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Article (Accepted Version)

Morris, Charlotte and Munt, Sally R (2019) Classed formations of shame in white, British single mothers. *Feminism & Psychology*, 29 (2). pp. 231-249. ISSN 0959-3535

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## **Article**

### **Classed formations of shame in white, British single mothers**

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#### **Keywords**

Shame, heteronormativity, single mothers, narrative, identity, class, respectability

#### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the formation of shame in a group of white heterosexual British women originally from middle-class backgrounds. Narrative interviews convey how participants perceive their lives to have been ‘spoiled’ and stigmatized through becoming single mothers. They articulate perceptions of how their lives have fallen short of idealised heteronormative, middle-class trajectories of neoliberal success and adopt a range of narrative strategies to counter this, informed by the politics of shame in relation to single motherhood in contemporary Britain.

#### **Introduction**

This paper draws on a study comprising 24 life history interviews with white, heterosexual single mothers across various urban and rural locations in the South-East of England<sup>1</sup>.

Exploring the social emotion of shame in relation to single motherhood, it foregrounds

strategies the women used to counter the shame which accompanies the transition to what can be perceived and experienced to be a stigmatised identity.

For Scheff (1997), shame is a central emotion, tying together individual and social aspects of human affect as a barometer of morality and a means of regulation and distance, ‘allowing us to regulate how close or far we are from others’ (Scheff, 1997, p.12). Single motherhood has been pursued by disciplinary acts of shaming throughout western culture’s Christian history; it was not until three quarters of the way through the twentieth century that single mothers stopped being incarcerated in asylums for the ‘moral turpitude’ of being pregnant. In Britain, traditionally shame has been ascribed to the state of single motherhood, notably encapsulated by the Victorian ‘fallen woman’ (Smart, 1992), and consciousness of this stigma marked participants’ accounts. Single mothers have long been discursively constructed as out-of-control, oversexed and low status women (Smart, 1992). Indeed Skeggs (2005) argued that British single mothers in the 1980s - 1990s came to symbolise amoral femininity for this generation. In our article, we explain how middle-class women especially may feel compelled to distance themselves from such a spectre, partly in the cause of a compensatory action to ameliorate their own shame as ‘failed neoliberal subjects’.

Here we interrogate how this group of middle-class participants adopted notions of superiority in seeking to distance themselves from what they perceived to be irresponsible lower-class women. Located within the context of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007) and its investment in the idealised responsible, self-interested individual, this reflects the growing status anxiety of the middle-classes (Ehrenreich, 1989), likely to have accelerated in the context of ‘Austerity Britain’ and its growing economic precarity.<sup>2</sup> As previous commentators have suggested (Bourdieu, 1986; Skeggs, 2004; Lawler, 2005) middle-class identities are normative, and thus desirable, being constructed around an exclusion of and

maintaining distance from ‘the repellent and disgusting ‘other’’ (Lawler, 2005, p.431). As feminist historians have argued, working-class women and single mothers in particular are inextricably linked to narratives of ‘moral decline’ (Thane and Evans, 2012). Walkerdine et al. (2001) and Lawler (2005) also suggest that proximity to the working-classes must be guarded against if middle-class feminine respectability is to be maintained. Thus, middle-class anxiety about proximity to the shamed social type ‘single mother’ – a kind of fear of contagious stigma - marked many respondents’ comments. Underclass identity is also negatively ethnicised: class hatred for the poor has been linked historically to concerns about racial ‘purity’ (Lawler 2005, Munt 2007, Wacquant 2008, Welshman 2013), and respondents were keen to distance themselves from such ‘pollution’, using their whiteness as a compensatory status lift.

### **Literature Review: Shaming narratives of single motherhood**

Single mothers in British society have long been vilified as embodying unregulated female sexuality with potential to disrupt the social order (Smart, 1992). Mann and Roseneil (1999) highlighted ways in which single mothers are subject to intrusive scrutiny and judgement in relation to their sexual and intimate lives; single mothers recently been repositioned as a threat to the social order in failing or refusing to provide a ‘civilising force’ for men. The nostalgic ‘family values’ discourse was promoted by Thatcher’s government in the 1980s following the lead of the American New Right and underpinned by Charles Murray’s (1994) populist political writing on what he postulated was the emergence of a threatening, immoral ‘underclass’ which challenged family stability. Such neoconservative notions of the ‘underclass’ suggested that those living in deprived, working-class areas were to blame for their poverty due to immorality and laissez-faire attitudes. This perspective ignored structural factors such as de-industrialisation leading to high levels of unemployment in parts of Britain,

and ongoing social inequities and decline in resources for social support. Tyler (2013) analysed how such national discourses were renewed recently, following urban civil riots in 2011. Following these riots came the emergence of a new menace (led by Prime Minister David Cameron), of “feral parents”, in an ideological shift that rejuvenated a re-racialization of the working classes not seen since Victorian times (De Benedictis, 2012). Negative depictions have intensified since the early 1990s, blaming single mothers for rejecting fathers and thereby contributing to a rise in crime (Gillies, 2007; Skeggs, 2005; Wallbank, 2001).<sup>3</sup>

At the time of this research and in the wake of urban riots across England and Wales in 2011, the right-wing Centre for Social Justice report ‘Fractured Families: Why Stability Matters’ warned of a ‘tsunami of family breakdown battering the United Kingdom’ (2013, p.4) with an accompanying Press Release that warned about ‘men deserts’. Run by the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Ian Duncan Smith, this neo-conservative policy thinktank attempted to link a host of social problems including poverty, educational underachievement and anti-social behaviour, to a decline in marriage, the rise in lone parent families and a lack of male role models. The centre previously placed pressure on the Government to promote marriage, which culminated in the Conservative-led coalition government’s re-introduction of the Married Tax Allowance in 2010, amid contextualising rhetoric around ‘Broken Britain’ (Tyler, 2013). Marriage was proffered as the solution to society’s ills, (Centre for Social Justice, 2013, p.70); such attitudes shift the blame for social problems caused by state-induced, structural poverty, to the individual sexual morality of single women (and by logical extension, feminism), in line with neoliberal and neoconservative agendas.

Concomitantly, the rise of the figure of the ‘chav’ in public media in the UK during the first decade of the twenty-first century consolidated this trope of the irresponsible sexually profligate, ‘dirty white’ single mother (Tyler 2008). The popular ‘chav’ stereotype was

encapsulated by the figure of the unemployed teenage mother living on a council estate with several children by different fathers of mixed ethnicities, exemplified at the time by the character of Vicky Pollard in the popular TV series 'Little Britain' (Tyler 2008; Lockyer 2010, Nayak and Kehily, 2014). This notorious and ubiquitous figure in British popular culture was encapsulated by Tyler in the denigrating phrase 'chav mum, chav scum' (Tyler, 2008). Tyler (2008) reads the iconic chav Vicky Pollard through a lens of disgust, linking toxic class hatred to shame and disgust. Such figures of contempt link into broader enduring class divisions and moral panics (Cohen, 1992) surrounding 'feral youth' and the 'undeserving poor', and are widely projected onto unemployed young men and teenage mothers (Nayak and Kehily, 2014). 'Chav' and similarly 'pram-face' stereotypes attributed to young working-class people are figures of abjection that are inextricably linked to neoliberal discourses of 'waste', that is, economically non-viable subjects.

## **Methodology**

Life History methodology was adopted in order to capture the complexity of single mothers' intimate lives. Life history narrative research has a long tradition within the Social Sciences which has been well documented (Plummer, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). This approach prompts participants to narrate aspects of their lives and is established as a means of linking individual transitions to broader social contexts and change, and demonstrates individuals' negotiation of their identities (McAdams, 1993). As such, life history methodology has been identified as an ideal means to capture marginalised identities and experiences and has been adopted widely by feminist researchers (Berger, Gluck and Patai, 1991).<sup>4</sup>

## **Sample**

Rich, multi-layered data gathered via 24 unstructured narrative interviews, conducted in 2011 in the city of Brighton and Hove and surrounding area, provided an ideal basis for exploring processes of transition for single mothers who had experienced relationship breakdown. Via a purposive sampling strategy, participants were comprised of a generational sample born between 1955 and 1980.<sup>5</sup> Participants had between one and five children, who ranged between ages two to their late-twenties. In terms of employment status, the majority (nine) were unemployed or full-time carers, seven were full-time employed with three in professional roles; seven were part-time employed with four in professional roles (making a total of seven participants in professional roles) and two worked in voluntary roles (although classed as unemployed). Many reasons for relationship breakdowns were given. Two of the participants had been abandoned by the fathers of their child in pregnancy, and three had escaped from violent relationships for their and their children's safety.

Smart and Neale's (1999) study of divorced women found that they are more likely to be engaged in rediscovering a sense of selfhood following emotional and material disruption of their lives. Eight participants disclosed coping with the 'after effects' of living with domestic abuse. This transition is particularly challenging in the light of the contemporary British context of neoliberalism and austerity (see for example Allen and Tayler, 2012; Gillies, 2007) in which state lone-family support has been cut. Single mothers face the challenge of adapting to their reduced social status alongside reconciling their perceived failure to achieve the dominant myths and aspirations of heterosexual married monogamy. Narrative and, as illuminated in this article, life history techniques are one way of making sense of such disruptions of identity and accompanying complex social emotions such as shame.

Analysis

A multi-layered strategy of data analysis was employed, analysing the data in three stages at structural, thematic and discursive levels (following Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998 and Riessman, 1993), and informed by feminist cultural theories of subjectivity. The first reading focused on the overall formal structure of the narratives, observing whether they drew on specific, recognisable genres and highlighting common features; the second focused on the narrative content, identifying key themes (including shame) and then finally sections of the narratives were investigated at a discursive level, noting language participants drew upon in shaping their narratives.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Narratives of lives as ‘spoiled’ and aetiologies of regret**

Participants often began interviews by relating traumatic experiences of relationship breakdown followed by describing challenging experiences of adjusting to parenting alone. Some felt their life to be irreparably spoiled (Goffman, 1963), having failed to live up to conventional middle-class aspirations, and entailing financial, social and emotional hardships that provoked a sense of regret. This was exacerbated by the adoption of what can still be viewed as a ‘stigmatised identity’ within British culture: while it is a common assumption that progressive social change has led to a de-stigmatisation of lone parent families, deeply ingrained archetypal understandings of ‘fallen women’ persist. Furthermore, social acceptance was not the experience of participants who had lived through different social, policy and discursive (as well as localised family and community) contexts in which single mothers have frequently been positioned as non-normative and problematic. As will be explored here, they were highly aware of and affected by ongoing negative media stereotypes and adverse appraisals within their local communities.



Goffman's work (1963) explicates the process of an identity becoming spoiled, stigmatised or 'disqualified from full social acceptance' (Goffman, 1963, p.9). For Goffman, stigma represents a discrepancy between a person's 'virtual social identity' in which they may see themselves as a 'normal human being' who deserves to be accepted, and their 'actual identity' whereby their identity claims are discredited and so spoiled. This process may be especially difficult for those, such as single mothers, who become stigmatised later in life, disrupting a heteronormative trajectory, and this may therefore necessitate a radical reorganisation of their view of the past (Goffman, 1963, p.47).

The transition to single motherhood was often infused with a sense of shame, linked to this 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963). Unsurprisingly, many participants' narratives were shaped by an emphasis on how single motherhood is not a position that is chosen or desirable. Some participants' narratives followed a 'fall from grace' narrative arc (Munt, 2007), prototypical in Judeo-Christian cultures, conveying status decline and stagnation. The 'fall from grace' is predominantly associated with women, with its ultimate manifestation in 'the fallen woman'. As Munt contends:

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

Hockey, Meah and Robinson (2010) observed that the imagined world of idealized heterosexuality is often in conflict with real life experiences. Juliet (45) explained how her life had not turned out the way she had anticipated or imagined and this was a source of continuing grief for her:

This man came along and said ‘I love you, I want to give you loads of children’ and it was that, it was like my Achilles heel but I haven’t been able to be the mother I wanted to be because it was just so hard and um, so that’s been very hard and caused a lot of sadness...

Juliet conveyed a sense of shame in not being a ‘good enough mother’ due to her lone parent status exacerbating the impossible standards attributed to aspirational middle-class motherhood (Hays, 1996). Similarly, Jacquie’s (43) narrative exemplifies the notion that her life had been spoiled when her anticipation of ‘living happily ever after’ was destroyed by her experience of her partner leaving, stressing the speed at which these events occurred, leaving her in shock:

I (pause) met somebody and fell in love... I thought he felt the same way too, we talked about having children, I was approaching 28, um it was something I wanted to, I was thinking about um, I became pregnant and um six months into the pregnancy he decided – well he didn’t decide, he was so casual about it, he just left and... that was that. [Pause – becomes upset]

In describing how: ‘I met somebody and fell in love,’ Jacquie sets up the (aborted) quest trajectory of romantic love; she frequently became emotional during the interview, demonstrating how much this painful rupture fourteen years earlier still affected her. Loss, regret, and disappointment was widely articulated by respondents, who had grown up to

expect romantic success, crystallized by bourgeois fulfilment. Conversely, transition to single motherhood often instigated a fall in social and material status which undermined neoliberal and heteronormative projections. Natasha envisaged the possibility of a positive counter-narrative about single motherhood; nevertheless, she conveyed that it was too difficult to escape from trenchant negative self-perceptions and sense of 'lack' (Butler, 2000):

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

### **Shame, envy, and 'failed' aspiration within single parenthood**

Broken romantic love trajectories were frequently experienced by participants as a form of cruelty, and led to internalised blame, failure, and ontological states of shame. Smart (2007) suggests that poor relationships in themselves are characterized by feelings of shame, with being single perceived as a failure. This sense of shame is highly gendered, reflecting that women typically tend to be considered as responsible for relationships and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983). Kaufman (2008) argues that global and economic uncertainty has re-centred ideals of 'the family' in the early 21st century, generating pity for single women who have not followed the ideal 'husband-baby-home' trajectory (Kaufman, 2008, p.22). He notes 'society's accusing finger' (Kaufman, 2008, p.25), present in many of the respondents' narratives including Jess (39) who referred to her children being perceived as 'baggage', explaining that 'I just felt shame for a long time that nobody wanted me, you know...' Many

interviewees related vignettes of 'perfect' families, to which they painfully compared themselves (comparison being a typical shame-based behaviour). Caitlyn (33) conveys a sense of envy in relating her experience of being alone with her child on the beach on a Bank Holiday where many normative families were on view:

I remember being on the beach one summer's day and there was a family in front ... there was a mum with her two little boys and I heard this crunching in the pebbles behind me and I looked behind me and there was a man behind me loosening his tie and with his briefcase and he surprised her and I just sat there and cried because I'd never had that family experience...

She thereby compares the idealised couple-centred family to her own diminished situation, lacking the father figure required for 'completion'.

Juliet (45) too evokes envy in upholding her idealised vision of family life:

I've got a friend who's got four children and she doesn't work, she hasn't worked at all and... that house seems to function very well, um... but she is also very happy to be a full-time mother, she takes pride in the role, she takes it very seriously and *is* a lovely Mum and they all eat really nice wholesome food and they go for nice walks in the countryside and her husband's a GP and she does care for him as well and he's a lovely guy and they do seem to have a really balanced relationship...

References to 'wholesome food' and 'nice walks in the countryside' associate successful family life with middle-class lifestyles, casting them in idyllic terms. In relation to her own circumstances, Juliet links declining moral values with the emasculation of men, with the result that men have become irresponsible, thus drawing upon 'family values' discourse. She distances herself from those who have 'deliberately' chosen single motherhood, aligning

herself with a superior morality based on a victimhood of being 'left'. This formation leaves such women perceiving themselves to be lesser models of family, gazing at what seems like unachievable happiness from the sidelines:

I think this, this one parent, one child unit just doesn't – well it might work for some people – it just doesn't really work for us, I think it's no good for either of us and also, I think I've suffered and lost so much of my life because of the decisions I've had to make...

There were many expressions in the interviews of aspirational desire for a 'decent' home in a 'nice' area, intertwined with romantic notions of the 'fairytale ending':

I guessed you know that I would grow up, meet a nice man, have a nice house, have children and do... replicate what [my parents] did – that's what I assumed would happen, you know... (Steph, 37)

I suppose I just assumed that I would marry somebody. My charming prince and we'd get married and have lots of children and live in the countryside. (Helen, 50)

There was the typical fantasy of the wedding and the children and the nice house and the not having to work or doing a job I chose, not because I had to but for my own fun [laughs] but I didn't envisage it being such a struggle (Teresa, 42)

I never assumed anything other than growing up, and having a loving, respectful, successful husband, and that we would probably have 3 children and that we would have worked hard together to get a nice home and to do decent things with him – that was, I just assumed it – that's just, yeah. I always just thought it would be like that. (Jess, 39)

Many thereby articulated envy for those acquaintances that had apparently ‘succeeded’ in their cultural and social indicators of ‘achievement’, including the acquisition of a partner and father figure for their children. Conversely, as discussed here and in line with previous research studies, to be ‘left on the shelf’ was perceived as a marker of failure and disenfranchised entitlement (Skeggs, 1997; Simpson, 2005).

### **Loss of Respectability**

Respectability, according to Skeggs (1997, 2005), is conferred on women primarily through marital status and appropriate femininity. She found that her working-class participants’ role as housewives, mothers and carers was key to developing positive identities which they observed in themselves and others (Skeggs, 1997). The middle-class participants here similarly conveyed their respectability through stressing their good mothering and pride in their homes, making a contrast with those positioned as less respectable; responses indicated a heightened awareness of popular media depictions of single mothers as disrespectable, for instance in this example from Susan (55):

I think [single mothers are] still viewed negatively unfortunately. I occasionally go onto parenting websites, you know, like mumsnet or netmums and there’s a surprising amount of venom towards single mums. It’s quite extraordinary – things that you’d think... there’s a lot of assumptions made about them. In people’s minds – especially those who read the ‘Daily Mail’ - they get this image that it’s someone who doesn’t work, who has endless children by different fathers and then brings them up on the dole and yes, I think there’s still a lot of prejudice against them. (Susan, 55)<sup>6</sup>

Participants’ narratives emphasised how their identity as single parents had not been ‘chosen’. However participants frequently invoked the ‘feckless father’ figure, perhaps as a

defence to justify their lone status; this trope also fits well with government demagoguery of the period (De Benedictis, 2012). Invoking 'lack of choice' remains constrained by the language of neoliberalism. There is a strong sense of loss of social status - in particular, of respectability as Chloe (34) relates:

[O]ne day I was this respectable married woman with children and the next day it kind of felt that I was kind of on the bottom of the social pile and I had various part-time jobs but they were fairly low level and I kind of felt looked down on...

This common experience of feeling shamed was foregrounded in the case of Natasha, the daughter of a single mother. Natasha (39) recollected how she grew up seeing her mother as a victim who evinced pity and therefore she was particularly sensitive to such prejudice:

I grew up with my mum being quite a sad person and feeling that people felt sorry for her or ridiculed her and I grew up feeling determined not to be like that um but you can have... you can go to a [mother and] baby group and say it's just me and the children and they say, 'Oh!' [pitying tone] and I want to say, 'would you rather I was with some layabout who's going to be a drain on my resources' and... yeah I don't know, it's a difficult one - I never ever wanted to be a single mum because of that stigma so now it's happening a second time around.

For several participants, becoming a lone parent entailed the need to claim state benefits and move to council housing; there were high levels of shame associated with living in settings that are linked to cultural notions of the 'feckless underclass'. Zoe, for example, depicts life on a council estate as 'heart-breaking' and 'miserable', drawing on contemporaneous media moral panics about 'anti-social behaviour':

It was all quite heart-breaking and difficult... it wasn't a particularly nice area, it was pretty miserable, loads of fights, joy riders, people banging on your door at four in the morning, but I was a single parent with no money so that's where the council said you're moving to so I said Ok, I didn't really know any better. (Zoe, 31)

'Knowing better' encapsulates the attribution of knowledge to cultural capital, and reverberates with the conception of how (social) 'betters' acquire such symbolic wealth. In neoliberal terms participants positioned poorer women as failing to make the correct choices, instead of following a legitimate path of continual self-improvement. Achieving normative married life with a 'nice man' and a 'nice house' is positioned as the ultimate feminine accomplishment, gaining markers of respectable white middle-classness, which should remain the goal, even under duress:

A single parent is someone who's normally depicted as not very educated who's being slack in their...[laughs] – clearly doesn't know how to use contraception but I was on the pill when I got pregnant with [my daughter], a big shock to me but um... that's taking from society, that isn't contributing anything, isn't very bright – it's all... to me it's all negatives ... when I was first thinking of leaving X I didn't have a salary and I didn't know where we were going to live so I went to see the council to find out and they said basically you'll be in a B & B and this will be the area and I went to look and I thought "Over my dead body am I bringing up a child in this area" and that's when I had to plan, I had to stay with X a year longer than I wanted to in order to get a job and save up money and that was quite horrendous 'coz he figured out luckily towards the end and afterwards that that's what I was doing because there was no way, I couldn't get out any other way and that's how I got the mortgage because I was actually in a job, at first I was condemned to renting somewhere which was really bad, it had no heating, damp



everywhere but it was still a good decision, [my daughter] was too young to realize what a shithole we were living in, I thought she'll never remember there was no heating and it was painted bright pink and downstairs about five colours... she'll never know, you know cheap furniture bought for a tenner, there was just no way was I going to become that person that was going to... that you see on the telly.

Loss of respectability is a shameful state to be avoided at all (cultural, social, symbolic as well as economic) costs, its resultant humiliations are to be hidden.

### **Sexual Promiscuity and Shaming**

Within Judeo-Christian traditions, the notion of shame has been specifically associated with the regulation of women's sexuality. Smart (1992) has described how marriage is seen to make women respectable, but to be without a man is correlated with uncontrolled promiscuity, thereby threatening the maintenance of 'normal' family life and ultimately society itself (Carabine, 2001; Smart, 1992): Smart's (1992) study explores ways in which UK single mothers have been vilified as the incarnation of unregulated female sexuality, locating this historically as emerging in Victorian culture with its virgin/whore dichotomy. Underpinning this, she highlights ways in which the categories of 'woman' and 'female sexuality' have been constructed throughout hegemonic discourse as 'the problematic feminine subject who is constantly in need of regulation' (Smart, 1992, p.7).

Four of the participants had Roman Catholic backgrounds that caused them direct shame in terms of becoming pregnant outside marriage. As Jess (39) explains, 'I got pregnant with X and I was very, very desperately unhappy'. Teresa (42), who lived in what she described as a close-knit community, experienced both being pitied and seen as a sexual threat, which saw her being excluded from predominantly couple-centred social circles:

[T]hey either see you as someone they feel sorry for and invite you round or they see you as someone who might try to nick their husbands ... it always feels a bit like you're the charity case – poor single mother! [laughter]

And Helen (50), who has a heightened sensitivity to how she is seen (a symptom of shame), comments:

I don't want to get involved with couples and then us split up, it's just embarrassing, well not embarrassing as such but it's almost like the neighbours talking, my latest partner has been chatting with the neighbours and now I think "well he might not be coming round anymore" and then a few months later another car pulls up outside – hopefully, I don't know, whenever – and then it'll be "Oh she's onto her next boyfriend" – I don't know, semi-embarrassing, makes you feel as if you can't hold down a relationship...

Jess (39) was conscious of this perception: 'I seem to be the only one not having a sex life but one thing that really bugs me is that people think that single mothers are sex maniacs or something'. She mentioned that married women often perceived her as being a sexual threat and desperate for a man. Similarly, Emma's (45) comment betrays awareness of right-wing discourse linking single mothers to social threat, insinuating that poverty is down to individual capriciousness:

I think they're presented as these slovenly, good-for-nothing, money grabbing slappers, you know, I really do. I think a lot of people view single mothers as having no morals - every single mother must have had at least 3 or 4 children from all different fathers, they just sit on welfare, don't look after their kids, let their kids run riot. You know, they just

sit and drink and spend all the maintenance money on alcohol and drugs and the next boyfriend.

Cristina (42) stressed that while popular media stereotypes suggested that single mothers are unable to control their fertility, she had not planned to have children but her contraception failed, thereby distancing herself from the 'other' promiscuous single mothers. Teresa countered the 'social threat discourse' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) by arguing that the decision to have children simply to acquire financial support and / or housing is likely to be extremely rare, and the level of welfare support is not such that it would be worthwhile.

Natasha expresses her ambivalence to, and internalisation of, media stereotypes, encapsulated by the influential British daytime television programme 'The Jeremy Kyle Show' which demonises working-class people as social 'trash':

I said to my mum when he left, I'm like something off 'Jeremy Kyle' and genuinely I do still feel like that.<sup>7</sup>

Generally, these women were haunted by the apparition of the 'chav mum' (Tyler, 2008) and they were each at pains to disprove this association.<sup>8</sup>

### **Classed projections: disgust and the displacement of shame**

Participants created hierarchies of value for single motherhood, invoking those failed mothers who they saw as confirming to adverse media stereotypes and stridently distancing themselves from them. Elaine (44) created a distinction between those whom she implies 'deliberately' became single mothers and those who became single mothers through what she presented as 'unavoidable circumstances'. In so doing, she reproduces disparaging typecasting of young women as prolific 'breeders'. Dehumanisation and speciesism in regard

to the white underclass is long established (Munt 2007), and Elaine was typical in scapegoating such poor young mothers:

I think there may be some who give us a bad name, there might be a few. I see some with like five buggies, loads of little children – they're very young themselves, I don't think they have any intention of not *breeding* [our emphasis] and they're not making it easy for all the rest of us out there... I mean everyone has a different story – some people did it deliberately, others like me – it happened to them, it was imposed on them. You don't set out thinking, 'I am going to be a lone mother'. I think that's a very unwise thing to do. I don't think society has a very good image of them... it's starting to change... but I think we're a bit like pariahs in society... I mean marriage is still considered the way to go isn't it or not everyone gets married do they but even a partnership, I mean and most of us would like to be in a partnership if we could – it's not like we've chosen not to have a man in our life.

The grammatical slippage between 'them' and 'we' identifies this dilemma. It should be noted that Elaine experienced a particularly catastrophic transition to single parenthood; having suffered a serious illness and subsequent relationship breakdown, her standard of living had severely dropped; having earned a professional, stable income she was now unable to work, living on a council estate and experiencing a high degree of social isolation.

Such intensity of feeling is echoed in other narratives, including that of Jess (39) who is haunted by the 'Vicky Pollard' apparition (Tyler, 2008) – a stupid, promiscuous single 'Benefits Mum' with sundry ethnically mixed children by different fathers – Jess raises this spectre in her comparison below:

The mother of my nephew and niece has six children by four different fathers, she has immaculate hair and a tight bum from her regular gym sessions and lovely nails<sup>9</sup> because that's her life because she manages with six children on the social to do it and I resent it because I resent that I work hard to earn quite a modest wage and I pay tax to support that and I know that that's what people think we all do and that's not true. Neither do I neglect my children by going out and pulling men in bars, I don't do that either... I don't know, within my own community, I know I'm respected for being a single mum, especially by other mums and by some male colleagues who have children now, they respect that enormously but then I come from an intelligent circle and then in the wider society there's *Jeremy Kyle* and you're almost up there for the pillory aren't you? (Jess, 39).

Such contempt in middle-class participants is often dissociative in relation to their potential stigmatisation, as they adopt a social commentator role, drawing upon neoconservative cultural narratives that position them 'above' those who 'choose' to be 'on the social'. Here Yvonne (49) reflects on what she perceives as deteriorating moral values:

I think it's so easy to exit relationships, so easy now, I find that disconcerting, really disconcerting, the readiness of people to divorce. Children aren't glue anymore, even a commitment people consider worth staying together for... yeah I think things have changed enormously although at the same time... although in some ways there are merits to that but there are also sad aspects to that – family units don't have the respect they used to, the stability... it's like you can have it all, buy now, pay later – so that kind of building nests... it isn't the same mind-set as when my parents grew up and people stayed together... because it was embarrassing if you got divorced, my dad wouldn't let her divorce him, nobody got divorced.

This neoliberal attribution of blame, that the underclass purposefully ‘choose’ their fates because of selfishness, is replete with nostalgia:

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

Phrases such as ‘half-brothers’ and half-sisters’ indicate miscegenation, an enduring preoccupation of eugenics, which historically has been unremittingly directed at the poor. See too, how shame is spatialized, as Juliet (45) observes in her discomfort that the advert for Gingerbread, a single parent group was displayed in a classically working-class food outlet as opposed to a more ‘respectable’ coffee shop:

It’s a 17 year old girl who’s... just stupid – that’s the sort of stereotype... um that’s been sort of my experience as well of the sort of lone mother groups, you know... there was just one advert for Gingerbread in the whole area and it was in the fish and chip shop and I just thought, “Isn’t that typical?” you know, why the fish and chip shop and not Café Nero or something.

Juliet is also keen to point out that she didn’t ‘choose’ this destiny, yet has to manage the contagion of being tarnished by association:

[A]nd um so then you have the single mother stereotype which seems to... when you have single mothers talked about, referred to they usually talked about in this way and there are professional people who, you know... arrive in situations... uh... for reasons that they don't necessarily choose. I mean I know, I know I... you know, I was the one that got pregnant, I know that but I don't feel I sat down and made a plan about this, that this is what I would like – I definitely did not want that, it sort of happened to me and... um there's not much sympathy for that... I think, it's kind of like "It's your own stupid fault" kind of thing but... that's not very kind actually.

Yvonne (49), who is Catholic, wishes to reject the stigma of divorce; she frequently passes as married, concealing her single status from others, stating ambiguously that 'I'm on my own with two children':

I think there is a great difference between a single mother who has never got married or been with a partner and somebody who has been with somebody and at the beginning it was right to have children and then it went wrong but I could not say for months I'm a divorcee, the stigma of that – that can't be me, we've never had anyone divorced... I would tend to say, 'I'm on my own with two children' if people needed to know for whatever reason 'cos I'm still me – I happen to be divorced, you know, that's how it is.

Comparing oneself to others, and disassociating oneself from those in a more denigrated social category can be a shame-based practise based on disidentification (Munt 2007).

Making strong real and psychic boundaries between white middle-class 'respectable' families and the 'underclass' is a recurrent theme. White superiority was implicit rather than explicit in most accounts, but here Jess rues the end of racial purity in her pejorative comment about 'multi-coloured' families that breed 'kittens', thereby animalistic imagery:

I think, like I said, all the boundaries have kind of disappeared but some people fight to maintain them, like I said, my 'Doris Day' friend, they love it, they want to be 2.4, they see that as something to be proud of, they've gone down the Catholic route for the sake of a good schooling, they think they've put structure, respectability... I don't know, this whole thing about chavs, this whole chav culture where you can call someone a chav, when I was young you used to be good [inaudible] or common, that was it, and you whispered it, you didn't call someone it to their face to say "look at those chavs" and that's not my belief, it's what I grew up with and... I think everything's mixed up now and they've put diversity out there which I think is a good thing, healthy because it's something for... there's a lot of diversity and there's nothing wrong with that, there is diversity but then you see Jeremy Kyle and there are multi-coloured families and stuff, it's sad, it's just like cats having kittens and they have kittens and they keep on having kittens and there's nothing in-between... (Jess, 39)

'Diversity' is invoked only to be dismissed, demonstrating respondents' familiarity with liberal discourses such as multiculturalism, only to undercut them.

## **Conclusion**

We have discussed single motherhood as a stigmatised identity within contemporary British culture, paying particular attention to discursive formations of shame, and the practices of shame that emerge from such subjectifications. Many participants were careful to reiterate that single motherhood was not their chosen identity and continued to cling to traditional social scripts of idealised heteronormative, monogamous marriage. They were keen to stress their value as good mothers, in spite of personal disappointment and regret for falling short of heteronormative romantic and neoliberal ideals. The loss of social, sexual and material status



associated with successful middle-class femininity was linked to the peril of losing respectability. Dominant classed and racialized identifications were mobilised to express their superiority over, and a disassociation from, those to whom stigma is securely attached - namely young, often 'dirty white' or BME working-class mothers. Strong psychic processes of 'dis-identification' (Munt, 2007) and moral displacement collapsed together racial/ethnic inferiority, and moral/sexual promiscuity and spun it away into the role of caricature, in classic abjuration. Such dynamics can only be seen, within the feminist framework of the authors, as disappointing.

Kaufman (2008), writing in the European context, argued that – as opposed to earlier commentators on the detraditionalisation of intimate lives (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992) - there has been a heightened significance of the romantic couple and couple-headed family ideals, against a global backdrop of risk and uncertainty. This may be especially acute in contemporary 'Austerity Britain' and its political swing to the Right. Similarly, these 24 life history narratives with white, heterosexual British women identified significant neoconservative moralising intended to distance or disassociate themselves from the despised and iconographic 'chav mum chav scum' (Tyler 2008), the failed neoliberal subject that they heartily disavow. Good manners required that their overt prejudices were necessarily coded – often rather coy terms were used such as 'Jeremy Kyle' (see footnote 7) or 'those people on the telly' as ways of delivering the meaning 'underclass' without too much frankness. The participants were perhaps ashamed of making such social judgments.

Whilst some attitudes with regards to family and relationship types have become more liberal, participants continued to experience single motherhood as a stigmatised identity. Participants responded to this stigma with various strategies, including over-emphasizing their respectability (Skeggs, 1997). They further mobilised a sense of pride in themselves as

ideal middle-class subjects by asserting that they were providing good role models for their children - they were very keen to uphold and defend their self-image as 'Good Mothers'. In doing so, there were instances where respondents engaged in what Goffman (1963) describes as 'information control', concealing identities in being careful about when, where and to whom to disclose their status as a single mother. There was often a level of profound 'dis-identification' with stereotypes, where middle-class participants continuously emphasised their social and economic capital; social background, good home, employment, educational achievements, intelligent social circle, well brought up children and hard-working attitudes, thus underlining the cultural and social capital that accorded them the protective, even golden status of respectability, distinction, and social standing (Skeggs, 1997).

The work of McAdams and Bowman (2001) argues that overarching personal narrative histories convey trajectories of redemption (whereby situations improve) and contamination (whereby they worsen) Narratives in our research tended to fall into these broad types.

Respondents were keen to stress a redemption trajectory as a defence against the 'contamination' of what was perceived as a classed failure, or fall (Ehrenreich, 1989). Twelve respondents, having begun with a narrative enactment relating to how their lives had been 'spoiled', then moved onto redemptive 'triumph over adversity' sequences, emphasising their dignity in transforming their lives through their efforts. We might term such emotional and interpretive labour as 'Protestant' in its determination to wrest value from adversity, representing the return to respectability through redemptive pride.

It is notable that all of our sample were middle-aged, and another explanation for the strategic disavowal of otherness may have been in part due to their painful disidentification with what has been pejoratively figured as 'pram-faced' youth, which represented for some the period of their most traumatic relationship breakdown. Nevertheless, it remains likely that our case

study of middle-class anxiety, instigates a transference of shame, from one stigmatised social identity, onto another, through the prism of the politics of race and class. As authors, we recognise that paradoxically our article may have contributed to ‘re-shaming’ these women, calling them out on their prejudices. However, we argue that shame itself creates social division, practises of fragmentation, blame and an absence of empathy. Thus, feminism has much work still to do in confronting the social harm that shame produces.

### **Acknowledgements**

**The authors would like to thank Tamara Shefer for the help and support she has given us in bringing this article to publication. We also thank the research participants, who gave their time generously in the interests of understanding more about the experiences of being a single mother.**

### **Notes**

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Austerity’ was the fiscal policy of the British Tory coalition government, from 2009 onwards.

<sup>3</sup> While it could be argued that there has been progressive social changes in the UK with the adoption of more liberal discourses seeking to include different family forms and more liberal attitudes among a younger generational cohort, there remains a highly influential neoconservative strand within the British government and culture, bolstered by the right-wing popular press. See also the annual British Social Attitudes Survey [http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39147/bsa34\\_moral\\_issues\\_final.pdf](http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39147/bsa34_moral_issues_final.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See further the Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research, based at the authors’ home institution, the University of Sussex, UK. <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/clhlwr/>

<sup>5</sup> Ages included five in their early forties, five in their early thirties, four in their late thirties, four in their mid-forties and four in their early fifties and three in their late forties.

<sup>6</sup> Regrettably a social media analysis was beyond the scope of this research. The Daily Mail is a popular right-wing British tabloid.

<sup>7</sup> The Jeremy Kyle Show is a notorious tabloid talk show run by ITV Studios in the UK since 2005. Its trademark USP is to encourage confrontation between members of impoverished families, one Manchester District Judge to describe it as “human bear-baiting”.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.netmums.com/coffeehouse/general-coffeehouse-chat-514/wine-bar-494/759369-chav-mums-discuss.html> for further data on popular views.

<sup>9</sup> A preoccupation with nails, and a manicure, is of course, a preoccupation of traditionally working and Black women’s cultural practices of beauty.

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