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**‘Born to fight’: The university experiences of  
the daughters of single mothers who are first-  
generation students in the United Kingdom**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Sussex

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## Declaration

### Work submitted elsewhere for examination

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree. However, this thesis incorporates, to the extent indicated below, material already submitted as part of required coursework for the degree of: MSc Social Research Methods which was awarded with distinction by the University of Sussex. Specifically, approximately 4,000 words from the dissertation titled 'Exploring methodology: Weaving a tapestry of knowledge' have been incorporated, with revision, into this thesis.

Signature:.....

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is a love letter to my mother and to my brother. Their support inspires me to reach higher and dream bigger. My brother has taught me to be patient, to be resourceful, and to worry less. My mother has taught me to be compassionate, to be kind, and to worry more. Their love has given me strength and determination. Everything I endeavour to accomplish in my life, I do for them.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to the participants who made this research possible. They were so very generous with their time and their stories. This research exists because of them and I have endeavoured to illuminate their contributions to the study throughout this thesis in a way that recognises and legitimises their unique, individual experiences and identities.

I am eternally grateful to my research supervisors. My primary supervisor, Professor Penny Jane Burke, has been a beacon of light guiding me throughout this process. During those times when I could not see myself as worthy, as good enough, as smart enough, she never stopped believing in me. My second supervisor, Dr Tamsin Hinton-Smith, always went above and beyond to provide me guidance throughout my time at Sussex. Both Penny and Tamsin have been extraordinarily patient and generous with their time and their support. When I have been fragile, they have been gentle. When I have lost focus, they have been firm. They have both shown me, by example, the kind of feminist activist academic I endeavour to become. I hope that I have made them both proud.

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## Summary

This thesis explores the university experiences of the daughters of single mothers who are first-generation students in the United Kingdom. Data was collected during spring and summer of 2013. Participants were recruited through flyers, email, and social networking sites. Participants were sought who met the following criteria: they considered themselves to have been primarily raised by their mother (or their mother raised them alone for about five years or more during their childhood); they were current or recent undergraduate university students at any university in the UK, any mode of study (full or part time), and any age (traditional age or mature students); and they were first-generation students (the first in their family to attend university, which includes students whose siblings might have gone to university).

A preliminary 30-question, online questionnaire was completed by 110 respondents. Among the survey respondents, 26 participated in qualitative, semi-structured interviews. After the interview, participants were encouraged to engage in reflective writing. Data was explored through a thematic, theoretical, and autoethnographical analysis. This research examines intersectionalities of gender, socio-economic class, race, and family status as they shape the students' identities and their university experiences. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks upon which this study is built include feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and the concept of social exclusion. The findings from this study contribute to the existing literature within the area of widening participation and social identities and illuminate the ways that single mother families are constructed by the media, by politicians, and in society. Additionally, this study bridges the gap between the existing literature on the experience of single mother families and the existing literature on the experiences of students in higher education, providing a deeper understanding of access, participation, and inclusion of this specific population of students as yet unexplored within existing research.

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# **Chapter One:**

## **Unorthodox beginnings:**

### **Notions of legitimacy as context and rationale**

I am illegitimate.

'All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know' (Hemingway, 1964:16). There it is, the truest sentence I know, the sentence I need to write, the words that I need you to hear. They have been sounding like a drum beat in my head and in my heart since I was a child. It is with resolute determination and with passionate conviction that I should begin my entire doctoral thesis with the declaration: I am illegitimate.

I have chosen to write this chapter first, exploring the context and rationale for my research, before the chapter introducing the study, which I understand is unorthodox. However, this is where the story must begin. Chapter Two provides a detailed introduction to the study, mapping out our path as researcher and reader for the rest of the thesis. Yet, before we embark on that journey, I will explain why this research is important and relevant, on a political level, on a social level, on a scholarly level, and on a personal level. As Butler wrote (1988:522):

The feminist claim that the personal is political suggests, in part, that subjective experience is not only structured by existing political arrangements, but effects and structures those arrangements in turn. Feminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context.

Individual experiences are impacted by the historical, social, and political contexts in which they occur and can contribute to the perpetuation or maintenance of unequal social and political systems. In discussing my status as an illegitimate child, my lived experiences, my identity and my story are tied inextricably to the larger political and social worlds that construct, define, misrecognise, and limit me. This is why I chose this research topic and this is why I chose to begin my thesis with the personal before exploring the historical, the social, and, of course, the political. Within this chapter, I begin with an exploration of the historical

understandings of legitimacy. Then I transition to a discussion on contemporary representations of legitimacy and how single mothers and their children are constructed through homogenising discourses. It is important to note that the women in this study each have unique histories, identities, and experiences. Their mothers became single mothers for a variety of reasons. However, they are all impacted by dominant discourses and representations of who is and who is not recognised as legitimate. Lastly, I illuminate neoliberal notions of legitimacy within higher education. This chapter provides the context and rationale for this study.

## **Historical understandings of legitimacy**

‘Write what disturbs you, what you fear, what you have not been willing to speak about. ... Be willing to be split open’, Goldberg instructed (1990:71). I am illegitimate. It is not only my status as a child born out of wedlock but it is also how I feel within academia. Let me begin by excavating the history of the first, my status as a child born to a single mother, before unearthing and turning over the latter.

Under the law and by definition, I am identified as an illegitimate person.

‘Legitimate’: genuine, real, valid, credible, authentic, appropriate, reasonable, legal, acceptable, authorised, recognised (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015b;

Thesaurus.com, 2015b). If I am not legitimate, then I am none of these things. I am a bastard, a child born out of wedlock, and thus an illegitimate person. The word ‘bastard’ is defined as unrecognised, unauthorised, not genuine; counterfeit, debased, adulterated, corrupt (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015a). Synonyms for ‘bastard’ as a noun include: scoundrel, villain, animal, wretch, devil, evil-doer, scumbag, beast, despicable person -- just to name a few (Thesaurus.com, 2015).

The concept of bastards or illegitimate people can be traced throughout history. The ancient Greek term for ‘bastard’, referring in this time period to children not accepted as legitimate by their father, was ‘nothoi’ (Patterson, 2005:278). Like the centuries of laws that would follow in the Western World, the nothoi were not recognised as citizens and had few or no rights. In addition to nothoi, there was also a category of people called ‘xenoï’ or someone born of one or both parents who were considered outsiders, strangers, foreigners (Patterson, 2005:269). Nothoi and xenoï, the ancient Greek equivalent to bastard children and to the children of immigrants respectively, were illegitimate people. They were not

considered citizens, not recognised as members of the community, not protected from harm or from enslavement under the law. They did not belong. They were placeless.

The history of illegitimacy and bastardy laws and understandings of the place of bastards, or rather the placelessness or lack of place, within Western societies, is highly gendered. The mother, but not the father, of a bastard child could face imprisonment in England for falling pregnant, including the possibility of life in prison should she bear a second child out of wedlock (Head, 1840:4). In fact, the first ever Magdalene Asylum, institutions in which unwed mothers were imprisoned for bearing children out of wedlock, opened in England in 1758 and did not close until 1966 (The National Archives). According to findings from an investigation completed by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2014:7), impoverished girls and women, including unwed mothers, imprisoned in Magdalene Asylums:

Were forced to work in slavery-like conditions and often subjected to inhuman, cruel and degrading treatment as well as physical and sexual abuse; Girls were deprived of their identity, education and often food and essential medicines, had the obligation of silence imposed on them and were prohibited from contact with the outside world; Unmarried girls who gave birth before entering or while incarcerated in the laundries had their babies forcibly removed from them.

The asylums operated in England, Ireland, Australia, Canada, and the United States, with the last of the Magdalene institutions closing in 1996 in Ireland (2014:7). The Magdalene Asylums were not the only institutions focused on the 'problem' of unmarried mothers. The Foundling Hospital in London opened in 1741 to care for the children of selected unwed women (Sheetz-Nguyen, 2012). At a 2015 art exhibition titled 'The Fallen Woman', Victorian understandings of single mothers as 'deviant' were explicated (The Foundling Museum, 2015):

In 1836 the Marriage Act extended the definition of legal marriage to include civil ceremonies held at the register offices, thus reinforcing the differences between the respectable and the non-respectable [woman]. This made the figure of the unmarried mother especially deviant and anti-social. ... The figure of the 'fallen woman' thus challenged the social, moral and sexual norms of Victorian society and threatened the image of the happy family home which was regarded as the secure base for both the nation and the empire.

In Victorian Britain, unmarried mothers were a 'threat' to the 'happy family home' as well as to the 'nation and the empire'. More than a century later, the notion that certain individuals and families were a 'threat' to the nation was mirrored in debates around Section 28 legislation in Britain, which was passed in 1988. The legislation defined a 'real' family as a husband, wife, and child. Families that deviated from the idealised norm were classed as 'pretend families' (Reinhold, 1994). Section 28 was primarily focused on disparaging homosexual people and families, suggesting that recognising the existence of non-nuclear families was 'corrupting children, destroying the family, spreading AIDS, and contributing to social revolution' (1994:62). For families that failed to obediently comply with the nuclear norm, they were not only deviant, but they were 'corrupting' society. As Reinhold (1994:76) highlighted:

The family was seen in these debates as the strength - or potential weakness - of the nation. The Conservative councillor who defined family as 'the husband, wife, and children unit' concluded that this unit 'should be maintained', for 'the family unit is important to the well-being of the nation'.

Non-nuclear families, including single mother families, were seen as a threat to the nation not only in Victorian times but in the 1980s as well. The fact that the Magdalene Asylums remained open until 1996, which is during my lifetime and the lifetime of my participants, makes it clear that the stigmatisation of single mothers and their children is not some ancient, outdated, historical shame from which society has learned and progressed. As Edwards and Caballero (2011:531) discussed, the social construction of single mothers still suggests that:

Mothers bringing up children without a resident man have long been seen as transgressing various boundaries and denoting the state of the nation in some way. ... Lone mothers have been regarded as members of an underclass, spawning anti-social children and corroding the nation.

The existence of single mothers and their children is still seen as a threat to the family and the nation. The stigma remains ever alive as a present-day spectre, looming like a shadow, haunting the lives of single mothers and their children, a nightmare that has yet to end.

The experiences of bastard children were, and, in many ways, still are, highly gendered. Historically, many of the rights denied to bastard children, such as the right to noble title, to succession, to land and other forms of inheritance,

were focused on male children (Spillers, 1987). The Special Bastardy Act within the Statute of Merton in England in 1235 confirmed the long-held definition: 'He is a Bastard that is born before the Marriage of his Parents' (Evans, 1817:174). The section of the Statute clarified that while the church allowed a bastard child to become legitimate under the eyes of God if his parents were married after the child's birth, the civil laws of England still considered all children born out of wedlock to be bastards and they, therefore, continued to be denied rights afforded to children deemed legitimate under the law (Merton Historical Society, 2001:16).

Children born out of wedlock whose parents later wed were still considered bastards as legislation redefining their status remained the same for nearly 700 years. After eleven attempts between 1918 and 1926 to change the law to allow a child to become legitimate if her or his parents married, the Legitimacy Act of 1926 was passed (Thane and Evans, 2012:50). However, the law was still very limiting and did not provide equal status to children born out of wedlock:

The new law enabled legitimated children to inherit property and land, ... but not titles. A legitimated person's seniority among his or her siblings was to date from legitimation, not from birth, to prevent their displacing the inheritance rights of siblings who had been born legitimate. ... If the mother was not British at the time of the marriage, she would acquire British nationality on marriage, but the child born before the marriage could not, even after the act passed. This left some children stateless because some national laws denied nationality to children born of foreign fathers (Thane and Evans, 2012:50).

Even after almost 700 years, some children born out of wedlock whose parents eventually married were still left nationless, placeless, unwelcome. The law did not impact those children whose parents did not marry or stay together or whose father had died. The law itself also limited the child's inheritance rights, still placing them last in line and denying them right to noble title, though that mostly impacted male children and not female children. With that gendered difference in inheritance, Spillers argued that female children cannot be bastards (1987:65):

Because the traditional rites and laws of inheritance rarely pertain to the female child, bastard status signals to those who need to know which son of the Father's is the legitimate heir and which one the impostor. For that reason, property seems wholly the business of the male. A 'she' cannot, therefore, qualify for bastard, or 'natural son' status, and that she cannot provides further insight into the coils and recoils of patriarchal wealth and fortune.

Yukins (2002:225) provocatively challenged the notion that women cannot be bastards:

Spillers's analysis provokes a paradoxical question: If women are not considered legitimate claimants to patriarchal inheritance, then are women not bastards or are all women bastards?

If legitimacy is gendered, seen as the purview of men, then are women ever bastards or, as Yukins asked, 'are all women bastards?' The question resonates with the ways women are still marginalised and made to feel illegitimate in so many facets of our lives, connected, in this study, to the feelings of illegitimacy within higher education.

While much has been written about bastard sons -- in history, in society, in law, and in literature -- there is also a history of women being branded as illegitimate, a history of bastard daughters. For example, there is the legal case of Marguerite de Manse born around 1730 (Gerber, 2012:5) who, after decades in court, was legally recognised as 'legitimate' and determined by law in 1775 to be the only heir to her father's estate:

Though she had been born out of wedlock and had initially been branded a bastard, Marguerite de Manse succeeded in establishing herself as her father's legitimate heir.

Her desire to be legitimate was so strong, that spending nearly her whole lifetime fighting for recognition did not dissuade her from her goal. I can relate. While I am not pursuing legal legitimacy through the justice system, my decades of educational pursuits are rooted in my desire to achieve, to be seen, to be recognised as legitimate within society and within academia. I want to prove that I am just as capable, just as competent, just as intelligent, just as worthy of a place within academia and within society as anyone else. I want to be respectable. I want to be an equal to those who are arbitrarily positioned as superior simply by virtue of their birth.

Gerber (2012:5) discussed 'an oft-cited maxim [that] children born out of wedlock had 'neither kin nor kind', which he describes to mean 'neither family nor nation'. Children born out of wedlock were so undesirable in England that a law was passed by Parliament in 1773 titled 'A bill for better regulating the settlement and providing for the maintenance of bastard children', which made it illegal to continue the common practice of church and community leaders forcing pregnant

unwed women to leave the parish as their children were considered a burden to the community (Parliament of Great Britain, 1773). Church leaders supposedly bound by Christian values, were forcing women and their children to become placeless, homeless, to belong nowhere.

In 1665, Ducros, quoted by Gerber (2012:5) wrote, 'To speak properly, bastards are excrement. ... They have neither family, nor race, nor name'. Bastards were treated like literal excrement according to recent revelations. In 2014, the shocking conditions under which unwed mothers and their children lived and died in forced institutions, like the Magdalene Asylums, resurfaced in international news coverage of a discovery in Ireland: 'The bodies of 796 children, between the ages of two days and nine years old, are believed to have been buried in a disused sewage tank' (O'Toole, 2014). The remains of hundreds of children of unwed mothers were supposedly disposed of like sewage. For millennia, children born out of wedlock in Western nations have been reviled as the human waste of society. Unwanted by the church, by society, by their families, by their nations.

### **Single mothers and their children in the present**

The practice of scapegoating, stereotyping, and stigmatising single mothers and their families within the Western World continues on today in largely the same shape and form it has taken for millennia. In April 2014, a *Wall Street Journal* article compared single mothers to cancer, as if they are a deadly disease plaguing society that needs to be eradicated (Maranto and Crouch, 2014). Single mothers are portrayed as hypersexualised animals, through public comments such as those made by American conservative politician Rick Santorum who stated that single mothers are 'breeding more criminals', as if single mothers are animals. He suggested that, 'We are seeing the fabric of this country fall apart, and it's falling apart because of single moms', as if the existence of single mothers will bring about the End of Days (Murphy and Kroll, 2012). In November 2013, conservative American radio host Rush Limbaugh (*The Rush Limbaugh Show*, 2013) referred to single mothers as 'receptacle[s] for male semen', as if they are inanimate objects to be used for sexual pleasure and then discarded as trash.

Single mothers are characterised as slothful, gluttonous, greedy, and dangerous, as evidenced by statements like those made by Australian conservative commentator John Hirst (2013) when he wrote:

Many single-parent households are not good places for children. The mothers are given to junk food, daytime TV and no-good boyfriends, who might develop designs on an adolescent daughter. The worst mothers are addicted to drugs and alcohol and under their influence neglect and abuse their children.

Hirst insinuated that single mothers are child abusers, endangering their daughters by welcoming paedophiles into their homes – because, according to his logic, any man who dates a single mother must have ‘designs on [her] adolescent daughter’ (2013).

Furthermore, the existence of single mothers is causing the destruction of society, according to American conservative author Ann Coulter who wrote, ‘Not only do single mothers hurt their children, they also foist a raft of social pathologies on society. Look at almost any societal problem and you will find it is really a problem of single mothers’ (Coulter, 2008:36). Coulter suggests that single mothers are the root cause of nearly all social ills including crimes such as murder and rape. Similar to Coulter, conservative American politician and 2016 presidential candidate Rand Paul blamed crime on ‘the breakdown of the family structure, the lack of fathers, the lack of sort of a moral code in our society’. He said those words without a hint of irony despite the fact that his own son has been arrested three times, even after having been raised in a married, heterosexual, nuclear family (Gray, 2015). Another conservative 2016 American presidential candidate Jeb Bush suggested that single mothers should ‘feel shame’ and should face harsher ridicule in society (Bash and LoBianco, 2015):

Their [single mothers'] parents and neighbors have become ineffective at attaching some sense of ridicule to this behavior. There was a time when neighbors and communities would frown on out-of-wedlock births and when public condemnation was enough of a stimulus for one to be careful.

Like Rand Paul's son, two of Jeb Bush's children, after being raised in a married, heterosexual, nuclear family, have been arrested, including his daughter, who has been arrested multiple times for drug offences (Glueck, 2014). Bush also suggested that being raised in single mother families ‘limits the possibilities of young people being able to live lives of purpose and meaning’ (Bash and LoBianco, 2015). Bush's



sentiments on the limited prospects of children raised by single mothers are especially ludicrous given the fact that, in my lifetime, two American presidents, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, were raised by single mothers (Hoskinson, 2014).

Similar to the demonising language used by US politicians, conservative UK politician John Redwood stated that single mothers are 'one of the biggest social problems of our day' (Rowling, 2010), which he stated before divorcing his wife and thus turning her into a single mother. Continuing on the theme of single mothers as the cause for the breakdown of society, after the 2011 London riots, conservative Prime Minister David Cameron blamed the unrest on 'families without fathers' that were causing a 'moral collapse' in British society (Thane and Evans, 2012:206). The following year, Cameron's own parenting abilities were called into question when he and his wife left their daughter, who was eight-years-old, alone in a pub (Siddique, 2012). Conservative Member of the House of Lords Baron David Freud, while serving as the minister of welfare reform, made derogatory statements about single parents living 'a lifestyle off benefits' and suggested that 'people who are poorer should be prepared to take the biggest risks - they've got least to lose' (*The Telegraph*, 2012).

While many of the examples of Western politicians and public figures making derogatory statements about single mothers and their children represent religiously-influenced, conservative notions of what makes a 'good' woman, a 'good' mother, and a 'good' family, their views are not simply those of societal outliers. They are given public and popular platforms to continue to stigmatise and marginalise single mothers and their hateful views go largely unchallenged, which reveals that history has changed very little when it comes to notions of legitimacy. Even the British derogatory slang word 'git', which is still in common usage, is derived from 'illegitimate' or 'bastard' (Collins Dictionary, 2015). Single mothers and their children are still reviled in society, still seen as no better than waste befouling the communities in which they reside, still a disease to be eradicated.

In September 2014, a group of single mothers in London, on the verge of homelessness, overtook and occupied an empty block of council flats. The activists, called the Focus E15 mothers, received widespread media attention and used their platform to draw attention to the growing trend in the UK capital of councils forcing precarious families to leave the city or become homeless and destitute.

Explaining the frightening ultimatum that the women and their children were given by the council, Jensen (2014) wrote:

In September 2013, the mothers were informed that the financial support paid by Newham Council towards their accommodation would be cut and they were served notices to leave by the Housing Association which manages the hostel. And so the ruthless machinery of housing allocation kicked into action. ... Some of the women were offered accommodation in cheaper parts of the country – including Hastings, Manchester and Birmingham – and were told that, if they refused such an offer, they would be considered to have made themselves ‘intentionally homeless’, thus freeing Newham Council from any further obligations to help them. Some of the women were in the hostel because they were escaping domestic violence, yet they were described as ‘not vulnerable, but needy’.

The Focus E15 mothers pointed out that they had families, friends, and support networks in and around Newham and that many of them had grown up there. They belonged in Newham. They had no connections to the cities to which the council had tried to banish them. The council had decided that these families were undesirable, unworthy, unwelcome, that they had no place in the community, that they did not belong. How is this any different from the community leaders in the 1700s who were forcing unwed mothers out of their parishes and townships? (Parliament of Great Britain, 1773). Newham Council wanted to force the Focus E15 women and their children to become placeless, to belong nowhere. They wanted them to be some other city’s burden. The council viewed these families as illegitimate. Regardless of the fact that London was the only place most of these women and their children had ever called home, the council, which is meant to protect and support vulnerable members of the community, sought to force them into abject poverty and homelessness. Newham Council was actively trying to force children out onto the streets, while empty, available, and liveable council flats were left vacant and boarded up (Jensen, 2014).

In October 2013, *The Daily Mail* published an article written by Richard Littlejohn in which he attacked Jack Monroe, a single parent, columnist for the Guardian, popular blogger and author, for being unemployed and raising a child on their own, using Monroe as an example for why benefits should be cut (Monroe came out as transgender in October 2015 (Monroe, 2015) and now uses the gender-neutral plural pronouns they and them. This section has been updated to

reflect that change, except for the direct quotation by Littlejohn). Littlejohn wrote (Littlejohn, 2013):

Jack's young son is three. ... We don't know how old he was when his daddy left home or indeed if his daddy was ever around in the first place. ... What we do know is that after Jack 'fell' pregnant, she resigned her job in the fire service to look after her new baby full time. ... Jack decided like so many others that it was her right to expect someone else to pay to bring up her son. That someone else naturally being the already hard-pressed British taxpayer. ... Her case goes to the heart of ... efforts to tackle the welfare monster and cap benefits.

Littlejohn used scare quotes for the word 'fell', implying that he believes that Monroe became pregnant on purpose rather than accidentally, a popular myth perpetuated about low-income, single mothers on benefits. He condescendingly referred to Monroe's son's 'daddy' and suggested that Monroe chose to become a stay-at-home mother in order to take advantage of the system. His allusion to 'the welfare monster' suggests that Monroe's participation in the benefits system contributes to the creation of that monster or that Monroe herself is that monster.

In response, Monroe addressed Littlejohn's slander on their blog, which was later republished by *The Guardian* (Monroe, 2013), point by point, including the fact that Monroe had to leave their job with the fire service because the long, inflexible hours were incompatible with raising a child alone; that they contributed taxes into the system while working; that their tattoos were purchased before Monroe was unemployed raising a child; and that they do not own a television, let alone a 52 inch plasma screen that Littlejohn had suggested all people on benefits have purchased with taxpayer funds. However, first and foremost, before Monroe wrote all of the above, they wrote (Monroe, 2013): '1. I am not single. I'm getting married in the spring'. By making this point first, it is as if the worst of the slander within Littlejohn's article is that he suggested that Monroe is still single and that their engagement status means they are somehow more respectable or credible to speak out against the rest of Littlejohn's revolting accusations. The first thing that Monroe needs Littlejohn and the world to know is that they are becoming respectable, that Monroe is becoming legitimate.

When groups of people are constructed as illegitimate, it becomes easier for their humanity to be erased within public discourses. The language used to discuss

single mothers demonises them as a unit. They are not seen as individuals, but, instead, are recognised under the umbrella of one identity: single mother. Single mother, like the word bastard, becomes synonymous with malicious words like immoral, criminal, fraud, child-abuser, lazy, neglectful, wasteful, greedy, gluttonous, drug and alcohol addicts, sexually promiscuous, thieves, animals, filth, waste. Bauman (2003:78) wrote:

All waste, including wasted humans, tends to be piled up indiscriminately on the same refuse tip. The act of assigning to waste puts an end to differences, individualities, idiosyncrasies. Waste has no need of fine distinctions and subtle nuances. ... All measures have been taken to assure the permanence of their exclusion.

In this passage, Bauman was specifically referring to refugees, another marginalised, negatively socially constructed, and homogenised group. The same can be said about the ways the Western World treats single mothers and their families. Refugees are seen as 'threatening national identity and social cohesion' (Morrice, 2011:2), which echoes the language used to describe non-nuclear families as threats to the nation during the debates around Section 28 (Reinhold, 1994). Thousands of years ago, both bastard children and the children of immigrants and refugees were equally illegitimate in Greek society (Patterson, 2005). Today, both groups are still treated like human waste, their bodies dumped into septic tanks (O'Toole, 2014) or left to wash up on the shores of Europe (Fisher, 2015). Similar to Bauman, Hall wrote about the homogenisation of the working class as a strategy for the perpetuation of the neoliberal agenda in the United Kingdom (2011:721):

A demonization of the working class - shifty, feckless, irresponsible, bad (and single) parents, with disorganized lives - Cameron's 'broken society' - is well advanced. In fact, the majority have experienced stagnant or falling incomes. ... The pay of professionals has more than doubled; the pay of unskilled and semi-skilled workers has actually fallen since the 1970s. The proportion on poverty wages has almost doubled.

Single mothers and other vulnerable groups become easy targets for scapegoating and finger pointing.

When presenting my research at conferences and symposiums, well-meaning attendees would often ask whether I thought the children of single mothers still faced stigma within society today. After all, they would say, 'So many

children are being raised by single mothers now. Since it is so commonplace, it must not be stigmatising for the mothers or the children anymore. I mean, it cannot really be that bad anymore, can it?' Often the questions were asked as if rhetorical, as if to say to me and to the rest of the audience: 'We all agree the children of single mothers do not face stigma in society today, right?' These questions would come after I discussed my findings, after highlighting the ways my participants discussed the very real stigma they faced and the consequences of that stigma on their lived experiences. Their questions were really a way for them to say to me: 'I do not believe you and I do not believe your participants'.

The 26 interviewees who took part in this study came from diverse family backgrounds and their mothers were raising them primarily on their own for various lengths of time and were on their own for different reasons, including divorce, bereavement, and abandonment. Yet, even the participants who were not born out of wedlock, whose mothers became single mothers through divorce or bereavement, faced the same stigmas by association with those born and raised without a father. Single mothers and their families are seen as one homogenous group, shackled by the same stereotypes and judgments against which they fight for recognition, fight for legitimacy. Marilyn, a participant in this study whose father had died, talked about the pain of feeling the need to tell complete strangers about his death in order to feel like her family would be seen as 'respectable' enough, pulled out of the putrid swamp of stereotypes and spared the full judgment reserved for the unwed mothers and their children. During my first year as a doctoral student, I was explaining my research to a scholar I met at a conference. Strangely, she became defensive at the notion that children are impacted by the stigmas and stereotypes of single mother families regardless of the circumstances under which their mothers became single. Confused, I explained that the existing research suggests that children of single mothers are less likely to attend university (Ringback Weitof et al., 2004; Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Clearly agitated, she proclaimed: 'Well, I'm a single mother because my husband died! I'm a widow; I'm not one of *those* mothers. My children are not stigmatised!' I am sorry to say to that mother, working so hard to prove her respectability to me, that my research tells a different story.

After receiving questions about whether stigma still exists for single mothers and their families, I started adding content to my academic presentations to make it more apparent that they still face judgment in the Western World, such as a screenshot from a Google UK search. When using Google's search bar, suggestions are given based on the most popular search terms entered by users. The image I use shows that the most popular search terms to complete the search 'single mothers are' includes the suggested words: bad, disgusting, bad for society, easy, scum, damaged goods, not victims, bad parents, and desperate. The words speak volumes about how negatively society views single mothers. The history and the mythology of the 'fallen woman' still haunts single mother families in the Western World today.

When audiences at academic conferences questioned the lived experiences of my participants, it reminded me of the neoliberal myth that 'equality is achieved' already (McRobbie, 2004:255) and their commitment to that myth is connected with the Belief in a Just World (BJW) theory, which explicates peoples' desire to believe that the world is inherently just and that people 'get what they deserve', no matter how much evidence of injustice is presented to the contrary (Bénabou and Tirole, 2006:700). The internal struggle to acknowledge the proof of present-day stigma that I present and reconcile that with the desire to believe that the world is no longer a terrible place for single mother families results in incredulity. The insistence of some academic audience members that the increasing numbers of single mothers are proof that they are no longer stigmatised is absurd. The increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees in the United Kingdom has resulted in more stigmatisation and oppression, not less (Thomas, 2012; Morrice, 2011). Why is it so hard to believe that the same is also true for single mother families?

The negative social construction of single mother families by the media and by politicians is not a burden borne solely by the single mother. The messages her child is likely internalising about her family is that it is broken, dysfunctional, incomplete, inadequate, and inferior compared to married, two-parent, heterosexual families. Within an earlier study, Dowd (1997:xviii) wrote, 'Children have lost the most from our stigmatizing of single-parent families. ... The lack of support and condemnation of single parents, based on the stigma associated with

them, bears most heavily on children'. The millennia of stigmatisation and criminalisation of single mothers in Western societies has not left their children unscathed. We, as bastard children, still face mountains of stigma and judgement.

### **Legitimacy in higher education**

To bastardise something is to corrupt, debase, degenerate, deteriorate, 'to change something in a way that makes it fail to represent the values and qualities that it is intended to represent' (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2015). My experiences in higher education have made me feel like my very presence, as a first-generation student from a working class, single mother family, has bastardised academia itself. Underrepresented students are scapegoated as the reason higher education is deteriorating. 'Students from non-traditional backgrounds are seen as being frequently perceived as a risk to universities and to the state that invests in them' (Hinton-Smith, 2012:12). We are blamed for 'lowering the bar' and 'dumbing down' the academy (Burke, 2012). Fingers point to us when academic standards are discussed because we have supposedly polluted or poisoned the system, resulting in poor and worsening standards. This notion of bastardisation is strongly emphasised in higher education, where the focus on Widening Participation for students who are less likely to attend university includes a counter discussion on the supposed correlation between an increase in equitable access and a decrease of academic qualifications and standards for university entrance. The inclusion of more underrepresented students 'is perceived as dilution, or pollution -- a situation which challenges the very notion of equity in higher education' (Morley, 1997:115). Those who argue against the Widening Participation agenda cite that the existence of underrepresented students, like me, within higher education contaminates the status of the degrees issued by universities because they are no longer the purview of the elite, they are no longer exclusive to the few but, supposedly, available to the masses. They claim that the presence of underrepresented students in university classrooms disrupts the quality and excellence of higher education itself (Morley, 1997).

I once tried to explain my research to a student in another department. He asked, earnestly, 'If we let more of them in, won't that take away spaces from those

who should be in university?' Firstly, the neoliberal language of 'us versus them' is pervasive in many aspects of society and higher education is not immune from the false binary of the deserving versus the undeserving. Secondly, the notion that there are a finite number of spaces or places at university is bizarre but connected to the same elitist language on which 'us versus them' is predicated. As Bauman wrote (2003:34):

There are always too many of *them*. 'Them' are the fellows of whom there should be fewer – or better still none at all. And there are never enough of us. 'Us' are the folks of whom there should be more.

Underrepresented students are often seen as 'Them'. We bastardise the ivory tower. We make it impure and illegitimate. We are an infestation or an infection, overrunning and sickening higher education.

However, the scapegoating of underrepresented students is a smoke and mirrors cover up of the real culprit: neoliberalism in higher education. The driving neoliberal ideals of 'commercialism, privatization, and deregulation' have taken a stranglehold over higher education in the United Kingdom over the last few decades (Giroux, 2002:426). The advance of neoliberalism within the academy has brought with it 'the conversion of knowledge into something to be sold, traded and consumed' (Reay, 2014). Under the influence of neoliberalism, 'individual and social agency are defined largely through market-driven notions of individualism, competition, and consumption' (Giroux, 2002:426). Through the lens of neoliberalism, higher education is viewed as open to any individual with enough drive, tenacity, and potential (Taylor, 2012).

Within the dominant neoliberal fantasy, the only possible obstacle for success is the student herself (Burke, 2012). The fantasy suggests that if she really wants to advance her career and her social positioning, then she will surely be successful in achieving her higher education goals. Higher education offers the promise of social mobility, but it is mostly just that: a promise unfulfilled. As Ball (2010:157) explained:

The UK remains low in the international rankings of social mobility when compared with other advanced nations. Parental background continues to exert a very powerful influence on the academic progress of children. ... Inequalities in degree acquisition, meanwhile, persist across different income groups. While 44 per cent of young people from the richest 20 per



cent of households acquired a degree in 2002, only 10 per cent from the poorest 20 per cent of households did so.

The social class divide in educational attainment is a systemic issue, but the blame is placed on the individual student, allowing 'institutional classism', as Ball names it, to swell and fester like an open wound.

The promise of social mobility allows the myth of the deserving few among the underserving masses to thrive (Walkerdine, 2011). It is this myth that perpetuates the notion that if a student from an underrepresented background is ambitious enough, aspirational enough, hard-working enough, determined enough, then she will surely be successful within the higher education system, no matter the odds stacked against her. If she is not successful, then it is proof of a personal failing and not of a system that is built to exclude her. As Burke (2012:105) explained:

The emphasis on individual aspirations misses out the significant interconnections between a subject's aspirations and their classed, racialized, (hetero)sexualized and gendered identities, ignoring their social, spatial and cultural contexts in which certain subjects are constructed, and construct themselves, as having or not having potential.

This is a systemic injustice masked through blaming and shaming individuals and current Widening Participation strategies contribute to the same systemic injustices. Most university Widening Participation units are focused on marketing and recruitment, with little effort or attention paid to persistence and retention of students after they enter the university (Burke, 2013). Essentially, Widening Participation units open the doors to welcome students into the university, a good first step to be sure, but, after that, students are largely on their own with very little support offered to help them navigate a system in which their privileged peers already have invested capital, knowledge, and advantages (Burke, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Bowl, 2003). As Burke illuminates (2013:110):

Inequalities of gender, class and race are assumed to be eradicated by the market of higher education, in which individual consumers exercise their 'choice' to participate in higher education or not. Notions of choice are tied into discourses of meritocracy in which the right to higher education is understood in terms of individual ability, potential and hard work rather than as shaped by structural, cultural and institutional inequalities and misrecognitions.

If a student gets into university through Widening Participation recruitment but is unable to persist through to degree completion, then the university does not have to take responsibility (Taylor, 2012). It becomes the individual student's fault, her shame. She must not have tried hard enough. She must not have wanted it badly. She must not be capable. She must not be good enough. She must not have been aspirational enough. Burke wrote (2013:111):

A lack of attention to the ways some groups have unfair access to the material and cultural resources needed to get ahead tends to individualise 'failure', explaining it in deficit terms as lacking ability, determination or aspiration.

As a matter of justice and equality, Widening Participation units should be tasked with levelling the playing field so that all students have equal opportunities to achieve their educational goals. In order for all students to feel welcome, to feel legitimate in higher education, then the Widening Participation agenda needs to focus on supporting students and contributing towards the equity that has so long been promised but still remains as yet undelivered.

Before my mother graduated from high school, she asked an academic guidance counsellor about going to university. The story she tells is that his response was simply, 'University is not for people like you'. In her case, what he meant by the phrase 'people like you' was working class students. Her parents, my maternal grandparents, were married, but they were raising their four children on working class salaries and living in a notoriously rough neighbourhood. 'People like you' became reason enough to shatter my mother's aspirations for higher education. For me, the conversation was drastically different. When I was 16 years old, my calculus teacher asked me to which universities I was considering applying. I told him that I did not believe that university was for 'people like me'.

What I had meant when I said 'people like me' was students from low-income, working class families, students from single mother families, and students from families in which no one had ever gone to university. Until he asked the question, I held my unworthiness as a fixed truth, embedded in my brain after years of internalising messages all around me that convinced me of the certainty that I am not good enough, that I am less than or inferior to the wealthier students from families with married, educated parents. My teacher revealed that he was himself a first-generation university student from a working class family. He

convinced me that university was indeed a place for people like me. While this discussion might have been insignificant and unremarkable for him, it was momentous for me.

My mother had talked about wanting me to go to university both to fulfil the dream that was denied to her and to give me career opportunities that were not available without a degree. She did not understand what it meant to be a university student, but she had long heard the rhetoric about higher education being the key to social mobility. Yet, her encouragement was complicated by the story she told about the guidance counsellor; If he judged her to be unworthy, then, as her bastard daughter, am I not also unworthy?

After all, I am illegitimate.

## **Chapter Two: The journey continues: Mapping out the study**

This thesis explores the university experiences of the daughters of single mothers who are first-generation students in the United Kingdom through a thematic, theoretical, and autoethnographical analysis of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with and reflective writings from 26 students who are currently pursuing or have recently completed an undergraduate degree in the United Kingdom. Data was collected during spring and summer of 2013. This research examines intersectionalities of gender, socio-economic class, race, and family status as they shape the students' identities and their university experiences. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks upon which this study is built include feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and the concept of social exclusion.

Chapter One provided the context and rationale for this study. Historical understandings of legitimacy and bastardy were explored. The contemporary context was illuminated through recent examples of the ways single mothers and their families, especially their daughters, are socially constructed through the media, through politicians, and through society in the Western World. Additionally, I discussed legitimacy as it relates to underrepresented students in higher education. Throughout the chapter, I interwove my own story and motivations for undertaking this research.

In this chapter, I provide an introduction to the study. The research questions guiding the study are presented. The aims, purpose, and impact intentions of the research are explored. I then explain the significance of the title I have chosen for the thesis. Finally, the remaining chapters of the study are summarised. This chapter is the map for the rest of the study, guiding you as the reader through the rest of the thesis.

### **Research questions**

The research questions this study answered are:

1. How do the dominant discourses, created and maintained by the media, politicians, and society, construct single mother families? (Explored in Chapter 5)
2. How compatible is that social construction of single mothers and their families with the higher education aspirations and participation of the daughters of single mothers? Does their family experience shape their higher education aspirations and experiences and, if so, in what ways? (Explored in Chapter 6)
3. Does their family experience shape their identities? How do the daughters of single mothers construct their identities when they enter university? (Explored in Chapter 7)

### **Impact intentions**

Like many activist academics, I want my research to change the world. Not just any world or some unspecified, generic world, but the world in which my participants live, in which I live as well.

Research is meant to be transformative; we do not merely analyze or study an object to gain greater understanding, but instead struggle to investigate how individuals and groups might be better able to change their situations. Further, researchers appear embedded in the research process; they are not 'scientists' who perform their work in a laboratory (Tierney, 1994:99).

I am not conducting experiments in a sanitised, controlled lab, outfitted in a bright white coat, face mask, rubber gloves, and protective goggles. I am in this research - fully, deeply, entirely. I jumped in enthusiastically. I rolled up my sleeves and dug in with my bare hands, sifting through the soil and detritus. This world is messy and chaotic but I want my research to be the seeds I plant. With my hopes so high that there will be sun and rain and that this will be a fertile space, I will continue to toil here until something good can grow. I did not undertake this research simply to state plainly the experiences of my participants, but to open up frank discussions about the inequalities that are still rife within society and, especially, within higher education. I want my research to make clear that higher education is still a space of exclusion where, through systemic disadvantages, some are unable to thrive. This is where I want to let the light in and change the entire landscape.

I whole-heartedly endorse Tierney's suggestion for the responsibilities of a social science researcher (1994:111):

I am arguing that the researcher/author has three tasks: the researcher engages the researched in a self-reflexive encounter; the research 'act' – the book, article or presentation – brings to light the inequities of the power that may exist; and the researcher actively works for care and change.

I believe my work accomplishes these three tasks. I crafted my interview guide and reflective writing guide to create a space that was open for my participants to tell their stories and be self-reflexive; I have presented many times, written this thesis, and I am writing articles to illuminate the inequities and injustices uncovered by my research; and I have dedicated my adult life to the pursuit of change within higher education as a proud activist and reluctant academic. I have hope that change is possible. If I did not, I would not be here. I would not have written these words. You and I, as researcher and as reader, would never have had this conversation. I agree with Tierney's assertion that Hope should be the answer to the question: Why research? (1994:111):

In a world such as ours, beset with oppression and the sense that life cannot change for the better, one constant that might unite us is that of hope. Our research efforts ought to enable our readers to reflect on their own lives and to help us to envision lives for ourselves and for our students that exist within communities of difference and hope. By 'difference', I mean that those identities of self with which we have come to define ourselves – race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, for example – ought to be honored and brought into the center of our discourses about education and its purpose. ... By 'hope' I mean the sense that the human potential might be reached where individual and communal differences are acknowledged and where we come together in the expectation that out of differences arises *communitas*.

I embarked on this research journey with hope in my heart and fire in my belly and I continually and eternally nurture that hope and stoke that fire. Along with my unapologetic optimism and my high hopes for my research to create meaningful change, I have written concrete aims for this research and the ways I intend for it to contribute to knowledge:

The aims of this study were to:

1. Examine the ways that single mother families are socially constructed through the media, through politicians' public statements, and through society.

2. Explore the possible impact of growing up in single mother families on the identities and higher education experiences of daughters during their university years.

The findings from this study:

1. Illuminate the ways that single mother families are constructed by the media, by politicians, and in society. (Explored in Chapter 5)
2. Contribute to the existing literature within the area of widening participation and social identities. (Explored in Chapters 6 and 7)
3. Bridge the gap between the existing literature on the experience of single mother families and the existing literature on the experiences of students in higher education, providing a deeper understanding of access, participation, and inclusion of a specific population of students as yet unexplored within existing research. (Explored throughout the thesis)
4. Identify common trends and themes within the data as well as demonstrate the complexity of the individual experiences of the daughters of single mothers. (Explored throughout the thesis)

My aims, goals, objectives, and intentions for impact may not result in a completely changed world, but I do believe that my research can contribute to knowledge in small, but positive ways. My small contribution will become part of a larger group of small contributions made by other like-minded, social-justice focused feminist academics. I may not be able to move mountains on my own, but I have already rolled up my sleeves and, through this research, I am joining the group effort to change the world, word by word, stone by stone.

## **Born to fight**

One of the interviewees for this study, Marlys, discussed the ways she feels labelled by society: *'I am a freak because I am a child in a single parent family'*. She explained that the oppression she has faced has made her a fighter:

*I think I was born with a lot more fight, both expecting and finding it necessary to give it – think Tracy Chapman, 'Born to Fight'. I have sympathy with society's underdogs and I try really hard not to judge people by categories.*

Marlys feels like she has had to fight for everything since she was born. She has experienced marginalisation for being the daughter of a single mother and,

because of that, she believes she is more sympathetic towards others. The song she mentioned in her interview, 'Born to Fight' by Tracy Chapman (1989), is also one of my favourite songs and the lyrics resonate with me as well:

'Born To Fight'  
 They're tryin' to take away my pride  
 Stripping me of everything I own  
 They're tryin' to hurt me inside  
 Make me into white man's drone

But no, no, no, no, this one's not for sale  
 I was born to fight  
 Said I ain't been knocked down yet  
 I was born to fight  
 Tell you I'm the surest bet  
 Ain't no man, no woman,  
 No beast alive that can beat me  
 'Cause I'm born to fight

They're tryin' to dig into my soul  
 And take away the spirit of my God  
 They're tryin' to take my control  
 Monitor my every thought

No, no, no, no, I won't let down my guard  
 I was born to fight  
 Said I ain't been knocked down yet  
 I was born to fight  
 Tell you I'm the surest bet  
 Ain't no man, no woman,  
 No beast alive that can beat me  
 'Cause I'm born to fight

Marlys mentioned Chapman's song because the lyrics speak to overcoming adversity despite the odds, which is why I chose the song title for my thesis. This study explores the challenges that the daughters of single mothers have faced before and during their time at university and the many ways they have had to fight in their life. As the daughters of single mothers, we fight to be recognised as legitimate, as respectable, as worthy, both inside and outside of the academy.

## **Outline of the rest of the chapters**

Chapter Three illuminates the existing research and literature related to the study, concentrating on key areas. The chapter begins with an explanation of why I focused my research on mothers and daughters under the subheading Why



mothers? Why daughters?. I briefly discuss the Social construction of motherhood before exploring Single mother families through the available statistical data. I further examine the Social construction of single mother families before exploring the Educational attainment of the daughters of single mothers. Within Identity and intersectionality, I explore the available research related to the intersectional identities of single mothers and their daughters. I then discuss First-generation students and Widening participation before briefly exploring the impact of Neoliberalism in higher education.

The research methodology of this study is explored in Chapter Four. The chapter includes two sections titled: Methodology part I: Frameworks, foundations, and principles and Methodology part II: Research design in practice. Within the first section, I explore knowledge and power as well as the philosophical, theoretical, and conceptual frameworks for my research. I illuminate my approach to reflexivity and positionality, objectivity and emotion, academic writing style, and my authorial voice. At the end of the first section of the chapter, I discuss my ethical considerations. Within the second section of the chapter, I explain my methods of participant recruitment, my methods of data collection, my methods of data analysis, and I provide the demographics and information about my participants.

In the first analysis chapter, Chapter Five, the social construction of single mother families, as illuminated by the data, is presented. The chapter answers the first research question: How do the dominant discourses, created and maintained by the media, politicians, and society, construct single mother families? The findings are illuminated through subthemes titled: Motherhood in the media; Single mothers as political pawns; This is a man's world; Communities, schools, and extended families; and Countering the social construction of single mother families. As it is the first of the three analysis chapter, it is more detailed and descriptive, with Chapters Six and Seven progressively moving towards a more distilled and analytical discussion of the data.

Analysis continues in Chapter Six, in which the higher education experiences of the participants is discussed. The chapter answers the second research question: How compatible is that social construction of single mothers and their families with the higher education aspirations and participation of the

daughters of single mothers? Does their family experience shape their higher education aspirations and experiences and, if so, in what ways? The subthemes explored within the chapter are titled: Social expectations; Education and worth; Aspirations and inspirations; and Belonging.

The final analysis chapter, Chapter Seven, explores the theme of identity within the data. The chapter answers the third research question: Does their family experience shape their identities? How do the daughters of single mothers construct their identities when they enter university? Since identity is already explored, in part, throughout the thesis, Chapter Seven is shorter and more focused than the previous two analysis chapters. The emerging significance of identity within the research is illuminated through subthemes titled: Misrecognised identities; Intersectional identities, Identity and university, and People like me.

Finally, Chapter Eight provides a discussion and conclusion of the study. I summarise the findings from the analysis chapters and indicate the implications the findings have for higher education policies and practices within the United Kingdom. To conclude the chapter and the thesis I offer a section titled Epilogue: Depictions of single mother families across the centuries, in which I return to the subject of the social construction of single mother families. I also discuss the perpetuation of inequality in education and my hope for a better, more equal society.

## **Chapter Three:**

### **Space for new knowledge: Exploring the literature**

The common discourses through which single mother families are socially constructed often suggest that the mere existence of single mothers is the root cause of the social ills with which they are often correlated (Edwards and Caballero, 2011; May, 2004; Phoenix, 1996). This negative construction can impact the children raised within single mother families (Dowd, 1997). The theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this research, including feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and the concept of social exclusion, challenge those discourses.

Reconceptualizing lone motherhood as a set of circumstances affected by context rather than as a uniform identity means that when studying the problems that lone mothers face, the theoretical focus is shifted from the individual lone mother to the social context. Consequently, when attempting to identify the root cause of the problems lone mothers face, the analytical gaze is not on the lone mother, but for example on how society is structured both discursively and practically around the nuclear family and how gender inequality restricts the lives of many lone mothers (May, 2004:187).

It is important to establish the frameworks for this study before presenting the available research, especially the statistical data, because many of the previous studies that have been conducted to examine single mother families do so without acknowledging the varied and diverse reasons that a woman might be raising her children alone. Additionally, many previous studies have positioned the nuclear family as norm without question, perpetuating the notion that married, heterosexual parents make the best parents.

The entrenched conviction that children need both a mother and a father inflames culture wars over single motherhood, divorce, gay marriage, and gay parenting. Research to date, however, does not support this claim. (Biblarz and Stacey, 2010:16).

This study is framed in a way that questions the assumptions around single mothers as one homogenous group and challenges the patriarchy that positions single mothers as inferior to married, heterosexual mothers. Much of the available research fails to examine the complex reasons a woman might be a single mother,

the socially constructed nuclear family norms that have created a 'single mother versus mother' binary, and the reasons single mother families may or may not be in poverty. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks utilised for this study question and challenge the assumptions produced and promoted through patriarchal discourses, including the available literature, and, as such, I present the following data as only one of many tools by which I will build the foundation of this research.

This literature review chapter includes exploration of topics and subthemes relevant to the research focus and research questions. I begin with the subheading of *Why Mothers? Why Daughters?* in which I explain why this study is focused on mothers and daughters and my reasoning behind choosing to use the term single mothers. I then very briefly explore the Social Construction of Motherhood, although I recognise that such a topic could itself constitute an entire thesis. Under the subheading of *Single Mother Families*, I discuss the statistical data about single mother families in the UK and in similar Western countries. Following that, I continue to examine the Social Construction of Single Mother Families that I began to cover in Chapter One, including the fluid and ever-changing definition of family and the roles of the media, of politicians, and of society in constructing single mother families as one homogenous group in dichotomous opposition against the idealised and highly-valued nuclear families. I then discuss the research related to the Educational Attainment of the Daughters of Single Mothers. Under the subheading of *Identity and Intersectionality*, I discuss the literature relevant to the intersectional identities of single mothers and their daughters, including reviewing research that examines intersections of gender, class, race and ethnicity in relation to students' experiences of higher education. I briefly explore literature related to First-Generation Students before explore Widening Participation policies and practices. I discuss the impact of Neoliberalism in Higher Education as it relates to this study before offering a conclusion to the chapter.

### **Why mothers? Why daughters?**

I have chosen to use the term single mother rather than the alternative terms, such as 'lone, or self-supporting, or solo or autonomous, all terms used in academic writings' (Standing, 1998:194). Since the term single mother is used by

the media and by politicians to construct the identities of women with primary care responsibilities for their children as deviant 'Other', it is the term I used to recruit my participants. For me and for them, it is a familiar term. It is the term that shackles the identities of the women, who raised my participants, to negative stereotypes. I did not choose this term lightly. Many academics have used the term lone mother, such as Standing who explained that (1998:193):

The term lone mother, is inclusive – it includes all mothers who define themselves as single (or lone, or self-supporting, or solo or autonomous, all terms used in academic writings), it includes women who are divorced, separated, widowed as well as those conventionally called single – never-married mothers.

I do not believe the distinctions between the terms 'single' and 'lone' are that vast. Additionally, by her own admission, Standing's participants preferred the term single rather than lone, so she made the conscious choice to use lone mother, 'a term seldom used outside of academic writings' (1998:193). My study includes the daughters of women who found themselves with primary care responsibilities for the same variety of reasons Standing states (separated, divorced, widowed, and never-married). I chose the term because I want to confront the stereotypes associated with it and the impact those stereotypes have on the identities and experiences of my participants.

Single mother as a term is problematic as it insinuates that a woman with primary care responsibilities for her children exists in a temporary state, as if she is simply lacking a necessary partner to make her complete and whole. Add a husband to fulfil the nuclear, heterosexual norm, and suddenly she becomes simply mother, without the need for a qualifier. Lone mother and solo mother are hardly different in that regard. Autonomous mother and self-supporting mother as terms seem to draw neoliberal distinctions between women who have the capital to be truly autonomous or self-supporting and those who must rely on their support network (such as their extended family) or on welfare to care for their children.

The focus on the nuclear family as norm means that there is no term for a single mother that does not create a false binary in which the single mother exists in opposition to the mother who fits the norm. It is for this reason, I chose to use the term single mother rather than a kinder, gentler, more nuanced term that distracts from the very real, very negative construction of the mother/single

mother binary. If the negative social construction of single mothers did not exist, then the term I could use when referring to the woman who raised me or the women who raised my participants would just be mother.

I am often asked why I chose to explore the daughters of single mothers rather than single parents. The ways parents are socially constructed is enmeshed with gendered norms and expectations, created and maintained by, and to the benefit of, the patriarchal system. Single fathers account for only eight percent of all single parent families in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2012). Understanding the social construction of single fathers and normative masculinities as they relate to fatherhood would be an entirely different study, one worthy of undertaking but beyond the scope and limitations of this doctoral research. I am also often asked why I chose to explore the university experiences of daughters and not sons. Like a study of single fathers, a study of the experiences of sons would be an entirely different study, especially given the societal fixation on the notion that boys raised by women alone are incapable of developing into 'real' men (Drexler and Gross, 2005). While the experiences of sons would be just as worthy a topic to explore in research as those of single fathers, including sons was beyond the scope and limitations of this study.

What I would like to know is: After I present my research focused on the stories of the lived experiences of the 26 women I interviewed, why is the most popular, and often first, question I am asked, essentially, 'But what about the men?'

### **Social construction of motherhood**

Western notions of motherhood impact upon the identities, opportunities, and experiences of women, whether they become mothers or not (Woodroffe, 2009). The onset of menstruation becomes the life event that defines the line between girl and woman, which means that a girl is considered to have entered womanhood when she becomes biologically capable of motherhood (Natsuaki, Leve, and Mendle, 2011). Motherhood is still positioned as what should be a woman's primary life goal, but not just any motherhood, 'good' motherhood (Vincent, 2010; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998). As Lawler (2000:2) wrote:

Her task is to produce the good, well-managed self, which will uphold democracy. Yet this is a vision of social harmony which is based on the radical expulsion and othering of groups deemed excessive, repulsive, threatening. In Britain and North America, single mothers have been the

prime target here, but many groups of mothers are subject to suspicious scrutiny, with working-class mothers under especial suspicion. Very often, they are seen as producers of children who are or who will be a threat to social order.

Single mothers and working class mothers are positioned as 'threatening' the nation. Even if a woman chooses not to become a mother, she does not avoid judgment. Women who choose to forgo motherhood are often pressured to defend their choice (Hadfield, Rudoe, and Sanderson-Mann, 2007). More and more women are choosing not to become mothers (Hadfield, Rudoe, and Sanderson-Mann, 2007), which is unsurprising considering the economic consequences of motherhood.

Motherhood has a direct and dramatic influence on women's pay and employment prospects, and typically this penalty lasts a lifetime. Mothers are far more likely than fathers to take time out from paid work, or to work part-time, in order to care for their children. They are, for example, nine times as likely as fathers to arrange not to work during school holidays. The motherhood pay penalty starts with women's loss of income when they leave paid work to give birth and care for their children. Even a short break then also reduces future earnings, as women will have lost out on relevant experience, training and promotion. For each year she is absent from the workplace a mother's future wages will reduce by four per cent (Woodroffe, 2009:3).

It is not just mothers who pay the penalty for giving birth. All women face possible prejudice in the workplace because of the social construction and expectations of motherhood.

Many mothers also face discrimination from employers, who assume they will be unreliable or unable to cope with the demands of the job. This discrimination extends to women without children too, with some employers regarding all women of childbearing age as potential liabilities (Woodroffe, 2009:3).

Women are reduced to the sum of their body parts. If she has already given birth, then some employers see her as automatically unreliable. If she has not given birth, then some employers see her as simply a mother waiting to happen. As Standing wrote (1998:188):

The social construction of appropriate motherhood, and control of women's sexuality through a dominant discourse of normative mothering (in a heterosexual, married relationship – a white middle-class model of the nuclear family) are issues that concerned me as a feminist. All women are defined in relationship to motherhood (either positively or negatively). ...

This construction of all women as potential mothers (and some women as potential 'bad' mothers) is one which impacts on women's lives and identities in various ways.

For all women, including the women in this study and their mothers, social constructions of motherhood impacts upon our lives. Who is recognised as a 'good' woman is tied to notions of 'good' motherhood and 'good' is often code for white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual, and married.

As Rich suggested 'heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a *political institution*' (1980:637). Every choice a woman makes related to motherhood is scrutinised under a patriarchal microscope. From her decision to date (and whom she chooses to date); her decision to have sex (if the sex is consensual in the first place); if she becomes pregnant (intentionally or not), her decision to terminate or continue her pregnancy; every choice she makes during her pregnancy; if, how, and when she chooses to work after giving birth; what her body looks like after giving birth; every choice she makes related to raising her child – all of her choices are, firstly, limited by structures of power and privilege and, secondly, will often be judged to be the wrong choices. For example, if a mother works while raising her children, then she is neglecting her maternal duties. If she stays at home to raise her children, especially if she is a single mother, then she is a lazy scrounging sponger. 'The story of girls and mothers has tended to validate middle-class practices and pathologise working-class ones' (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989:22). Whether a mother works or stays at home with her children is steeped in 'the political, economic and cultural contexts in which 'choices' are made' (Thomson, 2011:2). If a woman chooses to terminate her pregnancy, then she is seen as a baby-killer (Rohlinger, 2002), but if a working-class single mother chooses to carry a pregnancy to term, then she is seen as getting pregnant on purpose to line her bank account with benefits (Littlejohn, 2013).

Under the oppressive power of the patriarchy, a woman's choices are not simply a double-edged sword; her choices become the spikes on a morning star used to bludgeon her relentlessly.

When women have children, the demands of respectability expand to include 'good' mothering – responsible mothering, providing 'appropriate' forms of care. Judgements of failing are levied against both working-class and middle-class mothers; especially, in relation to the latter, in the case of those who are seen as putting career before children. ... However, working-



class women are particular vulnerable to being judged as failing (Vincent, Ball, and Braun, 2010:127).

In a system in which most decisions ultimately lead to some form of failure of womanhood and/or motherhood, the notion of choice itself is an illusion meant to mask the patriarchal control held over all women's bodies and lives. No matter how disciplined or obedient a woman is within that system, no matter how hard she tries to conform to the norms, she will often still be seen as not good enough.

### **Single mother families**

In the United Kingdom, the number of children raised by single parents has greatly increased over the last forty years (Hughes, 2009). Findings from the 2011 census indicate that single parent families represent '26 percent of all families with dependent children' and that, among them, 'women accounted for 92 percent of lone parents' (Office for National Statistics, 2012:5). 'Lone parents are bringing up one-in-four children in the UK' (Gregg, Harkness, and Smith, 2009:F63). By comparison, the United Kingdom has similar numbers of single parent households as the United States and Australia. Findings from the 2010 census in the United States showed that single parent households made up 26.5 percent of all families with dependent children (United States Census Bureau, 2010) and findings from the 2011 census in Australia indicate that 26 percent of families with dependent children are single parent families (Qu and Weston, 2013). In the United Kingdom, the racial and ethnic make-up of single parents includes 90 percent White, five percent Black, and two percent Asian, with three percent identified as other (Maplethorpe, Chanfreau, Philo, & Tait, 2010:22). While the stereotypes suggest that single mothers are usually teenage mothers, as Jones stated, 'In reality, only one in fifty single mothers are under eighteen. The average age for a single parent is thirty-six, and over half had the children while married' (2012:218).

Research in the UK by Maplethorpe, Chanfreau, Philo, and Tait (2010) examined the longitudinal data available from the 2008 Families and Children Study (FACS). They found that single mothers and their children are more likely to live in poverty than their two-parent household counterparts.

A report by Gingerbread, a non-profit organisation supporting single parent families in the United Kingdom, indicated that (2012:6):

With a stalling single parent employment rate, persistent barriers to work, low pay, and limited opportunities for progression, single parents tell us they feel trapped between public debate that wrongly stigmatises many as benefit dependent and the tough realities of the labour market. While political and media debates often stereotype single parents as 'lazy scroungers', the plain fact is that they overwhelmingly want to work – 84% of non-working single mothers would like to get a paid job, become self-employed or go to college/study – and nearly six in ten are already in work.

Gingerbread also found that 'One in five full-time and one in four part-time working single parent families are below the poverty line' (2012:3). So, even single parents who are working part or full time still face the prospect of living in poverty.

Maplethorpe, Chanfreau, Philo, and Tait (2010) found that single mothers are significantly more likely to have little or no advanced education compared with married and partnered mothers. 'Almost two-fifths (39 per cent) of lone parents had either no academic qualifications or GCSE grade D-G only (or equivalent)' (2010:69). The study conducted by Barnes et al. (2012) examined two sets of longitudinal data collected through The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), which followed families with children born in 2000 through to 2007, and The Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), in which participant families with teenagers were studied between 2004 and 2009. In addition to finding that single parent households were significantly more likely to be persistently workless than households with two parents, the study also found that the children raised in households in which persistent parental worklessness occurs are 'significantly associated with poorer academic attainment' at all age levels.

Much of the literature about single mother families fails to account for the diverse ways through which mothers may be raising their children alone, with a few exceptions, such as studies that have examined single mothers by choice (Golombok, 2015; Weissenberg and Landau, 2012; Jadvá, Badger, Morrisette, and Golombok, 2009; Mannis, 1999). The increases in single mother families, the number of those families living in poverty, and the percentages of single mothers with lower levels of completed education cannot simply be explained away by the rhetoric that suggests that family values have deteriorated and offers, as solution,

that men are the magical missing ingredient in the lives of single mothers and their children. As May wrote (2004:169):

Lone motherhood becomes the independent variable through which the lives of lone mothers and their children are explained and consequently, it is easily attributed as the main cause for many of the problems these women face.

Most of the academic and popular discourse around single mother families in the Western World fails to examine compounding issues such as: the fact that all women are impacted by the gender pay gap (Hilary, 2013); the high cost of living, which has been 'rising much faster than incomes' (Hirsch, 2015); the high cost of childcare (Alakeson, 2011); and the state of the economy in which unemployment and underemployment is high (Schmuecker, 2014). All of these factors contribute towards the many and multi-faceted reasons why a single mother family may be living in poverty.

### **Social construction of single mother families**

Popular public discourse, perpetuated by the media, by politicians, and through social policy, suggests that the typical and most highly-valued family unit is the nuclear family, consisting of a heterosexual married mother and father raising their children without government assistance. The nuclear family as norm is more myth than reality as family units are fluid and changing (Widmer and Jallinoja, 2008; Galvin, 2006; Bengtson, 2001; Teachman, Tedrow, and Crowder, 2000).

The traditional nuclear family is increasingly ill-suited for a postindustrial, postmodern society. Women's economic and social emancipation over the past century has become incongruent with the nuclear 'male breadwinner' family form and its traditional allocation of power, resources, and labor (Bengtson, 2001:4).

Yet, the dominant discourses suggest that single mother families are incomplete or inferior compared to other families (May, 2004). Single mothers are especially demonised because their existence is proof that the patriarchy is not necessary. Rich (1980:654) wrote:

Women have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically, in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, in order to remain respectable, in order to do what was expected of women because coming out of 'abnormal'

childhoods they wanted to feel 'normal', and because heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment. We may faithfully or ambivalently have obeyed the institution, but our feelings-and our sensuality-have not been tamed or contained within it.

Single mothers are often socially constructed as if in opposition to married heterosexual mothers, which creates a false binary that lumps single mothers together into one homogenous group. This study challenges that binary and the universal category of single mother that it creates.

The concept of family is in flux and in transition. There are 'a multiplicity of family types including two-parent families, one-parent families, cohabitating couples, gay and lesbian families, and extended-family households' (Teachman, Tedrow, and Crowder, 2000:1234). Yet popular discourse still clings to the concept of the nuclear family as if it is the norm against which all other families can be judged and punished for nonconformity. Discourses around family create false binaries, such as nuclear family versus 'Other' or single mother versus mother, that are not representative of nor reflective of the lived experiences of the many and varied family units.

The concept of family is changing visibly, invisibly, and irrevocably. When family identity is involved, language follows the lived experience. This language, managed within and across boundaries, reflects and shapes family experience (Galvin, 2006:15).

The language used about single mothers shapes and impacts their lived experiences and the experiences of their children. The media and political discourses shape society as well. In a mixed-methods US study by Haire and McGeorge (2012) with 769 participants focused on peoples' perceptions of single mothers and of single fathers, the researchers found seven common perceptions among participants about single mothers: that they are neglectful; are irresponsible and immature; have mental health issues; make poor choices; are promiscuous; are emotionally insecure; and that they have no hope for the future. Haire and McGeorge (2012:40) wrote:

These seven sub-themes are in stark contrast from the previous sub-themes describing single fathers' negative attributes. While single fathers struggle to pay child support, find adequate childcare, and balance dating with being a single parent, the above descriptions of single mothers describe them as terrible and inadequate people, not as individuals in a challenging situation. ... In this way, the stereotype of the heroic yet

unnatural single father who has 'stepped up' in what must be a bad situation to parent his children is reinforced at the same time that the stereotype of the deviant and troubled single mother who is unable to properly parent her children is also reinforced. Many of the participants' responses regarding the perceived negative attributes of single mothers are not primarily connected to their status as single mothers but as women who have deviated from the societal norm of a two parent heterosexual family.

Single mothers are vilified in ways that single fathers are not solely on the basis of their gender. Single mothers are a popular topic for the media and politicians and the language most often used about them is negative (Tomás, 2012; May, 2004; Kinnear, 1999; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998; Dowd, 1997).

Since the 1980s, the media in Britain and the United States have made many negative pronouncements on lone mothers. ... They have produced a construction of lone mothers as 'feckless', wilfully responsible for the poverty that has been well documented to be a feature of lone parenting ... and undeserving of either public sympathy or economic support (Phoenix, 1996:175).

Single mothers are viewed as both causing their poverty and oppression and deserving of the misery that accompanies poverty. The discourses around single motherhood perpetuates the idea that the category of single mother is homogenous and representative of the lived experiences of all of the women lumped into that negatively constructed stereotype, one that single mothers themselves both internalise and defend themselves against (May, 2004).

Politicians, policy-makers and public commentators have been talking about low-income single mothers and their children and the social problems they supposedly create for decades. Chapter One explored recent examples of Western politicians and public figures stereotyping and demonising single mothers and their families. 'Lone mothers experience the available cultural representations of lone motherhood as a straightjacket' (May, 2004:185). Single mothers are bound and restricted by the negative social construction of single mother families perpetuated through politicians, through the media, and within society. Author and former single mother, J. K. Rowling (2010, n.p.) wrote about the negative political discourse in an editorial article:

The Secretary of State for Wales, John Redwood, castigated single-parent families from St Mellons, Cardiff, as 'one of the biggest social problems of our day'. (John Redwood has since divorced the mother of his children.)

Women like me (for it is a curious fact that lone male parents are generally portrayed as heroes, whereas women left holding the baby are vilified) were, according to popular myth, a prime cause of social breakdown, and in it for all we could get: free money, state-funded accommodation, an easy life.

The myths and the stereotypes are also internalised by single mothers themselves, who endeavour to distance themselves from the negative 'Other' and prove that they are different and therefore undeserving of scorn and scrutiny (May, 2004).

Additionally, it is rare that a single mother herself is invited to be a part of the conversation within the media or in the creation of policies that impact upon her and her family.

Since women's experiences are marginalized and excluded in public policy discourses, the policies themselves are often constructed in ways that reproduce traditional gender ideology and relations (Gatta, 2010).

The negative social construction of single mother families by the media and by politicians is not a burden borne solely by the single mother. The messages her child is likely internalising about her family is that it is broken, dysfunctional, incomplete, inadequate, and inferior compared to married, two-parent, heterosexual families. Politicians often claim to want the children of low-income single mothers to rise up out of poverty and break the cycle of welfare dependency through higher education and gainful employment. Yet, at the same time, politicians and the greater society often subjugates both the single mother and her child to preserve the inequities within a class system that primarily favours and privileges particular forms of two-parent families. In an editorial article, Churchwell (2011, n.p.) points out the flaws in the discourses that demonise single mothers:

The Tories trotted out all the old chestnuts about fatherless children being more likely to have educational, social or behavioural problems, despite the fact that anyone with a rudimentary grasp of logic knows that correlations do not establish causation. Here's a bombshell: it may be that children without fathers have social and academic problems because the vast majority of such children and their mothers are also without money.

Oppression through the negative social construction of the single mother is perpetuated by the patriarchy that demonises her for utilising the social programs designed to keep her and her child from destitution. Single mother families are constructed as 'Other' in false opposition to the privileged nuclear norm, which

promotes the idea that families in which children are raised by married, heterosexual parents who are not dependent on social welfare programs are good and ideal and that other families are bad, deviant, nonconforming, broken, and dysfunctional.

### **Educational attainment of the daughters of single mothers**

Research examining parental education levels as they related to children's educational attainment have drawn correlations between the educational attainment of all mothers and their children. According to Scott's research in the UK (2004), the higher level of education completed by a mother, the more likely her child is to achieve academically as well. However, a contrary finding was reported in a US study by Martin (2012): 'Children of highly educated single mothers are less likely to attend a post-secondary school relative to their peers in highly educated, two biological parent families' (2012:45). Additionally, in an earlier study conducted in the US, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) found that the child of a single mother is more likely to drop out of high school regardless of the circumstances under which her mother became single, regardless of the age of the child at which her mother became a single parent, and regardless of the length of time during which the child was raised in a single mother household.

Research shows that the daughters of single mothers are less likely to attend university than their peers (Lee, Almonte, and Youn, 2012; Martin, 2012; Wojtkiewicz, 2011; Ringback Weitof, Hjern, and Rosen, 2004; Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000). Family structure has been shown to have an impact on children's educational outcomes, as is evidenced by research conducted in Sweden by Ringback Weitof et al. (2004). 'Our study of almost 150,000 young people demonstrates that children who live with only one parent over at least a five-year period during their adolescence show lower educational attainment at ages 24–25 years than children from two-parent families' (Ringback Weitof et al., 2004:142). A study in the US examined outcomes of children raised by divorced single mothers compared to those raised by widowed single mothers (Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000:536):

Controlling for other factors (race, gender, mother's education, year, and age), children from single-mother homes produced by parental divorce are significantly less likely than those from two-biological-parent families to

complete high school, attend college (given high school completion), or graduate from college (given college entry). They hold occupations that are, on average, significantly lower in status, and they have a significantly lower level of general psychological well-being (or feeling of happiness). In contrast, children from widowed single-mother homes are not significantly different than those from two-biological-parent families on any of these dimensions, with the exception of having slightly lower odds of completing high school.

The findings support the conclusions by McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) that indicate that all children of single mothers, regardless of the circumstances under which the mothers became single (including mothers who are unwed, divorced, or widowed), are less likely to complete high school and attend university. Research in the US shows that 'women's earnings and income increase dramatically when they have college degrees ... and completing a four-year college degree sharply reduces women's chances of being poor, from 16.7 percent to 1.6 percent compared with those with only high school education' (Polakow, Butler, Deprez, and Kahn, 2004:9). Given that the daughters of single mothers may be less likely to attend higher education, regardless of factors such as socio-economic status, the educational attainment of their mothers, and the conditions under which single motherhood occurred, this research is focused on understanding the experiences of those daughters who are the first in their family to enter into university.

Most of the research focused on the outcomes of children raised by single mothers are premised on the belief that: 'Having been raised by two biological parents, or not, is the crucial determinant of child outcomes' (Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000:534), which is contrary to findings by Hampden-Thompson and Galindo (2015) and Golombok (2015), which show that children can thrive in a variety of family units. Hampden-Thompson and Galindo pointed out that (2015:1) 'research in the area of family structure and educational outcomes has often failed to account for instability in family structure'. Examining longitudinal data from 10,783 young people and their parents, Hampden-Thompson and Galindo found that family stability, not family structure, was more likely to impact a child's educational persistence and attainment (2015:13):

The association between lone-mother families and educational persistence is related to the economical disadvantages observed in this type of family and not to any intrinsic difficulties in the nature of the relationships between lone-mothers or lone-fathers and their children. ... In the UK,



continued research that provides a more nuanced examination of the impact of family structure instability on young people's educational outcomes, by taking into account the diversity of possible educational outcomes, is needed.

Hampden-Thompson and Galindo discussed the fact that their results contradict findings from Goodman et al. (2009) and Brown (2004) because neither study accounts for family stability and only focused on family structure. The failure of many researchers to recognise families as complex rather than homogenous groups allows for the production and reproduction of academic discourses that continue to socially construct single mothers and their families as deficit compared with the norm of a married heterosexual nuclear family.

Over the last few decades, research on families and the educational outcomes of their children shows a long history of not only lazy but harmful research. As Golombok wrote (2015:3):

In spite of the rise in new family forms, the traditional nuclear family is still generally considered the best environment in which to raise children, and remains the gold standard against which all other family types are assessed. It is commonly assumed that the more a family deviates from the norm of the traditional two-parent heterosexual family, the greater the risks to the psychological well-being of the children.

Golombok (2015) found that children can thrive in a variety of family forms, yet many research studies still unquestioningly centre the nuclear family form as the neutral or the norm and relegate other family forms to the peripheries, constructing them through discourses of deviance and deficit. Failing to account for the complexities, such as economic disadvantages, that impact children's educational outcomes, regardless of family form, has allowed academia to be complicit in the continued demonisation of families that do not conform to the nuclear heterosexual norm.

The available research examining the educational attainment of the children of single mothers primarily focuses on the fact that they are unlikely to achieve as highly as the children raised in two parent families and ignores those students who are able to complete university degrees despite the statistics and the challenges. The gap in the literature that silences the voices and experiences of the children of single parents who are able to overcome the educational odds is reminiscent of the history of research around BME and working class students in

education focused solely on their underachievement or their lack of achievement (McKay and Devlin, 2015; Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick, 2010; Mirza, 1997). The success of BME and working class students is often ignored in higher education research. Instead, research is often complicit in constructing BME and working class students through discourses of deficit. McKay and Devlin, writing about working class students, explained (2015:2):

Literature and the discourse around students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds in higher education often adopts a deficit conception in which these students are associated with low entrance scores, decreasing standards and academic struggle and failure.

Similarly, Mirza, discussing the experiences of BME students, explained (1997:269): 'No one wants to look at their success, their desire for inclusivity. They are out of place, disrupting, untidy. They do not fit'. Just as critics have argued for comprehensive research for BME and working class students, inclusive of more and varied stories of students' experiences, this study similarly seeks to fill the gap in the research on the daughters of single mothers and allow the voices of those who are the first in their family to enter into university to be heard.

## **Identity and intersectionality**

Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to account for the fact that identity intersects in complex and permanently intertwined layers that cannot be viewed or studied as if encapsulated into separate boxes. 'The public sphere has always been classed, gendered, and raced, with many groups being seen as less than persons' (Apple, 2015:173). The experiences and identity formations of single mothers and their daughters are intersectional; they cannot be reduced to individual categories so that meaning can be made in a simple, orderly fashion. Their identities are three-dimensional and multifaceted, like a cut diamond. Brah and Phoenix (2004:76) explained that:

We regard the concept of 'intersectionality' as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands.

The identities of the daughters of single mothers are shaped by intersectionalities, as Hall and Paul write that ‘identities are constructed through, not outside, difference’ and that power and privilege shape the development of those identities (1996:4). The daughters of single mothers are already constructing their identity through the difference in their family status, but they are doing so through the kaleidoscope of intersectional identities just like their mothers.

Many research studies have been conducted to examine the relationships between identity categories and participation in higher education, such as socio-economic class, race/ethnicity, and gender. Mullen (2010) examined culture, class, and gender in higher education. Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009) explored the experiences of working class students. Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, and Grinstead (2008) examined students’ experiences through the lenses of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and age at a range of different status universities. Archer, Hutchings, and Ross (2003) explored issues of class in higher education. However, research focused on family structure as it relates to student identities and the university experience is limited. There have been studies focused on the university experiences of single mothers themselves in both the UK (Hinton-Smith, 2009; Reay, 2003) and the US (Haleman, 2004; Polakow, Butler, Deprez, and Kahn, 2004; Butler and Deprez, 2002) and there have been studies suggesting that the children of single mothers are less likely to participate in higher education in the UK (Ringback Weitoft, Hjern, and Rosen, 2004) and in other Western countries such as the US (Lee, Almonte, and Youn, 2012; Martin, 2012; Wojtkiewicz, 2011) and Sweden (Ringback Weitoft, Hjern, and Rosen, 2004). However, there have not been studies exploring the experiences of the children of single mothers in higher education. Examining the identities of the daughters of single mothers as they negotiate university life will provide a framework for understanding their experiences.

While the identity categories that single mothers and their daughters occupy cannot be dissected for individual examination, researchers exploring intersectionality often focus their discussion on one or two areas. For many students from backgrounds that have been traditionally excluded from or less represented within higher education, such as first-generation students, mature students, working class students, or ethnic minority students, their sense of

belonging in higher education and their sense of their worthiness of a university degree impacts upon their overall university experience. For example, Reay et al. (2009) examined working class students' sense of belonging. Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) studied students' race/ethnicity, class, and age and their sense of belonging at a post-1992 university. Before even entering higher education, some students, such as working class students or first-generation students, are more likely to select a lower status university regardless of their potential for educational attainment at a more prestigious institution, a finding that was reported by multiple studies in the UK (Evans, 2010; Leese, 2010; Mangan, Hughes, Davies, and Slack, 2010; Reay, Davies, David, and Ball, 2001) and the US (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Paulsen and St. John, 2002; Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal, 2001).

The powers and privileges certain single mothers may or may not have access to or be able to exercise depend on their social positions and identities. Working class women and women from minority racial and ethnic groups are more likely to fully experience inequalities than their wealthier, white counterparts (Collins, 2000; Mirza, 1997; Phoenix, 1997; Skeggs, 1997). The concept of intersectionality has been explored by many researchers, which helps to conceptualise the complexity of identity formation and social positioning. The book by Lutz, Herrera Vivar, and Supik (2011) follows the history of intersectionality theory and its uses within research to explore many facets of identity and oppression. For example, Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick (2010) explored the intersection of race and class in schools. Both Evans (2010) and Mullen (2010) examined gender and class in higher education. Archer and Francis (2007) explored achievement through the lenses of race, gender, and class. Brah and Phoenix (2004) suggest intersectionality theory as a framework for understanding the positions of women in a historical, political, and social context through gender, race, and class. Skeggs (1997) examined gender and class through intersectionality in her multi-year study on working class women in the UK. Skeggs, critiquing the negative social construction of working class women, writes, 'Working-class women, especially (potential) mothers, are both the problem and the solution to national ills. They can be used and they can be blamed' (Skeggs, 1997:48). Working class single mothers have often been used as scapegoats on whom to lay blame for all sorts of social problems from crime to economic issues.

Their perceived reliance on government programmes often makes them seem to be deserving targets of public scorn. Yet, a study by Brady and Burroway (2012) examining the prevalence of poverty among single mother families in 18 affluent, Western nations found that countries with more generous and comprehensive government assistance programs greatly reduced the percentage of single mother families living in poverty. As Brady and Burroway clarified (2012:738):

Although policy and demographic debates often focus on altering the behavior or characteristics of single mothers (e.g., encouraging education, employment, having fewer children, and marriage), welfare universalism could be an even more effective anti-poverty strategy.

The poverty experienced by many single mother families is a systemic issue and cannot be alleviated by writing policies that simply 'encourage' single mothers to get married.

The sense of belonging and worthiness, discussed earlier, shapes the university experience of working class students (Evans, 2010; Leese, 2010; Mangan, Hughes, Davies, and Slack, 2010; Reay, Davies, David, and Ball, 2001). A UK government report in 2012 found that social class not only plays a significant role in whether or not a student advances into higher education, but, if they do, social class also impacts upon which university the student is likely to attend (Milburn, 2012:4):

The most advantaged 20% of young people are still seven times more likely to attend the most selective universities than the 40% most disadvantaged. Access to university remains inequitable. There is a strong correlation between social class and the likelihood of going to university generally and to the top universities particularly. Four private schools and one college get more of their students into Oxbridge than the combined efforts of 2,000 state schools and colleges.

This finding is echoed in research by Reay (2015:19) who explained that 'In 2012, private school pupils accounted for 7 per cent of British children ... and 42.5 per cent of the new Oxford intake'. Educational opportunities are determined by access to money and privilege and are not based on academic aptitude.

As Reay declared (2015:20): 'Elite universities are not just central in social class reproduction; they are also institutionally racist'. The intersections of race and ethnicity, social class, and gender impact upon the experiences of many BME

single mothers and their daughters. As Dickerson, Parham-Payne, and Everette wrote (2012:92):

The dominant discourse has centered on negative depictions of Black single mothers and their families rather than examining the historic cultural strengths that help to offset the detrimental complexities in their lives.

The children of single mothers often internalise the racist discourse through which their families are socially constructed. Children from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds are constantly exposed to messages that reinforce institutionalised racism through the media and in the classroom and 'they learn that their parents, and hence they, are excluded from positions of power within society' (Phoenix, 1997:63).

The race and ethnicity of the daughters of single mothers greatly shapes their identity and educational experience. As Reay reported (2015:20), 'BME students are more likely to come from a lower socio-economic background with 75 per cent of Britain's minority communities living in 88 of Britain's poorest wards'. Before they even consider university, BME women are faced with racist obstacles within the classroom. 'Research indicates that teachers tend to express lower expectations of the abilities and aspirations of minority ethnic pupils' (Archer and Francis, 2007:119). Echoing similar sentiments, Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick explained that, 'Black students expressed a clear and consistent view that racism in society might hold them back from achieving their aspirations' (2010:48). The intricate and insidious ways that racism negatively impacts upon the educational attainment of BME students complicates the experiences of those students who are also the daughters of single mothers.

Gender as a social construct is also a vital part of this research. As Butler has argued, as interpreted through Jagger (2008:35):

Gender and gender identities are constructed through relations of power that are inherent in normative constraints that involve the sedimentation of gender norms over time. This isn't a founding constitution however that takes place once and for all; it involves a continuous process of 'ritualized repetition'. Since it is through this process that bodily beings, in all their diversity, are produced and regulated the necessary repetition involved provides both the space and the possibility for change. What is required is a critical reworking of those gender norms.

In this research I explored the possibility that the negative associations that

working class and racialized status conveys may impact upon the daughters of single mothers as well. Exploring the impact of the social construction of single mother families on their daughters and the ways through which those daughters, in turn, develop their own identities once they enter university adds more than just talk about social mobility. The findings from this study provide the foundations on which real action can be built and positive change could be implemented.

### **First-generation students**

Both Davis (2010) and Thomas and Quinn (2007) discuss the challenges of creating a universal definition of first-generation student status. Questions they pose and discuss include: What about students whose parents earned university degrees in another country? What about parents who started but did not complete a university degree? What about parents who pursued education or training beyond secondary education but did not earn a bachelor's degree? Additionally, I would add to the questions: What about students whose parents are pursuing higher education at the same time as their children? For the purposes of this study, I am defining first-generation students as those whose parents have not completed a bachelor's degree (Davis, 2010). I am including students whose siblings may have gone to university before them, as Thomas and Quinn suggested (2007:50):

A student may not be 'first in the family' to go to university, if an older sibling has already entered, but they would still be of the first-generation.

Beyond a universal definition of first-generation students, the characteristics that are most likely to separate a first-generation student from a continuing-generation student are the levels of comfort, confidence, and competence the student has while navigating through university life (Davis, 2010). 'Parental education provides access to cultural capital, which is the knowledge, language, values, experiences and ways of doing things that belong to the dominant social group' (Thomas and Quinn, 2007:68).

First-generation students are more likely to be from low-income households (Gardner and Holley, 2011). They are less likely to persist through to degree completion compared with their continuing-generation counterparts (Davis, 2010). For first-generation students who do persist, they are likely to 'take

longer to complete their bachelor's degree and have lower degree aspirations when compared with their peers' (Gardner and Holley, 2011:77). Although first-generation students may be less likely to persist or achieve compared to their continuing generation peers, universities are unlikely to collect demographic data on students related to their family background, such as whether they were raised by a single parent or whether their parents earned a university degree, which makes it difficult to examine their experiences at a national level. The university experiences of the daughters of single mothers who are first-generation students have not been explored. This study fills that gap in the literature.

## **Widening Participation**

Widening access to and participation in higher education has been identified as a means by which to promote social mobility and to achieve social equality (Burke, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Layer, 2005; Williams, 1997). Research has shown that the positive effects of social equalisation benefit all members of society, such as a more robust economy, lower crime rates, greater overall physical and mental health, longer life expectancy, and higher levels of happiness (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). In 2010, the Office of Deputy Prime Minister in the United Kingdom issued a press release stating (Cabinet Office, 2010):

In the UK, a child's future is still substantially driven by their parents' occupation, income and education – rather than by the child's own talent, ability and effort.

The same press release included a quote from the then Deputy Prime Minister:

I am acutely aware that it is very much easier to declare political support for social mobility than it is to improve it. If social mobility were improved every time a politician made a speech about it, we'd be living in a nirvana of opportunity (Cabinet Office, 2010).

Indeed, there is certainly a difference between declaring support for social mobility and actually taking action towards a more equal society, such as through policy changes and advocating for concrete measures to lessen the divide between the wealthiest and poorest families. A report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) titled 'In It Together: Why Less Inequality Benefits All' (OECD, 2015b) found that, among the nations included in the study,



women were earning 15 percent less than men and that, in order to achieve more equal societies (pg. 16):

Governments need to pursue policies to eliminate the unequal treatment of men and women in the labour market and to remove barriers to female employment and career progression. This includes measures for increasing the earnings potential of women on low salaries and to address the glass ceiling.

In the UK, the average income for the wealthiest 10 percent of the population is nearly 10 times that of the poorest 10 percent (OECD, 2015a). The income of the poorest 10 percent fell by two percent between 2005 and 2011, contributing further to the widening wealth gap (OECD, 2015a). 'The level of income inequality among the total population in the United Kingdom has been well above the OECD average in the last three decades' (OECD, 2015a). Another OECD study found that (Ramesh, 2013):

Out of 24 nations, young adults in England (aged 16-24) rank 22nd for literacy and 21st for numeracy. ... England is among a handful of nations where social background determines reading skills. ... The children of parents with low levels of education in England have 'significantly lower proficiency than those whose parents have higher levels of education'.

Social class should not be the determining factor for a student's literacy and numeracy skills in a developed, wealthy nation.

Many of the existing widening participation policies are primarily focused on *access to* higher education and not on *participation within* higher education, including student achievement, retention, and persistence, after students enter university (Kettley, 2007; Burke, 2002; Lewis, 2002). In addition to access and participation, what does higher education offer students who complete their degree? As Giroux (2002:445) wrote:

For many young people caught in the margins of poverty, low-paying jobs, and the casualties of the recession, the potential costs of higher education, regardless of its status or availability, will dissuade them from even thinking about the possibilities of going to [university].

Why should a working class student choose to go to university if what they imagine at the end of their degree is a mountain of debt and limited job prospects? In order to achieve the primary objective of widening participation, to include and engage more students in higher education who have been historically under-represented, research in the field must continue to address the social inequality

perpetuated by the gap in both educational access *and* attainment. Examining student retention and persistence through to degree completion requires a greater understanding of the university experiences of students who are less likely to attend university. This study is designed to explore those critical issues for a particular population of students, the daughters of single mothers who are first-generation university students.

## **Neoliberalism in higher education**

For decades, the advancement of the neoliberal agenda has turned higher education institutions into factories focused on capitalist ideals, where greater value is placed on profits than on people. As Giroux (2014:56) wrote:

Delivering improved employability has reshaped the connection between knowledge and power while rendering faculty and students as professional entrepreneurs and budding customers. The notion of the university as a center of critique and a vital democratic public sphere that cultivates the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for the production of a democratic polity is giving way to a view of the university as a marketing machine essential to the production of neoliberal subjects.

Under the influence of neoliberalism, higher education institutions have become corporations where the knowledge economy is marketised and privatised (Walker, 2010). Knowledge becomes merely a commodity to be made as cheaply as possible (through casual, part-time, and sometimes zero-hour contracts for teaching faculty, for example) and sold to the highest bidder (as evidenced by increasing student fees). Students are constructed as both the customer/consumer within the neoliberal knowledge economy as well as the product, allowing universities to capitalise on the 'employability' of their graduates. Within the neoliberal frame, underrepresented students become an unwelcomed nuisance, as Naidoo (2010:74) explained:

The new managerialist and marketized frameworks adopted within neoliberal paradigms are likely to erode the potential of higher education to contribute to equity. ... Students from non-traditional constituencies are viewed by elite universities to be time- and resource-intensive. Such students are therefore perceived to threaten institutional arrangements.

As I discussed in Chapter One, underrepresented students, like me, are viewed as bastardising the academy, polluting the pristine academic excellence that supposedly exists when the pursuit of elitism prevails over the pursuit of equality

(Burke, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Morley, 1997). The continued exclusion of underrepresented students from full citizenship within the academy, whether they are excluded from accessing higher education or excluded from full participation within higher education, is maintained through neoliberal language that gives the illusion that any student, regardless of background or identity, has equal access to 'success', if only she is 'aspirational' enough or 'resilient' enough. This language allows higher education to avoid taking responsibility for the elitism and systemic inequality that continues to deepen and fester. Instead, the finger can be pointed to individual students for failing to 'persist'. Yet, as Naidoo (2010:84) stated, 'there is at present a lack of evidence to support the assumption that an unregulated global market will lead to the development of high quality higher education'. What neoliberalism in higher education has created, however, is a wider social divide. As Walker (2010:236) suggests: 'The time seems overdue for the rebalancing of the goals of university education away from an unfettered marketization in which profitability concerns constrain genuinely educational purposes'. This study challenges the neoliberal values and principles that render underrepresented students, like my participants and like me, illegitimate within the academy.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the literature relevant to this study. By exploring the topics surrounding my research topic, I have provided the historical, social, and political context in which my research takes place. In order to establish and position the original contribution I am making to knowledge through my research, I must first explore the academic contributions already made. Within this literature review, I have explored single mother families, the social construction of motherhood and of single mothers, the educational attainment of the daughters of single mothers, identity and intersectionality, first-generation students and the Widening Participation agenda, and damage done through neoliberalism in higher education. In the next chapter, I discuss how I position my research methodologically, including philosophically, theoretically, conceptually, and ethically. I explicate my methods of data collection and analysis.

## **Chapter Four: Weaving the tapestry of methodology**

If the purpose of research is to contribute new knowledge, then I must first write about knowledge itself. Flyvbjerg (2001:9), asked: 'What is knowledge?; What can we know?; Under what conditions can we know that we know?' Building on Flyvbjerg's questions, the next important question for any researcher is: How can new knowledge be created? It is through the exploration and answering of these questions that a researcher's methodology is revealed and shaped.

Every facet of my research is feminist and unapologetically political and it is from this position that I build the foundation of my research; the place from which I create new knowledge. As Harding wrote (1991:127):

Feminist politics is not just a tolerable companion of feminist research but a necessary condition for generating less partial and perverse descriptions and explanations.

Revealing and addressing social justice issues and inequalities can and should be a part of feminist social science research. As Denzin suggested (2000:261):

The next moment in qualitative inquiry will be one at which the practices of qualitative research finally move, without hesitation or encumbrance, from the personal to the political.

Recognising, scrutinising, and criticising patterns of unequal power provides me with the opportunity to potentially disrupt and play an active part in eventually dismantling those patterns. Having a social justice agenda, from which I identify inequalities and seek to address them through research, does not negate my ability to be academically rigorous.

In this chapter, I will weave together the tapestry of my methodological framework. Throughout my thesis, I am using headings and subheadings to make my writing more accessible to the reader. They are not meant to indicate distinct delineations between one topic and another. I do not consider each part separable from the whole, but a thread within that tapestry, giving strength and meaning together. I recognise, for example, that ontology and epistemology are intertwined, not separate and unrelated. Similarly, the location of a subheading and topic within

my chapters does not indicate that the topic is of lesser importance than those before it. For example, while I write about my philosophical framework before my ethical framework, this is not meant to distinguish my ethical approach to research as less important. On the contrary, each part creates the whole; each thread in the tapestry is as important as any other. They each provide strength and are part of the artistry of knowledge creation that I present to you.

This chapter is separated into two major sections: Methodology Part I: Frameworks, Foundations, and Principles and Methodology Part II: Research Design in Practice. In Part I, I begin by discussing my understandings of knowledge and power, my philosophical framework, and my ontological and epistemological positionings. Next, I explicate my theoretical and conceptual framework. Following that, I write about the philosophical and theoretical tensions within my methodological frameworks. I then write about my approaches to reflexivity and positionality, objectivity and emotion, academic writing style, and my authorial voice. Lastly, I engage in a discussion of my ethical considerations. In Part II of this chapter, I cover my participant recruitment, methods of data collection, methods of data analysis, and demographics and information about my participants.

## **Methodology part I: Frameworks, foundations, and principles**

### **Methodological frameworks**

My ontological and epistemological positionings have an impact on me as a researcher and on the research I conduct. Declaring and clarifying the ways I position my research determined how I conducted my study, how I analysed and interpreted my findings, and how my findings will be understood in the larger academic discussion.

#### ***Knowledge and power***

In order to talk about my philosophical understandings of knowledge and existence, I must begin by troubling the structures of power and privilege that impact the creation of and understanding of knowledge itself. Halberstam wrote (2011:10):

We may want new rationales for knowledge production. ... We may, ultimately, want more undisciplined knowledge, more questions and fewer answers. Disciplines qualify and disqualify, legitimate and delegitimate,

reward and punish; most important, they statically reproduce themselves and inhibit dissent.

I believe it is well within my feminist postmodern perspective to trouble the notion that appearing to have all of the answers and speaking with absolute certainty is proof of my grasp of knowledge or my ability to contribute new knowledge through my research. Aligned with my feminist and political positionings, I am especially passionate about exploring questions related to knowledge and power within academia:

- Whose voices, experiences, contributions, and knowledge are valued and legitimised under the patriarchal power structures within academia?
- Who has the power to create new knowledge? Who is seen as 'legitimate' as a researcher or knowledge creator?
- Who is seen as 'legitimate' as a research participant or a knowledge contributor?
- Who is seen as 'legitimate' as a student or knowledge receiver?
- Who is seen as 'legitimate' as a teacher or knowledge conveyor?

The search for answers to these questions deeply influence me as researcher, as an activist, as a student, and as a teacher. These same questions have been asked by feminist scholars for decades. de Beauvoir, who wrote *The Second Sex* in 1952, explained that the 'Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth' (1989:143). I would add that those with power position their views of the world not only as absolute truth, but also as neutral or the norm against which other views are seen as inferior, strange, untrustworthy. Echoing de Beauvoir's understanding of knowledge forward through feminist history, Harding (1991:109) asked:

Who can be subjects, agents, of socially legitimated knowledge? (Only men in the dominant races and classes?) What kinds of tests must beliefs pass in order to be legitimated as knowledge? (Only tests against the dominant group's experiences and observations? Only tests against what men in the ruling groups tend to think of as reliable experience and observation?) What kinds of things can be known? Can 'historical truths', socially situated truths, count as knowledge?

Western notions of legitimacy within the knowledge community allows for the views of dominant groups (including, but not limited to, the views of men, white people, middle and upper class people, heterosexuals, able bodied people, non-immigrants, and people in married families) to be given more credibility than

those who occupy one or more marginalised identity category. Continuing on within feminist inquiry, Hey (2006b:296) wrote, 'Who grants or withholds authority, and what is validated as legitimate knowledge is an important and contested question' within academia and within academic writing. Similarly, Burke (2012:146) asked:

Who is seen as worthy of HE (higher education) access and to what forms of HE? ... Who is associated with 'knowledge' and who with 'skill'? Who is able to participate in producing knowledge and in what contexts?

These questions impact upon me as a researcher and they impact upon my participants and their experiences of higher education as well.

Legitimacy in higher education is judged in many ways, perhaps especially through the ways the student communicates within the academy. Spoken word performer and American undergraduate, working class, BME student Antonia George wrote poetry about the abyss between the elitist language of academia and the lived experiences of the working class. Through her writing, she challenged the inaccessible language of the ivory tower and the power through which academia creates knowledge about, but without, the people directly impacted by systems of exclusion and oppression (Moawad, 2015):

using language created by those up there to solve the problems of them  
down here  
because fuck systems of oppression, people out here trying to dismantle  
this light bill  
deconstruct these food stamps  
and be an ally to landlord coming with an eviction notice

...

The real world will remain at war with the language academia has created  
to make exploitation more palatable  
Because these words ain't no get out of jail free card  
Ain't no lottery ticket  
Ain't no promise of a better life  
Ain't no currency to be turned in for food, shelter, water  
These words  
ain't  
no saving grace

Academia has long been a space in which knowledge, language, and discourse have been used as a weapon to control, exclude, and harm marginalised and underrepresented groups. Traditionally, academic writing has been criticised for being overly verbose and jargon-filled, a pompous spectacle of vapid uniformity. As

Tang and John wrote (1999:S23), 'Academic writing has traditionally been thought of as a convention-bound monolithic entity that involves distant, convoluted and impersonal prose'. In a tongue-in-cheek essay in 1967 titled 'A brief lexicon of jargon: For those who want to speak and write verbosely and vaguely', Redfern wrote (1967:602):

Practice [writing jargon] steadily, always keeping in mind that the fundamentals of jargon – verbosity and needless vagueness – are best adorned by pretentiousness. ... Eventually you can produce sentences which mean anything or possibly nothing.

Decades and generations later, the joke persists because academic writing is still a space where plain speech is equated with lower levels of intelligence. Standing wrote (1998:192):

Language acts as a barrier, a way to reinforce inequalities of gender, class, and race – the denial of access to the 'correct way' to speak creates hierarchies of knowledge.

Writing within academia becomes a practice of exclusion and differentiation between us and them, between those who belong and those who do not, between the legitimate and the illegitimate. Burke wrote, with regard to academic writing as a space for exclusion (2008:200):

Writing is relational; authorial subjects are constructed around notions of 'voice', which are located in a wider politics of identity and knowledge. Writers are socially situated subjects and the meanings they produce through their writing are constituted through the contested and multiple discourses at play in different social fields. This raises important epistemological and ontological questions about the processes of writing. What counts as 'knowledge' in different higher education contexts? Who can be recognised as a legitimate 'knower'?

The performance of 'legitimate' academic engagement, whether verbally in the classroom or written for assessment, is repeated and passed down generation after generation, maintaining power with the dominant group, becoming ever more disconnected from the 'real world' and the people who exist in that world, including many underrepresented students and many research participants.

I designed my research with questions of legitimacy at the centre. The methodological decisions I have made relate back to the ways academic knowledge and writing practices have been exclusionary. My research is meant to challenge the unequal ways students experience higher education and that has informed the



ways I have collected, analysed, and written about my data throughout this process.

***Ontology: Transactional and subjectivist***

From a basic definition, ontology is the study of being or the nature of existence (Dale, 2002). My ontological positioning addresses the question: 'What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:108). The ontological perspective through which I approach my research is feminist transactional and subjectivist, which explains that we cannot separate ourselves from our understanding of existence (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Complete objectivity is not possible because our perceptions of reality and of existence are based on our unique experiences and identity and are situated within the context of the time period and place in which we exist (Letherby, Scott, and Williams, 2013:6).

Taking a transactional/subjectivist ontological position allows me to be reflexive throughout the research process (my understandings of and approaches to reflexivity are explicated later in this chapter). There are no assertions of objectivity since objectivity does not exist in any social science research. Writing provocatively, by admission, about the subject of researchers who claim to be fully objective, Simpson (2000:163) wrote:

Pretensions to objective and disinterested knowledge do not then appear fundamentally different from the claims of previous intellectual communities governed by shamans, sorcerers, and priests.

Similarly, as Rose (1997:305) explicates, it is dishonest to 'pretend to be an all-seeing and all-knowing researcher'. I am not an omniscient researcher; I cannot make claims to absolute truths and pure objectivity because neither exists within social science research.

Explaining transactional and subjectivist as a philosophical approach to research, Guba and Lincoln (1994:110) wrote:

The investigator and the investigated object are assumed to be interactively linked, with the values of the investigator (and of situated 'others') inevitably influencing inquiry. ... This posture effectively challenges the traditional distinction between ontology and epistemology.

Since the basis for a transactional and subjectivist view of existence is rooted in the belief that reality is situated within a particular historical and social context (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), it makes sense that identifying with this ontological understanding would also inform and be intertwined with my epistemological position and what can be known about existence. I agree with Stanley and Wise (1993:192) who wrote about feminist ontology as the heart of feminist epistemology, in other words understanding that being or the nature of existence is at the heart of any study of knowledge:

Feminist epistemology rooted ... in a feminist ontology; that is, a feminism rooted in the acknowledgement that all social knowledge is generated as a part and a product of human social experience. ... For us, the relationship between feminist epistemology and feminist ontology is one which positions ontology as the foundation: being or ontology is the seat of experience and thus of theory and knowledge. Nothing else is possible: there is no way of moving 'outside' experientially derived understandings/theories, whether derived from so-called first-, second- or third-hand knowledges of the social world; and nothing exists other than social life, our places within it and our understandings of all this.

Positioning my research within a feminist transactional and subjectivist ontology acknowledges that my participants and I understand our world through experience. I cannot know or interpret my research by looking through anyone else's eyes or seeing the world through anyone else's experiences or identities.

### ***Epistemology: Postmodernism and poststructuralism***

Woven with ontology, epistemology is the nature or study of knowledge and what can be known (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Maynard and Purvis, 1994). My epistemological positioning asks and answers the question: 'What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:108). In harmony with my ontological positioning, the epistemological positioning that best suits the way I understand existence and knowledge and thus shapes the lenses through which I view the world and my research within that world is feminist postmodernism and poststructuralism.

Postmodernism rejects the notion that there are universal narratives or definitive and fixed truths (Hesse-Bieber and Leavy, 2007; Thornham, 2005). 'Feminist postmodernism is very attentive to how totalizing theories have been

complicit in the marginalization of women and other minorities, as well as the essentializing of difference' (Hesse-Biber and Leavey, 2007:92). Postmodernists posit that social reality is constructed to the benefit of those with power and privilege (Ahmed, 1998). As Hawkesworth (1989:554) discussed:

Postmodernist discourses celebrate the human capacity to misunderstand, to universalize the particular and the idiosyncratic, to privilege the ethnocentric, and to conflate truth with those prejudices that advantage the knower. Postmodernist insights counsel that Truth be abandoned because it is a hegemonic and, hence, destructive illusion.

My research is especially focused on challenging hegemonic 'truths' about single mothers and their families, perpetuated by those with power for their benefit. Similar to postmodern notions of social reality, England (1994:242) stated that, 'Feminism and poststructuralism have opened up geography to voices other than those of white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual men'. While she was focusing on her specific field of study, geography, her statement rings true for the rest of the social sciences. Similarly, Simpson (2000:166) suggests:

If scholarly experts work within academic language-games or practices, then anyone who cannot participate in particular inquiries cannot gain their knowledge, which thus lacks universality. ... Recognizing such knowledge leads to suspicion that universities have preferred ways of knowing that manifest the biases of persons who are not female, not black, not handicapped, and not 'different'. Universities have thus falsely pretended to universality and thereby failed to serve learning impartially.

Knowledge is relative and fluid, based on and interpreted through individual experiences and perspectives (Ahmed, 1998). At the heart of postmodernism is a view of the social world as in flux, ever-changing, undefinable (Ahmed, 1998).

As Wexler (2001:26) discussed:

The bedrock principle of postmodernism is subjectivity, the idea that the world looks different depending where you stand, both literally and figuratively. The fancy name for this is positionality; a variety of things – race, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, educational level, experiences – combine to produce your positionality. Your positionality affects your perceptions of the world and, at the same time, your perceptions of the world affect your positionality.

Postmodernists understand that identities are intersectional and social realities are multifaceted; they are more complex than the binaries accepted by modernism (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007). Hawkesworth (1989:539) suggested that:

All dichotomies - objective/subjective, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, culture/nature-are a product of the basic male/female hierarchy that is central to patriarchal thought and society.

Rejecting false binaries and deceptive dichotomies opens up the opportunity to understand and create knowledge about the social world that recognises depth, complexity, nuance. Framing research through feminist postmodernism allows me to make meaning beyond us and them, black and white, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, norm and 'Other'.

Beyond resisting dichotomous thinking, postmodernism provides entirely new ways of conceptualizing long taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of the subject, the knower, and knowledge (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007:88).

As an epistemological framework, feminist postmodernism can provide voices for the silenced, the marginalised, and the oppressed that non-inclusive frameworks have ignored or relegated to the 'Other' category.

Postmodernists focus on difference and conflict where competing interpretations of reality are inevitable. Thus, the researcher's task is not to discover the 'true' interpretation, for none exists; instead, the challenge is to uncover the multiple voices at work in society that have been silenced (Tierney, 1994:99).

Poststructuralism provides me with the tools to examine the power of dominant discourses and structures and the false universal truths created by and within that power. Williams wrote (2005:110) 'Power operates on us and fixes the patterns we can move in. The role of ... poststructuralism is to loosen the grip of that power'. I am positioning my research within a postmodernist/ poststructuralist framework so that I can interrogate the power that impacts upon the higher education experiences of the daughters of single mothers and, hopefully, 'loosen the grip of that power', as Williams put it. Postmodernism and Poststructuralism are often discussed together or even used interchangeably (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007; Assiter, 1996). Humes and Bryce (2003:186) assert that both postmodernist and poststructuralist researchers:

Have demonstrated the serious limitations of narrow empirical approaches to educational enquiry and have reconnected educational research with broad sociological and philosophical debates about knowledge and power.

My postmodernist/ poststructuralist positioning allows me to keep coming back to legitimacy within academia – what is legitimated as knowledge and who has the power to be knowledgeable or to create knowledge? – the questions that resonate throughout my research. Assiter suggests that, just like postmodernists,

Poststructuralists not only deny the possibility of objective knowledge of an independently existing real world, but they stress the potentially manipulative powers of ‘discourses’ which have attained the status of knowledge (1996:3).

She also suggested that ‘poststructuralism has been described as the discourse of postmodernity’. (Assiter, 1996:4). However, poststructuralism is not exactly postmodernism and vice versa; there are distinctions between them.

Poststructuralism provides the tools with which to examine the power of dominant discourses and structures and the false universal truths created by and within that power. Hammersley (1995:14) states that poststructuralism:

Denies the possibility of any kind of universally valid knowledge of the kind proposed by advocates of the scientific model. It insists not just on the relativity of all knowledge claims but also that knowledge is a product of desire or power. ... Any claim on the part of researchers to be in pursuit of the truth, or to be in possession of knowledge, is treated by poststructuralists as hiding the work of other interests.

Knowledge is relative and contextual and there is no one universal truth. My research offers insight into the specific lives of my participants and, while some common themes emerge from their different experiences, there is not simply one truth to be found.

## **Theoretical and conceptual frameworks**

My research examines the intersectionalities of gender, socio-economic class, and family status as they impact upon the identity of and experiences of the daughters of single mothers who are first-generation students during their university years using a theoretical and conceptual framework that includes feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and the concept of social exclusion. My participants represent a diversity of age, class, sexual identities, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. In order to do justice to their stories within my research, I must begin with a strong theoretical framework for understanding their unique university experiences. Combining with the existing threads of my ontological and

epistemological positionings, my theoretical and conceptual frameworks provide more colour and depth to the tapestry that is my research methodology. It is within that methodological framework that I can question and challenge the assumptions produced and promoted through patriarchal discourses.

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks upon which my doctoral study is built include feminist theory (Butler, 2004; hooks, 2000), intersectionality theory (Lutz, Herrera Vivar, and Supik, 2011; Brah and Phoenix, 2004), and the concept of social exclusion (Byrne 2005; Jordan, 1996). My research is positioned by and developed through my theoretical and conceptual frameworks, woven together with my philosophical framework to strengthen my research.

### ***Feminist theory***

Using feminist theory allows me to examine the roles that gender and sexism play both in the social construction of single mother families and in the identity of and experiences of the daughters as they navigate university life. The best definition I've found for feminism, and the one that ideally suits my research, is by hooks (2000:28):

Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives.

The social world is constructed through and situated by gender relations. 'Feminist research, then, can offer different interpretations of social interactions and, potentially, provide possibilities for change ... in higher education' (Ropers-Huilman and Winters, 2011:668). For this research, I have chosen to especially focus on the concept of misrecognition (Burke, 2013; Burke, 2012; McLaughlin, Phillimore, and Richardson, 2011; Bauman, 2004; Muñoz, 1999; Butler, 1997; Butler, 1993) and on Judith Butler's examination of the construction of gender norms (Butler, 2004). As Hey discussed (2006a:453), examining those norms within the educational setting and the ways the dominant discourses and dominant structures reinforce binaries of who does and who does not belong:

Clearly a feminist poststructuralist take on educational subjectivities refracts Butler's notions of performativity, citationality and performative agency, but it also renders how this complex 'identity work' is undertaken in the material and discursive practices of schooling, the self and the other.

My response to the Butlerian performative along with others has been to repay attention to this idea of mutability by more firmly linking the social processes of subjective re/formation to the altering landscapes of the self made possible within communities within which we come to understand our 'place'.

For me, reading theory often feels like trying to appreciate poetry written in a language that is not my own. I want so desperately to fully comprehend the writing, but even with translations and interpretations available, I still feel like I am missing something at the heart of theoretical writing. I imagine it is like having the desire to read *The Odyssey* in the original ancient Greek but not the skill set to do so. Must theoretical writing be inaccessible so often? Is it feminist to write in a way that is only comprehensible by the few and not the many? In discussing her research with single mothers, Standing wrote (1998:192):

The women expressed ideas and concepts in plain language much more effectively (and powerfully) than complex theoretical explanations would have done. Yet the process of producing an academic piece of work demanded that I took the women's words and theorized from them, juxtaposing their language with that of the academy. In this way, the women's knowledge becomes invalidated.

I want my academic writing to be as accessible as possible. I have discussed many of the academic terms I have used within my Literature Review and within this Methodology chapter. I have interwoven academic discourse with the kind of plain speech, visual language I learned to use from growing up in my working class family, where stories are shared to show our roots, to build connections, to provide comfort and support, to seek validation, and to encourage each other. Our stories, like our laughter, are loud. We are not afraid of hard truths or strong emotions and I hope my writing reflects that part of who I am.

### ***Intersectionality theory***

As a key part of feminist theory, I frame my research with intersectionality theory, which helps me to conceptualise the complexity of identity formation and social positioning. My participants and I understand and experience the world differently because we have different identities, different life histories, face different challenges, and have differing levels of access to power and privilege. While we may share some identity categories, as we are all women, all daughters of single mothers, and all first-generation university students, our identities and lives

are unique to each of us individually. We are not one homogenous group. This research is framed by intersectionality theory as a recognition of the different and unique ways each single mother and her daughter may be socially constructed and experience oppressions and/or opportunities depending on the different identity categories they occupy or powers and privileges to which they do or do not have access.

Popular feminist blogger Dzodan (2011) posted an essay with a title that has become a battle cry among young feminists: 'My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit!' Her writing problematized the focus within many feminist organisations, and by many individual feminists, on the experience of white, middle class, heterosexual, Western women's experiences as if they provided a basis for understanding universal truths about women's lives worldwide. Speaking from her own experiences as a Latina immigrant from South America, Dzodan (2011) seems to draw a line in the sand with her declaration, not just for her own feminism as the phrase suggests, but for feminism as a whole and I completely agree. For me, there is no feminism without recognition of intersectionality. As Butler wrote (1990:194):

The feminist 'we' is always and only a phantasmatic construction, one that has its purposes, but which denies the internal complexity and indeterminacy of the term and constitutes itself only through the exclusion of some part of the constituency that it simultaneously seeks to represent.

It is fundamental to recognise that the ways that identity categories and lived experiences intersect and intertwine with each other influence how a person navigates within the world, is treated by others, understands themselves, and experiences the world. My understandings of myself and of the world are shaped by my experiences and my identities and the same is true for my research participants.

### ***Social exclusion***

Aligned within feminist theory and intersectionality theory, this study is viewed through the lens of social exclusion, which posits that groups with the most power and privilege maintain that power through systematic exclusion and oppression of marginalised groups (Byrne, 2005; Jordan, 1996). People and groups



in positions of power and privilege contribute to 'shaping the character of economic and social arrangements ... to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of others' (Byrne, 2005:2). Women and people of racial and ethnic minority backgrounds have been and continue to be the most marginalised and disadvantaged by social exclusion (Jordan, 1996). The popular, though erroneous, belief is that the solution to systemic social exclusion is to first lay blame on the individuals who are excluded and then to offer programmes that supposedly fix their shortcomings (Byrne, 2005). 'Exclusion is not a property of individuals or even of social spaces. Rather it is a necessary and inherent characteristic of an unequal post-industrial capitalism' (Byrne, 2005:128). As Byrne (2005) discussed, a primary issue around addressing social exclusion is examining the role of those with power to exclude rather than offering, as remedy, ways to adjust the characteristics of excluded groups of people to be more like the dominant group so as to be acceptable. With relation to this study, addressing the social exclusion of single mother families cannot be done by suggesting that the solution is that they adhere to the nuclear family norm.

Understanding the educational experiences of the daughters of single mothers requires a theoretical and conceptual framework that accounts for those systemic disadvantages through exclusion. Byrne (2005:1) writes:

Note that the term 'social exclusion' is inherently dynamic: exclusion happens in time, in a time of history, and 'determines' the lives of the individuals and collectivities who are excluded and of those individuals and collectivities who are not. Note also that although the term is about the character of the social system and about the dynamic development of social structures, at the same time it has implications for agency.

Discussing the historical origins of social exclusion, Byrne illuminates nineteenth-century laws informed by religious and social beliefs that the poor 'deserve everything they get because [their poverty] reflects their sinful and depraved state' (2005:21). Similar laws led to the imprisonment of unwed mothers in the United Kingdom, as discussed in Chapter One.

Also discussed in Chapter One, notions of fairness have not changed significantly over the centuries, leading to the development of the Belief in a Just World (BJW) theory in psychological and sociological studies and writings (Lerner,

1980). Also referred to as the Just World Fallacy, as the Just World Hypothesis, or as simply the Just World Theory, the premise is that

In a just world, everybody gets what he or she deserves and actions are rewarded with positive outcomes if enough time and effort are put into achieving their goals. Such world's perception foundation enables individuals to cope with their environment as if it were stable and predictable (Pietraszkiewicz, 2013:188).

When faced with possible proof that the world is not inherently just, people are more likely to engage in victim blaming as way of coping without having to give up their Belief in a Just World. Connecting with the concept of social exclusion, people who benefit from systemic inequalities believe they are more deserving of their privileges, as if they are rightfully and justly earned. Conversely, they believe that those who are socially excluded are equally deserving of their lot in life (Pietraszkiewicz, 2013). The members of the group contributing to the oppression of another group are complicit in the continuance of systemic inequalities because they believe, they are certain, they know that those who are unfairly disadvantaged by that system are deserving of their lot in life (Lerner, 1980; Rubin and Peplau, 1975; Lerner and Miller, 1978).

Those with more power and privilege are more likely to be complicit in the continuance of systemic inequalities because of their belief in a just world, leading them to find fault in those who are unfairly disadvantaged by that system. (Bénabou and Tirole, 2006). Both Belief in a Just World theory and the concept of social exclusion provide a framework for understanding the continuation of inequality in higher education and the context in which my participants experience the world and experience academia.

### ***Philosophical and theoretical tensions***

I want to acknowledge that there exists tensions within my philosophical and theoretical frameworks. I have selected theories and theorists that may not be in perfect harmony with each other. Additionally, there exists the possibility of discord between the philosophical underpinnings of my research and the theories and theorists upon which I am drawing. While I recognise the tensions, I do not intend to offer a form of mediation within my writing to give the illusion of harmony. There are no resolutions for those tensions and for that I am neither

defensive nor apologetic. Life is messy and so too should social science research be, as a reflection of the discord and discomfort that comes from creating new knowledge and better understandings about the social world. Cook advocated for an openness and transparency with regards to the existence and purpose of messiness in the research process (2009:279):

That mess occurs in research appears to be generally accepted but is usually absent from published accounts. ... Mess tends to have connotations of being sloppy, of not being a good researcher. ... If descriptions of the processes of engaging with mess remain unreported in methodological accounts, its existence not acknowledged despite its endemic nature, its purpose would be lost to open debate and discussion. Staying hidden meant it would continue to be inappropriately characterised as negative and it would remain misunderstood and underutilised.

Where tensions and messiness exist, I see the possibility of productivity, of discussion, of growth.

Within my research, there are tensions and a messiness in positioning myself within both a poststructural ontology and a feminist ontology. As one of my peers asked when I gave a presentation on my research in progress: 'How deep is your poststructuralism?' While I reject the notion of universal or fixed 'truths', which fits with my poststructural understandings of existence, I do believe that structures of power exist through which inequalities are built and maintained for the benefit of the privileged few and to the detriment of the oppressed and marginalised, which fits with my feminist understandings of existence. So, to answer the question posed by my peer: the depth of my poststructuralism is not out in the infinite of space. It is not completely relativistic nor completely nihilistic. Instead it is a well from which I am drawing water to give the knowledge I create in this research life, not to drown it beneath the impossibility of extreme poststructuralism, where no structures exist and therefore nothing is real or knowable or valuable. I believe structures of power exist and that those structures impact upon the identities and experiences of my participants. I also believe that research has the ability and the responsibility to interrupt those structures of inequality. As Archer, Hutchings, and Leathwood articulate, it is in the italicised word 'and' that both tension and productivity is possible (2001:42):

Researchers share a general treatment of 'race', class, gender, sexuality and disability as socially constructed, fluid, shifting and non-discrete identities *and* hold a common awareness and commitment to addressing the

associated, very 'real', inequalities. And yet we continue to face an awkward tension between the 'theoretical paralysis' of knowing that we cannot achieve a 'view from everywhere'.

It is within that 'and' that progress and growth exist within social research that is both poststructural and feminist. Without the 'and' then poststructuralism becomes the unbreakable chains that continue to limit the possibilities of progress, change, and transformation.

## **Reflexivity, objectivity, and emotionality**

### ***Reflexivity and researcher positionality***

I am here. In my research and in my writing, I am here. Within my research practice and writing process, I have engaged in reflexivity in order to make known the views, partiality, and positions of power I hold as a researcher. Being present and visible through reflexive practices within my research and writing allows me to be open and honest about who I am and the impact I have on the research. I am choosing the threads and setting the loom. I am choosing the words and shaping the narrative. I am weaving the tapestry, telling the story, forging the path, leading the journey. To pretend I am not deeply embedded within and throughout this thesis is disingenuous at best and deceptive at worst. As Evans (2013:5) explained:

Reflexivity allows for the postmodern context: the acknowledgement of the researcher's place in the research; the subjective (rather than objective) stance; and relative and constructed knowledge. ... Reflexivity is iterative: we revisit material over again, unpick it, looking for underlying implicit meanings. Each visit increases our understanding and adds another layer or perspective to our material.

Reflexivity allows me and the reader to examine and understand the ways my views shape the entire research and writing process, from conception to completion by threading myself (my experiences, understandings, ways of knowing) throughout the thesis (Etherington, 2004; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Hertz, 1997). As Hyland proclaimed (2002:1092):

Academic writing, like all forms of communication, is an act of identity: it not only conveys disciplinary 'content' but also carries a representation of the writer.

Engaging in reflexivity is 'to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we

interpret our world' (Etherington, 2004:19). As the daughter of a single mother, I chose to focus my research on the university experience of students who are also the daughters of single mothers. I recognised the potential challenges of researching a population to which I belong, such as projection onto and over-identification with my participants and not allowing space for difference between my experiences and theirs. However, I have been purposeful and mindful in my approach so as to avoid those challenges. I believe that my experiences allowed me to develop my study and examine my data from an insider's perspective.

Ethically, it was important that I also examined my insider's perspective itself because my experience is uniquely mine. The fabric of identity is woven from many threads; 'nobody has exactly the same life' (Lawler, 2008:5). While I found some commonalities in the experiences of my research participants and my own, I have been reflexive in order to recognise the ways our lived experiences are also very different. This involved me examining and re-examining my positioning and my potential biases in my writing. It is important that I have present my participants' voices and lived experiences through my research in such a way that recognises differences, that challenges the discourses around family norms, and that does not re-enforce the negative and homogenous social construction of single mother families.

My understandings of myself and of the world are shaped by my experiences and my identity. I am the daughter of a low-income single mother. I have no memory of meeting my father, though there are pictures of him holding me as a baby and I am aware that he has served time in prison. My mother, my brother, and I survived a period of homelessness when I was young and my mother had to rely on support from the government during part of my childhood in order to make sure we had food to eat. Yet, I am aware that my experiences living below the poverty line in America, a wealthy, developed, Western nation, are incomparable to the poverty and class-based experiences of those in developing nations. I am the first in my extended family to complete a university degree. I am white and, as such, benefit from the powers and privileges that come with whiteness. While I may find that my social position and my identity are shaped by my working class roots, regardless of the social mobility that my education has and will provide me, I will never have to worry about or negotiate within my world

because of the colour of my skin. As a woman, I recognise the ways that gender has and continues to impact upon my and my mother's lives.

My identity, background, and experiences form the lenses through which I view my research. 'By using reflexivity in research we close the illusory gap between researcher and researched and between the knower and what is known' (Etherington, 2004:32). Who I am cannot be untied from the research I conduct nor am I capable of disconnecting from my research participants.

Research is an endeavour characterised by politics, power and emotion, and it is important to reflect on the implications of this. ... I do believe that the life experiences and identities of researchers are present at some level in all that we do and that it is important to acknowledge this (Letherby, Scott, and Williams, 2013:3).

I can endeavour to be as ethical as possible through the examination of my positions and biases using reflexivity in my research and my writing, but I believe that objectivity is impossible to achieve in social science research and I believe it is unethical to suggest differently.

In addition to rejecting claims to objectivity, to universal truths or to absolute knowledge, I also reject the notion of reflexive omniscience. Rose (1997:311) describes the 'goddess trick' or the feminist researcher fallacy of claiming an all-knowing reflexive position while simultaneously rejecting the all-knowing claims to objectivity and truth within positivist, patriarchal research frameworks known as the 'god trick'.

'Transparent reflexivity' ... depends on certain notions of agency (as conscious) and power (as context), and assumes that both are knowable. As a discourse, it produces feminist [researchers] who claim to know how power works, but who are also themselves powerful, able to see and know both themselves and the world in which they work.

I will perform neither the god trick nor the goddess trick within this research. However, I will endeavour to be as open in my reflexive practices as is possible given that I am not omniscient.

Power dynamics exist between the researcher and the researched as well as between the researcher and the reader (Etherington, 2004; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Skeggs, 2002).

The implications for authors who subscribe to the ideas of postmodernism ... are that in developing our texts we provide some sense of where we are as authors. We must collapse the hierarchical nature of our research

endeavors. In so doing, we reframe our assumptions about reality (Tierney, 1994:107).

In addition to recognising and reflecting upon the ways that my experiences and identity impact upon my research, it is important for me to examine my positions of power within the researcher/participant collaboration and with regards to the overall research project itself.

When we enter into relationships with our research participants it is inevitable that issues of power come into focus and require us constantly to scrutinize and interrogate our own positions, views, and behaviours, turning back onto ourselves the same scrupulous lens through which we examine the lives of our participants (Etherington, 2004:226).

The power I have is evidenced by the fact that I designed the research study, I chose the questions for the semi-structured interviews, I analysed the data to identify themes, and I chose which quotations to use within my findings. 'The ability to be reflexive via the experience of others is a privilege, a position of mobility and power, a mobilization of cultural resources' (Skeggs, 2002:361). I must acknowledge the power I hold and the privileges I am exercising by engaging in research. I have shaped the way the participant voices are heard and understood within the research and it is important that I reflect upon the complex power relations involved in the research process and continually critically interrogate the ways I respond to the interviews.

### ***Rejecting objectivity and embracing emotionality***

Historically, social science researchers have attempted to mimic natural scientific inquiry by adopting methodologies that presume the existence of objectivity, as if the researcher has the ability to view the research and the researched through entirely impersonal, neutral, unbiased lenses (Etherington, 2004; Adkins, 2002; England, 1994; Harding, 1991; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002:49) illuminated:

The supposed objectivity, neutrality and rationality of scientific method allow the production of patriarchal knowledge and work against knowledge of the realities of gender relations. ... A political commitment to research for women precludes claims to detachment or neutrality but does not preclude any claim to valid knowledge.

To admit that one's personal history, experiences, and identity produces biases that influence and shape one's research was, and, for some, still is, viewed as a sign of weakness that results in flawed, unreliable research (Etherington, 2004).

However, I agree with the many scholars who believe it is impossible to be completely unbiased or impartial in social science research and my choice to be reflexive and open in my own research enables me to be more explicit throughout the research process about the assumptions, values and identities I bring to the research questions and process (Etherington, 2004; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Adkins, 2002; Ivanič, 1998; England, 1994). Additionally, reflexivity allows me to examine and challenge my power and assumptions so that my interpretations of the findings in my data will have been openly and thoroughly scrutinised by me and by the reader.

I had an interesting discussion with a few of my PhD student peers about data. We discussed the question: What is data? I know that the data I collected for my research project includes semi-structured interviews and reflective writings from my participants. The interviews and their writings are their lived experiences and their thoughts and feelings. When do their life stories become data? Is it data before I collect it? Is it data only after I analyse and present it as findings? Is it still data if I do not use a particular piece of it within my published findings and presentations of my work? I cannot say that I have all of the answers for these questions, but I believe the data I have collected are always stories because they are the lived experiences of my participants, even if stories are not always data. As Lawler (2000:12) wrote:

We all tell stories about our lives, both to ourselves and to others; and it is through such stories that we make sense of our selves, of the world, and of our relationship to others. Stories, or narratives, are a means by which people make sense of, understand, and live their lives.

This research includes my stories and the stories of my participants. I am making meaning and creating new knowledge through these stories. As Wexler (2001:29) explained:

Embracing the principles of postmodernism allows us to do several things as writers of creative nonfiction. It allows us, on both a theoretical and practical level, to see the events we're writing about as refracted through a prism. And it allows us to see that even the most unreachable stories – the stories in which truth seems to purposely hide in the shadows – can be



written as nonfiction by focusing as much on interpretation as event. In fact, it is these very stories that most need to be written as nonfiction.

One of my peers suggested that qualitative research data is different from stories because it is collected within an ethical and methodological framework with structure and purpose. While I agree with this definition of what constitutes qualitative research data, I believe that data begins as a story and remains a story even after I have analysed and theorised and written it down. It was told to me and in this space I am retelling it to you, which makes it research data and story simultaneously. I do not understand the desire to classify the words of my participant as one or the other, data or story, when the words are clearly both.

While I conduct my research in as ethical a way as possible, I do not believe in the possibility of complete objectivity to the point of neutrality (Etherington, 2004; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Ivanič, 1998).

Feminist researchers value an analysis of their own positioning in research in large part because they question the ways in which objectivity has been traditionally constructed in research (Ropers-Huilman and Winters, 2011:681).

Feminist researchers have challenged the false binary within higher education that sets rationality in opposition to emotionality, suggesting that researchers must eliminate all emotions in order to prove their ability to be rational (Leathwood and Hey, 2009:432):

Boler (1999) ... shows how dominant discourses of emotions have been used to exclude and control. For our concerns here, she illustrates how emotions are intimately tied to the construction of knowledge and to education and reminds us of the long history of feminist critique of the reason/emotion binary.

Firstly, it is impossible to be emotion-free. My research is not a chemistry experiment and I am not a computer. Secondly, I am capable of being both rational and emotional at once. I need not choose to be one or the other. As Hey wrote (2006b:300):

I also endorse this turning *to* difficult emotions neither as individual pathology ... nor as merely collusive with confession but as forms of witness shaped *collectively*.

My research is focused on the lived experiences, emotions, and identities of human beings – complex, multi-faceted, and unique. Additionally, I, too, am one of those

human beings, just as complex, with my own set of experiences, identities, and emotions. As Stanley and Wise wrote (1993:193):

Within traditional epistemologies, emotions are perceived as disruptive and subversive of knowledge as a wild zone unamenable to reason and its scientific apparatus of investigation and control.

However, admitting the existence of human emotions as part of the human experience, and therefore part of the research process, does not negate the reliability of the research itself. Positioning my research within a feminist ontological and epistemological framework allows me to embrace rather than to:

Disparage emotion as a second-class (or worse) source of knowledge by treating it as an obfuscating layer between social reality and reasoned understanding. Instead it banishes the myth of the dispassionate and unemotional 'scientific observer'. ... In other words, it insists that emotion is vital to systematic knowledge about the social world ... and that any epistemology which fails to recognize this is deeply flawed (Stanley and Wise, 1993:193).

I reject the pursuit of objectivity. It is neither possible nor desirable within social science research. I embrace emotionality within my research. My ability to be rational in my analysis is not diminished by admitting that my participants and I are not machines. I am emotional without apology, capable of understanding myself and the social world without trying to hide or deny my humanity.

## **Writing style and authorial voice**

### ***Academic writing style***

For centuries, the practice of storytelling, oral and written, has preserved the history of humanity. I come from a family of storytellers. We tell stories to celebrate and entertain, to reminisce and remember, to share our history and ourselves. As Brown states in a popular Ted Talk (2010):

I'm a qualitative researcher. I collect stories; that's what I do. And maybe stories are just data with a soul. And maybe I'm just a storyteller.

I conduct qualitative research because there are some things about the human experience that cannot be quantified and enumerated. Stories allow for experiences to be understood, for meaning to be made, for progress to be sought in context. Numbers alone cannot create knowledge about the social world. Storytellers and qualitative researchers must first be caring listeners, open to fully

hearing someone else's story so that it can be retold and so that meaning can be made. I endeavour to be both a skilled and ethical researcher and an honest and strident storyteller by retelling the stories of my participants in a way that has the potential to create positive change.

Along with writing reflexively, I engage in creative nonfiction writing practices to illuminate my research process. As Evans (2013:10) explains, in defence of creativity in academic writing:

When connected with writing, the word creative is most often linked with the imagination, fiction, artistry or flights of fancy. None of which sits comfortably with academia. ... There is room for literary flourishes in the world of academic writing.

Writing in a style that conveys both creativity and academic rigour allows me to communicate my research process in a way that is open, honest, and, hopefully, engaging. As a first-generation student from a low income background, traditional modes of academic writing carries connotations of elitism and inaccessibility and seems to create an authoritative, detached relationship between the researcher and the reader. As Hyland (2002:1094) wrote:

The fact that we bring this sense of self to our acts of writing in the university can create an acute sense of dislocation and uncertainty. Academic writing is a major site in which social positionings are constructed. ... [Students] must speak with authority, and to do this they must use another's voice and another's code, weakening their affiliations to their home culture and discourses to adopt the values and language of their disciplinary ones. ... As a result, students often find their own experiences to be devalued and their literacy practices to be marginalized and regarded as failed attempts to approximate these dominant forms.

My writing is deliberately intended, stylistically, to break the boundary between us, as researcher and reader. I chose this style purposely because it feels more authentic to me and who I am. This writing style is intended to be more accessible through a sense of familiarity, as if we are engaged in a conversation or dialogue.

From a postmodern standpoint, texts demand a sense of self-reflexivity on the part of the reader. ... A text is a construction among multiple constituencies – subject, researcher, narrator, author, and, ultimately, reader (Tierney, 1994:106).

As much as I recognise my place within this research, you too should see yourself within these pages, dear reader. You are reading and interpreting the words I've written. You play an active role in the ways this research can be understood, in

how meaning is constructed, in the ways this research joins the larger academic conversation. Just like me, you are not a neutral, objective party within this research. You are not without your own set of responsibilities related to this research – to be reflexive about your powers, privileges, assumptions, and potential for bias; to be open to new ways of thinking about obstinate forms of oppression; to welcome new ideas about resistance and transformation.

I have often expressed my desire to write in an accessible way. I endeavour to use as little academic jargon as possible to make my point. I recognise the importance of using some of the jargon necessary to place my research and writing within the larger academic conversations. Yet, I make a conscious effort to try to choose my words carefully. It is a fundamental goal for me to write as accessibly as possible: if ever I am to be the scholar whom I have imagined myself to be, then my writing must be understandable and comprehensible by as wide and as varied an audience as possible. Standing, whose research focused on single mothers, wrote (1998:186):

It is a particular dilemma for feminist researchers researching groups of less powerful people – that by the ways in which we write, and represent their words to an academic audience, we may in fact reinforce and contribute to inequalities of power.

I recognise that there are limits to accessibility and that the research in which I am engaging and the field in which that research resides requires that I learn and use certain academic words and concepts. Otherwise, the new knowledge I hope to create may not become a part of the on-going academic conversations. Yet, as one who identifies as a first-generation student from a working class background and who engages in research focused on students who similarly identify, writing accessibly does not feel noble or novel, it feels vital. Accessibility feels like the heartbeat of my research, proof that I can give life and 'legitimacy' to the stories my participants have graciously shared with me.

I understand that my writing is not accessible to all readers, so the imagined reader for whom I write are my participants, who would have had some access to higher education and have some understanding of the academic discourses in the fields of education and sociology or would understand my writing with little additional reading required. As Mills suggested (2000:219):

To overcome the academic prose you have first to overcome the academic pose. ... But, you may ask, do we not sometimes need technical terms? Of course we do, but 'technical' does not necessarily mean difficult, and certainly it does not mean jargon.

I would add that jargon can be used but with definitions, context, and clarity provided by the writer to make the dialogue with the reader possible. This is why I have clarified many of the academic terms I have used within my Literature Review and this Methodology chapter to state as plainly as possible the jargon within my research writing. Most importantly, I would like my participants to see themselves and their stories honestly represented within my writing. For me, writing accessibly means choosing carefully when and how to use academic jargon. The ultimate question becomes: am I using a specific word because I must in order to be fully understood or because I want to boost my ego? Perhaps, beyond ego-boosting, I should be asking: am I using jargon as a mask to cover my insecurities and self-doubts about whether I am good enough or worthy or legitimate enough to be a member of the scholarly community?

I also recognise that writing in a more familiar style does not lessen the powers I hold as a researcher to analyse, interpret, and present my participants' experiences. My power to guide the story of this research from conception to completion remains ever present. I do not believe that my style of writing detracts from my ability to be academically rigorous and to present and discuss my research.

### ***Authorial voice***

Academic writing has traditionally been a space of rigid conformity. Dominant notions of what makes particular kinds of writing more legitimate or credible over others have become norms. Hollow, lifeless, jargon-filled pages of third person words, falsely promising an objective, detached, neutral, unfeeling view of the human experience and the social world. This is how I was first taught to write academically: Forget yourself, swallow the dictionary, regurgitate onto the page for a good grade, then repeat, repeat, repeat. As Burke (2008:200) writes:

Writing is deeply enmeshed in wider power relations that construct the 'author' in classed, gendered and racialized ways. Writing is relational; authorial subjects are constructed around notions of 'voice', which are located in a wider politics of identity and knowledge.

As my research and my writing are unapologetically feminist and political, in harmony with my writing style, I have chosen to write academically in the first person. This is aligned with my reflexive practices and with my belief that complete objectivity is impossible to attain as a social science researcher.

Researchers have to learn to live with the confusions, ambiguities and value conflicts of the postmodern world as best they can: the notion of the intellectual as a detached enquirer after truth, operating outside the forces of power, has been shown to be a self-deceiving (and, in many cases, a self-serving) illusion (Humes and Bryce, 2003:185).

Writing in the first person is the best method for presenting my authorial voice to the reader without giving the false impression of impartiality that writing in the third person conveys (Kuo, 2008; Coffey, 2002; Tang and John, 1999; Ivanič, 1998; Hertz, 1997). 'First person then, is a powerful means by which writers express an identity by asserting their claim to speak as an authority' (Hyland, 2002:1093). Who I am is inseparable from my research and how I write should reflect that fact. 'I am not a neutral, objective scribe conveying the objective results of my research impersonally in my writing' (Ivanič, 1998:1). Writing in the first person means that I will not have 'the security of the anonymous third person – 'the researcher'' behind which to hide the impact and influence I have over the research (Etherington, 2004:27). I hope to convey my position and power as a researcher openly and honestly through my use of first person writing.

## **Ethical considerations**

This research was conducted within the ethical guidelines set by the university. Additionally, the research was guided by the ethical principles outlined by The British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002), The British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011), and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2010).

Participation in this study was voluntary. I collected written, informed consent from study participants. All participants received detailed information in a document about the study. I explained to the participants that confidentiality will be maintained with the exception of threat of harm to self or others. In order to maintain confidentiality, identifying data was stored in compliance with the requirements set by the Data Protection Act of 1998 (Parliament of the United

Kingdom, 1998). Digital audio files, interview transcripts, and research findings were coded and interviewees were given pseudonyms to maintain participant anonymity. Non-identifiable data was stored on a password protected computer.

The possibility of risk for participants in this study was low. However, given the personal nature of this study, there was potential for participants to become upset or distressed. In preparation for that possibility, I created a post-interview debriefing document provide to participants that highlighted the organisations from which they can seek support, guidance, and counselling (Appendix H). Additionally, I informed participants that they could terminate their participation at any time before data analysis began. Within the course of my data collection, participants discussed a number of topics that could be considered sensitive issues including, in no particular order: death of family members; domestic violence; sexual assault; alcohol and drug abuse; rejection and ostracisation from family; stigmatisation within the family, in school, and in the community; extreme poverty; involvement with social services; being placed in care; experiences of prejudice including racism, homophobia, sexism, and classism. If a participant was emotional during the interview process or seemed uncomfortable while discussing certain topics, I reminded her that she did not have to continue speaking about that topic, did not have to answer particular questions, and could terminate the interview if she chose to, just as my information sheet and consent form had made clear in writing. While none of the participants chose to stop or end the interview, a few chose to participate as interviewees in writing over email rather than in person or through Skype because of emotional concerns, such as a recently deceased family member.

Monetary compensation was not offered to participants so as to prevent tainting the reliability of study through coercive participation. I disclosed my status as the daughter of a single mother to the participants so that they were aware of my potential bias as it relates to my background and experience. As Oakley (1981:41) wrote:

It becomes clear that, in most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship.

My status and experiences provide common ground from which to build a trusting researcher/participant connection, possibly allowing the participants to feel more comfortable and open within the interview.

## **Methodology part II: Research design in practice**

### **Data collection and analysis**

#### ***Participant recruitment***

Participants were recruited through shared flyers, email, and social networking sites including Facebook and Twitter. A one page website was created for potential participants to learn more about the study and highlighted the criteria for participation (Appendix B). Single mother families are diverse and can be formed and defined in many ways. To allow for the diversity of single mother families, through my recruitment efforts I sought participants who met the following criteria:

1. Consider themselves to have been primarily raised by their mother (or their mother raised them alone for about five years or more during their childhood)
2. Are current or recent undergraduate university students at any university in the UK, any mode of study (full or part time), and any age (traditional age or mature students)
3. Are first-generation students (the first in their family to attend university, which includes students whose siblings might have gone to university)

Using this criteria, I intentionally chose to seek participants who self-identified as the daughters of single mothers or to have been primarily raised by their mother for about five years or more. The length of time was chosen based on previous studies, including Ridge and Millar (2011:89) whose study involved 50 single mothers whose 'median length of lone parenthood was about five years' and Ringback Weitof, Hjern, and Rosen (2004:142) whose study 'defined longer-term exposure [of children to a single parent household] as having been living with the same lone parent ... for at least five years'. I sought to interview current or recent undergraduates (defined, for this study, as those who have completed their undergraduate studies within the five years prior to the interview) as I wanted



their undergraduate experience to be both relevant to the current state of higher education in the UK and fresh in their memories. Most of the interviewees (22) were currently pursuing their undergraduate studies at the time of the interview with a few (4) having recently completed their degree. Among the survey respondents, those who fully met the criteria for interview participation and who selected that they were willing to be interviewed were contacted.

### ***Data collection***

Data was collected for this doctoral research during late spring and summer of 2013. This study was conducted using qualitative methodologies. 'Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world' (Merriam, 1998:6). Using qualitative methods provided deeply personal insight into the university experience of the daughters of single mothers and how they view themselves and their world from their own perspectives and through their own voices.

The first method of data collection, a preliminary 30-question, online questionnaire (Appendix C), provided some quantitative demographic data from 110 respondents. I developed the short questionnaire primarily as a recruitment tool in order to identify potential study participants and collect preliminary quantitative and qualitative data from a larger sample. The data collected through the survey, including demographic information and answers to some open ended questions, enhanced the qualitative data I collected through interviews and reflective writings. However, I do not consider this a mixed methods study as the questionnaire data serves only to give limited information and context for the qualitative data that was collected. I recognise the challenges of including questionnaires as a method of data collection, especially with regards to my ontological and epistemological positions. As Dunne, Pryor, and Yates (2005:49) wrote:

Many feminists and researchers with social justice interests have eschewed the use of questionnaires and quantification of research. The pre-fixed and one-off character of their use precludes reflexivity and reifies social relations through the imposition (and reproduction) of social categories and hierarchies that are the antithesis of their counter-hegemonic intentions in research.

My research is focused on problematising the discourses that maintain forced categories and false binaries, yet in order to identify my study sample, I chose to use a research method that has the potential to reinforce those dominant discourses. Through my awareness of the discord between the use of questionnaires and the purpose of this study and through my use of reflexivity, I endeavoured to construct and utilise questionnaires in a way that allowed me to stay as true to my research purpose as possible.

I intentionally designed my questionnaire so that most of the questions allowed the participants to self-identify. As England (1994:242) asked 'Can we incorporate the voices of 'others' without colonising them in a manner that reinforces patterns of domination?' My method for answering that question was to design my survey questions so that there were blank spaces for them to write out an answer for some of the identity questions or, where categories were offered for selection based on the 2011 UK census identity categories, I included an 'other' category and comment box so that they could self-define and clarify the terms they use for their own identity. Since this research explores the ways single mothers and their daughters are constructed through discourse as homogenous, it was important that I not perpetuate those same practices by designing a survey that did not allow for diverse ways of articulating identity.

I contacted all of the survey respondents who had indicated that they were willing to be interviewed by email to invite them to interview. I was successfully able to schedule and conduct 26 qualitative, semi-structured interviews (Appendix F), including in person interviews (4), interviews over Skype (19), and a few in writing over email (3), depending on the availability and comfort of the interviewee, with in person and Skype interviews lasting around 1.5-2 hours on average.

By conducting interviews using a feminist framework, I developed a deeper understanding of each individual student's perspective. Feminist approaches to research interviews challenge 'the mythology of 'hygienic' research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production' (Oakley, 1981:58). As a research method, the feminist interview explores the lived experiences of women, providing

representation for the marginalised, the excluded, and the silenced (Hesse-Biber and Leavey, 2007; DeVault and Gross, 2006; Letherby 2003). Feminist interviews are often characterised as participatory or collaborative, non-hierarchical, non-exploitative, and reflexive (DeVault and Gross, 2006; Reinharz, 1992; Oakley, 1981). Feminist interview techniques enable the researcher to make transparent and challenge the systemic gendered social inequalities (Gubrium et al, 2012; Letherby 2003; Reinharz, 1992; Oakley, 1981). The feminist interview as a method of data collection within research reveals ‘the subjugated knowledge of the diversity of women’s realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated’ (Hesse-Biber and Leavey, 2007:113). This is true for the voices of the women I interviewed. While there have been many studies over the last few decades focused on the educational attainment, or non-attainment, of the children of single mothers (Hampden-Thompson and Galindo, 2015; Lee, Almonte, and Youn, 2012; Martin, 2012; Wojtkiewicz, 2011; Goodman et al., 2009; Ringback Weitof, Hjern, and Rosen, 2004; Brown, 2004), what is noticeably absent from the academic conversation are the stories of the children of single mothers themselves.

The traditions of research interviewing have been strongly linked to social justice concerns and projects and the idea of bringing forward neglected voices—and these traditions have been especially important for feminist projects (DeVault and Gross, 2006:176).

Since ‘reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing’, the main component of qualitative research is presenting the interviewee’s experience or ‘insider’s perspective’ (Merriam, 2009:213). The student narratives drawn from qualitative interviews provide a rich tapestry of similarities and differences within their collective experiences. The feminist interview as a method of data collection within research reveals ‘the subjugated knowledge of the diversity of women’s realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated’ (Hesse-Biber and Leavey, 2007:113). Semi-structured interviews allow for comparison through the use of an interview guide, but with some flexibility around how the questions are asked (Bryman, 2008).

The method by which the interviews were conducted impacted the dynamics of the interview overall. While I would have preferred to do each interview in person, time and travel costs were prohibitive. Most of the interviews conducted through Skype were very similar to in person interviews in that I was

able to see the body language of the interviewees and ask questions in a different way if they looked like they were confused or I was able to offer to change topics if they looked upset. For a couple of the Skype interviews, technical challenges, including connection disruptions, made the interviews more challenging, but most of them went smoothly. James (2007) explored the potential benefits and challenges of email interviewing as a method of qualitative data collection. For the three interviews conducted over email, I had first asked the participants to interview over Skype. The three participants wanted to participate but asked if they could do so over email for various reasons, including recent death in the family, family crisis, and anxiety. I provided my interview question guide to those three participants and gave them guidance on how I would have conducted the interviews had we spoken in person or over Skype. While I found their written responses valuable, I was able to collect more stories from in person and Skype interviews than from the email interviews.

After the interview, participants were provided writing prompts and questions and encouraged to engage in reflective writing as part of the third method of data collection (Appendix G). Participant writing was selected as a qualitative method of data collection because it allowed participants a greater range of means by which to express themselves and reveal their experiences beyond just the interviews (Elizabeth, 2008). Engaging in reflective writing provided them that opportunity and strengthens and deepens the data collected for this study.

## **Data analysis**

### ***Thematic analysis***

As Guba and Lincoln (1994:108) ask: 'How can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?' Findings from my research are presented through thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews with and reflective writings from the daughters of single mothers who are currently pursuing or have recently completed undergraduate degrees as the first in their family to attend university in the United Kingdom. Thematic analysis was chosen as the method by which to examine the interview data collected for this study because it 'is useful for theorising across a number of cases, finding

common and different thematic elements between the narratives of different research participants' (Frost, 2011:108). I wanted to create new knowledge that challenges existing inequalities within education, but I wanted to do so in a way that first honours the lived experiences of my participants. Thematic analysis allowed me to organise, interpret, and illuminate the findings through common themes discovered within the data (Frost, 2011; Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight, 2010; Murray, 2008; Gillham, 2005). Examining and presenting the findings through common themes allowed me as the researcher and hopefully you as the reader to understand the commonalities as well as the differences in the university experiences of the interviewed daughters of single mothers.

My process of thematic analysis included both reading the transcripts and writing of my participants as well as listening to the audio of the interviews over and over. I developed codes as themes emerged. Some themes were expected, such as the common theme of belonging. However, some themes were surprising, such as how much accents and vocabulary impacted upon a number of my participants' experiences of higher education.

### ***Autoethnography as an analytical practice***

I have used autoethnography as a method of data analysis and interpretation. Holman Jones (2008:206) suggested that researchers envision

Autoethnography as a radical democratic politics – a politics committed to creating space for dialogue and debate that instigates and shapes social change. ... Personal text can move writers and readers, subjects and objects, tellers and listeners into this space of dialogue, debate, and change.

I use my stories, my history, my experiences, my ways of knowing and understanding the world to illuminate how I am thinking about and interpreting my participants' stories, histories, experiences, and ways of knowing and understanding. As Hey wrote (2006b:301): 'My central argument in defending the use of personal voice is that it is conversely the angry refusal to *forget one's history* that is at stake here'. Since I have already made clear that I cannot separate myself from the research as objectivity does not exist, I believe engaging in autoethnographic practices is aligned with my positionality as a researcher. Holman Jones wrote (2008:234):

Look at the intersections in the work of personal storytellers, performance ethnographers, and social protest performers ... as examples of how you might radically contextualize your texts and your subjectivity; embody personal and community accountability; attend to connection without collapsing or foreclosing debate, dialogue, and difference; move people to understand their world and its oppressions in new ways; and create the possibility of resistance [and] hope.

I am inside every word on this page, even the words I am quoting from others were chosen by me to give context, depth, and life to the words I have written myself. My own story belongs beside the stories of my participants.

Exploring the identities and experiences of my participants using thematic data analysis and autoethnography provides me with the tools to challenge the patriarchal binary that positions single mother families as inferior to the married, heterosexual nuclear norm that has been constructed within society and sets arbitrary limits on what is and isn't achievable by the daughters of those single mothers. My methods of analysis provide more threads along with my ontological and epistemological positionings and my theoretical and conceptual frameworks to create the full tapestry of methodology for my research.

## Participants

### *Survey respondents*

The 110 survey respondents included a mix of traditional age and mature students, including 72 who were born in the 1990s, 32 who were born in the 1980s, and 6 who were born in the 1970s. As far as socio economic class, 61 identified as working class/lower class; 17 as upper working class/lower middle class; 26 as middle class; and 6 respondents were not sure or declined to identify. Many of the comments they made about social class

<b>Demographics of Survey Respondents</b>		
<b>Age</b>		
	Born in 1970s	6
	Born in 1980s	32
	Born in the 1990s	72
<b>Social Class</b>		
	Working class	61
	Upper working class/ lower middle class	17
	middle class	26
	Not sure/ declined to respond	6
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
	White	95
	Black Minority Ethnic (BME)	15
<b>Sexual Identity</b>		
	Heterosexual	73
	LGBQ	19
	Other	9
	Declined to respond	13
<b>Religion</b>		
	No religion	92
	Christian	18
<b>Disability</b>		
	No	81
	Yes	17
	Declined to respond	12

identity will be explored in the analysis chapter focused on identity. For this study, I am operationalising social class as a self-defined category. Social class, as a construct and as a category for researching inequality, is complex and highly contested within academia (Irwin, 2015). Finite and all-encompassing definitions for social class categories do not exist and the classifications of social classes that do exist are inadequate for the purposes of this study, which is focused on the individual experiences of the participants. Irwin encouraged the use of participant self-definition within sociological research for:

Researching subjective perceptions and experiences of social inequality through participant defined relevancies. Social comparison approaches offer potentially helpful analytic purchase. ... Analysts have sought to understand the ways and extent to which people perceive and evaluate their own position with reference to socially near others (2015:262).

While I am interested in the way the world views my participants, including the ways they have been socially constructed and misrecognised, I am focused on the ways they self-identify and on the ways they understand and interpret their experiences of being socially constructed. Although I am not concerned with whether or not a student's self-identified social class aligns perfectly with the category in which they would be placed given family income levels and family occupations, previous research with university students indicated that participants' 'self-identified social class strongly correlates with students' self-reported and institutionally reported family income and parental education, lending validity to students' self-identification in a social class' (Soria and Bultmann, 2014:52).

With regards to racial and ethnic identity, 95 respondents (or 86.36 percent) identified as White and 15 respondents (or 13.64 percent) identified as BME (Black Minority Ethnic). This is close to the racial and ethnic make-up of UK single parent families, which includes 90 percent White and 10 percent BME (Maplethorpe, Chanfreau, Philo, & Tait, 2010:22).

In terms of sexual identity, 73 identified as heterosexual or straight; 19 identified as LGBQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer/Questioning); 13 declined to answer; and 9 indicated other responses such as 'irrelevant', 'complicated', and 'Primarily heterosexual'.

With regards to faith, 92 selected 'no religion' and 18 selected Christian. Faith categories in the survey are the same as those on the 2011 UK Census.

For the question: 'Do you identify as a person with a disability?' participants were provided with a blank space to self-identify. Out of the respondents, 81 indicated that they do not identify as a person with a disability, 17 indicated that they do, and 12 declined to respond. Among responses, one participant wrote 'Although I am dyslexic, no' and another wrote 'Not really but I have learning difficulties', showing that a respondent could have a diagnosed disability but choose not to identify as a person with a disability. Out of respondents who indicated yes, some chose to disclose which disability or disabilities they have, including learning disabilities, mental health disabilities, and physical disabilities.

### ***Interview participants***

The 26 interview participants were pursuing or had recently completed an undergraduate degree in the United Kingdom. Brief biographical sketches of each participant, along with her pseudonym, are provided in the Appendices (Appendix A). The participants are attending or have attended a wide variety of universities (21), representing the spectrum of university statuses, such as pre and post 1992 universities and Russell Group universities, and are pursuing or have completed a diverse range of undergraduate degrees in 16 subject areas including sociology, education, psychology, film studies, chemistry, visual communication, archaeology, social work, maths, photography, law, sculpture, linguistics, physics, media studies, and development

<b>Demographics of Interviewees</b>		
<b>Age</b>		
	Born in 1970s	2
	Born in 1980s	7
	Born in the 1990s	17
<b>Social Class</b>		
	Working class	19
	middle class	5
	Not sure	2
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
	White	20
	Black Minority Ethnic (BME)	6
<b>Sexual Identity</b>		
	Heterosexual	15
	LGBQ	6
	Other	2
	Declined to respond	3
<b>Religion</b>		
	No religion	16
	Christian	10
<b>Disability</b>		
	No	18
	Yes	3
	Declined to respond	5



studies. Among the participants, most were or had studied full time (24) and two were part time students.

The reasons their mothers have primarily raised them are diverse and include, but are not limited to, divorce, bereavement, break-ups within non-marital relationships, and abandonment. They represent a mix of traditional age and mature students, different social class identities, different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and different sexual identities.

Some of the participants were traditional age and some were mature students; 17 were born in the 1990s, 7 were born in the 1980s, and 2 were born in the 1970s. As far as socio economic class, 19 participants identified as working class and 5 identified as middle class. Two of them indicated that they were not sure with which socio economic class they identified. The survey provided space for explanation of their self-identification. One participant wrote that she was 'working class, but doesn't a university education make you middle class?!' Another one wrote that she has 'No idea [with which socio economic class she identifies]. Lived under the poverty line throughout vs. have savings now', as if to ask whether she is middle class now that she has a savings account, now that she has some unspent money.

Among the participants, 20 self-identified as White and 6 identified as BME (Black Minority Ethnic). As far as sexual identity, 15 participants identified as heterosexual; 6 identified as LGBTQ; 3 declined to answer; and 2 wrote 'unknown' and 'I don't really have a fixed sexual identity'. With regards to faith, 16 participants indicated that they are not religious and 10 indicated that they identify as Christian. Among the respondents, 18 indicated that they do not identify as a person with a disability, 3 indicated that they do, and 5 declined to respond.

## **Conclusion**

My research methodology is woven together from many threads, creating form, structure, and meaning collectively. In order to be fully appreciated, the tapestry should be viewed as a whole and not examined thread by individual thread. Setting my loom with the threads of my transactional and subjectivist ontological positioning as well as my feminist postmodern and postructuralist epistemological positioning allows me to begin to see my tapestry come together.

Transactional and subjectivist positioning allows me to recognise my position of power as the researcher and to be open about the ways that my experiences and identity shape my view of the world and my view of the research I undertake. Feminist postmodernism and poststructuralism allows me to challenge the claims of objectivity and neutrality of knowledge. Knowledge is situated and created within existing structures of power and is therefore neither neutral nor objective (Hawkesworth, 1989). That has a direct impact on academia, where knowledge is created and where those same structures of power are reproduced and reaffirmed. My research challenges those structures of power by examining the ways they impact upon the university experiences of the daughters of single mothers. I recognise that my research itself is positioned within the very structures of power that I am endeavouring to dismantle (Stone-Mediatore, 2003). I make no claims that the knowledge I am producing is neutral nor is it objective, which is aligned with my feminist postmodern/ poststructural framework. That same framework allows me to challenge binary and essentialising epistemological frameworks. My research disputes the existing essentialising knowledge about single mother families, in which they are reduced to one homogeneous group, and disputes the existing discourses about the educational aspirations and outcomes of their daughters, in which they are constructed through discourses of deficit, as if destined to fail. Poststructuralism allows me to examine the influences of power and the authority and legitimacy of meaning made within existing patriarchal power structures in relation to discourse and complex formations of identity. As Somekh and Lewin (2011:312) explain, Feminist poststructuralism:

shows how relations of power are constructed and maintained by granting normality, rationality and naturalness to the dominant half of any binary, and in contrast, how the subordinate term is marked as other, as lacking, as not rational. ... [Feminist poststructuralism] opens up the possibility of a different kind of agency. The subject is inscribed, not just from outside of herself, but through actively taking up the values, norms and desires that make her into a recognizable, legitimate member of her social group. To the extent that she is actively and reflexively engaged in that process she can act to disrupt the signifying processes through which she is constituted.

The daughters of single mothers are misrecognised as illegitimate within higher education. They are asserting their identities in opposition to the negative ways they have been 'Othered' by a society that expects them to fail. The next three

chapters cover the analysis of the research data. I present the voices of my participants and their lived experiences through the structure of the methodological framework I have built in such a way that recognises their differences, that challenges the discourses around family norms, and that doesn't re-enforce the negative and homogenous social construction of single mother families that dominant discourses have perpetuated.

## **Chapter Five:**

### **Mother as ‘monster’: Daughters discussing the social construction of single mother families**

Within Chapter One I provided the context and rationale for this study. Then I introduced the research questions; my impact intentions; the aims and purpose of the study; and the summary of each chapter within Chapter Two. A review of the literature for this study was explored in Chapter Three. In the previous chapter, I discussed the methodology for this research. Within the next three chapters, I provide a thematic, theoretical, and autoethnographical analysis of the data collected during this study, including questionnaire responses, interviews, and reflective writing. Each chapter answers one of the three research questions. Brief biographical profiles of the 26 participants are presented in Appendix A.

This chapter is focused on the data related to the social construction of single mother families and answers the first research question: How do the dominant discourses, created and maintained by the media, politicians, and society, construct single mother families? While the social construction of single mother families is discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Three, this chapter provides deeper insights from the lived experiences of the participants and their understandings of themselves, their families, and their world.

Within the interviews and reflective writings, the participants discussed the ways they believe their mothers and their families are socially constructed by the media, by politicians, and by society. They also discussed the ways their extended families and their communities treated them and their mothers. The social construction of single mothers suggests they are a homogeneous group, as if each single mother represents the same one-dimensional scary scapegoat for society's sins and failings. Single mothers become one of the monsters that sell newspapers and win elections. They become the feckless and reckless spectre that haunts society (Phoenix, 1996); the underserving devil that drains the benefits system (May, 2006); the animal that spawns more mouths to feed off of the good, innocent, hard-working taxpayers (Hadfield, Rudoe, and Sanderson-Mann, 2007). They are

easily made into villains in a society that is so desperate to find someone, anyone to blame for a crumbling economy and an ever-widening wealth gap (Tomás, 2012; Vincent, Ball, and Braun, 2010; May, 2006). They are the cautionary tale told like bogeyman stories to keep people conforming to norms lest they step out of line and become one of 'Them', because, ultimately, the social construction of single mothers really boils down to the deserving 'Us' versus the underserving 'Them' (Bauman, 2003).

The moral panic around single mothers is directly related to patriarchal dominance and control. As May (2006:4) wrote:

Lone mothers have been thought to be breaking against social norms by being unmarried or divorced, that is, without a man. Thus the concept evokes a boundary between 'proper' women who are married or with a male partner and problematic ones whose sexuality is not under male control. There is furthermore a differentiation between 'normal' nuclear families and other, 'inadequate' families (VanEvery, 1999). As a consequence, lone-mother families are perceived as a threat to the stability of society because they are bringing up their children in such an 'inadequate' family environment.

The dominant discourses about single mothers reminds me of the unrealistic villains in the B-movie cheesecake horror films of the 1950s like 'Attack of the 50ft Woman' or 'The She Creature'. The absurdity of the creatures within those movies coupled with the ways they are portrayed as being a truly terrifying menace to society is comparable to the ways single mothers are constructed. As Lawler (2005:433) wrote, it is 'the fatherless families who bring chaos to their localities and threaten the whole fabric of society'. As I discussed in Chapter One, for centuries, single mothers have been constructed as a 'threat' to the nation (Edwards and Caballero, 2011). Through scapegoating and stereotyping, Western politicians and the media are building the single mother monster through the patchwork of tired tropes and outrageous stereotypes. But who is the real monster? What purpose does the creation of the villainous hegemonic single mother figure serve within society? Who benefits from the social construction of single mothers as a threat? As Richardson wrote (2009:765)

We are made 'at-risk' through socially constructed negative attitudes and ideologies, which are reproduced through text, talk, social interaction, and discourse. Studies of discourse, power, and knowledge demonstrate that through official institutions such as schools and the media, elites disseminate certain scripts, which create inequality, and value people

differently based on White male patriarchal market values. These perceptions are continuously reinforced, making the reproduction of unequal society seem natural when in fact unjust social relations are constructed and continuously re-inscribed and re-enacted daily through various social practices which are detrimental to the development of just and equal community. ... Without focused and revolutionary intervention, the cycle of socially reproduced inequality continues.

The stories of the women in this study provide a more complex, multidimensional understanding of single mothers and their families. Their lives and the stories they tell about those lives are unique, each with their own triumphs, tragedies, and tears, challenges and celebrations, hardships, heartaches, and histories that cannot be easily placed into pre-defined boxes. Yet those stereotypes born out of the negative social construction of single mothers continue to persist and impact the identities and higher education aspirations and experiences of the daughters they raise. The subthemes covered within this chapter are titled: Motherhood in the media; Single mothers as political pawns; This is a man's world; Communities, schools, and extended families; and Countering the social construction of single mother families.

### **Motherhood in the media**

In Chapter Three, I briefly explored some of the literature around the social construction of motherhood. Through the dominant media discourses, the practices and performances of motherhood are judged and scrutinised (Vincent, 2010; Lawler, 2000; Standing, 1998). For example, the discourses around what makes a 'good' mother suggests that married mothers should choose their children over their careers (as if the choice must be one or the other) by becoming stay-at-home mothers (Vincent, 2010). Yet, those discourses ignore the economic and emotional impact of the choice to stay-at-home (Vincent, Ball, and Braun, 2010). Within the interviews, as the participants discussed the ways the media portrayed single mothers, a number of them discussed news stories about married mothers compared to stories about single mothers. Holly pointed out the double standards created by the media in her interview:

*The stay-at-home [married] mum will be kind of congratulated like: 'That's really great! You're spending all this time on your kids!' Whereas, for someone who is a single parent, they'd be like: 'God, you're just lazy! Go out and get a job! Go support your kids!'*

In Holly's example, the messages the media conveys suggest that married mothers can (and should) be stay-at-home mothers and that their children benefit from their choice to stay-at-home. However, single mothers are not viewed as stay-at-home mothers within the dominant media discourses; they are reduced to the stereotypes of lazy and workless or 'work-shy' (Jones, 2012). Amy echoed the same observation of media constructions, highlighting how the double standard can negatively impact all mothers:

*If a single mother did it [worked], it's kind of impressive. ... It's like, 'Oh look! She's trying!' And, if a [married] mother does it [works], it's kind of like, 'Well, why did you have the kids if you're not going to stay-at-home and look after them more?' I think there's more of an expectation on the nuclear family for a woman to be at home than maybe a single parent.*

There are pressures for all mothers to perform motherhood in certain ways (Vincent, 2010; Lawler, 2000; Standing, 1998; Silva, 1996). Motherhood is regulated through hegemonic and patriarchal discourses that define and limit mothers in different ways, depending on their circumstances (Vincent, Ball, and Braun, 2010).

The media contributes to constructions of motherhood that reinforces inequitable expectations on single mothers to spend more time in paid work and sacrifice their time mothering their children, whilst, simultaneously, contributing to the expectations of married mothers to sacrifice participation in the world of paid employment and focus their energies on unpaid mothering work (Vincent, Ball, and Braun, 2010). As McIntosh wrote about the media and political 'moral panic' in the United Kingdom about single mothers (1996:149):

One of the fascinating things about the attempt to demonize lone mothers is the assumptions it reveals about married motherhood and the family. ... The social pathology of the lone mother is just as imaginary as the social desirability of the nuclear family. ... Women's dependence on a breadwinner who earns a real 'family wage', sufficient to support himself and his children, is to a large extent a myth.

Both single mothers and married mothers are subjected to unrealistic expectations, perpetuated by the media and by politicians, of 'good' motherhood. Within the interview, Jeanette also discussed the double standards that mothers face depending on their marital status:

*A woman who is married and she stays at home is seen as the kind of homemaker and provider, and 'Isn't she fulfilling her domestic duties' and 'Oh, isn't she making her home so wonderful for her children!' But a single mother who stays at home is lazy and a benefit scrounger. ... Whenever I read about ... motherhood, there's two brackets on that motherhood: single motherhood and married motherhood. They are ... two completely different categories. You don't just refer to motherhood as a kind of overarching umbrella, there has to be that distinction. ... Single motherhood is bad, married motherhood, wonderful. ... Married mothers are seen as better, they succeeded, ... something's worked in their life, but single motherhood -- something's gone terribly wrong, you know.*

As Jeanette said, married mothers have 'succeeded'. They have been successful in their performance of motherhood and of womanhood (Lawler, 2000). In contrast, a woman who becomes a single mother is proof that 'something's gone terribly wrong' in relation to hegemonic constructions of mothering and motherhood. The media discourses about motherhood limit all mothers and place them under intense scrutiny for their parenting practices (Silva, 1996).

Sandra talked about people on benefits and the ways they are judged, especially single mothers.

*I think it's very negative that they'll be like, 'Oh, they shouldn't be seen as valuable because they're on benefits'. It shouldn't matter. If someone can't survive without it, then it's a necessity. Again, just because it's a single mother, it doesn't make her any less of a parent. It really shouldn't matter.*

As Sandra pointed out, the benefit system exists because, for some families, they are a 'necessity' in order to make ends meet, in order to survive. Through media discourses, people on benefits are seen as less valuable than those who are not.

Contemporary narrative productions orchestrate the story of poor women as one of moral and intellectual lack and of chaos, pathology, promiscuity, illogic and sloth, juxtaposed always against the alleged order, progress and decency of 'deserving' citizens. Trying to stabilize and make sense of unpalatably complex issues of poverty and oppression and attempting to obscure hegemonic representation, these narratives reduce and collapse the lives and experiences of poor women to deceptively simplistic dramas, which are then offered for public consumption. The terms of these dramas are palatable because they are presented as simple oppositions of good and bad, right and wrong, independent and dependent, deserving and undeserving (Adair, 2008:12).

People living in poverty are constructed through deficit neoliberal discourses as 'Other', undeserving, and deviant. Single mothers who stay-at-home with their children are misrecognised as lazy, as not wanting to work (Jones, 2012). Within



the dominant discourses perpetuated by the media, a single mother who chooses to stay-at-home is not recognised as doing so for her children's sake. Instead, her choice is positioned as a selfish one. The mixed messages the media sends when stay-at-home mothering is promoted as the ideal (McIntosh, 1996) but single mothers who do not work are feckless and reckless and neglectful (Vincent, Ball, and Braun, 2010) create a damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don't dichotomy. The traditional nuclear norm of the stay-at-home mother and the breadwinning father does not account for the diversity and complexity within family units (Golombok, 2015). Neither does it allow for the economic changes that have made living on one income impossible for many families with children in the United Kingdom (Hirsch, 2015; Lawton and Thompson, 2013). Media discourses that construct notions of 'good' motherhood should be challenged for the sake of all mothers and families.

When I asked the interviewees which terms they believed were associated with single mothers in the media, in politics, and in society, the most common phrase the interviewees mentioned was 'benefits scrounger'. More than half of the interviewees specifically discussed the word 'scrounger'. This was not a word I used within the interviews, so I did not encourage or prompt the use of the word. It is also a very specifically British word. The verb scrounge is defined as 'to sponge on or live at the expense of others' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015c). Suggested synonyms for scrounger include beggar, moocher, sponger, parasite, freeloader, leech, and thief (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015c; Theasaurus.com, 2015).

In January 2015, the UK tabloid newspaper *The Sun* published a feature called 'The Welfies', so-called awards for 'the grasping layabouts of the year' devised to publicly shame those the tabloid deemed to be 'Britain's top 'scroungers and dossers' (that's Sun-speak for people on benefits)' (Williams, 2015). Bauman (2004:39), in writing about identity, includes single mothers as an example of a group within the 'underclass'. For those who are in the underclass, Bauman wrote: 'You are cast outside the social space in which identities are sought, chosen, constructed, evaluated, confirmed and refuted' (2004:39). Single mother families are placed outside of the structures of power in which identities are constituted. As Hancock (2004:4) wrote:

One's public identity is conditioned not simply by one's own speech and action but also by others' perception, interpretation, and manipulation – particularly for those citizens who lack political equality. ... A politics of disgust is first marked by traditional signposts of inequality; for example, members of marginal groups, even when granted the power of speech, find their voices devalued or disrespected, increasing their isolation and alienation from the public sphere.

Within media discourses, single mothers are often villains and scroungers and their children are often seen as a burden on society.

In my interview with Amy, she discussed the stereotypes that negatively socially construct single mother families:

*The association of single parents to benefit scroungers -- I want to talk about that. I mean, that's exactly the whole stereotype and assumption. It's one of the assumptions ... [that] there are girls who go out and get pregnant deliberately to have a baby to get pushed to the housing benefits, to get all of these hand-outs and all of these magical things. ... I think it's disgusting that they throw those accusations out there. ... The newspapers do it all the time. It's not fair ... when the reality is very different from that and it's a very difficult life!*

Amy was animated and outraged during our interview when discussing the ways single mothers are portrayed by the media and by society as lazy, greedy scroungers purposely getting pregnant in order to defraud the benefits system. Her sentiments were echoed by Erica, when she discussed the role the media plays in perpetuating stereotypes:

*It's terribly negative, isn't it? It's fear mongering. ... It's all this rhetoric of scrounging, dole dossing, undeserving parents who, well they chose to get pregnant without a man. They deserve to be punished. ... So you build a rhetoric, you put it in the Daily Mail, and you'll read stories of the most horrendous people in society. So you'll see there's a woman on the front issue who is like, 'Yeah, I'm having my third child so I could get extra money'. But they're not the reality of single parent families who are struggling. ... But they build this rhetoric so then they can go into parliament and they say, 'Look at these scrounging, dole dossers! We got to take money off them!' ... So I think the media is a vile machine.*

Erica discussed the connection between the media as a 'vile machine' actively engaged in the negative social construction of single mothers as one homogenous group of undeserving scroungers and the political implications and consequences of that social construction. The example she gives of a media article focused on a woman who fulfils the stereotypes relates to the ways Lori said that single mothers

are blamed for their situation and that the blame is justified through selectively reporting individuals who are seen to prove the myth of the single mother as monster. She said that the media's message about single mothers suggests that:

*They put themselves in that situation. They chose to have a child so why should we have to pay for it? Things like that. The idea that they couldn't even bother to get married before having a child, and you know, the way I see it is that if you're with someone who isn't right, just because you're having a child doesn't mean that you have to be married to them. ... The media picks one story, one crazy ass story, makes a big deal of it and I don't think that's the norm.*

Media accounts tend to pathologise women who make choices outside of the strict, socially constructed regulations of 'good' motherhood. For example, as Lori discussed, there are discourses promoted through the media that suggest that a woman should face destitution (as Lori said 'Why should we have to pay for it?') and ridicule for becoming a mother outside of marriage. Yet there is also a competing discourse that demonises women who choose to terminate their pregnancies (Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell, 2009). Then there are the potentially dangerous discourses, especially for survivors of domestic violence, that chastise women who get divorced rather than staying married 'for the sake of the children' (Coltrane and Adams, 2003:370). The ways the media contributes to the pathologising of certain kinds of mothers and certain performances of motherhood includes the perpetuation of the visual image of the chav and the associated stereotypes attached to that figure, as Jeanette discussed:

*Single mothers in tracksuits, gold earrings -- cheap, tacky, poor and on benefits. They [the media] often think that women get pregnant and they can get houses or that they can get benefits or that they can kind of milk the system. ... [That] view is kind of perpetuated quite strongly by the Daily Mail, particularly. ... a paper which I find quite difficult to, you know, tolerate. ... [The media creates the image of single mothers as] Poor, benefit-cheats, they're scroungers, irresponsible, failures.*

The media portrayal of single mothers described by Jeanette is steeped in discourses of disgust (Tyler, 2008; Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2005; Ahmed, 2004; Hancock, 2004). The media made monstrous figure of the chav single mother is steeped in sexism, classism, and racism (Tyler, 2008; Skeggs, 2005). If you type the phrase 'future single mother' into a google image search, many of the memes in the search results show White teenage girls with Black teenage boys. Additionally, if

you search for the phrase 'Once you go Black, you're a single mom', a popular internet phrase, in google images, a number of racist memes populate the results. Lori discussed the disparity of negative media focus on single mother families depending on the class and race of the mother:

*I think it depends on what class they [single mothers] are and also what race they are. So I think if you're a white middle class [family], they [society] don't usually think much of it. ... They usually say, 'Oh, they're just divorced. It's fine'. sort of thing. ... Single working class family of any race, I would say usually it would be, 'Oh, she's doing it because she wants council house. She got herself pregnant because she wants a council house'.*

As Lori explained, within media discourses, white middle class single mothers can be recognised as possible divorcees, but working class mothers of any race are misrecognised as scroungers, no matter their story nor the circumstances by which they came to single motherhood. The myth of intentional pregnancies for the purposes of scamming the system came up again and again in the interviews and was discussed by Tyler (2008). The perpetuation of this media-fuelled myth suggests that raising a child while living in poverty is the dream life that single mothers deliberately sought for themselves and for their children. The reality is that many single mother families are living in poverty (Gingerbread, 2012; Maplethorpe, Chanfreau, Philo, and Tait, 2010). Since the reality is that single mothers who are employed full time still potentially face living in poverty (Gingerbread, 2012), the media and political discourses that contribute to social conspiracy theories that suggest that women are falling pregnant intentionally in order to enjoy a life of luxury at the expense of taxpayers is ludicrous.

The way the children of single mothers are portrayed by the media can be raced and classed and usually negative, as Heather discussed in our interview:

*Don't listen to what the media says about single mothers. I mean, I've read so many different articles about single black mothers, and their child went to crime, or she went to prostitution. Just because she's a single mother doesn't mean that's the cause of it. You could be in a nuclear family and your daughter took the track to prostitution or crime. So, it just seems that's the only thing that's highlighted. People think that's the only thing associated with single mothers. ... It's always the negative aspects. It's never the: She's a single mother, but her child went to university, and duly pushed them up the social mobility ladder.*

Heather's quote highlights the intricate and insidious ways that racism and classism contribute to the negative stereotypes of single mother families. She

rejects the ways she feels that her educational aspirations and hard work have been overlooked because of the negative social construction of single mother families.

In Zoe's interview, she talked about the ways the media contributes to normative identities being seen as the 'default':

*[Nuclear, heterosexual, white, and middle class norms are] sort of seen as the default. Then if you're anything otherwise, then it has to be noted because otherwise that's what people assume. ... I don't always feel like their race or their class or ... what they do as a job is always is relevant to the news story and I sort of think like, 'Why have you bothered to say that they're Chinese?' ... That's not really relevant to the story at all, but I think because people will assume that they're white because that's sort of seen as the norm. And they [the media] feel like they have to say otherwise. Or I think just by saying it ... you know people sort of think certain things, you know, depending on what the story is.*

She elaborated that readers will 'think certain things' such as stereotypes about particular identity categories. For example, when the media identifies the subject of the story as a single mother, as an immigrant, as Black, or as Muslim, even if those qualifiers are not directly relevant to the story, adding those details changes the ways a reader interprets and understands the story. The news is neither produced nor read through neutral lenses.

The media is complicit in the creation and maintenance of inequality within society by reporting from the perspective 'of the dominant group, thereby confirming the status quo, legitimating inequality, and reproducing the (ingroup) consensus' (van Dijk, 1995:24). The stereotypes about single mothers built and maintained by the media leave no room for difference in the lives of single mothers and their families. Whiteness and middle-classness become incongruous with the category of single mother. In addition to race and class, Amy and Lori both discussed the groups that are often maligned by the media, including single mothers:

*Amy: It's important to know what people are reading, and [The Daily Mail] that's a newspaper that very widely circulates, which is sadly where, like, most people get their ideas from. ... It's awful. The things they can say ... about most other minorities. It seems like single mums, immigrants, gypsies -- those are a free-for-all. You can insult those minority groups and it won't matter. There's no ramifications.*

*Lori: The stereotype is that all, all people of colour are immigrants and therefore they always get benefits and you know, all that sort of rubbish that comes out in media.*

The groups most vilified by the press are those deemed the underserving 'Them'. Constructing particular groups as the villains allows already oppressed minority groups to become scapegoats for society's ills and to reaffirm the place of the righteous and deserving 'Us' (Bauman, 2004). Certain minority groups, including single mothers and immigrants, are socially constructed as dangerous 'Others', as threats to the nation (Morrice, 2011; Bauman, 2003). Single mother becomes the homogenous category into which all women raising children alone are cast. As Blackman and Walkerdine (2001:55) wrote:

People are not constant beings and cannot be defined on the basis of any fixed, shared characteristics. ... Even if the psychological landscape is viewed as being socially formed, it is still problematic to view groups of people as homogenous, defined on the basis of their shared affiliation and access to particular cultural codes.

Single mothers share one affiliation and, as a result, are viewed through one homogenising lens as benefits scroungers draining the system and threatening the nation. Stacy and Sarah are both white, mature students, the daughters of single mothers, and single mothers themselves. From her written interview, Stacy's quote exemplifies the perspectives both of them shared:

*Never does this discourse recognise the many circumstances that work to create single mother families and the challenges and experiences of the single mother family are never portrayed in a positive, or even realistic manner. This dominant discourse is so integrated into society that it is difficult for many to overcome it. The self-fulfilling prophecy describes how individuals internalise views and stereotypes. Therefore, a susceptibility to cultural influence can cause an individual to recreate for themselves an outcome that is proposed for them. Thus, the untruth becomes the 'truth'.*

While some single mothers do live on benefits in council houses, the media narrative ignores the circumstances by which they came to single motherhood and, for some single mothers, the circumstances by which they came to poverty. Stacy knows that both she and her mother are stereotyped by the media, politicians, and society. She is demanding recognition of her value and legitimacy as a parent and as a person beyond the restrictive norms she feels she has to confront.

Sandra discussed the ways unemployed or underemployed single mothers are portrayed as lazy and feckless:

*It's not as easy as just going out there and getting a job. You really have to work at getting a job. You have to work among thousands of other people that are so qualified for this job. I feel really sympathetic for them. They are portrayed as scroungers; that they should just get off their lazy ass and do whatever. That's not the case!*

High rates of unemployment (Gingerbread, 2012) and high costs of childcare (Alakeson, 2011) are just a couple of reasons why a single mother might be unemployed. A single mother who wants to work but is looking for a job must juggle child-rearing with job searching and she is limited in the jobs she can take compared to an individual without the responsibility of raising a child as she will need more flexibility (Jones, 2012). For those single mothers who are already living in poverty who have not had access to higher education, minimum wage jobs are unlikely to offer a living wage for a family nor the flexibility a mother might need when she is the sole provider for her child or children (Hirsch, 2015; Gingerbread, 2012).

In contrast to Sandra's statement, which calls for a more nuanced look at single motherhood, unemployment, and poverty, a number of interviewees felt the need to first state that single mother scroungers do exist, that the 'single mother monster' is not always a myth. For example, Anita stated:

*It really, it annoys me because although I do know some people who are single mothers on benefits and ... should get a job and don't when they can -- the majority aren't like that at all. And it annoys me when I read the papers. ... it worsens when you just read the comments as well ... on the articles.*

The intent of statements like Anita's, to interrupt the homogenising discourse, is clear, but it further divides single mothers into deeper categories of 'us versus them' and 'deserving versus underserving' (Hutton, 2011; Bauman, 2003). As Blackman and Walkerdine (2001:55) explained:

Fictions and fantasies of the Other play a key role in the processes through which people relate themselves and others. We are suggesting that fantasies within media products may re-enact and reproduce subject-positions created across a range of discursive practices.

This battle cry of 'but not all single mothers!' further fuels the fires by which single mothers are burned at the stake and does not address the root causes of the very

real poverty and inequality faced by single mother families. Related to this idea, my mother believes in the myth of the 'welfare queen', created and perpetuated by conservative American politicians to advance policies and agendas that promote the nuclear family norm and subject single mothers to both scorn and greater levels of poverty (Hancock, 2004). It is my mother's acceptance of that myth that also allows her to try to construct her identity in opposition to that myth. By buying into the myth, she is able to attempt to counter it by declaring, 'Yes, welfare queens exist, but I am not one of them'. She can only insist on her 'respectability' if she first admits that the monstrous figure of the welfare queen is fact not fiction (Skeggs, 1997). As far as the ways she might appear to fit the stereotypes associated with the welfare queen figure, my mother did have two children by two different fathers, both of those men have spent time in prison, and she did access social benefits during my childhood when our family was destitute. However, her insistence on her respectability compared to other single mothers is born out of a desire to be recognised as a 'good' woman who did not intentionally fall pregnant and who sought government assistance out of desperation and not to defraud taxpayers (Skeggs, 1997). In order to counter the ways she feels misrecognised through media and political discourses that suggest that single mothers get pregnant on purpose and are abusing the benefits system, she must defend her 'respectability'. As May wrote (2004:185):

Lone motherhood emerges thus as a stereotypical status that is imposed upon the narrators from the outside and on that they defend themselves against. It is a label the narrators seem uncomfortable with – hence their attempts to find counter-narratives and their insistence that their lone motherhood is different from stereotype.

The internalisation of the myth of the single mother as monster scares women like my mother into believing that if she 'behaves' and follows the rules, then she is not a 'welfare queen' and is therefore deserving of respectability (Skeggs, 1997). As Freire (1996:48) wrote:

The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. ... They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized.

If the welfare queen or the benefits scrounger is 'Them' and a single mother insists she is not one of 'Them', then she can attempt to construct an identity among those



who are on the side of 'Us' – the good, the righteous, the deserving, the respectable (Hutton, 2011; Skeggs, 1997). Yet, what she accomplishes in this act is complicity within the system built to benefit those who are responsible for furthering her oppression.

What are the practices through which people are both constituted by and constitute their own responses to media fictions? ... If media fictions are part and parcel of the living of life in the present, these need to be explored as one aspect in which the fictions and fantasies of the subject are constituted through, or in relation to, the regimes of deeply interdiscursive meaning through which subjects understand themselves and others (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001:196).

Regardless of how much a single mother insists that she is 'respectable', once her status as a single mother is revealed or outed, she will still first be judged against, defined by, and misrecognised as the stereotypical single mother – the monstrous benefits scrounger. As Butler wrote (2001:23):

I find that the only way to know myself is precisely through a mediation that takes place outside of me, exterior to me, in a convention or a norm that I did not make, in which I cannot discern myself as an author or an agent of its making.

The task of insisting, over and over, that she is not one of those monsters is monumental. If she succeeds in establishing herself and her family as the exception to the scrounger rule, what happens if she or her children make a mistake and fall out of line? If her child gets in trouble at school or with the law or if she loses her job, will each imperfection and mistake still be attributed to her single mother status as if failure is expected? And, if she or her children do achieve or succeed in any way, will each accomplishment be used to prove that there are no obstacles to overcome, that all that stands in the way of single mothers and their children is simply their own laziness and lack of aspirations and determination?

Almost all of the participants discussed the popular misconception that single motherhood is a choice or that poverty is a choice. When oppressed groups are constructed by dominant discourses as having a choice, then they are also constructed as deserving of the consequences they face for supposedly making that choice (Bauman, 2004). Among the interviewees, these excerpts from Holly and Erica illuminate the topic best. Holly talked about the blame poor people receive for being in poverty and accessing benefits:

*It's, you know, government money; It's tax people's money, so they feel like they have an opinion. You know, 'That's my money; I'm paying for you to do that'. ... They literally think that they're directly sort of like handing you the pay-out. You know, since they feel like they have an opinion on your situation. ... And I think like it is really damaging because it's made me sort of feel, and I think especially when I was younger, like really sort of like ashamed. ... I'm from a family that doesn't have a job. ... You are seen as being like lazy and like it's your choice, like you chose to be bad or something, that you chose to be poor. ... It's quite offensive.*

Through neoliberal discourses, poverty is positioned as a choice for which families should feel ashamed. As Jones wrote (2012:220):

Proclaiming that people are responsible for their situation makes it easier to oppose the social reforms that would otherwise be necessary to help them. But such demonization does not stand up to scrutiny. People born into poor, working-class communities do not deserve their fate, nor have they contributed to it.

Erica talked about the ways the system failed to support her and her brother when they were struggling to cope with her mother's alcohol and drug addictions and unemployment, leading to their destitution and an unsafe home environment. She discussed the ways society has focused on blaming people for their poverty.

*I think we're [society] only getting worse, aren't we? And I think it's petrifying, it's completely petrifying. You know, the education system is making it harder for teachers to be social agents, you know, agents for social change. ... Because how can you be socially just when you're already working fifty-five hours a week for thirty-five hours pay? ... You don't have the time to think, 'You know what, Robert's shoes are a little bit short, small for him this week'. You just don't have the time, so it scares me, it really scares me. ... There will be no social justice. It will be, you know, dog-eat-dog. ... I think it's going to get worse. ... [Without social justice] It's Robert's fault that his shoes are too small for him and his feet because his mother hasn't got a job to pay for those shoes. We are completely reinforcing it ... and we're justifying it. ... Neoliberalism does not have any moral compass; it does not have any ethical compass. ... It works so well because it's invisible and people accept it.*

Neoliberalism ties in with the Belief in a Just World (BJW) in the continued reproduction of inequalities. When people are blamed for their own oppression, such as single mother families facing blame for the stigmas they face and the poor facing blame for their own poverty, it becomes a monumental and seemingly impossible task to build unity and solidarity for the pursuit of a more just and equal world.

## Single mothers as political pawns

In addition to the role of the media, politicians play an equal part in the negative social construction of single mothers and their families, as I discussed in Chapters One and Three. A number of participants discussed the impact media messages and political speech has on society, as Stacy's quote highlights:

*I believe society's views on single parent families are shaped by politicians and the media. They disseminate an official 'knowledge' that portrays these families as a drain on society, dysfunctional, disadvantaged and uneducated.*

The media and politicians are culpable in the creation of the myth of the scrounger, of the single mother as monster. Many of the interviewees discussed the ways politicians change their language about single mothers depending 'how it will get them the most votes', as Heather, Sandra, and Debra articulated:

*Heather: I don't really like the government and how they twist things, and how the media twist things to relate to the current government at the time. So, I think the government, they always have a different views of single mothers one day. They'll be like: 'the nuclear family is the best type of family', but then they'll be like: 'Oh, we're open to all types of families'. It's almost kind of confusing, what politicians want out of families.*

*Sandra: I think it's just another way for people to be, judgmental and like, a scapegoat kind of thing. It's not single parent families that are the problem in this country. ... It's the country as a whole. ... I think politicians jump on the bandwagon with single parent families. ... I think it's easier for people to turn around and say that they're [single mothers] negative. ... Politicians just try anything to get a vote. It's like they'd sell their own grandmother if it would get them votes. ... They just say anything for the sake of saying it, without having much truth behind it.*

*Debra: I have seen them be vilified as folk devils in order to turn public opinion against them -- the benefits-scamming, council-house, uneducated stereotype used by tabloids. In most instances this is unwarranted and unjust. I have also seen them be heralded as hard-working ... [as] politicians try to appear favourable, which again is a warped and dishonest portrayal.*

Both Heather and Sandra's statements exemplify the feeling among many of the participants that politicians are focused on getting votes, even if that means perpetuating myths about single mothers (Hancock, 2004) and about people on benefits (MacDonald, Shildrick, and Furlong, 2014). As Gafney (2014) wrote:

There are two pervasive myths about welfare in the UK which are routinely retailed by politicians and the media. The first is the myth of the family where 'nobody has worked for generations'. The second is the myth of the

area where 'nobody works around here'. By 'myths' I don't just mean widely believed falsehoods, but statements which embody a mythological mode of thinking which has no relation to facts whatsoever. The point about these myths is that they refer to things taking place elsewhere involving other people. It is the sense of otherness they convey rather than the factual inaccuracies they involve, which tells us we're dealing with myths.

Politicians contribute to the ways marginalised people and families are further turned into threatening 'Other' in the national conscious. In addition to contributing to harmful stereotypes built on fiction, as Katie pointed out, both politicians and the media focus on stories that feed the fantasy and not on counter-narratives:

*A lot of the time I think they [politicians] very much focus on the fact that a lot of single parents have to rely on the welfare state. ... It's like, you know, they're not just a drain on the resources. There's a lot of single parents out there that are, you know, working full time and, you know, still providing for their families. It's very frustrating that politicians seem to only focus on the negatives. I've yet to see, like, in the newspapers or anything, you know, see them say, for example, 'Woman has done something fantastic; It's amazing that she's able to do this as a single woman'.*

Katie's quote points out that there are single mothers on welfare but that there are also those who are working. What is not discussed is the fact that there are single mothers who are working and yet still need to access the benefits system because minimum wage is no longer a living wage (Hirsch, 2015; Gingerbread, 2012). The focus is rarely on how the system can be fixed so that full time wages allow families to live above the poverty line. The focus tends to be on families on benefits, often represented as if they are joyously, deviously, greedily living off of the good, respectable taxpayers. As Sandra's said in her interview:

*The thing with politicians is that they like to pretend that everything they do is worthy. ... Look at all the expenses scandal and everything like that. And, yet, that's how they view people on benefits. They're scroungers. And they, you know, they should get off their ass and get a job. ... How can they sit in their office ... and say, 'You're not worthy of benefit anymore'? They've never met that person. They don't know. ... They do portray them [single mothers] to be negative, but they're so quick to judge people. ... You can't have a square box and expect everyone to fit into it.*

Sandra points out that the judgements made against single mothers, by politicians and the media, are not levied with the same ferocity against the wealthy caught up in tax avoidance or expenses scandals. While not all journalists nor all politicians

are complicit in the negative social construction of single mother families, the discourses perpetuated through certain media outlets, such as tabloid newspapers, and by certain politicians, such as the examples I gave within Chapter One, is deplorable. Through them, the vicious dogged pursuit of single mothers is like a human foxhunt. They are outnumbered and defenceless. They are an easy target for sport, with the victors reaping the rewards of more votes or more newspapers sold.

In what ways are society's perceptions of single mothers and people living in poverty shaped by negative media and political discourses? Research conducted by Kings College London, Ipsos Mori, and the Royal Statistical Society (2013) found that the British public:

Estimate that 34 times more benefit money is claimed fraudulently than official estimates: the public think that £24 out of every £100 spent on benefits is claimed fraudulently, compared with official estimates of £0.70 per £100.

The same research also found that the British public significantly overestimates teenage pregnancy rates, suggesting that '15% of girls under 16 get pregnant each year, when official figures suggest it is around 0.6%' (Ipsos Mori, 2013). Katie points out that society's views of single mothers mirrors the messages perpetuated by the media and politicians:

*They [society] think that everybody's just living off welfare, and, you know, why can't they go out and get a job? It's like – it's almost like my mum can never really win. That really – that just frustrates me. Obviously, I know how much my mum does.*

Katie's quote points out a common theme throughout most of the interviews – single mothers and their daughters 'can never really win'. For many single mothers, the choices she makes will rarely be 'good enough' to become one of the deserving 'Us'. If she does work but still needs to access benefits to make ends meet, then it is her fault for not working hard enough and it is not seen as the system's fault for not ensuring that minimum wage is a living wage for a family with one income. If she is struggling to find a job when unemployment is high, she is just a lazy scrounger who enjoys sponging off of the hardworking taxpayer.

**This is a man's world**

The media, politicians, society (Hancock, 2004), and even many academic studies (Biblarz and Stacey, 2010) continue to focus on the nuclear, heterosexual family as the norm against which other families are judged. When it comes to single mother families, the blame seems to be focused on the woman – whether she is blamed for having a child in the first place or blamed for not staying in a relationship or blamed for not finding a new man or blamed for the poverty in which she and her child may find themselves. Sandra challenged the idea of the nuclear family as the only kind of family that can be viewed as ‘wholesome’:

*Even though it's, the world is changing, the whole idea of a nuclear family of one mum, one dad, and a child, is seen to be a wholesome family unit. But what's wholesome in my feeling [is] ... when you have a child and you're happy with the family unit that you're in. ... It might not be [a choice], because of divorce or you're separated. What if your partner gets ill and they die? ... Just because you're a single parent doesn't mean you want to be a single parent. ... Parents that decide that they don't want to find someone and they want to have it themselves – it shouldn't matter.*

Sandra's quote highlights some of the many reasons a woman might be raising children on her own – divorce, separation, bereavement. She challenged the idea that single motherhood is always a choice on the part of the mother for which she can be blamed. However, she also pointed out that when a woman does choose to have a child without a partner, that still does not mean their family unit is lacking in comparison with nuclear families.

One of the common stereotypes discussed in the interviews about single motherhood is that the father of the child is usually thought to be an absentee father, which may be true for some families but not all. However, for those single mothers who are struggling on their own without the financial support of the father of their child, the blame is still placed on the mothers, as these quotes from Lori and Sandra highlight:

*Lori: A lot of them blame the woman rather than the man for, for leaving his responsibilities. They now blame the woman for not having an abortion, that sort of thing, they blame the woman for not being in a steady relationship, they blame the woman because she hasn't got any family to go back to. ... It's always the woman's fault.*

*Sandra: [Society suggests that] If they can't afford to have children, they shouldn't have had children in the first place kind of thing. ... They seem to forget that there was somebody else that created that child as well. It's not just the mother.*

Single mothers are judged to be irresponsible if they cannot afford to raise their children without benefits, but blaming them does not fix the system in which earning a living wage to support a family on one person's income has become impossible (Hirsch, 2015). Many of the interviewees discussed the judgement women face when raising children on their own as more negative because of her gender, as Jeanette's quote highlights:

*I think some people view single mothers as a kind of failure ... of womanhood, actually. ... I think particularly in this country people sort of see single mothers as a kind of stereotype ... of very young women who ... got pregnant quite young.*

The notion that a single mother is a 'failure of womanhood' – as if a woman's only job is to find and keep a man with whom to raise children in a nuclear family – is steeped in patriarchal inequality. As May (2004:187) wrote:

When attempting to identify the root cause of the problems lone mothers face, the analytical gaze is not on the lone mother, but for example on how society is structured both discursively and practically around the nuclear family and how gender inequality restricts the lives of many lone mothers.

Within the dominant neoliberal media and political discourses, single mothers are blamed for the challenges they face and every choice a single mother makes is judged to be the wrong choice. As Heather discussed:

*It always feels like, 'Oh, she chose to be alone'. I mean, she had the choice to be married, but she doesn't. There's always certain situations where people become single mothers, and it's not always a very, a very nice situation. I think some people should be more considerate when they're judging single mothers. ... When both of them [my parents] were home, it wasn't a very good place for a child to be around, because it was just not a very good environment with both of them there. So, when they separated, ... it was much better.*

Her family life when her parents were together created an environment that was not 'a very good place for a child', so she knows that her mother made the right choice for her and her siblings. Yet, her mother is viewed as the cause of her own poverty because she 'chose to be alone' as if she is to blame for the breakdown of the relationship.

Many of the interviewees discussed the pressure that people, including friends and family, placed on their mothers to either get back together with their fathers or to concentrate on finding a partner. As Katie's quote highlights, the focus

on nuclear families as the norm means that single mothers are under extra scrutiny if they are not actively seeking new partners.

*A few of her friends were like, 'Do you not think you should maybe try and get a boyfriend?' And my mum was just like, 'No. I don't feel the need to have a man in my life currently. I've just gotten out of a fourteen-year-long relationship that was a marriage! I shouldn't have to just, you know, form another nuclear family'.*

In this long excerpt from Lori's interview, she first painted a picture of living in an ideal community in which she felt supported and safe. Once her mother broke up with her partner at the time, her neighbours encouraged her mother to 'find herself a new man'. The men her mother brought home were abusive and violent and made Lori unsafe in her home.

*There are a lot of married families, it was a very nice community, a lot of married families there that were working class, things like that but it was a very safe neighbourhood as well at the same time so you could let your kids go out and play. ... And it was all very friendly, very good. And then when my mum and this guy broke up, it was decided that my mum now had to go out and get drunk. ... So they [the neighbourhood women] would all rally round, pick her up, take her out drinking to find herself a new man. You know, because it wasn't, it wasn't good enough that she was on her own or anything like that. She had, she had to have a man, obviously. And that got worse because the guys that she was bringing home were actually abusive. So, that whole cycle of abuse basically, all that sort of thing. So, I think, you know, I kind of wish that they'd been more supportive rather than 'Right, well, she needs to go find another man' sort of thing. ... I didn't see them [the neighbours] as community anymore; I started seeing them as people that were bringing these men into my life that were very dangerous and very violent.*

The social pressure for Lori's mother to 'find a man', as if her life was incomplete without one, resulted in violence against Lori and her mother. Lori's mother is not absolved of responsibility of her choice to bring home violent men. However, as Lori points out in her interview, the neighbourhood women that she once saw as part of her safe, friendly community were not concerned about Lori's safety, health, or happiness. Their focus was on the need for Lori's household to meet the nuclear family norms at any cost. As Rich explained (1980:657):

*The lie of compulsory female heterosexuality ... asserts that primary love between the sexes is 'normal', that women need men as social and economic protectors, for adult sexuality, and for psychological completion; that the heterosexually constituted family is the basic social unit; that women who do not attach their primary intensity to men must be, in functional terms,*



condemned to an even more devastating outsiderhood than their outsiderhood as women.

That single mother families are constructed as broken, dysfunctional, incomplete relates to the social assumption that heterosexuality is the norm. To not participate in that norm, to not opt into 'compulsory heterosexuality', to not buy into the idea that a woman 'needs' a man, is viewed as a failure of womanhood (Rich, 1980).

Heather's parents separated because her father was violent and abusive. Even though her extended family knew the circumstances under which her parents separated, they still advocated for her mother to get back together with her abusive father.

*They [extended family] weren't supportive, and they were quite – once she was separated, they would sometimes come by and say, 'Oh, you need to have – your father's important in your life, you need to see if your mum will get back with your father, or see if he will get back with your mother', which was very absurd. Knowing the situation that happened, and why they separated, I didn't understand why they thought it would be essential for her to get back with my father. I didn't understand. I didn't know why we should be a nuclear family. I didn't know that it was a nuclear family at the time, but I thought, rather than it be my mum and dad, why can't my mum just raise me if she could do a good job of it?*

Heather's extended family tried to persuade her, as a child, to convince her mother to get back together with her father. Heather discussed how unsafe she felt in the house when her parents were still together, having to witness domestic violence first hand. Her family knew about the violence, but all they cared about was that her mother should focus on maintaining a nuclear family. It did not matter that the cost of this suggestion was the health and safety of Heather, her siblings, and her mother.

Jeanette talked about the ways men are seen as the solution to the problems faced by single mothers:

*[Politicians speak about single mothers like] it's a problem that needs to be fixed. ... We need to kind of help them because they're so sort of underprivileged and they need to get them out of this terrible situation they're in. ... They're on one-person income. And that's why they don't have any money, and that's why they don't have as much money because obviously they're half of what society thinks that's kind of normal in sort of like financial terms. ... 'Oh, we need to like find them husbands to come and make them better'.*

Households with children in which there is only one income are more likely to be in poverty (Gingerbread, 2012; Hirsch, 2015). The media, political, and societal discourses that suggest that the only way to fix that poverty is for single mothers to find a husband to fit into the heterosexual norm (Rich, 1980). As Skeggs wrote (1997:120):

Heterosexuality is continually given legitimacy through its repetition and through the silencing and delegitimation of any alternatives. We are always implicated in the organizing system of heterosexuality, even if we define ourselves against it. Heterosexuality is the acceptable, dominant and for some often the only known way of speaking sexuality.

Those mothers who remain single are easily blamed for their poverty because not actively seeking a man is proof that they are, somehow, choosing destitution and are, therefore, deserving of the stigmas and social exclusion that they face.

Through the Belief in a Just World (BJW), discussed in Chapters One and Four, their poverty is constructed through dominant discourses as a choice and not an injustice (Bénabou and Tirole, 2006). Through those discourses, there are rarely ways by which a single mother living in poverty will be recognised as 'deserving'. Instead, she is usually misrecognised as outsider or 'Other', supposedly threatening the nation for having the audacity to exist without a man.

Some of the interviewees discussed the gendered differences in how single parents are constructed by the media and within society. The discourses around single fathers is very different from those around single mothers (Haire and McGeorge, 2012). Interviewees talked about how society views single fathers as 'brave' 'heroes' who should be congratulated or be given sympathy for the sacrifices they have made in order to raise their children alone. This is in sharp contrast with the judgement the interviewees said that single mothers face for making the same sacrifices. The different ways single fathers are viewed compared to single mothers highlight the gendered notions of what it means to be a father and what it means to be a mother (Doucet, 2009). Mothers are expected to be maternal and to perform motherhood in specific ways (Lawler, 2000). Caring for children is considered motherly and seen as a woman's obligation. For single fathers, their performance of the duties traditionally associated solely with motherhood becomes laudable (Haire and McGeorge, 2012). All of the participants

discussed the social norm that raising children is seen as the purview of women, that it is a maternal, feminine endeavour (Vincent, 2010). Gendered expectations of parenthood create stark contrasts between the ways single fathers and single mothers are constructed through media discourses and social norms. Within those discourses, single fathers are heroes and single mothers are villains, as these quotes from Zoe, Vera, and Jeanette highlight:

*Zoe: I think it's seen as more of a miracle that they're [single fathers] actually raising children ... I think it's because women are more, sort of more portrayed, you know, [as] caregivers and ... they're [men] more seen as you know, being the breadwinner.*

*Vera: I think the single fathers it's kind of 'Oh, he's so brave to be looking after those kids' and 'How does he do it?' and like 'It must be so difficult without a mother around'. ... Not like the rage or the anger or the resentment, there's just the empathy and sympathy ... There's also tendency to vilify single mothers and favour the single fathers.*

*Jeanette: Like, 'Oh, isn't it wonderful he's a single father!' ... 'Isn't he doing such a great job?!' Whereas single mothers it's not like that. ... [Single fathers] They're super heroes. ... They're wonderful, they're, you know, heaven sent, that's what they're described as, you know, because the woman ... who isn't there anymore. You know, whether she's passes away, she left her children, you know, or whether she chose to ... divorce her husband then not take responsibility of the children --- just [like] what a lot of men do. You know, we villainise her, we make her, you know, something really evil. And, and the dad ... steps up and takes responsibility, isn't he wonderful?*

Within the interviews, many of the participants discussed the ways single fathers are especially valorised, by the media and in society, for their parenting, including receiving adoration for accomplishing the most mundane of parental tasks. For example, in Lori's interview she said:

*[People will say] 'Look at him! Picking up his children from school!' ... Hang on for a second -- that's just what being a dad is!*

In contrast, single mothers are not praised or congratulated for their parenting practices in the same way or to the same degree. Through dominant discourses, fatherhood is viewed as a choice a man makes for which he should be commended (Vincent, 2010). Motherhood is viewed as a requirement and any mother who falls outside of the rigid set of expectations society places on her as a mother is deserving of the ridicule or poverty she faces (Vincent, 2010).

A number of the interviewees talked about single fathers constructed by the media as 'tragic' heroes deserving of sympathy because the assumption is that they are either widowers or divorcees and their former spouses were too terrible to be trusted to raise the children. That perspective is highlighted by these quotes from Marilyn, Erica, and Audrey:

*Marilyn: It's [single fatherhood] more of a tragedy that he's lost the wife and the mother of his child whereas like for single mothers it's seen like, 'Oh, she's just had millions of kids and lives with different men' that kind of thing.*

*Erica: [Society suggests] if there's a single father, what did that horrible mother do? Why did that bitch-of-a-mother leave him? Why is he a single father? So then, single fathers are always exceptional, aren't they? Even if they are on benefits because they're doing what that horrible woman never could do.*

*Audrey: I think the thing is with single fathers there's the assumption that the mum must be awful because normally in society the mum is pretty much guaranteed, you have to do something absolutely awful to have your child taken away from you. So there's this assumption that the father is somehow kind of wonderful because, you know there's this perception that mothers should be naturally maternal and that a father isn't. So therefore they've [single fathers] taken on that maternal role, you know, then they've gone out of their way to do something that kind of is against what society expects of them.*

Sarah, as both the daughter of a single mother and a single mother herself, also talked about the idea that single fathers are seen as deserving of sympathy, as if parenthood is a plight they must suffer through.

*People feel sorry for them [single fathers] in a way, 'Oh, you're as single dad? Oh, that must be really hard'. 'Oh, what's it like raising your children on your own as a father?' ... I personally think they get more of an easy ride. ... When you think of single fathers you think, 'Oh, the wife's left you' or you know, 'you've been left on your own' or 'you're widowed'. Whereas single mothers, you don't always feel like that [sympathy].*

Sarah talked about how neither she nor her mother were afforded the same sympathies she believes single fathers receive within society. Dominant discourses suggest that if a single father is not a widower, then his former partner must be a terrible person to have left him to raise the children alone. For a man to have taken on the role of sole caregiver is proof that a woman somehow failed in her duties as a woman and as a mother. When the gender roles are reversed, the single mother is not afforded the same sympathy. In both scenarios, the first in which a single

father has been, tragically, 'left' to raise his child and the second scenario in which a single mother is alone because she has either chosen her partner badly or she is not good enough to 'keep' her man, the woman is positioned as the villain. Many participants suggested that single mothers are often viewed as promiscuous and irresponsible. Unlike single fathers, the first assumption is not that a single mother is a widow or that her former partner was unfit to parent or even that she might share child rearing responsibilities equally with a former partner after a relationship has ended.

The gendered differences in parental expectations also impact all parents (Doucet, 2009). A unique perspective shared by Kiersten shined a spotlight on the ways fathers might find it challenging to perform even basic parenting tasks because social norms dictate that child rearing is a woman's responsibility:

*In some ways I think it's harder for a single father. ... The fact that baby changing facilities in public toilets are in the women's toilet. ... I think that kind of just shows that it is not expected. On the other hand, ... if you see someone that says 'I'm a single father' then you'd be acting like 'that's good, well done' ... I think it's harder for a man because the facilities and society doesn't see them as taking on that role but I think at the same time they're seen in a much more positive light because ... they're seen as being better than a single mother I'd say.*

Since fathers are not expected to be caregivers (Golombok, 2015), society is set up in ways that can disadvantage those men who do have childcare responsibilities, not just single fathers but any father who might need to change his child's nappy while out in public. The dominant discourses also do not allow for the existence of gay single parents. The social assumption for both single fathers and single mothers is that their former partners were the opposite gender. Heterosexuality is viewed as the unquestioned neutral and discourses on parenthood are heteronormative (Golombok, 2015; Muñoz, 1999; Rich, 1980). The gendered and sexual norms define and restrict which parents are recognised as legitimate and heroic and which are cast as illegitimate, deviant, and villainous.

### **Communities, schools, and extended families**

The participants had different experiences within their local communities, within their schools, and within their extended families when they were growing up as the daughters of single mothers. For the interviewees who grew up in more

working-class communities in which a diversity of family units existed, they talked about feeling like their family was accepted, as exemplified by these quotes from Heather, Sandra, Jeanette, and Katie:

*Heather: I feel my local community was fine with it, I think. There's single mothers, there's nuclear families, there's young mothers. So, I think – I think, especially, because I'm coming from London, and there are a whole variety [of families], I don't think it's looked down upon.*

*Sandra: I don't think they viewed them [single mother families] negatively, especially the small sort of set of neighbours we have with who we were really close. ... It wasn't a negative thing. It was just, you know, it was just a different way of a family. It's not a bad thing.*

*Jeanette: In my local community it's not uncommon and so it's, it's fine. I mean I live in a, in a council property and so I'm kind of surrounded by a lot of people who are into similar situations and so ... it's quite normal.*

*Katie: In my community, I think it was very much accepted. ... There's loads of single mothers. There were a lot of teenage parents, and a lot of families that were still, you know, very nuclear families. ... There was no 'Oh, I can't believe she's doing that!' You know? Also, what I really enjoyed was there was none of this 'Oh, what a strong woman raising those kids by herself'. Sometimes I find that quite patronising. ... This is just her life, you know?*

Single mother families are part of the variety of existing family units within the communities in which many of the participants were raised. A number of participants felt like their families were accepted within their local communities. As Sandra said, her neighbourhood included a variety of family units and single mother families were viewed as 'just a different way of a family' within the community. In Jeanette's example, single mother families were viewed as 'quite normal'. Katie describes her neighbourhood as including a mix of family units where there was neither judgement nor congratulations for being within a single mother family.

In contrast with the participants who felt like their community was accepting of a diversity of families, a few interviewees discussed growing up in more affluent, middle-class neighbourhoods that were not accepting of single mother families. This is illuminated by quotes from Anita and Marlys:

*Anita: I grew up in quite an affluent middle class area with lots of families or elderly couples and, I mean, anyway you could describe my neighbourhood is like a bit like Desperate Housewives. ... When it [the divorce] happened, it was very much so, everybody was kind of like, 'Oh, poor thing'. And so very overly*

*sympathetic to my mother, like, like it was this terrible, terrible thing to happen.*

*Marlys: [It was] bad. I grew up in a [London] suburb. Mum lived there before it was posh and suddenly 'ladies that lunch' and 'kept' women started moving in, and I was definitely left out because mum didn't have a man.*

Anita talked about the judgement she experienced growing up in her community. When Anita's parents divorced, the community treated the event as if it were a tragedy, a 'terrible, terrible thing to happen'. Similar to Anita, Marlys discussed growing up in a more affluent community. Even though Anita's family lived in their neighbourhood before the more middle class families moved in, she and her mother were ostracised because they did not meet the nuclear family norm.

Ahmed (2004:88) explored disgust:

When thinking about how bodies become objects of disgust, we can see that disgust is crucial to power relations. Why is disgust so crucial to power? Does disgust work to maintain power relations through how it maintains bodily boundaries? The relation between disgust and power is evident when we consider the spatiality of disgust reactions, and their role in the hierarchizing of spaces as well as bodies. ... Disgust reactions are not only about objects that seem to threaten the boundary lines of subjects, they are also about objects that seem 'lower' than or below the subject, or even beneath the subject.

Single motherhood is constructed as a 'failure' of motherhood and of womanhood (Tomás, 2012; Coltrane and Adams, 2003). They are not read as 'respectable' (Skeggs, 1997). For those living in more affluent communities, the disgust, scorn, and stigmas they may face is part of the 'us versus them' dichotomies in which the 'Us', married, middle class mothers, see 'Them', single mothers, as 'lower'. They are seen as 'disgusting Other' invading or occupying a space from which they were supposedly meant to have been excluded, such as 'respectable' middle-class neighbourhoods.

Some of the interviewees shared stories about the ways they were made to feel like they were different in school because they were the children of single mothers. Zoe talked about a memory from her primary school experience that remains vivid in her mind.

*I do remember being in primary school when we're making like cookies, and you know, [the teacher] said to make a mum and a dad and brother and sister. And 'cause my dad didn't live with me, I said I didn't have a dad. ... My family is my mum, my brother. And my teacher said, 'Well, you know, put it in*

*anyway because that's what family is like'. So I think, you know, they did sort of try and reinforce the nuclear family thing.*

In this excerpt, Zoe makes clear the ways that normative understandings of what does and what does not constitute a legitimate family were perpetuated even within a primary school classroom. Zoe was agitated while recalling the story. She was outraged that her attempt to define family by her own experience was forbidden. The teacher required her to conform to the more valued, nuclear norm, constructing Zoe's family unit as wrong, incomplete, and deviant. As Butler stated (1990:185):

The rules that govern intelligible identity, i.e., that enable and restrict the intelligible assertion of an 'I', rules that are partially structured along matrices of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, operate through *repetition*. Indeed, when the subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity.

The nuclear heterosexual family is recognised, is made intelligible, is legitimated through repetition. For Zoe, her family is rendered unrecognised, unintelligible, and illegitimate through a seemingly innocuous primary school task.

Jeanette talked about the differences between her primary school experience, where many children came from single parent families, and her secondary school experience, where she felt judged for being from a working class, single mother family:

*I went to a primary school where actually a lot of the parents are single parents because that was the area that we lived in. ... My secondary school was very different. I went to a very Catholic, very upper class school and I very much was the poor kid. So for me, from eleven to eighteen I was the poor kid, like that was my kind of tag as it were. And, and it's exhausting like exhausting to constantly think that way. So you kind of think, 'Do I want to do it for another three years? ... Do I want to have to justify myself for another three years?' [by going to University] Because obviously it's going to come up, people are going to talk about bursaries, people are going to talk about the money that they received. This is the kind of conversation every day in your life but: Do I really want to do that?*

After years of judgement for being poor, Jeanette question whether she wanted to endure another three years of judgement by choosing to go to university. Whether or not she had higher education aspirations or the aptitude to complete a degree,



one of the things that could have prevented her from going to university was the 'exhausting' judgment she anticipated from her peers.

Sarah discussed her school experience and the ways she felt ostracised and isolated because of her social class and because of her status as the child of a single mother.

*I was raised in a single-parent family, my mum was a single parent, obviously, since I was born. ... When I was at school we were segregated on different tables for lunch. ... Children from single parent families were really excluded. You know, we were, we were kind of put to one side a lot. ... For lunch time, because we got free school meals, I think there was eight of us in the school who were from single parent families, so we had to go into the canteen first and get our food and go and eat at the table. ... We went to something called Gingerbread group, which was for single parents. So with them [the children of single mothers], you know, we were quite often [pause] made to feel different, definitely made to feel different. We all used to hang around in the playground together, the eight of us. ... My mum was friends with all the other single parents. ... Looking back it almost feels like they didn't mix with the married mums.*

While free school meals and the Gingerbread group Sarah mentioned were both intended to provide support for children from working class and from single parent families, the ways Sarah experienced both contributed to her feelings of isolation. She was 'made to feel different' in school as the child of a single mother. When I went to school, my family income meant I was qualified for free school meals, but I was not made to go to the lunchroom early nor sit at a separate table. I remember that all children went through the hot lunch line together and the only difference was that I gave my name to the cashier who quietly checked me off of a list of the children receiving free school meals. Support programmes for children from lower income families and from single parent families are important, but the ways those programmes are implemented matters. Good intentions are not enough when the impact is negative.

Within the interviews, participants discussed how their extended families treated their mothers and them. Some of the interviewees talked about having supportive extended families, as illuminated by Sandra's story:

*When my mum found out she was pregnant, she first told ... my great grandma, my mum's nana. And she was really supportive. 'Don't worry, it'll be fine, you know, these things happen'. And, then, I think my mum found it really difficult to tell my nana – which I don't understand why, because she was a young mum herself, and these things happen. There's not really much you can*

*do when you are pregnant, you know? It's just one of those things. ... She was 18 when she got pregnant, 19 when she had me ... and she wasn't married, ... but they weren't too bothered. They didn't really mind. ... I think maybe people would see my mum's age for the time and think, 'Oh, she's got a child'. But people are always going to judge people, aren't they? It doesn't make her less of a person because she had me. If anything, it shaped my mum and now she's at an age where she can enjoy her life, and she's already had children.*

Sandra's extended family members were supportive of her mother when she became pregnant as a teenager. Their attitude was 'these things happen'. In contrast, a number of interviewees talked about extended family members who were judgmental and unsupportive. Amy talked about how her family reacted to her mother's pregnancy:

*It was difficult. My mum was very much left by herself for a period of time. My grandmother didn't want her to do it. The only one who was very supportive was my granddad. My nan tried desperately to stop her from having me. Tried really hard. Tried to bribe her. Just nasty, just not very nice things, which obviously I didn't know about until later in life. ... My mum ... was thirty-two. She had a job, a good job. She owned a house. She was in a better position than most nuclear units that she knew to have a kid.*

Amy discussed the fact that her grandmother was initially unsupportive of her mother's decision to continue her pregnancy and raise Amy alone, despite the fact that her mother was in her 30s, gainfully employed, and owned a home, which is contrary to the stereotypes most often associated with single mothers. Amy's grandmother tried to bribe her mother into having an abortion. In the interview, Amy clarified that she believes her grandmother wanted her mother to have an abortion so that her grandmother did not have to face the shame of her unwed daughter having a baby. While her grandmother came to accept her mother's decision to carry her pregnancy to term and played a part in raising Amy, her aunts and uncles cut ties with Amy's mother. To this day, the extended family members still refuse to engage in a relationship with Amy or her mother. The stigma associated with her mother's status as a single mother became a burden to bear for both mother and daughter with the extended family still fixated on the shame they believe single motherhood brought upon them. It did not matter how Amy's mother performed 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997) in other ways – owning a home, having a good job, and being in her thirties – she was still 'just a slut' and therefore unworthy of a relationship with the extended family members.

Like Amy, there were additional participants who discussed the ways that they felt judged and ostracised within their own extended families. The negative social construction of single mother families is not simply presented and promoted from the outside by faceless forces like the media and society, it can also be found in the words and actions of those nearest and dearest to single mothers and their children, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Anita's mother's family supported her and her children when the relationship ended. However, she did not feel supported from her father's family.

*My mum's family were very happy. They didn't like my dad and my parents don't speak, my two families don't speak. ... My dad's family hated my mum. [They] didn't really speak to me ... or my sister about it. They very much brushed off the whole event and then when my dad sort of moved in with his mistress and had two children, ... me and my sister were very much ignored in the whole process. We weren't told about it. And you know, I go to my grandma's [father's mother] house and you know, maybe once or twice a year, and she sits down and talks about, you know, my dad's new children and what they do and all these things. Then I started going, 'Me and my sister are doing quite well for ourselves'.*

Anita discussed the ways she felt unsupported by her father's family and she talked about her grandmother bragging about her father's younger children to her.

In my life, when I was little, my mother used to bring me over my father's parents' home. After my father finished serving prison time and married another woman, photographs of his new children replaced mine on the walls of his parents' house. They would refer to my father's younger daughter as my sister, even though I had never met her. Yet, they referred to my brother, who was being raised in the same household as me, as my *half* brother. They would correct me and insist he was my *half* brother not simply my brother and their other granddaughter was my sister, not my half sister. For them, the children their son made were somehow more legitimate, no matter that we had different mothers, but the son my mother had by another man was merely my *half* brother and not just my brother.

Similar to Anita, Katie discussed how different sides of her extended family reacted to her parents' divorce.

*My dad's parents, my gram and my grandpa, it's very strange because they almost cut my mum out completely when the divorce occurred. ... The only time we were with the extended family on my dad's side recently was when my gram actually died. It was at the funeral. Even then, there was – from my dad's sort of extended family ... were like, 'Why is [Katie's mother] here? Why*

*is his ex-wife here?' And my mum was like, 'I knew her for years'. Like, 'Why shouldn't I be here?' That was, you know, for me, that was really strange, because from my mum's side, there's never been any of that. ... We have cousins on my dad's side, and it felt like, you know, they were still getting Christmas presents and birthday presents. Me and my little sister were like, 'Well, we're still here'. ... I was just a bit like, why should we be getting persecuted for something that is completely out of our control?*

Like Anita, Katie felt 'persecuted' by her father's side of the family after her parents divorced. Her and her younger sister were left out and punished for the end of her parents' relationship. Katie talked about the positive impact of her parents' divorce on her and her sister.

*My best friend from high school, she's still in a nuclear family. The only reason her parents are still together is because of the children. And I'm like, that's a really dangerous situation to be in, because if my mum and dad had stayed in that position, I wouldn't have enjoyed it. I remember the arguments. It's like, I would have hated to have had any longer with that than I did. It's quite frustrating because my mum and dad now have respective partners, and they're far happier with their respective partners than I've ever seen them ... It's sometimes not best for the children. I definitely think if my parents had stayed together, I would have ended up not coming to university ... because I wouldn't have wanted to leave my little sister ... in that environment.*

In this excerpt, Katie challenged the popular suggestion that women should stay in deteriorating or abusive relationships 'for the sake of the children' (Coltrane and Adams, 2003). In her case, the end of the relationship brought happiness for Katie, her sister, and both of her parents. In Stacy's experience, her grandmother was against her mother getting a divorce 'for the sake of the children':

*I do remember, though, that my nan, was very against my mother seeking a divorce. She felt as though, for the sake of myself and my sisters, my mother should remain married. I do also remember the financial implications attached to my father leaving. My mother worked long hours to compensate, so there was increased demands on myself, as the oldest child, to help care for my sisters and help around the house. I imagine that neighbours and friends did notice the fact we had less, but I never felt inferior. I realised that some of my friends, that had both parents at home, appeared to have less happy home lives.*

While the end of the relationship meant that her mother had to work more to provide for her and her sisters, Stacy, like Katie, felt like her family was happier after the divorce.

A few of the interviewees talked about their extended families judging their mothers for having children with different men, which was true within my family as well, and their stories are exemplified by these quotes from Amber and Lori:

*Amber: They [my extended family] used to look down on my mum, and used to think she was crazy. They'd think: 'Why would she keep having children?', because she had six children without having a man around.*

*Lori: [My extended family was not supportive] because my sister and me, we have separate dads, so me and my sister actually believed that one of the major reasons that my mum actually moved with this [new] boyfriend ... [was] because she didn't want to be seen as like a tart or slag or a slut [by the family].*

Among the participants who had siblings from different fathers, they talked about this as a compounding factor in the judgment and stigmas their families faced. There seemed to be a great divide, in their experiences, between single mothers with one child or with multiple children with the same man compared to a single mother who had children with different men. By their accounts, the scorn a single mother family faces is magnified by this difference. As Skeggs wrote (1997:123):

Shame involves a recognition of the judgement of others and awareness of social norms: one measures oneself against the standards established by others. The discourses of shame is one of the most insidious means by which women come to recognize, regulate and control themselves through their bodies.

The participants who have siblings from different fathers did not discuss being ashamed of this fact, but they did talk about this distinction being a source of judgement for which their mothers faced ridicule and scorn.

Heather discussed the ways her family distanced themselves from her mother after her parents separated. Her father had been violent and abusive and, after they separated, her extended family were not supportive.

*I don't know if they were very happy about it. I know my mum, ... she was very isolated. She doesn't really talk to my uncles and aunts anymore. They weren't very supportive when she first became a single mother. I mean, she talks to them now, but they were not supportive at first because they are quite traditional and they thought, 'Oh, she should have a husband'. She hasn't remarried either. ... I don't feel they are very supportive or very happy that she became a single mother.*

After surviving domestic violence, when Heather's mother and her children needed the support of their extended family, the family distanced themselves. They

believed that a woman should remain in a 'traditional' nuclear family even at the cost of her and her children's safety. Having a man, even an abusive man, was more important than Heather and her family being free from danger and harm. For them, it was better that Heather's mother endured the bruises and risked her life and the lives of her children than for her to have the audacity to besmirch the family's good name by ending the marriage and becoming a single mother. The greater sin was not the man who raised his fist but the woman who said 'Enough'.

### **Countering the social construction of single mother families**

After discussing the ways single mothers and their families are constructed, I asked each woman what they wish people knew about their mother and their family. Many respondents talked about wanting people to know how hard their mothers worked, as illuminated by these quotes from Stacy, Julie, and Heather:

*Stacy: I do wish that more people recognised how hard my mother worked to provide for us and how, even though she was often busy, she always strived to ensure that we didn't go without. She would sacrifice her own needs in order to meet ours.*

*Julie: I just would like people who have never been in that situation to appreciate how hard it is for a single mother to get out of that cycle, never being able to have their own money, really, or feel worthy or respected from other people.*

*Heather: I wish they knew that it's very hard. I wish that one day they [politicians] could experience it for themselves, or at least be, there'd be a single mum politician or a single father politician to represent for single mums and single fathers out there. ... I think there should be at least, one day, there should be a single mother or single father running for Prime Minister and say, 'Look, a nuclear family doesn't always need to be needed'.*

Heather's example of a future Prime Minister who is a single mother is not without precedent. Former president of Iceland Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was a single mother and she was 'the world's first democratically elected female head of state' (Cochrane, 2011). A number of presidents of the United States have been raised by single mothers, such as Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Andrew Jackson, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington (Hoskinson, 2014).

Some of the participants talked about how normal their families are and how they wish the world understood that family units are diverse, as exemplified by these quotes from Simone and Angie:

*Simone: It's not really anything to be ashamed of or looked down on or it's not even unfortunate, you know. I'm sure in many cases, single mother families are better than the conventional one.*

*Angie: I'd just like them think that it's completely normal, just as normal as their family but kind of lacking one member. ... There's probably a lot more similarities than differences.*

Many participants expressed a desire for the world to understand that their family and lived experiences were 'normal' for them. They wanted to counter the dominant discourses that construct their families as failures, as inferior, or as deviant. Stone-Mediatore discussed the ways that narratives that counter normative discourses can act to disrupt what is taken for granted as 'truth' or 'familiar' (2009:129):

Those life stories that struggle to articulate and contextualize experienced contradictions can offer images and narrative matrices that help readers view the same world with a different focus; that is, to 'see' their familiar world with greater sensitivity to elements unintelligible within hegemonic history.

The participants in this study want to disrupt the stereotypes and stigmas created outside of them that inform what is believed to be known about them. Their own stories, illuminating the many and multi-faceted ways families are formed, provide a more complex, nuanced understanding of what it means to be the daughter of a single mother.

## **Conclusion**

Within this chapter, I have explored the ways that single mother families are negatively socially constructed through the media, through politicians, within society, and within communities and families. The dominant discourses that produce one homogenous category of 'single mother' limits the possibility of deeper understandings of individual experiences. The women in this study discussed the ways they feel their families and they, themselves, are misrecognised through those discourses and the dehumanising stereotypes they produce. Through the dominant neoliberal notions that contribute to false dichotomies, like 'deserving and undeserving' and 'us versus them', inequalities are continually produced and reproduced without interruption (Richardson, 2009). The stories the participants tell offer the possibility of countering the narratives that construct

them as inferior 'Others', as 'threats to the nation'. In stark contrast against the social construction of single mother families, they assert their worth and their legitimacy as individuals and as families. In the next chapter, I will explore the university experiences of the daughters of single mothers and whether the social construction of the participants' families impacted their experiences within the academy.



## **Chapter Six: 'Should I be here?': Daughters experiencing higher education**

In the previous chapter, I discussed the social construction of single mother families through the interviews with and reflective writings from the daughters of single mothers. Within this chapter, I explore the university experiences of the interviewees. I illuminate the ways their experiences are shaped by the social construction of single mother families. This chapter is focused on answering the second research questions of this study: How compatible is that social construction of single mothers and their families with the higher education aspirations and participation of the daughters of single mothers? Does their family experience shape their higher education aspirations and experiences and, if so, in what ways?

Academia has been partly complicit in the negative social construction of single mothers and their families by almost exclusively discussing their educational achievements in negative terms, positioning them as lacking educational aspirations and as deficient because of their family background. Many research studies fail to question the assumption, held as truth, that the married, heterosexual nuclear family form is best for children's educational outcomes. Yet, as Biblarz and Stacey found (2010:17):

Current claims that children need both a mother and father are spurious because they attribute to the gender of parents benefits that correlate primarily with the number and marital status of a child's parents since infancy. At this point no research supports the widely held conviction that the gender of parents matters for child well-being. To ascertain whether any particular form of family is ideal would demand sorting a formidable array of often inextricable family and social variables. We predict that even "ideal" research designs will find instead that ideal parenting comes in many different genres and genders.

Most of the available research focused on family makeup and the higher education participation of children suggests that the children of single mothers are less likely to participate in higher education (Lee, Almonte, and Youn, 2012; Martin, 2012; Wojtkiewicz, 2011; Ringback Weitof, Hjern, and Rosen, 2004; Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Yet, recent research suggests that previous studies have ignored the complex variables that can account for

lower rates of higher education participation among the children of single mothers, such as higher rates of poverty (Hampden-Thompson and Galindo, 2015). Why are the children of single mothers discussed within academia so often through discourses of deficit?

Academia has also been partly complicit in the ways certain students are constructed as legitimate in higher education while other groups of students, especially underrepresented students, are constructed as illegitimate (Burke, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Leathwood and Read, 2009; Burke and Jackson, 2007; Bowl, 2003; Read, Archer, and Leathwood, 2003). As Bowl wrote (2003: 125):

The habitus related to educational practices and policies may be unthinking, taken for granted, habitual. It could be argued that this explains the apparent contradiction between an institutional language which speaks of inclusion, and educational experiences which appear to exclude ethnic minority pupils from working class backgrounds and university students who do not fit the standard profile of the undergraduate: eighteen-year-old, white and middle class.

In spring 2015, I was a seminar tutor for a qualitative research methods module for second year undergraduate sociology students. I created a classroom activity to promote discussion about the impact of discourse. The students were divided into pairs and I asked each pair to 'design a student and professor based on media discourses of the qualities and characteristics of the most valued, stereotypically 'good' student and professor in the UK'. I gave them a worksheet with identity categories and characteristics to complete for their imagined student and professor (Appendix I). Twenty-four students participated, including two men and twenty-two women; 6 BME (Black Minority Ethnic) students and 18 white students; and one mature student. According to their perceptions of media discourses, all of the 'ideal' professors they created were middle aged or older, married, heterosexual, white, middle-class, mostly able-bodied (apart from a few who wore glasses) cisgender men. Out of the twelve 'ideal' students that they created, around half were cisgender men and half were cisgender women, but they were all traditional-aged, heterosexual, white, middle-class, and able-bodied. Following the exercise, the class discussion focused on the impact the idealised norms have on students who do not fit the criteria. We also discussed the student activist campaign, *Why is My Curriculum White?*, which is focused on challenging

the ways normative discourses are perpetuated through higher education (UCLTV, 2014).

Within academia, working class students (McKay and Devlin, 2015) and BME students (Mirza, 1997) are constructed through discourses of deficit. That certain students are constructed through discourses as more valued and more legitimate is reflected in university admissions, as Leathwood and Read reported (2009:50):

Older women and minority ethnic applicants are less likely to get places at university than other UVAS applicants, with women making up 66.2 per cent of the 'no offer' group'.

For the underrepresented students who do enter university, their experiences and feelings of belonging can be impacted by systemic inequalities embedded within higher education policies and practices (Burke, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Furlong and Cartmel, 2009; Bowl, 2003; Read, Archer, and Leathwood, 2003). As Hinton-Smith wrote (2012:297):

Mechanisms of exclusion continue to marginalise WP [Widening Participation] students once they have gained access into the academy, and hence the ambitious project we face of dismantling long-established cultures of exclusion in order to reconstruct them [universities] as more egalitarian pillars of learning for all.

The main focus of this study is to address the void within existing research that leaves out the stories and experiences of the daughters of single mothers who do enter the ivory tower. The subthemes covered within this chapter are titled: Social expectations; Education and worth; Aspirations and inspirations; and Belonging. The subtheme of Belonging is further divided into the subsections titled: Belonging and accents; Belonging and knowledge; Belonging and social class; and Belonging and self-doubts.

## **Social expectations**

In the previous chapter, I explored the negative social construction of single mothers and their families. When I asked the participants what they thought society expected of them to become or what society expected them to achieve based on the fact that they are each the daughter of a single mother, all of them stated that society expected negative outcomes for them. The outcomes and

expectations of underrepresented students were also seen as low in the study by Bowl (2003), who found that students from working class and Black Minority Ethnic backgrounds were discouraged from pursuing higher education. This subsection answers both of the research questions posed in this chapter, but especially the second, Does their family experience shape their higher education aspirations and experiences and, if so, in what ways? Many interviewees in this study said they thought that society expected them to become single mothers themselves and to live in council flats on benefits, as highlighted by these quotes from Kelly, Anita, and Jeanette:

*Kelly: I think sometimes they think that the children will be the same, so all the daughters will be single parents as well.*

*Anita: It seems to me like if a girl grows up in a single parent family, she's expected to be a single parent. If a guy grows up in a single parent family, he's expected to turn out a mess because he has no male role model.*

*Jeanette: [Society expects] that we're going to have babies. That, you know, obviously our mums were not clever enough to hold on to a man then, or ... we must be a bit dim-witted as well.*

Some research findings in the 1980s suggested that daughters of single mothers were more likely to become single mothers themselves compared to their peers growing up in nuclear families (McLanahan, 1988; Mueller and Cooper, 1986). However, there have not been recent studies to support that those findings have persisted. The social expectation that daughters of single mothers will become single mothers themselves sets limits on their life prospects not only when it comes to their educational and career potential but also their romantic prospects, as Jeanette said, they are viewed as 'not clever enough to hold on to a man'. Some of the interviewees discussed society seeing them as 'damaged' or having 'issues' as a result of being raised by a single mother, as evidenced by these quotes from Audrey and Jeanette:

*Audrey: There's kind of an assumption that their children are damaged if they don't have a mum and a dad. ... If you're supposedly damaged it would imply that you wouldn't be able to get on as well in life.*

*Jeanette: there's this idea that it's [being in a single mother family] some kind of terrible turmoil, that we're all kind of suffering through it, you know, and we're going to end up with ... issues because we haven't had a father. ... As*

*much as I love my mum, the fact that she's a single mother has nothing to do with me as a person. ... How do we fix these broken views?*

Some of the participants talked about society expecting them to become criminals or addicted to drugs or alcohol, as highlighted by these quotes from Lori and Anita:

*Lori: Poverty borne of poverty creates more poverty. ... It means you're automatically given things that you're 'allowed' to do. So technically I'm allowed to be a criminal or a commoner ... for the rest of my life. Those are my options. Or have a kid!*

*Anita: [According to the society] if you come from a single parent family you're more likely to take drugs, not get an education, be an alcoholic. And I sit down and think: I'm in education and not an alcohol or drug addict.*

Some of the participants talked about society expecting them to accomplish very little during their lives, as emphasised by these quotes from Sandra and Jeanette:

*Sandra: You're from a single mother family. You're not going to amount to much.*

*Jeanette: I feel like, you know, that I'm not expected to achieve as much because I'm from a single parent family. So I mean like, it would almost be okay if I did not bother going to university because obviously I was from a single parent family—which is just ridiculous!*

As was evidenced in the previous chapter, popular public discourses suggest that the typical and most highly-valued family unit is the nuclear family, consisting of a heterosexual married mother and father raising their children without government assistance. Those who exist outside those norms, such as single mothers and their children, are scorned and punished through negative social constructions and misrecognitions (Butler, 1997). The daughters of single mothers are misrecognised as future addicts and criminals destined to live in council houses on benefits and become single mothers themselves. All of the women in this study talked about society expecting very little of them. Their status as the daughter of a single mother marked them and dominant discourses perpetuated a cycle of misrecognition, viewing them as incapable, as unintelligent, and as deviant. The negative social expectations the participants discussed impact upon how they feel about themselves, as highlighted by this quote from Amber:

*It does have an impact, because if you're constantly told like, if the media says that you're a scrounger and you're no good, then you can ... take that on board.*

Misrecognitions and low expectations are placing limits on the lives of many prospective students from underrepresented backgrounds (Burke, 2015). This is highlighted through Erica's quote when she talked about the ways her life has been negatively impacted because she was not expected or encouraged to be 'academic':

*Before I started in Uni it was just important because it was the only way I could become a teacher. Of course, you need that qualification. But now, actually having been through Uni, it's the social justice side of it. It's the fact that now I have a lot of opportunities. ... I was expected, from the family I was in, not to go to Uni. ... So for me now going back into education, that's what's important to me—education. It's everything, isn't it? You know. ... It's been a major key to change my opportunities. ... You know, I was never kind of encouraged to do academic and I'm excellent at the academic side of it and all. And I'm actually quite angry about that, you know, Jessica, because my whole education was leading me to a point that I was expected to get to, and actually that's not the point that's right for me. ... I'm so frustrated today because ... I could have been doing this for a long time now!*

Erica expressed her frustration at approaching her undergraduate graduation as a mature student when she believes she had the aptitude and aspirations to have gone to university as a traditional age student. She just needed someone to believe in her and encourage her instead of facing messages that university was not for people like her. The ways the participants feel misrecognised within society can easily become internalised. How are they meant to see their own value when society suggests they are worthless? How are they meant to develop higher education aspirations when they feel constantly constructed through discourses of deficit? As Burke wrote (2015:393):

Misrecognition is a potent concept to help shed light on the subtle and insidious ways that different bodies and personhoods (or subjectivities) are positioned, constructed and mobilized across pedagogical spaces through practices of symbolic violence, such as shaming. In such contexts, students marked out as different are continually at risk of being relocated as 'undeserving' and 'unworthy' of higher education participation.

Who is and who is not seen as legitimate or worthy within society impacts upon the ways those individuals see themselves as deserving or undeserving of educational aspirations (Burke, 2015; Hinton-Smith, 2012). Those who are misrecognised through stereotypes, who are constructed through shame, can be marked as 'Other' not just before they enter university, but also through discourses and university practices once they are there (Burke, 2015; Read, Archer, and Leathwood, 2003).

## Education and worth

Within the interviews, I asked the participants the question: What does a university degrees say about a person? I purposely worded the question so that it was about their thoughts and feelings about the worth of an educated person in general, allowing them to talk more broadly and, perhaps, detached from themselves. Some interviewees talked about people with a university degree in terms like ‘committed’, ‘dedicated’, and ‘hard working’, such as these quotes from Jeanette and Katie:

*Jeanette: [A university degree indicates] that they're committed, I mean that's three years and there are always—there are going to be times in that three years when things are going to get really tough. And I think if you managed to stay on the course then it says something about you. It says that you're a kind of determined person. ... We live in a world where education is really valued especially in Britain and it opens a lot of doors. And I think it's really important to make yourself ... employable.*

*Katie: I think it says that they're dedicated. They know what ... they want to be and where they want to go. It also shows that they have commitment as well, and ... for like, employers it shows them that they're willing to put in the graft. It is hard work.*

Some of the participants talked about not seeing someone with a university degree as better than someone without one, as illuminated by these quotes from Anita and Sandra:

*Anita: I think for somebody to get a degree, I don't, I don't necessarily see them as being better or cleverer than someone without a degree.*

*Sandra: I think people put a lot of emphasis on having their degree. ... Just because somebody hasn't gone to a university doesn't mean that they haven't done a lot of things that make them equally as good, you know? ... It shows that they can put in the hard work, because a degree is not easy, but ... I don't think it's everything about a person.*

For some participants, it was important for them to make clear that earning a degree does not make a person superior to someone without one. In this way, they are resisting neoliberal discourses that suggest that higher education is the ‘correct’ path to take in life (Burke, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Burke and Jackson, 2007). As the participants suggest, an individual’s worth cannot be judged on their participation in higher education alone. Since all of the participants in this study

are first-generation students, those who would be judged through neoliberal discourses for non-participation in higher education would include their family members.

A few of the participants discussed how the subject area someone chooses to pursue or the 'kind of degree' someone earns influences what people think about them and their educational accomplishments, as highlighted by these quotes from Amy and Marilyn:

*Amy: I think it's different, depending on the degree, because when I say I've got one in Sociology, sometimes I get a bad reception, ... but as soon as someone says maths or physics, that's quite a legitimate degree to have. So, I mean, you get more respect with that. You mention the social sciences, you have to justify your degree and your choices. I always feel like I have to prove that I know what I'm talking about. ... I'm not sure what it means to have a degree anymore, because most people own them now. ... Having a degree, now, is just kind of standard.*

*Marilyn: I think it means they're like committed because they're like studying three years. ... Actually doing something like that they didn't have to do but they've chosen to want to do [a degree]. ... I guess if you get a really, really good degree that means you're really clever but any kind of degree is just like commitment really, I think.*

In Amy's experience, certain subjects are viewed as more 'legitimate' for study than others and she has felt the need to justify her choice to pursue a social science. She also discussed the fact that having a degree is 'standard' now, indicating that most people have one. Marilyn talked about higher education as a choice rather than an expectation that everyone will undertake.

## **Aspirations and inspirations**

The interviewees discussed their educational aspirations and why they chose to go to university. Their aspirations, hopes, and dreams about higher education varied widely among them. For some participants, going to university was something they felt was expected of them, which challenges the dominant discourses through which underrepresented students are constructed as in deficit (Burke, 2015). These quotes from Jeanette, Sandra, and Kiersten highlight the topic:

*Jeanette: It wasn't really a conscious decision and I just think I always just assumed that I would because it just seemed like sort of natural next step. I've always been quite academic person so that's always seemed quite natural.*



*Sandra: I never really decided to go to university. I was following advice [from school] and I was going to do it. It wasn't, 'Oh, I might go'. It's, 'Oh, I'm going'. The choice of degree was a hard one, but going to university was never really a thing [I had to choose]. ... I think it's because it was, it was what you did. You go from primary school to high school to college to university. ... Without university, now, it's difficult to get a job.*

*Kiersten: It was always kind of an option. ... The teachers are quite encouraging and my family is quite encouraging as well. So it's just kind of always like the next thing to do.*

While some participants saw attending university as a 'natural next step', there were others for whom the decision to go to university was consciously made. Amy talked about her higher education aspirations being deeply influenced by a university visit she participated in while at school.

*We were taken on a trip in year nine to [University Name], actually, and that's when I decided that I'd really like to go to Uni. I'd never really thought about it practically in terms of money or anything else. I don't think until that point, my mum had considered it as an option. Then, when I got to college, I talked about it and it just seemed like the natural progression, because I did quite well in school, and then went to college and did quite well in college. It just seemed natural to go on, so I decided I wanted to do that route and stay. It just made sense.*

While Amy and her mother had not considered university as an option until the school trip, the progression on to higher education 'seemed natural'. Amy discussed trip in depth during the interview.

*I'd never seen a university. I'd seen university in films and things, but I'd never been to a Uni. It was quite interesting to see what it was like. It was interesting to talk to students when you're in year nine. I was about thirteen, talking to people about how they'd found it and how they'd got there. It was inspirational for us, I guess, as a group. It was just the top set that they'd taken in our school.*

Amy had no concept of university life or what to expect from a higher education experience apart from what she had seen in films. She found the opportunity to visit a university to be 'inspirational'. The trip left a lasting impact and influenced her decision to go to university. While it might not have been an initial expectation her family had for her, Amy's school promoted higher education as a choice through the organised trip. Similar to Amy's experience, Lori decided to go to university because of a programme in school.

*When I was twelve years old. ... We had career talks in secondary school and I wanted to be a doctor ... and I realised I obviously have to go to Uni to do that. So, but I've ended up going to a completely different direction when I actually went to university, I did an art degree. ... I'm more creative and ... it was the much better choice.*

While Lori switched her career path, her choice to go to university was influenced by her school promoting different career options. Higher education as a route towards more career opportunities was discussed by a number of interviewees, as highlighted by these quotes from Katie, Heather, Lori, and Kalila:

*Katie: I knew that I wanted to go to university from probably about the age of thirteen. ... I knew I wanted to do something academic-related. I didn't want to end up just staying in the same town and getting a full time job. ... I studied chemistry, so I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I knew I had to go through university in order to get there. The sort of aspiration was always there.*

*Heather: Sometime around when I was in secondary school, so about year nine, that's when I kind of decided, I knew that I wanted to go to university. And then, as I just progressed and I saw the economy was getting worse, I think university seemed to be the only option, as I knew if I left secondary school now, or I left college now, I know for a fact it would be very hard to get a well-paid job. So, I thought university probably would open up new opportunities.*

*Lori: I thought to myself, 'Well, I'm good at this. I'm good at learning. I can carry on with this' and from there on I thought, well to me it was 'The more you learn, the better job you get'. So I wanted a better future for my [future] children.*

*Kalila: It gives me some stability in life as well. Like if you have a degree, you're always better off in life than someone who doesn't have a degree in this economy.*

For a number of participants, they believed their career goals were only attainable with a university degree. Sarah talked about being unemployed and having 'no prospects' when she decided to go to university.

*I had been made redundant from a job I was doing. ... When my son started school, I met up with another mama, she was doing [an] occupational therapy [degree] and she kind of encouraged me to go and do a year in here [university]. So, I had no job, I had nothing, not really, no prospects for what I wanted to do in life without having to go and get a degree for myself.*

The influence of her peer who was pursuing a degree as a mature student made Sarah realise that university was an option for her. As a single mother, Sarah's

career-driven incentive for pursuing higher education mirrors findings from Hinton-Smith (2012), showing that single mothers participating in higher education were often motivated by the possibility of career development and a capacity to earn higher wages. Stacy, who is also a single mother, talked about aspiring to go to university so that she could further her career, just like Sarah. However, her university experiences have made her realise that higher education offers so much more than a career path.

*When I began my study I did feel as though it were a means to an end, a way of improving the lives of myself and my family. Being able to find employment in an area that I would find interesting and stimulating, rather than just working to get by. While I do still strive for this, I ultimately feel that my experience as a student has already given me so much more than I ever imagined. I had always spoken to my mother about returning to education and I remember, very clearly, the way my mother talked about the regret she had over not pursuing her interests/passions. She had always felt it was not possible for her to follow this path and then one day it just seemed too late, as though she had missed her opportunity. She would stress that I should not allow this to happen to me and that she believed I could achieve all that I wished for.*

Stacy did not want to miss the opportunity that her mother had missed. She believed that pursuing a degree would offer her the chance to pursue a career that was more fulfilling than 'just working to get by'. Only after spending time at university did she realise that the university experience was more than just 'employability'.

A few participants talked about developing the desire to attend university from within and not from outside encouragement, as discussed by Erica and Jeanette:

*Erica: Everything I've achieved is off my own back from being smart enough to see, actually, I'm not going to do anything unless I do it by myself.*

*Jeanette: I haven't really had a sort of mentor figure in my life, really. I've never been given any advice or encouragement from other people. My education has been a kind of thing that I sort out on my own.*

In addition to the participants who talked about needing to be self-reliant in pursuit of their educational dreams, a few of the women in this study talked about their mothers being apathetic or discouraging of their educational aspirations. For example, Lori's mother abandoned her at the age of fifteen and Lori became legally emancipated by the age of seventeen. In Amber's interview, she said: 'My mum has

*no interest in education, so she hasn't really influenced me at all*'. For a few of the participants, like Lori and Amber, they faced the additional challenge of pursuing higher education without a strong support network, which Hinton-Smith (2012) found could have a negative impact on higher education aspirations.

Most of the participants talked about the importance of mother's support for their higher education aspirations. Some of the participants discussed the ways their mothers pushed them towards educational success, as highlighted through these quotes from Kalila and Debra:

*Kalila: Education wise, she's always been that person that I've always looked up to. ... She definitely always said 'Be focused, do you work, revise, keep your head down, and do it to the best of your ability. ... If you're going to do something, do it right'. That's always been her motto. ... She's always instilled in me the fact that I should do my best and that I shouldn't just settle for mediocrity ... especially with education.*

*Debra: My mum pushed me very hard in all aspects of education, probably because she realised the benefit of doing well at school, getting good grades, going to Uni and getting a high-paid or worthwhile job.*

Some of the participants talked about their mothers encouraging them, but wanting them to make their own choices, as Katie's and Kiersten's quotes highlight:

*Katie: My mum's always been very supportive of me. She's always been like, 'If this is what you want to do, go for it'. She, herself, she never went to university. [She says] 'I'm so proud of you for going to university. But ... If, at any point, when you go to university, you don't feel like that's what you want to do, ... don't feel ashamed or embarrassed that [you] might have to drop out'. It's a lot of pressure and a lot of decision making to make when you're like, seventeen. This is what you want to do with the rest of your life.*

*Kiersten: She's kind of just being encouraging in a way that she's just always said sort of, "Whatever you want to do, you can do it." She hasn't been, hasn't been pushy or anything like that.*

Katie's mother let her know that there was no shame if she discovered that university was not the place she wanted to be. As Katie said, choosing to go to university is a big decision to make at such a young age for traditional aged students. That her mother supported her no matter what took the pressure off. Similarly, Kiersten did not feel like her mother pushed her too hard, but she did feel encouraged. Stacy also talked about the encouragement she received from her

mother as she worked towards higher education as a mature student and as a single mother herself.

*My mother encouraged me all the way and continued to do so while I was completing my access course. Sadly, she passed away the day before I discovered I had passed and was therefore granted a place on my degree of choice.*

Stacy chose to be interviewed over email because of the fairly recent loss of her mother. Her mother's support and encouragement was monumental for Stacy.

All of the single mother participants in Standing's study (1999:71) 'wanted the best for their child' when it comes to their education. However, as Standing wrote (1999:71):

It is impossible to talk about lone mothers' involvement in schooling in isolation from the deficit discourses of lone motherhood, notions of 'good mothering' and general social and education policies which uphold and reinforce normative discourses on motherhood and family. Lone mothers' understandings of parental involvement are mediated by their class and 'race' position, social support and their structural and discursive positioning within a racially structured patriarchal capitalism, as well as by family structure.

That most of the women in this study talked about the positive influence their mothers had on their educational aspirations is unsurprising to me, but their narratives contradict dominant discourses that position their mothers as uninvolved and uninterested in their children's educational outcomes.

In addition to family encouragement, some of the participants talked about the impact teachers had on their higher education aspirations, as highlighted by this quote from Lori:

*I wanted to teach people. ... My college was a huge turning point for me. ... I had the most support from two college lecturers. They were amazing, amazing people and I mean, if it hadn't been for them I probably wouldn't have carried on to university. So, I mean, I wanted [to become a teacher] to tell other people, 'You can do this'.*

Lori was inspired by teachers who believed in her and that helped her develop a passion to become a teacher herself so she could inspire students like her to realise their potential. This finding is consistent with research that suggests that supportive individuals, such as parents and teachers, can have a strong, positive impact on the educational aspirations of students (Hinton-Smith, 2012). Katie was

also inspired by a teacher, who encouraged her to continue on a science career path:

*He [teacher] actually told my mother to make sure that I stuck with science, because we did ... a class test. ... The way my mind worked, the teacher said: 'It's so logical. It's very rare to see it in a woman', he told my mum at a parent-teacher meeting. So she's had that at the back of her mind when she's encouraging me.*

While Katie is proud to be 'rare' among women, the story she tells about her male teacher implying that women are inherently illogical and less intelligent than men in the sciences sounds too familiar, perhaps because it is based on the same outdated myths that kept women out of higher education for centuries. The perpetuation of gendered notions of rationality and intelligence constructs female students as less capable than and inferior to male students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields and contributes to continued inequalities in the classroom and beyond (Walkerdine, 1988).

Some of the participants discussed wanting to go to university to prove that they are just as smart as anyone else, as illuminated by these quotes from Anita and Sarah:

*Anita: I think for me, a lot of people said that I wouldn't [go to university] so it became ... 'No, I'm gonna prove you all wrong'. ... My dad told me that I couldn't. It felt rubbish. And it's really the nicest word I can use to describe it. (laughs).*

*Sarah: It's [the media's stereotypes] probably one of the reasons why I wanted to go into education and make something of myself, just sort of almost give a big [obscene hand gesture] to you guys! [laughs] You know, I might be a single parent but it doesn't mean that I'm a nothing. And I feel the media sometimes portrays us as 'Can't work, won't work'. And that's not the case at all. ... There are so many reasons why people become single parents. ... Sometimes I feel that we are all kind of, you know, hooked with the same stick in a way -- scrounging on the benefits in our lovely council houses and it's not like that at all.*

Like Anita and Sarah, some participants were partly driven by their desire to prove that they are worthy. Adair, a working-class, single mother who survived domestic violence, wrote about her personal experience of going to university and her desire to counter the ways she had been misrecognised (2008:2):

*My intimate understanding of this inviolate and closed cycle helped me to reframe childhood memories of being marked as 'trash', 'unworthy', 'dirty'*

and 'illegitimate'. I became convinced that if I could only go back to school, I might be better able to understand, contextualize and counter this cycle; and that through higher education I could acquire the knowledge, skills and the authority needed to disrupt this ubiquitous, self-replicating, and nearly impenetrable cyclical force of power.

For some participants, higher education becomes like a battle ground where they can finally fight to prove they are worthy, prove they are legitimate. They see academia as a space where they can resist the dominant discourses through which they feel misrecognised (Burke, 2012).

## **Belonging**

Belonging is a major theme running through the findings of this research. The construction of who is and who is not legitimate within university, and, therefore, who does and who does not belong, is perpetuated through the media and through higher education policies and practices (Read, Archer, and Leathwood, 2003). Belonging is a big umbrella under which many subthemes emerged in this study. Within this section, I explore the many ways the participants' discussed belonging, or not belonging, in higher education. Belonging in the forms of subtle reminders that the daughters of single mothers are not the norm in university, such as university and student loan forms that ask for detailed information about mothers and fathers. Belonging in the form of overt reminders, such as fellow students suggesting that students who receive bursaries are getting undeserved 'free money'. As well as belonging in the form of external reminders, such as students making fun of those with accents that are associated with being working class. Additionally, belonging in the form of internalised struggles, such as students refraining from participating in class discussions because they are afraid that they are not smart enough. Who is seen as legitimate in higher education is constructed through dominant neoliberal discourses, as Taylor wrote (2012:3):

The talented student ... is often seen to be able to choose a path through precariousness, to carve out a new, even more deserving, position. They can cope, the resilient and enterprising worker. ... Being 'good enough', even 'better than', shapes and structures the kinds of politics, performances and investments that are possible.

Constructed norms around who is legitimate as a student collide for the women in this study with the ways the nuclear family is also constructed as norm. Both serve

as obstacles to overcome for the participants throughout their formal education. Katie discussed how even the forms she had to complete to attend university made it clear to her that she does not belong:

*You get your forms, you're filling in your details. It asks for your parents – plural – details. And I'm just like, my mum and dad have been divorced for, like, ten years. ... It's hard enough to get the grades. It's hard enough to get your place at university. Once you've got that, you've got all these other pitfalls, as well. ... I had difficulties filling in my student loan application. It was just, like, how many barriers do I have to cross in order to get to university coming from a single parent family? ... I proved I have the brains and the capability to get to university, but you're still trying to make it more difficult for me.*

Before even attending university, the ideal student (Burke, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012) is constructed through the language on the forms prospective students must complete. Katie said she was able to demonstrate her academic abilities, but there were still more hurdles to overcome.

Some of the participants discussed the ways they felt out of place once they started university because of their family background, as highlighted by quotes from Katie and Jeanette:

*Katie: I noticed, actually, coming to university, a lot of my friends that I have at university, their parents are still together. I'm still very much a minority. ... I'm at university and I'm like, 'You know, my mum and dad aren't together'. Everyone's like, 'Oh wow, how does that make you feel?' You're just a bit like, 'It's fine. I'm a completely rounded person. ... I've had no negative effect coming from a single parent family'.*

*Jeanette: I was always sort of praised for doing well despite of my circumstances. ... Like somehow having a single parent family made me an idiot, like 'Oh, haven't you done well getting into university?' Like, why would that have a bearing on whether my mother was single or not? I mean, I'm independent of my mother. I'm a different person, you know.*

The interviewees did not want their family status to change how people viewed them. As Katie said, being raised by a single mother did not 'negatively effect' who she is. Jeanette wanted to be recognised for her accomplishments, not patronised for what she achieved as if she did well 'despite' her 'circumstances'. She wanted to be seen as her own person, capable of going to university, without people assuming that her status as the daughter of a single mother meant that her accomplishments were unexpected or extraordinary.



I asked the question: 'What do you hope to gain by going to university?' Vera, without pausing, proclaimed her answer as one word: '*Respectability*'. I asked her to elaborate.

*I'm from a working class background and single parent family and I think it's kind of interesting for me to look around me and see how I'm not the norm there [at university]. ... It's been interesting for me to try and almost pretend that I'm from the same background as everyone else, like just to try to fit in, to strive to be a part of that.*

Vera's words echo the work by Skeggs (1997) on working class women and the determination to be seen and recognised as 'respectable'. In Vera's case, she talks about trying to pass, to 'almost pretend' to be 'the same ... as everyone else'. She feels like an imposter among her peers (McIntosh, 1985). In this passage, she indicates that her background, growing up working class in a single parent family, is not consistent with the norm at university and that she must therefore earn respectability through education and through mimicking the students from middle class, nuclear families. She just wants to 'try to fit in', to belong. Which students are positioned as legitimate, as good, as ideal through discourses, both outside and within the university, impact upon the sense of belonging underrepresented students feel (Burke, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Read, Archer, and Leathwood, 2003). This, in turn, negatively impacts their higher education experiences as they continue to face misrecognition through stereotypes based on their identity categories, such as class, race, or family background.

### ***Belonging and accents***

The ways that different British accents are stereotyped and negatively perceived impacts the university experiences of students who do not speak with the more highly valued accents associated with middle and upper class individuals. Valerie Hey (1997:142), in discussing her working class background and northern accent, wrote:

I have long experienced myself being read through the grid of elitist values – a powerful complex of ideologies and cultural practices which splits cleverness not only from femininity ... but also from working classness [and] northerness. My negotiation of these class relations is literally carried, condensed and expressed most acutely in my voice.

Many of the interviewees talked about the ways their accents were negatively stereotyped within academia and how those judgments impacted their university experiences, as illuminated by a quote from Erica:

*I don't want to be judged on my accent. And they do, you know, like people don't take you seriously because you're talking in a working class accent. ... We're talking about accents. It's a very big part of your identity. As soon as you open your mouth, unless you can prove by other means that people should take you seriously, just because you've got a working class accent, you lose.*

When Erica speaks, she believes that her working class roots are revealed and judged through her accent. What does this mean for students like Erica in the university classroom? The simple act of opening her mouth to ask a question or contribute to the class discussion is fraught with anxiety. Similar to Erica, Audrey discussed the fact that her accent was different from her peers at university and she worked to intentionally change the way she spoke.

*I noticed that my accent was significantly different ... from everyone else there [in class]. Everyone spoke like the Queen ... and I became really, really self-conscious. ... Everyone was somehow more, more kind of educated to a higher level. ... Over the years I've learned to say, say for example when I say water, it's wa-ter, wa-ter, but-ter; But years ago I would have said wa-er and bu-er (laughs) which people can kind of pick you out a mile off. ... The stereotype of a Cockney is really, it's really negative as if they're the most uneducated people and that they ... don't pronounce their words properly and that it's somehow a little bit kind of inferior, a little bit dodgy, you know. It's a really kind of negative stereotype but yeah ... my accent has kind of lightened up over the years.*

In this quote, Audrey discusses being very aware of the fact that her accent did not belong. She endeavoured to erase her accent by training out her use of the glottal stop and instead practiced pronouncing her Ts so that she might no longer be seen as 'uneducated', 'inferior', and 'dodgy'. Many of the women in this study, like Audrey, discussed trying to hide, change, soften, or 'lighten up' their accents so that academia might find them more suitable. They are forced to be chameleons, to speak 'like the Queen', to adapt to the southern, middle class norms privileged through elitism within the ivory tower. As Lawler wrote (1999:17):

There is always the danger that you might *not* pass; that someone might 'see through' you. Accents are a particular pitfall here, particularly in Britain, where they (are assumed to) clearly mark social location.

As Hey (2006:297) suggested, 'working class women could never quite become 'ex', even as they move into middle class positions in the academy'. Adopting middle class mannerisms, ways of speaking and writing, ways of knowing and understanding, does not give a working class student access to the privileges and benefits that come with actually being middle class.

Dawn talked about the judgment she feared related to her accent impacting the ways she did or did not participate in the classroom.

*I was aware of kind of the north south divide. ... I've never tried to hide my accent or anything like that... but it has come up. ... I didn't speak so much [in class]. ... Had I said something wrong or something that didn't sound so intelligent, that would then be attached to the accent and it would... create more of an assumption about me. ... [It's] almost as if I had to say something more intelligent because of the fact that I had an accent, almost as if I had to compensate.*

Here Dawn is discussing the fact that she doesn't believe she is only representing herself and her views when she speaks, but that she is representing everyone with a similar accent and class background. She feels pressured and burdened to be more brilliant than her peers with southern accents and, as a result, rarely participates in class. This reminds me of a discussion I had with a lecturer my university who told me that students who are silent in his classroom, who do not participate or engage in class discussions, or who are obviously struggling academically but do not ask for help must not care about their education. 'If they cared about their education', he said, 'they would ask questions in class and ask for help during my office hours'. He assumed that silence and struggling without seeking academic guidance were proof of a lack of interest and lack of commitment on the part of the student. Silence can be seen by teaching staff as evidence of an unengaged student (Burke, Crozier, Read, Hall, Peat, and Francis, 2013), allowing the silent student to be easily misrecognised and dismissed. However, many of the participants in my study, like Dawn, discussed the anxiety of participating in discussions or asking questions in class. They fear that they might say or ask something that will 'out' them as working class, as not belonging or not smart enough to be there. Some of the students who discussed struggling academically said they would rather fail or drop out than ask for help because asking for help was a sign of weakness and further proof that they do not belong at university.

Amber talked about tutor favouritism of privileged students and the ways she felt judged by her accent and class background in the classroom.

*The lecturer always knew the names of them [private school educated] students. Always. Always talked up to them more, so you'd always find the same people talking [in class], but I think that's because the lecturer would think they were more intelligent. ... It's the words you use as well. So, for example, say that you can't articulate yourself properly. You're as intelligent as the other person, but because you haven't had the same schooling or haven't had the same upbringing, they all think that person clearly knows more than you. ... I feel intimidated to talk to them [lecturers], and then sometimes I think they'll think I'm stupid. And that sounds silly, but I think that they'll think I'm stupid – or I don't put my hand up [in class] because I don't want ... people to laugh at me. ... There's a girl in my class, and ... she's from Peckham. When she speaks, I can see everyone laughing. ... And I'm thinking to myself, this girl has tried so hard to get here, and you all are just laughing at her. I don't want them to do that to me, because I feel like, because I don't speak the same accent or I don't pronounce my Ts.*

Amber would rather be silent in class than face judgment. She wants her intelligence to be recognised, but her accent and vocabulary and social class background become the means by which she feels she is identified as illegitimate in academia. Amber talked about being intimidated by lecturers and not wanting to waste their time because she doesn't think she is smart enough. As a result, not only does she miss out on the opportunity to participate in class discussions because of both the real and the perceived prejudices she has experienced based on her social class and accent, she also misses out on the opportunity to build relationships with teachers that could prove helpful for future references, internships or placements. As Bauman writes (2004:38) there are those who are:

Burdened with identities enforced and imposed by others; identities which they themselves resent but are not allowed to shed and cannot manage to get rid of. Stereotyping, humiliating, dehumanizing, stigmatizing identities.

Amber knows that she is negatively judged by her accent. In her interview, she also discussed lecturer favouritism. In her experience, lecturers engaged more with students from more privileged backgrounds. She wants to be recognised and valued in academia but she is bound by the stigma of the restrictive norms placed on her based on her accent and her social class. Some participants, like Amber, talked about being intimidated by lecturers and not wanting to waste their time because she doesn't think she is smart enough.

### ***Belonging and knowledge***

In addition to accents, many participants discussed feeling like they did not belong based on the knowledge and vocabulary their peers learned before entering university. Erica discussed the ways she was reminded that academia promotes elitism through jargon and inaccessible, impossible language.

*I've read a lot of articles throughout my whole time and some of it is just academic snobbery. ... You have to sit with Dictionary.com opened in every other line, but it makes it impossible to read. ... People make words up as well and it's just to show how clever they are. And, and it's, I'd like to say it's bullshit.*

Erica views the over use of academic jargon and made up academic words as signifying perpetuation of elitism within academia. The use of jargon becomes a Litmus test -- If someone does not know the words or does not understand the ways of deciphering the academic code, then they do not belong within the ivory tower. To this, she calls bullshit. Erica discussed the idea that her accent, her vocabulary, and her swearing are associated with stupidity and for them she is made to feel ashamed.

*My accent means I'm working class and it means I'm stupid. ... You are made to feel ashamed that the way you talk is not clever. You're not a clever person unless you talk in big words. ... And actually I'm a prolific swearer, that's the working class thing. My swearing is atrocious. So, obviously you don't do that in front of well-off upper class people, do you?*

Erica and some of the other participants used swear words during the interviews and apologised for doing so. I would remind them that they could speak freely, without hesitation and without censoring themselves for me. I know that the research interview conveys a sense of importance, but I tried to create a space for the participants to speak without worry about being judged for their choice of words. In this excerpt, Erica connects her frequent use of swear words to her working class roots, as if her vocabulary 'gave her away' in academia, revealing her to be a working class infiltrator amongst the professional, well-spoken elites who, supposedly, better belong and are more entitled than she to be in a university classroom. It reminded me of my own background and the way that swearing became a normal part of family conversation in private, but was (and still is) a source of shame for my mother in public. Swearing is bound up with the working

class identity, whether or not a working class person uses swear words. It is considered the language of the uneducated and the ignorant. Standing wrote (1998:197):

The dilemma of language is particularly acute for feminist researchers who, like myself, are from working-class backgrounds. In order to succeed in higher education, working-class students have to surrender part of their working-class identity. ... Working-class knowledge, language and culture do not 'fit' into traditional academic convention.

Is Erica or am I a legitimate knowledge and meaning maker if we are also unapologetically working class? If I choose not to shrug off my working classness, if I forgo the assimilation process, if I refuse to conform and mimic the language and ways of a class to which I do not belong, to which I am not allowed to belong, am I still able to claim legitimacy within academia? What does this mean for students like Erica in the university classroom? When she speaks, her working class roots are revealed either through her accent, her vocabulary, or her swearing.

In the interview, Amber discussed both vocabulary and classism in the classroom, including the ways one of her lecturers perpetuated stereotypes about single parents and people on benefits:

*Even, like, the terminology that they'll use ... there was certain things that they would say and I wouldn't understand that. Maybe it's because I didn't do my A levels, but they would – there's this lecturer at my Uni, and he would always be putting down single parents. He would always be talking about people on benefits, or he would always use an example of ... a single mother living in a top floor council flat. And I was thinking, just because people are single parents doesn't mean they live in council flats, or it doesn't mean they're on benefits.*

A number of participants discussed either choosing to be silent in the classroom to avoid judgment or choosing carefully when and what to say to prove their intelligence beyond the stereotypes associated with their accents or their background, which is consistent with research findings from Burke, Crozier, Read, Hall, Peat, and Francis (2013). This is highlighted by quotes from Zoe and Amy:

*Zoe: I do think the differences in my background to others puts me at a disadvantage in terms of knowledge in subjects like politics, history, literature and philosophy. My peers learned about these things growing up from ... their parents. ... They certainly weren't learning it from school so it must have been their home environment. Therefore, when they discuss issues surrounding these subjects, I will keep quiet as I don't really know what they are going on about and don't want to look stupid.*

*Amy: You kind of wish that people would have a better understanding of things. ... [A] large majority of people [back home] voted for BNP – that's the British National Party – they're just awful. And I couldn't understand it. ... I think when you study something so closely related to politics, it made me realise how little education we ever had about politics in school. ... I felt like an idiot in my [university] class. People knew a lot. I was playing catch-up really quickly to understand those things. I don't blame people for being ignorant because you aren't taught it.*

Many of the participants realised that they did not have the same knowledge as their more privileged peers. The cultural capital some students acquire through their parents creates an 'uneven playing field' that disadvantages underrepresented students (Bowl, 2003:125). For some of the participants, their more privileged peers gained knowledge about a variety of subjects at home in ways that they did not. Their peers' knowledge is reaffirmed as valid and valuable in the university classroom and their fear of looking 'stupid' or 'like an idiot' kept them silenced (Burke, Crozier, Read, Hall, Peat, and Francis, 2013). Their university experiences are shaped by their fears of being 'outed' as not belonging.

Heather discussed her class, race, and family status as they impacted on her experience in university:

*Honestly, I still – I don't feel like I belong. ... I mean, I'm not very well spoken, so sometimes I feel a bit put down when people start using big words, and I think, I don't – that's not how I speak. At the same time, I'm an ethnic minority, and in a class full of white people. When we talk about race, it seems like a very touchy subject. ... Some of the things that have happened to me, some of the things people have said to me, this is life experience. I don't think anyone else in my class could ever fully understand. ... They'll never fully understand how it feels to be from a working class background. I mean, as well as being an ethnic minority, and mine's a single mum, and she's also unemployed now. So all of that kind of falls into one.*

In Heather's example, her identities cannot be individually examined. Her experience is bound up in the multiple ways she identifies and must be understood through that kaleidoscope of complexity. Yuval-Davis writes (2006:200) that identity:

*Is constructed along multiple axes of difference, such as gender, class, race, and ethnicity, [age], sexuality, and so on. ... The intersecting social divisions cannot be analysed as items that are added up, but rather as constituting each other. Although discourses of race, gender, class, etc. have their own*

ontological bases that cannot be reduced to each other, there is no separate concrete meaning of any social division.

Heather realises that the ways her peers use big words are proof of their worth in the classroom and become markers differentiating her background from theirs as if she is less academically valid. She does not see her lived experiences of social class and race being valued in class discussion. Skeggs (1995:190), a working class academic, explained her own similar experience in higher education when she wrote:

When I arrived at university, ... I realised I'd got it all wrong. The things at which I had culturally excelled were completely undervalued and many of the things that were valued I had not even known about.

Heather feels rejected for both the vocabulary she has not learned and the subjects that are important to her on which she wishes to speak. As a result, she contributes less in class discussions and the white, middle class norms against which she is judged are strengthened and maintained. As Standing (1998:198) wrote:

Knowledge is differentiated by race and ethnicity, as well as by class. Black women have to negotiate racism in their everyday lives, and their knowledge can be seen as part of a collective identity as black women, learnt through kin relations and everyday interaction with a white racist society.

Stacy felt like her tutor thought she was 'stupid'. She gave an example from her experience in the classroom.

*I started an introductory class ... at the local college. I felt out of my depth instantly. ... The second week we were asked to complete an online test to assess our English and Maths skills. I was surprised to find that I had the third highest scores for this. Although what I remember most is the surprise that the tutor displayed. At this time I was a single parent myself and had recently had to finish work due to childcare issues. Following the traditional stereotype the tutor had already marked me down, or that is at least how it seemed. This did, however, make me all the more determined to prove myself.*

Stacy believed that her tutor had not expected her to do well on the test just because she is herself a single mother and from an underrepresented background. Her tutor's reaction to her high mark spurred her on to show her worth.

### ***Belonging and social class***



Academia is still an exclusionary space in which working class students are constructed through discourses of deficit (McKay and Devlin, 2015). Most of the participants in this study self-identified as working class. While higher education promises social mobility, many of the participants discussed the ways they were reminded that they did not belong at university because of their class identity. As Lawler wrote (1999:3):

Since working-class selves are frequently marked in pathological terms, this raises particular difficulties for the idea of an 'escape' from such a position. Class in this sense is embedded in people's history and so cannot be so easily 'escaped'.

Some of the participants talked about the subtle reminders that their working class background was not the norm at university. In these examples, Amy talked about houseplants and Katie talked about holidays:

*Amy: They had a house plant sale, and I was like: This is a university campus? Having a house plant sale? I can't comprehend this. ... I was just kind of like, what stupid person has money, time, energy to care for a house plant? ... It's subtle differences like that. ... I overheard someone having a discussion about differences in soyabean or chai lattes or something, and I was like, I don't actually know what that is. ... It's the little things. ... I still will never understand house plants.*

*Katie: People talking about holidays and stuff, and where they were going during the Easter break. I was like, well, I've never actually been on holiday because my mum can't afford it. And everyone was like, 'Oh, how have you never been on holiday?' I was like, 'Oh, my mum doesn't earn enough money. We live hand to mouth. What my mum earns gets put straight into the house'. People couldn't, they just couldn't – they were like, 'My goodness! How have you never been on holiday?' And I was just like, 'I haven't. You know?'*

For Amy, houseplants and specialty lattes are the purview of the privileged classes. When discussing this topic, she was animated, sitting forward in her chair, her eyes widening, using her hands for emphasis. Like Amy, I grew up working class and I have still never owned a houseplant. We both laughed at the absurdity of keeping houseplants. Katie's peers seemed to think the fact that she had not been on holiday was beyond comprehension. Langston wrote (1995:69):

The way one acts and talks can give away class background. ... The culture of most working-class kids places them at a disadvantage in an educational setting. Most privileges are the result of class advantages, and in order to gain these privileges, the working-class students must be willing to become middle-class impersonators. They have to learn not just the course content but a new culture as well.

Class becomes a space through which working class students can be made to feel 'Other'. For many underrepresented students, the process of trying to be socially mobile includes adapting to the dominant norms of speaking, writing, dressing, being (Burke, 2012).

Funding for university became a subject of discussion among peers fraught with judgment and misunderstanding, as Jeanette and Lori explained in their interviews:

*Jeanette: There's this same idea like, 'Oh, you got free money'. But no, it's balancing the scales. It's not giving me an upper hand, it's making it so that you don't have the upper hand. ... And I think there's also, what comes with that is this idea that you should be ashamed for receiving it or you should feel guilty for receiving it. ... I should be embarrassed that I received that money.*

*Lori: I think that universities are doing one thing right and they're trying to recruit more but then, in doing that, it makes ... you feel like, and also ... people in the society feel like you're getting a free pass. ... Or makes someone like you or someone like me question whether we, you know, deserve to be there or whether it's valid that we're there or whether we're just filling a quota. ... My bursaries were just there because they bridged the gap ... and yet that wouldn't be seen as right because they [other students] just hang out and say, 'Well, I want free money. Why can't I have free money?' And that was just, that was heart-breaking because it felt like no one, no one knew where it was coming from and no one would turn around and support me through it. You know, no one would turn around and be like, 'No, you know what, it's not your fault that, you know, you come from a crappy background'.*

Lori talked about the positive impact of Widening Participation recruitment efforts that bring more students from underrepresented backgrounds, like her, into universities. However, along with those recruitment efforts comes judgement about whether the students who are recruited 'deserve to be there' or whether they are 'just filling a quota'. This echoes the discourses that suggest that underrepresented students do not truly belong at university and are, instead constructed through language of dilution or pollution (Burke, 2012). Lori also talked about the bursaries she received in order to afford to go to university and the ways her peers judged her for them, as if she was receiving undeserved 'free money'. In the interview, she explained that the bursaries she received helped to 'bridge the gap' and were not an unfair or undeserved advantage for her over her peers. Lori wanted her peers to understand that the university bursaries she

received made it possible for her to participate in higher education. Without them, she could not have. So they are not simply 'free money'; they are necessary for ensuring fairness and equity.

When I asked the participants what obstacles they believe prevent more students like them from participating in higher education, all of them mentioned the rising tuition fees and costs. As Hinton-Smith wrote (2015:8):

Rising student debt and its associated anxieties can inform individuals' decision-making in a way that compromises long-term prospects through compulsion to prioritise immediate financial demands. This can mean privileging employment that may offer a higher starting salary but lower wage growth potential.

The threat of continued increases to tuition fees and costs sends a message to working class students that higher education is not a place where they belong. If they do pursue a degree, their experiences in university can make them feel like they are illegitimate.

### ***Belonging and self-doubts***

A few of the students talked about their self-doubts within academia and the ways they questioned whether they belonged. Erica talked about having 'the drive but no confidence'. She gave the example of constantly doubting her ability to earn a first, no matter how many times she did it:

*I've always known I kind've got a level of intelligence but obviously you don't have that supported, ... you're not told ... actually 'you are capable', ... so when I started Uni I wanted to get a first. I went in, if I'm going to do this, I'm going to get a first. But actually, never did I believe I would get a first and actually sitting here and talking to you today, until I get the results next week I wouldn't believe I'm capable of getting a first until I've got it. So I've always had this kind of conflict from the beginning, I have a desire to gain a first but actually no self-confidence, no self-esteem. I mean I was going to quit in my first semester, convinced myself I wasn't good enough, you know, 'I'm not good enough to do this and I'll quit'. And then I got my results and I was, you know, first across the board. ... But still what's ridiculous, even when I'm getting first, first, first, first, first, I'm saying 'Oh, the next one will be the one where I don't get a first because I'm not good enough to do this. I didn't do A levels ... This isn't for me'. Do you see that conflict? ... I have all the drive but no confidence.*

Erica's experiences of self-doubt in academia mirrors my own. For me, no matter how many times I have earned high marks or have achieved something in higher education, such as completing another degree or giving another academic

presentation, I still have deeply rooted academic self-doubts. For me, each educational accomplishment does not equate to climbing further up a ladder towards confidence. Instead, after each accomplishment, I feel like I am back on the ground, trying to advance up on just the first rung, again and again and again. As Erica said in the passage above *'I'm getting first, first, first, first, first, I'm saying 'Oh, the next one will be the one where I don't get a first because I'm not good enough'*, so, for both of us, rather than recognising our accomplishments as a mountain of impressive achievements, we can only see the ways we believe we are lacking, the ways we believe we are in deficit. Like Erica, I am constantly waiting for the proof that I am not good enough. Within academia, I cannot see my value, my worth. I can only see the ways I am not good enough, the ways I fulfil the stereotypes. Echoing sentiments similar to Erica, Katie talked about feeling like she constantly had to prove her worth in higher education:

*It's the whole having to prove that we're capable and able to be here. I think that's what it's basically like. Doesn't matter how well you perform, you're always going to doubt yourself. You're always going to wonder, 'Should I be here?' ... It is very difficult. ... I think it's definitely hard to feel worthy.*

Susan also talked about facing self-doubts, questioning whether she should say in university:

*I wouldn't be here without all of them ... [in] the department. They're the most lovely lecturers I could ever have hoped for – the whole lot of them and I've cried in so many of their offices going 'I can't do it anymore! I'm just going to fail!' ... I got some great advice from the head of my department once. I was in his office saying 'I'm going to quit'. ... He was just like 'We all feel completely incompetent' – saying that even he struggles with, he thinks they're going to find him out as a failure or a fraud. And he's the head of a department and if he's still thinking like that and I'm thinking like that at second year, that's not so bad I guess. ... And my lecturers were so lovely. ... [they said] 'I know you can do it. I can see in you what you can't see yet'.*

Self-doubt, feelings of fraudulence, and imposter syndrome impact upon the progress some underrepresented students are able to make in university.

The more hierarchical the activity or institution, and the higher up we go in it, the greater our feelings of fraudulence are likely to be. People feel fraudulent especially when ascending in hierarchies in which by *societal definition* they do not belong at the top of the pyramid. ... And so when we rise up in hierarchical worlds, while socialized to feel that we *shouldn't* be there, it is not surprising if we appear to ourselves to be fraudulent (McIntosh, 1985:3).

I chose the question Katie asked, '*Should I be here?*', to title this chapter because the sentiment captured so many of the stories the participants told about wanting to be in university but feeling like the obstacles they faced in order to belong, in order to be seen as legitimate, to be valued, to be recognised as good enough, were, sometimes, so frustrating and challenging. For some of them, their feelings of fraudulence and self-doubt shook the foundations of their determination to complete their degree.

## **Conclusion**

Within this chapter, I have illuminated some of the university experiences of the participants within this study. The research questions this chapter answered are: How compatible is that social construction of single mothers and their families with the higher education aspirations and participation of the daughters of single mothers? Does their family experience shape their higher education aspirations and experiences and, if so, in what ways? As the data shows, the social construction of single mother families impacts upon the educational aspirations and experiences of the daughters of single mothers. They are constructed through discourses of deficit and their academic aspirations are often misrecognised because of the stereotypes about their family background that they face and work to resist. The participants discussed the negative expectations they believe society has for the daughters of single mothers, which are not compatible with their individual desires to achieve a university degree. Their university experiences are often marked by many reminders, both subtle and overt, of the ways they do not fit within the 'ideal' student norm. This can impact upon their sense of belonging as they navigate their university programme. Within the next chapter, I will explore, in more depth, the identities of the participants and the impact their university experiences have on their understandings of their identities.

## **Chapter Seven:**

### **‘People like me’: Daughters constructing their identities**

In the previous chapter, I explored the university experiences of the study participants. Within this chapter, I focus on the emerging significance of identity within the data. Since identity is threaded throughout this thesis, this chapter is shorter and more focused than the previous two analysis chapters. The concept of identity is challenging to define (Lawler, 2008; Bauman, 2004). Identity is rooted in the historical, the social, the political, and the personal (Bauman and Raud, 2015). Identity is not simply the ways we see and define ourselves, but it is also how we are recognised or misrecognised by others (Butler, 2001). ‘Identities are fluid, multiple and contradictory ... [and] there are also structures in place that reinforce gendered, classed and racialised social divisions’ (Burke and Jackson, 2007:111). Identity is not a perfect mirror into which we individually gaze upon our true, fixed selves. Identity is constructed through many lenses and mirrors, reflecting, refracting, filtering, distorting how we see, know, and understand our selves and how the world sees and judges us (Lawler, 2008). Who I am is not a declaration I make without being challenged by a world that sees me differently than I see myself. For the participants within this study, understanding and defining identity is complicated and emotional. Identity is a performance that involves pronouncements, negotiations, protestations, and affirmations (Butler, 1997). I agree with the ways Lawler (2008:2) wrote about identity:

I use the term ‘identity’ in a wide-ranging and inclusive way to mean both its public manifestations – which might be called ‘roles’ or identity categories – and the more personal, ambivalent, reflective and reflexive sense that people have of who they are. I do this so as to avoid reducing identity to categories of gender, race, nation, class, sexuality, etc., with which it is often associated. While, clearly, such categories are important both individually and collectively, they cannot in any way account for the complexity of identity as it is lived.

An individual’s different identity categories, through which they may experience different, intersecting levels of privileges and marginalisations, impact upon the ways self-defined identity may be limited and oppressed or opened and expanded (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001; Hall and Paul, 1996). I

believe an exploration of identity offers more questions than answers, though, through this chapter, I have endeavoured to illuminate identity within the research data.

The participants in this study share a few common identity categories. Like me, they are all the daughters of single mothers and they are all first-generation students. However, the categories that we share do not bind us together to one homogenous identity. Our stories should not be reduced to a singular, one-dimensional narrative through which the world may misrecognise who we are collectively while simultaneously dismissing who we are individually. As Yuval-Davis wrote (2011:158):

People born in the same families, with the same socio-economic background and geographical location, can have different identifications and political views; ... People can identify themselves as belonging to the same racial or ethnic collectivity and have very different socio-economic backgrounds as well as different political and normative evaluations of these identity categories; and people can share the same political and value systems but come from very different backgrounds as well as memberships in identity groupings. For this reason, it is not enough to construct intercategorical tabulations in order to predict, and even more so understand, people's positions and attitudes to life.

Shared identity categories may sometimes account for similarities across experiences, but reducing individuals to just the categories they share may not allow for a deeper understanding of the complexities of identities and experiences. For example, Heather comes from a divorced family, but her father was abusive. In contrast, Katie comes from a divorced family, but both of her parents were a part of her upbringing after the divorce. Then there is Vera, whose parents divorced, but then, years later, her father died, so would I include her within the group of divorced single mother families or the bereaved single mother families? What about Amber, whose biological father was absent from her life, but her mother was married to a man for seven years during her childhood before getting a divorce? Should Amber be categorised as the daughter of a single mother and an absentee father or should she be categorised as the daughter of a divorced single mother like Heather and Katie? I cannot easily group together Heather, Katie, Vera, and Amber into one category of 'daughters of divorced single mothers' because their experiences of divorce are uniquely their own. In contrast, the interviews with Sarah and Stacy, who are both the daughters of single mothers and are also single

mothers themselves, overlap in many ways and provide similar insights about their understandings of the world, of university, and of their own identities. The lived experiences and identities of the participants in this study do not always overlap within obvious, simplistic categories. However, there are common themes across their interviews and reflective writings that provide insight into their identities, which I have explored within this chapter.

This chapter answers the third research questions of this study: Does their family experience shape their identities? How do the daughters of single mothers construct their identities when they enter university? As I wrote in Chapter Four, I have not attempted to define different identity categories myself as I am interested in the ways the participants explore self-definition (Irwin, 2015). In order to illuminate the theme of identity within the research data, I have chosen a few select subtheme sections that I have titled: Misrecognised identities; Intersectional identities, Identity and university, and People like me.

### **Misrecognised identities**

Within the interviews, I asked the participants about how, when, and to whom they disclose their status as the daughter of a single mother. Many discussed keeping this part of their lived experience and identity a secret from people until they thought they could trust that the person to whom they chose to disclose would not negatively judge them. In the previous chapter, I included a quote from Vera who talked about trying to fit in at university by ‘pretending’ to come from a middle-class, nuclear family. Marlys talked about the challenge of being different:

*I think there's a certain 'sameness' to a lot of people in the university system and the further you are from the 'same' the harder it is.*

Kiersten talked about being ‘afraid’ to disclose her family background:

*I've pulled myself up but because people now don't see me ... like my friends like they don't know my family. ... Being in university, sort of, it's more of a middle class thing and that everyone else ... was sort of from a nuclear family, so I think that was more why, whereas if I were at home I wouldn't, I wouldn't be, I wouldn't be afraid to say it.*

For many participants in this study, their efforts to conceal their status as the daughter of a single mother, like most of the participants in the study by Morrice (2011) who kept their asylum seeker and refugee identities a secret, is fuelled by a



desire to be seen, to be known, to be understood without judgement. Within her writing, hooks suggested (1994:181):

To avoid feelings of estrangement, students from working-class backgrounds could assimilate into the mainstream, change speech patterns, points of reference, drop any habit that might reveal them to be from a non-materially privileged background.

It's easier for the daughter of a working class single mother to try to 'pass' as part of the privileged, two-parent student population than to openly embrace her family background among her university peers. 'Class becomes internalised as an intimate form of subjectivity, experienced as knowledge of always not being 'right'' (Skeggs, 1997:90). Amy talked about university as a space where students can try to shape how they are perceived:

*That's the brilliant thing about that first day [at university] -- when you know nothing about anybody. You can be who you want, and that isn't about class. That's about you as an individual. So, you can dress how you want. You can talk about what music you listen to. You only reveal a certain amount of those things about you. ... There's nothing related to your background about that. ... I don't mean it's a case of trying to blend in and trying to be different to what you are, but you, you reveal certain things about you. You shape the person you want people to think – and it's not a lie, it's just the you that you want to be. ... Like, the single parent thing didn't come up for me for a very long time at Uni. ... You just try to present yourself in the way you want people to see you, I guess.*

For Amy, in the first days at university, what she chose to 'reveal' about herself was carefully negotiated so that her peers would see her in the ways that she wanted to be seen. What I understood when Amy said: 'It's not a lie, it's just the you that you want to be' was that Amy wanted her peers to recognise her true self, to see her self-defined identity, before their perceptions of her were tainted by stereotypes and prejudice.

For many participants, the choice to keep their family status private was influenced by negative reactions when they had disclosed previously, as illuminated in these quotes by Holly, Jeanette, and Katie:

*Holly: When people find out that I just have my mum, they normally can't comprehend. ... They're like: 'Oh, I didn't realise. You don't seem ... messed up. You don't seem damaged. You don't seem fucked up'. ... I've even got the comment like: 'Oh, but you seem middle class' ... So middle class people don't have single parents? ... How can you be so narrow minded to think like that?*

*Jeanette: It's embarrassing, and it's insulting. ... I am somehow categorized even though ... [it has] nothing to do with me. ... Initially on meeting me I don't think they would put me in those categories but the minute they found out that I am from a single parent family, my kind of economic background, and the fact that I grew up in a council property, I'm easily put in that [stereotypical] category.*

*Katie: They hear 'single parent' and they go, 'Oh, troubled. Coming from a broken home'. ... They just say, 'Oh, poor you'. That's really horrible. 'Emotionally stunted', as well. That's another one. ... I've become a lot more self-defined, I think. ... My mum's always been like, 'Speak your mind and stand up for who you are'.*

The participants know the ways they are misrecognised and the ways that stereotypes about the daughters of single mothers are negatively constructing their identities outside of their control. They are forced into identity categories by society simply for being the daughters of single mothers. As a result, many of them are careful about whom they tell about their family status because the negative discourses around single mother families looms large over them like a shadow that they cannot shake. Butler (1997:33) discussed disidentification and misrecognition:

Imagine the quite plausible scene in which one is called by a name and one turns around only to protest the name: 'That is not me! You must be mistaken!' And then imagine that the name continues to force itself upon you, to delineate the space you occupy, to construct a social positionality. Indifferent to your protests, the force of interpellation continues to work. One is still constituted by discourse, but at a distance from oneself.

Within Katie's quote, she explained that she has become 'more self-defined'. Yet, as Butler's quote illuminates, the ways we are perceived are constructed outside of our control through dominant discourses. The participants within this study want their identities to be recognised, valued, and legitimised beyond the negative misrecognitions that are placed like shackles upon them.

## **Intersectional identities**

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, identities are intersectional. An individual's identity categories cannot be separated and understood apart from each other as they each overlap and intersect in complex ways. However, within this section of the chapter I explore the ways different categories are illuminated

within the data. Each category only tells part of the story of the lived experiences and identities of the participants. However, I believe it is important to examine a few of the categories like puzzle pieces as I put the whole picture together.

Specifically, I explore class; race/ethnicity; and sexual identity within the data. As Blackman and Walkerdine wrote (2001:177):

Returning to an idea that race, class, gender and sexuality, for example, are structural positionings that limit, constrain or even enable access to particular cultural resources through which we make sense of the social world. Instead, people are positioned differently in relation to social practices in which their subjectivities are 'read' differently depending upon their gender or class, for example. They are also positioned in relation to Other practices, such as domestic practices, practices of consumption, lifestyle, popular culture and 'subcultural groups', in multiple and often contradictory ways. It is at the nexus of these practices that a person's subjectivity is formed and reformed.

The ways the intersectional identities of the participants in this study are 'read' are largely dependent upon the structures of power and privilege that construct and define them outside of their control.

### ***Class***

Among the interviewees, 19 self-identified as working class, five as middle class, and two indicated that they were not sure. Throughout this thesis, I have explored social class, but what does it mean to be classed? How does one experience and understand their classed identity? Kuhn (1995:98) wrote that:

Class is not just about the way you talk, or dress, or furnish your home. ...  
Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being.

This is true for me. Even when I present my research to a primarily British audience, where my American accent does not expose my working class background, the ways I experience my working class identity are visceral, from cooking habits that remind me of the years when we did not have enough food to eat to the way I still wear shoes until the soles fall apart.

Within the survey for this study, I offered participants a text box in which they could self-define their current social class as well as another text box in which they could explain whether they grew up in a different social class within their single mother family. For many respondents, their uncertainty about social class identity provided more proof that class is challenging, perhaps impossible, to

define (Irving, 2015). Among the responses within the text box in which they could self-define their current social class, one respondent wrote: 'I am not sure which class to identify with as I am highly educated'; another wrote: 'Working-class background, potentially defined as middle-class now due to degree'; and another wrote: 'No idea. Lived under the poverty line throughout vs. have savings now'. These examples from the survey illuminate the belief that changing social class can be accomplished by earning a university degree or by having money after bills are paid. I was fascinated by the respondent who seemed to indicate that having a savings account provided social mobility, as if her access to a middle class identity could be mediated through the simple act of accumulating unspent money. I understand the logic of the respondents. Even while pursuing my undergraduate degree, I believed that higher education would provide me a way into the illusive and exclusive middle class. However, the piece of paper confirming the award of my degree offered no warm welcome into the middle class. The promise of social mobility through higher education seems to come with a lot of caveats and fine print. Brown, quoted by hooks (2000:3), discussed the ways class shapes life experience and identity:

Class is so much more than Marx's definition of relationship to the means of production. Class involves your behaviour, your basic assumptions about life. Your experience (determined by your class) validates those assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act.

Shifting between the social classes would require me to become another person, to 'think, feel, act' differently, and such a feat seems nearly impossible. I imagine performing middle classness to be as if I am a little girl again playing dress up with my mother's bright red dress and strappy high heels – nothing fit and I looked adorably ridiculous. Even now, after earning two master's degrees and pursuing a PhD, I certainly do not expect to be taken seriously as a member of the middle class. As Mahony and Zmroczek wrote (1997:4):

Class experience is deeply rooted, retained and carried through life rather than left behind (or below). In this sense it is more like a foot which carries us forward than a footprint which marks a past presence.

For me and for most of the participants in this study, class identity strongly impacts upon lived experiences. As examples, Lori and Katie discussed the influence of class identity on their experiences:

*Lori: I'm very working class and I intend to hold on to it. ... There are a lot of rich kids in my university and it was difficult for me to get along with them and I think that the reason why is because, I mean, I was brought up differently and I had to stand on my own two feet before I went to the university. ... There's a lot of unchecked privilege in universities. ... My working class background [means] having to fight for everything.*

*Katie: I definitely consider myself low social class, because my mum doesn't earn that much and everything. That's kind of to be expected as well, if that makes sense. They expect if you come from a single parent family, they expect you to be sort of working class. ... I think you find that quite a lot of people are very much, like: 'Oh, you're from a single parent family. You must be working-class'. ... My mum's not a CEO of a corporation or anything. That's automatically not what they assume when they hear single parent. They just assume working class. ... It is very much shaped by class, definitely.*

As the quote from Katie illuminates, the dominant discourses around single mothers suggests that no one will assume her mother is a CEO. Anita echoes the same frustration with the assumption that all single mothers are working class:

*Coming from a sort of like a middle class background nobody expects you to have a single parent family. ... I think people who come from lower social classes I know there's a tendency for people to automatically assume that they come from a single parent family or they were from a broken family.*

Anita suggests that all single mother families are assumed to be working class families and that all working class families are either single mother families or 'broken' families. The dominant discourses around social class and families offer no space for difference.

### ***Race/ethnicity***

A number of participants discussed the impact of their racial and ethnic identities on the ways they understand themselves and on the ways the world views and treats them. The impact of systemic racism can be felt in many aspects of the lives of BME women, including within their higher education experiences (Reay, 2015; Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick, 2010; Archer and Francis, 2007; Phoenix, 1997). Among the interviewees, six out of the 26 interviewees self-identified as BME (Black Minority Ethnic). The following quotes from Zoe and Heather illuminate the ways race impacted upon their university experiences:

*Zoe: I feel once people learn that I am from a single mother family, with brothers and sisters all by different fathers, they are careful about what they say with regards to ... not offend me. However, my closer friends are largely liberals and I don't think the fact that I'm not from a nuclear family really makes a difference to them. But certain people don't appear to be the same with regards to race and class. I have encountered more issues and awkward situations because of these things. ... They have caused me to think far more about my identity and how I am perceived by others. It is something I struggled with a lot in my first year of university*

*Heather: I don't want to get too racial, but some people always think [the typical student is] white, middle class. ... That's what they always think of it. I mean, you know that obviously minorities and white people go to university. But, it's mainly associated with being white and middle class. ... I came from London, and it's quite a very ethnic diverse place. And I came to university, and when I was in the first term, I was the only black person in my class. I was actually taken aback. ... I know there's other ethnic minorities on campus, but I was so taken aback. I thought, 'Oh my gosh! I'm the only black person in my seminar'.*

Black Minority Ethnic students encounter racism in overt and covert ways. As Glenn discussed, ignoring the very real ways that racism, classism, and other systemic prejudices impact upon people's lives does not make inequality disappear (2000:11):

Social structural arrangements, such as labor market segmentation, residential segregation, and stratification of government benefits, produce race and gender 'differences' in ways that cannot be understood purely in representational terms. For this reason, I find neoliberal attacks on affirmative action and other measures aimed at redressing race and gender disadvantage to be either perverse or disingenuous. Proponents of this view argue that these measures falsely reify race and gender and that therefore social policy ought to be race-and gender-blind. Unfortunately, not paying attention to race and gender does not make gender-race inequalities go away, precisely because these inequalities are institutionalized and not just ideas in people's heads.

For some of the women in this study, their racial and ethnic identities shaped how the world sees them and how they see themselves.

While engaged in this research, I have shed many tears, mostly out of sorrow and anger, though some out of joy and excitement. There is one interview excerpt that still elicits one of the strongest emotional reactions and that is from Amber when she talked about the ways her extended family treated her because she is mixed race:

*My mum was kind of the black sheep of the family. ... My mum is white, and my brothers and sisters are white. So, they look down on my mum not just because she is a single parent, but also because she had a baby with a black man. So, I internalise that more than her being a single parent.*

Within the interview, as she talked about this part of her identity and her lived experience, her tone of voice was matter-of-fact. This is her life. This is what she knows to be true in her world. That she alone among her brothers and sisters was viewed by her extended family as if she were the greater of her mother's sins: having a child by a Black man. 'This regulatory ideal construes skin colour as a sign of degeneracy and impurity, as the ineradicable sign of negative difference' (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001:153). Amber was forced to carry the burden of facing racism, not just from the outside world, but from inside her own family. For some of the participants in this study, racism is one of the lenses through which the world views them and they, in turn, understand their identity in response to those views.

### ***Sexual identity***

Among the 26 interviewees, eight indicated in their survey responses that they self-identity as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer) or other (including pansexual). Sexual identity offers another lens through which to view and understand intersectional identities. Sexual identity was discussed by a few participants, as highlighted by these quotes from Lori, who identifies as bicurious, and Sandra, who identifies as a lesbian:

*Lori: I think sexuality is a big one because I mean like I've always said that I was straight and I think I am still but I mean I don't know what other word -- bicurious. I think it's, I don't think it's the right word. ... When I was younger I went through a lot of like changes in my sexuality, things like that. I mean my sister is a lesbian, a lot of my friends are gay and lesbian, and I know I'm not lesbian, I'm just—and I know that I'm not completely straight, I'm just sort of in there in the middle or something (laughs).*

*Sandra: It shouldn't matter if you're two women, two men. ... It doesn't matter. It does in peoples' judgments, because we like to put people into categories. As humans, we can't understand things unless we can categorize things. ... Family units can be changed and adapted, and they shouldn't be seen as different. If you can bring up a child, it's all about how you bring them up, what you teach them. You are shaping a human at the end of the day.*

Both Lori and Sandra offer ways of understanding themselves and understanding what family means beyond the socially constructed, married, heterocentric norms. Muñoz wrote about disidentitification as a means by which those within marginalised groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities and the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans\*) community, negotiate identity by transcending or transforming existing and limiting norms for their own purposes. He wrote (Muñoz, 1999:31):

The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message ... and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.

In Sandra's example, her experience of being raised by a single mother and her identity as a lesbian place her outside of socially constructed family norms. However, she chose to transform, for herself, what it means to be a parent or be a family and reject the norms that do not account for difference. Butler wrote (2006:531):

Both visibility and invisibility are political precisely because the pervasive question regarding gay families is whether they can be admitted into the realm of appearance, of what is socially intelligible, if not normative?

For family forms that deviate from the currently accepted socially constructed norms, including single mother families and gay families, visible representations are political. On the topic of gender and sexuality as parts of our identities, Butler wrote (2004:16):

We try to speak in ordinary ways about these matters, stating our gender, disclosing our sexuality, but we are, quite inadvertently, caught up in ontological thickets and epistemological quandaries. Am I a gender after all? And do I 'have' a sexuality? Or does it turn out that the 'I' who ought to be bearing its gender is undone by being a gender, that gender is always coming from a source that is elsewhere and directed toward something that is beyond me, constituted in a sociality I do not fully author?

We state our identity categories, in this case sexuality, as if we can have ownership and authorship over how we 'do' them, but those categories, such as gender and sexuality, are done to us because they are prescribed and constructed before us and outside of us.

We exist in the nexus of practices that differentially read or define our subjectivities. Within these practices race, class, gender, sexuality and



ethnicity intersect in the production and construction of our own lived experiences (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001:164).

Normative notions of identities, whether looking through the lenses of class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or family status, impact upon how the world views us and how we live and navigate within the world.

## **Identity and university**

Within the interviews, I asked the participants about the impact of their university experiences on their understandings of themselves. Many of them talked about becoming more confident and independent, as illuminated by this quote from Sandra:

*[University] helped me learn who I am. The confidence I have as a person is completely growing. My independence has shot up.*

However, in contrast, some participants opened up about the ways university challenged their perceptions and understandings of themselves, as highlighted by this quote from Anita:

*I don't know who I am now. I just have no idea. ... I think, because I've learned more about society and it's changed my views, not, not in a big way but it has changed how I looked at things and it's made me sort of question... question who I am and I'm still trying to get comfortable with the changes.*

Within Anita's interview, she made clear that she believed the discomfort and changes were ultimately good. Similar discussions of growth and change are highlighted by these excerpts from Stacy and Sarah, both mature students and single mothers themselves:

*Stacy: I feel the knowledge I have gained from my study has empowered me and given me a new found confidence -- a confidence that not only enables me to challenge dominant discourses, but to also feel that my own opinions are valuable. When I began my studies I did feel as though it were a means to an end, a way of improving the lives of myself and my family. Being able to find employment in an area that I would find interesting and stimulating, rather than just working to get by. While I do still strive for this, I ultimately feel that my experience as a student has already given me so much more than I ever imagined.*

*Stacy: As a mature student and a mother of 5 I find my time is consumed with family life and study. Next to my family and my partner my 'student' status is, at present, the most significant aspect of my identity. My understanding of myself has changed dramatically since I started university. ... Now it is as*

*though I have the same dreams and ambitions I had then [when I was younger], but I am better placed to realise them.*

University offered Stacy and Sarah opportunities for personal growth and greater understanding of their identities, which was unexpected, but welcomed.

One thing many participants talked about was feeling like they were in limbo between two worlds, no longer fully belonging in their home community but not really belonging fully at university, which impacted how they felt about who they were and how they understand their identity. This is illuminated through excerpts from Lori and Amy:

*Lori: The community I was from, that was all working class. ... I mean, you could ... see a middle class person walking a mile, you know what I mean. ... It was seen as you know, 'You don't need to go to university. ... You finish school, you get a job, you start earning money'. ... I started thinking, 'Well, education is the way. That's the way forward and the way out of this'. ... when I was younger, like in secondary school people would say, 'It's a waste of time and you know you can't afford it anyway and what will you do with that debt?'*

*Amy: Out of my group of friends ... I got the worst grades out of all of us. They're all very much home birds. Out of all of us, I did the worst. And it was kind of expected of them that they'd go to Uni. ... They got really good, good grades ... and they decided not to. ... Their parents didn't like me very much, because I was the girl with the tattoos and the piercings. ... And it kind of flipped around, and then they didn't go [to university], and I did. ... They stayed around and just -- I wouldn't say dead-end jobs, they're not bad jobs. A job is good to have. ... My mum always says sometimes she thinks it's a little bit of resentment that I actually went and did it.*

For some of the participants, choosing to go to university means becoming placeless and belonging nowhere. Walkerdine and Lucey wrote (1989:12):

Only through education could we avoid having to become like our parents, to carry in our bodies the pain of having to do that kind of work. But, for all of the eulogies to the equal opportunities, comparatively little is written on the trauma of leaving and isolation, the disdain with which one is supposed to view the place from which one has come and the terrible guilt that we and not they have got out, have made it, and will work in conditions which they can never know.

Higher education offers the promise of social mobility and, for many students, that promise includes the possibility of a future life unlike the ones their families and communities have known. Finding a place in the world becomes so much harder when a person becomes placeless.

## People like me

Many of the participants talked about facing the pressure to succeed in university to prove that they are not the stereotypes associated with the daughters of single mothers. As Blackman and Walkerdine illuminated (2001:55): 'It's down to you, keep on struggling, keep on trying, focus upon yourself, keep up the hard work, be resilient, strive to be independent'. The participants talked about their successes and failures being viewed and constructed, outside of them, as reflections of their families, of all people from their same socio-economic background, of all people with the same accents, or of all women who are also the daughters of single mothers. Many of them talked about wanting their triumphs and challenges to be seen as simply reflections of just their individual capabilities or unique circumstances. This is highlighted through excerpts from Heather, Katie, and Lori:

*Heather: If I fail, it's my fault. Not my mum's fault. I mean, she can only help me to a certain extent with my degree. She doesn't have the answers. So, I think there's a stigma to be felt. ... They [society] look down upon you and everything's so related back to your family.*

*Katie: It's more of the pressure again, because ... it's almost like we're staking a claim on our position in university. It's like, if we fail, it means the next ... generation of [children from] single parent ... that want to come to university, won't. If we haven't managed to do it, will they have any sort of hope of doing it? ... If we fail exams ... they're like, 'Oh, single parents. That's who's to blame'. ... If we don't get it right, they're not going to give other people chances. It's quite hard, you know, to represent your background. I personally don't know anyone else on my course that's from a single parent family.*

*Lori: I was thinking, you know, can you actually leave your past? You know, can you actually decide. ... I will either be 'She went to Uni and then went and got a minimum wage job but that's okay because she's you know, from a working class, single parent family, so it was expected' or 'She went to Uni, got a good job and she's not a stereotype. She's the one that broke out'. Do you know what I mean? I will never be able to be seen as me.*

Many of the participants feel like their accomplishments and challenges are unfairly judged and scrutinised. They feel under intense pressure to perform success in certain, prescribed ways. Their efforts to reach their academic goals become even heavier burdens on their shoulders when they feel like the world is watching and waiting for them to either fail and prove that 'people like them' are not good enough or smart enough, or succeed and prove that 'people like them' are

clearly capable of success. If they fail, they believe the world will expect it. If they succeed, they believe the world will use their success as an example to prove that there are no obstacles to success and all others within their same identity categories and groups are 'lazy'. The neoliberal narrative suggests that if an individual simply wants to achieve badly enough, then they will find a way to be successful. The 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' neoliberal discourses position people as individually responsible for their life circumstances (Giroux, 2002). The same narratives allow the perpetuation of the Belief in a Just World (BJW), allowing people to be constructed as the cause of their life circumstances and therefore deserving of the challenges they face (Bénabou and Tirole, 2006). Through those discourses, systemic inequalities are allowed to fester and grow. Bauman wrote (2001:47):

If they fall ill, it is because they were not resolute and industrious enough in following the health regime. If they stay unemployed, it is because they failed to learn the skills of winning an interview or because they did not try hard enough to find a job or because they are, purely and simply, work-shy. If they are not sure about their career prospects and agonize about their future, it is because they are not good enough at winning friends and influencing people and have failed to learn as they should the arts of self-expression and impressing the others. This is, at any rate, what they told – and what they have come to believe.

For so many of the daughters of single mothers who enter university, their successes and failures are inspected under an intense microscope. As many of the participants discussed, they believe that their actions are rarely attributed to just them as individuals but instead are seen as representative of their whole family, their whole social class, their whole race/ethnicity for the BME participants, and everyone who is also a daughter of a single mother. Jeanette and Erica further illuminated the pressure of performing perfection within their reflective writing:

*Jeanette: I can't win. If I am successful I have bucked a trend, well done [Jeanette] they will say 'Haven't you done well'. As if somehow coming from a single mother I must be mentally sub-normal. If I fail no one will really bat an eyelid. It's 'no wonder' they will say 'it's to be expected'. It becomes an issue no matter what I do, where I go. When people ask you about your parents and you're obliged to correct them, saying parent, dropping the S. Then the silence, the pity, their desperation at not knowing what to say. ... I'm not broken, I don't need fixing.*

*Erica: I started university doubting that 'people like me' are good enough, are worthy to become teachers, are worthy to make a difference. I finish*

*university knowing that I'm as worthy and able as any other person. ... Yet sadly, I finish university also proving 'them' right. My story reifies the neo-liberal narrative that if you work hard, if you make sacrifices and that if you 'want' to then anyone can achieve, no matter their background, their problems or their financial status. What's sad is that that narrative is wrong, without benefits and the social safety net I'd have never achieved, never met my potential and certainly wouldn't be considering a Masters/PhD route. ... I entered the system and university feeling like an intruder, feeling like I shouldn't be there, feeling like I should drop out, feeling like I wasn't able.*

Both Jeanette and Erica discussed and rejected the two choices they feel that society offers them: to either embody the stereotype that the daughters of single mothers are doomed to failure or to serve as the poster children for the great things the daughters of single mothers can achieve 'if only they just try hard enough'. They are claiming identity in opposition to the popular narratives that have been built beyond them, both demanding recognition for their legitimacy as valued members of the academic community and recognition for the very real obstacles that exist for the daughters of single mothers to gain access to and persist within higher education.

## **Conclusion**

During some of the academic presentations I have given about this research, I have been asked about whether some of the experiences of the study participants are more related to other shared identity categories. For example, when participants discussed their classed experiences and identities or their racialized experiences and identities, how are those experiences related to being the daughters of single mothers? Identities are intersectional. The participants in this study experienced university and formed their understandings of themselves through intersectional lenses. It is not possible to separate one identity category from another when both are intertwined, along with many others, within the same person. For the individuals who took part in this research, their identity as the daughter of a single mother was so important for them that they chose to take a 30 question survey and they chose to participate in interviews and reflective writings. For the participants in this study, being the daughter of a single mother is a very strong part of who they are and how they know themselves. That cannot be disconnected from the other ways they identify or experience the world.

As Butler asked (1993:219): 'What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?' What space is there for the daughters of single mothers to claim their own identities and shed the negative identities that are forced upon them? While 'benefits scrounger' is the phrase the participants in this study believe is used most often to describe their mothers by the media and while their own prospects for success are deemed doubtful by society, how can they assert their identities within the already exclusionary ivory tower of the academy? As was highlighted, if they attempt to pursue a degree, but are unable to complete, they believe the outcome will be expected. Yet if the daughters of single mothers are successful in academia, then they are used as examples to disprove the existence of barriers and of systemic exclusion, as if individual ambition and determination were the only obstacles in the path towards a university degree for this underrepresented student population.

## **Chapter Eight: Implications for policies and practices: Daughters demanding legitimacy and recognition**

Within Chapter One, I provided the context and rationale for this study, focusing on historical understandings of legitimacy, modern representations of single mothers and their families, and legitimacy within higher education. In Chapter Two, I mapped out the rest of the thesis, providing the research questions and discussing my aims and intentions. Chapter Three covered a review of relevant literature. I explored methodology in Chapter Four. Within the previous three chapters, Five, Six, and Seven, I have explored the data and illuminated the findings for this study. In Chapter Five, I examined the ways single mother families are socially constructed through the interviews and reflective writings of the participants. In Chapter Six, I discussed the university experiences of the interviewees. In Chapter Seven, I presented an exploration of identity within the data. In this final chapter, I summarise the findings from the previous chapters and indicate the implications those findings have, especially for higher education policies and practices within the United Kingdom. This chapter is divided into two major sections titled Summary of research findings and Implications for higher education. To conclude the chapter and the thesis I have written a section titled Epilogue: Depictions of single mother families across the centuries, in which I discuss the social construction of single mother families and the perpetuation of inequality in education. I do this while drawing upon the juxtaposition between two examples of depictions of single mothers in the arts and performing arts: 'The Fallen Woman' exhibit at the Foundling Museum, which explored unwed mothers in Victorian Britain and the play 'Future Conditional', which is set in present day Britain and includes a single mother character. I conclude with my hope for a better, more equal society and educational system.

### **Summary of findings**

There are four major contributions to knowledge that this study has made. The first contribution is that the findings of this study have illuminated the ways

that single mother families are constructed by the media, by politicians, and in society. This contribution was made through the findings discussed within Chapter five, which answered the first research question: How do the dominant discourses, created and maintained by the media, politicians, and society, construct single mother families? The findings suggest that single mother families are constructed through negative dominant discourses that produce a homogeneous view of single mother families as a group, allowing individuals to be misrecognised and limited through stereotypes.

The second major contribution this study has made through the findings from the data is to build upon the existing literature within the area of widening participation and social identities. This contribution was made through the findings discussed within Chapters Six and Seven. Chapter Six answered the research question: How compatible is that social construction of single mothers and their families with the higher education aspirations and participation of the daughters of single mothers? Does their family experience shape their higher education aspirations and experiences and, if so, in what ways? The findings offer insight into the experiences of the daughters of single mothers who are first-generation students, illuminating the complicity of academia in the production and reproductions of inequalities. Chapter Seven answered the research question: Does their family experience shape their identities? How do the daughters of single mothers construct their identities when they enter university? The findings provide deeper understanding around the ways this group of students understands their identities before and after entering university.

The third major contribution the findings have made is to bridge the gap between the existing literature on the experience of single mother families and the existing literature on the experiences of students in higher education, providing a deeper understanding of access, participation, and inclusion of a specific population of students as yet unexplored within existing research, which was accomplished within all three analysis chapters and throughout the thesis. Lastly, the fourth major contribution to knowledge this study has made is to identify common trends and themes within the data as well as demonstrate the complexity of the individual experiences of the daughters of single mothers. This, too, was evidenced within all three analysis chapters and explored throughout the thesis.



## Implications for higher education

The findings from this study have implications for higher education policies, especially higher education funding and student loan policies and Widening Participation (WP) policies. The data suggests that the current funding policies and Widening Participation policies are not translating into increased access and participation in higher education among underrepresented student groups (Burke, 2012). The recent government green paper (Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015) suggested that the cap on tuition fees for home students in the United Kingdom should be lifted, allowing some universities to set significantly higher fees. The findings from this study suggest that such a change to fees would be detrimental for many underrepresented students, making their participation in higher education financially impossible. Tuition fees should not be increased. To the contrary, fees should be reduced and returned to more affordable rates. Additionally, student funding policies should be updated to recognise that many students cannot rely on financial support from their families, so the ways higher education costs are calculated should reflect that many students will be responsible for all expenses, from tuition to toothpaste. It is not enough to provide loans to cover the costs of fees when the costs of living continue to increase without adequate financial support offered to students for those costs. Many underrepresented students who desire a university degree but do not have access to funding to cover all costs find themselves trying to juggle their coursework with their employment, sometimes the equivalent of full time work, to the detriment of their education. Policies must change to enable students to fully finance their studies in a way that allows them to stay engaged and make the most out of their education.

The findings from this study suggest that Widening Participation policies should be updated. Based on the research data explored in this study, Widening Participation policies need to be rewritten so that, when they are put into practice, they allow for more than simply expanded access. After all, the policies are not called Widening Access, they are called Widening Participation. As Burke wrote (2013:109):

Although WP has largely been driven by a neoliberal agenda in recent years, my understanding of WP is that it is a project of social justice by virtue of its

underpinning aim. The emphasis on widening, rather than simply increasing, access to and participation in higher education places focus on those groups who have been traditionally excluded or under/misrepresented in higher education. We must then pay attention to the patterns of social inequality in higher education. However, my position is that it is not enough to identify patterns of under-representation or to develop 'quick-fix' solutions to 'lift barriers'. As well as identifying patterns of under-representation, it is important to develop sophisticated, theorised and critical approaches that depend on long-term strategies guided by praxis-oriented understandings of the subtle and insidious operations of gendered, classed and racialized inequalities in higher education.

In order to enable students to fully participate within higher education, the policies must address the support needs underrepresented students have so that they can engage in their studies, feel like they belong at university, and persist through to degree completion. The findings for this study suggest that Widening Participation policies should be updated in order to hold academia, including individual universities, accountable. What that means, in concrete terms, is that universities should be recording and reporting more and better data related to admissions, retention, and persistence through to degree completion of their students. If a pattern emerges in that data suggesting, for example, that particular student groups are disproportionately earning lower marks or dropping out of their degree programmes, then universities should be required, through policies, to implement support programmes to address those inequities. There should be consequences for universities that do not address persistent systemic failures that result in unequal student admissions, learning experiences, and educational outcomes.

While improvements to student funding policies and Widening Participation policies would provide better access into higher education for underrepresented students, better access is not enough. As Engstrom and Tinto made clear (2008:50):

Access without support is not opportunity. That institutions do not intentionally exclude students from [university] does not mean that they are including them as fully valued members of the institution and providing them with support that enables them to translate access into success. Too often our conversations about access ignore the fact that without support many students, especially those who are poor or academically underprepared, are unlikely to succeed.

Policy changes must be accompanied by changes implemented at individual institutions and within individual classrooms. In addition to policy implications,

the findings from this study have implications for higher education practices. Which practices? All of them. Those practices include the forms students must complete for admissions and for loans and scholarships; the financial, emotional, and academic support offered to students; the teaching practices that shape classroom experiences; the ways we conduct research on and with marginalised groups, including single mother families and underrepresented students – and everything in between.

Academia should question the inequalities within society, not contribute to deepening and widening those inequalities further by continuing to engage in oppressive practices. The answers to the questions we must ask ourselves, as academics, have important implications for higher education practices and policies. As Grace, a working class academic, asked (2005:186):

As academics, we must ask questions of ourselves that are not trivial: To what extent are our decisions about students' capabilities determined by our own interpretations of class markers? How do class-based judgments make it possible to dismiss a student? How do these judgments shape our teaching practices?

Her questions resonate with the findings in this study, especially the data discussed in Chapter Six. To her list of questions, I would add the five questions I pose in Chapter Four focused on whose knowledge and experiences are valued and whose participation is seen as legitimate within higher education. As a reminder, those questions are:

- Whose voices, experiences, contributions, and knowledge are valued and legitimised under the patriarchal power structures within academia?
- Who has the power to create new knowledge? Who is seen as 'legitimate' as a researcher or knowledge creator?
- Who is seen as 'legitimate' as a research participant or a knowledge contributor?
- Who is seen as 'legitimate' as a student or knowledge receiver?
- Who is seen as 'legitimate' as a teacher or knowledge conveyor?

Additionally, as a result of the findings of this study, I would add:

- How are the cultures and practices of the university further reifying norms about who does and who does not belong, as well as who is and who is not

seen as legitimate? (This question relates to findings from Chapters Six and Seven).

- When silent or quiet students are positioned as disengaged, deviant, or academically incapable, what impact does that have on those students? (This question relates to findings from Chapters Six).
- In what ways are norms and stereotypes about families perpetuated through classroom practices or through research practices? (This question relates to findings from all three analysis chapters).
- What space is there for underrepresented students, including the daughters of single mothers, to claim their own identities and shed the negative identities that are forced upon them? How can they make space to belong within the exclusionary ivory tower? How can academia contribute to a culture shift that broadens expectations and opportunities and challenges the norms, assumptions, and stereotypes through which underrepresented students are misrecognised, contributing to their feelings of not belonging? (These questions relate to findings from Chapters Six).
- What are the real costs and consequences of unequal access to education, not just for individuals, but also for society as a whole? (This question relates to findings from all three analysis chapters).

These questions are just the start of the ongoing conversations we must have within academia in order to work towards equality and social justice within higher education. The findings in this study have developed a greater understanding of the experiences of a particular underrepresented group, the daughters of single mothers who are first-generation students, within higher education. However, the implications of those findings more broadly contribute to the ways positive change in higher education could be achieved through better practices.

The data discussed in this thesis reveals inequalities in education for this marginalised group, before they enter university and throughout their higher education experiences. Through the findings, I am able to offer important and concrete changes to higher education practices that could be made to achieve greater equality in higher education. At the institutional level, universities should:

- Update university forms, documents, and publications (both online and in print) to account for the diversity of the student body and to prevent the

perpetuation of particular norms. For example, forms that request family information should not require a student to list a mother and a father.

- Record better, more complete admissions, persistence, and degree completion data (as suggested above) and develop strategies to resolve any patterns of inequality that emerge from that data.
- Provide training for staff who interact with students, especially teaching faculty and staff who supervise student research, to ensure that staff are not contributing to unequal experiences of underrepresented students. The work of staff should contribute to students' sense of belonging at university.
- Hold individual schools and departments accountable for addressing inequalities in student experiences, including student marks, classroom experiences, and persistence through to degree completion.
- Require individual schools and departments to review their syllabi and handbooks to ensure that their modules reflect a diversity of voices and to review their classroom practices to ensure that they support the participation of a diversity of student voices.
- Develop programmes to provide greater support for underrepresented students, including financial, emotional, and academic support.
- Ensure that university resources and support programmes are as accessible as possible, including taking into account the needs of particular underrepresented student groups, such as working class students, Black Minority Ethnic (BME) students, students with disabilities, and part time and mature students.
- Update the ethical review process for research to better identify research designed to perpetuate biases and norms.

The findings also suggest that there are changes that individual academics can make to their practices to increase equality in higher education. Individual academics should:

- Consider and address the ways their teaching and research practices may be perpetuating inequalities or particular norms.
- Review syllabi and handbooks to ensure that the content of each module reflects a diversity of voices, perspectives, and experiences.

- Address assumptions around students who are constructed as 'problematic', such as students who are persistently absent or students who are quiet or silent in the classroom.
- Develop strategies to encourage a diversity of students to engage in the classroom and offer a variety of ways for students to engage with the module.
- Become familiar with the support programmes and personnel at the university so as to direct students to the resources they might need. If those support programmes are inadequate, encourage the university to make the improvements necessary to support underrepresented students.

It is not simply the responsibility of academia as an abstract entity, beyond the individuals within it, to change the ways elitist middle class norms are maintained and reified. It is the responsibility of academics, both as individuals and collectively, to contribute to a cultural shift that challenges the stereotypes that marginalise certain students while simultaneously privileging others. It is as much my responsibility as an early career academic as it is any established academic to question the values within higher education that are responsible for the ways some students are made to feel like they do not belong and that they are not legitimate within higher education. Through my research, my teaching, my activism, and my work, I want to dismantle the ivory tower and build higher education again, starting from a foundation of equity.

### **Epilogue: Depictions of single mother families across the centuries**

On 25 September 2015 I visited 'The Fallen Woman' exhibit at The Foundling Museum in London, which explored the figure of the single mother in Victorian Britain. The exhibit included paintings, photographs, cartoons, plays, books, trinkets and artefacts, and documents, including accepted and rejected applications from women who sought to give their child up to the care of the Foundling Hospital. The display text at the exhibit included (The Foundling Museum, 2015):

The notion of female chastity was an important aspect of public morality and the differences between the 'respectable' and the 'fallen' were continually defined in an attempt to create social and moral boundaries.

The 'fallen woman' refers to a particular kind of moral identity; neither a prostitute, nor an ideal wife and mother, it implies that the woman *had been* respectable but has dropped out of respectable society through her experience of sexual relations outside of marriage. It was precisely these women whose illegitimate babies were accepted into the Foundling Hospital in the Victorian period. ... The conventional narrative of the fallen woman and of unmarried mothers was of downfall and decline. Cast out by society and by their families, they are exposed to the harshest extremes of society and, maddened by shame, they are forced to abandon their babies and even to consider suicide and infanticide.

Within Victorian society, the single mother and her illegitimate child were outcasts. Society viewed them as the cause of shame to their families, to society, to the nation. Single mothers had 'fallen' and they were no longer respectable and their children were illegitimate in society. The stigmas and consequences they faced were seen as just and deserved. The ways they were depicted by politicians and within the media, art and literature at the time suggested that they were despicable, vile, disgusting.

Yet that was a long time ago. So much has changed in over a century. There have been advances in the rights of marginalised groups within British society and perceptions and representations of some of those groups have progressed. Women who have children out of wedlock are no longer desperately turning to institutions like the Foundling Hospital to care for their children nor are those women imprisoned in institutions like the Magdalen Asylums for the 'sin' or 'crime' of falling pregnant outside of marriage. The concept of family is evolving along with the changing times. Yet, as this study illuminates, time has not worn away all of the remaining vestiges of judgment, scorn, and ridicule single mother families face in the United Kingdom. Many centuries of history in which single mothers and their children were socially constructed as illegitimate people, as 'human waste', and as a 'threat to the nation' have created a lasting legacy that continues to influence the lives, identities, and experiences of so many, including the women in this study.

On 9 September 2015 I went to see a new play at The Old Vic Theatre in London called 'Future Conditional' that explores deepening inequality within the British education system (Oglesby, 2015). I was in the thick of writing my thesis and preparing for another term of university teaching, so I grabbed up discount tickets online with high hopes to be inspired and reenergised. The play, set in present day, highlighted the ways that students are advantaged or disadvantaged

depending on their family's socio-economic class and the postcode in which they live. As the play makes clear, intellect and academic aptitude are irrelevant when it comes to educational opportunities afforded to students in the United Kingdom.

Oglesby (2015), the playwright, indicated that part of her research for the play led her to Wilby who wrote (2013):

For 25 years, education policy [in the UK] has followed a more or less consistent track, in which the main parties share certain assumptions: for example, that standards can only be raised by control from the centre; that schools and teachers need constant monitoring and testing; that competition is good for schools. But as we digest the latest horror story from the OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] – that standards of literacy and numeracy among our young adults are almost the lowest in the industrialised world. ... The best way of improving standards across the board is to reduce poverty and inequality. ... Look at the OECD results and those of other international tests. Like us, the US usually comes out badly. Like us, the US is saddled with high levels of inequality and child poverty – of the 24 countries in the OECD survey, it is the most unequal, while we're [the UK] the second most unequal. Contrast with Finland, which is at or near the top in this latest survey and most others. Finland is an exceptionally egalitarian country, with little poverty.

Seemingly at the heart of the play was the idea that a better society and a better education system were possible through the reduction of poverty and inequality. This is at the heart of my research too. I had so much hope as I took my seat near the rafters of the theatre. Yet the play left me deeply disappointed.

One of the characters was the epitome of every stereotype of a 'chav' single mother that the media constantly offers up to be ridiculed and reviled. From her clothes, her accessories, her accent, her constantly borrowing money off of another mother for petty purchases, her drunken insistence on celebrating St. George's Day leading to her assaulting another mother on the playground, her worklessness and the implications that has for her child's education – everything that befits the 'chav benefits scrounger' myth (Tyler, 2008). Every line of her dialogue served to paint her as daft and dumb and the other mothers as intelligent and reasonable by comparison. She was the monstrous single mother, the threat to the nation, both frightful and comical, contrasted against the other mothers, who were portrayed as the 'good', 'deserving', and 'respectable' mothers who wanted the best for their children. Even in present day Britain, the stereotypical single mother figure serves as a prop to prove the legitimacy of others. The figure is still constructed and



manipulated to serve as the ghost that haunts respectable women, keeping them in line. This is illuminated throughout this thesis, but especially in Chapter Five. Single mothers are constructed as a homogenous group through mostly negative stereotypes and tired tropes. Those stereotypes impact not only the women at whom they are levied but their children as well, as this study has illustrated through the participants' data in Chapters Six and Seven.

While watching the play, the disappointment continued as a wealthy Oxbridge-educated character gave a passionate speech about how bias against wealthy people is the 'last acceptable prejudice' and some of the audience erupted in thunderous applause. The speech was reminiscent of speeches given by current Mayor of London Boris Johnson, in which he suggested that the super-rich face as much ridicule and oppression as the homeless (Withnall, 2012). However, when that same Oxbridge-educated character insisted that 'the opposite of competition is mediocrity!' to which a character from a working class background countered, 'No, the opposite of competition is collaboration', no one applauded. The juxtaposition between those two parts of the play left me heartbroken. How might we, as a society, address real, evidenced inequalities, including socio-economic inequalities and educational inequalities, when the neoliberal paradigm is so pervasive as to convince people that the wealthy face prejudices and oppression more than those living in poverty? How many people still believe that the opposite of competition is mediocrity rather than collaboration? What impacts do those beliefs have on the deepening inequalities within the education system and within society?

The main character was Alia, a girl from Pakistan who arrived in England as a refugee after her father and other family members were murdered and her illiterate mother could no longer care for her. Her mother, while only discussed in passing to provide Alia a back story, is another example of the ways single mothers are positioned as incapable, as the focus on her illiteracy seemed to be offered as part of the proof that she could no longer care for Alia after the death of her husband.

While in secondary school in England, Alia finds herself as the student member of a committee tasked with developing strategies for improving the United Kingdom's educational ranking in the developed world. Her bold suggestion

to the committee, as a solution to improve education, is that Oxford and Cambridge Universities should reserve a place for the top two or three students from each and every school in the United Kingdom, regardless of the status of the school the student had attended and regardless of the social class or postcode of the student's family. The six adults on the committee discussed the feasibility and merits of the suggestion. Some of the characters pointed out that such a change might encourage ambitious parents with financial means to move to traditionally working class neighbourhoods so that their children could attend lower performing schools where their chances of rising to the top spots of the school were better. Other characters suggest that this internal migration would be a positive thing and would lead to more equal neighbourhoods and schools, as the balance of incomes eliminated the existence of poverty postcodes. The plan was viewed by three of the six adult committee members as a real opportunity for transformation towards equality in education. The other three protested and it was revealed that those three were Oxbridge educated, including the character that had proclaimed that 'the opposite of competition is mediocrity'. He railed against the inclusion of underprivileged students as that would degrade the 'international excellence' of Oxbridge, similar to the arguments that suggest that the inclusion of underrepresented students through Widening Participation programmes will result in 'pollution' of academic standards (Burke, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Morley, 1997). The Oxbridge trio wanted to keep the system unequal. They insisted that they were not unfairly advantaged. Instead, they said they deserved the education that they had privileged access to because of their hard work. Their dialogue mirrored those who suggest that allowing more underrepresented students into university, especially into elite universities, will detrimentally impact university 'excellence'. Even in this modern vision of Britain's educational future, those of us who are underrepresented in the academy are still imagined as a vermin infestation. We are still the filth, the human waste. We are still seen as illegitimate.

My presence and the presence of my participants in higher education should not elicit scaremongering proclamations of excellence destroyed nor engender fear of systemic degradation. We underrepresented students are truly 'Born to Fight', entering the ivory tower after fighting over and over to prove our

worth, to prove we are good enough, to prove that we deserve a place, to prove that we are legitimate. It is those who are privileged, those who have long benefitted from the unequal system, those for whom advantages paved an easy path, who should fear that when the system is finally made equal, then it will be their own academic mediocrity that will be exposed and laid bare.

I will continue to work towards that higher education utopia, towards justice and equality, towards a fair educational system and a fair society in which underrepresented students, like me, are finally recognised as good enough, smart enough, worthy enough for the spaces we occupy in the academy and beyond. My participants and I have felt misrecognised and illegitimate within academia and within the world and I will continue to work to change that. I will continue to fight for equality until the 'truest sentence' that I know is:

I am legitimate.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Participant biographical sketches

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**Amber** is a BME (Black Minority Ethnic), working class, mature student. Her mother primarily raised her alone throughout her life. Her mother did get married and divorced from another man during her childhood. Amber has five siblings, among which she is the second oldest. At the time of the interview, she was in her second year as a full time student studying a social science at public research university that was formerly part of the 1994 Group.

**Amy** is a white, working class, traditional age student. Her mother was always a single mother. Amy is an only child. She was a full time student and completed her undergraduate degree from a post-92 university the year prior to the interview. At the time of the interview, she was in the second term of a master's programme in the social sciences at a smaller, research-intensive university that was formerly part of the 1994 Group.

**Angie** is a white, working class, traditional age student. Her mother became a single mother after her parents relationship ended when she was one. Her mother married her step-father when she was fourteen. Her biological father died shortly before the interview. She has an older brother. At the time of the interview, Angie was in her first year as a full time student at a Russell Group university studying a social science.

**Anita** is a white, middle class, traditional age student. Her mother became a single mother after her parents divorced. She has an older sister. At the time of the interview, Anita was in her second year as a full time student at a post-1992 university studying a social science.

**Audrey** is a BME, working class, mature student. Her mother became a single mother after her parents separated. She is an only child. She was a full time student and completed her undergraduate degree from a post-1992 university in the arts six years prior to the interview and she completed a master's degree the year prior to the interview.

**Dawn** is a white, working class, traditional age student. Her mother became single after she left her father when she was a toddler. Dawn has an older brother. She was a full time student and completed her undergraduate degree from a post-92 university the year prior to the interview. At the time of the interview, she was in the second term of a master's programme in the social sciences at a Russell Group university.

**Debra** is a white, middle class, traditional age student. Her mother was always a single mother. Debra is an only child. At the time of the interview, Debra was in her final year as a part time student at a Russell Group university studying law. Debra asked to participate through an email interview.

**Erica** is a white, working class, mature student. Her mother was always a single mother. Erica has a younger brother. At the time of the interview, Erica was in her third year as a full time student at a public research university studying a social science.

**Heather** is a BME, working class, traditional age student. Her mother became a single mother after her parents divorced. Heather is the second youngest of five children. At the time of the interview, she was in her first year as a full time student studying a social science at a smaller, research intensive university that was formerly part of the 1994 Group.

**Holly** is a white, working class, traditional age student. Her mother became a single mother after her parents divorced when she was eight. She has a younger sister. At the time of the interview, Holly was in her third year as a full time student at a public research university studying a subject in the arts.

**Jeanette** is a white, working class, traditional age student. Her mother became a single mother after her parents divorced. She has a younger brother. At the time of the interview, Jeanette was in her third year as a full time student at a public research university studying a social science.

**Julie** is a white, mature student, unsure of her social class, and she is a single mother herself. She identifies her mother's social class as working class. Her mother became a single mother after her parents divorced when she was an infant. Julie is the oldest of four children. Her three siblings from her mother's second marriage that also ended in divorce. Julie has two children. At the time of the interview, Julie was in her second year as a full time student at a post-1992 university studying a social science.

**Kalila** is a BME, working class, traditional age student. Her mother became a single mother after her parents divorced before she was born. She is the oldest of five children. At the time of the interview, Kalila was in her first year as a full time student at a Russell Group university studying a subject in the arts.

**Katie** is a white, working class, traditional age student. Her mother became a single mother after her parents divorced. She has a younger sister. At the time of the interview, Katie was in her second year as a full time student at a newer public university studying a natural science.

**Kelly** is a BME, working class, traditional age student. She has a younger brother and step-sisters and step-brothers. Her mother became a single mother after her parents divorced. At the time of the interview, Kelly was in her first year as a full time student at a post-1992 university studying a social science.

**Kiersten** is a white, middle class, traditional age student. Her mother was a single mother from Kiersten's birth until she was 10 years old. Kiersten has a younger brother. At the time of the interview, Kiersten was in her third year as a full time student at a Russell Group university studying mathematics.

**Lori** is a white, working class, traditional age student. Her mother was always a single mother. Lori was emancipated from her mother at the age of 17. She has an older sister. She was a full time student and completed her undergraduate degree from a post-1992 university in a social science the year prior to the interview.

**Marilyn** is a white, middle class, traditional age student. Her mother became a single mother after her father died when she was six. She has a younger sister. At the time of the interview, Marilyn was in her first year as a full time student at a Russell Group university studying a social science.

**Marlys** is a white, traditional age student, and unsure of her social class. Her mother was always a single mother. Marlys has step-siblings on her father's side, but she is an only child at home. She was a full time student and completed her undergraduate degree the year prior to the interview. At the time of the interview, she was a part time student in the first year of a master's programme in the social sciences at a Russell Group university. Marlys asked to participate through an email interview.

**Sandra** is a white, working class, traditional age student. Her mother was always a single mother. Sandra is an only child. At the time of the interview, Sandra was in her second year as a full time student studying a social science at a smaller, research intensive university that was formerly part of the 1994 Group.

**Sarah** is a white, working class, mature student and a single mother herself. Her mother became a single mother after her parents divorced shortly after she was born. She has a son and an older brother. At the time of the interview, Sarah was in her third year as a full time student at a newer university studying a social science.

**Simone** is a white, working class, traditional age student. Her mother became a single mother after her parents separated when she was three. Simone is an only child. She was a full time student and completed her undergraduate degree in the arts from a post-92 university three years prior to the interview.

**Stacy** is a white, working class, mature student and a single mother herself. Her mother became a single mother after her parents divorced. Her mother has since passed away. She has five children and a younger sister. At the time of the interview, Stacy was in her third year as a full time student at a post-1992 university studying a social science. Stacy asked to participate through an email interview.

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**Susan** is a white, working class, traditional age student. Her mother became a single mother two months after she was born when she left her father. Her mother got married when she was five, but her step-father committed suicide when she was seven. Susan is an only child. At the time of the interview, she was in her second year as a full time student studying a natural science at a smaller, research intensive university that was formerly part of the 1994 Group.

**Vera** is a white, working class, traditional age student. Her mother became a single mother after her parents divorced when she was seven. Her father died when she was eleven. Vera has an older sister. At the time of the interview, Vera was in her first year as a full time student studying a social science at public research university that was formerly part of the 1994 Group.

**Zoe** is a BME, working class, traditional age student. Her mother was always a single mother. Zoe has three siblings and she is the second youngest child. Her father died when she was fourteen. At the time of the interview, Zoe was in her second year as a full time student at a Russell Group university studying a social science.



## Appendix B: Participant recruitment webpage

### University Experience of the Daughters of Single Mothers

**Call for participants**

Are you an undergraduate student (or have you completed your undergraduate degree in the last few years) in the UK who is the daughter of a single mother? Please consider participating in this qualitative research project.

**Who can participate?**

Since single mother families are diverse and can be defined in many ways, I am looking for participants who:

1. Consider themselves to have been primarily raised by their mother (or their mother raised them alone for about five years or more during their childhood)
2. Are current or recent undergraduate university students at any university in the UK, any mode of study (full or part time), and any age (traditional age or mature students)
3. Are first generation students (the first in their family to attend university, which includes students whose siblings might have gone to university)

**Questionnaire**

If you are interested in participating, please complete this [Questionnaire](#). Your responses are greatly appreciated!

**About the research**

The purpose of this study is to understand and explore the university experiences and identities of the daughters of single mothers who are first in their families to attend university. Your identity will be protected. Participants will be provided with pseudonyms. The results of this research study may be published but all data will be anonymised. To learn more about this research, view the [Information Sheet](#).

**About the researcher**

Hello! I am Jessica Gagnon, a PhD student in the Department of Education at the University of Sussex. I am a first-generation university student from a working-class single mother family from the United States. I am interested in widening participation in higher education and in identity formations within the university experience.

**Contact**

Jessica Gagnon  
 University of Sussex  
 Department of Education  
 Essex House 140  
 Brighton, UK BN1 9QQ  
 Email: [uniexperieresearch@gmail.com](mailto:uniexperieresearch@gmail.com)  
 Researcher Profile: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/people/peoplelists/person/307322>  
 Research Supervisor: Professor Penny Jane Burke

[Sign in](#) | [Report Abuse](#) | [Print Page](#) | [Powered by Google Sites](#)

<https://sites.google.com/site/uniexperieresearch/>

## Appendix C: Participant recruitment questionnaire

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### QUESTIONNAIRE

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the Participant Information Sheet [link to document will be provided here].

This questionnaire is divided into three sections with nine brief questions in each section. It is estimated that it will take you approximately 20 minutes to complete this survey. At the end, you have the option to provide your name and email address if you are possibly interested in participating further with this research.

The information that you provide will be treated in confidence and your identity will be protected. The results of this research study may be published.

\* Required

### About You

The following 9 brief questions are about you. Only the questions with an asterisk (\*) are required.

**Year of birth\***

**Country of birth \***

(question replicated from the UK 2011 Census)

☐ England

☐ Wales

☐ Scotland

☐ Northern Ireland

☐ Other:

**If you were not born in the United Kingdom, when did you most recently arrive to live here?**

(question replicated from the UK 2011 Census)

**How would you describe your racial or ethnic identity?\***

**What is your religion?\***

(question replicated from the UK 2011 Census)

☐ No religion

☐ Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)

☐ Buddhist

☐ Hindu

☐ Jewish

☐ Muslim

☐ Sikh

☐ Other:

## Part 2/4

With which social class do you identify?\*

What is your current occupation?\*

Do you identify as a person with a disability?

What is your sexual identity?

### About your family

The following 9 brief questions are about your family. Only the questions with an asterisk (\*) are required.

Do you identify as having been primarily raised by a single mother?\*

(for example, were you raised by your mother alone for about five years or more during your childhood?)

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Other:

When and for how long has (or was) your mother been a single parent?\*

Under what circumstances did your mother become a single parent?\*

(examples could include but are not limited to: ended relationship/divorce, bereavement, father/partner absentee, fertility treatments, adoption)

Do you have any siblings? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

### Part 3/4

If you have siblings, where are you in the birth order?

Has anyone in your family attended university? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, please describe their relationship to you.

(examples: mother, father, aunt, uncle, older sibling, cousin)

With which social class would your immediate family identify? \*

What is your mother's occupation? \*

### About Your University Experience

The following 9 brief questions are about your university experience. Only the questions with an asterisk (\*) are required.

Are you currently an undergraduate university student? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Other:

Which university do you attend? \*

Which course/area of study are you pursuing? \*

## Part 4/4

**What are your modes of study?\***

(select all that apply)

- ☐ Full-time
- ☐ Part-time
- ☐ Attend classes in-person
- ☐ Attend classes online
- ☐ Attend classes through a mix of in-person and online
- ☐ Other:

**What month and year did you begin your studies?\*****What month and year do you expect to complete your studies?\*****What are your current living circumstances?**

- ☐ I live with my mother/family
- ☐ I live on my own
- ☐ I live with flatmates
- ☐ I live in university housing
- ☐ I live with my partner/spouse/children
- ☐ Other:

**Are you the recipient of bursaries/grants/scholarships/or studentships?\***

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other:

**Are you using student loans to partially or fully fund your studies?\***

- ☐ Yes, partially
- ☐ Yes, fully
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other:

**Interested in being interviewed?**

Approximately 25 students who are the daughters of single mothers will be interviewed for this research study. Please consider providing your full name and email address if you may be willing to participate in an interview. To protect participant privacy, pseudonyms will be used; real names will not be used within this research. The results of this research study may be published.

**Full Name**

(optional if you wish to be interviewed)

**Email address**

(optional if you wish to be interviewed)

## Appendix D: Participant information sheet

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University of Sussex

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

*You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.*

**Title of Research Project:** The First-Generation University Experience of the Daughters of Single Mothers in the UK

**Description and Purpose of Research Project:** Through a qualitative study conducted in the UK, I will explore the identity formations of the daughters of single mothers pursuing undergraduate degrees as first-generation university students. The purpose of this study is to explore the possible impact of growing up in a single mother family on the daughters whom they have raised. Examining the identities of the daughters of single mothers as they negotiate university life will provide a framework for understanding their experiences. It is intended that this study will inform the creation of new or the improvement of existing social and educational programmes and policies aimed to encourage and support historically underrepresented students in their endeavour to earn university degrees.

**About the Researcher:** I am Jessica Gagnon a Ph.D. candidate in Department of Education at the University of Sussex. I am a first-generation university student from a working-class single mother family from the United States. I am interested in widening participation in higher education and in identity formations within the university experience.

#### **Why have I been invited to participate?**

You have been invited to participate because you identify as the daughter of a single mother and you are a first generation university student. In total, it is expected that approximately 25 students will participate in the study in the UK.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time during the data collection process without giving a reason.

#### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Your participation in this research will provide a deeper understanding of your identity and your experiences as the daughters of a single mother who is a first generation university student. Your voice will contribute to the larger collection of voices of participants, allowing your individual and unique lived experiences to resonate within the findings and challenge negative, homogenizing discourses about single mother families.

#### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

The length of the initial interview should be approximately 1-2 hours. The interview will be audio recorded and written notes will be taken. The recordings will be transcribed. After

the interview, you may be invited to provide reflective writings and/or to participate in follow-up interviews.

**Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?**

The information that you provide will be treated in confidence by the researcher and your identity will be protected in the publication of any findings. In order to maintain confidentiality, storage of identifying data will comply with the requirements set by the Data Protection Act of 1998. No identifying data will be stored on a computer. Digital audio files, interview transcripts, and research findings will be coded and interviewees will be given pseudonyms to maintain participant anonymity.

**What will happen with the results of the research study?**

The results of this research will be used in the researcher's thesis for a Ph.D. in Education at the University of Sussex. This thesis will enter the public domain once it is submitted to the University in September 2014. The findings from this research may be used in conference presentations and academic journal articles. To protect participant identity and privacy, pseudonyms will be used; real names will not be used within this research study.

**Contact for Further Information**

If you have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with the researcher. However, if you would like to contact an independent party please contact the Director of Studies.

**Researcher Contact Details:**

Name: Jessica Gagnon  
University Address:  
University of Sussex  
Department of Education  
Essex House 140  
Brighton, UK BN1 9QQ  
Email: J.Gagnon@sussex.ac.uk

**Director of Studies Contact Details:**

Name: Prof. Penny Jane Burke  
University Address:  
University of Sussex  
Department of Education  
Essex House 122  
Brighton, UK BN1 9QQ  
Email: P.J.Burke@sussex.ac.uk

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.**



## Appendix E: Participant consent form



### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

#### Title of Research Project:

The First-Generation University Experience of the Daughters of Single Mothers in the UK

**Researcher:** Jessica Gagnon, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Education, University of Sussex

#### Description of Research Project:

Through a qualitative study conducted in the UK, I will explore the identity formations of the daughters of single mothers pursuing undergraduate degrees as first-generation university students. The purpose of this study is to explore the possible impact of growing up in a single mother family on the daughters whom they have raised. Examining the identities of the daughters of single mothers as they negotiate university life will provide a framework for understanding their experiences.

The length of the initial interview should be approximately 1-2 hours. The interview will be audio recorded and written notes will be taken. The recordings will be transcribed. After the interview, participants may be asked to provide reflective writings and/or to participate in follow-up interviews. To protect participant identity and privacy, pseudonyms will be used; real names will not be used within this research study. The results of this research study may be published.

It is intended that this study will inform the creation of new or the improvement of existing social and educational programmes and policies aimed to encourage and support historically underrepresented students in their endeavour to earn university degrees.

#### Consent Statement:

I agree to take part in this research. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I am aware that I can choose not to answer any questions at any time and that I am free to withdraw from this study without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. I also understand that withdrawal of my data will no longer be possible once the analysis process of the research data begins 17 May 2013. I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the researcher and that my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings.

Name ..... Date .....

Signature .....

Please note: if you have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with the researcher. However, if you would like to contact an independent party please contact the Director of Studies.

#### Researcher Contact Details:

Name: Jessica Gagnon  
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## **Appendix F: Interview guide**

### *Part 1/2*

#### **I. Your Academic Aspirations**

1. When did you decide that you wanted to go to university? What are your current higher education aspirations? Why is higher education important to you? What do you hope to gain? What inspired you to choose to pursue a university degree? What does earning a university degree say about a person?
2. Has your mother influenced your higher education goals? How? What kind of advice have you received from your mother about higher education? Have other family members, a mentor, role model, or anyone else shaped your higher education aspirations? How? What kind of advice have you received from them about higher education?

#### **II. Your Family: Views from Inside and Outside**

3. What, do you believe, are the views of society about single mothers and single mother families? What are some of the stereotypical words and phrases most often used to talk about single mothers? In what ways are single mothers and single mother families described by the media? By politicians? Do you think that single mothers are judged differently depending on her race or class? How did growing up in a single mother family feel in your local community? Within your extended family? Do you feel that your community or your extended family treated your family differently because you were a part of a single mother family? How do you feel about the way that single mother families are publicly discussed by the press and by politicians? Do you think the experience is different for single fathers in comparison with single mothers? What about working mothers and stay-at-home mothers? What, do you think, society expects from the daughters of single mothers? In your perception, are the experiences of daughters of single mothers different or similar to sons? Explain. How would you define family? What does family mean to you? What do you wish people knew about your mother? About your family?

#### **III. Your Identity**

4. What are some of the words that you would use to describe who you are, your identity? What categories do you feel fit you? Are there categories that you think others place you in but that you don't believe fit you? I noticed you did/did not include 'student' as term to describe your identity; Can you talk about that? Has your understanding of yourself and who you are changed since you entered university? In what ways? How has growing up in a single mother family shaped how you feel about yourself and who you are?

**IV. Your Student Experience**

5. How do you feel about being a student? What does it mean for you to be the first in your family to go to university? How do you feel about accessing higher education when your mother did not or could not? Has your experience as a student affected your relationship with your family? Are there times when you feel like you don't belong at university? Are there times when you do feel like you belong? Do you feel like a part of a student community? Can you tell me about a time during your university experience when you felt proud? Can you tell me about a time during your university experience when you felt challenged or stressed? What do you enjoy most about higher education? Least? Where do you find support and encouragement? Who are your biggest supporters? How do you cope with academic challenges?
6. What obstacles do you believe exist for the daughters of single mothers who would like to go to university? Do you think that the views that society, the media, and some politicians hold about single mother families influences whether the daughters of single mothers go to university? What could be done to encourage more daughters of single mothers to pursue university degrees?

## Appendix G: Reflective writing guidance



### REFLECTIVE WRITING GUIDANCE

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research project. After you've had time to think about the interview, I'd like to ask you to engage in some reflective writing.

Your writing can be about anything you've thought about after the interview or anything related to this research study. You can write in any form you wish, for example you can write down a story from your childhood or from your university experience, you can write a letter to your past self or your future self, you can reflect on your emotions during or after the interview in journal style writing, or you can write poetry.

You can write as little or as much as you like, from just one side of an A4 page to as many pages as you wish. You are free to write what you'd like, without judgement. As with the research interview, your writing will be confidential.

**Some possible questions to ponder or answer in your writing:**

Do you have any stories to share about your family?

What advice did your mother give you about your education?

How does it feel to be a first-generation university student?

Do you have any stories to share about your university experience?

What are your higher education aspirations and how do those fit with your career aspirations?

What thoughts do you have about the way single mother families are portrayed by the media or by politicians?

What do you wish you could tell the world about your family or about single mother families in general?

If you could write a letter to your past self or your future self, what would it say?

You are not bound by these questions. You can write about anything you'd like related to the study, to your identity, to your family experience, and to your university experience. Anything you have to write will be helpful in telling the whole story of you in relation to this research.

I will follow up with you and ask that you consider submitting your reflective writings to me by email [J.Gagnon@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:J.Gagnon@sussex.ac.uk) within two weeks of our interview, if possible.

I greatly appreciate your continued participation in this research study. You are welcome to contact me or my director of studies at any time with questions or concerns or to share any post-interview thoughts or feelings you may have.

Best Regards,  
Jessica Gagnon

## Appendix H: Post interview information sheet



### POST-INTERVIEW INFORMATION LETTER

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research project. Since this research examines your personal experiences, identity formation, and your family life, there is the potential that you may experience a range of possible emotions, positive and/or negative, during and after the interview.

In preparation for that possibility, I have created this post-interview debriefing letter that highlights some of the organizations from which you can seek information and support. Organizations included in the list below are just examples of possible places from which you may wish to seek information or support. Inclusion on the list does not indicate promotion or endorsement of the organization by the researcher or by the University of Sussex.

#### Gingerbread

Website: <http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/>

Information: Also known as The National Council for One Parent Families, Gingerbread is a national charity that provides advice and practical support for single parents and a wealth of information about single parent families in the UK. Their vision is "a society in which single parent families are valued and where they (and their children) are treated equally and fairly."

#### British Federation of Women Graduates

Website: <http://bfwg.org.uk>

Information: BFWG promotes women's opportunities in education and public life; works as part of an international organisation to improve the lives of women and girls; and fosters local, national and international friendship.

#### National Union of Students (NUS)

Website: <http://www.nus.org.uk/>

Information: The National Union of Students is a confederation of 600 students' unions, amounting to more than 95 per cent of all higher and further education unions in the UK. Through their member students' unions, they represent the interests of more than seven million students.

#### Youth Access

Website: <http://youthaccess.org.uk/>

Information: Providing information, advice, and counselling to young people ages 13-25. Youth Access is the largest provider of young people's advice and counselling services in the UK.

#### SupportLine

Website: <http://www.supportline.org.uk/>

Information: SupportLine offers confidential emotional support to children, young adults and adults by telephone, email and post.

After you've had time to think about the interview, I hope you will send me some reflective writings as part of this research project. Details about that part of the research are included on a separate page. You are welcome to contact me or my director of studies at any time with questions or concerns or to share any post-interview thoughts or feelings you may have.

Thank you again for participating in this research!

Best Regards,

Jessica Gagnon

## Appendix I: Classroom activity

In Pairs: Design a student and professor based on media discourses of the qualities and characteristics of the most valued, stereotypically 'good' student and professor in the UK

Qualities/Characteristics	Student	Professor
Full Name		
Age		
Gender		
Race/Ethnicity		
Sexuality		
Religion/Faith		
Socioeconomic class		
Family background		
Current Family (Single? Married? Children?)		
Nationality		
Abilities/Disabilities		
Which University?		
University Subject		
University Activities		
Dress Style		
Personality		
Social Life		
Ambitions		
More?		