate against the power imbalance but it is possible to ensure participants and their accounts are treated with respect and in line with rigorous ethical standards in terms of data protection, confidentiality and anonymity

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[36] Single parent charity Gingerbread is a notable exception: http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/

(outlined by the British Sociological Association[37]). This was especially important in view of the fact that some participants were likely to be vulnerable and in some cases exposure may have conceivably led to harm – some of the participants had escaped from violent relationships and wanted to protect their children from these details and so had especially pertinent reasons for not wishing to be identified. Much of the data could be viewed as extremely personal and sensitive.

Ethical approval was sought and granted from the University of Sussex School Research Governance Committee (at that time the School for Social Sciences and Cultural Studies). Informed consent was sought from participants who were informed fully and in accessible language about the purpose, methods, possible uses of the research, and what participation in the research would entail. They were provided with a copy of a participant information form (Appendix 2) by email in advance of the interview where possible and I always brought hard copies with me and went through them prior to the interview – allowing time to read them, summarising the main points and answering any questions. Participants then signed a consent form (Appendix 3) which was kept in a secure location. The use of participation and consent forms was reassuring, helping participants understand the nature and purpose of the research and indicating that I had suitable training and institutional support to conduct the research in a professional manner. The right to withdraw or take a break was especially welcome as participants often needed to take a break after disclosing particularly painful experiences. The confidentiality of information supplied by research participants and their anonymity was respected through providing a pseudonym and taking care not to identify participants through the provision of excessive detail about them as individuals. Only basic details were provided where relevant and whole transcripts will not be made available, only extracts are utilised in order to illustrate key points. This is important given that some of the participants had escaped from violent backgrounds and wanted to protect their identities, location and children. A delicate balance was attempted to both allow voices to emerge and the personal insights and complexity of experience to be shared without risking identification; therefore extracts are generous and preserved in the way in which they were spoken but full transcripts are not available. Data is password protected and hard copies and recorded material is filed in a locked drawer to be destroyed on completion of the doctoral thesis. Participation in the research was voluntary and free from coercion - participants were encouraged to tell their stories in their own way - excessive probing and interrogation was avoided. Participants could take a break at any time and were free to terminate the interview if they did not wish to continue. My own experience of single motherhood and knowledge of local support systems meant I was able

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[37] http://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf

to be supportive and empathetic to participants and highlight possible sources of support, in line with a feminist approach to interviewing (Oakley, 1981).

Reflection

One of the challenges I have faced throughout the research design and writing process is the question of how far to include my own experiences. In the introduction of the thesis I make it clear that the thesis stemmed from and relates closely to my own experiences. I considered keeping a personal reflection as part of the research design and have frequently reflected on my own experiences for the duration of the research. However, in order to protect my own personal wellbeing and privacy and that of my children and other family members, I took a decision not to include my own experience as data. I was interviewed early in the process by an experienced researcher in order to draw out my own narrative of single motherhood and intimacy and this proved to be a therapeutic experience but also one which enabled me to empathise further with participants in the interview situation and to understand the courage and the emotional intensity involved in disclosing personal experiences. I was also aware of the way in which I was constructing my narrative in order to help me come to terms with my experiences and to make sense of my own internal conflicts around intimacy.

Many of these narratives told of extremely intense experiences and personal journeys. As well as the emotional trauma of experiencing relationship breakdowns and the after-effects of abusive situations in many cases, the material deprivation many of the participants and their children had endured or were still enduring was often extreme. It was at times difficult to listen and to deal with the emotional impact these stories had on me and I had to be careful to manage my own emotional wellbeing, especially where narratives resonated with my own experiences. At times it was hard not to be in a position where I could help or provide relief - it was important in some cases to maintain boundaries and not raise expectations about potential for involvement or assistance. I could only offer general advice where appropriate and also did not want to further infringe on participants' privacy. I also managed expectations in terms of how far my research would actually have a positive impact: it is unlikely to directly transform participants' lives and unlikely to influence policy. I can only reiterate my aspiration of contributing to knowledge and understanding about single motherhood and intimacy.

Another issue was that at times inevitably I found myself feeling offended some of the views I encountered, especially where some participants seemed to concur with the stereotyping of certain groups of single mothers. At times there were instances of racism and classism which I found difficult to deal with, not wanting to collude or be seen to agree with these

viewpoints but on an instrumental level not wishing to interrupt, voice dissent and risk the collection of quality data – especially where participants were relating their narratives. On reflection, it is inevitable that participants' worldviews reflect the cultural discourses available in their particular local and cultural context. In these cases I chose to remain neutral but to try to understand how these views were formed and remain sympathetic as far as possible to the context and situation from which participants were speaking. However, this was not a comfortable position and I was reminded that it is important not to romanticise or assume women's shared viewpoints or interests but to recognise tensions and divisions within and between women's perspectives.

Overall, it was a huge privilege to listen to these stories and each interview offers an incredible amount of insight and reflection as well as a wealth of thoughtfully articulated experiences. As well as dissonances between the narratives, there was some common ground. I often related very closely to what I was being told and many of the interviews ended in continued conversation and sharing. It was important in the majority of cases to maintain boundaries in order not to impose and invade privacy but I often felt that I had made a friend through the sharing of experience and valued the time I had spent with these thoughtful, insightful, strong and caring women. It became more and more evident how generous these participants had been in sharing very precious time and in often opening up their homes to me or travelling to meet me as well as sharing details of their intimate lives and so I have aimed to treat the stories with the respect they deserve and to produce a piece of meaningful research which makes a valid contribution.

I here take the opportunity to note that I have taken care to preserve the narratives as far as possible in the manner in which they were told in order to capture the voices, contexts and unique styles of narrative telling. Bearing in mind that these are marginalised narratives in a broader context where single mothers are often spoken about but seldom have an opportunity to make their voices heard, it was essential to ensure their voices, experiences and perspectives were valued as an important source of knowledge and understanding (Harding, 1987; Harstock, 1983; Oakley, 1981, 2005). This is reflected in the decision to include extended narrative extracts for illustrative purposes throughout the data findings chapters. I suggest that the unique qualities of this narrative data necessitate the presentation of longer extracts than would be the case with regular semi-structured interviews. It is hoped that the reader will be provided with contextual information, enabling an insight into these multi-layered experiences and perspectives. As well as highlighting multi-faceted aspects of their content, it also reflects ways in which the overall narratives are often structured, through a series of self-contained micro-narratives which contribute to

the overall narratives by telling of specific episodes or events (see the 'Personal Transitions' section of Chapter 4 for further elucidation).

CHAPTER FOUR Transitional moments: intimacy scripts, continuity and change

Introduction

This chapter focuses primarily on narratives and their structures, exploring common themes and patterns in the way participants' stories are told, identifying the use of genres and wider cultural narratives relating to intimacy. It moves on to explore themes of change and continuity in terms of intimacy, within the wider context of social changes, and participants' perceptions of this. It employs the concept of 'intimacy scripts,' seen as resources through which individuals construct their intimate lives, by offering a range of possibilities for potential pathways. These draw on wider cultural narratives and shared understandings (often highly gendered) of how lives should be lived and how people should behave alongside their specific social contexts and their 'personal scripts' of fantasies, desires and expectations. The nuanced, contextualised personal narratives of single mothers presented here challenge the 'transformation of intimacy' thesis. Rather, they convey gendered intimate lives and scripts in a state of uncertain transition, encompassing the need to negotiate deep cultural conflicts, tensions and contradictions, with participants moving across and inhabiting a variety of positions, described here as 'scriptual liminality'. The 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992) ideal emerges as a possibility in terms of egalitarianism – however, both its desirability and achievability remain ambivalent. In cases where there is aspiration towards democratic relationships, there is still nostalgia for traditional forms of intimacy (Jamieson, 1998) with clearly defined gender roles, in many cases due to the perceived permanent nature of such relationships. Simultaneously, the reality of the idealized archetypal nuclear family form is often undercut by negative experiences (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010). There is therefore a sharp distinction between intimacy as imagined and intimacy as lived, between intimacy scripts and experiences of intimacy, resulting in ambivalence (Budgeon, 2008). While the possibility of developing democratic relationships in terms of gender is often aspired to, the experience of gendered inequality in intimate relationships undermines this, supporting the arguments of Jamieson (1998) and Smart (2007). Narratives of single mothers' intimate lives draw on a variety of wider cultural narratives which relate to intimacy, including egalitarianism, sexual liberation, traditional family values and romantic love and these are alternately replicated, reproduced, resisted and rejected within the narratives. The data reflects a generation of women coming to terms with highly gendered personal,

cultural and social transitions, changing expectations, complex choices around intimacy which often generates confusion, ambivalence and disappointment.

These narratives are unsettled, drawing on a range of competing and conflicting discursive resources and experiences, exposing the complex process of constructing intimacy scripts. They highlight the gendered nature of intimacy and cultural expectations of how women should behave in their intimate lives. Yet for some, the possibility opens up of questioning these norms and constructing positive identities as single mothers. Ultimately they serve to illuminate single mothers' personal transitions and their responses to a changing social context, marked by ambivalences, liminalities, continuities, conflicts and collisions.

Personal transitions

Participants related transitions in their intimate lives which often contained overarching narratives of contamination, survival and becoming. Often, one of these elements became the predominant feature shaping the overall narrative. Overall, however, the narratives were far from being clear-cut, cohesive accounts, drawing on a range of competing and contradictory discursive resources, although it is possible to discern some common themes and styles of storytelling. What I term 'micro-narratives' are self-contained narratives within these main narratives, used for illustrative purposes where they exemplify aspects of the broader interview narratives. Narratives in this study were often made up of a number of such smaller self-contained narratives and I have sought where possible to preserve these as spoken in order to provide context and 'give voice' to participants. It is likely that, having never been asked these questions in this particular way before, participants constructed their main narratives through a series or patchwork of well-rehearsed anecdotes or 'tellings of events,' interspersed with reflections, in order to shape and make sense of their narratives of intimacy.

This relates to the reworking of narrative identities, especially in coming to terms with experiences of identity disruption (Becker, 1997). Indeed notions of individuals progressing through time and experiencing transformation is deeply embedded in Western cultural traditions (Becker, 1997). Plummer's work on 'sexual stories' is relevant; he identifies well established generic forms for the telling of relatively new stories such as 'coming out' and 'recovery' from abuse. These stories often involve 'suffering, surviving and surpassing' which, although relatively modern genres, also fit broadly into archetypal journeying narratives which involve 'taking a journey,' 'suffering' and 'finding a home' (Plummer, 1995). These genres are identifiable in my participants' narratives, although they often resist a clear-cut generic resolution, rather conveying a

sense of disappointment and ambivalence. Many were immersed in the immediate challenges of day-to-day survival. Available genres are perhaps inadequate to describe the suddenness of the ruptures of identity and circumstances which, for many, accompanied the transition into single motherhood. The modernist story genres Plummer identifies have emerged in recent history, enabled by certain social conditions with the emergence of social movements such as gay rights and the women's liberation movement (Plummer, 1995, p.60). Single mothers' stories currently have no public forums in which to be heard; while they often run counter to dominant cultural narratives there is no specific political framework or receptive public audience to enable their telling and, in a time of social and economic uncertainty, I would argue that they are still awaiting their moment in history.

These narratives of personal transitions often entailed a tentative, complex process, strewn with obstacles and often key 'turning points' (McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich, 2001; Strauss, 1969) where participants experienced a moment of clarity or realization which affected their future path. For Strauss (1969) 'turning points' are often a part of the process of self-development or transformation of identity – they may be part of a formal passage of status or, in the sense used here, a 'moment of revelation' which prompts a new phase. Smart and Neale (1999) found that self-development was an important aspect of women coming to terms with divorce. Participants' turning points were often instigated by a 'key figure' in their lives or an event.

While there is often an element of a 'triumph over adversity' narrative arc (Plummer, 1995), ongoing challenges experienced by participants do not necessarily allow a straightforward redemptive movement (McAdams and Bowman, 2001). Participants often began by relating traumatic experiences of relationship breakdown and the challenging experience of adjusting to parenting alone, constituting what I refer to as a 'double trauma'. For some, their life was conveyed as irreparably spoiled, failing to live up to their aspirations and expectations in terms of intimacy and engendering negative experiences of financial, social and emotional hardships along with spoiled identities (Goffman, 1963). These narratives are therefore dominated by **'contamination'** narrative sequences, which indicate ways in which life has been spoiled, depicting decline and stagnation in contrast to the positive forward movements of redemptive sequences (McAdams and Bowman, 2001): '*A redemption sequence is a movement in life storytelling from an emotionally negative or bad scene to an emotionally positive or good outcome. By contrast, a <u>contamination</u> sequence encodes the reverse movement – from good to bad. In a contamination sequence, an emotionally positive or good experience is spoiled, ruined, sullied, or contaminated by an emotionally negative or*

bad outcome' (McAdams and Bowman, 2001). McAdams and Bowman (2001) observe that the contamination sequence has its roots in ancient traditions, particularly the 'fall from grace' prototype endemic in Judeo-Christian cultures. The use of contamination sequences by single mothers may reflect their need to testify to the painful experiences associated with becoming a single mother but having little opportunity to do so, and bolsters a common emphasis that single motherhood was not of their choosing. It is possible to discern a resistance to simplistic romantic 'Hollywood' consummative, redemptive endings (Plummer, 1995). Narratives of contamination may also reflect the narrator's experiences of liminality (Becker, 1997; Turner, 1967) whereby they felt unable to sufficiently rework their life scripts and narratives, to move forward from their experiences of disruption, achieve closure and envisage a future. For Frank (1995), this inability to move forward in narrative terms constitutes 'narrative wreckage' (Frank, 1995).

Another overarching narrative was that of **'survival'** – many narratives were 'holding' narratives, that is the participants moved beyond an initial contamination sequence to describing how they coped with their everyday lives and began to come to terms with relationships breakdowns and challenging circumstances. The majority of participants' narratives could be described primarily as 'survival' narratives. Coming to terms with experiences often involved an overlapping 'self-development' narrative identified by Jordan (2004) as prevalent in contemporary life and crucial for women coming to terms with divorce (Smart and Neale, 1999). Closely related to the 'survival' narrative theme is that of 'recovery,' associated with therapeutic discourse and often found in narratives of overcoming addiction (Plummer, 1995); this was particularly pertinent for those single mothers who had experienced physical and mental illness and those recovering from experiences of abuse. In this way recovery was part of their 'emotional' as well as material survival. These narratives often trace a solitary, individual trajectory from the position of being a 'victim' within intimate relationships and also within the wider society, through being a 'survivor' and in several cases towards transformation or *becoming.*

'Becoming,' is used in the sense of reclaiming a sense of personhood which some participants felt they had lost through negative relationship and relationship breakdown experiences (Smart and Neale, 1999). This broadly relates to Giddens' emphasis on the importance of the self as a reflexive project in Western modern life, in terms of seeking to re-find or recreate the self, which he observed specifically in post-divorce couples (Giddens, 1991). **'Transformation'** indicates moving into a new phase or identity (Becker, 1997; Strauss, 1969) and so these narratives are ultimately

redemptive (McAdams and Bowman, 2001). A minority of participants' narratives moved into this redemptive category and this in the main reflected their circumstances; for example their children might have grown older, giving them more space and time to pursue their personal goals or careers. Others, despite professional and academic achievements, were unable emotionally to move beyond the sense of their lives having been spoiled. There was also an example of a single mother living in extremely difficult circumstances who nevertheless felt her life (including her intimate life) was in a forward movement and that her transition to single motherhood and away from an abusive relationship was emancipatory. There was much diversity and complexity among these narratives which eludes simplistic categorisation.

Therapeutic discourses which incorporate and endorse this forward movement of healing and reworking identities have limited value in describing and making sense of lives which contain difficult, messy and ambivalent experiences and emotions (Craib, 1994). Rather, the narratives often conveyed a sense of profound suffering, lack of choice involved and ways in which participants have been forced into difficult decisions through the need to make the most of their circumstances and survive. Others related how over time their situation contained possibilities for recovering from past traumas, exploring new intimacies, gaining a sense of control over their lives and rediscovering a sense of personhood - a goal often privileged at least temporarily above the formation of new relationships. The situation of being single did open up for some the possibility of redefining what they are seeking from intimate relationships, entailing a questioning of pre-conceived intimacy scripts.

Contamination

Contamination narrative sequences (McAdams and Bowman, 2001) which emerged here included experiences of violence, other forms of abuse and the loss of self often entailed; the necessity of making difficult decisions; the trauma of becoming a single mother and enduring financial hardship; experiences of stigmatisation or 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963) through the loss of social status, and ultimately the loss of idealised intimacy scripts which shaped expectations of how their life trajectories, partnerships and families would be. Goffman's work (1963) explicates the process of an identity becoming spoiled, stigmatised or 'disqualified from full social acceptance' (Goffman, 1963, p.9). For Goffman, stigma represents a discrepancy between a person's 'virtual social identity' where they may see themselves as a 'normal human being' who deserves to be accepted and their 'actual identity' whereby their identity claims are discredited and so spoiled. This process may be especially difficult for

those, such as single mothers, who become stigmatised later in life as their own deeply held views of what is normal and acceptable may be challenged and this may therefore necessitate a radical reorganisation of their view of the past (Goffman, 1963, p.47). The transition to single motherhood in contamination sequences was often infused with a sense of shame, linked to 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963) and this will be explored in more depth in Chapter 6. As Becker (1997) observes, disruptions to the life course can engender a destruction of personhood, identity, sense of normalcy and 'fit' into society.

One of the most impactful experiences of contamination came from those participants who had experienced domestic violence or other forms of abuse and had to escape from their partners and / or fathers of their children. In this sample eight of the participants reported experiences of abuse from the fathers of their children. Emma, a 44 year-old full-time employed mother of two, provided an exemplary case: her story contained all of the narrative features of disruption, contamination, survival, becoming, emancipation and recovery. As with participants in similar situations, Emma experienced a 'double trauma' of abuse and then, having escaped that situation, became a single mother, experiencing significant material disadvantage and 'spoiled identity'. Her narrative initially focused on these intense experiences, then moved through stages of survival and recovery, which involved building personal confidence; supporting herself and her children; developing a career and beginning to rediscover and rebuild her intimate life through friendships and relationships. Her narrative began with the story of beginning to recover from severe, suicidal depression - stemming from being trapped in an abusive marriage - and making the decision to leave the marriage and start a new life. In line with Frank's (1995) notion of the 'wounded storyteller' the narrative does not directly relate the experience of violence itself but traces around it, focussing on the effects on her. Smart (2000) noted that women who have experienced domestic violence tend to underplay it and this may be that it is painful to talk about in conjunction with possible feelings of shame. This extract captures Emma's journey through despair to hope, fear and realization and narrates a 'turning point' (Strauss, 1969); a moment of revelation whereby she recognized life was worth living if she could experience pleasure:

> *'What I was trying to do was to shut down basically and became a bit of a robot and sort of shut down myself and everything that I wanted for me and me just disappeared really… I hated me, didn't like me and um… so I sort of shut down and was just looking after the kids, doing housework and um… that kind of thing but it was only [a singer] – he helped me get out 'cos I heard his concert and it just moved me so much that I just thought if I'm still capable of feeling this way*

then maybe life would still be worth living even if I could only have moments… I guess what I'm trying to say is that it showed me that there are things out there that can make you really happy and bring you lots of pleasure and that life didn't have to be so miserable [laughs] so I thought, you know, part of it was that I didn't want to be alone, I didn't want to take my kids away from their father… that was very difficult to get over, knowing that I was going to get a lot of stigma 'cos I was a single parent, knowing I had no good qualifications, no marketable skills, no family support… um, that was a major obstacle that I had to overcome through counselling, realising that if I was going to have to make this step I was going to have to make it on my own'.

This reveals that a fear of single motherhood made it difficult to leave the relationship, encompassing fear of being alone; of the consequences of taking the children away from their father; facing an uncertain economic future and of experiencing stigma (a fear of stigma preventing women from leaving their partners or meaning they stayed with them longer than they would otherwise was noted by Ford and Millar, 1998). As with many participants, the emphasis on the difficulty of the choice to become a single parent is in contradistinction to the stereotype of single mothers deliberately choosing their circumstances. There was recognition of the reality that this was going to be an extremely difficult step and there would be little material or social support, exacerbated by the anticipation of stigma associated with single mothers. However, her turning point, encapsulated in experiencing a moment of pleasure and transcendence, provided a strong motivation to improve her life. The individualised, solitary nature of the journey she was about to undertake was underlined with her realisation that she was going to have to 'make it on her own'. She emphasized her lack of material belongings, skills and qualifications, demonstrating how she was starting with no resources and highlighting the enormity of the journey she was about to undertake and the obstacles she had to overcome.

Anita, a mother of two in her late forties, unemployed at the time of interview, also narrated a moment of clarity which proved to be a turning point in her life. This micro-narrative counterpoises the superficial, outwardly happy appearance of her marriage with the reality of having every aspect of her life controlled by her husband. She used the rhetorical device of how she 'woke up one morning' and realized she could not live in that way anymore to emphasize the suddenness of her realization as opposed to her previous lack of awareness and 'personhood'. She described the psychological abuse she endured where, under the threat of violence, she had to work to a strict routine to keep the house and children perfect, every aspect of which was dictated by her

husband. This created a loss of personhood and highlights the 'inner strength' or courage it took to make the decision to leave. Again, she traced the edge of 'the wound' or the worst aspects of what she endured, simply saying, 'there was a lot more to it than that'. Anita resisted positioning herself solely as a victim, enabling a more positive identity to emerge:

> *'My um then ex-husband's parents were quite well off and we bought a house in x and he built it for me and it was lovely and if I give you the bits in between the abuse and the punching and the fighting – that would probably be boring – but um... that was it. I woke up one day and I can even remember, it was a Saturday and I said I want a divorce. I couldn't stand living like that anymore. I don't know... he used to give me a menu on a Monday and I used to have to cook the menu and it used to have to be ready by a certain time um and that was it, I was never allowed to do anything. As long as his house was spotless and his children were spotless. So all his towels were straight and the tins in the cupboard were straight and that's how he lived and that was it. Well it wasn't, there was a lot more to it than that but that was the way it was and I don't know, I woke up one day and um just didn't want to do it anymore so...um I don't know where I got the courage from to be honest but I went and found a place to rent and I took my children… and that was it really'.*

Chloe, an unemployed 33 year-old mother of two, had recently escaped from an abusive relationship in another country. Her turning point (or 'crux' as she described it) came when she returned to the UK to visit friends and family against the wishes of her partner and he made a suicide attempt. Even though that particular act of violence had been committed against himself rather than her, being away from the situation had given her a perspective she hadn't had access to while in the abusive situation where she was psychologically controlled - and she made the decision to stay in the UK. As with Anita and Emma, psychological abuse meant that she had lost self-awareness and insight into her own situation of powerlessness and victimisation until a moment of realization. These narratives reveal the extent of the control exerted by abusive partners, causing their perceptions to become distorted so that they needed to be sufficiently physically and mentally removed from their situation to see it clearly:

> *'It came to a sort of crux in the summer because my… my ex was violent and um and an alcoholic and he was very against me coming to see my family and um but I had done... and while I was here he took an overdose and ended up in hospital and that was the climax of an argument really, he put the phone down*

and did that and I think after the shock of being… once the shock had subsided I realised that it was almost the reverse – he'd committed a violence to himself as opposed to me but I couldn't take it anymore. I'd had that physical space to myself by being here to see um just that little bit of perspective that in abusive relationships is so hard to gain sometimes 'cos they've got control that I thought I've just got to stay here so I did… it was the beginning of a downward slope after that and I mean the abuse, it meant that I had no power really, it was very one sided and it felt like it was another area of control um… So now I'm just very much enjoying being alone really!'

For many participants, the process of becoming a single mother was difficult, even though they were convinced it was the right decision. Indeed they often felt that they had no choice, it was necessary for their and their children's welfare. The second major period of trauma related in Emma's story began with the moment she left her violent husband in another country, to begin a new life with her two children. She emphasized how she had limited resources and struggled to manage basic survival for her and her children, describing how it was years before she had a proper bed to sleep on and was reliant on a combination of social security and charity. The situation was emotionally, as well as financially, challenging with continued threats from her husband. Overall, she described an experience of intense upheaval and financial deprivation - her case encapsulating the 'vulnerability' Smart (2000) noted was a feature for women post-divorce. Again, these narratives clash with popularist stereotypes of single mothers being 'better off' than couples and choosing single motherhood in order to benefit from generous 'state hand-outs'. This may reflect participants' consciousness of popular stereotypes and cultural narratives, representing a narrative strategy to resist them:

'I left [the country] with my two kids, a couple of bags of clothes, a thousand pounds with which I had to buy a car um no furniture in my house, no nothing. I didn't have a bed to sleep on for three years. Um, I had nothing. In fact the guy from the council who came to check if I needed housing benefit couldn't even believe that I was living there. I mean the house was a tip so I was struggling to get a house to get, you know, even just basic survival in place, at least a relatively comfortable home for us. It was very difficult 'cos I was on income support, um and I was getting around fifty pounds a week, you know, which was barely enough to live on and um most of my furniture was what people gave me or was from [local charity shop] and other charity shops… So yeah it was really, really hard and dealing with a bitter ex-husband who was threatening me that I

was going to lose everything I had even though I didn't have anything. He was going to take me to court, he was going to send me no money… so it was all a bit of a nightmare really.'

This narrative pattern of contamination and disruption can be found in a number of participants' accounts – indeed several had left other countries to relocate back to the UK when relationships with their children's father ended. For Yvonne, a 55 year-old full-time employed mother of two, this was initially due to needing the support of her extended family. However a number of factors including housing costs influenced her choosing a location which was not near her family. Her account echoed Emma's in emphasizing that materially she had nothing – '*no money, no job, no schools, no home – no nothing*' and had to start a completely new life, emphasizing the disruption she had experienced. Reflecting on these experiences encompassed 'identity work' in terms of rationalizing decisions and often setting the scene for the emergence a more positive 'survivor' identity rather than a 'victim'. Narratives also entailed identity work in countering negative cultural narratives of single motherhood:

> *'I decided we needed to come back home because I needed the support of my family – when you're living in a foreign country and things are going well that's fine but when things are going very badly wrong, like a divorce with two children, you need your family around you so I came back to England when x was 7 and x was 10 with no money, no job, no schools, no home – no nothing – didn't even know where to go because my parents at that time were at x so it was pointless going there, my sister was living in x at the time… with housing costs it just seemed ridiculous… so we sort of ended up in x.'*

These narratives of leaving unhappy marriages underline the difficulty and complexity of the decision which was not taken lightly by participants as it engendered severe risks of poverty, joblessness, homelessness and loss of status. However, no matter what difficulties were endured subsequently, the decision to leave was not questioned in the narratives. Rather, the dramatic, severe nature of the separations depicted here illustrates how difficult the relationships were that this choice was seen as the only possible solution. This was explicated in Susan's account which similarly described her situation of leaving with 'two suitcases and three hundred pounds' and no home or job as preferable to remaining in the marriage. That the decision was right was confirmed by what Susan saw as the subsequent lack of commitment, love and sense of responsibility from her daughter's father:

> *'It was a long and difficult process but in the end I decided I had to leave and so I came back to England and truly became solely responsible for her and at the time I had no job to come back to, I had no home, I had two suitcases and three hundred pounds but anything was preferable to staying there by then and I think it upset me that he didn't put up more of a fight, not for me, for her and he said something very odd when I left which was 'No matter how much I love her, you love her more' which struck me as a very odd thing for a parent to say as though you can apportion these things out and I imagine he was upset when she went but he's never made any effort really to maintain what I would call a proper relationship with her.'*

The difficulty of the decision to leave and the long-term financial and social implications was also a pertinent feature of Anita's narrative. Descriptions of her experience of the psychological abuse she was subjected to were juxtaposed with her situation (at the time of interview) of being homeless and in poverty, having lost all financial security after escaping a second abusive marriage. She went on to state that she was better off emotionally, if not financially, and repeatedly urged any woman in an abusive relationship to get out immediately. This may be in part that she was conscious her narrative could reach the public domain, having been previously silenced, and she believed this to be a chance of warning other women against staying in an abusive relationship. Her narration also involves 'identity work,' moving towards positioning herself as a survivor, possibly as a therapeutic process of trying to make sense of these experiences (Riessman, 1995) but also in an attempt to convey how difficult they were. It is reminiscent of Frank's 'wounded storyteller' (1995) who provides a testimony partly to tell their story to themselves in order to heal and to adopt a positive, morally responsible position, using their own suffering to help others. Other narratives involving experiences of abuse, such as Emma's, tended to avoid any direct depictions of the abuse itself, as Frank described, rather they traced around the edges of the physical and emotional suffering they had endured.

There was a strong sense that Anita's freedom from the relationship came at the price of destitution in contrast to relative comfort and having things bought for her – although this also served to accentuate the extremity of her experiences and need to escape. Ultimately Anita lost her first two children (they were removed by Social Services due to becoming involved in another violent marriage) and so loss was a major theme running through her narrative. Her overarching story was essentially one of contamination, involving severe disruption and loss, with her present very much bound up with dealing with the emotional and financial aftermath of her two marriages, ongoing physical and

mental health problems and basic survival for her and her children. There was no clear-cut resolution; rather she frequently returned to attempting to convey how difficult the period of abuse was for her through focusing on specific details of, for example, how she had to cut vegetables and fold towels a certain way (while indicating that there were further instances of abuse which were unspeakable). However, her current life situation of impoverishment and homelessness was also difficult and so there was no ultimate narrative redemption. There was a strong sense of Anita testifying to the pain and hardship she had endured by focussing on the details of her experiences, perhaps to a perceived audience who may not understand what it is like to experience domestic abuse and single motherhood. Having a sympathetic listener and a safe interview space may have enabled her to safely explore and make sense of these aspects of her experience:

> *'Apparently I used to cut cabbage wrong. I didn't know there was a wrong way to cut cabbage. But there you go... and don't ever, ever, ever let anyone... put your baked beans in a line and put your mushrooms in a line and your towels... and be that pathetic that you do it and I did it. Every towel had to be in a square... and the day I ran, the day I ran I knew I was losing everything because my first husband never, ever, ever made me short of money as long as he paid for it in front of me and he bought my knickers. I'd say 'I want some knickers' and he'd take me to [the shop] and buy them for me… Now I live... um... well in the flat but it's not a flat, it's not mine…'*

Of course the decision to leave a relationship did not always lie with the participant and for some a key moment in their life was the shock of being abandoned or discovering the father of their child was not willing or ready to become a parent. Karen, a woman in her late forties with five children, currently unemployed, offered one such example. The micro-narrative below provides an account of how she was uprooted from her locale, family and support network in the North-East of England in order to be with her partner and was subsequently abandoned when he felt unable to cope with the imminent arrival of their child. The outcome was that she and their child lived in poor, inadequate conditions in Bed and Breakfast accommodation for two years with Social Security being their sole income. Here she conveyed the sense of disruption and hardship, consequences of the decision made when she was younger to leave her home and follow her boyfriend:

> *'I'd given him the ultimatum and said 'Look, baby's coming, either we make or we break' and he said 'I'm going to be moving further to the South because of*

> *work' and I said Ok – when I look back now I gave up a three bedroom house and my work to come out there to be with him so yeah I gave up security but at the time – well you're not going to know unless you get out there. We survived in the relationship for about 10 months and then he just turned around said 'I just can't handle the thought of bringing up a child and I don't know if our relationship is going to work'. I was out in the world in the South, I didn't know anybody here, didn't know the place, it was totally alien to me and so… I went straight down to the DHSS with a broken heart and said, 'Right, what do I do now?' They gave me emergency accommodation and…I ended up in there for – instead of three months as they actually said - I was living like that for two years'.*

The emphasis on material hardships, emotional suffering and lack of support in many of these accounts again may stem from a desire to 'tell it like it is,' to testify how difficult life for single mothers can be in the company of a sympathetic listener and behind the safety of anonymity but with the knowledge that their accounts will reach an audience and possible challenge pre-conceptions. They run counter to dominant cultural narratives of how single mothers deliberately choose to claim social security for their own material benefit. Cultural and personal narratives are closely intertwined. For Karen, history and personal life collided in a very direct way when she was photographed by a journalist to provide evidence that young single mothers were not living in luxury in contrast to the contemporaneous political concerns about privileged access to housing. An image of an uncaring world and society is depicted in many of these accounts, accentuated by the aloneness and naïveté of themselves as protagonists and so it is possible to discern political undertones, stressing the unfairness of their situation.

Interrelated forms of loss, disruption and contamination were present in these narratives - as well as the loss of homes, status, material comfort and of course relationships, for some participants one key loss was that of their intimacy scripts, the expectations they had grown up with regarding intimacy, love, romance and family life. Juliet, in her mid-forties, unemployed, with one child, explained how her life had not turned out the way she anticipated or imagined and this was a source of continuing grief for her. A sense of disappointment that an actual life has fallen short of being a forward, positive movement is often apparent in such narratives. Hockey, Meah and Robinson (2010) observed that the imagined world of idealized heterosexuality is often in conflict with real life experiences. What Juliet thought was the beginning of a long-term partnership and family life following the romantic culmination of being told she was

loved, in line with a conventional intimacy script, did not transpire as the father decided he was not ready to become a parent or partner. For Juliet this was the beginning of a chain of events which spoiled her life, disrupting her anticipated 'intimacy script' and engendering an unfulfilling family life which did not live up to the traditional couple centred life she had envisioned. Here she highlighted her lack of choice over her circumstances, her disappointment and the lack of fit with her ideal intimacy script:

> *'I thought I was really old, you know, I was 33 which I thought was ancient and this man came along and said 'I love you, I want to give you loads of children' and it was that, it was like my Achilles heel but I haven't been able to be the mother I wanted to be because it was just so hard and um, so that's been very hard and caused a lot of sadness and um… I think this, this one parent, one child unit just doesn't – well it might work for some people – it just doesn't really work for us, I think it's no good for either of us and also, I think I've suffered and lost so much of my life because of the decisions I've had to make…'*

Jacquie's narrative also exemplifies 'contamination' and the loss of a projected intimacy script based on the ideals of romantic love which did not come to fruition. Jacquie was full-time employed, in her early forties and the mother of one. As well as personal and material loss, the cultural narrative of romance, of 'living happily ever after' was destroyed by experience. This was reflected in her narrative which began with the cultural narrative of romance: *'I met somebody and fell in love,'* which sets up the anticipation of following a normative intimacy script of getting married, settling down with the person she loved and having children. The narrative ended abruptly with her partner leaving, underpinning the speed at which these events occurred, leaving her in shock and producing what Frank (1995) terms 'narrative wreckage'. An anti-romance narrative is detectable here, subverting the storybook outcome of 'living happily ever after,' rupturing the romantic genre and emphasizing the disappointment and the abrupt ending to romantic and conventional intimacy script aspirations. Jacquie frequently became emotional during the interview, demonstrating how much these events of fourteen years earlier still affected her, comprising a painful 'rupture' rather than a turning point as she had no control over her circumstances:

> *'I (pause) met somebody and fell in love… I thought he felt the same way too, we talked about having children, I was approaching 28, um it was something I wanted to, I was thinking about um, I became pregnant and um six months into the pregnancy he decided – well he didn't decide, he was so casual about it, he just left and… that was that. It wasn't like it was this one day and something*

else another day – there was no discussion around it so it was probably

worse…' [Pause – becomes upset]

Zoe's narrative followed a similar trajectory although it went into more detail. Zoe, 30, with one child and unemployed, also began her narrative with being 'head over heels in love,' again drawing on the romantic genre. Zoe reflected on what went wrong, describing the mistake of romantically believing her partner had a 'loving soul' who would therefore make a good father although in reality he had a prison record, was unemployed and came from a challenging background and so was identified in retrospect as being an unsuitable partner. As with other participants, being a lone parent was not part of her life plan and so came as a shock, experienced as a rupture of an imagined intimacy script based on idealized romance and couple-centred family life. The majority of participants envisaged that they would find a permanent life partner with whom to have children, underpinning the power of normative models of intimacy evoked in cultural narratives of romantic coupledom and conventional nuclear families, as a measure against which other relationship forms are judged. As with other narratives, the material realities of single motherhood were as much of a shock to Zoe as the breakdown of the relationship with the father of their child(ren) and so her narrative moves from a romantic depiction of being in love to heartbreak and the harsh realities of being placed in a deprived social housing area with little financial resource. There is a discernible sub-text in this and similar narratives where participants portray themselves not only as victims of the fathers of their children and unavoidable relationship breakdown but as victims of an uncaring wider society which offered little support for challenging circumstances, further impacting on the quality of their and their children's lives and contribute to it being spoiled (contaminated). In the micro-narrative below this is reflected in the Zoe's vulnerability and naiveté in accepting sub-standard housing because she 'didn't know any better'. Ultimately the experience of disappointment also enables a questioning of previously followed ideals such as romance; Zoe had become more politically and self-aware and able to critique her previous naïve self and the flawed ideology of romance she had subscribed to:

'I was quite young, quite a young pregnancy I was only 17 and head over heels
in love as you are when you're 17 with x's dad – I was with him until [my child]
was 1 – things were a bit strained emotionally because it was a lot of pressure.
He was a bit older than me and had a history – he'd just got out of prison when
we met – dodgy family – terrible, terrible father material but I thought he had a
loving soul so I didn't care! But we split up after a year because the obvious
things that were going to happen happened – he didn't want to work, he spent

all the money, he wasn't really there enough and so... I thought 'hang on, this isn't really working out' and so I confronted him about it and he left.

When he left, he kind of pretty much went. It didn't really occur to me that I was going to be a lone parent, I probably thought we were just having a big row and he'd come back but he just disappeared and didn't come back for about six months and I was a real emotional wreck and then he came back and said 'I love you' and I said 'I love you too' and we had about a month of wondering if it was going to work and then he was with someone else – I found out he was seeing someone…

It all feels really young – looking back over a decade on but then it wasn't, I was a parent and it was all quite heartbreaking and difficult for [my child] so then we broke up and I lived in... it wasn't a particularly nice area, it was pretty miserable, loads of fights, joy riders, people banging on your door at four in the morning but I was a single parent with no money so that's where the council said you're moving to so I said Ok, I didn't really know any better.'

Survival

The majority of the participants' accounts move on from describing a phase of contamination to depictions of how they were able to survive and also often to begin to recover, broadly following genres of 'survival' and 'recovery' (Plummer, 1995) which are here closely interlinked. This is exemplified in Karen's story. On finding herself alone with a baby who she did not know how to care for, Karen sought help and information from her local hospital, joined local mother and toddler groups and made the decision to 'make a go of it' on her own, even though she lacked support. She emphasized how hard the experience was by stating, '*I wouldn't recommend it to anybody*'. She described how she supported herself and her baby through cleaning jobs, taking the baby with her until she eventually sought help at the Department of Health and Social Security. Karen portrayed herself as an individual against the world or an 'outsider' (Budgeon, 2004), emphasizing the lack of support and obstacles she needed to overcome such as facing discrimination as an employed parent. Her overall narrative arc therefore moves from one of 'contamination' to one of 'triumph over adversity' where she takes on more of a heroic role (McAdams, 1993) in taking control of her circumstances:

'I had this little child, didn't know the first thing about it. I went to the hospital and said could I hire a nurse. I had the midwife who came out for the first week

and she was a good help because she taught me a few things because before that I was always working, didn't know the first thing about bringing a baby up. She said I doubt you'll be able to hire a nurse, just do what comes naturally and I said yeah but I'm living out in the south, I don't know anybody, I don't know my way around here and she said just take the baby out in the pram and start going out, walking about and that's when I started going to all the mother and baby, toddler groups and that and she just gave me all this bumph and I just sat down and went through it – where to go, what to do…

I wouldn't recommend it to anybody… I sort of thought if I don't make a go of this I'm not going to know… I was on my own, [my son]… I wasn't in any relationships or anything like that because I just had to try and find my way of looking after… by doing little jobs – I was doing cleaning jobs and asking people if I could just leave the baby and feed him because I was breast feeding at the time. I had some employers at the time who would look at me and say, 'You're breast feeding in my house' but I said 'Well you want me to do the work!'– people would think well she's young, she's got a baby and I found the work was getting more and more and then one day I thought 'I can't do this anymore' and so I went to the DHSS and said like, 'you know I want to work, I've got a young baby and I don't know what to do' and they said well either find work or we'll help you out.'

However, while it is possible to discern archetypal 'triumph over adversity' styles and heroic self-depictions within these narratives (McAdams, 1993), as previously touched on, they did not tend to be coherent with clear-cut endings or resolutions and so they are not necessarily redemptive, due to the ongoing hardships which were being faced. The narratives therefore resist to an extent, redemptive 'Hollywood' endings (Plummer, 1995) and also in part a linear movement towards order, as posited by Becker (1997), although they stop short of being 'chaotic'. Rather they are ambivalent, acknowledging the pain of disappointment and loss (Craib, 1994) as well as continuing difficulties. For some participants, rewriting ruptured scripts and reshaping their intimate lives was, at the time of interview, an impossibility due to more pressing material needs. As Jordan (2004) and Gabb (2010) recognized, economic circumstances often curtailed the ability to make individualized choices about intimacy. Anita's priority was survival and finding a home for herself and her two daughters and she described this as being the 'endgame,' a future resolution to a life story which has so far been spoiled. Even though her current life was depicted as difficult, living in one room in a friend's house and suffering from ill-health, she reiterated that she had made the right decision by

leaving violent partners. Her positive relationships with her children was emphasized, enabling a more positive motherhood identity to begin to emerge, although she hinted that they were her only reason for living – '*without them I don't know*' . It is apparent that she hoped that by telling her story for research purposes, other women might be persuaded to escape from abuse so this moral testifying was in this way constitutive of a more positive identity (Frank, 1995). Her final statement indicated that she perhaps should have left earlier before she was damaged but rationalised decisions to stay by convincing herself the violence was due to a 'bad day':

> *'So we... have put ourselves down – me and my girls, my 2 beautiful girls to find a council house of which – I don't know how long that's going to take but my friend is kindly putting us up and we have one room which we all share and I hope that soon I – sorry we, 'cos it's a we... I've got 2 beautiful girls – x is 13 and x is 7 and um... they're my stars – without them I don't know... um I don't know if this is relevant but I recently got [health problem] – I'm taking [medication] and life's kind of fun but... what the endgame is I don't know, I think the endgame is to try and find us somewhere to live where we're happy but if I can advise any person in this world who is with a violent man – get out as fast as you can. Never go back... Never think that was a bad day, never ever think that. Don't think it was a bad day and it won't happen again because it will. No man ever treats a woman like that.'*

Many participants' accounts were orientated around the everyday survival of their families, highlighting the difficulty of being a single parent and managing childcare alone. Susan, a 55 year-old, full-time employed mother of one, related her experiences of homelessness, the difficulty of claiming benefits, finding a place to live and a job while managing childcare and dealing with mental health issues. The first part of this extract described this experience of having nothing and no control over her life and then moved onto significant obstacles which had to be overcome, in line with Plummer's notion of modernist tales of 'suffering, surviving and surpassing' (Plummer, 1995). The role of 'key figures' such as a Lone Parent Adviser and also luck are emphasized. Here the teller is not primarily positioned as a hero(ine) but more as someone who is forced to survive difficult circumstances beyond her control. She indicated that it was only as her child grew older and her life was not dictated by the need for childcare that she had more opportunities and a sense of liberation, underlining that choices and possibilities are shaped by material and social factors:

'In the beginning it was a complete nightmare because we had nowhere to live so we spent May to August sofa surfing basically, staying at various friends' houses on their sofa and because we had no fixed abode it was impossible to get a job or to I had to sign on at a particular place every single week and because I had no fixed abode we had to sign on at the first place where I registered for income support and all that was an incredible eye opener for me because I'd worked since I was 16 years old and had never not worked and I just had to come back and accept that I had no means of supporting myself or [my daughter] so we were living all over the place – at one point we were staying with friends for 6 weeks while signing on in x and because I was in no fixed abode they wouldn't allow me to claim my benefits from any local post office – thy said you know you have to come here and then I was um allocated a place in a hostel for homeless people which was a mixed blessing really. It did mean that I now had a fixed address and could start to apply for job… I had to start to do things to get my life back in order and it was a nightmare because of childcare and x was still in a pushchair and obviously still very dependent on me and I was desperately trying to put a brave face on things because I didn't want it to affect her but although at the time I thought I was being quite normal the reality was that I clearly wasn't – I was seeing a psychiatrist at the time.

Again once I had a fixed address I was under the care of a doctor who sent me to a psychiatrist and I had started to attend this computer training course and places like the job centre were really great actually – I had a lone parent adviser who was fantastic – I think it is the luck of the draw really and I got lucky and she helped me to find childcare for a couple of days a week while I went to do my course and then I had to go and do a work placement and the hostel we lived in was in x – it couldn't have been a more horrid place and was hardly near the commercial centre of x and so everything involved great long bus journeys. I think I spent a very large proportion of my time on the bus with a folded pushchair between my legs and a bored two year-old with me and we got through it but the next how many years have been – everything I've done, every decision I've made until quite recently have had to take into account childcare, holidays, all that sort of thing so it's been a long time coming out of that really – it's just been the last couple of years that I've felt a bit more liberated.'

Experiences of surviving as lone parents were contrasted with those of two-parent families in positive and negative ways. Economic and emotional survival without support was seen as challenging but provided a sense of independence and achievement. As participants moved through the interviews, often more positive aspects of their situation began to emerge. This was evident in Jacquie's account who, alongside disruption and loss, related the positives of the break-up occurring when it did, causing minimal emotional difficulty for her child. She related an increase in personal resilience and independence as a result of her situation although she frequently returned to the emotional disruption of the relationship breakdown:

> *'It has made me resilient and just getting on with things, I don't need to rely on people to sort things out, you just sort it out yourself. And I've had friends who have had difficult break-ups with partners and it's been really difficult for the child – arguments, custody and in a way I think I haven't had to deal with that. I mean, as I say, he left but he didn't say he was leaving, he left me to find out gradually and then he came back after x was born and he was very unreliable, he'd say he'd come back this week or come back this month and he wouldn't so it was quite drawn out…'*

Often participants drew on a therapeutic discourse of recovery (Plummer, 1995), alongside 'self-discovery' (Jordan, 2004; Smart and Neale, 1999). Participants described 'turning points' and 'key figures' who helped to aid this process of recovery. Emma narrated how she over time began to recover from her experiences of living in a violent relationship and the resultant depression through the help of a Counsellor, through finding enjoyment in life through her interests and attending developmental courses. She described moving from the position of being afraid to interact or speak in front of people - partly as she was so used to being not listened to, threatened and attacked - to gaining confidence through assertiveness training and achieving qualifications. Overall, there was a positive, redemptive movement throughout this narrative; moving through the painstaking process of recovery, overcoming the low expectations of life and finding the help needed in order to function adequately. The emphasis on this process also served as a reminder of the pain and suffering endured in the relationship and damage to her sense of selfhood, illustrated in the depiction of losing the ability to speak:

> *'I had a fantastic counsellor who really, really helped me and um together with the counselling and the anti-depressants and [my favourite singer] and you know, persuading myself, you know because I expected so little… I thought if I*

could get by and even if I can just enjoy a good book, enjoy a sunset, enjoy some beautiful music then um there was still reason to go on living and somehow getting the strength to move.

[When I first started studying at the local organisation] I did not want to interact with anybody… which is a classic symptom of being depressed, you know, interaction with the rest of the world is too hard, too difficult but they actually made me do a communication course in assertiveness and x actually sort of made us and I really resented it at first and I thought 'no I want to get on with computers, I don't want to do this' but it was fantastic, it was really beneficial and I ended up being able to and being able to enjoy interacting with the other women. The thing that was hardest for me to do was when I opened my mouth to be able to say something everyone was quiet and they stopped and looked at me and that was like 'wow', I was so used to being shouted over, talked over, face in your face, you know, knocking you down, threatening you, you know, I wasn't used to it and I couldn't speak. I couldn't speak and I got a stutter, developed stuttering problems which have gone actually now – yeah. It got so when people looked at me I would clam up and I couldn't talk so um… yeah, so I did my business computer course and then I went on to do [qualification] in IT.'

Becoming and Transformation

Smart and Neale (1999) identify the importance for women post-divorce of the process of rediscovering a sense of self, feeling that they had *'lost sight of their 'true' selves'* and needed to *'become themselves or find themselves again'* (Smart and Neale, 1999, p.195). This process for my participants was often marked by an experience of transformation, of emerging into a new identity (Becker, 1997; Strauss, 1969). An aspect of this was emancipation from difficult or unfulfilling relationships which may have hindered the pursuit of personal and professional development goals (Smart and Neale, 1999). Examples of reclaiming a sense of personhood included re-finding a sexual self and experimenting with intimate arrangements. It can be argued that there are multiple intimate possibilities open to heterosexual women - wife, lover, girlfriend, partner, single (sexually available or not) although these available heterosexual identities have their limitations (Van Every, 1996). These sexual possibilities may be subject to cultural, social, practical, moral and economic constraints, alongside the power of normative gendered intimacy scripts which shape practices and expectations.

Despite beginning with a contamination sequence, Emma's narrative was ultimately redemptive; one of emancipation from an abusive relationship, through a stage of basic survival and a long process of recovery, moving into a stage of becoming and reclaiming her personhood. Emma in the ten years since she left her marriage had achieved a degree, embarked on a successful career and was in the process of tentatively forming a new relationship. Narrating this journey engendered positive identity work, moving away from the position of 'victimhood' to a heroic 'triumph over adversity' narrative. She related her ability to stay focused, survive and recover to an inner 'core of strength,' linking this to a childhood where she was not expected to conform to gendered norms or prevented from doing anything on the grounds that they were 'unfeminine'. Significantly, she linked her eventual emancipation with a refusal to adhere to gendered norms, implying that the more normative, 'feminine' intimacy script would be to stay in and 'put up with' an unhappy, abusive marriage:

> *'You know sometimes I think that there's a core of strength in me that blows me away sometimes – it's you know really the only thing that's kept me from going to drugs and drink and, you know getting back into an abusive… I've got a very strong sense of my 'self'. So even though my parents would have their faults and gave me a lot of issues, on the flip side there have given me strength… and my family, my dad's never been the kind to say 'well you're my daughter, you have to wear a dress', you know, me and my sister we ran around in shorts having apple fights and mud fights and we weren't aware, we weren't aware of any 'you're a girl, you have to behave in a certain way', you can do football, whatever – so I think that that's important.'*

Resistance to portrayals of women solely as victims were present in many narratives. The characterization of the 'strong woman' who had inner strength and courage in order to overcome obstacles was recognizable in several accounts, for example Deborah's who described how her own strength came from female ancestors as well as her faith and early experiences of overcoming adversity through coping with her mother's alcoholism and violence in the home. She described how she was able to maintain this earlier resilience when experiencing domestic violence, even though that resilience was damaged. She provided a more 'female' orientated account of a typical heroic figure (McAdams, 1993) by relating her courage to her ancestors' survival and the fight for women's rights over the generations, hence overturning prescriptive gendered narratives where men are more likely to be positioned as heroes and women as passive. The story of women's emancipation thereby became a 'counter narrative' to a certain extent, although there is ambivalence in an undercurrent of the figure of a

'long-suffering woman' who copes with adversity in a context where the status quo is not fully challenged. As Deborah's female ancestors survived being alone, this inspired her with courage to deal with her situation even though she saw it as non-ideal:

> *'I think that resilience has been borne into me from a very early age. I mean I started being hit at home when I was 11 so it was either sink or swim and I learned to swim quite quickly. If you started to sink when I was young you would get hit so I had to learn very fast… So resilience is learned I think at a very young age, it's been knocked back a lot by the domestic violence from my husband but I've still managed to hold onto, as you say, that inner bit of me... and having just one genealogy recently I've realised that it must be in my genes – going back to my Great Grandma who lived in x and fought for women's rights and used to go and fight the MPs... and some of them were quite terrified of her – so I've got good strong female blood because a lot of my ancestors spent a lot of their time alone and for them to have survived and for me to be here – it obviously worked for them and as I say, I don't think it's ideal but yeah, I've got a lot of inner strength and I'm very grateful for that…'*

Intimate trajectories were portrayed as long, complex and challenging processes, taking into account the need to prioritise survival, to come to terms with negative experiences, transform lives and in many cases rediscover lost selves. Evidently it is impossible to extricate 'stand-alone' narratives of intimacy from contexts, circumstances and experiences. While the majority of participants remained immersed in the position of 'survival' because of their particular circumstances, some moved from narratives of contamination through survival and towards a position where they could begin to reconnect with their intimate selves, project towards the future and reimagine intimate relationships. Emma was one of several participants in the process of forming or establishing new relationships although this did not constitute an idealised romantic ending (Plummer, 1995), forming instead a tentative, complex and precarious process. Participants tended to aspire towards re-partnering but their ability to do so was dependent on a number of factors including basic economic survival, material and emotional stability and the age of the children. Yvonne related a trajectory, echoing that of many other participants', of moving from the rupture of her initial romantic intimacy script through making the decision to leave an unhappy marriage to basic survival and then eventually, when the circumstances were right (when her children were older), re-exploring intimate possibilities. This is condensed in the following micro-narrative which captures the movement from being naïve, innocent and unquestioning about cultural narratives of romance - which informed her intimacy script - and what she implies is a

more mature approach to intimate relationships based on shared values and enjoyment of life. It demonstrates how participants were able to reflect on and evaluate their experiences, distancing themselves from previous identities and reformulating their intimacy scripts:

> *'I made a big, big mistake – I mistook falling in love with actually having an infatuation for this man when I was 24. I'd never really had a serious relationship, I thought this was it. Really made a big mistake – I thought 'You're married now for better or worse, have to make the best of it' and we had the children so you stay on until... and I thought, 'hang on', I thought, 'I was staying because it was the right thing to do for the children but if they're unhappy because we're together then I have to be brave enough to say I'm going and it can't go on'... and it was such a traumatic time anyway that... looking for work and making sure they were Ok, I didn't even think of looking for another relationship… I wasn't in the right state of mind to begin thinking about meeting any other men at that time and with the ties of having the children, they were too young to be left on their own and when they got a bit older I realised I've always, always wanted to meet somebody really special who has the same values as I do and who is really passionate about life and me.'*

While many participants remained focused on everyday survival but aspired towards eventually re-partnering, an alternative version of single motherhood emerged as an emancipatory, independent position and viable alternative to unequal relationships. Participants often experienced a newfound independence, being able to make decisions and have control over the resources in order to better benefit themselves and their children. This was especially evident in cases where previous relationships were abusive. Chloe described how, despite the loss of somebody with whom to share the challenges and enjoyment of her children's development, she was enjoying being able to think and choose for herself, to create stability in her family and strengthen her relationship with her children. While she reflected on how she did not choose her situation and it does not live up to the romantic 'happy ever after' intimacy script which she imagined, she was beginning to enjoy the freedom of having time to herself while the children were with their father and the opportunity of rediscovering skills and activities which gave her pleasure. The rediscovery of her selfhood or trajectory towards 'becoming' were depicted as an overriding positive outcome, resisting the conventional intimacy script which had previously influenced her choices. In this way her narrative is one of resistance, alongside a positive reworking of her identity. It can be read as a 'counter narrative' to dominant conceptions of single mothers deliberately

creating their circumstances - she possibly speaks out to a wider audience stating that '*it's not as if I didn't try to make it work*':

> '*On the whole I don't really feel that I chose this – I wanted to have a happy ever after life [child interrupts]… I didn't plan to be on my own… it's not as if I didn't try to make it work…[child interrupts]… it's strange because those few weekends that I've had… [Pause, deals with child] I've got more time than I've ever had in a strange way, those weekends where they're with their Dad I've, I did a little workshop with my friend… it made me realise how much I enjoyed doing it and I haven't been able to do that so there are real sort of advantages in a way if you do have contact with the other parents and you do have that time without children.*'

She contrasted her previous, current and possible future situations, concluding that while sharing a life with somebody is the ideal, ultimately the process of becoming, realizing her potential and providing a good role model for her children were more important. In this way she counteracted the disappointment of not achieving her imagined 'happy ever after' intimacy script. The experience of disappointment and loss can to some extent be seen as a resource which enabled her to see and begin to liberate herself from the limitations of this heteronormative script. As with many of these accounts, her narrative only partially reflects the modern, reflexive individual (Giddens, 1991). There remained a strong sense of the traditional, long-term, stable intimate life as an ideal - if not always possible - intimacy script. This remained an important touchstone for these narratives against which intimate lives are measured. Chloe's trajectory was shaped by material circumstances and the impossibility of envisaging a future intimate life while coming to terms with negative experiences of relationships. Far from being purely individualistic, she emphasised the centrality of caring commitments to her children - 'self-development' activities are justified through seeking to become a better role model. Ultimately she refused to remain in the position of a passive 'victim' by reclaiming her right to personhood and regaining control over her life:

> '*The advantages were feeling that I had control over my own daily life as well as more long-term plans – I can actually start to think about what values I have rather than the ones imposed by him and financially just feeling much more… just much less guilty actually, just going into a supermarket and being able to make selections that are mine rather than what my ex is going to say about them um… and parenting, I find it easier strangely because I can actually give*

the children a lot more focused attention than before. I mean it's hard obviously because they've been through such a trauma in the last few months but I feel that actually we've got a stability that we haven't had for a long time – it's peculiar but it's between me and them – I feel it's much more level um I s'pose I just feel that my brain – I've got my brain back actually. I haven't got this other voice going constantly if that makes sense!

…I've started to realise that sharing life with somebody is such a gift really, it's so nice if you do get that and that I may not… I've just closed the chapter on doing that with x and that's hard. Especially with children, because you want to share their development really. But the future for me really is getting to a place where I'm feeling that I fulfilled my potential as a human being and you know being just the person that I know I want to be, it sounds silly but I think I've just been squished for so long that I'm just sort of – be who I think I can be and… feel confident again and… also be somebody who my children will actually look at and respect and feel strengthened by…'

While there were some similarities between the narratives in emphasizing the possibility of transformation and becoming, participants were operating within very different contexts, with different levels of economic and social resources and were at different points in their trajectories. While some had achieved their goals, many may not have opportunity to follow personal goals due to a range of factors. Certainly, where participants made the decision to leave difficult or abusive relationships, this was not regretted despite the harsh personal and material consequences which often ensued. For many, transitioning into single motherhood was an emancipatory experience on a personal if not economic level and, as a result, they were able to successfully care for children and begin to meet their own needs. However, the possibility of rediscovering intimate selves and forming new couple relationships remained uncertain for the majority of participants. While more equal partnerships were tentatively put forward as an ideal to be aspired to, whether or not it is a real possibility in contemporary society is uncertain; the extent to which gender relations and relationships are perceived to have changed over the past generation remained tenuous (Jamieson, 1998). This may be due to ongoing cultural expectation that childcare is ultimately the responsibility of women (Fineman, 2004; Lewis, 2001), as suggested here by Susan:

'Probably some people would say yes they have [an equal relationship] and well that's not my experience of being in a relationship – you know, I've got this

wonderful partner who cooks for me and does his share of the childcare and drops them off at school and so on but I'm not convinced by that and it hasn't been my experience of it and it's not what you observe at the school gates is it really? I mean probably by now some men are aware that they shouldn't have those expectations but on the whole I think they still do um... I mean surely we've move on from... I feel I should say yes of course things have changed but I'm not convinced that it's true, otherwise why would it be so frequently the case that women end up as being the lone parents – I know male lone parents do exist but I think generally it's still women and that says something about the relationship that they've come out of and the expectation that they will be the main carer.'

These narratives were not told in a vacuum but within wider structures and specific social, cultural, local milieus (Plummer, 1995). Participants held shifting positions in relation to intimacy, gender and family, moving between traditional, couple centred nuclear intimacy scripts, egalitarian equal relationships and romantic fantasies which in the course of their narratives were revisited, critiqued and reworked. Narrative telling provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on their life trajectories, to consider their present and also to project towards future possibilities. It enabled them to explore their personal trajectories in the light of shifting historical and cultural contexts, spanning time, place and generations - to be explored more fully in this next section.

Inter-generational and scriptual transitions, continuities and collisions

These narratives drew on wider cultural narratives in terms of intimacy including notions of social change linked to increased gender equality and democratic relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992), the increase in choice and fluidity alongside risk (Bauman, 2003; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992) and that of the decline of 'traditional family values' (Evans, 1993). Especially pertinent to participants' experiences were notions of the changing status of women, with questions around how far women experience or perceive greater equality in relationships. Their narratives suggested continued inequalities for women in relationships (Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 2007). Simultaneously, and more noticeably with younger participants, it was recognized that in some cases gender roles are less fixed and more fluid, complimenting research findings of Hockey, Meah and Robinson (2010). It was inferred that there is more possibility for negotiation or mutual disclosure in heterosexual relationships than in previous generations (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998). However, the overall picture provided here falls short of the democratic intimate relationships

envisioned in the 'transformation of intimacy' thesis. This section draws on participants' reflections on their narratives, alongside responses to semi-structured interview questions about intimacy and generational differences.

For Karen, continued gendered inequalities were manifested in ongoing expectations of rigid gender roles, with the male as 'provider' and female as 'domestic caretaker' which previously comprised mandates for intimate lives (Lewis, 2001). This caused disputes between her and her ex-husband and so their divorce was emancipatory for her as it meant she now had the freedom to work. She described how she resisted normative, traditional expectations about gendered roles in relationships with limited success in persuading her husband to take some responsibility for childcare. Subsequent experiences of dating taught her that these sorts of attitudes were common. While the men she had met were keen on having children, they did not expect to take on the responsibility of caring for them or - in other words - were more interested in 'having' a family in terms of possession than 'doing' family:

> 'My ex-husband, he always thought I should be at home, he goes out to be the provider, he thought it should always be like that and over the years we argued – for a good 10 years – and I said, 'I like working, I was working when you met me so…' he would reluctantly take the boys out in his lorry for the day when he knew it would be safe so I could go to work, he would still kick up about it and make it hard for me to want to go to work so as soon as we got divorced, that was it for me, I was straight out the door working and working really hard and I love the independence, I think it's great but there's still a lot of men out there who don't want to see women working. I've talked to quite a few and found they're only interested in having children.'

Jacquie voiced the perspective of many participants when she stressed that even though there is currently an expectation that women should work, they are still expected to take sole responsibility for domesticity and caring (Lewis, 2001). She indicated that it is possible to find a relationship where men are prepared to take on some domestic and caring responsibilities although this was not within her personal experience. There was an underlying suggestion that because of the general expectation that women will manage multiple roles, maintaining their primary responsibilities for domesticity, emotional labour and child-care even when in paid work (Hochschild, 1997), there is a lack of sympathy for single mothers as they are simply performing the roles all women are expected to fulfil:

'I think it's probably women are more resentful because the fact is now they're probably working as hard as their partner, as hard as the man and yet still expected to do the same amount – I think that generates a bit of resentment… the female is still likely to be doing the cooking, the washing, the ironing, the cleaning and everything else that needs to be done… but then it depends on the relationship, doesn't it because then you may have a man who's more willing to take on more roles than he used to – I mean I'm talking as an outsider here… the expectation is that you'll just get on and deal with this – deal with work and school and the house and do it yourself.'

Continued inequalities were evident from depictions of previous relationships - some participants described how they felt like single mothers while still in relationships due to unequal caring responsibilities. Fathers' lack of support for parenting was another source of (often unexpected) disappointment. This suggests that while they grew up in a culture where equality was advocated and they were expected to develop careers, there was not a similar expectation that men would play a stronger role in parenting (Fineman, 2004; Jamieson, 1998; Lewis, 2001). Jamieson (1998) astutely observes that it is continued *inequality* in practise and the rigidity of gendered roles which creates tension and destabilises relationships - this was borne out in participants' narratives. An example came from Anna who noticed little difference in terms of parental responsibility when she became a single mother, observing that her children's father had the freedom to choose which aspects of parenting to get involved with as opposed to taking full responsibility for their care:

'I think I felt a lot like a lone parent even when I was in that relationship because I had all the responsibility and he wasn't particularly hands on and so there was a sense in which um I felt that I was... that I had the responsibility for the children. So in that sense I felt sometimes that I was a lone parent anyway even we he was around and then when he left… he used to visit and would take the kids out occasionally so I suppose my sense of responsibility didn't change because I still felt I had the same degree of responsibility except some of the things I used to share with him I could no longer share and I made most of the decisions but sort of... the physical caring for them, he did what he had to do, the bare minimum, so when he left that side of things, I had to be the one who had to put them, well at least the younger one to bed every night – the physical side of it always fell to me um and he dipped in and out of the fun things.'

This was echoed by Susan who stressed how, even though her husband was from a more child friendly culture, indicating that he was good with children prior to becoming a father, he was unwilling to play an active role in the care of his child. She highlighted that on the birth of their child, she realized her whole life would change and the child's needs would come first but there was not an equivalent transformation in her husband who not only continued as before but expected his needs to take precedence. These examples are indicative of deep rooted gendered expectations regarding parenting, clashing with more egalitarian expectations of these women of this generation. The gap between Susan's expectations of equality and the reality of her experience conveys her disappointment. The anticipated experience of being in a family unit - which to her involved sharing parental responsibilities - did not come to fruition, a far cry from democratic relationships involving mutual disclosure and negotiation:

> *'I think I became a single parent as soon as she was born actually. I don't think her dad ever really engaged with the idea of parenthood – which surprised me. He's from a background and culture where children are much more accepted. We worked in an environment where we had families coming to stay and he was absolutely fantastic with children so I really expected him to be a great dad and he really wasn't. It's almost as if... I realised my life would never be the same from the moment she was born and understood that it was going to be a long time before I could put myself first with anything and that my main role was to meet her needs. He seemed to think that his life could just carry on like before and that he could fit in being a father around his job and everything else so yeah, I just found that all of the childrearing fell to me and then he then started to complain that he wasn't getting enough attention and so I said to him, 'you know, if you shared some of this then maybe I'd have a bit more time to give you' although I don't think an adult should be complaining about not getting attention. It was always me who was feeding her, getting her up and dressed, planning things for her to do in the day and he wasn't part of the family.'*

Towards democratisation?

Cultural tensions about gender roles in families and relationships, with men and women adjusting (or not) to changing expectations, were indicated in the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and evident in 'scriptual ambivalences' within these narratives. There are some indications of increasing democratization within heterosexual relationships, flowing from women's increased economic and emotional independence and the ability to make choices and assert their needs as Anna suggested (below).

However there are continuing inequalities in the way '*women have to juggle more than men do*': In Anna's previous experience her husband expected her to take on the domestic and childcare alone, so again there was a gap between cultural narratives of increased equality and the realities of experience:

> *'Women have a lot more freedom to choose relationships than they did when I was a child and that's to do with having a degree of economic independence and also a degree of confidence... about needs and about how to assert those needs and having somebody to understand those needs uh so I think women are much more confident now about who they are and what they want out of life and that affects the relationships that they sustain or dismiss... I think in terms of heterosexual relationships there has been some progress towards women sharing domestic burdens but I still think that on the whole women have to juggle more than men do um so if you're in a heterosexual relationship there's room now to negotiate with men… about who does what you know whereas perhaps in another time – when I was a child there didn't seem to be that room to negotiate - expectations were much more rigid than they are now.'*

The ability to talk and negotiate more in contemporary intimate lives is a common strand in these narratives and reminiscent of the notion of 'disclosing intimacy', of mutual sharing and negotiation (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998). For Sam, a 33 year-old full-time employed mother of one, the ability to talk about issues which affect relationships is a positive development defining contemporary relationships, even though it may mean people are less likely to stay together if the relationship is not working. This is in line with the notion of the 'pure relationship,' indicating that this understanding of intimacy as 'disclosing' is part of public consciousness and the landscape of intimacy possibilities:

> *'When I was younger a relationship between a man and a woman was kind of a private thing, I mean no-one knew what was going on, if there was problems no-one knew about it you know with older generations you'd think they were going to stay together forever whereas nowadays people are a lot more able to talk about relationships and they know they're not necessarily going to stay together if it's not working or they might want to talk about things to make the relationships work so I think nowadays there is an ability to talk about things whereas I don't think there was before, you don't have to be embarrassed, no-one's going to be shocked by it, it's not going to be discussed behind closed doors so now it's a lot better that people can talk about things…'*

For Steph, a 37 year-old full-time employed mother of one, better communication between the sexes is seen as potentially beneficial for her son's generation, enabling friendship between men and women. She observed that in this way men may start to develop more respect for women, although that may not happen in all cases. Earlier in her narrative, Steph explained that she struggled with her relationships with men because sexes were kept separate when she was young, encouraged to develop separate interests and not to form friendships, and so she perceived the possibility of increased egalitarianism as a positive development for heterosexual relationships. It is possible that one strategy for dealing with the disappointment of not achieving an equal relationship is hoping that the next generation might have better opportunities. Participants often seemed to view themselves as part of a transitional generation in terms of gender roles and the quality of relationships, hoping that in future men will respect women and see them fully as people:

> *'The generation after us, the kids in their teens, early twenties now, there definitely seems to be more friendships between male and female and not this sort of divide um amongst the genders um… and I think that's brilliant and I think that's an excellent, positive thing and that's how it should be and I think you know as we get older, our generation… I do find that men are a lot more um… you know the whole thing that they want when they're twenty, it's just stupid and they know it, it's about respect and it's about knowing somebody as a person and that's what matters and I think they know that when they get to a certain age and if they don't that's very sad for them really… but I still think there is that anxiety and fear, a little bit of separation of the genders and hopefully… if my little boy gets older nobody's that bothered and there's not that separatism but yeah...'*

There is no definite consensus regarding whether relationships between men and women have improved although the majority of participants tentatively suggested that there is more possibility for equality. This is an area where there is much ambivalence within and between the narratives. As Teresa, a 49 year-old part-time employed mother of one suggested, it is likely that while some couples seem more 'modern' or egalitarian, others may have entrenched gender roles with women being more subservient, in this example, seeming to ask their husbands for permission to go out:

> *'In some respects, from what I can see from my friends' relationships, some of them seem um more modern than what my parents' were like or from what I've seen from older generations but some of them seem old fashioned I suppose,*

> *like asking if they can come round, almost like getting permission, whereas I*
> *know that in their mind they're being equal and just checking things out*
> *whereas I might see it as getting permission.'*

These narratives highlight conflicts between a desire for egalitarian relationships and the realities of often having experienced inequalities. There was a prevailing hope that more equal (democratic) relationships may be possible but also a sense that the risks of relationships becoming unequal or even abusive are too great. Heightened risk in respect of contemporary relationships is highlighted by detraditionalization theorists (Bauman, 2003; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992), however the risks in these narratives are highly gendered (to be explored further in the next Chapter, see section on 'Risk'). The prevalence of domestic violence and other forms of abuse was cited by Emma as evidence of continuing gendered inequalities. However, as with Steph, she described the possibility of a relationship which approximates the 'pure relationship' which transcends gender categories, is based on equality between two autonomous individuals and where both parties are in the relationship because they want to be:

> *'There's still a lot of people who still have very archaic views of relationships as*
> *you can tell by the numbers of domestic violence that still goes on but um… I*
> *think for myself I've sort of looked around, sort of examining peoples'*
> *relationships, at least how they appear on the surface, and I know that it is*
> *possible to have the kind of relationship that I want which is, you know, two*
> *individuals who care about each other and want to be together… but you're still*
> *your own person– it's not a relationship where you're the woman, you're the*
> *man; you've got to fit in this role, he's got to fit in that role… you know we're just*
> *two people who want to be together.'*

Nostalgia versus liberation

While the possibility of more equal relationships between men and women is generally viewed positively, not all participants aspired unquestioningly to this as an ideal. In some cases, a more 'traditional family values' model of intimacy was central, indicating a longing for the certainty of traditional gendered roles and a return to more stable, committed, enduring relationships perceived as a feature of intimacy in previous generations. This reflects Jamieson's (1998) and Kaufman's (2008) identification of the romanticization of the past as a cultural response to perceptions of uncertainty. For Juliet, it was clearly defined gender roles which best enabled families to function well and so for her, the shift to women working as the norm had a negative impact on family life. She explained that this was due to strains on women with couples working full-time

and an underestimation of the amount of work involved in managing childcare and households. She described the pressure she felt under to work as soon as her child started school, although she was not ready to return to work. While the position of women as 'house slaves' as in the past was not seen as a solution, a more traditional arrangement with clearly defined gender roles was contrasted positively with the current situation of not having any time, recognised as a 'triple shift' of paid work, domestic responsibilities and emotional labour (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993, 1995; Hochschild, 1997):

> *'With the opportunities that women have to work… something's been lost with that and it's not that I'm in any way advocating some sort of return to women being at the kitchen sink but… I suppose that by having those previously more defined roles, I suppose it somehow made it more possible for family life because actually something that seems to be hugely underestimated is just the amount of time it takes to run a house – to shop, to cook, to do the admin, to do the DIY, to mow the grass – all of these things, they actually take time and I remember when [my daughter] went to school, she'd been there for 3 days, I'd had 5 years of hell and this parent said 'so you've got a job now?' and I just thought, actually I've just about got time to breathe and do those things and so with women working I just think that puts enormous strains on that sort of traditional set-up and I know um, it's not like I'm looking back onto it with some sort of glorious past because I know that for women with desires, ambitions and intelligence and all the skills and abilities that women have that that's not ideal either, that they're just basically house slaves um but at least I think there was just more time in the day to do the things that needed to be done and maybe more time to be with family… it's just 'cos I observe people, you know, where couples are both working and it's just… It just seems to be an enormous strain. I think the children miss out but I think everyone misses our because of the phenomenon really of never having any time at all…'*

While Juliet asserted that she was not advocating a return to the past and the subordination of women, indicating a sense that this might not be seen as an acceptable position to take, there was nostalgia in her descriptions of couple-centred families which followed a traditional pattern, especially in the way she referred to details of their life seen in idyllic, idealistic and romantic terms with reference to 'wholesome meals' and 'country walks'. She used the word 'function' frequently, suggesting that pragmatically families are more likely to work with men and women in traditional roles, chiming with 'family values' discourse. However there was the

corollary that whereas women in the past might not have been appreciated for their domestic and caring work, in these families they are not taken for granted (possibly because full-time motherhood is no longer an unquestioned norm):

> *'I've got a friend who's got 4 children and she doesn't work, she hasn't worked at all and her oldest child's 10 and… that house seems to function very well… but she is also very happy to be a full-time mother, she takes pride in the role, she takes it very seriously and is a lovely Mum and they all eat really nice wholesome food and they go for nice walks in the countryside and her husband's a [professional] and she does care for him as well and he's a lovely guy and they do seem to have a really balanced relationship… but I think that he respects and appreciates her a lot so maybe that's different, they used to do that a lot but their roles weren't necessarily appreciated… it's like having some sort of… solid person in the centre of the family and I think if you don't have that, I don't know many families that function well if you don't have that.'*

Adopting the position of cultural commentator in critiquing the way things are now in comparison to a previous era may be one way in which participants made sense of their experiences and the rupture of their planned intimacy script. They were able to see their situation in the context of wider social and cultural change (albeit here viewed in pessimistic terms). By asserting their adherence to more traditional gendered intimacy scripts they also countered dominant cultural narratives of single mothers as the source of relationship breakdown and social issues, emphasising that single motherhood was not their choice. It therefore enabled a more positive identity construction than culturally available formulations of single motherhood. What is unclear is whether the nostalgic vision created was seen to be possible in reality or whether it simply served as a stark contrast to the current situation – highlighting 'what should be' as opposed to what is. Another source of nostalgia was for the solidity, stability and perceived lasting nature of relationships in past generations. There was a suggestion from Karen, for example, that in contemporary life people are too quick to get married and then to divorce whereas in the past once married you 'stuck with it'. She attributed this to the proliferation of choice about relationships, echoing Bauman's (2003) more pessimistic thesis regarding the disposability of contemporary relationships:

> *Karen: 'Years ago they used to think that you know, once you got into a relationship that was it – no more moving about, once you got into that relationship, you stuck with it… Divorce these days, they're making it harder*

and it might be good in one way because it might make people stop and think twice before they get married but um… I keep thinking to myself, maybe they had the good idea years ago, just sticking with the same partner and learning to cope with that…'

Charlotte: 'So what is it that's changed?'

Karen: 'There's too much choice today. There's far too much freedom of choice'.

Parents and grandparents were often still an important influence in participants' lives. Certain values about relationships and traditional family life, such as the importance of marriage continued to be passed on through the generations so forming '*meaning-constitutive traditions*' (Gross, 2005). For some single mothers, this meant they were perceived negatively and at times might internalize suggestions that they should ideally find a partner and get married (Wallbank, 2001). However, in resistance to these normative expectations they actively defended their choices and circumstances and highlighted the positive aspects of managing lives and families independently. In this example, also from Karen, there was a defence of single motherhood but simultaneous allusion to the discourse of romance, claiming she hadn't yet met 'the right one':

'Seeing all of my aunties and my cousins, they were all getting married by the time they were 17 and they all seemed to end up in long marriages and… like my Gran, she got absolutely mad when… before my son was born, they didn't like the fact that we just wanted to live together. They called it 'living over the brush' back then and they didn't look favourably on me at all. I was like the black sheep of the family for a good few years – but I just said to them, 'Look what's happened now', I said, 'At least now we've split up there's no comeuppance, all it is, is my son' and I said, 'he's going to want for nothing' because I always made sure I was working at the time so there is a big thing with relationships where people look at them differently because my Mum keeps saying to me now, 'When are you going to get settled down?' and my father says, 'I don't want to leave this earth and see you not being looked after' and all that kind of thing and I say, 'do I look like I can't look after myself?' I don't know what going to happen – whether I meet the right one or not, who knows?'

In contrast to more negative position on contemporary intimacy adopted in a previous example from the same participant, here contemporary relationships and the perceived

increase in choice are viewed positively. Love is repositioned as something to be chosen based on partners' qualities rather than an inevitable necessity and expectation for forming the basis for family life, in line with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995). There was also a suggestion within these narratives that in the absence of a long-term partner, single mothers have the opportunity to focus on their own personal development and that of their children (Smart and Neale, 1999) which takes precedence over seeking new partners. A new partner would have to be 'right' and so repartnering was seen as an important choice but not a necessity, with examples given of single mothers who cope well. It is unclear whether this stems from an increase in individualism and the emphasis on individual choice, from the cultural dominance of romance or from the perception of risk and the necessity of choosing a partner carefully to mitigate against this. It is likely that there is a combination of these factors alongside the prioritization of day-to-day survival. Karen's narrative ended on an ambivalent note where, having ignored her Grandmother's advice to settle down with a partner like other female members of her family, she insisted on following her own (what she perceived as) more adventurous path through life but 'ended up' with five children after a series of relationships. This is indicative of ways in which participants attempted to negotiate a path between different generational meanings and intimacy scripts, generating complexity and ambivalence. There is an implicit suggestion that maybe she should have listened to her Grandmother and followed a traditional path as she does not view her current situation in wholly positive terms:

> *'I think the older generation don't like it, they think that partners should be together but then you meet some people who are single people and they're doing well for themselves – they've got their kids but… you still get frowned upon – my Grandmother used to say to me 'You're living over the brush' you know, 'Living together like that you should be married' and at the time I had no intention of getting married and listening to my Grandmother I'd think, 'Is that what life is supposed to be?' and seeing my cousins… by the time they were 17 years old they were getting married, having children and I thought maybe that's the way to be but I still had this thing in me where I wanted to go travel, be adventurous, just enjoy life but looking at my life now, I've ended up with 5 kids!'*

Gendered intimacy scripts shaped ideas of how relationships 'should be' and the roles men and women 'should' play which influence aspirations and choices around intimacy. Those more orientated towards 'traditional' forms tended to be more attracted to a patriarchal family, in line with popular 'family values' discourses, and hoped to enhance their children's upbringing by eventually introducing a father figure. It was therefore a

source of frustration where there were barriers to this. Yet, participants' positions were constantly in flux within the narratives. Juliet adjusted her notion of a father figure as the most desirable trait of a partner in the course of her narrative, aspiring rather to a (lasting) 'confluent love' model (Giddens, 1991), while maintaining her belief in the importance of a father role in the family and seeing the absence of such a figure as a lack or 'empty space' (Butler, 2000):

> *'I just want somebody for me which is good, certainly a much more appealing prospect for a man I would think and… yeah, I would like to have someone to live with, share my life with and… my daughter, because she doesn't have a father, that person would have to be prepared to fulfil some of that role and obviously if she'd been younger they would more naturally be able to take on that father role and now that she's older they wouldn't have had all those years of intimacy with her… I don't know but it's very important for me, somebody who would… be prepared to be in that role to a degree. Not as much as it used to be but, but it's a really big deal for her and, you know, she really, really wants a Dad… Some people in this situation say that they feel that their, the closeness that they have with their child makes things very difficult for a third person to come in but I feel that with us there's always been this empty space.'*

While some participants were more traditionally orientated in terms of intimacy and took a pessimistic stance towards a perceived increase in choice, others saw these changes in more positive terms, drawing on notions of 'sexual liberation'. Zoe (at 30 one of the youngest participants) indicated that intimacy and sexuality have become a lot more open, there are more opportunities for sexual self-expression and diverse intimate forms such as 'open relationships' where sexual experiences are separate to the partnership, echoing Gidden's (1991) notion of 'plastic sexuality'. In this instance, Bauman's (2003) 'liquid love' and the increase in plurality and fluidity are seen as a positive change. However, this perspective is ambivalent; a more negative aspect of contemporary intimate life understood as overly high expectations and the tendency to move on quickly from relationships where expectations are not met (reminiscent of the 'pure relationship'). She attributed this to the prevalence of romantic discourse ('*the Hollywood effect*') where people are influenced by romantic images into always seeking something better (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Evans, 2003):

> *'It's fantastic that in terms of sexuality it's so much more open now... I think there's still stigmatisation around but people feel much more open about expressing themselves. It's not unusual to meet people who are open about*

being in a lesbian or gay relationship or an open relationship, I've got friends that do what the hell they want, they're in a stable loving relationship but their sex life is something that's totally separate... um and then you get, you know, different arrangements of family as well. People are surprised when they hear [my son's] dad is his step-dad and now we've broken up but it's still his dad even though he wasn't his dad in the first place. You've got lots of different kinds of families, different relationships, I suppose less marriage, more divorce. I don't know if that's a bad thing or a good thing. I'm not saying divorce is a good thing but I don't see marriage as anything wonderful, I think for some people it is but I don't really get it... I think there's a tendency to have really high expectations of people and if they don't meet them they're very quick to move on. Maybe it's the Hollywood effect – all these romantic images, if it's not all you want then you say, I'll find something better... at the other end of the spectrum there's all these open, dynamic relationships…'

There was resistance to idealization of marriage in some of these accounts, exemplified by Zoe's statement that '*I don't see marriage as anything wonderful*', suggesting resistance to heteronormative intimacy scripts. For some participants this is due to previous negative experiences of marriage based family life. Emma, for example, described how her and her siblings witnessed violence and abuse in their home. As Evans (2003) argued, the idealization of couple based family life can be undercut by negative experiences. For Sam, lasting marriages and relationships were not the norm in her childhood and she saw it as important to leave unhappy relationships. She conceded that her inability to trust was not necessarily a good thing, describing herself as a cynic, perhaps recognizing that she was resisting heteronormative ideals. Her position on intimacy was unclear; advocating that you should get out of a relationship if you're not happy to some extent reflective of the 'pure relationship.' However, describing herself as a realist, she did not necessarily aspire to an equal relationship due to her distrust of men. It was unclear whether this was an indication of self-perception in that she did not expect her relationships to last, or how she viewed men generally. An undercurrent in some of these narratives which suggests that men tend to reject commitment (Ehrenreich, 1983). Her position was ultimately informed by negative experiences of family and relationships:

'My background is that a lot of my family are married into the family, they've split up, got together with someone else so you know I don't really see marriage as a long term thing or relationships as a long term thing – I lived with my Nana and Grandad and my Nana was my step-gran. My mum left when I was four so

there was my father but he then married again and they buggered off to another country so you know I've never seen relationships as something – when you hear about these couples who've been together for fifty years it's like 'Oh, stupid people!' [laughs] yeah so coming from that background I think I've never seen relationships – if you're happy with a relationship then fair enough but if you're not happy in it then get out. I've probably always had that attitude which is not good because I've never been one to trust completely that they're going to stick around for a long time, they're going to get bored, they're going to get fed up… I like to think of myself as a realist – cynical maybe but there you go!'

Sam, later, did not see position her distrust of relationships solely in terms of individual experience but related them to cultural changes and at a different point in the interview compared the attitudes of her generation who did not see relationships as long lasting with the more traditional attitudes of her grandparents who believed in staying in a marriage (Sam was also one of the younger participants in the study). While Sam was influenced by the attitudes of a previous generation, and the notion that you have to 'stick with it', she had decided against the idea of marriage as she did not want to stay in an unhappy relationship. She emphasized how she did not consider long-term relationships to be the norm for the current generation. This is pertinent in terms of the 'transformation of intimacy' thesis; the possibility of gradually changing attitudes and emergent practices is one which could be reinvestigated for different generations and contexts. However, her position is far from the ideal of democratic relationships as she suggests that it is men specifically who are unlikely to stay in relationships, as with a number of other participants who identify men's 'flight from commitment' (Ehrenreich, 1983) as being a social problem. Sam recognized that she was caught between generational positions, describing the conflict of believing at once in 'old fashioned ideas' about staying in a marriage 'no matter what' but at the same time unable to trust that she will be happy in a relationship. It could be said that at the time of interview Sam was in a state of liminality (Becker, 1997; Turner, 1967), unable to move forwards to make full sense of her experience and to satisfactorily forge a new script or dismiss the previous one – indicative of a recognition of the limitations of available scripts:

'I worked with people who were a lot younger than me and they don't see relationships as being long-standing and that's why I got on with them because a lot of my attitudes were similar but on the other hand being brought up by my Grandparents I still had – well still have a lot of old fashioned ideas from them where once you we're in a relationship that was it, whatever happens you have to work at it, you take those vows – that's why I don't believe in marriage – and

*you stick with them no matter what. You make them work so it's kind of
conflicting. I think people… the few friends I've stayed with, classmates, my
generation… I think they have the same attitude that a relationship is not long
lasting, you don't have to stick with a relationship if you're not happy… all the
single mothers I know, even the ones that got married, the relationships they're
in have never been long lasting, they don't look at them and say, 'this is what
we're going to do when we're 60' because that just doesn't happen…'*

Bauman's (2003) vision of more fluid, diverse and ultimately risky intimate forms in
contemporary life emerges in some of these accounts, although these perceived
changes are viewed as positive or negative in different degrees. For many
participants, the ability to get out of an unhappy relationship was viewed positively, in
contrast to previous generations where women might have been trapped. This is
unsurprising given that many had left or escaped from difficult situations. Sofia
described how greater self-confidence led to more choice over who to have a
relationship with and how to go about it and attributed this, in line with Bauman (2003),
partially to an increase in technology and greater ability to communicate and form
relationships. She also stated that the relative ease of leaving relationships made it
better for the children of separated parents who were not forced to observe marital
dissonance (chiming with research suggesting that children's wellbeing is negatively
affected in environments where there is tension or marital discord)[38]. Conversely,
again echoing Bauman, Sofia stated that contemporary relationships are based on sex
and materialism rather than love:

*'Number one the technology – you can use so many options to make a
relationship, you can be sitting down and still make a relationship, there's so
many ways of doing that… traditional way is completely different – traditionally
people don't have that much patience because it's more…. Maybe people are
more confident with themselves… if not happy, if not things going well they just
finish and it's not so good for the kids growing up with not happy parents…
doing bad things around the kids… it's better for the kids to be in a separated
family like my kids – they can have two homes, one with mummy, one with
daddy and not have to see arguing – it's a better option for them.'*

Charlotte: And in what ways have relations between men and women changed?

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[38] The Good Childhood Report (2013), The Children's Society, available at http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/well-being
(Accessed 30-05-2013)

> *'Well… nowadays it's mainly sex… I think so, this is the main big change, not much love… emotionally people are much more materialistic in their relationships now.'*

For Cristina, changes around intimacy were highly gendered. Countering the notion of women's emancipation, she disputed that women are now better off through greater economic independence as there is still an expectation that they take full responsibility for childcare echoing the perspectives of other participants and feminist theorists (Fineman, 2004; Lewis, 2001). Consequently, while some women of this generation grew up expecting to 'have it all' in terms of career and family, in reality this means women are more financially insecure whereas men do not have to take childcare into consideration when making career (and intimacy) choices. This lack of responsibility means it is primarily men who have the freedom to be more fluid in relationships and family and to make choices. Echoing Sofia in the previous extract, and in line with Bauman (2003), Cristina saw intimacy as becoming more materialistic and disposable and therefore more high-risk. She saw this primarily in gendered terms of men being more likely to leave relationships and less likely to value them or have the patience to cope with boredom apart from a minority of 'thinking men':

> *'I think 'cos I grew up through all of that in that women should want all of this and not want to be married and have a family or you know not want to step off the career ladder… you can definitely do that now for women that choose that – really dangerous choice if you get divorced or if you were never married in the first place 'cos financially you are stuffed long term in the future in terms of pensions and that has got to change, there's got to be some change, either in the law or… there's got to be some recognition that bringing up a child is actually important and doing things around the home is important you know so I think that to me is a worry for [my daughter], when think about careers for her they would need to be careers that are family friendly and I find that you know I wish that somebody had said that to me when I was younger, I wish that I had done that because that's invaluable knowing that and guys don't have to think that way so that's one thing that I think is coming a bit more full circle but I don't think that men are as serious about families or see their responsibilities and maybe I'm doing them a disservice – I mean don't get me wrong, I know lots of nice guys… but I think they're kind of a rarity, they're a bit more kind of thinking men…*

…I think they just seem a bit more fluid, they can be with someone for a few years… for as long as it lasts and I think relationships… even down to friendships have to be worked on, you go through good times and bad times and you say, 'I'm not putting up with this'... My track record with relationships is crap but even I can see that… and the thing that I most want for myself is when you see those old people that have clearly been through a lot together, good times and bad times and I think that's how you really know someone and they know you… I think there's a great expectation of everybody wanting everything now, wanting the new telly now… and I think that comes right through to relationships – it needs to be great now and then sometimes it's not so great but you know what, it's normal to go through months when you're bored … yeah, so that's what I think the changes are – extended family gone and more fluidity.'

Conclusion

Participants related narratives of personal transitions set against a backdrop of perceived change, yet these stories of contemporary intimate lives fall short of the dramatic, radical transformations predicted by theorists. There is no clear divide between past and present, with inter-generational continuities and cultural perpetuations of heteronormative understandings about intimacy and continuing inequalities central to these accounts. Discourses of 'traditional family values,' romance and coupledom as the ideal are present in participants' narratives, alongside desires for more egalitarian, democratic relationships in terms of gender roles. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the notion of the 'pure relationship' is present as a possibility if not a reality and the aspiration towards equal relationships begins to form an alternative, 'progressive' intimacy script, co-existing alongside 'traditional' intimacy scripts which remain a key point of reference. It is significant that there appeared to be less adherence to traditional intimacy scripts among younger participants and observations of much more fluid relationships among their peers and so further research is recommended to contrast different generations and contexts. There is ambivalence surrounding the perceived increase in choice as this often sat uncomfortably with the lack of choice experienced by some participants. Single mothers underwent highly complex, unsettling transitions in their personal lives and understandings, intersecting with uncertain intimate transitions in the wider culture, particularly in relation to gender roles in relationships.

Participants drew on recognizable narrative themes, both archetypal (McAdams, 1993) and modern (Plummer, 1995), as they moved through a variety of sequences and narrative themes of rupture, disruption, loss, survival, emancipation, recovery, becoming and transformation. Narratives were often shaped in response to experiencing a double trauma of relationship breakdown and becoming a single mother. Loss and disappointment were experienced in a variety of forms; as the loss of a relationship or family life which participants had envisaged as being lasting; loss of identity and selfhood within the relationship (which they often sought to rediscover); loss of relative material comfort and security and the loss of idealized expectations of couplehood and romance which informed intimacy scripts. Some participants depicted individualized trajectories with detectable 'triumph over adversity,' 'self-development' (Jordan, 2004) and 'recovery' journeys (Plummer, 1995). However, other narratives were primarily categorizable as 'contamination' stories which, while in some cases entailed a degree of redemption (McAdams and Bowman, 2001), conveyed an overriding sense that their lives had been irreparably spoiled. In this way they resisted simplistic therapeutic 'recovery' formulas and emphasised the multi-layered material, emotional and social difficulties encountered. Single mothers' own positions within these narratives are ambivalent, though it is possible to observe hero(ine), victim and survivor positions. Ex-partners / children's fathers are often notable through their absence (this may reflect Smart and Neale's 1999 findings that post-divorce women tend to distance themselves from ex-partners). Some highly female orientated accounts began to emerge, positioning men as weak or irrelevant and so overturning archetypal patriarchal narratives of men as heroes and women as passive victims. It is possible to discern an unspoken but mutually understood (between single mothers) narrative of 'society' as an invisible 'villain' which must be battled: There was a strong sense of single mothers as outsiders, isolated, struggling without support and on the margins of normative society. While superficially adhering to typical western individualised narratives of 'self-development' (Jordan, 2004), the lives depicted are not individualistic but intertwined with the lives of their children, shaped by the needs of dependents (Kittay, 1999). Some accounts can be read as 'counter narratives' (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989), challenging dominant cultural narratives of single mothers who deliberately reject normative intimate forms, thereby threatening the social order and gaining unfair advantages in accessing resources. Rather they conveyed a sense of material hardships endured in an uncaring world where single mothers' voices are unheard and the realities of their existences ignored. At the same time there was a delicate balancing act in testifying to the realities of single motherhood while constructing positive identities and distancing themselves from a 'victim' role,

emphasizing how they have achieved personal emancipation and successful motherhood 'against the odds'. Nevertheless, these narratives often resist simplistic formulaic categorisation and neat resolutions, conveying a sense of ongoing pain (Frank, 1995), disappointment, ambivalence (Craib, 1994) and liminality (Becker, 1997). The modernist story genres Plummer (1995) identifies have, he suggests, come into being in recent history, enabled by the right social conditions with the emergence of social movements such as gay rights and the women's liberation movement. Single mothers' stories currently have few public forums in which to be heard; while they often run counter to dominant cultural narratives there is no specific political framework or receptive public audience to enable their telling and, in a time of social and economic uncertainty, I would argue that they are still awaiting their moment in history.

In terms of intimacy, narratives moved through a range of often contradictory positions, suggesting that they are drawing on range of cultural, discursive resources – reminiscent of Duncan's (2011b) conception of 'bricolage'. Understandings and experiences of intimacy are also inextricably linked to the specific social and material circumstances of the participants. Especially in the early stages of becoming a single mother, survival and an overriding commitment to the welfare of their children often supersedes any prioritizing of couple relationships. In some cases participants' experiences prompted a reviewing and adjustment of expectations and intimacy scripts while others remained optimistic about meeting 'the right one', drawing on romantic discourse. Others considered forming new relationships as a high-risk strategy. Romantic discourse was prevalent (Evans, 2003), alongside contrasting portrayals of risks associated with predatory or uncommitted males (Ehrenreich, 1983), to be explored further in the next chapter. Responses to the concept of romance varied from unquestioning acceptance to cynicism, resistance and rejection. De-stabilising of gender roles meant possibilities for more equal relating into view for some participants, in line with detraditionalization theories. Newfound independence and the seeming increase in choices around intimacy are perceived as emancipatory on one level. However, actual experiences of intimacy indicated rather a lack of choice about available relationships and suitable male partners. These narratives evidenced profound gendered inequalities in relationships which, along with perceived risks, engendered increasingly complex paths to negotiate when forming intimacies with men (this will be considered further in the next chapter). Some participants tended to look nostalgically to the past, with its perceived stability, fixed gender roles and lasting relationships (Gross, 2005; Jamieson, 1998; Kaufman, 2008) while for others a traditional couple based family life was experienced as less than ideal. There was a

wide spectrum of perspectives relating to ways in which relationships had changed with some (notably younger participants) welcoming increased diversity in relationship and family forms (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010). What I term 'scriptual liminality' can be discerned within and between these accounts, with both traditional and more contemporary formulations of intimacy co-existing and often in conversation with each other. Some participants suggested that relationships had become devalued through consumerism (Bauman, 2003) and unrealistic commercialized romantic expectations (Evans, 2003). Narratives therefore echoed different aspects of intimacy theories - it is certainly possible to discern Bauman's (2003) pessimism about contemporary intimate lives in the light of increased consumerism and technology alongside aspirations towards more democratic, mutually disclosing forms of intimacy (Giddens, 1992). However, ultimately these theories prove to be partial and incomplete as they do not fully take into account the significance of gender in contemporary intimacies (Evans, 2003; Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 2007).

Despite perceptions that achieving equal relationships was more possible than in previous generations, it was evident that continuing gendered inequalities mitigated against this. This was linked to ongoing predominant cultural expectation that women should be responsible for childcare (Fineman, 2004; Lewis, 2001). For some, this collided with the expectations of greater gender equality in relationships with which they had grown up, in an era of rapid change in terms of women's changing position in society and increased participation in public life. While most had grown up expecting to receive education, training and participate in employment, there remained an expectation that they would take primary responsibility for private lives (Fineman, 2004; Jamieson, 1998). Domestic and caring responsibilities were seen as putting women in the precarious position of financial dependency on either a male partner or the state, disadvantaging them significantly over the life course. It is evident that equality is often more of an ideal than a reality in women's experiences. The following chapter investigates further the practices of intimacy in the everyday lives of single mothers, taking into account the experiences, responsibilities for dependents and emphasis on survival highlighted here.

Everyday intimacies: single mothers'
intimate practices

Introduction

This chapter explores the patterning of intimacy in the everyday lives of single mothers, particularly in terms of the choices they make. The concept of 'everyday life' attends to the seemingly 'ordinary,' 'mundane' and routine aspects of social life, '*interrogating taken-for granted meanings and exposing their social and historical specificity*' (Bennett and Silva, 2004, p.112). It is therefore a helpful concept for feminist research, containing the potential to highlight and disrupt underlying gendered assumptions and power relations. Focussing on the everyday is especially pertinent in terms of exploring choices and risks: '*The apparently contradictory movements towards choices and risks are most obvious in the everyday, where our engagement with normal daily routines masks the complexity which gives everyday life its shape*' (Bennett and Silva, 2004, p.112). The emphasis here is on 'doing intimacy,' in line with Morgan's notion of 'doing family' (1996), exploring the intricacies of intimate practices (Jamieson, 1998). The chapter demonstrates ways in which available choices are constrained by material circumstances alongside normative gendered expectations. Complexity around choice-making is evident as single mothers attempt to balance their individual needs for sexual and emotional intimacy with prioritising children's needs – their choices shaped by interdependencies (Fineman, 2004). The concept of 'free choice' based on the notion of a (male) individual free from constraints favoured by white, male, middle-class theorists is therefore inadequate. Alongside material barriers to intimacy beyond the parent / child unit, conflicts can arise between normative intimacy scripts of romantic, sexual coupledom and cultural assumptions of ideal motherhood, intensively focused on children's needs (Hays, 1996). Such conflicts are played out in single mother households, in the physical, virtual and emotional spaces which they inhabit.

The chapter begins with an exploration the centrality of intimacy between single mothers and their children, with a particular focus on ways in which they establish and maintain emotional, spatial and sexual boundaries within and around their households. It moves on to discuss the significance of risk in single mothers' intimate lives which may involve managing actual physical, sexual and emotional risks to themselves and / or their children as well as negotiating perceptions of risk. The chapter then focusses on friendships which form another key source of emotional intimacy. It considers ways

in which some single mothers may transcend heteronormative intimacy scripts through the decentring of couple relationships as the primary source of intimacy; in this sense they can be viewed as 'pioneers of change' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). In contrast, other participants experienced significant barriers to intimacy which again brings into question the emphasis on increased choice in the 'transformation of intimacy' thesis (Giddens, 1992).

Mother /child intimacy

When asked about their most important source of emotional and / or practical support, participants usually responded that it was their children or a particular child. The centrality of children as opposed to romantic partners as a source of intimacy in part reflects Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (1995) observation of the growing centrality of children in people's lives generally and so opens up the question of how far single mothers are 'pioneers of change' in terms of intimacy. However, the emphasis on children also complements the notion of acceptable, respectable femininity in highlighting the importance of caring identities (Skeggs, 1997). It could reflect what has been described as a cultural adherence to an ideology of 'intensive motherhood' (Hays, 1996), which emphasises the intensive, selfless and nurturing commitment required of the maternal role, despite women's increased participation in the public sphere. Participants' responses may therefore be perceived, to some extent, as adhering to conventional notions of motherhood as a primary, central role for women. Emphasising the importance of children in their lives may be one strategy to counter negative assumptions about single mothers, including potential moral and normalizing judgements about their sexuality and ability to parent (Gillies, 2007). Material circumstances are likely to shape intimate practices and, as touched on in the previous chapter, the need for day-to-day survival often takes precedence over other intimacies. Survival can be an intense shared experience between parent and child. In cases where single mothers are unable or unwilling to seek other forms of intimacy and where romantic partnerships are not possible, it is unsurprising that children become an important source of emotional fulfilment and meaning. It is likely that all these factors, cultural and material, come into play in the emphasis on relationships with children.

Accounts of mother-child(ren) relationships were often accompanied by a sense of guilt for burdening children with problems and emotional difficulties. While participants often kept details of their romantic or sexual lives away from their children, preferring to share the details with friends, children were witness to everyday hardships and emotions and in that sense were closer to being 'partners,' as one participant described

her child. Jess (aged 39), a part-time professional and mother of two, used the metaphor of 'hunting in the wilderness' to describe the closeness afforded by sharing everyday hardships. The experience was portrayed as ambivalent; as much as it enabled strong emotional bonds, it could be 'vicious' being the sole provider and not having anyone with whom to share the financial responsibility. Depicted here is an intense emotional partnership, 'undiluted' by the presence of another adult, but not one which is equal in terms of responsibility, as children are unable to share fully in ensuring day to day survival of the family unit:

> *'I always had this image in my head of a mother cheetah hunting alone with her cub, that's what we are you know, we're out there in some kind of wilderness, it's just us two. I think it's probably afforded me more closeness with my children but it's also more vicious, at times when I'm absolutely ground down by being the provider and you have to get out sometimes, get some head space so yeah, both the sharpness of it and the sweetness of it have been more intense probably because it hasn't been diluted by another adult in the mix.'*

There was a constant balance to be sought in enjoying this intimate connection, shared experience and empathy and protecting children from details of sexual and emotional lives - emotionally overburdening children was often deemed irresponsible. It therefore reflected to an extent the 'disclosing intimacy' relationship (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998). It is also overlayed by guilt and anxiety about how far the intensity of this relationship is socially and morally acceptable in a culture which emphasises the protection of children and their innocence (Ribbens, 1994; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2003; Walklate, 2004). While intensity may be lauded in mothering relationships (Hays, 1996), there are evidently cultural boundaries around how far mothers are permitted to 'disclose' to their children. This was evident in an account from Helen (aged 50), a full-time professional mother of three. She conveyed the guilt attached to this situation, describing it in negative terms as 'awful,' suggesting it was at odds with normative perceptions of a mother / child relationship:

> *'If I was totally honest – and this is dreadful – it's my daughter, my second daughter. I don't tell her everything of course but she's the one who can pick up on my emotions – even if I say I'm Ok she says 'mum I know you're not, what is it, is it such and such?' And she'll know what I've been thinking. Similarly I can tell what she would have been thinking when she's got issues. So I don't pour my heart out to her, she's seen me crying, I do that often enough… I tell the details to my girlie friends. In particularly one girlie friend who's had such similar*

experiences… but my daughter sees me every day. She'll say 'look mum you do that and I'll do that'– she knows it gets too much and she'll step in but – she's not perfect! – she's the one that's there… that's awful really that that should be a daughter but that's the truth of it - yeah.'

Deborah was similarly concerned about the emotional impact on children of sharing her problems and turning to them for physical affection as opposed to a partner. Having strayed from her anticipated intimacy script, she saw her family in negative terms in contrast to what she saw as a 'normal family' with two adults at its centre:

'What is the normal family in my mind? Two adults, two kids – purely because that is the average number of kids (I think it's 2.3 or something)... um and two adults whether they be single sex or whatever – it's somebody who you can talk to at night, give a cuddle to, hold your hand when you need it... it worries me sometimes that I take that sort of thing from my children... not that they're not wanting to offer it but it might not always be when they're offering it that I ask for it if that makes sense and it would be nice to have another adult to request that from rather than from your kids... you know like 'can I have a hug?' for example.'

While in this section of the interview, Deborah would seem to be subscribing to a heteronormative model of family, at another point she described her family life in positive terms in the way that it functions, emphasizing how her and her children work as a team, thus underpinning the ambivalence of single parenting. Children may take more responsibility within the relationship, in helping the family to function well and working towards shared goals. Deborah therefore demonstrated scriptual liminality in concurrently adhering to and resisting a normative script about what family should be:

'Well we're a very close family and it's quite beautiful really – I don't think that's something that's easily found in family life, particularly in today's society. I'm very proud of my children and we work very hard and we work very well as a team together, as a family…

So in a way we were learning at different paces but we were learning at the same time. Shared goals, shared aims, shared directives and working towards them together... it doesn't always work – nothing's perfect but it enables them to bring up things they're worried about or talk to me about things, perhaps things that children might not talk to parents about in an average family where it hasn't

> *happened... it doesn't mean we're better than them or they're better than us, it's just different.'*

Deborah here vividly depicted an egalitarian family unit which enabled mutual disclosure and support. While single mothers may experience guilt about disclosing to their children, there may be more scope for children to discuss issues and their emotions in a way which Deborah suggested might not happen in a couple-centred family unit. Other participants such as Karen embraced closeness and mutual disclosure with their children, despite occasional negative perceptions of others:

> *'So with my kids I've never closed up on them – anything they want to talk about… I mean some of my girlfriends have been shocked at what they know about but the thing is… if I can see by looking at my son's eyes there's something going on there I'll say, 'Look have you got time, do you want to talk? 'Sometimes he'll be, 'Yeah, yeah' and I'll say, 'Look, don't put that big boy act on with me''.*

There was a sense in some of the interviews that the relationship between a single mother and her children may not be as hierarchical as that which might be found in a two-parent family. This was described by Teresa as a partnership that, while not completely equal, is one where both parties take responsibility for the relationship:

> *'Well, we're always together, we do lots of things together and we are… I don't want to say like friends because there is a definite hierarchy, I'm the one who's in charge but in the way we relate to each other, we talk more like adults – what we do during our days, it's more like a partnership and I do try to make her feel part of it, help make decisions about what goes on and to give her responsibilities in our relationship so… at the end of the day we're not complete equals but I do try to make her feel like it's more of a partnership.'*

Caitlyn (aged 33), a part-time employed mother of one, compared her family life with her child negatively with what she perceived as a 'normal' family with two parents and described her emotional response to an idyllic family scene on the beach. However, she similarly conveyed a sense of scriptual liminality, caught between adhering to and resisting conventional intimacy scripts. At the same time as regretting not having had this experience, she recognized that she and her child could enjoy a certain amount of freedom and lack of constraints which may not occur in a nuclear family unit. She was able to devote herself to her relationship with her child and focus on her needs without being constrained by others' (i.e. a partner's) needs and a more structured, restricted

lifestyle. Similarly to other participants, she employed the term 'partnership' to describe the relationship with her daughter, contrasting this with 'friends':

> *'I remember being on the beach one summer's day and there was a family in front … there was a mum with her two little boys and I heard this crunching in the pebbles behind me and I looked behind me and there was a man behind me loosening his tie and with his briefcase and he surprised her and I just sat there and cried because I'd never had that family experience but equally at the same time I love the fact that me and [my daughter] could be on the beach until 6, 7 o'clock at night because there was no-one expecting us home for dinner and so there was this amazing freedom and so we became much more of a partnership as mother and daughter – not quite friends but it certainly doesn't seem to be the relationship I see when there's a couple.'*

There were therefore ambivalences in the way in which these single mothers experienced and represented their family lives with positive and negative aspects running concurrently throughout their responses. These are indicative of scriptual liminality and unsettledness – participants often internalizing conventional intimacy scripts while at the same time discovering new ways of doing intimacy. There were further ambivalences in terms of mother-child relationships, previously explored in feminist thought (Rich, 1977). While it may be tempting to portray the close relationship between a single mother and her children in romanticised terms as free from patriarchal control, this very intensity can potentially have negative as well as positive effects. Not many participants chose to disclose more negative aspects of the relationship and this is likely to have been at least in part due to the need to maintain a socially acceptable mothering identity.

Sam depicted how closeness between mother and child may be heightened when there is an only child. The following extract highlights that this intense relationship can be a difficult one emotionally for both parties, despite the possibilities of more equality and mutual disclosure:

> *'It's difficult because being a single mother, it being her and me means we just argue all the time – we are very similar and sometimes I felt that having another relationship was a good thing for her and it would give me a bit of breathing space – I don't know if it worked, the thought was there. But yes, if there was a partner there she would be a completely different person but at the moment it's just the two of us… we are close, I give her her space and she gives me mine but she's always there, I know everything she does, much to her horror! Yeah,*

she's very mummified though – whenever I go out somewhere she says 'mummy's got to do that, only mummy can say that' so that can be a bit of a problem and I think well I may as well just get on with it.'

There was general consensus among participants regarding the intensity and closeness of the relationship but also many ambivalences, encapsulated in Elizabeth's narrative. Her description of her relationship with her son provided a sense of the fluctuating nature of the relationship, depending on material circumstances. Elizabeth (aged 49) had one child and was unemployed due to ill-health. She echoed the sense of guilt many participants felt about children having to endure emotional turbulence and 'bear the brunt' of single mothers' feelings of stress and pressure:

'It's definitely been a bit of a rollercoaster ride for both of us depending on how much stress and pressure I've been under and when I've been under a lot of stress or pressure then I'm afraid he's been the one who bears the brunt of what I'm feeling and that's not necessarily fair on him and when things are going well we just have a really nice relationship.'

Parenting as a single mother

Single mothers may feel an additional sense of responsibility in terms of developing intimate relationships outside the family unit, as there is a perceived need to model heteronormative relationships for their children. In the case of parenting girls this may include modelling appropriate sexual behaviours (Chodorow, 1978). This was described by Helen in terms of perceived social rules (sexual scripts) about how women ideally ought to conduct their sexual lives. There was a suggestion that it is expected that a woman should wait for a certain amount of time, having met a potential romantic partner, before beginning sexual relations and so certain ground rules for 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997) or normative gendered sexual scripts were evoked. It was not considered appropriate to introduce romantic / sexual partners to children before a certain amount of time had lapsed. Helen therefore utilized time when the children were with their father to spend time with potential partners so that her sexual life was kept separate until she was ready to gradually introduce a new partner. She ensured that she had known the man for a certain period of time and allowed opportunities for her children to get to know him before he was allowed to spend the night with their knowledge:

'So as far as people staying, I never let anybody stay that the children know about unless we've been together for a few months because I'm the role model

for the girls so I might have known someone 4 or 5 months before I'll let them stay. And the girls would have known them, they would have met them by that time, they would have been to the house but they would never be staying while the girls are there.'

Another example of the importance of 'good parenting,' with reference to shaping gendered roles, was provided by Elizabeth who emphasized the challenge and importance of socializing boys. Elizabeth here rejected conventional gendered intimacy scripts, following traditional breadwinner / domestic patterns, instead emphasising the importance of teaching boys to respect women and contribute to domesticity:

'My kind of aim is to raise him to be a decent kind of man. If I was looking for a boyfriend this would be the kind of man I'd want to meet – a boy who picks up his dirty washing off the floor, a boy who can do the washing up, a boy who can cook, who does domestic chores, isn't expecting high praise because he's deemed to clean the toilet, a boy who has respect for women and an appreciation of what they, in fact that's what I want him to have, that respect for women.'

Significantly, Elizabeth cast her ideal partner in the egalitarian model - as someone who is respectful of women and does not expect them to do the majority of domestic chores. This could be seen as an example of how the 'pure relationship' is emergent as an ideal type in terms of egalitarianism, although participants tended to aspire towards permanence and stability as opposed to transience in relationships. However, suitable partners were perceived to be in short supply, in terms of both stability and equality, and so these ideal relationship types were not necessarily available. Furthermore, ambivalence and scriptual liminality are ever-present in these interviews. The challenges of parenting alone were framed in the same interview as managing two separate, highly gendered roles of being 'mother' and 'father'. Another section of Elizabeth's interview reflected a more traditionalist notion of the importance of the father figure; there was a concern running through these interviews about whether children need a father figure, intersecting with populist 'family values' discourses:

'You have to do both roles, you have to be the mother and father and I don't think when you're trying to be the father that it carries the same weight because whenever you introduce a male figure you're saying 'don't do this, don't do that' but the minute a man goes 'do as your mother says' they stop – it's like an in-built thing so in terms of the discipline when you're raising a boy in particular it's harder without a father figure there and they know it.'

Disadvantages of parenting alone, without a father figure, were frequently cited and included dealing with the challenges of parenting and disciplining children alone; coping with the financial difficulty associated with a single income or Social Security benefits; having to make decisions alone without reference to another adult; not having any time for the self (especially where there are younger children and where there is no shared childcare arrangement in place) and, for some, social isolation. However, it was also often seen as an advantage that one parent could make decisions for themselves and their children. Participants valued the independence and freedom this afforded, alongside the time they could devote to caring for and building strong relationships with their children. Despite the huge weight of responsibility carried alone, as Anna reminded us (below), making parenting choices without needing to negotiate meant less conflict. As suggested by Teresa (in the next extract), this enabled more clarity for the child as well as more personal freedom for the mother:

> *'In some ways the fact that I'm on my own means that I don't have to negotiate parenting choices anymore and I can parent the way I think is desirable. I think not having to negotiate with another person is quite an advantage, being able to have that autonomy is an advantage. The disadvantage is that if you're not used to taking the responsibility yourself then that is huge – you've got nobody to share that sense of responsibility with and I think that's a big deal'.* (Anna)

> *'I suppose the advantage is not having to argue with someone else about how things are done and your word is the last word, there's no playing parents off against each other… I suppose our bond might be closer because of it, I don't know but it is, I feel, I can be independent in that I can make decisions and we can just get up and go without having to ask anyone else what they think so selfishly it's better… maybe I am better off as a single parent.'* (Teresa)

Boundaries and relationship choices

The importance of relationships with children and increased sense of responsibility that can accompany parenting alone means that children's needs are prioritized when it comes to making choices about 'romantic' relationships. Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies' (2003) study of step-families also found that this was the case. A number of participants indicated that essential criteria for potential partners included their attitudes towards children and that the ability to accept the child was an essential aspect of the relationship. This was heightened in cases where children's fathers were absent or uninvolved with their children:

'Obviously it's a lot harder - you don't have the freedom that you had when you were single and also you have to consider the impact of a relationship on your child and you know, it's just as much how that person gets on with you as how they embrace your child and if they don't it's not going to work out and I've certainly had a couple of boyfriends who you know superficially have said I love children blah-de-blah but the reality is they've wanted an exclusive relationship with me and they've pretended to themselves that I'm a single woman and the child's my responsibility as some kind of added on extra and I've thought 'no, that's not good enough, it's not good enough for me and it's certainly not good enough for my child who's already got one father figure who's rejected him, I'm not going to give him another', so that doesn't work for me. I just think these men are so naïve, they think they can have this exclusive relationship with a single mother…' (Elizabeth)

This illustrates that children tended to be the emotional priority over romantic partnerships - the emotional impact on children was taken into consideration when selecting potential partners. An alternative way of managing sexual relationships was to separate dating, sexual encounters and casual relationships from family life. It was considered that children did not need to know about adult relationships unless they became 'serious' in terms of being more long-term and committed. However, due to the closeness between the mother and her children, it could feel counterintuitive not to discuss this aspect of their lives as Jacquie described:

'Cos you feel like… cos when I've had dates and things you know, internet dating, I've met about half a dozen people… it's not like… I feel like I'm being secretive because I've not told [my daughter] about it… but there's no need to. It's never moved on, it's never led to anything but there is that part of you, you feel like you're being a bit furtive. Do you know what I mean?' [laughs]

Participants employed a variety of strategies to establish and maintain intimate - emotional, spatial and sexual - boundaries within and around their households. These boundaries served to protect the close bonds and family unit; protect children from the emotional impact of coping with another person in their mother's life and ensured children were protected from knowledge of sexual activity. Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003) identified the importance of the construction of boundaries in their study of step-families; these included physical and affective boundaries and were premised on people's ideas about 'family' and their moral responsibility for children - highly pertinent in the case of single mothers who often have primary responsibility for

their children's welfare and wellbeing. Helen's love-life and family life were kept as separate as possible - it was only when her children spent regular time with their father that she conducted her sexual life. For her, as previously discussed, it was imperative that she modelled appropriate sexual behaviour for her daughters as young adults. She emphasised that (short-term) 'boyfriends' as opposed to (long-term) 'partners' remained peripheral to the core family group and were not part of their household or everyday lives. Although she ideally wanted to find a long-term partnership, her relationships tended to be short-term and so she felt it was important to protect her children from becoming emotionally attached to her partners and suffering from the emotional fallout of her relationship breakdowns.

While a long-term partner who formed part of the family unit was often seen as the ideal, it might be extremely difficult for a potential partner to fit into such an established close-knit family unit. As previously touched on, there was perceived to be a lack of availability of suitable men and the responsibility of managing a family alone precluded taking care of someone else. The perception that a male partner might mean an additional emotional and practical burden was echoed in several accounts. As Teresa elucidated, many men of a similar age may have what is commonly termed 'emotional baggage,' in that they may still be recovering from past relationships or have complicated lives with ex-partners and children and this was considered to be too much to cope with practically and in terms of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) alongside the challenges of single parenthood. Hochschild (1983) emphasized the highly gendered nature of 'emotion work' in relationships as well as work settings which is often, as with domestic work, under-appreciated: '…*the emotion work of enhancing the status and wellbeing of others is an unseen effort, which, like housework does not quite count as labor but is critical to getting things done. As with doing housework - well, the trick is to erase any evidence of effort, to offer only the clean house and welcoming smile*' (Hochschild, 1983, p.167). This resonates with the perception that men expect to be looked after and also do not 'carry their weight,' either emotionally or with domestic chores and childcare. A partner would for some, constitute having another child or emotional and practical (and in some cases financial) dependent, echoing feminist commentators regarding continuing gendered inequalities in relationships (Fineman, 2004; Lewis, 2001; Smart, 1999).

With children's needs prioritized, participants often had to be highly discerning around making relationship choices, even when this meant that they were left with few possibilities for sexual or romantic relationships. This might be read in the context of Bauman's (2003) perception of the commodification of intimacy, whereby individuals

are always calculating whether a potential partner is worth their time and effort. However, participants are not thinking individualistically but taking into account the needs of their dependents and the maintenance of their family unit (Fineman, 2004).

There may be an underlying 'emancipatory' strand running through these accounts; the need to become more discerning and careful about relationship choices was also seen in positive terms. The decision not to enter a relationship where they will adopt a supportive or subordinate role was potentially empowering for some participants, disrupting traditional gendered intimacy scripts:

> *'Ideally I would want a proper relationship, someone who would live with us and be part of our unit but I think that could be difficult for someone because my daughter and I already have this unit which is just us so they would have to fit into that rather than growing into one ourselves so I could see that might be difficult for someone and also at my age, I can see most men are either married or in a relationship and if they're not they're looking for something else from me [laughs] which isn't ideal for me or they're recovering from their own broken relationships… or they're looking for someone to take care of them and I've already got a child – not another one!*
>
> *And in a way I think being a lone parent has strengthened me like that because before I had her I would be the person who was taking care of everything and always in charge and supporting and doing that and looking after everyone and now I'm not prepared to do that anymore – you've got to carry your weight and if you can't do that then it's goodbye. It's helped make me stronger and make better choices – not that there's been any choices! – but it's made me feel better about saying no.'* (Teresa)

When participants did enter into relationships, it could be emotionally strained in cases where they felt pulled emotionally by both their children and new partner. Alongside the need to create boundaries and provide a normative sexual role model, there was an underlying emotional tension and guilt about spending time and emotional energy on thinking about a partner. This was exacerbated by the strong bonds and sense of responsibility for children's wellbeing which accompanied the experience of single motherhood for these participants:

> *'I think as a lone parent you tend to think you have to be... or I tend to think I have to be responsible for everything so... I did feel very pulled in terms of... when I was with [my partner] I was spending time away from... not spending*

time away from [my child] but... the thought that... the mental energy because when I'm not in a relationship with somebody a lot of my mental energy goes on thinking about the children and you know I'm conscious of being in a relationship and that I spend a lot of time thinking about them rather than the children um... so that's like an internal tension, it sets up - all that guilt, all that stuff... and I worry about the effect of my relationships on [my younger child] because I don't want to subject her to a series of people running through my bedroom and I haven't done that and I wouldn't particularly want to do that for myself... let alone for [my daughter].' (Anna)

Crucially, Anna touched on the cultural tension between being a mother and also a sexual being (Rich, 1977), describing the guilt about wanting time, energy and space to conduct sexual relationships, the feeling that 'I'm a mother and that's not allowed'. For Anna the initial discomfort of beginning a sexual relationship as a parent (specifically as a mother) was exacerbated when, having explored her sexuality, she entered into her first relationship with a woman. She was concerned about the potential effect on her youngest daughter of being made aware of their sexual relationship:

'I was trying to carve out a space for me and my relationships and the guilt that actually I need some space and 'I'm a mother and that's not allowed' and all those stupid things that women put themselves through... so yeah, it was very difficult but we're at the stage now where she stays the night occasionally when [child] is here and that's Ok now – it doesn't happen regularly but it happens occasionally.

And opportunities to have sex were very few and far between to start with – I mean they [the children] knew her because she'd been around as a friend but when a change came it took a while – not [my eldest daughter] because she's gay but for the youngest one, it took time for her to adjust... and that has consequences for intimacy.'

Echoing previous comments, Anna underlined the importance of having a partner who understands the situation and is interested in children as something which enhances and is central to emotionally intimate adult relationships. Sandra reiterated the importance of new partners understanding children, seen as vital for the relationship to work. She appreciated that her partner valued and admired her ability to parent alone and this also enhanced emotional intimacy. As with many of these accounts, the new partner was not seen as adopting a parenting role or as a prospective 'father figure' but as a friend of the family who did not interfere with parenting, thus rejecting a traditional

patriarchal family model. This process of a partner becoming part of a family was one of very carefully managed gradual familiarization. It was essential that anyone introduced to children was deemed to be 'safe'. The following quotation demonstrates the importance of negotiating physical spaces for intimacy and privacy. For Sandra this included being upfront with her children about her need for privacy for relationships and for them to respect boundaries, encapsulated by the lock on the bedroom door:

> *'I always deliberately kept that aspect separate – I wouldn't tell the kids I was going on a date, I don't want to build it up into some big… if I did bring a man home, the kids would know they were safe and they'd see them as a friend, they would just be a friend. I was with [my ex-boyfriend] for two years and it was really good, they just saw him as a friend and he was really laid back and didn't interfere, he'd just say, 'Oh you're bringing up three children, you're doing a really amazing job', you know, that's one of the reasons I loved him and it worked. And you know, [my children] give me my privacy – I've got a lock on my bedroom door and when [my boyfriend] comes over they know to knock, you know, I don't make a big deal out of it, I'm very open about sex.'*

Caitlyn recounted her experience of managing the relationship between her child and new partner which was fraught with difficulty. Introducing a partner into the family unit where she and her child were very close was challenging; there were layers of complexity due to him resenting her child, her ex-partner and her past, blaming her for having a child with an unsuitable partner at a young age. After a number of difficult attempts at being together, the couple sought counselling and at the time of interview were beginning to resolve these issues. Complex dynamics operating in this family unit were evident, with Caitlyn describing the difficulty and ambivalence of being pulled emotionally in different directions. While the majority of single mothers re-partner[39], it is not necessarily a straightforward process (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2003). Caitlyn and her partner had begun to live together at the time of interview and she was the only participant with a live-in partner but she still identified as a lone parent, as effectively she was the only person parenting. This chimed with the experiences of several other participants who felt that they were parenting alone, even in partnerships with their children's biological fathers, underlining the idea that new partners did not automatically take on the role of parenting. The complexity of the emotional situation was reflected in the negotiation of physical space with the new partner seen as impinging on the child's space and vice versa:

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[39] The average duration for single parenthood is 5 years: Skew, A., Berrington, A., Falkingham, J. (2008) 'Leaving Lone Parenthood: Analysis of the re-partnering patterns of lone mothers in the UK.

'I think that's what I've learned about relationships, is how much negotiation is involved in all relationships but when one of you has a child and it's not both of yours, there's this extra level of negotiation that has to go on and they both want a piece of me sometimes one will upset the other one and because me and [my daughter] had been so close for so long and it had just been us two, it was difficult for her and he never saw that from her position, that he was coming into her space, he just saw her as kind of a burden… she was in the space he wanted to share with me and sometimes he resents the fact of how close we are.'

Biological fathers, with one exception in this sample, tended to be peripheral in single mothers' lives. As touched on in the previous chapter, in narrative terms, they were associated with the past from which participants had moved away. Fathers' relationships with children were often carefully managed by participants, as was the relationship with subsequent ex-partners. This echoes the findings of Smart and Neale's (1999) research on fathers and mothers after divorce, where mothers tend to be still overwhelmingly responsible for childcare and the management of relationships, involving 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1983). Some fathers looked after their children on a regular or occasional basis, which meant participants had some freedom and opportunities to pursue other relationships (echoing Smart and Neale, 1999). Where fathers were absent and / or non-contributing, as was commonly the case, this willingness to maintain and manage the relationship could subside. Elizabeth eventually made the decision to withdraw from this role, leaving the responsibility for the 'emotion work' to the father:

'I wanted a good male role model for him as he was growing up so I made an effort for him to still be in our life, I wanted there to be a channel of communication between us and we've visited x a couple of times, he has moved to x and has a new family now in x and we've been to see him there and now it's got to the stage where I've said 'so far I've done all the running, if you want to continue to see your son you've got to make the effort to come over and see him' because I'm not even in a position where I can – I'm not even working at the moment – and you know he's never contributed a penny to his upkeep so you know I'm going to put the ball in his court, he knows how to get in contact with him…'

Managing risk

Participants' emphases on boundaries and the prioritization of children's emotional wellbeing links to perceptions of risk, a key concept in theories of individualisation and intimacy (Beck, 1992; Giddens 1992; Lupton, 1999; Morgan, 1999). For detraditionalization theorists (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991, 1992), risk is intrinsically linked to intimacy in contemporary life. Beck (1992) describes a 'risk society' which he argues characterises modern society, involving heightened perceptions of risk and the necessity of risk avoidance. While awareness of risk may be partially attributable to the uncertainties inherent in modern life generally, single mothers are likely to be aware of potential risks due to their past experiences, their personal vulnerability (Smart, 2000; Walklate, 2004) and the importance attached to the protection of children, which may be augmented for single mothers as sole guardians. Any decisions about whether to pursue intimate relationships or to re-partner have to take into account the wellbeing of the whole family, as opposed to the mother as an individual, in line with understandings about interdependence (Fineman, 2004; Gilligan, 1982). Intimacies in everyday life are carefully managed so as to protect the often central relationship of the mother and her children and their safety.

Risks, it is argued, form part of the contemporary landscape of intimacy: Giddens emphasises the emotional risks inherent in egalitarian, confluent relationships where there is an expectation of 'opening out' to the other (Giddens, 1991). 'Risk' and 'trust' are inextricably linked, with individuals continuing to seek 'ontological security' through personal relationships (Giddens, 1991) even while holding a heightened awareness of risk. Where the world is experienced as increasingly insecure and indeed the current economic climate renders many aspects of life uncertain, this may engender an increased desire for trust and commitment generally (Kaufman, 2008); this is likely to be exacerbated for single mothers coping with myriad material uncertainties. As Weeks et al (2001) posit, '*Trust and commitments are less assured and yet individuals still need the security that these promise – perhaps in fact, need them more in order to face a world of continuing insecurity in work and at home*' (Weeks et al, 2001, p.23).

Perceptions of risk may be enhanced for single mothers with their prioritisation of establishing boundaries and protecting their family units, which may well have been subject to actual physical and emotional harm. Risks from the standpoint of participants included the threat of physical, sexual and psychological harm, often based on experience. Walklate (2004) highlights ways in which perceptions of risk and fear of crime are gendered. Drawing on radical feminist perspectives, she indicates ways in

which women may come to experience the threat to their personal security as normal, often characterising their relationships with men. While she highlights the limitations of this perspective and its risk of evoking biological essentialism, she maintains the importance of taking women's experiences into account and recognising the '*routinised, daily threat to personal security that characterises many women's lives*' (Walklate, 2004, p.97). This threat to personal security infiltrates both public and private domains, whether at home, on the streets or on public transport, for example (Walklate, 2004, p.97). From the standpoint of these single mothers, risks were physical, sexual and emotional - although they were primarily concerned with the protection of their children rather than themselves. Some participants had a heightened awareness of risk, based on previous experiences of violence or other forms of abuse, which informed their parenting practices. For Deborah, who became a single mother through escaping domestic violence, this element of protection strengthened her bonds with her children. Her account demonstrated how the situation of single motherhood often results from the need to protect children, especially from witnessing or experiencing domestic abuse, again running counter to popular cultural narratives that single mothers choose their situation. Sandra here explicated how she and her children openly discussed and managed the situation together when her ex-partner became violent towards their daughter. The period of adjusting to divorce or separation was often portrayed as extremely volatile with high levels of perceived or actual threat from ex-partners (echoing Smart and Neale, 1999):

> *'There's been a lot of situations where I've had to fight for the kids, including initially against their father – to keep them safe... and when their father sadly didn't know what he was doing and when a child grows up relying on their parent for their safety, I think that strengthens the bonds…*
>
> *There was a bit of an incident recently… As a parent, I was finding it hard, I wanted to say f*** off to [my daughter] a couple of times and I went and did [parenting course for parents of teenagers] and it really helped because I don't believe in shouting at kids and hitting kids but then it's cultural – he's from [a different culture] where they think that's discipline, that it's Ok to beat up your kids. So anyway, we sat around the table and discussed it and said 'What are we going to do about Dad?' And because it was just a one off and it hadn't happened before we decided to give him another chance and he had a police caution and since then I hope it's made him think…'*

In cases where participants had experienced abuse, perceptions of risk shaped and defined intimate lives and choices for significant periods of time. Participants highlighted that it may take a long time to recover from the emotional repercussions of living with domestic abuse, both for themselves and their children. Alongside protecting children from direct harm, there was a perceived need to protect them from further emotional instability resulting from the presence of another person entering the family environment. Emma explained how she managed the development of her new relationship in balance with meeting her child's needs, reassuring her child that the new partner did not pose a threat to their relationship. Managing this delicate balance while experiencing ongoing emotional difficulties as a result of previous relationships was detrimental to her emotional wellbeing, although she emphasized how she had coped:

> *'Really difficult 'cos at the same time as being in a relationship and dealing, trying to deal with being in a relationship – on its own – let alone all the emotional problems that I know I had and have – um I, you know, really bad insecurities, lack of confidence, you know, I knew these were things that could really ruin this relationship and I had to get a grip so it's been pretty difficult and in the first few months at times I thought 'I can't do this', you know, I can't do it, it's just too much.*

> *Emotionally I've felt completely shattered in the past few months, I've completely and utterly had it in the last few months and year and I just felt I just can't, can't cope with it but I have and with the occasional… wobbly bits… I have and it's been very hard and to balance my needs for him with what he's doing and having to make [my daughter] feel that she's not threatened at all by him, for her nothing's going to change, you know, he's not moving in, I'm not moving in with him, you know I wouldn't even contemplate that early on in the relationship, um no way. You know, I don't want her to feel that I don't love her or that I love her any less just because I've got a man in my life…'*

Some participants encountered negative experiences of partners coming into their lives and becoming attached to children with difficult emotional consequences for children if they were inconsistent, dishonest about their level of commitment or where there was subsequent relationship breakdown. Karen described how negative experiences increased protectiveness over her children's wellbeing and created barriers to developing partnerships:

> *'Alarm bells started ringing in my ears because at first he was all about taking my daughter to Florida for her birthday and everything like that and then one*

> *day she turned round and said, 'When are we going to go?' and he totally cut*
> *her off saying, 'I'm not going'. She was totally broken-hearted and I thought,*
> *'That's it'– I'm not going to let another guy get that close to me or her again*
> *because seeing the pain that she went through because she was wanting to*
> *buy everything for the holiday… and he was just standing round and totally*
> *denying all knowledge of it.'*

A more sinister fear held by some participants, perhaps enhanced through their sense of vulnerability and in the context of high profile cases in recent years[40], was that they might be targeted by paedophiles. This heightened anxiety and initial distrust of men, consolidating a perceived need to create protective barriers around their family unit. This anxiety was described by Cristina who dated a number of men following separation from her daughter's father. It was exacerbated through her daughter's father monitoring her behaviour as a mother, in the context of a legal custody case where he attempted to cast her as an 'unfit mother'. With her family unit under threat, she felt the need to prove her ability to protect her child:

> *'Very few people would have met [my daughter]. It was like I had a real criteria*
> *of what they had to be to meet [my daughter]. When she was younger it was*
> *mainly because I had a really big fear that they might be a paedophile that was*
> *only targeting me to get to my child! It was something that was in the news at*
> *the time…*
>
> *There were some guys I met who were potential… they'd say, 'Oh I like*
> *children' and I'd think, 'You're a pervert!' [laughter] which is just ridiculous but I*
> *think I really became well a bit paranoid because you're kind of really aware*
> *that you haven't got anyone else to bounce things off and if anything happened*
> *her dad would basically – well he'd always blame me for everything anyway…*
> *so it made things really, really difficult for me when she was younger, worrying*
> *about all of that.'*

Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003) observe that perceived risks associated with re-partnering and forming step-families can impact on the moral identities of parents. This is likely to be pertinent for single mothers, given their sense of responsibility for and closeness to their children. Negative perceptions of single parenthood and sensationalizing of high profile media cases (discussed in Chapter 1) may comprise an additional barrier to forming intimate relationships. Teresa recounted

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[40] High profile paedophile cases have included the Soham murders, 2002 ; the cases of April Jones and Tia Sharpe in 2012.

how perceptions of risk can also be held by extended families, creating an atmosphere of anxiety and judgement about her behaviour. Responses to sensationalist stories may be disproportionate and undermine single mothers' abilities to make choices about appropriate partners. However, the main actual threat for Teresa was men's potential dishonesty about their relationship status. Participants indicated a perception of vulnerability of single mothers and their children who might be 'targeted' by predatory males. Single mothers as well as their children are deemed to be at risk, whether from potential abusers or men who simply want sex without commitment:

> *'Every time I have met someone my family has been convinced they're either a paedophile or a drug addict or someone who would need me to support them – even though I don't think like that they put those seeds in my head so I'm thinking' are you only after me for my child' and it's really scary that you think like that – sensationalist stories that you hear… it would be nice just to be able to think, just relax from that and meet someone… I think that my family think I'm so desperate that I'd make bad choices – I know I have made some bad choices but they're not evil predators and I happen to think that 99% of the population are nice people but I do feel vulnerable because I've been out of the game for so long and you tend to trust people a bit more and then 2 months down the line you find out they're married or things like that and it's very easy for people like that – not nice guys – I think you're more of a target, you know.'*

The lack of suitable partners was a running theme which may reflect to some extent a male 'flight from commitment' which Ehrenreich (1983) depicted as embedded in late twentieth-century Western culture. The perception of risk to single mothers and their children from males was multi-faceted, incorporating physical, sexual, financial and emotional threats which in turn shaped intimate behaviours and choices. Karen felt that she was more vulnerable when at home alone with her children and learned to negotiate sexual relations in order to protect herself, for example by not inviting men she dated into her home. She also ensured she did not become too emotionally attached to men due to note wanting to appear vulnerable and so did not share her problems with them (below). The subsequent quotation from Zoe encapsulates the tension between a desire for intimacy and fear of the potential emotional consequences of relationships going wrong:

> *'Men often take advantage of a mother who's at home with a child… when I was working it seemed easier because I had lots of excuses to escape – I'd say I'd meet them at certain times and it was nice, I felt in control. Now I'm not working*

and I'm speaking to a lot of different guys, I've met them in different places and sometimes I've let them come to my house… and I've decided well against that now with advice from other people … because there's a lot of men that think that because you say 'Come round to mine', they automatically think you want them to stay over and like now if I do talk to them I stipulate straight away there'll be no staying over and I see how interested they are [laughs]…'

'I'm a bit more guarded about my emotions… where I may have issues with children, with parenting, with upsetting emotional issues, I don't tend to share those as much with a man now – partly because they won't understand because they're not family and also partly because I'll make myself vulnerable by getting attached to them so I keep detached I suppose which… impacts on how relationships are going to go in any case but it's just part of protecting myself'. (Karen)

'I definitely am someone who thinks, 'Right, I want some male attention! 'But relationships...I do crave it, I definitely crave intimacy – right now I would love to be in a loving relationship but if anyone approached me, I'd chase them off with a stick because, you know... what might go wrong, the energy it takes to make it go right, there's just so many... the way I see it the probability is if I meet somebody it will go wrong, it's just such a high risk venture.' (Zoe)

Participants' desire for intimacy, closeness and trust was therefore tempered by an awareness of emotional, sexual and physical risks to themselves and their children from men. This was exacerbated by concerns about the likelihood of commitment from prospective male partners and the need to protect themselves and their children from further emotional pain and upheaval. Their responses are indicative of how women, specifically single mothers, may experience what Walklate describes as a '*permanent state of ontological insecurity and precariousness*' (Walklate, 2004, p.97) through a constant need to negotiate threat. However, there is a danger, as Walklate (2004) specifies, of seeing women solely as victims and ignoring the ways in which women might engage in pleasure seeking and risk taking behaviour. Single motherhood also provided possibilities for experimentation, for taking control over their intimate lives and for risk taking and pleasure seeking conventionally associated with masculinity (Walklate, 2004). Participants often tried Internet dating, met a wide variety of men and tried different sorts of relationships, explored in this chapter ('Exploring new possibilities'). Nevertheless, new relationships were perceived as containing potential

risks and participants negotiated to ensure they were not 'taken advantage of' emotionally and sexually and that relationships did not impact negatively on children.

Friendships

For many participants, single motherhood represented a changing landscape of intimacy whether through choices or their changing circumstances, both expanding or limiting possibilities and opportunities. For many, especially in the light of the highly complex process of re-partnering, this entailed moving from the notion of an intensive emotional / sexual partnership with one person to different relationships with different people. Friendship was highly significant in the lives of the majority of single mothers in this sample – friends often became increasingly central to their lives, offering emotional and practical support, while family members were often more peripheral (apart from several isolated instances involving a specific – usually local - family member to whom participants were close). This echoes Spencer and Pahl's (2006) finding that friendships can take on a new significance where family relationships are non-existent or have deteriorated. In many cases the geographical upheaval of partnering and separating, alongside lack of understanding from family members, meant that families were seen as secondary in terms of meeting intimate and practical needs, echoing the notion of 'elective affinities' (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998) and the findings of Roseneil and Budgeon (2004) regarding the increasing significance of friendships.

Becoming a single mother may entail experiencing the rupture of intimacy scripts, the need to survive difficult material circumstances, and navigating risks around the protection of their children and themselves. In this context, it is understandable why such women might seek intimacy with others in similar situations to help them navigate these complexities and insecurities: As Weeks et al (2001) argue, '*In modern society, most people, whether heterosexual or homosexual, live through very similar experiences of insecurity and emotional flux at various times of their lives, and relationships based on friendships and choice often become indispensable frameworks for negotiating the hazards of everyday life*' (Weeks et al, 2001, p.21).

Participants reported that the development of meaningful and lasting female friendships, especially with other single mothers, was one of the more positive aspects of being a single mother:

> '*One thing that I do remember after the break up was forming this circle of female friends and they were some of the best times that I've had because we were all in similar situations and it was just so wonderful to talk to other women*

and it was so funny and so sad – all of these emotions – and we really built
strong friendships and we still see them now you know – people meet partners
and you don't sort of hang out as much but we still meet up and have very
strong friendships and that's something I'll take with me forever.' (Steph)

Friendship could take on a heightened status, providing a pinnacle of intimate connection as opposed to insecure and unfulfilling heterosexual relationships (Roseneil, 2004) which seldom lived up to idealized versions of heterosexual intimacy (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010). At 'turning points' (McAdams and Bowman, 2001; Strauss 1969), with intimacy scripts and identities in flux, it is unsurprising that participants turned to friends for acceptance and a sense of identity and belonging: '…*friendships particularly flourish when overarching identities are fragmented in periods of rapid social change, or at turning points in people's lives, or when lives are lived at odds with social norms*' (Weeks et al, 2001, p.51).

Whether through choice or necessity, the significance of friendships may to an extent reflect a transitional social landscape of intimacy, opening up possibilities beyond the heteronormative couple centred model (Roseneil, 2004). However, it is also specific to the context of being a single mother; new friendships were most often formed with other single mothers and those who were likely to sympathise with their situations. It was not simply a question of forming 'elective affinities', freely choosing kinship groups and transcending 'communities of need' (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998); friendship groups were at least in part formed around necessity. While friendships entailed mutual disclosure they also often contained a practical element which, given the challenges faced in everyday life, should not be underestimated. This was exemplified by Jess, who relied on exchanges of childcare in order to help organise her life:

'*It's my 'have children round to tea day' when I can cash favours or I've got a friend who works shifts in x, any x day she knows I can have [her child] and she will help me on her day off – other mums help enormously and actually it's easier when you take another child home with you…'*

Helen's trajectory illustrated a shift from a reliance on one person to fulfil all emotional, physical and social needs towards having a friendship group which satisfied many - if not all - intimacy needs. While friends may not fulfil sexual needs, Helen described relationships which comprised disclosure at a level which she perceived may not be possible with men due to differences and communication barriers between men and women. In this way she resisted both the heteronormative couple-centred ideal and

also the suggestion inherent in the individualisation thesis of increasing egalitarianism, negotiation and 'opening out' between men and women:

> *'Where I said I was very close to my husband emotionally – he was everything, he was my best friend, everything I wanted answers to he had the answers or I thought he did - but as times have gone on, certainly as I've got older or maybe because I've been on my own more, I wouldn't look for everything in one person. I've got a good group of girlie friends - some single, some married and I've realized now that in some ways I was very lucky to have that marriage but I don't think I would want to put all my eggs in one basket with one person again... I have fun and different sorts of giggles and laughs with my girlie friends and I'm not sure my partner would be in that role.*
>
> *There's obviously the physical side, it's a different relationship – I'd be looking for some fun and laughter obviously but I've realized that men and women are so different and certainly in my first marriage I didn't realize that but I've seen differences in the way men communicate or don't communicate… I've got different and in a way lower expectations of a man because when they don't communicate it's actually nothing negative but not the way my female friends respond whereas if a male you ask them something you'll get a yes or no answer and that's just them so yes I've got different expectations…'*

This lack of emotional relating may be one reason why male friends rarely featured, apart from two isolated exceptions, and ex-boyfriends occasionally remained friends. This may also be linked to issues around 'trust,' based on previously negative relationship experiences with men and perceptions of risk. It is pertinent to note the differentiation between predominantly physical, sexual and relationships with men and mutually disclosing intimacies with female friends. For Elizabeth, it was the sexual nature of heterosexual relationships which represented a barrier to disclosure – this insight does not sit comfortably with the assumed centrality of 'the couple,' either in popular culture or individualisation theses (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Roseneil, 2005). Like many participants she stated that she was closest to her female friends, describing one advantage that a friendship is uncomplicated by sex and sexuality. It was depicted as a non–judgmental relationship, valuable for single mothers who often feel judged and negatively viewed by the wider society, including family and pre-existing friends. Elizabeth contrasted the quality of her friendships with relationship with family members. She drew a sharp distinction between these relationships, attributing this to a middle-class background where family members are

expected to be independent of each other and, unlike friends, attach conditions to any support they give. In this particular instance, individualism is associated with family rather than friendships, challenging laments of the decline of 'traditional kinship' (Bauman, 2003). This simultaneously reflects the emotional limitations of a specifically middle-class individualised model of family:

> *'My girlfriends really – they give me good advice, they know me well enough to say I'm making an idiot of myself, to challenge me rather than judge me and um yeah then the people I choose to socialize with when I do have free time and it's not complicated by the agenda of sex and sexuality – it's just spending time together, having a shoulder to cry on and being there for me – they're the people I value most and…*

> *my family are there for me too but they're not and never will be one of these really close I don't know the word – they're not that, they are… not the sort of close working class knit model but the middle class you know you go off independently and make very little demand on each other kind of thing and if you <u>do</u> do something for somebody in your family you can sure as hell expect to have to do something back so it's conditional support rather than the sort of unconditional support I would get from my friends.'*

For Helen, spending time with friends in similar positions entailed greater understanding about her intimate practices and the fact that her relationships tended to be casual and short-term. She thereby sought 'acceptance' (Weeks et al, 2001) for what might otherwise be construed as 'alternative', even 'unrespectable' (Skeggs, 1997) ways of conducting her intimate life. Conversely, she was concerned that married friends might not feel comfortable meeting short-term partners and was careful about introducing people because of how she might be perceived – she was therefore aware of the potential for 'normalizing judgement' (Carabine, 2001; Foucault, 1977):

> *'I feel I can ring up a female friend and ask them over and I couldn't just do that with a couple and so I see less couples now and because when I'm in a relationship I'm not sure if it's going to last I don't introduce them to too many of my friends because they'll just think 'Oh she's onto another one now'! So I've got my friends who are single mums and are similar to me in that they'll have relationships that last a year to 15 months but my stable married couple friends I tend not to introduce people to 'cos um I don't know how comfortable they'd feel – they have a different sort of lifestyle – they have their married long-term relationship and I have my short-term relationships.'*

Participants often reported moving away from or being excluded from friendships with couples or women in couples and so their position as single mothers dramatically transformed their 'personal communities' (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) - a term referring to people's immediate landscapes of intimacy, usually made up of friends and family. Another reason raised for difficulties in maintaining friendships with couple-based social circles was implicit stereotyping of single mothers as sexual predators and a threat to other women. Jess described this scenario, explaining how she was no longer invited out by heterosexual couples, though still maintained friendships with lesbian couples. This denotes the experience of exclusion, a failure to meet the standards of 'normalisation' (Foucault, 1977) and the establishment of heterosexual hierarchies (Van Every, 1996), where those in couples are positioned as superior to 'singles':

> *'There are an enormous amount of stereotypes about single mothers and even in immediate social circles there is a concern with other women that you're threatening which I find enormously insulting, I really do. There's the temptation to be bitchy and say 'as if I would fancy him' but… you're not needy but you're not a ballbreaker either… It really bugs me that people think that single mothers are sex maniacs or something but I don't think we're more so than any other woman. I think you're very unlucky, one thing I hate even in my x circle is the only people – couples - who invite me out are the lesbian couples um and the only time I got invited out by my hetero-couple friends was when I was in a relationship. Even though they are good friends and they are intelligent, strong women… I don't think they are doing it on purpose, they just discount you. I just remember x saying 'why don't you come round to dinner with me and x' and I'm like [sigh]… I was always here before… but I don't think I've ever tried to threaten other women.'*

This may be in part that single mothers are perceived as 'needy', in desperate need of a partner, especially for financial support, as this is a thread running through many of these accounts: *'I wouldn't want to get into a relationship being so financially needy and I think that's another thing as well, men are very suspicious of that and as soon as a man finds out you've got debts that'll be the end of it you know – you're only after me for my money …'* (Teresa). Single mothers run the risk of being judged for not following the normative intimacy script based on gendered roles, whereby a woman is provided for by a man. These scenarios also reveal the cultural problematic of mothers who are also sexual beings (Rich, 1977) and risk losing their sexual 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997) by appearing to be sexually available.

Another barrier to friendship was where participants' lifestyles became incompatible with friends' after becoming a parent or single mother. Sam explicated how her previous set of friends were unable to identify with her situation, being in a 'different world' where they were more focused on going out and leisure activities. This experience is likely to be common to many new parents but is particularly pertinent for young single mothers who may have children before the rest of their peer group and find it difficult to meet others in a similar predicament:

> *'A lot of my friends were from there and they were younger than me, not interested in having kids yet, wanted to go out all night every night and when I became pregnant I stopped all that and I lost all my friends that way and they're not the sort of people you continue that friendship with because it's a different world for them and for me so yeah I lost a lot of friends… I mean there's still a few friends I stay in contact with but it's… once a year, maybe a comment on a status on Facebook – that's about it really.'*

For some, due to their circumstances, there were limited opportunities and resources to make friends with people in similar situations, leading to social isolation. Participants often felt they were not part of their local communities, either because there was a lack of opportunity to meet other single parents with shared interests or due to a perception of difference, due to class, race, culture or circumstances. However, in line with previous findings (Spencer and Pahl, 2006), friendships were usually locally based – developed through parenting networks, schools, neighbours or work. Single mothers' acceptance into friendship and parenting circles was often contingent on their locale. Juliet contrasted two areas where she had lived – one urban, multicultural environment where there were liberal attitudes towards single parent families and where it was normal to socialize with parents from diverse backgrounds. Living in the suburb of a small city where two-parent families were the norm and families were more self-contained, she found she did not 'fit in' and was judged for her situation:

> *'When I went to x I felt really – I don't know, I just felt people were much more open, friendly, welcoming and non-judgmental. I've experienced a lot of judgement at that school. So I've just been trying to keep a low profile, trying to keep [my daughter] happy but then I've got to find an outlet for me, I've got to try and find support, friendship elsewhere and that's just really tough – when I haven't got the life of a single person because if I was a single person then as a single I would join everything, I would go on everything, I would be working, you*

> *know, so I would have far more avenues to meet people. It's just a very slow*
> *process.'*

Close friendships were often long-term, formed early in participants' parenting lives through local communities or peers from work, school or college who had had children at a similar time. Some reconnected with old friends who were now in similar circumstances, as parents or single parents and many forged new friendships with other single parents, partly through necessity. However, in cases such as Juliet's where single mothers were uprooted from their original communities, even though there was the possibility of maintaining contact with old friends via internet and phone, it was hard to develop new friendship circles. It is significant that participants' 'personal communities' (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) were shaped partly through choice but mainly through their circumstances – by their local contexts and the way in which they were perceived. Yet where friendships were established, with other single mothers in particular, these were described as extremely committed and meaningful, revealing 'hidden solidarities' (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). These findings challenge Bauman's (2003) vision of a world marked by lack of commitment and fleeting, casual encounters. Neither do they neatly fit with individualisation theories' emphases on experimentation and choice, given the part circumstance, constraint and necessity play in shaping intimate lives.

Yet, while these accounts challenge the notion of 'free choice,' the circumstances of becoming single mothers often did to a degree open up new possibilities and offered an expansion of 'personal communities,' moving away from 'given' or ascribed ties towards 'chosen' ties based on shared experiences and understanding (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) even where this shift is precipitated through necessity. In this sense these participants can be seen as 'pioneers of change' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), even while there is a concurrent attachment to conventional intimacy scripts and nostalgia for more traditional ways of doing intimacy. Weeks et al (2001) argue that for those who operate on the boundaries of heteronormativity, friendships can take on a particular significance. While they were primarily discussing the lives of non-heterosexuals, it would seem that this applies at least to some extent to single mothers who are often marginalized (outside heteronormativity) through their experiences: '*Friendships… can allow individuals who are uprooted or marginalized to feel constantly confirmed in who and what they are through changing social experiences. They offer the possibility of developing new patterns of intimacy and commitment. All these features give a special meaning and intensity to friendship in the lives of those who lives on the fringes of sexual conformity*' (Weeks et al, 2001, p.51).

Exploring new possibilities

For those with the resources to do so, becoming single, represented an opportunity to experiment with romantic and sexual relationships, to engage with 'everyday experiments in living' (Giddens, 1991; Weeks et al 1999). Whether through choice or necessity, intimate lives shifted in significant ways. This was often connected to wanting to experience sexual pleasure and other forms of fulfilment missing in previous partnerships. While participants had a heightened awareness of risk, their primary focus was on protecting their children – becoming a single mother represented an opportunity to seek sexual pleasure and excitement and to take risks through experimenting with casual relationships. This signified a transcendence of the 'asexual mother' role (Rich, 1977) and provided an antidote to the everyday rigours of 'survival'. It may have formed part of re-building ruptured identities or simply seen as a first step towards re-partnering. Sexual exploration links to Giddens' (1991) notion of 'plastic sexuality' and cultural emphases on sex primarily for pleasure. However, the reality was often more complex, shaped by heteronormative understandings of romance, coupledom and the ultimate objective of re-partnering.

Several participants engaged in Internet dating and others had been introduced to prospective romantic / sexual partners through friends. Some experienced a range of sexual partners in stark contrast to those who had no opportunities for sexual relations. Some chose casual sex or long-term sexual arrangements rather than seeking one romantic relationship, through not wishing to re-partner due to bad experiences or wanting to maintain stability for their children by keeping sex lives separate, as previously discussed. Experiments included sexual relationships with people from different ethnic backgrounds and exploring sexuality and sexual identities. For other participants, being single itself was an experiment which some successfully adjusted to, making it a life choice to remain single.

For Sandra, rediscovering her sexual, feminine side was part of a recovery process during the difficult period after her husband left her and their children for another woman. There was a particularly difficult period of adjustment while divorcing in terms of emotions, parenting, finances, housing, legal battles and resulting stress and mental health problems. However, her children encouraged her to begin to enjoy her femininity again and she gradually started dating. While her sexual life with her husband had not been satisfying, she had been willing to renounce that aspect of herself but began to rediscover this again, dating casually for two years before finding another long-term partner:

'The stuff that was going on was him sort of slowly pulling away from the family – his girlfriend pulling him, me not having any support, not knowing what it is to be a single parent and… panicking, crashing the car – I couldn't concentrate. I was thinking I'm going to be with the kids the whole time – oh my God, is he still going to give me some money, how can I afford things – all this stuff. I didn't know if we'd have a home. You go into a depression, all this stuff – you go into a depression kind of thing. I call it purgatory because between us splitting and the divorce there was a court case to see how we would live and that first few months – it was a kind of distraction and the kids would be saying, 'Oh come on Mum, put on some make-up, buy some clothes'– so I actually started being feminine again and it was nice, I enjoyed it.

…We were happy together right up until we broke up so to this day I think it was the end of a good relationship – but the sex wasn't so good for me… I sacrificed that part of myself, the sex life for the children and the family. So… I was Ok with that – for instance he didn't give me oral sex in all the time we were together. I was Ok with that 'cos what you don't get you don't miss. So when I started dating afterwards and discovered men like giving oral sex it was great – yeah!'

Anna similarly wanted to rediscover her sexuality when her marriage of twenty-two years ended and so she initiated a sexual relationship with the friend of a friend specifically for this purpose, which she termed a 'fuck buddy' relationship. This could be seen as an example of 'plastic sexuality' (Giddens, 1991), although it was not experienced unambiguously as liberating or empowering. While the arrangement served its purpose of experimentation and sexual discovery, in the event she found it difficult to separate sex and emotions:

'Having just got out of that, having just got out of a 22 year marriage - you know, I didn't want to go back into that – what I wanted was sex, I'm not sure, I didn't think at the time that what I wanted was intimacy... so I think probably after um, I don't know, it was probably 10 months or so – a friend of mine set me up with a friend of hers, he wasn't a stranger, it was somebody I'd known because I knew him through her um and you know the deal was that it was just sex and it was great because I thought I'd lost my libido and I didn't realise I was a sexual being and so that was about sex and it was a good lesson because it made me think a lot about the relationship between sex and intimacy... because I thought I didn't want to be emotionally close to anybody I

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> *was interested in just having a fuck buddy relationship and that was basically*
> *what was set up but I realise that um... that it was very difficult for me to*
> *separate my emotions from just sex.'*

Anna initially dated a variety of men - usually met through internet dating sites - and engaged in casual sexual relationships. Eventually she developed the confidence to explore her sexuality and embarked on an open relationship with another woman with whom she had developed a close friendship. For her, the transition to single motherhood encompassed the opportunity to reshape her intimate life:

> *'I'd always felt much more comfortable in the presence of women, much more*
> *um female focussed and knew that at some point in my life that was what I was*
> *going to experiment with, it was just a question of again having the courage and*
> *the opportunity to do that. I wasn't prepared to put myself on lesbian dating*
> *websites – didn't have the confidence to do that. Anyway x was obviously*
> *interested so after I'd finished with x… um so that was nearly a year ago now, x*
> *and I got it together and it's great!'*

Karen also found that becoming single represented an opportunity to experiment with relationships: *'Trying different situations of going out and being with people and seeing… how I felt'.* Having been in a marriage where she experienced severe emotional abuse, she turned to the Internet to begin talking to different people and eventually dating and building up her sexual confidence. The internet provided an opportunity to date younger men and men from different ethnic backgrounds; like other women in her situation dating websites opened up a new world of possibilities and provided an important learning experience where previously they might have been inexperienced or naïve about relationships. For Steph, this experience similarly enabled her to learn more about men and herself which was her primary intention alongside having fun. Internet dating in some ways proved emancipatory for participants who had been in long-term, unfulfilling relationships. The experience had a positive outcome for Steph, whereby she eventually met her current partner with whom she developed a long-distance 'living apart together' (Duncan and Phillips, 2010) relationship. Significantly, while the distance and the fact that he had two children by two different mothers proved complicated, she chose to be with him as she respected him and it was challenging to find a man she could respect (tying in with observations about the lack of suitable partners):

> *'I did Internet dating after about 2 years where I learnt so much about men! It*
> *was really quite an eye opener and taught me a lot about myself as well and*

really helped me to grow and learn and… you know again I think emotionally holding back, you know – it was fun, that's what it was for me, it was fun and it was very, very interesting on a social aspect sort of learning about behaviours of people – so valuable – you know. And so I did that for 2 years and then I met the person that I'm with now and because we met on internet dating and he was living in x and we were like 'well this isn't going to work is it because you live there and I live here and we're just going to keep in touch through Facebook and you know'… and then we just, we just had to be together and it was the first time that I'd genuinely felt this feeling of 'I respect this person' because that was something that I had an issue with – respecting these men that I came across – they never proved anything else but you know this was a good man if you like but it's been very difficult because of the distance and he has two children by two different mothers… all the juggling and the complications…'

In contrast, over time Karen developed a certain amount of suspicion and cynicism after negative experiences with Internet communication, especially with men described as 'players', who persuade vulnerable women to have sexual relations with them through romantic overtures but then disappear and seduce a number of women at the same time or those who attempt to rush into relationships via correspondence alone, without getting to know the other party properly. The Internet is therefore a social medium which contains certain risks as well as opportunities for single mothers:

'Another guy who I got talking to, he thought that once we met up, that would be another relationship but I said, 'I would like to meet you, get to know you, maybe over time we'll meet up again but just because we've met up once doesn't mean there's a relationship there'… so I'm too frightened to speak to him now [laughs]! So I mean I thought this internet thing would be good but it's starting to become a bit of a headache now, I'm starting to be too frightened to go on some of these sites 'cos I just know what's going to be on there waiting for me next! [laughter]'

Barriers to intimacy

While some participants were able to meet potential friends, lovers and partners and form relationships, opportunities to do so were contingent on their particular social and financial circumstances. Thus their experiences represent a challenge to the assumption of 'free choice' which underpins the 'transformation of intimacy' thesis (Giddens, 1992). The barriers experienced are not being attributed to particular 'types'

of single mother – as we have seen, single motherhood often entailed a journey in participants' narratives and individuals may experience different stages, often including a period of basic survival. Experiences such as dating were shaped by social, emotional and financial resources. Internet dating can be costly and other ways of meeting people and / or dating requires childcare which not all participants had access to. Some participants had regular childcare cover from relatives, friends or child(ren)'s father(s), which allowed them some freedom to develop intimacies but this was not always the case. As previously touched on, the intensity of the relationship with the child and level of care and involvement in protecting and ensuring their physical and emotional welfare could preclude or complicate forming relationships outside this unit. The perceived need to create protective boundaries may comprise another factor in preventing intimacies from forming. Further barriers to forming intimacies outside the immediate family unit which participants experienced included lack of financial and time resources and in some cases internalized stigma or anxiety about how they might be perceived (explored further in Chapter 5).

A small number of participants felt that their intimate needs, whether emotional or sexual, simply remained unmet. Even where single mothers enjoyed close relationships with their children, children were unable to reciprocate and meet all of their social, emotional and sexual needs. Teresa, for example, accepted the situation of being single, focussing on the survival needs of working, providing and caring for her child. She differentiated between the attachment with a child based on need and the emotional attachment between adults based on choice:

> *'You know, people say you've got your child but that's different, that's a totally different thing and totally different needs and um whereas when someone's with you as an adult, when you're in a relationship with someone it's because they want to be with you and when it's your child they have to be with you. When they're younger, it's like with a cat, you know, they only stay because you feed them and it's almost the same with babies, you know, that they have no choice, they have to stay with you and love you because you feed them but I feel there's definitely a part of me that's been closed – because those needs aren't being met I block them off and put them away somewhere and get on with everything else I have to do and forget that.'*

Sofia was concerned that her children would not accept it if she dated or found a new partner – possibly because she considered that her children were still emotionally

vulnerable after their father left. This underlines the insight that single mothers are often not solely focused on their own emotional needs but prioritise their children's:

> *'Yeah I think it's really hard – this one she'll say, they believe if I meet someone I'll go away, I don't know where it came from, that's what they believe, even if I make a joke that I'm going to meet someone they go crazy –'mummy no, no' – I just get used to being alone, I'm not really looking for anyone. Sometimes I think it would be nice doing something and then you just get used to not doing it – I don't know if that makes sense…'*

Sofia's isolation began when she was in a marriage with her children's father and she was prevented by him from socializing. For those who had lived in difficult or abusive relationships, confidence and self-esteem were often affected and created a significant emotional barrier to meeting people and forming friendships and relationships. The age of children is another variable which shapes opportunities and choices; apart from the practical barriers of childcare, some had older children who they can openly discuss relationships while others were younger and unable to understand. Nevertheless, adolescence could be an extremely difficult time to broach sensitive subjects such as sexual relationships and sexuality; this might also be a time where single mothers feel it is particularly important to model what they consider to be appropriate sexual behaviour:

> *'Now that she's older it's a bit easier but it's still… she's more aware of what's going on so I have to be a bit more careful whereas when she was younger I could be a bit more lax about it, you know, somebody could stay over… but now she's more aware so I have to be careful and also I'm a role model for her as to how to be a woman so my needs have to take second place to that.'* (Cristina)

Anna described a trajectory, which many participants followed, of moving from a position early on after her separation where she had to prioritise basic welfare and survival needs, along with supporting her children's emotional needs, towards beginning to think about her own intimacy needs. This demonstrates how, in line with Jamieson's (1998) argument, basic survival needs to be achieved prior to choices about intimacy to be realized. Additionally, for many participants, intimacy was very meaningful; it was taken seriously and required a certain amount of thought, commitment and energy. In other words it was something else that needed to be carefully managed, entailing 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1983):

'I was consumed by practical things I suppose, the place we were living in wasn't very nice and then there was trying to sort of work out separation arrangements um and I felt uh very much that my life was in chaos and so there was, you know, there was no room to work out what my needs were in terms of intimacy um... um it was just, I was just in, I was in survival mode – you know, meeting my basic needs and meeting the kids' basic needs and hopefully some of their emotional needs was all I could just about cope with for the first, probably for the first 8 or 9 months I was back.'

Time is another resource often in short supply due to demands of childcare, work and other commitments and so could impede the development of intimacies. 'Time pressure' has been identified as a 'contemporary malady' (Southerton, 2009), partly due to cultural ideals surrounding relationships with the emphasis on 'quality time' (Southerton, 2009, p.58). Time can also be experienced differently according to gender (Sullivan, 1997). Oakley (1974) identified the disproportionate amount of time women spent on housework; women have continued to take primary responsibility for domestic work and childcare (Lewis, 2001) and in the light of increasing participation in work and public life women have increasingly 'juggled' domestic and workplace responsibilities (Sullivan, 1997). The management of emotional and inter-personal relationships, in addition to work and caring responsibilities, represents a 'triple shift' (Duncombe and Marsden, 1995; Hochschild, 1997). Single mothers are likely to be under additional time pressures, not having a partner with whom to share domestic and (often) financial responsibilities. This was, apparent in the way Jess described a single mother friend: '*She micro manages everything in her life and I think that's to do with being forced into routines left, right and centre to suddenly earn money, hold the house together, manage two children – she doesn't stop for breath*'. Given these pressures, it is unsurprising that some single mothers, especially those with young children, might struggle to find time to develop friendships and relationships. Negative impacts on single mothers of juggling childcare and work (or job seeking) responsibilities, in terms of their own wellbeing, were evident. This was not simply a case of time pressure alone, but the combined pressures of the intensity of childcare, lack of personal space, unrelieved fatigue, and financial stress. For Sofia and Teresa, coping with young children and day-to-day household maintenance while attempting to find work meant they did not have enough personal or financial resources left for dating or socializing:

'It's difficult, hard, especially if you have you know young kids – too much responsibility. Basically you're just… basically I have no time for myself, it's just looking after the kids, cooking, cleaning then by the time it becomes 7, 8

o'clock in the evening I'm just tired and want to go to bed really – no social life, my life is just based around their lives, their activities… I don't have my own private life, I'm not socializing, that's a big disadvantage – they are the main things really – no socializing, no private life – just eating, sleeping, eating, sleeping.' (Sofia)

'I suppose the most important thing is working and trying to make money to support us and having been a student and racked up so much debt, you know, especially the way things are now, sometimes I could just give up and cry – at the moment I'm just trying to find ways to make ends meet basically.' (Teresa)

Priorities can change as single mothers adapt to their circumstances. Zoe felt that she was too 'time poor' (Southerton, 2009) to pursue a relationship as her priorities were caring for her child who had additional support needs, seeking employment, improving her home and her personal development. She believed that a relationship would take up too much time and inhibit these pursuits. There was ambivalence in many of these accounts about the advantages and disadvantages of developing new sexual / romantic relationships. Zoe's feelings about relationships fluctuated according to how she was feeling about herself. Describing how she was content being single at times when she was feeling assertive and confident, she also experienced periods of loneliness when she did want to be in a relationship. She asserted that it was a 'positive relationship' she ideally wanted – defined as one which is equal and based on sharing and trust (therefore approximating a 'democratic relationship'). She indicated that she was discerning and wanting to make good choices rather than entering a relationship for its own sake – relationships were optional rather than a necessity. This position related to prior experiences of intimacy as she felt she had made poor choices in the past:

'I'm not prepared to spend even a second of my time thinking about it… relationships with whoever because I've got so much I need to do at the moment. I need to support [my son] because he's a bit dyslexic and he needs support at home and school and I really want to give him my energy and get a job and do my house up and do my garden up and learn to play the guitar and... there's just a million things I want for myself and I know a relationship would take up time and then I think no, no, no, no, no [laughter]… When I feel really assertive and confident I think I don't want a man but when I feel lonely, which is probably about 70% of the time, it's just me and [my son] and I think 'I wish

> *there was someone else here' so… I don't know, I would love to have a positive relationship.'*

Due to these varied barriers and social, financial, emotional and geographical disruptions which often accompanied the transition to single motherhood, most participants had experienced a degree of social isolation at some point, especially in the early stages of single motherhood. Feminist writers have highlighted ways in which motherhood in itself can be isolating, especially where young children confine women to the domestic realm (Rich, 1977). Eight participants had been uprooted from their homes, extended families and communities in order to escape domestic abuse. Others had left neighbourhoods when they had partnered and had children some previously insulated within a couple. Often the constant work of childcare and domesticity precluded social and leisure time. While friendships were important to many participants, these sometimes took a long time to form and become established. Not all participants felt they belonged in their local communities, partly because of how they were perceived. Largely because of her status as a single mother, Juliet felt she did not fit into her community and experienced social isolation. Although she had made one friend with whom she had things in common and shared a mutually disclosing relationship, she was not able to see her regularly. She stated she would value friendships with other parents with whom to share family orientated activities:

> *'What would be very nice would be if I could find a friend who maybe had a child and who I got on with because it's quite hard finding, you know, relationships where I get on with the parents and she gets on with the children, you know, at weekends it would be nice to find people to hang out with, you know, go for a walk together, each lunch together, you know, this whole sort of thing really… so yeah.'*

For those who, like Juliet, felt they did not fit into their immediate communities either through being a single mother or through social or cultural differences, this could seem an impossible struggle. Sofia, for example, originated from a different European country, leaving behind the family and friends she had grown up with. She had very little freedom within her marriage and reported being questioned by her husband even when going to the local shop. Alone with two young children, recovering from the emotional legacy of her marriage, struggling to find work and live on social security benefits, the work of childcare and housework was overwhelming. With no disposable income to go out or follow leisure pursuits, she had no social life. She lived on a social housing estate and said that there were other single parents living close by but, she

explained, the stark cultural differences in terms of parenting caused her anxiety and created barriers between her and other parents. She gave examples of local parents letting their children go out alone or not being suitably dressed. Because it was the norm in her culture to be more protective, she felt she was perceived as a 'bad mother'. Sofia's experience is a reminder that single mothers are an extremely culturally diverse group with profoundly different ideas about parenting. In terms of friendship, usually there needs to be more in common than the fact of single motherhood alone for friendships to develop. Jess attempted to go on holiday with a group of single mothers but found disparities between the women and their routines created tensions. This demonstrates that while single mothers can be an important source of support for each other, it is essential not to overstate or romanticize this or to assume they are a homogenous group.

Many participants found times such as weekends, bank holidays and other holiday periods especially difficult, perceiving that couple-centred families would be doing things together on those days. Caitlyn echoed the descriptions of many other participants when she said that these times were associated with couples, but she then stipulated that she had never actually had that experience when she was in a two-parent family with her child's father, underlining the disparity between the fantasy of a perfect family and the reality:

> *'Bank Holidays have always been an issue for me as a single parent. Everywhere you go there's bloody couples and families and you know I remember going to x with a friend of mine and her partner thinking it would be nice but I ended up feeling really crap because everyone else had their partners with them and it was this special time with their families and we didn't have that and never had had that because at the time when I was with her father we never had that…'*

Choices

As previously indicated, choice making about intimacy and the process of developing intimate relationships is extremely complex, often shaped by material circumstances in the context of unsettled personal and cultural transitions. Single mothers potentially have multiple opportunities for experiencing different forms of intimacy, including emotional intimacy with children, friends, lovers, extended family and new partners. However, some participants found that their intimate needs were largely unmet. These single mothers felt isolated, uprooted from their original communities and extended families, and found it difficult to meet people, make friends and form relationships,

exacerbated by caring and domestic responsibilities. The ability to forge and develop intimate connections also depended to a large extent on the support and financial resources available. Giddens tends to assume a rational, autonomous human being making choices about intimacy, which excludes those with caring responsibilities (Fineman, 2004). He seems to suggest that access to resources has little impact on the ability to make choices, at one time using the example of a lone mother (Giddens, 1991) (discussed in Chapter 2). Yet the evidence presented here suggests that there is a complex range of barriers to developing intimacies, not least because of the profound gender inequalities experienced in relationships. Single mothers may be recovering from difficult experiences of relationships, including abuse and traumatic relationship breakdown. Immediate priorities on becoming single mothers are often protecting themselves and their children, basic welfare provision, economic and emotional survival.

Participants discussed how they had sometimes made poor choices around relationships. The following extract from Emma's story reveals how entering into another relationship was an escape from the difficulties and hardships she was experiencing with finances, coping with parenting, family issues and ongoing issues with her children's father. In this account, she portrayed an idyllic view of family life and the role of her imagination in building her partner 'to be more than he actually was' or, in other words, romanticizing their relationship. This reflects to an extent the power of romantic discourse (Evans, 2003) and the heteronormative assumption of the primacy of coupledom. A variety of factors led to her becoming engaged and moving in with him too quickly. Unfortunately the pattern of abuse she had previously experienced began again and so Emma and her family became homeless and in an even more vulnerable position than the first time she had left a violent partner. This history was a factor in why Emma became even more cautious when entering into relationships:

> *'I built him up to be more than he actually was so we got engaged and decided to move in together and then after a few weeks of moving in I thought, 'Oh, my god, what have I done?' And he became controlling and would watch me when I was getting ready to go out and ask me why I was wearing perfume and started getting angry and causing fights if I were to go out… and I was stuck again. I'd given up my house, given up a lot of my furniture, had nowhere to go again, was in a really bad situation again… so I ended up having to go to the council and telling them I was homeless.'*

Deborah related how she had at times got into complicated situations around intimate relationships because of the lack of opportunities for intimacy as a single mother. An example she gave was how she entered into a relationship with an ex-boyfriend who was estranged from his wife. However, she could not fully commit to the relationship as he was still married and she had a strong Catholic faith. This was a difficult decision as she described how rare it had been for her to be close to someone as a single mother – especially as she had a disabled child with additional care needs and so had little time and opportunity to meet potential partners: *'I think sometimes that the situations I've got into, I've got into because these opportunities for being close to someone are so rare when you're a single mum.'*

Deborah also drew on a romantic discourse to suggest that falling in love itself is not a matter of choice, stating that 'y*ou can never help who you fall in love with'.* Intimate life in this view is shaped both by circumstances, where there is a lack of opportunity for adult intimacy, and strong emotional forces over which one has little or no control. Romantic notions of 'meeting the right one' often colour these narratives, not seen as a person's inevitable fate, but rather a matter of luck or chance.

Elaine provided an alternative perspective in suggesting that society could do more to create structured opportunities for socializing and dating or providing a break for single parents - identifying structural factors which impact on and shape intimate lives. She described how parents sometimes develop groups or babysitting circles, recognising that not all parents have access to support from extended family and so other parents were a potentially vital source of support. While some participants did have friendship groups and support from other parents, for others this was difficult to access. Here Elaine highlighted a perceived lack of social support for single parents:

> *'There could be more that's done in terms of what you're saying – I mean not necessarily a 'finding men for single mothers group' but there could be more places where they can go as a single woman. I mean they do form their own little groups don't they where they'll say right you look after the kids while I meet someone and maybe we'll all go out but there needs to be some aspect that they're supported emotionally so they can go back to being a single mum after they've had this little break and it's very hard to get that break isn't it, without paying for it 'cos not all families have got that – mums and dads and siblings or... it would be nice if there was some way that they could be given the chance to just go out and socialise more and that's been one of my big problems – there's been no-one I can leave the children with and... they wouldn't*

necessarily get married or anything but at least they would be given a bit of a
boost wouldn't they...?'

It is notable that Elaine referred to single parents as 'they,' distancing herself from this category, thereby re-emphasising that single motherhood was not of her choosing but was imposed due to unforeseen and unfortunate circumstances. This 'distancing' process, in particular dissociating from teenage mother scapegoats, was observed in a previous study of single mothers (Ford and Millar, 1998) and will be explored further in the next chapter. Choice or its absence is a defining theme running through and shaping many participants' narratives. Elaine's narrative, for example, was very strongly based around how she did not deliberately become a single mother through choice but as a result of illness and a subsequent marital breakdown. She stressed that she was brought up to aspire towards marriage and she hoped her children would also want this – although at the same time she recognized that becoming part of a couple is not essential and so - in another example of scriptual liminality - was both influenced by and resistant to traditional, heteronormative intimacy scripts:

> *'I mean we all want our children to find somebody loving and stay with them*
> *forever but that's not necessarily going to happen. My parents did it – they were*
> *happily married and it was all very lovely and I probably would be too and I*
> *would encourage my children to if they can but I'm not going to say it's the be*
> *all and end all, whether you find someone or not, just make something of*
> *yourself, be happy and if someone comes along it's a bonus…'*

While other participants, such as Emily, suggested that there is some choice involved in becoming a single mother, it is seen as the best available option amid difficult circumstances, despite potential consequences of poverty, insecurity and discrimination. It is therefore a rational decision which is in the best interests of the child. This echoes findings from Gillies (2007) who stressed that often single mothers in her sample had no choice and, for example, left violent partners as a last resort. The majority of her participants if they had a genuine choice would have preferred to raise their families with a supportive partner but that option was simply not available. Emily highlighted the unforgiving nature of the blame accorded to those who have simply made mistakes in their relationships or their choice of partner:

> *'I think there's a lot of negative stereotypes and it isn't always justified because*
> *it isn't always our fault and most of us are just trying to do the best we can for*
> *our kids you know – taking them out of situations that are potentially even more*
> *harmful. Being a single mum isn't ideal but then neither is being with a father*

who lies and cheats – that would be even worse so I do think we get a lot of the blame for things which aren't our fault in the first place but then there are people who will say you got into the situation in the first place you know I shouldn't have married him but it's easy to say in hindsight.'

For some, remaining unpartnered became a choice – it was considered a valid option by several participants. While those who were more romantically orientated conceded that they might never meet the right person, those who ideally sought relationships based on equality found it difficult to find a suitable partner. Susan fell into the latter category with a strong sense of an ideal relationship based on equality and mutuality. However, she accepted that this was very rare, based on her experience and observations of others. She recognized that she would be financially better off with a partner and experienced loneliness but did not see this as being a good enough reason to re-partner. As her child grew older and she had more freedom and time, her priorities were not finding a partner but focusing on her own personal development and creative pursuits, which she had not previously had an opportunity to do. She compared herself now to her younger self who sought long-term relationships because *'that's what you were supposed to do, that's what was normal'*. Now at 55, she felt she had 'been there, done that' and was ready to prioritise her own needs.

Susan felt that in her current position, she was no longer so concerned about what was 'normal' or considered desirable by others, and so resisted heteronormativity. Her perception of male partners was, echoing other participants' accounts, that they would need looking after. As much of her life had been spent as a woman in the service of others - in relationships, her marriage, her child and in the workplace - the prospect of becoming a carer again, or having to constantly compromise, did not appeal. Remaining single therefore represented a sense of liberation and independence, a strengthening of her personal identity, which challenges Giddens' (1992) notion that finding a partner is key to self-development. For these reasons she rejected the possibility of dating and trying to meet someone, alongside recognizing the hard work that can be involved in this process. While an aspect of this may have been changing self-understanding and priorities related to her age and stage in her life-course, she contrasted herself with others in similar situations who felt they should be with a man, rejecting the need to be 'normal'. Reluctance to participate in conventional femininity performances in terms of 'dressing up' is symbolic of this resistance to heteronormativity and traditional intimacy scripts. It also rejects the inevitability of being a 'sexual being'. Nevertheless, there is still a note of 'disappointment' in the final sentence that she has not had an opportunity to meet an ideal man (represented by

George Clooney) who was both (it is connoted) sexually attractive and willing to contribute to domestic chores:

> *'Ideally it would be nice to have a bigger family unit with two incomes but it would only be nice if it was the right person, not to have to compromise every single day of my life and not just for the sake of it, you know, I wouldn't want to share my life with someone else just because financially it was better or because I felt lonely – none of those are good enough reasons for me for being with someone, I'd rather be by myself… Whenever I've considered being in a relationship with someone again, I've thought, 'it's hard work being in a relationship' and I think right from the beginning, from 'oh no, I've got to meet someone – how am I going to do that?' And then you'd have to get dressed up and you'd have to find a babysitter and go out and listen to them talking about themselves – I'd rather be at home and do knitting! [laughter]*

> *I would only want to be with someone who I felt positively enriched my life and I think that's something I've never encountered… I've always felt, 'here's someone else to look after'… I think what I would want is a very equal relationship and in my experience they are very hard to find.*

> *I've got friends who are single mothers who very much want to be in a relationship. I've got one friend who jumps from one relationship to another… and I hear all this, you know, 'don't you get lonely? Don't you want someone you could lean on?' and things like that and I think, you know, actually I don't wish or I would be actively looking for and…. Maybe I'm in a huge amount of denial and I don't think I am, you know, I just think I get a lot more satisfaction out of other areas of my life now. I don't know if it's as well having been there, done that… now I don't care what's normal – I've tried it, I've tried long term relationships, tried marriage, tried to be a family and… clearly didn't succeed… [although] if George Clooney knocked on my door and offered to do all the housework I might think yeah, Ok!' [laughter]*

Conclusion

This chapter explored ways in which single mothers do intimacy in everyday life. A variety of factors connected to being a single mother impact on and shape intimacies. In some instances being a single mother can open up new possibilities and ways of being intimate. Where there are opportunities to do so, they may experiment and transform the intimate landscapes of their lives as part of their process of re-becoming.

However, single mothers are bound by the social and economic realities of their existences alongside sometimes overwhelming responsibilities for their children. The need to care for and protect the physical and emotional wellbeing of children is a very real and immediate reality, taking emotional priority over sexual, romantic and social relationships. At the beginning of their journeys, usually entailing relationship breakdown, single mothers are often faced with welfare crises such as poverty, debt, homelessness, unemployment and escaping violence which are an initial priority alongside the process of emotional recovery for themselves and their children. It is often once these issues are stabilized that single mothers can begin to see themselves as sexual and social beings again. Many of these accounts are far from emancipatory yet it is possible to discern some movement away from highly gendered traditional intimacy scripts and increased aspiration towards relationships based on equality alongside an unwillingness to 'settle for less', not least because of the inequalities many participants had experienced. There are undeniably multiple levels of constraint on the intimate possibilities open to single mothers, operating through personal lives, social settings, material circumstances and cultural norms. Yet, they may also exercise agency in resisting and moving beyond social and cultural constraints, finding alternative ways of doing intimacy and creating new intimacy scripts, for example through embracing being single and focussing on friendships and / or personal goals. In these moments they can be seen as 'pioneers of social change' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

In line with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), children assumed a central role in participants' lives, often described as their most meaningful and valued relationship while romantic / sexual relationships may be peripheral and transient. The relationship is portrayed as especially intense, with both positive and negative consequences, in instances where there are little other resources available for support from others. This very intensity is a concern, with participants commenting that children are not a substitute for couple relationships, underlining that the normative couple centred family unit remains the cultural ideal and aspiration for many. The cultural emphasis on the centrality of motherhood (Hays, 1996) may reflect that single mothers feel more confident in portraying 'carer' identities which are socially and culturally approved (Skeggs, 1997). Privileging motherhood over sexual identities may be one way in which participants maintain feminine 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997), especially in the face of moral judgements about single mothers. Nevertheless, it is likely that intimacy between parent and children in single mothers' households are experienced as highly intense, creating a tight-knit unit which involves an element of protection against (male)

intruders. Processes of seeking, choosing and maintaining romantic and sexual relationships are often overlaid with perceptions of threat to the family unit and a need to establish protective boundaries, alongside maintaining a sense of acceptable normalcy within wider family and community settings. The heightened sense of risk and vulnerability of both mother and child(ren) is exacerbated where there is a history of physical and / or emotional abuse.

Friendship provided many participants with support and mutually disclosing intimacies, in the absence of suitable partners. For some, 'mutual disclosure' tended to occur at a deeper level with female friends (and sometimes children) than with male sexual partners. Many found it difficult to achieve the emotional as well as sexual fulfilment they sought through heterosexual relationships. The strength and enduring nature of friendship ties and interdependencies, alongside the primary commitment to children, does not support pessimistic visions of contemporary intimacy (Bauman, 2003). Where single mothers reject heteronormative couple relationships or find they are not possible, it does not follow that there is a rejection of intimacy on a profound level – single mothers seek meaningful intimacy in their lives through mutual disclosure, primarily with children and friends. The experiences and emotions articulated were a far cry from the dystopian, superficial, atomised version of relating envisaged by Bauman (2003). While there was often a layer of more superficial friendships in participants' lives, and the possibility of casual sexual encounters existed, ultimately these women were seeking meaningful commitments in their relations with others. It is unclear as to how far these friendship groups coincided with individualisation (Roseneil, 2004). Intimacy cannot purely be seen as a matter of individual choice but here was often shaped by necessity. Aspects of individualisation such as the formulation of individualized life projects, which may include alternative forms of intimacy, were developed in response to a lack of suitable available partners, perceptions of risk and traumatic or unfulfilling experiences of heterosexual relationships. It is evident that there is no clear dividing line between making choices and acting from necessity, between pioneering new forms of intimacy and adhering to social norms. It should be noted that extended families were not foregrounded in these narratives, although individual family members were occasionally mentioned as providing practical and emotional support; this may reflect a combination of geographical distance and, in some cases, tensions around their status as a single mother.

Constraints are material and cultural, bound up with normative expectations and inter-generational continuities, as explored in the previous chapter. As touched on here, single mothers do not initially struggle to become sexual beings solely due to a lack of

opportunities, but also through complexities of cultural uncertainty and guilt around motherhood (Rich, 1977). These single mothers were in many ways still constrained by heteronormative intimacy scripts while tentatively reaching towards new possibilities and responding creatively to their situation. They were subject to 'normalizing judgements' (Carabine, 1996; Foucault, 1977) relating to negative representations of single motherhood. This was manifested in scrutiny regarding their intimate lives, parenting and sexual behaviour; it also led to exclusion from heteronormative social groups (such as social circles dominated by married couples). These were at times internalized, resulting in comparisons between their situation and what they considered to be 'normal'. Making the decision to remain single was culturally contentious due to heteronormative ideals of coupledom as well as negative, stereotyped depictions of single mothers. Some participants were able to be creative in experimenting and trying new forms of intimacy, of moving away from what they had once perceived as being 'normal' towards embracing new ways of being and becoming the authors of their own intimacy scripts or 'pioneers of change' (Beck and Beck-Gensheim, 1995). However, as Susan touched on in the final extract, straying from conventional intimacy scripts could seem counterintuitive or unacceptable to others and reinforce stigmatized versions of the self. The final chapter will explore this insight further in terms of how single mothers negotiate normative expectations and the impacts on their identities.

CHAPTER SIX Being a single mother: pride, shame and respectability

Introduction

This chapter considers the complexities surrounding the identity of 'single mother'. To be a mother, without a (male) partner or father figure for one's child and (apparently) sexually available is considered as a problematic heterosexual identity, operating on the boundaries of heteronormative expectations. Cultural tensions around motherhood and 'normal,' acceptable female sexuality emerged in participants' narratives, shaping the parameters within which they conducted their intimate lives. Running throughout these narratives are concurrent themes of pride and shame, the latter being dominant. These interlink with narratives of survival and contamination (discussed in Chapter 4). Shame was at times experienced by participants as an emotional response to circumstances while others perceived that some (especially young working-class) single mothers were cast as 'shameful' and attempted to distance themselves from this association (Ford and Millar, 1998). This chapter begins by exploring notions of 'shame' and 'pride' further before moving on to the presentation of findings relating to these themes.

Participants were well aware of negative cultural and media perceptions around single motherhood. Negative stereotypes of single mothers have roots in a long history of stigmatising working-class women in general in British culture and 'unmarried mothers' in particular (Smart, 1992). In recent history, negative depictions have become culturally entrenched, especially since the early 1990s and the controversial 'underclass' debates (Gillies, 2007; Murray, 1994; Skeggs, 2005; Wallbank, 2001). Projected through the media, they contribute to ongoing stigmatization of single mothers and are absorbed into day-to-day attitudes and discourse (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Wallbank, 2001). More recently, anxieties surrounding the poor, white, working-class have emerged in the popular stereotype of the 'chav,' encapsulated by the stereotyped image of the unemployed teenage mother living on a council estate with several children by different fathers (Tyler, 2008). Stereotyping involves placing people in broad categories and ascribing an array of assumptions about them which are associated with that category (Goffman, 1963). Single mothers felt they were often portrayed as greedy, selfish, promiscuous, out-of-control, irresponsible, poverty stricken, lazy and poor parents (see Chapter 2; 'Single mothers and moral decline').

Stigma, described by Goffman as a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963) was often internalized by participants, negatively impacting on identities. This closely intersects with norms surrounding appropriate feminine sexuality which single motherhood challenges. Accounts were often overlaid by shame, associated with stigma – participants 'felt' shame as an emotion and also felt they were subject to being 'shamed' with shame as externally imposed. Experiences of shame closely relate to 'contamination narratives' (explored in Chapter 4). Both narratives of contamination and the emotion of shame are culturally linked to the archetypal notion of a 'fall of from grace' (McAdams and Bowman, 2001; Munt, 2007). This, it should be stressed, is predominantly associated with women, with its ultimate manifestation of 'the fallen woman'. As Munt contends:

> '*Shame is also a powerfully spatial emotion, effecting displacement, and effacement in its subjects. It is important to understand this motion of shame in that it is characterised by a <u>fall</u> from a higher status to a perceived lower, adverse one. This descent is of prime concern as it involves loss and a degradation, undeserved or not… Minority groups are shamed in this way because they are compelled to feel inferior to a social ideal, the loss of the idea of possibility of which is experienced as humiliating…*' [emphasis in original] (Munt, 2007, p.80)

Stigma in this instance is conceived as highly gendered, bound up with heteronormative ideals of femininity and female sexuality. It is located in and a response to unequal power relations with attempts to control female sexuality, embedded in our culture. Single mothers in British society have long been vilified as embodying unregulated female sexuality with the potential to disrupt social order (Smart, 1992). Smart highlights ways in which categories of 'woman' and 'female sexuality' have been constructed through discourse as '*the problematic feminine subject who is constantly in need of regulation*' (Smart, 1992, p.7).

The notion of shame is specifically associated with patriarchal control and regulation of women's sexuality within feminist thought (Chodorow, 1978; De Beauvoir, 1949; Kristeva, 1982; Millet, 1970; Rich, 1976). This surfaced in the form of anxiety about being a mother and also a sexual being (see Chapter 5, 'Boundaries' section). Shame is therefore not solely an emotion experienced at an individual level but forms a powerful ideology of control operating at a discursive level (Foucault, 1978). To borrow an illustrative quotation from another cultural context, '…*the power of the discourse of shame lies in the fact that it becomes part of a woman's understanding or definition of*

their self. Shame, cannot be merely seen as an imposition on the female body but has to be seen as the way that the female self is defined' (Viswanath, 1997, p.329).

For Scheff (1997), shame is an often overlooked but central emotion in terms of social interaction, tying together individual and social aspects of human activity as an emotion, a barometer of morality and a means of regulation and distance: '*As an emotion within individuals it plays a central role in consciousness of feeling and morality. But it also functions as a signal of distance between persons, allowing us to regulate how close or far we are from others*' (Scheff, 1997, p.12). In some participants' accounts there is evidence of moralistic distancing from others in the category of 'single mothers'. It is important to note that this distancing is often 'classed,' as participants were at pains to remove themselves from association with stereotyped young, working-class single mothers and maintain their sense of 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997). Skeggs (2005) argues that while single mothers in the 1980s - 1990s culturally came to symbolise out-of-control, amoral femininity, this gave way to an emphasis on working-class women in the subsequent decade. The level of anxiety about the status of being a single mother in participants' accounts indicates that these categories may well have become culturally conflated – single mothers are depicted as out-of-control, oversexed working-class women by default, and so feel compelled to justify their position and distance themselves from this spectre.

Giddens (1991) relates 'shame' to self-identity and the individual biography: '*Shame bears directly on self-identity because it is essentially anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which the individual sustains a coherent biography*' (Giddens, 1991, p.65). Narrative telling and the attempt to restore coherence, especially in moving from contamination to redemptive narrative sequences (McAdams and Bowman, 2001) is relevant here. Participants distanced themselves from negative depictions by constructing narratives conveying 'pride,' whereby they are seen in heroic terms as 'triumphing over adversity' or as victims of circumstances who have not wilfully chosen this trajectory, invoking narratives of contamination to convey how their lives have been spoiled (see Chapter 4). They attempted to come to terms with a 'spoiled identity' which, as Smart (1999, 2000) reminds us, is part of the emotional landscape for women post-divorce who often experience loss of identity and self-esteem along with economic vulnerability.

The concept of 'normalising judgement' (Carabine, 1996; Foucault, 1977) is applicable, indicating ways in which single mothers themselves may internalise cultural and /or local notions of acceptable femininity, motherhood and sexual behaviour (Wallbank,

2001) and conform to normative expectations with regards to their relationship practices. For Carabine, the concept of normalisation helps us to understand the regulatory processes of normalisation of marriage, heterosexuality and the family, the means by which '*women's bodies and sexuality are disciplined and controlled*' (Carabine, 1996, p. 61). My participants consistently defined themselves against what they perceived to be 'normal'. This was highly contextualized with disparate experiences ranging from a single mother living on a council estate where single motherhood was the norm, to another in an area dominated by couple-based families feeling that she was being judged. Regulatory discourses in which women are judged by their sexual behaviour (Carabine, 1996; Smart, 1992) and control (or otherwise) over their fertility are interwoven among these narratives. Participants alternately subscribed to, resisted, and rejected such cultural narratives and normalizing judgments.

Participants responded to stigma with various strategies, including invoking a sense of pride, often viewed as the opposite of shame (Munt, 2007; Scheff, 1997) and emphasizing their respectability (Skeggs, 1997). They did this by asserting that they were providing good sexual and economic role models for their children, also by distancing themselves from those single mothers to whom they believed media stereotypes referred, namely poor, young, working-class mothers (Ford and Millar, 1998). There were instances where they engaged in what Goffman (1963) describes as 'information control'; concealing identities in being careful about when, where and to whom to disclose their status as a single mother. There was often a level of 'dis-identification' with stereotypes, where participants emphasised their social background, good home, employment, educational achievements, intelligent social circle, well brought up children and hard-working attitudes, thus underlining their respectability and social standing (Skeggs, 1997). Many participants were careful to reiterate that single motherhood was not a chosen identity and that they ideally subscribed to traditional intimacy scripts, while at other times they diverged from these intimacy scripts and began to imagine alternatives. However, as this chapter discusses, the process of constructing alternative positive identities (Wallbank, 2001), alongside formulating alternative intimacy scripts is extremely precarious - not least because of the limited heteronormative identities available (Van Every, 1996).

The chapter continues by exploring a case which exemplifies themes of shame, pride and respectability. It then explores participants' perceptions of negative media stereotypes, experiences of stigma and internalised 'normalising judgement'. This exploration is developed through examining responses to single motherhood from

participants' communities and social circles. The problematic aspects of 'being single' in a culture which emphasises the primacy of romantic coupledom emerge, as do the complex expectations surrounding 'being a mother'. Ultimately, the normative intimate identities available to heterosexual women are revealed as limited and limiting.

Being a single mother: managing pride and shame

Natasha, a 39 year-old professional and mother of two, was acutely aware of the emotional conflict within herself of pride and shame; these tensions ran throughout her narrative and so she provides an exemplary case. The concurrence of pride and shame could be seen in part as an emotional response to scriptual liminality - caught between old and new ways of perceiving intimacy. She demonstrated an acute awareness of the stigma attached to single motherhood which originated in her being brought up by a single mother herself in an even less forgiving era where she was bullied for being a 'bastard'. She reacted against this with anger, deciding to take on her mother's name, thereby resisting negative associations of being without a father figure and demonstrating symbolic pride in her upbringing by a single mother:

> '*I knew that my mum was very, very sad and my dad left her in a very different society at that point, pregnant and pretending to be married – that was a 'knee jerk' result… I've always been a feisty sort of character and always felt a sense of outrage… I used to get bullied when I was at school… I remember going home and saying, 'mum, what's a bastard?' I had an absolute sense of outrage that because my father left my mum I was in some way not good enough and when I was 16 I changed my name back to my family name as a statement to say, 'this is who I am and I'm not ashamed of who I am.'*

Natasha recollected, however, how she grew up seeing her mother as a victim who evinced pity and became sensitive to prejudice (in the form of shock and pity) shown to her when she became a single mother, for example in a mother and baby group. The reactions of other mothers indicated the automatic assumption that single mothers and their children are worse off without a father figure and that they are victims of circumstance. It was not only the work involved in parenting alone but the stigma associated with the situation which Natasha found difficult to cope with emotionally:

> '*I grew up with my mum being quite a sad person and feeling that people felt sorry for her or ridiculed her and I grew up feeling determined not to be like that um but you can have… you can go to a baby group and say it's just me and the children and they say, 'Oh!' [pitying tone] and I want to say, 'would you rather I*

*was with some layabout who's going to be a drain on my resources' and yeah…
yeah I don't know it's a difficult one – I never ever wanted to be a single mum
because of that stigma so now it's happening a second time around I just feel
like I'm going to have to be uber strong about it – yeah.'*

Natasha envisaged the possibility of a positive counter narrative about single
motherhood, which in her case included invoking pride through the achievements of
raising children alone successfully, escaping from an abusive relationship and forging a
successful career. She therefore engaged in 'identity work' (Gubrium and Holstein,
2001), reinforcing that the right choices had been made. She rejected conventional
intimacy scripts in suggesting that the mere presence of a father figure is not in itself
necessarily advantageous. Nevertheless, she conveyed that it was extremely difficult to
escape from negative self-perceptions and the sense of lacking (Butler, 2000). She
partially attributed this to the situation of being a mother, orientated towards the needs
of children rather than the self, low in social status and with little external rewards or
positive feedback:

*'I do [feel a sense of shame] and I don't know what you'll find but equally you
could feel proud that you've raised a child who is doing well in school, you could
also feel proud that you haven't stayed in a relationship which is possibly
damaging – to free myself for a better life and a happier life which will be better
for my children but that somehow it's always that you're lacking – I don't know if
that's just me because I'm still battling with how I feel …*

*Thinking of all the mums I've known over the years – I've not known many
women who've got very good self-esteem, who've been in that position – partly
circumstantial because there's not much to feed your esteem when you're
mostly orientated around the kids unless you're one of these unusual people
who can feel like a fabulous mother all the time but I would say yeah that
people don't feel good about being in that position.'*

Negative media stereotypes

The majority of participants perceived that stigma around single motherhood was
perpetuated by the media, especially the tabloid press. Online forums for parents and
television talk-shows were also cited as examples. They noted how media stories
focussed on negative examples of single motherhood with a dearth of positive role
models. Media stereotypes referred to included single mothers deliberately getting
pregnant in order to access a disproportionate share of resources, being

undereducated and unemployed and failing to control their sexuality and fertility in socially prescribed ways - depicted as having a large amount of children by a number of different fathers (see Chapter 2; 'Single mothers and moral decline'). Discourses therefore have the potential to impact on ways in which single mothers see themselves and in turn make choices about intimacy, feeding into the ongoing development of intimacy scripts and notions of what 'should be'. Simon and Duncan's (1999) identification of specific gendered discourses surrounding lone motherhood found that they were used by lone mothers themselves in local contexts and these discourses are recognizable in the narratives here. The 'social threat discourse' is the most commonly referred to: this is highly prevalent within the British media, reflecting the popular 'family values' position (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) which casts single mothers as formative members of an underclass, choosing not to work but to live on benefits at the expense of the state. They are perceived as sexually promiscuous and signifying moral decline, having children outside wedlock without suitable father figures. While this position was often resisted within the narratives in my study, it is recognizable within some anxieties about social status, sexuality and parenting alone without a father figure. Ultimately many of these narratives were shaped by an emphasis on how single motherhood is not a position which is chosen or desirable. The 'social problem discourse' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) positions lone mothers as victims who are economically and socially disadvantaged, caught in a poverty trap and in need of help, also present within the narratives in this study. There was a strong emphasis, based on experience, on socio-economic difficulties faced by many lone parents and the lack of suitable male role models. In contrast, 'the lifestyle change' discourse (Duncan and Edwards, 1999), which more fully reflects detraditionalization theories, views single mothers as making one choice out of many possible family forms. However, this position did not manifest itself within the narratives here as participants foregrounded the lack of choice over their situations.

Nevertheless, while participants had not chosen single motherhood as a 'lifestyle,' they occasionally felt able to validate it within a landscape of diverse intimate and family forms, in resistance to strands of the 'social threat' discourse. Finally, the 'escaping patriarchy discourse' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) positions lone mothers as liberated women who do not want to be controlled by a man, emphasizing financial and emotional advantages to being a female head of household. This is apparent in some of the narratives here. Participants often suggested that they were now in a better position than if they had continued to be controlled by a male partner / the father of their children. This may have been in part a reaction to negative experiences of

relationships with many literally 'escaping' from threats to their own and their children's safety and wellbeing. It may also reflect 'identity work' in reinforcing and justifying choices and constructing a positive identity. The majority of participants, however, still aspired towards what they saw as a 'complete' family with a father and /or being part of a couple and often contrasted their own situation negatively with this ideal.

Participants generally responded negatively to invocations of single mothers as a 'social threat' in the media. Emily noted how single mothers often provide a scapegoat for a number of social problems while Sam's account suggested the damaging impact on self-esteem of engaging in negative depictions and she highlighted the lack of positive depictions to counter these:

> *'You know my parents read the Daily Mail and they're always banging on about single parents and how we're the root of all evil – it depresses me sometimes – you know children from broken families don't do that and don't do this and they do do that and do this – come on, give me a break... not all the mess in the country can be blamed on single mothers.'* (Emily)

> *'The thing is with news – I hate watching the news because I can't stand all the bad things, I suffer from depression and have done for ages and it's always the bad things and they always pick the worst things that happen so when it comes to single mothers it's always the ones that have got 15 kids, live in a mansion and that's the way everyone sees us and I think that's wrong – it's never the single mother who's gone out and fostered, the single mother who's helped someone, it's always only the bad things that people see so it's not good…'* (Sam)

One strategy to cope with negative stereotypes was therefore to dismiss them, pointing out their flaws and irrational bases. Cristina stressed that far from being unable to control her fertility, she had not planned to have children but her contraception failed, thereby distancing herself from stereotypes of sexual irresponsibility. Teresa countered the 'social threat discourse' in a typical statement, stressing that the decision to have children simply to acquire financial support and / or housing is likely to be extremely rare and the level of state benefits is not such that it would be worthwhile. She therefore invoked the single mothers as 'social problem' in opposition to the 'social threat' discourse, emphasising that they are victims of poor social support:

> *'A single parent is someone who's normally depicted as not very educated who's being slack in their… [laughs] – clearly doesn't know how to use*

contraception but I was on the pill when I got pregnant with [my daughter], a big shock to me but … that's taking from society, that isn't contributing anything, isn't very bright – to me it's all negatives, I can't even think of any role models… I'm trying to think… are there any? I can't even particularly think of any in terms of celebrities…on telly or anything…' (Cristina)

'I think the media usually perceives single mothers and women who have deliberately got pregnant to get council houses. I sort of laughed at it when I was on my own with my daughter because I thought who'd have a child just to be unemployed and if you have another one, you're not going to get that much more money – it's not worth it!' (Teresa)

Another strategy some participants employed was differentiating between types of single mother, identifying those mothers who they saw as confirming to media stereotypes and distancing themselves from them (Ford and Millar, 1998). Elaine counteracted the stereotype of the 'lazy single mother' by stressing how hard it is to raise children alone – a full-time job in itself. She then went on to reinforce the 'social threat' discourse by describe young women living in her local area who conformed to stereotypes, apparently determined to have as many children as possible regardless of the circumstances. She thereby created a hierarchical distinction between those who deliberately became single mothers and those who became single mothers through unavoidable circumstances, echoing the notion of 'heterosexual hierarchies' (Van Every, 1996). She stressed that her preferred choice would be to bring up her children with a partner, demonstrating that her own values were normative and that she subscribed to a conventional intimacy script. Stereotypes of sexually irresponsible single mothers were present in the suggestion that it was because of the presence of certain women who choose single motherhood who give others a 'bad name', insinuating a lack of sexual respectability (Skeggs, 1997). She reproduced disparaging, stigmatising language in highlighting the numbers of children of some young women, suggesting their 'breeding' was out of control. These views reflect a more generalized cultural anxiety about poor-white, working-class emergent in the figure of the 'chav' and the caricature of the teenage mum whose only interest is in having babies at the expense of the state (Tyler, 2008). Elaine scapegoated women in this category, arguing that it is their fault that there is little recognition of the difficulties faced by lone parents, leading to the under-provision of resources to support them. She emphasized that marriage above all is still seen as the most desirable norm in terms of family and intimacy, again reflecting hierarchies of heterosexuality where marriage is the most normative and therefore desired heterosexual identity (Van Every, 1996), and that to

choose other routes directly leads to socio-economic disadvantage, consolidating the 'social threat' discourse. She stressed that she herself did not reject this ideal but stated that it is not always practicable to achieve marriage, especially within the time and financial restrictions of being a full-time single mother (also drawing on the 'social problem' discourse):

> *'I think there may be some who give us a bad name, there might be a few. I see some with like five buggies, loads of little children – they're very young themselves, I don't think they have any intention of not breeding and they're not making it easy for all the rest of us out there... I mean everyone has a different story – some people did it deliberately, others like me – it happened to them, it was imposed on them. You don't set out thinking, 'I am going to be a lone mother'. I think that's a very unwise thing to do. It's a hard enough thing being a mother or a father willingly and I don't think society has a very good image of them, I don't think there's the support there should be for them... it's starting to change … but I think we're a bit like pariahs in society... I mean marriage is still considered the way to go isn't it or not everyone gets married do they but even a partnership, I mean and most of us would like to be in a partnership if we could – it's not like we've chosen not to have a man in our life. It's just that as with everything else you don't really have very much time to change it. You can't just go to Tesco and get a man!'* (Elaine)

It should be noted that Elaine experienced a particularly catastrophic transition to single parenthood and had invoked a number of contamination narrative sequences. Having suffered a serious, traumatic illness and subsequent relationship breakdown, her standard of living had severely dropped; having previously earned a professional, stable income she was now unable to work, living on a council estate and experiencing a high degree of social isolation. Her experiences and accompanying diminishment in social status (or spoiled identity) may have meant that identity work in separating herself negative associations may have seemed especially urgent.

Jess similarly experienced a number of episodes of contamination through various relationship breakdowns, experiences of abuse, physical and mental health problems with her transition to single motherhood accompanied by a loss in professional and social status. She was uncomfortable with being associated with stigmatised versions of single motherhood and criticized ways in which single mothers are homogenised in the press, regardless of circumstances. She invoked an example of someone who she sees as conforming to the stereotype of those who have large numbers of children to

access a disproportionate share of resources, emphasizing how this individual used state resources for what were perceived as selfish purposes, able to afford luxuries such as going to the gym and beauty treatments. Again, drawing on this 'social threat' discourse, she created hierarchies of single mothers. A dichotomy was drawn between working and non-working, benefit dependent single mothers. She drew on alternative example of women who had denied themselves and worked hard in paid and unpaid labour (with reference to a friend who had a strict domestic regime) - successful domesticity being traditionally associated with feminine respectability and pride (Oakley, 1974). Jess thus created a hierarchy of respectability, making a distinction between respectable and non-respectable women (Skeggs, 1997). In this extract she assumed a moral tone, drawing on 'social problem' and 'social threat' discourses:

> *'[A distant relative] has six children by four different fathers, she has immaculate hair and a tight bum from her regular gym sessions and lovely nails because that's her life because she manages with six children on the social to do it and I resent it because I resent that I work hard to earn quite a modest wage and I pay tax to support that and I know that that's what people think we all do and that's not true... I see women who struggle and deny themselves a lot or women like my friend who force themselves into such tightly managed regimes so they do what they have to do um I don't think… there's still kind of a hidden belief… or a lack of understanding about the diversity of single mothers because we are just other parents aren't we? We don't fit one bag, don't fit one mould.'*

For Cristina, anticipation of stigma and discrimination in terms of the socio-economic disadvantages of single motherhood shaped her trajectory; she stayed longer than she wanted to with the father of her child in an attempt to escape poverty, poor housing and living in a deprived, disadvantaged area (with the accompanying diminishment of social status that would entail) (Ford and Millar, 1998). She drew on the 'social problem' discourse, making the connection between the stigma associated with single motherhood and ensuing material disadvantages (discrimination), such as being placed in a hostel or deprived area. There was an underlying perception that becoming a single mother invites a punitive, discriminatory approach from local councils and the state generally in restricting their access to housing (Land and Lewis, 1998). This is corroborated by feminist commentators (Carabine, 2001; Smart, 2000) and studies on lone parenthood in the UK policy context (Land and Lewis, 1998). It should be noted that not all participants had the option of staying longer with the father of their children to save money and not all had the socio-economic resources at the time of interview to escape poverty. For those who were able to work and provide what they considered a

decent environment for their children, this was a source of pride which counteracted stigma and disadvantage. In Cristina's case, she felt driven by a desire to escape stereotypes of impoverished, inadequate single mothers she saw in the media. She was conscious of the possible shame her daughter might associate with living in an impoverished environment which did not meet normative expectations of an acceptable home. However she was able to leave her initial housing situation before her daughter was old enough to remember it. Her achievement in acquiring material respectability, thereby avoiding negative associations of single mothers with poverty, and in concealing her struggles from her daughter was depicted as a source of pride:

> *'When I was first thinking of leaving [my partner] I didn't have a salary and I didn't know where we were going to live so I went to see the council to find out and they said basically you'll be in a B&B and this will be the area and I went to look and I thought, 'Over my dead body am I bringing up a child in this area' and that's when I had to plan. I had to stay with [my partner] a year longer than I wanted to in order to get a job and save up money and that was quite... At first I was condemned to renting somewhere which was really bad, it had no heating, damp everywhere but it was still a good decision, [my daughter] was too young to realize what a shithole we were living in, I thought she'll never remember there was no heating and it was painted about five colours... she'll never know, you know cheap furniture bought for a tenner, there was just no way was I going to become that person that you see on the telly, you know.'*

Responses from communities/social circles

The participants closely linked the negative media focus on single mothers with attitudes and responses from those in their communities where there may be an adherence to 'social threat' discourses and an assumption that single mothers are less worthy members of society who should not be taking up resources. As Duncan and Edwards (1999) observe, the circulation of discourse is closely linked to local contexts. Sandra perceived resentment from her neighbours, on a gentrified city street, who assumed all her income came from the state and that she did not deserve nice home and car. She compared these attitudes to those associated with immigrants, attracting suspicion that they are unfairly and undeservingly accessing resources:

> *'Well there's a lot of jealousy I think because people think you're out to get what you can, you know that you're getting all this money. I know people look at me – because I think I must be the only single parent on the street - and think, 'What's she doing living in that house, how come she's got a car?' It's like the*

immigrant communities isn't it – people get jealous because they think they're
taking up all the housing and jobs and money.'

Juliet similarly coped with negative and judgmental attitudes in her local community, especially from other parents at her child's school in a suburban area where single parents were in a minority. She described how this made her feel invisible, 'unseen,' and that there were immediate assumptions about her situation and instances of defining her by the label of 'single mother' without understanding why she was in that situation, seeing it as a permanent, unchangeable predicament. The reality of her situation was therefore hidden behind stereotypes:

> *'I've never experienced what I've experienced before going to this school where*
> *you know they talk the talk but it's really weird, really just judgmental [becomes*
> *tearful], I just feel very unseen and um…you know they make so many*
> *assumptions about the fact that I'm in this situation. People just assume that*
> *that's it and that's how it's going to be and that's Ok.'*

Other responses from communities included viewing single mothers alternately as victims who invoke pity and as sexual predators who pose a threat to other women (also see Chapter 5; 'Friendship'). These accounts are indicative of a widespread perception of the single mother as a 'social threat' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999), particularly in relation to their sexuality. While marriage is seen as making women respectable, to be without a man is linked to uncontrolled promiscuity, thereby threatening the maintenance of 'normal' family life and ultimately society (Carabine, 2001; Smart, 1992). Teresa, who lived in what she described as a close-knit community on the outskirts of a city, experienced both of these extremes of being pitied and seen as a threat which, like Jess (see Chapter 5; 'Friendship') saw her being excluded from predominantly couple centred social circles:

> *'Well most of the people in my community are in relationships, there are two*
> *other single mothers I know on my road and it seems to be very couply and*
> *they either see you as someone they feel sorry for and invite you round or they*
> *see you as someone who might try to nick their husbands but there's always*
> *that sort of you know getting too friendly, it always feels a bit like you're the*
> *charity case – poor single mother! [laughter]'* (Teresa)

In contrast, Emma had a more positive experience of charitable attitudes and behaviour from those in a close-knit rural community where again single mothers were an exception – although some individuals might construe this as 'pity'. In this case

there was a difference between her expectations of stigma and actual responses in this local context. However, she was still highly conscious of the potential for 'normalising judgements' (Carabine, 2001; Foucault, 1977), arising from her friendships with men. Her use of the derogatory term 'slapper', denoting promiscuous female sexuality in relation to how she might be perceived suggested that she had internalised notions of single mothers as embodying non-respectability and out-of-control sexuality:

> *'[Being a single mother has] made me very aware of how people are looking at me, judging me… but I have to say that my actual experiences with people – directly with neighbours – in [the village] where I first went and I was very worried about how they would perceive me, they've just been so wonderful and supportive. I used to get home and find that people had left fruit and vegetables and bags of clothes and, you know, for me and, you know, they'd help. I worked weekends to make some money and they'd babysit the kids for me, I could bring the kids over - I made some friends who are still friends now... But part of me feels that I'm a single mum but hey, that doesn't mean that I am, you know, a slapper, that I've got blokes coming in and out...'*

In contrast, for Sam, living on a council estate on the outskirts of a city where a large number of single mothers were housed, single motherhood was seen as the norm. In that context she found racism was more of an issue than her single motherhood (Sam identified as mixed race), indicating the significance of class and race as well as relationship status in shaping identities and power relations in local contexts:

> *'Being where I live there's not that many coloured people and that [gestures to face] has been more of an issue than my being a single mother – no I've never thought of being a single mother as much of an issue whereas my colour has been, but then where I live now, on an estate, there's hundreds of us – they're all over the place so it's not… I'm normal which is great so yeah, I don't really know.'*

Anna demonstrated awareness that responses towards single mothers varied depending on settings. While she felt very disconnected from her suburban locality, where she did not socialise with the neighbours and was not conscious of negative attitudes, some friends were housed in city centre flats where they were much more visible and more likely to be judged. While she was aware of negative depictions in the media, she had not encountered direct discrimination herself and attributed this to living in a liberal area in Britain where there may be more acceptance of diverse family forms. However, she was concerned about whether her daughter might experience stigma,

being made to feel different because her father was not living with them or in contact. She was relieved that her daughter made friends in a similar situation but worried about her being 'labelled' and, in line with the 'social threat' discourse, suffering from not having a father's influence:

> *'Personally I don't feel as a lone parent that I'm discriminated against in my community but then I don't really feel part of my community so I don't know... if people discriminate against me they're few and far between... but then I know lone mothers who I spoken to do feel like they're looked down on but then that's living in a situation where you're living in a block of flats, you have more of a sense of people around you and being watched and looked at – I don't know... but um I think there is still a stigma attached to being single parents…*

> *The stigma that I think is still attached to being a single parent for me is about stigmatising the children um but I don't know whether it's because I live in a very liberal part of the world, I don't think she's been a victim of that particularly but that is something that does worry me, that she's going to be labelled. I'm not worried about being labelled because I'm perfectly capable of fending off labels but she's not necessarily. I think it's my concern about the effects on her because she doesn't have any fatherly influence – I don't know how common or uncommon that is – it's her growing up knowing or feeling that she's been rejected by her father that concerns me.'*

Natasha attempted to dismiss the stigma she felt when her relationship with her second child's father ended, drawing on an 'escaping patriarchy' discourse to resist the idea that she should be defined by her relationships with men. Conversely, there was ambivalence in that she still related herself to negative media stereotypes, citing the 'Jeremy Kyle' show[41] which portrays those who do not control their sexuality and fertility in socially acceptable ways as deviant:

> *'I didn't feel like I could the second time around, I wanted to just give up – but I have to be strong, I have to be the person that I am and not the person I think I should be, I'm not just the product of the way that men I've chosen who were wrong for me have behaved. I have to accept some responsibility but I have to also have compassion for myself so I can move on and be strong about the fact that I have two children, it doesn't matter that I have two children… I said to my*

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[41] A popular UK ITV talk show which focusses primarily on problem relationships, dysfunctional families and paternity issues.

> *mum when he left, I'm like something off 'Jeremy Kyle' and genuinely I do still feel like that.'*

She found that such stereotypes carried over into relationships with men and described an encounter where she went on a date with an old friend who mentioned how she had children by different fathers - this, she perceived, made her less viable as a romantic prospect. This left her feeling judged and 'on trial'. She noted that although he appeared superficially to hold liberal attitudes, there was an underlying suspicion surrounding her sexual behaviour, a sense of her breaking with acceptable heteronormative roles. Natasha responded by emphasising that her own choice would have been to get married and have a stable, permanent family life with two parents but that her situation was not of her choosing. She therefore alternately resisted and reproduced a heteronormative intimacy script, demonstrating scriptual liminality:

> *'I went on a date with someone I've known for years who's separated recently and we've always connected well, got on really well and so we went out on a date –um the date was lovely and we had dinner and everything but we had a phonecall just last week and he was saying, 'Oh you're really lovely and I always knew you'd got [your daughter] but now you've got these children by different men' and I was like [surprised noise] as though I was on trial and so I felt able to address it with [him] because he's very articulate and thought, 'no I will take it up with you because you're mister liberal, mister eco, mister Guardian reader but scratch the surface'… and I said, 'yes I've got two children with two different men but they were 10 years apart, they were both with men I lived with, the first of whom I planned to marry, the second with whom I was planning to have a family and stay together forever' – in neither instance did I choose that.'*

Likewise, in her relationship with the father of her second child, Natasha felt that she was being judged by his parents because she already had a child. She felt she was cast in accordance with negative stereotypes as a 'scheming single mother', in other words seeking money from potential partners. This manifested itself in comments such as her not being the 'marrying kind' and assumptions about her sexual morality and suitability as a partner:

> *'I think what I failed to say as well was with x his mother would never meet me because I had a child and she didn't approve and she would describe me to him as probably a scheming single mother so he – in that relationship, despite feeling that he really loved me and [my daughter], there was always a sub-text, I*

always felt I had to prove I wasn't um and um I found that quite hard, that assumption being made about me… even from the very first meeting with them I felt like I was on trial um and throughout relationship his dad made repeated comments that I wasn't the marrying kind, how it wasn't my thing, how I was morally defective in some way because I hadn't married.'

For some participants, attitudes towards single motherhood were linked to religion. Jess, who grew up in a strictly Catholic family and attended Catholic school, remembered the negative ways in which single mothers were perceived and asserted that she would refuse to be treated in such a way. She stated though how she still adhered to some of the principles such as the importance of marriage and, in an example of nostalgia, bemoaned the decline of marriage for her children's generation along with the emergence of more varied family forms, seen negatively as 'fractured'. A strong 'social threat' discourse was prominent within this narrative. Her pronouncement that she thought marriage 'would be forever' may be an expression of her disappointment at being unable to follow the desired conventional intimacy script to which she still adhered:

'I remember there was a mum at my Catholic school who was a [whispers] single mum and it was a no-no, people would say 'she's not married' and she was looked down on and I know I would really turn round and give them a piece of my mind if someone said that to me but that's not so much the case now because there's all these fractured family units, step-children you know, half-brothers, half- sisters… people have got very… they've lost some of their values… my son doesn't want to get married, maybe because I haven't and it's a shame… I always thought marriage would be forever and I still think if I'm getting married I'm not getting married twice but I don't think people regard marriage as forever.'

Yvonne described her awareness of the stigma attached to getting divorced within her Catholic family, to which she responded for some time through concealment or 'passing' (Goffman, 1963). However, she saw the treatment of single mothers as mostly dependent on their age and circumstances. She drew a dividing line between younger single mothers who have not been married or had a long-term partner and those who have, contrasting the fact that she was married when she had children positively with those who weren't – another example of heterosexual hierarchies. She therefore rejected the label and accompanying stigma for herself – stating that, 'I'm on my own with two children' as opposed to describing herself as a 'single mother':

> *'When they say 'single mothers' now, it tends to be 16 to 25 type age group. Don't think that the older generation, when you've actually been divorced, I think there is a great difference between a single mother who has never got married or been with a partner and somebody who has been with somebody and at the beginning it was right to have children and then it went wrong but I could not say for months I'm a divorcee, the stigma of that – that can't be me, we've never had anyone divorced... I think it was my cousins, my aunt and uncle who found that very difficult to digest... I would tend to say, 'I'm on my own with two children' if people needed to know for whatever reason 'cos I'm still me, I'm still [myself] – I happen to be divorced, you know, that's how it is.'*

Experience of stigma is evidently highly context dependent, inflected with class, race, religious affiliation, socio-geographical location, age, employment status and peer group. Steph, for example made a distinction between the tabloid press at one extreme and her immediate circle of peers who were supportive and admiring of her achievements in bringing up children alone and invoked a sense of pride linked to the achievements of single motherhood:

> *'I think um from peers and the wider spectrum of people that I know, you know people who are married, happily married with kids, people who are single… gay men, everyone I know, I would say that they have respect for single mothers and always go 'I don't know how you do it' and I think that… yeah I think that there is a lot of respect from people I know from various backgrounds and situations, there is that respect and sort of seeing it in a positive way – yeah.'*

Participants tended to perceive that attitudes towards single mothers had changed significantly over the last generation, in line with it becoming more common. Steph's is a typical statement in this regard, reflecting the British Social Attitudes survey (2013)[42] which suggests that attitudes have changed significantly over in the past thirty years with the younger generation (born post-1980) becoming more liberal and tolerant in terms of family forms:

> *'I think it's probably quite common for our generation - I certainly wouldn't have wanted to be a single mother in the '70s after hearing my ex-husband's mother telling me about how it was and you know the treatment – you were a social outcast effectively um… but yeah I don't know actually, maybe it is getting*

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[42] See website for information: http://www.britsocat.com/

> *better, maybe attitudes are getting better, they've certainly moved on a lot in thirty years.'*

Nevertheless, Sam suggested that there are still negative attitudes among the older generation who are highly influenced by sections of the media and described the dehumanizing aspect of being treated like a statistic and not a person:

> *'I know a lot of older people through work and family, whatever, there's the attitude that if you're a single mother you're automatically on benefits, you're automatically scrimping off the Government um you know, should be out at work, blah blah… and you think 'I'm not like that actually – I'm not a statistic, I am a person' so I think the older generation are still like that, slightly difficult but the younger generation – it's not so much a problem.'*

Attitudes towards single motherhood were also seen in their historical context. While a general consensus existed that life for single mothers had improved, there was again (echoing findings in Chapter 4) nostalgia in a number of accounts for a time in previous generations when there were perceived to be better values and morals with regards to family life and relationships. Elaine provided a typical example, recounting the level of shame attached to single motherhood when she was a child, at a time when divorce was considered scandalous and single mothers would be disowned by their families. She also stated how maybe this morality should be upheld, invoking a sense of 'nostalgia for shame'. This may be in part due to her narrative being dominated by an emphasis on her not having chosen single parenthood alongside the accompanying distancing from younger single mothers on the council estate where she lived, refusing to be identified in the same category:

> *'Well certainly it would have been a shame way back – the unmarried mother was certainly discarded – her family would disown her wouldn't they – she'd be shuttled off to an aunt in a far distant part of the country with an unfortunate influenza wouldn't she... whereas now there's no shame and maybe it's sad that there's no shame, maybe the morality needs to come back a bit but... society has changed – once society has changed you can't unchange it can you... I can't think from my childhood what it was like, I mean there must have been single parents but you weren't really aware – it was all these couples. My parents' friends were all married and it was a kind of scandal if they got divorced or had children out of wedlock, it was just [shocked face]…'*

Other participants were more optimistic about changes in social attitudes. Steph differentiated between what she perceived as ignorant attitudes present in the media and those in her immediate social and work circles where a more positive version of single mothers as representing liberation and empowerment emerged, deserving of pride in their ability to work and raise children without the need for a male provider. She thus drew on an 'escaping patriarchy' discourse in evoking a sense of pride in her achievements:

> *'I think it's um… probably quite common for our generation, I certainly wouldn't have wanted to be a single mother in the '70s … and you know the treatment – you were a social outcast effectively um… but yeah I don't know actually, maybe it is getting better, maybe attitudes are getting better, they've certainly moved on a lot in thirty years… I think in work circles, I don't feel that stigma's there, it's almost, we're almost a kind of empowered generation that we're bringing up our children and we're working and we're doing Ok at both of it and I don't feel I'm treated any differently [at work].'*

Other participants highlighted ways in which the stigma surrounding single mothers is maintained, although it may take a different form. Natasha suggested that the experience of shame was much more acute for her mother who felt the need to lie and pretend to be married but reinforced the continuation of stereotypes in the media and ways in which negative depictions and assumptions can be internalized. She also emphasized that the state of being single, especially as a woman, is still a problematic identity in a society which is dominated by idealized notions of the couple (Budgeon, 2004; Kaufman, 2008), central to heteronormative intimacy scripts (to be discussed further in the next section):

> *'Where I grew up it was a very small town and my mum had been living away in x so she could come back and say she'd been married and I don't think many people now would feel the necessity to lie so… um… attitudes have definitely changed but there's definitely a lot of negativity which a lot of people internalize and you know just things like assuming a woman has children so she can get benefits, this kind of thing is so much part of you know what we read in the media, it's quite dreadful isn't it – I mean who would choose it? Who would choose it? So yeah I think perceptions have changed but then… I don't know, I still think we live in a world where married or otherwise, the relationship dominates – so that as a single women or a single mother, you get excluded.'*

Being single

Jess described the sense of shame associated with being single, equated here with being rejected or unwanted. She suggested that being single and having children was a barrier to intimacy with potential partners rejecting her on the basis of not wanting to 'take on' her children (in an earlier section she referred to her children as being perceived negatively as 'baggage'):

> *'I just felt shame for a long time that nobody wanted me you know… I had the most adorable child and then two adorable children but as your eldest becomes older they are always more challenging to people. In-between, I met loads of people between [my children's' fathers] because that was a gap of 8 years but… I think that whatever they liked me for I don't think they ever saw [my child] making up that package as well, I never felt they fully embraced it.'*

Much of this sense of failure was associated with not having a partner or maintaining a successful relationship. Smart (2007) suggests that poor relationships are characterized by feelings of shame, interlinking with class, gender and social vulnerability and many participants may have experienced this. Being in a couple was seen as the ideal cultural norm and therefore being single was seen as a failure, indicating the pervasiveness of heteronormative intimacy scripts. Again, this sense of shame is highly gendered, reflecting that women typically tend to be considered as responsible for relationships and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983, 1990). Kaufman argues that due to economic uncertainty in Western culture, there is a recentering of ideals of 'the family' and an attitude of pity for single women who have not followed the ideal 'husband-baby-home' trajectory (Kaufman, 2008, p.22). He notes experiences of stigma associated with diverging from this normative trajectory, invoking the image of 'society's accusing finger' (Kaufman, 2008, p.25).

Natasha's trajectory was all the more challenging because growing up, she sought to define herself in opposition to her mother who she perceived as a failure. Even as a child, possibly partly through being bullied at school, she had a firmly entrenched notion that being in a couple was normal for adult women and she therefore wanted to find a partner for her mother:

> *'It's breaking the thing about equating singleness with failure and having a partner with success because it's really entrenched and some relationships are just wrong – um and you know my mum's never had a relationship ever that I've been aware of and I was always determined I wouldn't be like her and*

> *I will find someone but actually as her child I was thinking that because she wasn't with someone that she was unhappy and I was always trying to fix her up with someone – the milkman or whatever.'*

In an exchange with myself, the participant related some of the sense of the stigma of being a single woman to cultural representations - both alluded to a character the popular novel (and film) 'Bridget Jones'[43] as a cultural touchstone for shared experiences of feeling excluded (also highlighted by Kaufman, 2008), for example at parties dominated by couples. One of the difficulties faced in such social situations was intrusive questioning about her personal life, being held up as an example of a single woman and a single mother. As Kaufman (2008) argued, single women are constantly exposed to questioning based on the assumption of a questionable status. She found it impossible to avoid the label of 'single parent' ascribed to her and assumed to be her defining feature:

> *'I find it really difficult going out when you know there's going to be lots of couples. When I've said to friends who are in couples, 'I don't think I can cope with this, I've got to leave' they've said 'I didn't even realize there weren't many people here without a partner' but I would be acutely aware of it. I don't know, I suppose I feel I don't want to go out in social situations is that if you're without a partner people kind of you know – think they can ask things like, 'was your baby planned?' People seem to think you're open to kind of a grilling about your life, that your life is somehow… they'll ask you about… draw attention to the fact that you're on your own. You're desperately trying to be this sort of independent entity and you get pulled back into that's who you are, you're a single parent and that seems to be your defining feature.'*

> *Charlotte: 'I have had that at parties with people saying [shocked tone] 'You mean you're not with anyone? You're here on your own?''*

> *Natasha: 'And you get drawn into this Bridget Jones scenario – remember that scene where 'am I covered in scales?''*

> *Charlotte: 'The smug married couples! [laughter] 'cos couples tend to hang out with couples so if you go to a party dominated by couples you're seen as a bit special or people assume you're desperate to find a partner.'*

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[43] Fielding, H. (1996) *Bridget Jones's Diary: A Novel*. London: Picador

Helen similarly described a heightened awareness of potential negative perceptions of others and specifically perceptions of her as a failure for not being able to 'hold down' a relationship. She made a choice not to socialize with boyfriends due to awareness that her relationships seldom lasted, which she found embarrassing. She was also acutely aware of what her neighbours might think:

> *'I think probably I keep partners and myself more just the two of us rather than going out and meeting people, again because I don't want to get involved with couples and then us split up, it's just embarrassing, well not embarrassing as such but it's almost like the neighbours talking, my latest partner has been chatting with the neighbours and now I think, 'well he might not be coming round anymore' and then a few months later another car pulls up outside… and then it'll be, 'Oh she's onto her next boyfriend'– I don't know, semi-embarrassing, makes you feel as if you can't hold down a relationship.'*

A common theme running throughout these narratives is a cultural perception of single women - especially single mothers - as highly promiscuous. They are judged on the number of partners they have had and it may be assumed that they have chosen not to be in a long-term relationship. Jess was conscious of this perception, even though she was not having any sexual relations at all: *'I seem to be the only one not having a sex life but one thing that really bugs me is that people think that single mothers are sex maniacs or something but I don't think we're more so than any other woman'.* In her social circles where there were couples present, she was aware that women often perceived her as being a sexual threat and desperate for a man:

> *'There are an enormous amount of stereotypes about single mothers and even in immediate social circles there is a concern with other women that you're threatening which I find enormously insulting, I really do. There's the temptation to be bitchy and say 'as if I would fancy him' but… you're not needy but you're not a ball-breaker either.'*

The cultural stereotype of single mothers as promiscuous and a sexual threat was aptly described by Emma who used the derogatory term 'slapper'- relating to female promiscuity - as an example and described how it is assumed single mothers' children have multiple fathers and that they are immoral:

> *'I think they're presented as these slovenly, good-for-nothing, um, you know, money grabbing slappers, you know, I really do. I think a lot of people view single mothers as having no morals, you know, every single mother must have*

had at least 3 or 4 children from all different fathers, you know, they just sit on welfare, don't look after their kids, let their kids run riot, you know, they just sit and drink and they spend all the maintenance money on alcohol and drugs and the next boyfriend and I think it's appalling.'

Elaine extended this description of the representation of single mothers – linking stereotypes of multiple pregnancies to race and the perceived shame of having different coloured children by different fathers, depicted in opposition to respectability and good role models of feminine sexuality for future generations:

'I do think people have this image of these lank haired kind of cigarette smoking layabouts and all they want to do is get pregnant constantly by loads of different men and they have different coloured children from all kinds of different fathers – like it's a lifestyle choice – it maybe makes it attractive to some girls who don't want to work and you probably look at their parents and they probably didn't have very good role models but I don't think most of us set out to tell our children that that is the way to go.'

Jess similarly depicted an image of unrestrained sexuality and reproduction regardless of racial boundaries based on what she has observed on the 'Jeremy Kyle show' – although she insisted that diversity in family life is ultimately a good thing. These types of family are seen as operating at the other end of the spectrum to what she describes as her '2.4 family' friends who are striving for respectability and stability. 'Jeremy Kyle,' the television talk show as previously highlighted, was mentioned several times by participants in relation to negative representations of single motherhood and here in relation to inter-racial families. This interlinks with anxieties about 'chavs' who are culturally associated with concerns around inter-racial relationships and families (Tyler, 2008). The statement 'it's sad' in this extract connoted a sense of shame and pity for those who do not manage their sexuality and fertility in socially acceptable ways, another example of distancing from negative stereotypes:

'I think everything's mixed up now and they've put diversity out there which I think is a good thing, healthy because it's something for… there's a lot of diversity where people are trying to create little tiers like my 2.4 friends and there's nothing wrong with that, there is diversity but then you see Jeremy Kyle and there are multi-coloured families and stuff, it's sad, it's just like cats having kittens and they have kittens and they keep on having kittens and there's nothing in-between…'

Being a mother

While participants valued their mothering identities as important, the association of motherhood with economic dependency was at times another source of shame. This echoes negative media representations of single mothers as being lazy and a drain on resources and entails another layer of complexity as single mothers attempt to construct positive identities from their situation. While married women or those with a (male) partner to support them have more freedom to choose whether to work and being a married full-time mother carries some respectability, not working as a single mother carries the stigma of being a drain on state resources, as Chloe observed:

> *'Yeah, well I was on benefits to begin with and it, and it was very weird actually suddenly having this new label that one day I was this respectable married woman with children and the next day it kind of felt that I was kind of on the bottom of the social pile and I had various part-time jobs but they were fairly low level and I kind of felt looked down on in some way whereas when I was at home with the children and I was married that was absolutely fine.'* (Chloe)

These accounts are redolent of continuing gender inequalities embedded in societal structures and manifested in intimate relationships (Evans, 2003; Jamieson, 1998). Particularly apparent is the way childcare continues to be seen primarily as the responsibility of women. As Fineman (2004) argues, the market and the state depend on the caretaking work of women in the main, yet at the same time women continue to be treated as autonomous individuals, free to enter the labour market unencumbered by caring responsibilities. Those with caring responsibilities cannot be seen purely in terms of autonomous individuals with freedom of choice in terms of how to either enter the labour market or organize their personal lives, as the needs of dependents and economic circumstances are likely to shape what life choices are available to them. Fineman (2004) and Kittay (1999) posit the notion of interdependency as a critical response to theories which revolve around the notion of autonomy, obscuring the needs of dependents and those, usually women, responsible for them. Feminist theorists highlight ways in which the liberal conception of autonomous, rational beings have been privileged over relational, connected ways of being, related to the notion of an 'ethics of care' (Gilligan, 1982) which imagines the possibility of a more connected, interdependent subjectivity.

The societal emphasis on the importance of paid work within the current neo-liberal context (Fraser, 2013) can have a detrimental impact on the identities of single mothers, especially where within certain contexts and circumstances work is hard to

find and childcare is not readily available. As Duncan and Edwards (1999) observe, lived patterns of work and care are associated with single mothers' orientations to motherhood, in line with the dominant discourses of their local contexts. Not complying with cultural expectations with regards to paid work can have difficult consequences for single mothers (Carabine, 2001; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Klett-Davies, 2007). There is a cultural conflict between the ideal of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996) and the socio-economic necessity of paid work. Sandra observed that the political expectation for single mothers to work alongside demonization of non-working single mothers in the press can create potential for exploitation. She also conveyed that there is little recognition of the realities of the work of bringing up children without the support of close-knit female communities which she saw as defining previous generations (in part through nostalgia and / or the experience of growing up in a working-class community and now having little contact with neighbours):

> *'I think lone mothers are seen a bit like them, as low down, as scum – there's a stigma towards it because they take up money. It's like an underclass. But they don't see how hard it is, they don't see how hard it is to bring up children on your own. In the old days, when the men went off to work, children would be brought up by the women in the communities. Women would help each other. Now there's none of that – women aren't really helping each other anymore…*

> *I mean it's a massive responsibility, bringing up a child – it's not just you, there's another person or people you've always got to think about. And you're expected to work. It's almost as if the Government are encouraging it now and I still haven't worked out why, it feels like a conspiracy – like when they brought over all the immigrant worker in the 50s to do all the jobs no-one else wants to do – now single mothers are being forced into low pay work – I don't get it. I mean I would do it for my kids, I would get out and sweep the streets if I had to for the children – I suppose I'm lucky I haven't been in that position.'*

These observations tap into the complex, classed nature of motherhood identities, raising the question of how far motherhood itself is valued in society (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Skeggs, 1997). For middle-class women who have grown up being more career orientated (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) it may be a particularly difficult choice, in terms of identity, to stay at home. As Chloe described here, this entails being dependent on a partner who holds the higher status of being the breadwinner and so risks devaluation:

'Well there is this pressure within a certain class I think to have a job and be successful – they do tend to look down on those who aren't doing that – I know because friends of mine from uni have been caught up in this mad career thing and saying I just want to use my brain - and it's fair enough just to want a few hours out of the house because you need it but don't suggest that you don't need your brain because [motherhood is] hard on your mental faculties - it's really hard work but it's just not valued really... So – yeah it always seems to fall between camps really, you've got to choose one or the other which is a shame… yeah I mean my ex – although he said he valued it, the bottom line was he enjoyed being the one, the money earner… it was like it's 'my money that's buying this', it made me feel not particularly valuable.'

In contrast, other participants experienced negative attitudes in relation to them working, underlining the complexity of making choices around working versus full-time parenthood. For Jacquie, being in a position where she had no choice but to work invited expressions of pity and hostility from women in her social circle who were primarily economically supported by their husbands:

'I have encountered, I have experiences that from… from other females making comments such as 'I don't want to end up like you', meaning in your position as a single parent and from the other point of view, other females making comments about me being at work and not at home with my child so I get it from both sides.'

Many participants highlighted a more subtle form of discrimination involving a lack of understanding for the realities of single parenthood in certain social settings. Steph described a lack of distinction in her child's school community, and among two-parent families, in terms of the work involved and the high expectations of parental contribution to school life when this is not always a possibility and with support not always forthcoming from children's fathers. Her account suggested that she internalized a sense of inferiority, feeling 'shamed' at her lack of ability to contribute and to meet expectations of her community due to caring and work commitments:

'When you work full-time as a single parent it's very difficult [to contribute] and there doesn't seem to be that sort of, you sort of feel shamed in a way because you think, you know, I don't want to play the single mum card all the time but you know, it just seems to be this assumption that everyone's got this support and you know, 'dad'll do it' and it's just not the case.'

In the course of their narratives, many participants countered 'social threat' discourses (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) which label single mothers as 'lazy' and immoral, a burden on the state and poor role models by emphasizing how hard they have worked and how honest they are in respect to claiming benefits. Deborah undertook voluntary work for which she received no support and earned additional money by taking in student lodgers which, she stressed, she was always honest about. She described this attitude as being 'old fashioned', distancing herself from those who might fit the media stereotypes and emphasizing how she maintained her pride. Nevertheless, she conveyed a sense of inferiority at not being fully complete or 'wholesome' (with its moral overtones) due to not being paid for her work:

> *'I hate being on benefits, I loathe it with a passion. I work really hard but I don't get paid for that work but I love what I do but if I could be paid to cover the expenses that I have, having done my budget and everything then I'd feel a more wholesome person I suppose, more complete but I do the best I can within the limits I've got so if I can get a bit extra as week I do and if a student's available and I can take them in I do and I declare that – actually I'm very open and honest and above board about things. I feel funny about people conning benefits... do you know what I mean? I'm a bit old fashioned about things like that, I've got my pride, you know.'*

Participants' accounts suggested that stigma associated with single motherhood is heightened when they are claiming benefits (Klett-Davies, 2007). They conveyed a general perception that single mothers have deliberately chosen to be without a partner and are therefore solely responsible for the circumstances in which they find themselves. The available choices in order to maintain respectability are either to be supported by a (male) partner or to work and provide for themselves and their children. However, as Chloe explained, it is not always that simple. Having recently arrived back in the country with young children after escaping from an abusive relationship, she felt that she needed to build up a support network before being ready to seek work, being constrained by caring responsibilities and school hours. She re-emphasized, as with many participants, that becoming a single mother was not a choice:

> *'I think there's a suspicion on the whole that people have taken it on too lightly, you know, being on their own and not perhaps – you know – done what it takes to make it work. There is that prejudice I think and yet the reality is, no-one's got a clue about people's circumstances um and… and it also I think, there is, there is an element of people thinking, 'Well it's all very well, you get*

income support if you're a lone parent' but um that you could work and… they
don't appreciate, well I'm only just beginning but envisaging trying to get a job
with this (3 year-old child) and the other two at different schools and finishing
at different times and then if one of them gets sick, it's a total nightmare!

I need to build up more of a support structure that is in place before I start
really looking for work but yeah, on the whole I don't really feel that I chose
this – I wanted to have a happy ever after life (child interrupts)… I didn't plan
to be on my own… it's not as if I didn't try to make it work…

but yeah, I think there is definitely that stigma, people are more accepting of it
than in the past but there's still that – they're a bit like urgh, especially if you're
on benefits, you know, if you've got some work going on then maybe you feel
a bit more… confident about your circumstances.'

Other participants, such as Deborah, stressed the realities of trying to live on state
benefits, refuting media depictions of single mothers 'living a life of luxury':

'Well I've never met a lady who was deliberately pregnant in order to have the
flat, benefits and... living on benefits is not fun – you're close to the wire all the
time, you're on the edge of the fence all the time. Something goes wrong -
your car, our washing machine... it has a major impact on your life, because
you can't just go and get another one whereas if there are two of you working
you could and you don't think twice about it...'

Steph, along with other participants, stressed how important it is for her personally to
provide a good role model for her son in terms of working and being able to provide -
crucial for maintaining respectability and pride. However, she made it clear that it was
not easy to achieve this position, having been unable to focus exclusively on her career
for five years while her son was younger. She underlined that parenting alone is
extremely hard work but at the same time her account celebrated the achievements as
a woman of managing motherhood while working and providing, invoking pride even
while simultaneously experiencing guilt:

'I want to have a good career and earn some decent money because um I've
kind of not really done that for various reasons, I mean I've worked in x for 10
years and I'd say 5 years of that is taken with childcare and I wasn't really able
to focus on my career but then I did do a masters so it was personal
development but now I'm working full-time, I've been working full-time for a year
and my little boy's in after school club, that's all he knows, he loves it,

absolutely fine and I really feel that I have quite good economic power which I like him seeing, you know that mum can you know – mum pays for this and that and mum does most things really and that's normal for him and I think that's a really positive role model for him to see that… actually I am doing alright but you know, I think guilt is probably invented for mothers.'

Expressions of guilt about both the quality of care (mothering) provided and their ability to provide economically, along with the need to justify their decisions and situations, was a common feature in many of these narratives. This may be indicative of the struggle to reject negative assumptions and to carve out more positive identities. There seemed to be an underlying pressure for these single mothers to prove themselves as viable parents and women, regardless of their relationship status. Even in terms of parenting alone, regardless of employment status, Sofia indicated that a single parent is more likely to be judged for their parenting abilities as there is no other individual to blame if anything goes wrong. At the same time, the work of bringing up children alone is relentless and there is a lot of additional social pressure to be the 'perfect parent', as she described here:

'You've got so much responsibility, you have to do everything on your own, if they get bored you have to take them out, you have to cook, you have to clean, you have to discipline them – to be a single parent in the public, in the social life I am the person to get the blame because I am bringing them up alone, it's my kids, I'm the only parent so I am the only one who gets blamed.'

There was an implicit 'hiddenness' within many of these accounts – many participants felt that they had to cover up their struggles as parents and workers for fear of being labelled as inadequate. This is reminiscent of Goffman's (1963) notion of information management and 'passing' or concealing stigmatised identities. For some it was necessary to hide their relationship and family status in order to gain or remain in employment, especially in working environments deemed to be sexist. Cristina successfully followed this strategy and her employer was shocked when it was revealed she was a single mother as it was assumed parents would automatically require lots of time off. However, Cristina hid the realities of trying to find cover when her child was ill and / or childcare was unavailable. Her emphasis that 'I did all that myself' indicates that the achievement of managing these hardships while maintaining a competent appearance was another source of pride:

'Before I went into x the job I was in they never knew I was a single parent, I deliberately didn't tell them because I knew I wouldn't get the job and my boss

> *admitted to me years afterwards he never would have given me the job so that*
> *was the worst… I knew I could get up that ladder quite quick if they didn't ever*
> *know I had a child and I know how sexist they are so I didn't tell them, they*
> *found out… well I told them after four years and they were really shocked,*
> *couldn't believe…and they said, 'but you haven't had loads of time off' and this*
> *is obviously their perception of single mums… but I always had so many A, B, C*
> *plans booked in you know when she was ill and stuff and it was quite*
> *horrendous, quite stressful but when I look back I think I did that all myself.'*

Accompanying guilt, anxiety and hiddenness surrounding decisions about working and parenting, there were many anxieties about how children will fare without a father figure, as previously discussed. This is a common theme in the 'social threat' discourse, the importance of the father figure relating to more traditional notions of the ideal patriarchal family form – the father as the head of the family who, as well as being the main breadwinner, would have overall responsibility for discipline. As Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003) maintain, '*Although understandings and expectations of fatherhood have shifted over the years to become increasingly associated with psychological caring and nurturing, fathers are still likely to be perceived, and to perceive themselves, as taking a major role in protecting and disciplining children*' (Ibid., p.90). Anna related how she coped with the anxiety of the absence of a father figure. While ultimately she rejected the notion that a male authority figure was necessary - drawing on the 'escaping patriarchy' discourse - she experienced guilt about whether she did enough on her own, recognizing that this guilt was likely to be damaging to herself and her relationship with her children. She was also concerned about the sense of rejection her children might experience in the absence of a father when they compared themselves with two-parent families. This sense of incompletion was manifested with single mothers frequently describing how they felt like they were not a 'proper family' without a male partner, reminiscent of Butler's (2000) question of the 'spectral,' unfulfilled position of the father in single mother families and their deviance from normality, as Natasha depicted here:

> *'Well I've had this sense of I'm not a proper family and when I've talked to*
> *friends who are a proper family about not being a proper family and they've*
> *said, 'Don't be ridiculous, of course you are' but that's the way I feel, having this*
> *feeling that I'm just this lunatic that goes to work, comes in, is tired and I'm just*
> *this whirlwind I just don't know how to feel – that we're a family without a*
> *partner.'*

This is indicative of the effects of cultural narratives and discourses which have become internalised as 'normalising judgements' applied to the self (Carabine, 2001; Foucault, 1977). Cristina felt this absence of being in a 'proper family' acutely, having originated from a cultural background where large families are the norm. Even though she accepted that she and her daughter were officially classified as a family, she described how it did not feel like one to her:

> *'Until very recently the thing that I found the saddest thing was that I didn't really see [my daughter] and I as a family. Every time we went on holiday it felt like 'you're the single parent and child, not the families'… especially coming from my background where my mum's x and big into marriage and all my family, cousins have got big families, that's what I want really and I feel quite resentful that I haven't got it.'*

Highlighting and questioning the gendered division of parenting roles in our society, Steph asked why the blame for things going wrong within the family usually falls on the mother, whereas fathers are not deemed to be culpable or responsible. The 'sexual double standard' was often referred to in terms of expectations about the sexual behaviour of men and women. There is a sense here of an expectation that it is women's responsibility to deal with the consequences of sex, namely children, thus creating a 'parenting double standard' where the lack of responsibility of fathers is deemed acceptable. This is aligned to commentators (Fineman, 2004; Lewis; Smart, 2000) who have noted the continuation of childcare being seen as women's responsibility, despite the decline of the 'breadwinner' model. These assumptions are reflected in the structural disadvantages and cultural denigration which ensues from mothers being positioned as dependents:

> *"I still think there's a stigma about single mothers, about the children or about them not being as able, there's a stigma around that generally in society… if there's things go wrong it's because she's a single mother or if there's a problem with the child, well it's because dad's not around anymore. I also feel there's a real acceptance that dads mightn't be around and it's taken for granted that mums do the work and if there's a dad there great but if he isn't well that's what happens to a lot of kids. I find that acceptance in society really difficult, that it's Ok for dads not to have that responsibility for their children.'*

Emily moved back to live with her parents when her marriage ended but, while her children had access to a father figure in the form of her father, she was concerned that he was overly authoritarian, coming from a different generation where fathers tended to

be primarily disciplinarian. This concern was partly due to the unequal relationship between him and her mother which she did not see as a healthy relationship to model for her children. This illustrates that while many participants saw access to a male role model and to a good relationship as ideal, they held a moderated view that it is essential that it be a good male role model and /or a good relationship. In contrast to more traditionalist viewpoints, this was influenced by gender equality ideals. Some aspects of dominant cultural narratives such as the importance of couple-centred families were therefore partially adhered to but moderated in the light of values of gender equality. Implicit in this extract is a perception of the possibilities for women of this generation to emancipate themselves from unequal partnerships - not a viable option for Emily's mother:

> *'And now I'm in-between two generations- my dad is very strict, very authoritarian which is a challenge – I think a bit of discipline is good for them but sometimes he can be very abrupt. They haven't really got a good male role model and never have really – their dad and my dad – what warped picture of men are they going to grow up with?'*

> *Charlotte: What sort of male role model would you like?*

> *'A balance between having fun with them and disciplining them – my dad does have the balance a lot of the time but the thing that gets me is he's always putting my mum down – criticising, getting at her… he will not take any suggestion that he might be wrong and they've never had an equal marriage really. What would be nice is someone to consult with and share things and so on but my dad is 'Ok this is the way it is which is not really what I want modelled for my children but there we go... my generation is a bit more assertive in asking for what we want and not staying in a marriage if we don't get what we want.'*

Other participants rejected the cultural ideal that it is necessary to have a mother and father figure in order to successfully raise children, epitomized in this example from Yvonne who stressed the opinion that as long as children are raised in a positive, loving environment, it doesn't matter how many parents are involved:

> *'It's much better to be one person who is positive and puts love into the relationship with the children than if you've got two people where that doesn't happen. I would say to anybody, children need a positive, loving environment however many parents or parent is involved.'*

Jess, towards the end of her narrative, reflected on the sense of pride inherent in the achievement of raising children alone, evident in the high standards of behaviour and aspirations of her children. As with other participants, she differentiated between attitudes in wider society and the media where more negative examples are dominant and her own social circles which she saw as more intelligent, accepting and aware. Significantly, here she returned to the narrative about the woman who fitted the stereotype of a single mother on benefits and revised her view, explaining that she had taken on four step-children and devoted herself to mothering ten children full-time, here presented as admirable. She therefore, in the course of her narrative telling, had what can be described as a 'moment of epiphany' where her perception changed. Having subscribed to the 'social threat' discourse previously, she now transformed this into a narrative of pride and 'triumph over adversity':

> *'I'm proud, I think my children will be proud, raising them on my own hasn't meant slipping standards, my children have always been complemented on their manners. My son wants to be a policeman so I'm not worried about him being a druggy or smoking or doing any of the other things young people are exposed to… in my personal community every single friend who's had children since I've had children have said, 'I don't know how you did it', you're not going to get an Oscar for it …*

> *… within my own community I know I'm respected for being a single mum, especially by other mums and by some male colleagues who have children now, they respect that enormously but then I come from an intelligent circle and then in the wider society there's Jeremy Kyle and you're almost up there for the pillory aren't you …*

> *…like I said x is a little bit like that but then she is a good mother, she's taken on four step-children because their mother died of cancer. Whatever disparity we have, she loves them, she's made a home for 10 kids now and she's really committed to them and she was born to mother, that's her thing. I don't think you can stereotype people…'*

In terms of intimacy, parenting alone is not necessarily seen as an impediment to children forming positive relationships in the future although it is perceived as a barrier for some. Steph described the work of achieving a balance between enabling children to witness the realities of relationships rather than the 'rose tinted' vision of intimacy she grew up with and providing a sense of optimism regarding the possibilities for intimacy through friendship as well as romantic relationships. It is evident that she drew

a sense of pride from her ability to manage her son's development of an 'egalitarian' outlook on relationships which she saw as providing a better foundation for relationships. She therefore conveyed an optimistic outlook with regards to future generations in terms of intimacy:

> 'I really want my son to be happy and have good friends and I want him to be influenced by me, selfishly because… I just think that I have quite a good way of looking at people and I think that that's a positive thing that will help him later in life with forming relationships and seeing that everything's not as maybe rose tinted and maybe I thought things were when I was a child because with my parents it was all lovely and the world isn't like that so I want a very honest relationship with him but not completely knocking the stuffing out of the fact that there was some brilliant people and amazing people and… giving him the good foundations for having good relationships with people and… that's very important for me.'

Available heterosexual identities

While single motherhood is a problematic identity, culturally stigmatized and associated with shame, it can also be a source of pride as indicated in many participants' accounts. It is contrasted favourably with other, less attractive if culturally acceptable roles for women. The role of 'wife' is portrayed as problematic because of its associations of unequal gendered hierarchy, subordination to a husband, economic dependency and lack of personal freedom. Most participants aspired to being a 'partner,' if not a 'wife,' while some engaged in casual sexual relations, often hiding their intimate lives and ensuring the intimate needs of their children were met as a priority, as discussed in the previous chapter. Others did adapt to being single but were aware of this as a problematic identity. Jess gave an account of a friend who had taken on a subordinate role in her marriage, seeing this as not being authentic, even if it did mean the marriage was likely to last. For herself, she was not willing to compromise on being in a relationship with an equal although she did not assume this was a realistic goal. She related this to not wanting to appear to be vulnerable and conform to stereotypes of single mothers who are desperate for a partner to support them economically. This pertains both to maintaining pride and 'managing risk' (discussed more fully in Chapter 5):

> 'I've always just aspired to have somebody who walks through life beside you at the same pace. I don't want to lead and I don't want to be led. I think that's a

misconception about single mums, is that we're all ballbreakers. I'd love to have somebody who there was just a mutuality with…

I've got a friend who's just so happily married but she lets her hubby pick out her clothes, he chooses her make up, he tells her how to have her hair done and she loves it, she absolutely loves it. And it would drive nuts you know, she's not allowed to go over a certain weight, she has to belt everything in to show off her little waist and she buys into it, she subscribes to it and they're happy, they know what their roles are and I would put money on it that that is one marriage that will last and she never wanted to be the one making decisions even though she's a bright woman in a senior position but she's like a dolly… and she said that's why you're on your own, you've got to soften up, let guys….

And I said no that's not being true, it's not being true to yourself – I'm always frightened of appearing vulnerable in front of men, that's one of my fears because that's when guys take advantage, when they think you're needy, you want a meal ticket. You want them to take you on…'

Steph, who was in a distance relationship, related how this current situation was preferable to living with someone or getting married. She referred to having been in a married situation where she felt like a 'Stepford wife'[44] (referring to the novel and films depicting 'perfect wives' who are in actuality robots) where she felt restricted and constrained. In her current 'living apart together' relationship, she was able to seek intimacy through friends and family and found those relationships sustaining without the need for a full-time partner:

'For me personally with my relationship with my partner, I think I've gotten to a place where I still kind of like my… I don't want to get married again, I don't want to live with someone again and all that so this kind of suits me in a way because I like my autonomy of being me and I'm frightened of going back to that 'stepford wife' thing, it scares me a lot so… yeah and I just want to continue with my female friends and um you know continue with the good relationship with my family and that's basically it really I think.'

Feminist commentators such as Van Every (1996) have noted that a limited range of 'acceptable' heterosexual identities for women include that of 'wife'. Drawing on other theorists, she highlight that this role culturally entails subordination and dependency, upholding patriarchy and the notion of the 'male head of household':

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[44] Levin, I. (1972) *The Stepford Wives*. New York: Random House.

'In these theories 'wife' is not defined simply as 'a married woman' (Oxford Concise English Dictionary) although most such women would come within its scope. Rather, it refers to the particular social position of women as subordinates of individual men. For Johnson (1988), the characteristics central to the definition of 'wife' are subordinate status, economic dependence and the accompanying psychological characteristics such as deference. Delphy and Leonard (1992) specify the economic characteristics further to include the appropriation of labour, paid and unpaid, by the (male) head of household, including the work involved in raising his children as well as any work done for someone else. They also highlight the fact that unmarried women may be 'wives' in this sense.' (Van Every, 1996, p.48)

At a later point in the interview, Steph expanded this notion – emphasizing the importance of women having a sense of self-worth and not compromising in relationships. Her suggestion that you 'have to really keep your head about you' is a reminder about the level of perceived risk in relationships and the need to protect children and the self (discussed in Chapter 5; 'Managing Risk'). Similarly to other participants, she drew a sharp distinction between 'love and romance' on the one hand and 'reality' on the other, demonstrating a mistrust of the notion of romance based on experience. This extract suggests that her sense of pride - in the achievement of parenting alone, developing her individuality and gaining a sense of self-worth - would be compromised if she were to be submerged in a relationship, to 'melt into somebody else'. She draws on a therapeutic 'self-development' narrative (Jordan, 2004) but rather than simply adhering to Western values of individualism, this is specifically a response to the risk of assuming a subordinate position in a relationship and so interfaces with the 'escaping patriarchy' discourse:

Charlotte: 'What are the potential pitfalls?'

Steph: 'Um… of compromising in a relationship that will leave you unhappy but maybe you don't realise because you're swept away with the love and the romance, the talk and that's not reality, it doesn't matter how much you can love somebody, there has to be – and I think that's what I've learnt and taken away from it – I like my individuality and my rights as a person in society on my own terms and that's so important and that makes me happy and that makes me feel like I've achieved and I don't want that kind of compromised and to melt into somebody else.'

Natasha drew a line between the idealized, largely imaginary scenario of the 'perfect relationship' and the realities which are likely to include unsatisfactory sex lives, boredom and irritation despite outward appearances encapsulated in the image of the 'nice house'. She recognized that there is a 'hiddenness,' secrecy and shame about unhappiness within marriages and families and so the appearance of idealized romance and perfect, 'proper' family life can serve merely as a mirage. In contrast, single mothers can still enjoy the excitement of dating and above all, represent courage in being able to leave unsatisfactory relationships and not compromising. This again enables a sense of pride and is aligned to an 'escaping patriarchy' discourse where it is not seen as essential to be in a relationship with a man:

> *'Who are we really comparing ourselves to? It's imagined people really – I compare myself to people… as a kid I used to look at nice houses and wonder what's it's like to kind of be in a proper house and a proper family kind of thing and those are the people we probably kind of compare ourselves to – at least I do – and it's kind of a mirage. What you forget is that your married friends are probably having really boring nightie on sex, they don't have anything to say to each other – after 20 years there's none of that, if you do go out on a date, you know, you can dress up and there's novelty and excitement that there's not going to be… and you forget that people are probably bored and irritated with each other because that's what happens isn't it – my friend left someone after 24 years and you would never have known that she was unhappy – she put on a brave face and I always seemed really good but inside she'd been unhappy for years - in all these situations it's about having the courage to just move on from the hand that life has given you.'*

Helen likewise contrasted her situation positively with situations she knew of where married women are trapped in poor relationships which they can't escape. Through narrative reconstruction, therefore, single mothers can begin to reclaim stigmatised identities as a positive source of pride (Weeks et al, 2001). This extract encapsulates how single mothers can potentially develop positive identities, moving away from the sense of shame associated with single motherhood towards accepting and embracing their status as single women and mothers who successfully parent their children without a male provider:

> *'Interestingly some of my married girlie friends are jealous because they feel they're in relationships which are at a dead end and they're frightened to get out and they think, 'I wish I was in that situation, I wish I had the children to myself'*

so I think it's a mixed bag out there um but at one time I used to be cautious about saying I'm on my own with the children but now I don't feel cautious, that's my situation and I'm not ashamed of it – I'm Ok where I am, I'm quite comfortable being a single mum, I'm doing Ok, I'm doing an Ok job and so I think my perception has changed.'

Wallbank (2001) argued for the possibility of single mothers constructing alternative identities and this emerges in these participants' narratives. Natasha similarly stressed the possibility of seeking an alternative positive identity without the need for a male partner, emphasizing how women can easily be defined by relationships with men. She described her mother as having been socially disabled, defined through her relationship status. While Natasha enjoyed dating, she had made a decision to develop her own interests and to move away from the assumption of needing a male partner and father figure in order to be complete. While single motherhood may not initially be a chosen way of life, it has the potential in this construction to become a positive identity. The emphasis on personal development, self-definition and freedom from dependence on a partner was seen as providing a good role model for her children:

'I think it would be so easy just to give up and be defined by our relationships to men. I think that's, I just feel that's ridiculous that in this day and age – and I do feel particularly strongly about that because I think my mum was so disabled by that - I know lots of women of that era in the 60s and 70s who did seize the day - and she was very sensitive and she never recovered from that because of how she was defined by a society and I do feel outrage at that and I don't want my children to grow up thinking that 'my mummy lived like a half-life' and so instead of dating I'm actually looking into joining x and trying to do the things I loved before I had children, I want to do x and x, hopefully health-wise I'll feel a lot better and I want to abandon the feelings I had before [my daughter] when I felt that in order to be complete I need to find someone who I could have a family with… and I'll be much freer , much stronger if I can actually feel not defined by being a single parent but by just me and for my children to see that.'

Conclusion

This chapter explored the complexities surrounding the identity of 'single mother' which emerges as culturally problematic, engendering negative stereotypes and perceptions. To be an adult woman, and particularly a mother who is not currently in a stable, preferably married, relationship and therefore sexually available is to threaten normative expectations surrounding the family, motherhood and acceptable, respectable femininity and female sexuality. Participants were subject to 'normalizing judgments' (Carabine, 2001; Foucault, 1977) about appropriate ways of conducting themselves sexually and managing their intimate lives. Entrenched cultural stigma surrounding single mothers – potentially sexually available women with children – was often fuelled by negative media representations, absorbed into daily discourses and interactions within communities and social circles. This directly impacted on participants' relationships and self-perceptions. Narratives contained discourses of single mother families as a social threat (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) - sexually deviant, immoral and in need of a father figure to impose discipline. They were often infused with a sense of shame or inferiority in comparison with 'normal' women in couple centred families. However, narratives of pride were also invoked, generating more positive constructions of single mothers and their families as hardworking, resilient and successful, thus resisting negative stereotypes.

Negative cultural assumptions, evident in single mothers' use of the 'social threat' discourse (Duncan and Edwards, 1999), which evoked a sense of shame, included an emphasis on children being worse off in single parent families; alternative, personal style the failure to adequately discipline children without the presence of a father figure; single mothers deliberately choosing their situation in order to access a disproportionate share of resources; displaying unrestrained sexual drives in failing to control their fertility; tending towards promiscuity and posing a sexual threat. Taken together, these assumptions paint a picture of an 'unrespectable woman' when compared to traditional feminine norms of modesty, se-sacrifice and sexual restraint which are pertinent to idealised notions of motherhood as noted by many feminist commentators (Rich, 1977; Skeggs, 1997; Smart, 1999). Shame is also associated with the situation of being single. In some of the narratives an unpartnered woman is associated with failure as a woman. Single women, especially those with children, are cast in cultural narratives as unwanted, abandoned social and sexual outcasts to be pitied and derided, or as harbouring a threatening, rampant promiscuity and unrestrained fertility from which 'normal' families need to be protected. The notion of

'social threat' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) incorporates this sexual threat single mothers are seen to represent. Participants negotiated these wider narratives and discourses in their ongoing process of developing intimacy scripts, in turn resisting, rejecting and identifying themselves with them.

Stigma and discrimination were experienced primarily through negative assumptions in the media, the wider society and certain communities which cast single mothers alternately as lazy, unproductive, dependent, greedy, calculating, lacking control over their sexuality and discipline of their children, promiscuous and a threat to couple centred families and therefore the social order. It was also manifested in expressions of pity, direct exclusion from certain circles and an ignorance of the realities of lone parenthood which rendered some participants as invisible within their communities. Cultural representations were perceived as primarily negative with very few available positive examples or role models of single mothers. There were also experiences of discriminatory practices in terms of housing and employment with difficult material consequences. However, it should be stressed that experiences of and responses to stigma varied and were experienced in different degrees according to multiple factors, including class, race, religious affiliation, socio-geographical location, age, employment status and peer group.

Reconstructing intimate identities in more positive ways presented a challenge, not least because there are limited alternative identities for heterosexual women. Firstly there was the need to resist and where possible counteract stigma, linked to the 'social threat' discourse (Duncan and Edwards, 1999), along with the accompanying sense of shame, and with this aim participants employed a variety of strategies within their narratives. This was evidently not an easy task as participants had often internalised stigma and 'normalising judgements' and fluctuated between positions, at times reproducing stigmatised versions of the single mother identity. Some undermined the premise of negative assumptions by highlighting their irrational basis and refusing to accept negative labels. Participants also drew on and reworked existing positive narratives of pride about motherhood, hard work, survival and emancipation in order to counter negative and stereotypical representations. Others employed a 'distancing' strategy (Scheff, 1997) to remove themselves from those they perceive as being the single mothers to which the stereotypes refer (Ford and Millar, 1998) and constructed hierarchies of single mothers, positioning themselves in opposition to those perceived as deserving these negative labels. Distinctions were drawn between married and unmarried mothers; younger and older; those who depended on state support and those who were 'honest and hardworking'; those who chose it as a lifestyle option and

those who had no choice. Yet occasionally a positive view of the diversity of family forms was invoked to validate the single parent family, although there was little subscription to the view that single motherhood is a 'lifestyle choice' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Rather, single motherhood as a 'social problem' was more often invoked to refute the 'social threat' discourse and highlight the consequences of poverty and lack of social support for single mothers. Positions often fluctuated and in one case there was a 'moment of epiphany' where the participant finally rejected stereotypes which had previously influenced her judgment of other single mothers.

Narratives often impressed the fact that single parenthood was not a course which had been chosen. Participants tended to position themselves as victims of circumstance rather than as actively choosing single motherhood, with most aspiring to a stable couple relationship (although several questioned this norm). They emphasized their respectability (Skeggs, 1997), again counteracting the shame associated with single motherhood, by underlining their struggles to work, to create an acceptable home, to raise their children effectively and to manage their sexuality and relationships - keeping these separate from their mothering role (discussed in Chapter 5; 'Boundaries'). The secrecy and hiddenness of efforts to maintain respectability (Skeggs, 1997), despite the struggles and material hardships often endured, was apparent and this helped to invoke a sense of pride. This 'hiddenness' can also be linked to Goffman's (1963) notion of 'information management,' whereby stigmatised identities are concealed. As well as emphasizing respectability, pride was apparent where 'escaping patriarchy' discourses emerged, contrasting the position of single motherhood and its relative freedom from male control to the position of women trapped in unhappy or abusive relationships. This also helped to counteract the sense of shame and failure associated with being single as a woman, underpinning that while being in a couple relationship may carry a higher social and cultural status, it is not in and of itself necessarily advantageous in line with the discourse of 'escaping patriarchy' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). There were instances where participants gained a sense of pride from encouraging children to adopt more egalitarian, 'progressive' attitudes towards gender equality, perhaps, it can be suggested, paving the way for alternative intimacy scripts for future generations. The process of narrative telling enables and illuminates the process by which single mothers respond to, reproduce, resist and challenge conventional cultural narratives and conceptions of intimacy, the family, femininity and sexuality; in some cases moving towards new ways of being and constructing alternative intimate selves and scripts.

CHAPTER SEVEN **Conclusions**

Introduction

The stories of intimate lives presented in this thesis are indicative of a generational cohort of women whose lives and understandings of intimacy are in transition, especially in relation to gender roles. Participants' narratives were shaped by 'intimacy scripts' which drew on wider cultural narratives around family, coupledom and romance alongside gender equality and the possibility of more democratic relationships (Giddens, 1992). These wider cultural narratives contributed to the process of making sense of their experiences and circumstances and to imagine possible futures through their narrative telling, with the corollary that wider shared cultural understandings of intimacy often imported restrictions in terms of how women are expected to behave in their intimate lives. It is likely that in turn the telling of these narratives of intimacy contributed to the ongoing, dynamic process of re-creating and maintaining intimacy scripts (a process which can be termed 'scripting').

A general perception of an increase of choice and fluidity around intimacy is discernible in line with detraditionalization theorists (Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Jordan, 2004). Some participants had experimented with different ways of 'doing intimacy' in their personal lives. Nevertheless, narratives also reproduced highly gendered, normative understandings of intimacy and ideal family life, undermining predictions of dramatic social transformation. Traditional intimacy scripts incorporating heteronormative ideals of coupledom, romance and traditional family retained a strong hold as ideals to be aspired to. While participants often sought more equality in relationships, there were also instances of nostalgia for more traditional, clear-cut gendered roles. Participants tended towards privileging committed, long-term, stable romantic couple relationships. As argued by the Personal Narratives Group (1989), while personal narrative can provide strategies to challenge conventional social gendered expectations, they also reflect the lives of women who thrive within these norms or collude with their maintenance.

In this study there was not only variance between participants but often, notably, conflicts and collisions occurred within single narratives. A perceived increase in choice often chimed uncomfortably with the lack of choice experienced by some participants in their personal lives. In contrast to more pessimistic outlooks on change, highlighting fragmentation, fleeting encounters and materialism (Bauman, 2003), which some participants concurred with to a degree, ultimately the majority of participants sought

and valued profound relating, deep connection, commitment and lasting relationships whether this was with a partner, children or friends. Barriers to developing romantic partnerships, however, included lack of material and social resources, the perception of a lack of suitable potential male partners and perceived risks associated with re-partnering. These were often based on negative experiences of unequal relationships (Jamieson, 1998) and a lack of commitment from the fathers of their children. Accounts which highlighted a lack of male responsibility echo feminist observations that parenting is still highly gendered and widely viewed as the responsibility of women, despite their increased participation in public life (Lewis, 2001). 'Emotion work' (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; Hochschild, 1983) and responsibility for the management and maintenance of intimate relationships in general was experienced as gendered.

Cultural narratives of the desirability of traditional families, romance and coupledom as the ideal are present in participants' narratives, coinciding with a simultaneous desire for more 'progressive' (egalitarian, democratic) relationships in terms of gender roles. This creates a sense of 'scriptual liminality' whereby there is no clear adherence to one specific intimacy script. Evidence suggested that the emergence of the 'pure relationship' is present as a possibility if not a reality; the aspiration towards equal relationships formed an alternative intimacy script, co-existing alongside 'traditional' intimacy scripts which remained a key point of reference. There were some examples of single mothers beginning to envisage and live out new intimate possibilities through the insistence on more egalitarian ways of relating; through the decentring of the heteronormative couple (Roseneil, 2005) and through embracing being a single woman and a single mother as a positive identity. It is significant that there appeared to be less adherence to traditional intimacy scripts among younger participants and observations of much more fluid relationships among their peers (also identified in the work of Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010) and so further research is recommended to contrast these different generations. Single mothers underwent highly complex and unsettling transitions in their personal lives and understandings, intersecting with uncertain intimate transitions in the wider culture, particularly in relation to gender roles in relationships.

This conclusions chapter begins by summarising each chapter then revisiting the way in which the concepts of 'intimacy scripts' and 'scriptual liminality' have been utilised in the thesis. It will discuss how participants constructed their intimacy narratives and revisit what was learned about intimate practices in their everyday lives. It will explore ways in which participants experienced being positioned outside heteronormativity and

then move to focussing on ways in which participants made choices about intimacy. The chapter will briefly indicate potential future directions for research and publication. Throughout the chapter, theories of intimacy will be alluded to in the light of these findings and this ongoing discussion will be summarised at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Summary

The 'Theoretical Perspectives' chapter outlined the theoretical framework for this thesis. It firstly sought to both acknowledge the influence of theories of the detraditionalization of intimacy, linked to individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992) while also critiquing these approaches. It problematised the 'transformation of intimacy' thesis (Giddens, 1992) emphases on increased choice and democratization of intimacy (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Jordan, 2004). Further, it challenged notions that the recent era has been marked by decline in intimate relations in the context of a consumerist society (Bauman, 2003). Detraditionalization theorists are critiqued for exaggerated the dichotomy between past and present (Jamieson, 1998). Theorists have problematised the notion of change by highlighting continuities of more traditional modes of understanding and practicing intimacy (Duncan, 2011a and 2011b; Gross, 2005; Plummer, 2003). Recent research has drawn out the importance of attending to context and complexity in intimate lives (Gabb, 2010). It is imperative that continuing gendered inequalities are not downplayed (Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 2007) and that experiences of those with caring responsibilities are not discounted (Fineman, 2004; Kittay, 1999). The chapter raised the ongoing influence of popular discourses of heterosexual romance (Evans, 2003) alongside negative depictions of single women (Kaufman, 2008), specifically single mothers (Carabine, 1996). Finally it addressed omissions within detraditionalization theories in terms of explicitly addressing heterosexuality (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010) and class (Gillies, 2007; Skeggs, 1997 and 2005).

The 'Methodology and methods' chapter located the study within feminist methodology, particularly feminist standpoint methodology which seeks primarily to prioritize the experiences of women (Harstock, 1983). It raised a number of epistemological issues in connection with this, including concerns about recreating an essentialising category of 'women' (Butler, 1990). It argued that it is necessary in pragmatic terms to use such categories while retaining sensitivity to complexity and process rather than viewing categories as fixed.

Discussing the practical aspects of conducting the research it explicated the choice of narrative interview, selected in order to capture complexities of single mothers' lives, to enable them to shape their own stories and to capture their perceptions of socio-cultural transitions. Unstructured narratives were supplemented with semi-structured interview questions. Narrative was discussed as a tool for exploring transition and making sense of disruption in lives. Becker (1997) argues that Western stories tend to be linear, moving from chaos to order, restoring understandings of the self and the world and regaining a sense of normalcy. She asks whether this may change as lives become increasingly fragmented and less coherent - relevant to exploring accounts of contemporary intimacy in the light of change. She highlights the performative nature of narrative telling, seen as an empowering, active process of identity construction. This can be linked to Giddens' (1991) notion of the reflexive project of self. However, as Plummer (2001) argues, narrative telling takes place in cultural contexts, drawing on wider cultural narratives. The sample and recruitment of twenty-four single mothers between the ages of thirty and fifty-five was discussed. The chapter outlined the research design, considering approaches to truth, reliability and validity; analytical procedures; interview process and ethical considerations. It concluded with reflections about the role of the researcher and experience of conducting the interviews, particularly in the light of being a single mother seeking to develop positive research relationships based on reciprocity.

Chapter four, 'Transitional moments: intimacy scripts, continuity and change', set out to explore themes of change and continuity around intimacy in participants' personal lives as they intersect with wider social changes or perceptions of change. The chapter attends firstly attended to the way in which participants told their narratives of intimacy in terms of structure as well as content. Archetypal genres of 'contamination' which emphasizes life getting worse and 'redemption' which emphasize life getting better (McAdams and Bowman, 2001) provided a framework for this. Narratives tended to focus on the transition to single motherhood, moving from relationship breakdown to the experience of being single mothers, often represented as traumatic life episodes. The majority of participants remained in a position of 'survival' (Plummer, 1995), closely linked to their material circumstances (Squire, 2008). Others narrated a period of 'becoming' or 'transformation' which included the rediscovery or recreation of lost selves. Moving on from exploring personal transitions, the chapter investigated ways in which wider cultural narratives of change emerge. It focused on the extent to which participants experienced or perceived greater equality in intimacy than in previous generations. The chapter highlighted unsettledness around intimacy within and

between the narratives. There was evidence of competing and conflicting intimacy scripts, even within a single narrative, around desires for more egalitarian relationships and nostalgia for an idealized past, including the certainty of traditional gendered roles. This was conceptualized as 'scriptual liminality'.

The chapter 'Everyday intimacies: single mothers' intimate practices' explored shifting landscapes of intimacy for single mothers in their everyday lives. Children were central to participants' intimate lives and it was frequently reported that the relationship was closer than it would have been in a couple-centred family unit. These relationships were experienced as intense which at times was problematic although they were described as less hierarchical and more democratic than in couple-centred families. Friendships took on increased significance, particularly those with other single mothers who were less judgemental than others, especially in communities where couple families were the norm. For some participants, especially those with few material resources, there were multiple barriers to achieving intimacy outside the family unit. Others experimented with intimacies, engaging in new sexual relationships, experimenting with their sexuality and (re) discovering sexual selves away from their role as mothers. It was highlighted that being both a sexual being and a mother can be culturally problematic. In some cases sex lives were conducted away from the family. Participants worked to maintain boundaries and there were concerns about physical, sexual and emotional risk to themselves and their children from potential male predators. Further concerns were raised about the impact on the children if they did not behave appropriately and also about the judgements of others if they behaved in an overtly sexual way, linked to negative depictions of single mothers as promiscuous.

The final findings chapter, 'Being a single mother: negotiating narratives of pride and shame' examined ways in which the identity of 'single mother' was understood and narrated. Participants were highly aware of negative media representations of single motherhood and this influenced their self-perceptions, leading to internalized stigma, a sense of shame or 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963). Many had experienced discrimination, especially in relation to housing and employment but also when dating - from prospective partners and their families. Duncan and Edwards' (1999) notion of single motherhood as a 'social threat' discourse was highly prevalent. The identity of a single woman was often experienced as a problematic heterosexual identity and participants at times felt they were failures for not being in a relationship with a man (in line with Kaufman, 2008). Participants responded to stigma through rejecting, resisting but also at times reproducing the 'social threat' discourse and working to maintain 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997). To counter cultural narratives which invoked shame,

participants attempted to convey a sense of pride in their achievements as mothers and individuals, despite multiple barriers. Several participants began to reconstruct singleness and single motherhood as a positive identity and valid choice. However, participants often questioned themselves, comparing their own situations negatively with a perceived norm, drawing on traditional intimacy scripts.

Intimacy scripts

The thesis utilised the concept of 'intimacy scripts,' developing Simon and Gagnon's (1973) concept of 'sexual scripts'. Intimacy scripts are viewed as resources which individuals use to construct their lives by offering a range of possibilities for what path to choose in relation to intimacy. Intimacy scripts entail an ongoing, dynamic process of 'scripting', as individuals may adhere to, negotiate or remake the scripts which are available to them; in some cases they may retreat from the creation of alternative scripts to the safety of intimacy scripts which best fit with the norms and traditions of their culture. Intimacy scripts incorporate (and are likely to be built on) wider cultural narratives and shared understandings of how lives should be lived and how people should behave; they also draw on individuals' specific social contexts and interactions with others as well as interlinking with their 'personal scripts' of fantasies, desires and expectations. Individuals are shaped by but also shape intimacy scripts, creating a template for how to live out their intimate lives. The study has identified the power of traditional cultural narratives about intimacy and ways in which these have shaped ideals and expectations. Nevertheless, these often came into conflict with participants' experiences where, for example, they had negative experiences of being in a heterosexual couple. Cultural narratives interacted with (hetero)normative expectations of the life-course, with participants having initially expected to grow up, date, fall in love with a man (when they found 'the right one'), get married, have children and live in a nuclear family for the majority of their adult life.

This study has enabled an insight into the process which occurs when anticipated intimacy scripts do not come to fruition. Where relationships with children's fathers broke down, there was often a profound sense of loss, disruption and rupture which occurred in part due to an incongruence of expectation and reality – a disruption of their intimacy script. Participants had to come to terms with no longer following heteronormative intimacy scripts and this often impacted negatively on their identities, at times feeling themselves to be stigmatised. Their narrative telling contributed to 'identity work,' enabling them to begin to understand and sometimes rework their intimate identities in positive ways. Idealism about the possibilities for egalitarian

relationships was contrasted with nostalgia for more traditional, patriarchal family forms (Jamieson, 1998). Within the wider culture they were positioned outside the idealized heteronormative nuclear family headed by a married couple (Carabine,1996) and as such often found themselves marginalized, excluded and disadvantaged within local communities and the wider society. Participants at times defined themselves and their position negatively in contrast to 'ideal' coupledom. Romantic couple love often emerged as an ideal, alongside nostalgia for a more traditional, stable past (Jamieson, 1998) based on clearly defined gender roles. Simultaneously, this was in contest with more 'progressive', egalitarian ideals of intimacy. Furthermore, while notions of romantic love and traditional patterns of intimacy were present in the narratives, they were accompanied by accounts of the experiential realities of relationship difficulties, breakdown and inequalities. Nevertheless, there were continuities of meanings around intimacy across generations (Gabb, 2010; Gross, 2005), influencing choices, although there were also disparities. While these narratives entailed change, flux and transition around understandings of intimacy there was no definitive dividing point between past and present – instead they reflect complexity and ambivalence, suggestive of an increasingly complex society (Simon and Gagnon, 1999). The findings here also lend credence to Plummer's (2003) observation that traditional, modernist and postmodernist intimate forms co-exist in diverse Western cultures. What is especially significant in my research is that different versions of intimacy were often present within a single individual's narrative.

At the same time as experiencing a sense of loss and ambivalence in terms of their own personal intimacy scripts, participants were negotiating increasing complexity around available intimacy scripts in the wider culture. Competing versions of 'intimacy scripts,' whether 'traditional' or 'progressive' (Duncan, 2011a and 2011b), ran through participants' narratives and were in constant flux, in turn aspired to and rejected. Conflicting, seemingly disparate cultural scripts existed alongside each other in a single narrative and were in turn accepted and resisted, in order to make sense of experiences, imagine futures and re-construct identities. Dominant cultural narratives around intimacy drew on traditional gendered notions of family, romance, ideal coupledom and motherhood but these collided with more progressive versions, linked to diversity, sexual liberation and egalitarianism. The latter coincided with the 'transformation of intimacy' thesis (Giddens, 1992). This unsettled, sometimes unsettling, experience of alternating between different competing versions of intimacy scripts (sometimes being caught between them) is referred to here as 'scriptual liminality'. Even while there was aspiration towards more 'progressive' egalitarian and

non-traditional intimacy scripts, normative, 'traditional' intimacy scripts remained a key touchstone and frame of reference (Simon and Gagnon, 1999) against which intimate lives were measured. Participants often described themselves as being in an inferior position or less desirable situation as those in happy couple relationships, despite their own negative experiences of heterosexual couple relationships.

Single mothers' narratives of intimate relationships

Participants drew on recognizable narrative themes, both archetypal and modern (Plummer, 1995), moving through sequences of 'contamination', 'survival' and 'becoming' (or transformation) in their narrating of experience (though not necessarily in that order). These were interspersed with popular 'triumph over adversity,' 'self-development' (Jordan, 2004) and 'recovery' narratives (Plummer, 1995). Some narratives were dominated by overriding 'contamination' stories of how their lives had been spoiled while others contained a degree of redemption (McAdams and Bowman, 2001), even transformation (Strauss, 1969) but most often they stressed how participants were surviving and coping with everyday life. Narratives tended to resist either simplistic therapeutic 'recovery' formulas or redemptive 'Hollywood' endings (Plummer, 1995) – rather they emphasized experiences of disappointment (Craib, 1994). They were characterised by reference to the multiple material, emotional and social difficulties which were frequently encountered. Narratives were often shaped in response to the experience of suffering the 'double trauma' of relationship breakdown and becoming a single mother which entailed a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963), an identity which participants frequently emphasised was imposed rather than chosen. It should be stressed that it is impossible to view narratives of intimacy as discrete; rather they were enmeshed in everyday realities of existences, past histories and current circumstances.

A significant number (one-third) of participants had experienced extreme inequalities involving cases of abuse, in previous partnerships, which often resulted in a sense of loss of personhood. While some of these participants narrated their lives as being irrevocably 'spoiled' or 'contaminated' (McAdams and Bowman, 2001), other narratives included a journey towards 'self-discovery' (Jordan, 2004; Smart, 1999), identified as key part of sustaining a sense of self (McAdams, 1993). In some cases this included a transformation or rediscovery of their intimate and sexual selves. This journey was precarious, often taking place in the context of extreme material hardship with basic survival and necessity taking precedence over reflexive organisation of themselves and their lives (Jamieson, 1998). For the majority of participants, narratives remained in the

realm of survival, reflecting the material circumstances of their lives (Squire, 2008). For others, narratives were ultimately overlaid with 'contamination' sequences (McAdams and Bowman, 2001), failing to live up to how they had envisaged their lives and measuring poorly against their perceptions of normality. These single mothers had often found themselves disadvantaged, isolated and excluded, positioned as outsiders and some lacked the socio-economic and / or emotional resources to lead intimate lives beyond their immediate family.

Experiences of loss incorporated the loss of a relationship or family life; identity and selfhood; the loss of relative material comfort and security; the loss of social standing (with exclusion from couple-centred social circles) and of idealized intimacy scripts. Single mothers' own positions within these narratives fluctuated, though it is possible to discern hero(ine), victim and survivor positions. Some female orientated 'strong woman' accounts begin to emerge, positioning men as weak or irrelevant, overturning archetypal, patriarchal narratives of men as heroes and women as passive victims. Single mothers were often depicted as outsiders, isolated, struggling without support and on the margins of an unforgiving (hetero)normative society. Some of the accounts can be read as 'counter narratives' (Personal Narratives Group, 1989), challenging dominant cultural narratives of single mothers in emphasising the realities of their existences, which involved significant material, emotional and practical challenges. Even while these narratives drew on recognisable genres, they resisted simplistic formulas, instead in many cases conveying ongoing pain, disappointment, ambivalence and liminality. 'Liminality' in this sense reflects the difficulty of creating narrative order from chaos (Becker, 1997). While the narratives stopped short of 'chaos' in terms of their construction, they reflected everyday material realities and uncertainties and so tended to resist simplistic endings, with the majority of participants' narratives remaining in the realm of day-to-day survival, corroborating Squire's (2008) insight that narratives closely relate to the material circumstances in which they are told. I argue that they are also reflective of wider cultural transitions, uncertainties and unsettledness around intimacy, especially in relation to gender. In terms of 'scriptual liminality', participants were often unable to settle on one specific frame of reference to make sense of their intimate lives, moving between 'traditional' and 'progressive' positions. Traditional heteronormative intimacy scripts retained a powerful touchstone, shaping notions of 'what should be'. I maintain that these import traditional, patriarchal notions of what women should be and how they should behave and manage their intimate and sexual lives.

Intimate practices in everyday life

The interviews enabled insights into the intimate practices of single mothers in their everyday lives. For many participants, re-partnering was an aspiration but they struggled to find suitable partners. For those who formed new relationships, this process was experienced as complex, risky and precarious. There was a heightened sense of risk, reflecting the emotional, social and economic vulnerability of both mothers and children, which is often the case post-divorce (Smart, 1999) and here exacerbated in cases where there was a history of physical and / or emotional abuse.

Relationships with their child(ren) were central to single mothers' intimate lives, in line with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995). The maintenance and the protection of their family unit and maintenance of intimate boundaries was paramount. The need to care for the physical and emotional wellbeing of children and to protect them from harm was an immediate priority over the development of intimacies outside the family unit. At times this very intensity of closeness between participants and their children was a concern, as it was non-normative and not considered appropriate for children to be in any way a substitute for couple relationships. It was considered essential to delineate and manage sexual relations carefully around the children, to prioritise childcare and keep sexual partners at a distance from children, at least until relationships became more established. The formation of new relationships was experienced as highly complex with participants taking responsibility for the relationship and feeling torn between the different intimacy needs of partners and children. It was valued when partners retained the role of being a 'family friend' who did not interfere with parenting but understood the need to prioritize children. Participants frequently reported experiencing guilt around being a mother and a sexual, sexually available (single) being. For those with daughters, the management of sex lives in line with culturally acceptable notions, was important. The cultural emphasis on the centrality of motherhood (Hays, 1996; Rich, 1977) may also reflect that single mothers feel more confident in portraying their 'carer' identities as these are socially and culturally approved (Skeggs, 1997). Privileging motherhood identities over sexual identities may be one way in which some participants maintain female 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997), especially in the face of moral judgements about single mothers.

Single motherhood represented for some an opportunity to form intimacies 'beyond the couple' and so enabled a departure from traditional ways of 'doing intimacy' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Roseneil, 2004). The development of friendships with other women, in particular other mothers and single mothers, was one example of intimacy

beyond the couple. In many cases, however, friendship were formed and maintained primarily through necessity rather than choice, in the absence of emotional and practical support from partners, children's fathers, extended family or couple-based friendship groups. One participant reminisced about traditional, predominantly working-class communities of women helping each other which raises the question of how far these single mother friendship groups represented innovation in intimacy, entailing 'elective affinities' (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998) or rather a return to 'communities of need' (a potential area for further research). Individual relatives were occasionally cited by participants as being close to them but extended families were marginal in these accounts. A small number of participants were isolated within their communities through cultural, social or ethnic differences or their status as a single mother and so were not always able to access friendship groups. Friendships often involved a high level of 'mutual disclosure' as well as practical support. The strength and enduring nature of these ties and their interdependencies, alongside the primary commitment to children does not support more pessimistic versions of contemporary intimacy (Bauman, 2003). Friendship groups often shifted when women became single mothers; there were instances where participants found themselves excluded from heterosexual couple centred social circles. Friendships with other women reflected 'hidden solidarities' (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) in the way they enabled acceptance (Weeks et al, 2001). However, unlike similar friendship groups in non-heterosexual communities, these lacked any political basis or public voice (Weeks et al, 2001). Outside individual lives and immediate social circles, it should be stressed that there was little sense of 'single motherhood' entailing a shared, positive identity. Indeed, there were indications of tensions between different groups of single mothers and, on occasion, a resistance to or refusal of this category. Yet, despite these dissonances the identity of 'single mother' still contained possibilities for pride and there was also recognition of shared experiences such as being subjected to negative stereotypes.

Outside heteronormativity?

Detraditionalization theories tend to implicitly assume the normativity of heterosexual coupledom as an unproblematic category and primary unit for intimate relations. Here heterosexuality is viewed, in line with Jackson (2005), not solely as a sexual category but as social one which shapes gendered norms, practices and relations. In this research it is made visible rather than taken-for granted and assumed (Jackson, 1999; Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010). 'Compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980) is seen as holding coercive power in reproducing unequal gendered power relations and marginalising those, including single mothers, who not conform to its normative

standards. Heteronormativity shapes intimacy scripts, creating an imagined world, shaping expectations and fantasies (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010) and casting those who deviate from its idealized norms as failures. This was echoed in the way some participants' accounts were overlaid by sense of shame and failure for being single and for being single mothers.

Echoing the findings of Hockey, Meah and Robinson (2010), this research revealed how this imagined world of ideal heterosexuality can came into conflict with participants' real life negative experiences of heterosexual relations such as physical violence, betrayal, emotional abuse, rejection and abandonment of them and their children. This created a discrepancy between expectations and experiences of hegemonic heterosexuality, triggering a sense of loss and disappointment. Nevertheless, participants continued to be influenced by a cultural milieu which idealises love and romance (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Evans, 2003). Such popular 'cultural narratives' in turn shape and strengthen traditional intimacy scripts through the creation of expectations and desires for romance, marriage, family and lifelong partnership.

The thesis explored the complexities surrounding 'single mother' identities which emerge as culturally problematic and positioned outside heteronormativity. It was discussed that the single mother threatens gendered heteronormative expectations surrounding the family and female sexuality. Participants were subject to 'normalizing judgments' (Carabine, 1996; Foucault, 1977) about appropriate sexual conduct and management of their intimate lives which they often internalised. Stigma surrounding single mothers was channelled through negative media depictions and stereotypes and impacted on participants who often internalised this stigma, even while challenging it. Narratives frequently drew on discourses of single mothers as a 'social threat' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) - sexually deviant, immoral and in need of a father figure to impose discipline. Negative cultural assumptions, propagated by the media and upheld in certain social settings, included an emphasis on children being worse off in single parent families; the failure to adequately discipline children without the presence of a father figure; single mothers deliberately choosing their situation in order to unfairly access resources; displaying unrestrained sexual drive in failing to control their fertility; tending towards promiscuity and posing a sexual threat. It is likely that in turn these discourses informed the process of intimacy scripting, delineating how women are expected to behave in their intimate lives and underlining the importance of finding a male partner (and father figure).

Stigma and discrimination were experienced by participants primarily through exposure to the media and in certain local contexts; manifested in expressions of pity, exclusion from heteronormative social groups, an ignorance of the realities of lone parenthood and discriminatory practices with regards to housing and employment. Negative depictions were often internalised by participants whose narratives were overlaid with a sense of shame or inferiority in comparison with 'normal' women in couple centred families. These were at times countered with narratives of pride, generating more positive constructions of single mothers. Shame was also associated with 'being single,' an unpartnered woman being seen as a failure as a woman (Kaufman, 2008). Single women were perceived to be cast in the wider culture as unwanted, abandoned outcasts to be pitied or as harbouring a threatening promiscuity.

Participants responded to these wider cultural narratives in a variety of ways; through reproducing, resisting, rejecting, internalizing and identifying themselves with them at different points in their narratives. Some undermined their premise, dismissed and / or refused to accept them. Participants invoked positive narratives of pride about motherhood, hard work, survival and emancipation in order to counter negative and stereotypical representations. Others employed a 'distancing' strategy (Scheff, 1997) to remove themselves from those they perceive as being the single mothers to which the stereotypes refer (Ford and Millar, 1998). They constructed 'heterosexual hierarchies' (Van Every, 1996) of single mothers, positioning themselves in opposition to those perceived as deserving negative labels and thereby reproducing 'single mothers as a social threat' discourses. Distinctions were drawn between married and unmarried mothers; younger and older; those who depended on state support and those who were 'honest and hardworking'; those who chose it as a lifestyle option and those who had no choice. There was also an unspoken but discernible classed element to these judgements – creating hierarchies of 'respectable' and 'unrespectable' women (Skeggs, 1997). Participants sought to establish themselves as 'respectable' (Skeggs, 1997), at times directly contrasting themselves to other single mothers, by underlining their struggles to work, create an acceptable home, raise their children and manage their relationships in social acceptable ways. However, positions in relation to other single mothers fluctuated and in one case there was a 'moment of epiphany' where the participant rejected media stereotypes which had previously influenced her opinions of certain single mothers.

Another example of how participants were constrained by heteronormative intimacy scripts was apparent in the guilt around motherhood and sexuality (Rich, 1977). As mothers, they were continually subjected to 'normalizing judgements' (Carabine, 1996;

Foucault, 1977) about their intimate lives, parenting and sexual behaviour. In some cases they were excluded from heteronormative social groups (dominated by married couples). These at times resulted in comparisons between their situation and what they considered to be 'normal,' with some lamenting the absence of a father figure in their family unit. Making the decision to remain single was perceived as culturally contentious due to heteronormative ideals of coupledom as well as negative depictions of single mothers. There was some resistance to conventional heteronormativity in some instances, such as a questioning of the role of 'wife' and the primacy of 'the couple,' embracing their situation or initiating less conventional way of doing intimacy – such as a 'living apart together' relationship (Duncan and Phillips, 2010). Some participants were creative in experimenting with intimacy, moving away from what they had once perceived as being 'normal' towards embracing new ways of being, for example, finding ways to be 'happily single' and in this way might be viewed as 'pioneers of change' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) in terms of intimacy. However, straying from conventional, heteronormative intimacy scripts could seem counterintuitive, requiring justification. Participants suggested there were limited heterosexual roles available for women. Heteronormativity therefore retained a regulatory force, impacting on participants' understandings of their intimate lives, delineating what was possible and acceptable and thereby shaping intimacy scripts.

The transformation of intimacy?

The transformation of intimacy thesis (Giddens, 1992), alongside the research and counter-arguments it has provoked, has provided a touchstone and theoretical framework for this study. This thesis has however challenged the basis of 'detraditionalization' approaches to intimacy on a number of key points: The notion of the democratisation of intimacy was undermined by the evidence of continued inequalities between men and women; the assumption of 'free choice' was not borne out in terms of the barriers and constraints (emotional, material and cultural) experienced by participants and more pessimistic views of the detraditionalization of intimacy were countered with emphases on how much participants valued meaningful and lasting intimate relationships with children, friends and partners. Indeed both optimistic and pessimistic positions were overly polarised, as Jamieson (1998) has argued. Ultimately, and as others have begun to explore (for example Duncan, 2011a and b), there is no evidence of dramatic, radical change but a complex relationship between past and present (Gross, 2005; Simon and Gagnon, 1999), overlaid with the continued significance of 'traditional' alongside 'progressive' (Duncan, 2011 a and b) understandings of intimacy or as Plummer (2003) argues, the concurrence of

traditional, modern and postmodern forms of intimacy. Detraditionalization theories underestimated the power of hegemonic heteronormativity and gendered understandings of intimacy.

'*Scriptual liminality*' can be discerned within and between these accounts, with both traditional and more contemporary formulations of intimacy co-existing and often in conversation with each other. Some participants suggested that relationships had become devalued through consumerism (Bauman, 2004) and unrealistic commercialized romantic expectations (Evans, 2003). These narratives echoed different aspects of intimacy theories - it is certainly possible to discern Bauman's (2003) pessimism about contemporary intimate lives in the light of increased consumerism and technology alongside aspirations to more democratic, mutually disclosing forms of intimacy (Giddens, 1992). Participants often idealised an egalitarian practice of 'disclosing intimacy' based on emotional connection, close to Giddens' (1992) model of confluent love, while simultaneously desiring more traditional, patriarchal family forms or alternating between them as ideal types.

There was no evidence of a rejection of emotional intimate attachments on a profound level – single mothers sought meaningful intimacy in their lives through mutual disclosure, primarily with children and friends. The experiences and emotions articulated here were a far cry from the dystopian superficial, atomised version of relating envisaged by Bauman (2003). While there was a layer of more superficial friendships in participants' lives, and the possibility of casual or solely sexual relationships existed (albeit with a perception of risk), ultimately they sought meaningfulness, stability and long-term commitment in their relations with others.

Choice-making processes around intimacy were complex, constrained by material circumstances, the needs of dependents and social and cultural expectations. Aspects of individualisation such as the formulation of individualized life projects, which may include alternative forms of intimacy, were discernible and developed in response to a lack of suitable available partners, perceptions of risk and negative experiences of heterosexual relationships. It becomes clear that there is no clear dividing line between making choices and acting from necessity, between pioneering new forms of intimacy and adhering to social norms. Intimacy cannot purely be seen as a matter of individual choice but was often shaped by necessity. To some degree, participants' narratives highlighted possibilities for experimentation with alternative forms of intimacy. They indicated an increased importance of friendship and children as opposed to couple relationships, although these choices may be a response to specific circumstances

rather than reflecting wider social change. While it could be argued that there is increased fluidity in terms of intimate possibilities, choices are highly complex, constrained by material circumstances and influenced by cultural expectations and norms. The continued prevalence of notions of ideal couplehood and traditional family values shaped self-understandings and choices, casting other possibilities as less valuable. Participants often positioned themselves as victims of circumstance rather than as actively choosing lone motherhood, with most aspiring to a stable couple relationship (Gillies, 2007). However, the absence of suitable partners and poor social and economic standing of many single mothers meant high levels of constraint in their intimate lives. These single mothers had often been faced with welfare crises such as poverty, debt, homelessness, unemployment and escaping violence which were an initial priority. It was often once these issues were stabilized, and due to other factors such as their circumstances and the age of their children, that participants could begin to see themselves as sexual and / or intimate beings again.

Many of these accounts are far from emancipatory but at the same time, it is possible within some narratives to discern some movement away from highly gendered traditional intimacy scripts and increased aspiration towards relationships which are based on equality and an unwillingness to 'settle for less', not least because of the inequalities many participants have experienced. Available choices were often accompanied by uncertainty and risk and processes of choice-making are overlaid with colliding and conflicting models of ideal intimacy. Nevertheless, there were some instances of reflection, experimentation, re-consideration and negotiation of intimate lives and scripts, even though these were often highly personal, private, subtle, complex and unpredictable as opposed to dramatic, transformative and universal (Giddens, 1992), lending some credence to Weeks et al's observation: '*Beneath the rhetoric, in the intimate worlds where most personal lives are lived, many people are quietly reassessing and reconstructing bonds of trust, negotiating relationships, experimenting with ways of life which are meaningful for them, even if society has not yet given these grass-roots transformations meaning and recognition*' (Weeks et al, 2001, p.28).

Recognising that this small-scale qualitative research does not lend itself to broader generalisations, if the narratives explored here are at all reflective of intimacy in wider contemporary British society, they provide some limited indications of change, more accurately described as transitions and adaptations, against a backdrop of complexities, ambivalences, liminalities, uncertainties and unsettledness. Narratives of personal transitions are set against a backdrop of perceived change, yet these stories

of intimate lives fall short of a predicted radical transformation. There is no clear dividing line between past and present, with the foregrounding of inter-generational continuities (Gabb, 2010; Gross, 2005), the perpetuation of normative understandings about heterosexual intimacy (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2010) and continuing inequalities (Evans, 2003, Jamieson1998; Plummer, 2003; Smart, 1999, 2000, 2007). It would be tempting but unrealistic to suggest that we may be currently in a period of liminality but may yet emerge into a new era marked by a 'transformation of intimacy' (Giddens, 1992). While new intimacies and ethical possibilities for relating may open up (Plummer, 2003), this research is more indicative of increasing complexity (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). It is also essential not to ignore the likely continuation of the 'darker side of intimacy' (Plummer, 2003).

Detraditionalization theories do not fully take into account the highly gendered aspects of intimacy, as argued by Evans (2003), Jamieson (1998) and Smart (2007) and evidenced in these narratives. Gendered inequalities were evident in the majority of participants having overwhelming responsibility for childcare, augmented by the refusal in many cases of fathers to contribute to the upbringing of their children, instances of exclusion and discrimination, experiences of physical and emotional violence and, as I see it, the symbolic violence (shame) wrought upon those who did not conform to conventional (patriarchal) versions of how mothers and women should live out their intimate and sexual lives.

While there may be a spectrum of available possibilities, opportunities to experiment and new boundaries, and while equality was now an aspiration for many participants, commentators who heralded a brave new world of equality in intimacy were overly optimistic. The evidence presented here indicates social, economic and cultural marginalization of women who operate outside culturally imposed boundaries of normativity, especially for those who do not have the resources to experiment and define their own personal lives (Jamieson, 1998). To an extent, these narratives of single mothers represent a version of the world Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) describe, where romantic love is ever paramount and sought after but not always possible – although this tended to be due to a lack of potential suitable partners than to mobile existences. Children can to an extent fulfil a desire for closeness and commitment, friends often fulfil a desire for 'mutual disclosure,' and the use of online dating and social networking sites sometimes mitigated against social isolation (although in some instances they only serve to accentuate it). Often from necessity and dependent on circumstances, single mothers often begin a process of rebuilding their intimate lives, a process often fraught with complexity and risk. Yet I do not concur with

Kaufman (2008) that these women inevitably occupy a position of despair as there are moments which open up possibilities for questioning, challenging and resisting hegemonic heteronorms and for discovering new ways of doing intimacy. Certainly, women in this study often stated that they were less prepared to stay in unequal or abusive relationships than their mothers' generation. Many sought more egalitarian relationships in the future even where this was not possible and, in some cases, demonstrated a heightened awareness of the importance of gender equality, reflected in their parenting practices. Single motherhood, therefore, represents both a trap and an opportunity, limiting and expanding intimate horizons and possibilities.

Next Steps and concluding remarks

This thesis, in the course of answering the research questions it initially posed, has inevitably raised a number of areas which require further thought, analysis, publication and investigation. Firstly, although this small but varied sample only allows tentative observations regarding age, there was some indication that younger participants (those born around 1980) perceived more liberal attitudes and fluidity in intimate practices among their peers and so further cross-generational work is needed, particularly in the light of changing attitudes over generation and time.[45] Secondly, further work is needed to explore the highly complex and multiple intersections of class, ethnicity, culture, religious affiliation, socio-geographical location and other forms of diversity in shaping single mothers' experiences and understandings of intimacy. In the final findings chapter these complexities began to emerge in terms of single mothers' responses to stigma and their distancing from specific groups of single mothers. In particular, the complex interrelationship between heterosexuality and class invite further investigation and theorisation. This area is as yet underdeveloped (Jackson, 2011) and it is beyond the scope of this sample and study to do so in a thorough and meaningful way, although it touches on these discussions (Skeggs, 1997, 2005). Thirdly, the study begins to explore the role of emotional responses to single mothers' experiences and situations, particularly in terms of shame and pride, and this could be opened out into a more in-depth study of the emotional lives of single mothers. Fourth, participants related experiences of seeking intimacy through internet dating sites and more in-depth studies investigating the role of internet dating, social media and mobile technologies and what possibilities and limitations are afforded for single mothers are likely to advance this area. Fifth, the notion of 'intimacy scripts,' has been introduced in this thesis but it is anticipated that this concept will be developed further in future work and publications. Finally, the emergent themes of moral as well as spatial boundaries and

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[45] British Social Attitudes survey 2013, British Sociological Association: http://www.bsa-30.natcen.ac.uk/ (Accessed 13.09.13)

the delineation of what is possible or acceptable, alongside issues around marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion suggest that there is scope for contributing more fully to debates around 'intimate citizenship' (Plummer, 2003). The next stage in my research career will be to develop work in this area, taking as a starting point the experiences of post-divorce and separation women of internet dating and ways in which these experiences are narrated as this has the potential to open up these debates further and to explore further shifting intimate landscapes and possibilities at intersecting personal, social and cultural levels. Priority will initially be given to dissemination and publication arising from this thesis and a working dissemination plan is summarised below:

Activity	Title	Destination
Conference Abstract	Narratives of shame and pride: troubled identities and UK single mothers	1.Troubled narratives: identity matters conference, University of Huddersfield 2. Feminism and Psychology – peer reviewed journal
Seminar paper, to be developed for publication	Intimacy narratives of heterosexual single mothers in the South-East of England	1. NOVELLA seminar series 2. 'Narrative works' - peer reviewed journal on narrative
Conference paper / article	'Considerations of equality in heterosexual single mothers' intimacy narratives'	Pre and Post-conference publication – 'Gender, Equality and Intimacy: Uncomfortable Bedfellows, Institute of Education
Conference paper, to be developed for publication	Single mothers' management of their intimate lives	1. NGender Conference, University of Sussex 2. Families, Relationships and Society – peer reviewed journal
Journal article	Making and remaking intimacy scripts in single mothers narratives of intimacy	Sociological Review
Journal article	Betwixt and between: ambivalence and liminality in single mothers' intimacy narratives	Sociology
Monograph	Intimacy practices of single mothers	Palgrave Macmillan / Polity

 (Fig. 2: Dissemination plan)

I end the thesis by noting that against a backdrop of ongoing economic uncertainty in the UK, the domination of more conservative ideals of the family, intimacy and gender prevail. In times of uncertainty and risk, it may be as Kaufman (2008) argued that people tend to seek ontological security in the traditional institutions of marriage and

the family. If this perspective is correct, traditional, heteronormative intimacy scripts are unlikely to be replaced in the near future, indeed there may be some regression in terms of gender roles and ways of doing intimacy. In this scenario, single mothers will continue to feel the impact of 'society's accusing finger' (Kaufman, 2008, p.25) and experience stigma, discrimination and shame. Single mothers at the time of writing undoubtedly face continuing negative media coverage and political propaganda with the prospect of continuing economic sanctions, examples including cuts to social security benefits, especially for those with larger families; increasing expectations for single parents of young children to seek paid work; the proposal for the removal of housing rights for young mothers[i] and re-introduction of the married tax allowance[46]. A recent report from the Centre for Social Justice, 'Fractured Families: Why stability matters' (2013)[47] re-invokes the 'underclass debate, warning of the dangers of children growing up in lone parent families, predicting a 'tsunami of family breakdown battering the country,' postulating that children are growing up in 'men deserts' and calling on the Government to do more to incentivise marriage. Paradoxically, it is moving resources away from vulnerable families and so pushing them into poverty rather than family-form which is most likely to have damaging consequences for children (Gillies, 2007). Feminist academics, writers, activists and policymakers and all those with an interest in promoting social justice have a responsibility to challenge these punitive and regressive forces wherever possible. Plummer (1995) argued that stories await their moment in history to become public and I contend that it is imperative that these stories - often hidden and told only among single mothers - must now be heard.

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[46] http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/incometax/married-allow.htm (Accessed 12.09.13)
[47] http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/publications/fractured-families-why-stability-matters.

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APPENDIX ONE: Interview schedule

Narrative section

This research is looking at the lives of single mothers in relation to their experiences of intimacy (relationships). Intimacy means being close to someone – this might mean emotionally, physically, sexually or in other ways. In your own time and your own words, starting from wherever you like, perhaps you could tell me your story...

Example prompts:

You could begin by telling me about intimacy leading up to becoming a single mother

Perhaps you could say more about the experience of intimacy as a single mother

How do you see your future in terms of intimate relationships?

The section ends with joint reflections on what has been said followed by a semi-structured section:

1. Reflections on experience

How do you balance the demands of parenthood with your needs for intimacy (relationship)?

What are the advantages / disadvantages to being single while bringing up children?

Who would you say you've been closest to?

Have any of your relationships changed since becoming a single parent?

2. Relating personal story to social, historical change

In what ways have relationships changed during the course of your lifetime?

Do you feel families have changed over the past generation?

In what ways have relations between men and women changed?

Has this affected you and your choices in any way?

3. Context

How are single mothers portrayed in the media?

How do you feel about this?

How do these portrayals relate to real, lived experiences?

How are single mothers viewed in your community?

APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

STUDENT / RESEARCHER

Name: Charlotte Morris – Dphil (PhD) candidate. Email: cmorris392@hotmail.com

RESEARCH PROJECT TITLE: Intimacy narratives of single mothers

INSTITUTION

School of Law, Politics and Sociology, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RQ

PROJECT INFORMATION

This study sets out to explore the intimate lives of lone mothers living in Brighton – Hove. It is hoped that lone mothers will share their stories through interviews. The study is interested in capturing experiences of intimacy in everyday lives, choices which have been made and what influenced those choices. There is a possibility that you will share experiences which cause you emotional distress. You will be under no pressure or obligation to share experiences you don't wish to. Taking part will hopefully provide a chance to reflect on your experiences, help contribute to knowledge in this area and challenge assumptions about lone mothers.

The interview would involve a recorded conversation with the researcher during which you would tell your story and this would usually take 30 – 90 minutes, depending on how long you feel comfortable talking. This will be at a time and location convenient to you. You have every right to break or withdraw from the interview at any time. You will remain anonymous throughout the research process and so your name will be changed. The interview recording and data will be treated with the utmost confidentiality by the researcher, hard copies of transcripts will be kept in a locked drawer and any data held on the computer will be password protected. Data protection will be paramount and the recordings will be destroyed after a period of time.

SUPERVISORS

Dr. Suzie Scott (email: S.Scott@sussex.ac.uk)

Dr. Ben Fincham (email: B.M.Fincham@sussex.ac.uk)

APPENDIX THREE: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROJECT TITLE: Intimacy Narratives of Single Mothers

INSTITUTION: Gender Studies, School of Law, Politics and Sociology

PARTICIPANT'S AGREEMENT

I agree to take part in the above project. I have read an information sheet about the study and have received satisfactory answers to any questions. I understand the aims and purpose of the study. I am willing to be interviewed by the researcher and to allow the interview to be recorded and transcribed. I am aware the data will be processed for the preparation of a DPhil (PhD) thesis and related academic papers, and I give permission for this use of my information.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND DATA PROTECTION

I understand that information I provide will be confidential and that nothing that could identify me will be disclosed in the thesis, or in any reports on the project, or directly to any other party. The interview transcripts represent the 'field notes' or raw material. No single transcript will be reproduced in its entirety in the thesis or any subsequent papers. General inferences will be drawn from a number of participants' material, with isolated quotes or excerpts being used to illustrate particular points. Codes (e.g. 'Participant A') or pseudonyms will be used where it is necessary to distinguish between participants' data. The recordings and interview transcripts will be kept securely at the researcher's home for the duration of the study. No one else shares the premises or enters the premises in her absence. Once the study is completed, the recordings will be destroyed.

WITHDRAWAL

I understand that my participation is voluntary; that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project; and that I can withdraw at any stage.

Name (please print):_____

Signature:_____

Date:_____

SUPERVISORS: Dr Suzie Scott and Dr Ben Fincham, Department of Sociology, 01273 678655