

'I had to work through what people would think of me': negotiating 'problematic single motherhood' as a solo or single adoptive mum

Jai Mackenzie

To cite this article: Jai Mackenzie (2021): 'I had to work through what people would think of me': negotiating 'problematic single motherhood' as a solo or single adoptive mum, *Critical Discourse Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/17405904.2021.1997775](https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2021.1997775)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2021.1997775>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 15 Nov 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 96



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

'I had to work through what people would think of me': negotiating 'problematic single motherhood' as a solo or single adoptive mum

Jai Mackenzie 

School of English, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

ABSTRACT

This article considers how five single mothers, who used adoption or donor conception to bring children into their lives, negotiate a persistent and pervasive discourse of 'problematic single motherhood' in their interview talk. Tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall [2005]. *Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach*. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4–5), 585–614.), especially the overlapping strategies of distinction, authorisation and illegitimation, are shown to be particularly salient for these parents, as they work to legitimise their routes to motherhood by distancing themselves from widely stigmatised positions such as young motherhood, working-class motherhood and unplanned motherhood. I argue that these single women's intersubjective positioning serves to protect them against stigma and discrimination, but often relies on the reproduction of other polarising and discriminatory discourses, which feed into idealised constructions of mothers as responsible, middle-class, and appropriately aged citizens. Overall, the analysis suggests that it is difficult for these single mothers to challenge the multiple and intersecting discriminatory discourses, ideals and stereotypes that converge in exclusionary and limiting constructions of single motherhood, whilst maintaining a recognisably legitimate social position for themselves.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 January 2021
Accepted 22 October 2021

KEYWORDS

Single motherhood; donor conception; adoption; sociocultural linguistics; discourse analysis; intersubjectivity; discrimination; social class

Introduction

Single mothers continue to be stigmatised and discriminated against in UK media, policy and society. To give a recent example, in August 2019, new guidelines published by the South East London National Health Service trust (NHS SE London) acted on widespread, but robustly challenged, stereotypes and generalisations about single women's parenting capabilities. These guidelines made single women ineligible for the free IVF treatment that was available to couples, on the reasoning that they produce 'known disadvantage' to 'both the child and the mother', exert 'less control on their children', and 'place a greater burden on society in general' (Poggrund, 2019). Unsurprisingly, NHS SE London

CONTACT Jai Mackenzie  jai.mackenzie@nottingham.ac.uk  School of English, University of Nottingham, Trent Building, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

received an avalanche of complaints from single-mother communities, and several critiques of their policy were published in the national media (e.g. Roberts, 2019). In response, they reversed their policy, announcing in December 2019 that single women would be given the same access to IVF treatment as same-sex couples. Nevertheless, much of the damage was irreversible, with bias against single mothers temporarily made highly explicit and public by this powerful institution.

This article contributes to scholarly explorations of motherhood and the family by examining some of the ways in which single women work to legitimise their parental roles and family circumstances in a contemporary UK context where single parenthood is becoming increasingly common,¹ but prejudice and discrimination remain. It does so by presenting an in-depth linguistic analysis of a significant moment from the interview talk of one single mother, who has been given the pseudonym 'Rachael'. It also draws from four other single mothers' interview data to illustrate points of convergence and contrast between their situations, experiences and ways of legitimising their single motherhood. These five single women used donor conception or adoption to bring children into their lives, and I use participants' preferred language for identifying themselves throughout, to distinguish between 'single adopters' (single women who adopted their children) and 'solo mums' (single women who conceived with the help of donor conception).

The article is situated within a tradition of sociocultural linguistics, a 'broad interdisciplinary field concerned with the intersection of language, culture and society' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586). It also develops my previous work on discourses of gendered parenthood (Mackenzie, 2017, 2018, 2019), further examining the ways in which regulatory structures that delimit 'good', 'natural' and 'common-sense' ways of being a mother are taken up, negotiated and rejected in relation to a discourse of 'problematic single motherhood'. In line with my previous work (Mackenzie, 2019, p. 10), and following Foucault (1972, 1978), discourses are defined here as practices, norms and structures that regulate 'our sense of who we are, what we know and the power to define that knowledge and subjectivity'. From this perspective, the analysis considers how Rachael, along with four other single women, negotiates 'good' versus 'problematic' motherhood in her everyday life, and how these negotiations feed into broader social constructions of motherhood and the family.

Background: complicating single motherhood

Single parents are a heterogeneous group; some may have started a family in the context of a relationship, which ended through separation, estrangement or death, whilst others may have been single parents from the outset, bringing children into their lives through brief or non-romantic sexual encounters, assisted conception, adoption or other care arrangements (Bernardi et al., 2018; Hinton-Smith, 2016). However, popular media and public policy often group all parents who raise children without a partner using the category of 'single', or 'lone', parents (Salter, 2018). Further, this group is often problematised, with dominant discourses of gender and sexuality continuing to position two-parent heterosexual families as the most 'natural', 'good' and in the 'best interests of the child', and other family formations as lesser (Correia & Broderick, 2009, p. 243, 245; Golombok, 2015; Malmquist, 2015). The stigmatisation of single mothers also intersects with class, race and age-based prejudices in popular constructions of the 'problematic

single mother' as young, white (in the UK; black in the U.S.), heterosexual, working-class and economically reliant on the state (Bock, 2000; McDermott & Graham, 2005; Salter, 2018). This imagined group has been persistently vilified as a social threat, with negative stereotypes compounded in the UK by popular caricatures of the young, single, sexually excessive and ignorant 'chav mum' (Tyler, 2008).

Research across the social sciences has shown that oppositional constructions of 'ideal' or 'good' versus 'problematic' or 'bad' motherhood continue to sustain widespread stigma against young, single, working-class women. For example, Lawler (2000) found that these groups were positioned outside the normative and morally 'right' criteria for good mothering in her participants' constructions of the 'good mother' as heterosexually coupled, not too young or old, economically stable and adhering to middle-class values. In the context of a UK online discussion forum, I have shown how the 'good mother' is produced through converging discourses of gendered parenthood and classed parenthood (Mackenzie, 2017, 2019). For example, through close analysis of one Mumsnet Talk thread where users joked about 'exchanging' their children, I showed how contributors positioned themselves as 'good mothers who embody cultural stereotypes and assumptions around 'affective' femininity and 'sensitive' motherhood, middle-class status and child-centric parenting' (Mackenzie, 2017, p. 308). In their research with Australian heterosexual couples, Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) suggest that for this privileged group, motherhood is naturalised as a 'compulsory' stage in the progression of adulthood, whilst socially marginalised groups such as teen mothers face injunctions against reproduction.

Studies in Europe and the U.S. have suggested that solo and single adoptive mothers tend to have a different demographic profile from the stereotypical position of the 'problematic single mother', and indeed from the realities of socio-economic precarity that many single mothers experience (Bock, 2000; Golombok, 2015; Hertz et al., 2016; Malmquist et al., 2019; Mendonça, 2018). This research suggests that solo and single adoptive mothers tend to be well-educated, financially secure, middle-class women, who become parents as they approach middle-age. Nevertheless, they are still affected by the stigma associated with single motherhood (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007; Bock, 2000), as well as facing additional, distinct forms of stigma and discrimination based on their specific routes to motherhood. For example, they may feel compelled to defend themselves against 'charges of selfishness' for consciously 'depriving' their children of a father (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007; Golombok, 2015; Mendonça, 2018, p. 19). Further, discourses of gender, sexuality, compulsory fertility and biological relatedness may converge to position single *adoptive* mothers as 'second-rate', 'inauthentic' parents (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007; Jennings et al., 2014), and women who do not, or cannot, have children via sexual reproduction as 'lesser' (Faircloth & Gurtin, 2017; Mamo, 2007).

Research with solo and single adoptive mothers has shown that their complex social positions amidst multiple and sometimes competing discourses can lead to a number of tensions and conflicts. Holmes (2018) and Zadeh et al. (2013), for example, have illustrated that many solo mothers legitimise and justify their use of donor conception as a route to single motherhood through emphasis on choice, including their carefully considered decision-making process, and the fact that their children were very much wanted. However, this emphasis on choice can sometimes be at odds with solo mothers' sense that they did not choose to be single, and would have preferred a

'traditional' family life. Others might work to sustain a sense of legitimacy, authenticity and personal pride by drawing on the aforementioned distinctions between 'good' and 'problematic' motherhood. Bock (2000) explores such strategies of distinction in the talk of 26 U.S. solo mums and single adopters who are predominantly white, middle- to upper-class, middle-aged and heterosexual. She suggests that these women legitimise their positions as mothers by emphasising their belonging to a 'charmed circle' at the top of a hierarchy of motherhood, because they possess idealised qualities such as economic stability, a 'goldilocks' age (not too young or old), middle-class values and responsibility (also see Holmes, 2018; Hudson, 2017; Zadeh et al., 2013). These findings are echoed by Whitehead (2016, p. 116), who shows how older, middle-class women in an online infertility community construct motherhood as a gendered entitlement 'by drawing on mainstream moral evaluations of 'good' and 'bad' mother[s]'. Whitehead (2016, p. 115) suggests that concepts of intentionality and choice are key to these negotiations, with prospective parents laying claim to their entitlement and worthiness through reference to hard work and sacrifice, and through contrast with those who are 'too young, irresponsible, and unprepared to deal with the accountability required for motherhood'.

This article will consider how norms, ideals and stereotypes of 'good' versus 'bad' motherhood are naturalised through a discourse of 'problematic single motherhood'. It will show how this discourse is taken up and negotiated by one UK-based solo mum, Rachael, as she works to justify and legitimise her own single motherhood, as well as considering the words of four other solo and single adoptive mothers.

Data and methodology

The study and participants

This article is based on research with nine parents who brought children into their lives through adoption, donor conception, surrogacy or co-parenting arrangements. Each individual (no partners were directly involved in the research) completed a short questionnaire at the start and end of the study, took part in three face-to-face interviews and shared selections of their digital media from a variety of contexts. In order to explore the experiences of single adoptive mothers and solo mothers who used donor conception, in this article, I focus only on interview data from the five participants who took these routes to parenthood.

The interviews with these five single women, which were open-ended and participant-focused, took place over eleven months, spaced at 3–4 month intervals to allow for preliminary analysis of the data, and subsequent refinement of my questions and analytical focus. Each of these interviews was shaped by one central, open question, with some specific questions in reserve. This flexible approach allowed participants to control the agenda to some degree, and revealed what aspects of these women's lives and practices were most important to *them*. The focus, core question and timeframe for each set of interviews is represented in Table 1.

As noted above, there are many ways of defining single parenthood, but I focus here on women who were single when they began the process of adoption or donor conception, and have remained single whilst raising their children. These participants have all been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Three of these women –

Table 1. Interview schedule and key questions.

Interview 1: 'tell me about your family' – participants' family lives, experiences and support channels (December 2018 – January 2019)
Interview 2: 'show me your digital life' – participants' use of digital technology to connect with others (April – May 2019)
Interview 3: 'how do you describe your family and support networks?' including diagrammatic visualisation of these networks (September – October 2019)

Rachael, Laura and Sarah, used donor insemination to conceive their children. The other two, Lynne and Cheryl, adopted their children. In very broad terms, the demographics of these participants, identified through a preliminary questionnaire, correlate with previous research suggesting that solo and single adoptive mothers tend to be white, cisgender, heterosexual, financially secure and well-educated women with professional occupations (Bock, 2000; Golombok, 2015; Mendonça, 2018). In addition, they have tended to become parents in their late thirties or early forties, and mostly work part-time, having gained a degree of financial security before having children (cf. Hertz et al., 2016; Malmquist et al., 2019). However, the questionnaire and interview data also revealed that some of the participants departed from these broad generalisations. For example, Sarah is bisexual, and Lynne prefers not to disclose her sexuality, saying that it feels irrelevant to her life of celibacy. Further, Lynne has been a young single carer; she first applied to foster children at the age of 21, and her first child moved in when she was 25. Laura, who has the highest level of education amongst the participants (she has a PhD) but is the lowest earner, rents her home and receives state benefits. Laura also lives in an area with a higher than average rate of unemployment and a large percentage of residents (83%) who are categorised as skilled working-class, working-class, or not working. Cheryl lives in an area with similar demographics.² Several of these participants, therefore, do not neatly fit the categories of middle-class, middle-aged, heterosexual single women. Nevertheless, Rachael, who is the key participant for the analysis that follows, very much does.

The single women I interviewed were all embedded in social and support networks of other parents. Rachael, whose words will anchor the analysis that follows, is particularly well connected within solo mum, infertility and single parent communities. Becoming a solo mum also inspired Rachael to start a new business, supporting other women in similar situations. As part of this emerging business, Rachael runs a Facebook group for solo mums, a blog and Instagram account where she regularly posts advice and information, and offers mentorship and coaching services to single women, as well as consultancy to organisations such as fertility clinics. Through her extensive, often public-facing digital engagement, Rachael encounters a diverse range of perspectives on parenthood, fertility and family life.

Analytical process

The analytical process for this research can be divided into two broad stages. The process of interviewing, coding and categorisation, which was thematic and primarily non-linguistic in focus, formed the first stage. Once each interview was complete, it was transcribed and coded, using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, according to the grounded theory practice of assigning descriptive labels ('codes') to each line of text, and grouping

these codes together into 'categories'. Through the process of coding, comparison across codes and data, and refinement of codes and categories, I began to construct key themes and theories with increasing clarity and concision (see Charmaz, 2014 for more detail on grounded theory strategies).

For the second stage of analysis, I revisited data from the key codes and categories identified at the first stage, this time with a linguistic focus. For the specific strand of analysis explored in this article, I focused on the codes 'enduring prejudice, stigma or misunderstanding', 'negotiating normativities', 'being outside the ordinary' and 'distinguishing from others'. Subsequently, I selected a single 'significant moment' from the data, which represents a site of discursive struggle and contested knowledge, power and subjectivity (Baxter, 2003; Mackenzie, 2019). This significant moment is taken from an interview with Rachael, where she grapples with multiple overlapping themes and discourses that recur across her three interviews. These recurring and overlapping themes are also made relevant by the other four single parent participants, and I draw on excerpts from these women's interviews to illustrate points of similarity and difference in their interview talk.

The micro-linguistic analysis that will be presented below focuses on the participants' *intersubjective positioning* in their interview talk, considering how these women position themselves in relation to others, especially other 'types' of parents, and through that positioning, how they take up and negotiate a broader discourse of 'problematic single motherhood'. In doing so, I utilise aspects of Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) sociocultural linguistic approach, attending to four common 'tactics of intersubjectivity': *adequation*, *distinction*, *authorisation* and *illegitimation*. Through the process of adequation, 'differences irrelevant or damaging to ongoing efforts to adequate two people or groups will be downplayed, and similarities viewed as salient to and supportive of the immediate project of identity work will be foregrounded' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 599). Through processes of distinction, on the other hand, similarities that might undermine efforts to distinguish between groups are downplayed, and differences that might support this project are foregrounded. The processes of authorisation and illegitimation go beyond the situation, groups and identities of immediate concern, encompassing powerful and institutionalised socio-political structures and discourses. Authorisation involves 'the affirmation or imposition of an identity through structures of institutionalized power and ideology', whilst illegitimation concerns 'the ways in which identities are dismissed, censored, or simply ignored by these same structures' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 603). This sociocultural linguistic paradigm provides a framework for specifying the various strategies of mitigation, justification, alignment and distinction that participants employ, and analysing them in relation to wider discursive structures.

Analysis

Legitimising solo motherhood at a local level

When we first met, Rachael told me about her journey to single motherhood with the help of donor sperm and IVF. She explained that, in her late twenties, she had been engaged to a man, and hoped they would start a family together. After this relationship ended unexpectedly, Rachael tried for many years to meet someone she could start a family with, but

didn't find the 'right person'. She began to think about becoming a mother on her own in her mid-thirties, when she became concerned that it would be too late if she waited any longer. She gave birth to her daughter Poppy, now a young infant, when she was 39.

The participant interviews, as noted above, were open-ended and flexible, and Rachael, who was accustomed to talking and writing about her experiences of solo motherhood, was particularly comfortable shaping the direction of our interviews. In the first interview, after my initial prompt 'tell me about your family', most of my subsequent prompts, therefore, took the form of follow-up questions or encouragement such as 'can you tell me more about that?' or 'that's really interesting'. As the interview came to a natural end point, I asked Rachael whether there was anything she wanted to add; whether she felt she had 'missed anything out'. In response, Rachael raised the topic of 'making the final decision [to become a solo mum]'. After noting that she was primarily concerned about 'what will people think' and 'will people feel pity for me', Rachael explained the process of deciding to become a solo mother, detailing others' reactions alongside her own feelings and desires. This three-minute sequence, represented in Extract 1, will be the focal point for the analysis that follows, alongside brief excerpts from the other single women's interviews to illustrate points of similarity and difference in the way they talk about their decisions to become single mothers.

Extract 1. Rachael, interview 1.

- 1 R erm (.) so (.) yeah I had to work throu:gh (.) what people would think of me:
 2 and (.) a little bit that's been dealt with as I've gone [along] because as I've
 3 J [mmhmm]
 4 R told people at every stage their reaction has been so positive I've been like oh
 5 ok h.
 6 J yeah
 7 R and it kind of then (.) now I'm like (.) oh actually I can make this into a positive
 8 because people seem pretty impressed with it erm (0.8) whereas if people
 9 would've questioned it I think I would've questioned it even mo:re
 10 J yeah
 11 R erm (.) some of my friends (0.3) were (.) had to think about it at first but what
 12 most of them have said is they saw how much I tried (.) to go down (.) let's say
 13 the traditional it [wasn't] like I wasn't a 21-year-old saying (.) I want a baby this
 14 J [yeah]
 15 R is how I'm gonna [do it] they were like (.) it's kind've (.) your only option if
 16 J [yeah]
 17 R you don't (.) if you want to guarantee that you're not gonna miss out (.)
 18 J mmm
 19 R erm so I think people were supportive because they felt like I (.) had explored
 20 all of [the] sort've (.) routes and they didn't want me to miss out on being a
 21 J [mm]
 22 R mum hh. erm (0.3) and (.) the other thing is I think (.) when you look at
 23 research and stuff (.) s:olo mums I think we talked about this before (.) are just
 24 in (.) this big dump of people (.) erm particularly single like (.) they're just
 25 categorised as single pa[rents (.)] erm
 26 J [mmm mmm]

- 27 R and and it's quite different and (.) there are all sorts of single parents from [all]
 28 J [yes]
- 29 R walks of life h. but statistically: (.)
- 30 J yeah mmm
- 31 R a they're referred to as you know (.) erm struggling more in society: (.)
- 32 J mmm yeah
- 33 R less money: less (.) affluence (.) struggling more at school blah blah h. and you
 34 go and I'm like ah that couldn't be further from the truth
- 35 J mmm
- 36 R of of this demographic who (.) have actually (.) they're career women who've
 37 fought this long and hard and have [gone] through it on their own so hh. erm
 38 J [yeah]
- 39 R (0.3) there's an element of me (.) erm wanting to make sure that (.) that
 40 circumstance isn't (0.3) mixed together h. and I mean not because I'm
 41 judging those people but just because it is completely diff[erent] erm and then
 42 J [yeah]
- 43 R there's an element of me as we:ll h.wanting to make sure people know this was
 44 a choice of mine
- 45 J mmhmm
- 46 R so one of the things erm and again (.) just purely what people think about me h.
 47 I d- people knew I was single so I didn't want them to think that this had
 48 happened by accident?

At the start of this sequence, Rachael explains that working through 'what people would think of me' (line 1) was an instrumental part of her decision-making process, when she was thinking about whether to have a child on her own. As the sequence continues, she makes it clear that her consideration of solo motherhood has disrupted both her own and others' ideals of motherhood and family life, noting that she herself has 'questioned' her decision (line 9), and that some of her friends 'had to think about it at first' (line 11). Her frequent use of verbs that concern both her own and others' perception, understanding and desire (such as 'think' and 'questioned' in the examples above) contributes to Rachael's construction of her solo motherhood as something that was only undertaken after intense reflection, consideration, and with due attention to others' concerns, specifically those of her friends and family. Such local intersubjective negotiations, as the following analysis will show, are a defining feature of this significant moment, suggesting that relationships and interactions within her local, personal network of friends and family are extremely important for Rachael's sense of pride and legitimacy as a solo mother.

Illegitimation: problematic single motherhood

At several points in the significant moment above (Extract 1), Rachael draws on a discourse of 'problematic single motherhood', whereby single motherhood is widely acknowledged to be unfavourable and illegitimised in a wider social context. For example, between lines 4 and 8 Rachael suggests that she expected people to react negatively when she decided to become a mum on her own. She juxtaposes these

(anticipated) negative reactions to her solo motherhood with (actualised) positive reactions, marking it as noteworthy that ‘at every stage their reaction has been so positive I’ve been like oh ok’, and ‘people seem pretty impressed with it’. The unexpectedness of these positive reactions is underlined by Rachael’s emphasis on the stressed syllables in ‘positive’ and ‘impressed’, and her interjection of surprise ‘oh ok’.

Rachael further takes up a discourse of ‘problematic single motherhood’ when she states her own preference for a ‘traditional’ route to parenthood (i.e. via heterosexual couplehood). She notes, for example, that others ‘saw *how much I tried* to go down let’s say the traditional [route]’ (lines 12-13), with the intensified verb of desire (see italics) suggesting that she had a deep longing for a ‘traditional’ family life. Her use of the totalising pre-modifiers ‘*only* option’ and ‘*all* of the ... routes’ (lines 15 and 19-20) emphasise both the comprehensiveness of her attempt to take a traditional route to parenthood, and the unfavourability of single motherhood by comparison. Thus, Rachael implicitly positions heterosexual couplehood as the most legitimate, widely authorised route to parenthood, whilst solo motherhood is negatively evaluated as a last resort.

Despite implicitly taking up a discourse of ‘problematic single motherhood’, Rachael is able to legitimise her own position as a solo mum through evaluative oppositions between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ reactions to her solo motherhood (lines 4-8). Laura, who became a solo mum around the same time as Rachael, constructed a similar opposition in our first interview (Extract 2).

Extract 2. Laura, interview 1.

L: I’d anticipated negative reactions erm and then was really positively surprised ... the reactions that I I got were much more positive than I could’ve imagined ... people have been almost like really impressed by it

Through these oppositions, both Laura and Rachael express their initial expectation that they would be positioned as ‘problematic’ single mothers. At the same time, they work to position themselves outside of this discourse, taking up the locally authorised position of women who are admirable and ‘impressive’ in others’ eyes, and thus distinguishing *their* single motherhood as *unproblematic*.

In the sections that follow, I show how Rachael further positions herself outside of ‘problematic single motherhood’ by breaking this discourse into its component parts. This analysis will show how she, and other participants such as Laura, are able to take pride in their single motherhood, and to be positioned by others as ‘admirable’ and ‘impressive’, despite the ways in which wider circulating discourses continue to stigmatise single mothers. I also point to moments at which other participants use similar strategies, or indeed where their strategies differ, and consider some of the possible local and contextual explanations for these differences.

Authorisation: compulsory motherhood and choice

I suggest above that Rachael negatively evaluates single motherhood as a ‘last resort’ through her use of the totalising pre-modifiers ‘*only* option’ and *all* of the ... routes’ (lines 15 and 19–20). At these moments, Rachael is giving voice to her friends’ assertions, namely that ‘[single motherhood is] your only option ... if you want to guarantee that you’re not gonna miss out’ (lines 15–17), and ‘they felt like I (.) had explored all of [the]

sort've (.) routes and they didn't want me to miss out on being a mum' (lines 19–22). There is a hierarchy at work in these constructions, whereby a discourse of 'problematic single motherhood' works to position solo motherhood as less favourable than coupled motherhood, but not being a mother at all is an even less favourable option. In the context of this hierarchy, Rachael is able to legitimise her solo motherhood by positioning motherhood not as a choice, but as a compulsory obligation.

By drawing on ideals of compulsory motherhood, Rachael positions herself as having had *no choice* but to become a single parent. In doing so, she also resolves the potential tension between 'choice' and 'tradition' that is well documented for solo mums who wanted to have children as part of a heterosexual couple, but ultimately did not have that option (Holmes, 2018; Zadeh et al., 2013; see discussion above). The other single women in this study negotiated tensions between tradition and choice in different ways. For example Sarah, a solo mum with an adult son, positioned solo motherhood as a 'first choice' when talking about her conversations with (and support for) other prospective solo mums (Extract 3).

Extract 3. Sarah, interview 1.

S: there's lots of women who say oh I don't want it to be second best and I say ... by the time you've made this decision that is your first choice

Sarah's emphatic, unmitigated repositioning of single motherhood here, from 'second best' to 'first choice', acknowledges some solo mums' preference for a 'traditional' route to parenthood, yet conceptualises choice and decision-making as an ongoing, dynamic process. In this way, Sarah works to dissolve the conflict between tradition and choice by creating a discursive space where solo mums can take an agentic position, as women who have chosen to become single mothers, without compromising their allegiance with 'traditional' routes to parenthood.

Cheryl, Lynne and Laura, on the other hand, positioned single motherhood as their 'first choice' from the outset as they talked about their families in our first interviews. For example Cheryl, a single adopter, said she had 'always' wanted to be a single mother, because 'it's just far easier on your own'. Lynne, a single woman who adopts and fosters disabled children, described her position as a religious 'calling' that she 'always knew' she would respond to. Laura, too, said that she had 'always assumed' she would adopt (although she ultimately used donor conception), explaining that couplehood was a secondary consideration in this arrangement: 'even if I'd ended up with a partner a conversation that I would've had ... would've been I want to adopt'. For these women, two of whom are adopters, and one of whom initially planned to adopt, there seems to be less of discursive tension between 'tradition' and 'choice'. Indeed, their use of language that is emphatic, unmitigated and high in epistemic modality positions them as certain and assured in their decisions. In Lynne's case, her reference to single adoption as a 'calling' goes a step further, pointing to a religious obligation from a higher power. These participants' positioning of motherhood as a natural, expected, even obligatory outcome, legitimises their single motherhood in a similar way to Rachael's implication that becoming a parent on her own fulfilled an obligation of compulsory motherhood.

For Cheryl and Lynne, however, *single* motherhood is naturalised to the same extent as *coupled* motherhood. These participants may be in a stronger position to legitimise their

single motherhood because they are not subject to accusations of ‘selfishness’ in the way solo mums like Rachael often are. Indeed, the single adopters in this study said that they were often revered by others when mentioning that they adopted their children, being described as ‘saints’ (Cheryl) and ‘put on a pedestal’ (Lynne). Rachael’s discussion of the prejudice she has encountered online confirms that she has directly experienced such perceptions of selfishness versus saintliness. In our first interview, she explained that she had often been the direct target of discriminatory comments on her blog posts and web articles, with many commenters accusing her of being ‘selfish’, because ‘every child deserves to be brought into the world knowing who their father is’. Every post, she noted, also has at least one comment saying ‘you should adopt’, suggesting that adoption is perceived to be a more morally legitimate route to solo motherhood than donor conception.

Despite her previous assertion that single motherhood was not a choice, towards the end of Extract 1 Rachael emphatically states that she *did* make a conscious decision to become a mother: ‘[I want] to make sure people know this was a choice of mine’ (line 43); ‘I didn’t want them to think that this had happened by accident’ (line 48). Here Rachael constructs ‘choice’ differently, in terms of careful and deliberate decision-making, through opposition with ‘accident’. The opposition of chosen versus accidental single motherhood seems to be a well-used distinction in Rachael’s network of solo mothers, despite their general avoidance of the label ‘single mother by choice’ (which is more popular in the U.S.). In interview 2, for example, Rachael mentioned a podcast that was shared to her Facebook group called ‘I’m a single mother by choice not by accident’. Further, Lynne, a single adopter, said in our first interview that ‘it is different being ... a single parent by design rather than by accident’. This opposition distinguishes these women from single mothers who unintentionally conceived after a brief sexual encounter, or whose relationships broke down after the conception or birth of their children, and works to position solo and single adoptive mothers outside the discursive sphere of ‘problematic single motherhood’. I would suggest, however, that this distinction is more about ‘responsibility’ than ‘choice’, since these participants position themselves as women who are in a position to make responsible, well-considered decisions. The distinction between ‘responsible’ and ‘irresponsible’ motherhood is explored further in the section that follows.

Adequation and distinction: young motherhood, working-class motherhood and irresponsible motherhood

As Rachael’s interview sequence continues (see Extract 1), she disentangles and specifies the component parts of ‘problematic single motherhood’ as *young motherhood*, *working-class motherhood* and *irresponsible motherhood*. She distinguishes herself from each of these components in turn, and in doing so, further positions herself outside a discourse of ‘problematic single motherhood’, without presenting a significant challenge to its intersecting regulatory structures. This explains how Rachael is able, at the start of the extract, to both align with a discourse of ‘problematic single motherhood’, yet take pride in her position as a single woman making an ‘admirable’ choice.

Rachael first draws explicit attention to *youth* as a key component of ‘problematic single motherhood’ in lines 13–15, when she says ‘I wasn’t a 21-year-old saying (.) I

want a baby this is how I'm gonna [do it]' She makes a similar, more explicit statement at an earlier point in the interview, drawing on the voice of a specific young woman she had come into contact with (Extract 4).

Extract 4. Rachael, interview 1.

R: one girl contacted me and said "I'm twenty-one I cannot find a partner so I'm thinking of doing it on my own ..." I do not agree that someone should be doing this at 21

In these excerpts Rachael, who was 39 years old when she gave birth to her daughter, very clearly opposes and distinguishes herself from these (hypothetical and real) prospective single mothers through emphatic and unmitigated negation ('I wasn't'; 'I do not agree'). She further distinguishes herself from these young women through the direct speech attributed to them. Whilst Rachael, as shown above, explains her decision-making process by engaging in multi-voiced negotiations of different perspectives and potential objections to her solo motherhood, the constructions attributed to these women move swiftly from their 'problem' scenario: 'I want a baby'/ 'I cannot find a partner' to their solution: 'this is how I'm gonna do it'/ 'I'm thinking of doing it on my own'. The marked contrast between Rachael's voice, and the voices she attributes to younger single women, implies that these younger women have been less careful and responsible in their decision-making; that young motherhood goes hand-in-hand with irresponsible motherhood. The distinction, in turn, gives Rachael the opportunity to emphasise the time, care and thought *she* put into her decision to be a solo mum. Thus, Rachael positions herself as a responsible single mother, in line with her distinction between 'chosen' and 'accidental' single motherhood (see analysis above).

As well as distinguishing herself from *young* and *irresponsible* single mothers, Rachael also distinguishes herself from *working-class* single mothers through reference to markers of social class including wealth, education and life chances. For example, between lines 31 and 33, she invokes culturally recognisable negative constructions of single parents that converge with stereotypes of working-class people, such as 'struggling more in society', having 'less money less affluence' and 'struggling more at school'. She notes, however, that this 'couldn't be further from the truth' (line 34) where the demographics of solo mothers are concerned. Her contrasting description of solo mums consolidates this distinction in specific terms, positioning them as 'career women', a category that implies wealth, education and social status.

It is also noteworthy that, between lines 31 and 37, Rachael's language choices when describing 'other' single mothers ('struggling more in society/at school'; 'less money less affluence'), and solo mothers specifically ('fought this long and hard'), both refer to struggle and hardship, but Rachael does not foreground this similarity. Instead, the words she uses to describe 'other' single mothers imply ongoing challenge ('struggling') and deficiency ('less') in relation to large-scale structures ('society'; 'affluence'; 'school'), whereas her words for solo mothers point to a struggle that is temporary, has been overcome, and has more positive and heroic connotations ('fought', 'gone through it'). Further, in these contrasting constructions, 'struggling' single parents are positioned as more passive, with 'struggling' functioning as a complement in the construction 'they're referred to as ... struggling more in society' (line 31), whereas solo mums are positioned as more active and agentive, with 'career women' functioning as the actor and 'fought' as the process in 'they're career women who've fought this long and hard' (lines 36–37). At

moments like this, where Rachael is working to legitimise her position as a single parent by emphasising her economic stability and middle-class status, experiences that she might have in common with a broad spectrum of single mothers, such as not having a co-parent or partner, or intensified parental and childcare responsibilities, are backgrounded.

Other participants made similar class-based distinctions as they worked to authorise their positions as single mothers. For example, Sarah also emphasises the professional status of the solo mothers she knows, noting in our first interview that ‘they’re all completely ordinary people y’know nurses teachers social workers doctors bankers all sorts’. In my first interview with Cheryl, she said that she often doesn’t mention that she is a single parent because of class-based stigma – specifically, the negative assumption that ‘you’re a bit of a drain on society’. Cheryl responds to this threat against her legitimacy by positioning herself as a self-sufficient citizen who makes a valuable contribution to society: someone who has ‘always worked’ and ‘always supported myself financially’. Here, like Rachael, Cheryl isolates the class-based stigma that underpins a discourse of ‘problematic single motherhood’ in order to maintain a position of legitimacy for herself as a professional working mother. Lynne made even more explicit class-based distinctions in our third interview when she rejected the term ‘marginalised family’ because of its classed connotations, being associated with people without ‘formal education’, ‘living on benefits’ and who are ‘socially deprived’ (Extract 5).

Extract 5. Lynne, interview 3.

L: If you’re reading a newspaper article about marginalised people very often it’s people ... who didn’t complete any kind of formal education who are living on benefits ... it’s sort’ve synonymous with socially deprived and I don’t think I am socially deprived and I don’t think my children are

Lynne’s distinction from ‘socially deprived’ families through repeated emphatic negation (‘I don’t’) implicitly engages with an assumption that, to use Cheryl’s words, she and her children are ‘a bit of a drain on society’. Lynne later offers a further response to this implied critique, saying ‘yes I’m not working but ... I think [my children] are quite good members of society’. Her reference to her children, and to ‘not working’, suggests that she feels this threat to her legitimacy particularly keenly as a single mother who has physically disabled children, and who does not work outside of the home. As such, she is responding not only to class-based, but also disability-based stigma, whereby disabled people are positioned as ‘lesser’ than able-bodied people, and as a drain on society’s resources.

Coda: participants’ reflections

As a coda to this analysis, it is important to note that Rachael acknowledges the potentially harmful effects of making distinctions between solo mums (including herself) and ‘other’ single mums. For example, in line 41 she is careful to make a distinction between positioning herself as ‘different’, and ‘judging those people’. In our third interview, when talking about terminology used to describe different parents and families, including the term ‘single mother by choice’, Rachael clarified the point that distinction can imply judgement (Extract 6).

Extract 6. Rachael, interview 3.

R: the feedback I got about single mum by choice [from my Facebook group] ... was that ... it's offensive to other ... single mums because they're like well that implies that we're single mum not by choice

Laura, similarly, said in our third interview that she preferred not to use the category 'single mum by choice' because it 'almost sounds a bit defensive like I'm a single mum oh but not one of those single mums'. Laura further explained that she preferred not to use any term with 'connotation[s] that my situation was somehow better than anyone else's'. Throughout the interviews, in fact, Laura's carefully considered self-positioning suggested that she was highly attuned to the potentially stigmatising connotations of different identity categories. Whilst she does use distinction strategies, she tends to avoid evaluative oppositions (such as choice vs. accident) or reference to generalising macro-categories (such as age and class). Instead, she usually foregrounds practical differences between her own and others' situations, such as the presence or absence of a 'dad' and the difficulties of 'negotiat[ing]' a co-parenting relationship. These distinctions can be seen in Extract 7.

Extract 7. Laura, interview 1.

L: I think single mum has connotations that don't apply in my case ... I guess *what I have is very much what I always thought that I would have* and what I planned to have whereas a single mum it's not necessarily like that because there is a dad but that dad's either not in the picture or is in the picture and that needs to be negotiated

In this extract, Laura's distinction between her situation and others which are 'not necessarily like that' does still serve to authorise her solo motherhood through emphasis on choice and careful planning (see italics), but the distinction relies on less marked evaluation and opposition. Overall, despite their awareness of the damaging potential of distinction from 'other' kinds of mothers, distinction strategies seem to be an almost reflexive response for Rachael, Laura, and the other single women who took part in this study, as they work to legitimise their solo motherhood, and in turn to establish their own sense of pride, dignity and acceptance.

Discussion and conclusion

Words spoken by Rachael, a UK-based solo mum who conceived via donor conception and IVF, provide the starting point and anchor for the analysis presented in this article. A single significant moment from her interview talk offers a window into her everyday dialogic negotiations, as she works to legitimise her solo motherhood in relation to both her own and others' presumptions and expectations of 'ideal' motherhood and family life. Tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) arm Rachael with strategies to disentangle and distinguish herself from a discriminatory discourse of 'problematic single motherhood', by breaking this discourse into its component parts, and directing its associated stigma specifically to single mothers who are working-class, young and 'irresponsible'.

There is a good deal of overlap between the strategies Rachael uses to legitimise her single motherhood and the strategies used by the other four single women whose words are explored here. For example, Rachael, Sarah, Cheryl and Lynne all invoke social class when they work to position themselves as working, 'career' women, and distinguish themselves from negative, classed stereotypes around being a 'drain on society'.

Further, Rachael, Laura and Lynne all emphasise the conscious, responsible planning of their solo motherhood, in contrast with those who did not intend to be single mothers.

However, the above analysis also suggests that each participant's unique experiences, circumstances and history, including factors such as their age, the means by which they had children, and their historical expectations of family life, mean that the structures they navigate, and the strategies they use to do so, are by no means uniform or universal. For example, Rachael legitimises her position by distinguishing herself from those who consider solo motherhood in their early twenties, in turn emphasising her preference for entering motherhood, especially 'unconventional' motherhood, in her late thirties. However, the other four single women do not mention age as they work to legitimise their positions as single mothers. Indeed, one participant, Lynne, was precisely the age Rachael deems too young for single motherhood – 21 – when she first began the process of fostering and adopting disabled children. For Lynne, it is social class that comes to the fore as she distinguishes herself from 'marginalised' families who are 'socially deprived'. Here, Lynne may also be responding to perceptions of both adoptive families and disabled children as 'lesser', a pair of intersecting prejudices that Rachael has not experienced directly.

These single women also experience, and work to overcome, the discursive dilemma between tradition and choice that is well documented in research with solo mothers (Holmes, 2018; Zadeh et al., 2013) in different ways. Whilst Rachael positions solo motherhood as a last resort, and emphasises her lack of choice in taking this route, Sarah reconstructs solo motherhood as a 'first choice', rather than 'second best'. However, there is little indication that this discursive tension is felt by Cheryl and Lynne, who are both single adopters. The contrasting charges of 'selfishness' and 'saintliness' that the two groups have experienced suggests that stigma around 'choosing' single motherhood, and therefore 'depriving' children of a father, is specifically directed towards single women who have used donor conception, rather than single adopters.

Overall, this article has shown how five solo and single adoptive mothers use tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), especially distinction, authorisation and illegitimation, to maintain a position of personal pride and dignity in the face of threats to their legitimacy as 'good' mothers. The analysis reveals that the women often employ these tactics as a way of distancing themselves from widely stigmatised positions such as young motherhood, working-class motherhood and irresponsible motherhood, in response to the particular forms of scepticism, critique and discrimination that they have each encountered. Class-based discrimination is shown to be particularly persistent in these women's negotiations of single motherhood, sometimes intersecting with age and disability-based stigma. Thus, in the course of defending *their* specific routes to parenthood, these single women often reproduce and authenticate the stigma directed towards *others*, leaving the regulatory structures of 'problematic single motherhood' largely intact. These insights echo the findings of previous research with similar groups, which has shown that solo and single adoptive mothers work to sustain a sense of legitimacy, authenticity and personal pride by distinguishing themselves from groups who have been associated with 'bad', 'problematic' or 'struggling' motherhood (Bock, 2000; Holmes, 2018; Hudson, 2017; Zadeh et al., 2013).

These findings point to a need for further discourse analytical research that can identify and challenge the ways in which multiple and intersecting discourses converge, in

different ways for different groups, to produce restrictive, exclusionary ideals around 'good' motherhood and 'legitimate' family forms. By doing so, we may further disrupt hegemonic ideals of motherhood, and promote the acceptance of truly diverse and multiple family forms.

Notes

1. In 2020, 14.7% of UK families were headed by lone parents. Source: Office for National Statistics.
2. Demographics by postcode identified via <https://www.postcodearea.co.uk/>

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Louise Mullany, Kelly-Mae Saville and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this article. Special thanks also to Rachael, Laura, Sarah, Cheryl and Lynne, without whom this work would not have been possible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work has been supported by the British Academy, [grant number PF2\180026].

Notes on contributor

Jai Mackenzie is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Nottingham. Her primary research expertise lies in explorations of language, gender, sexuality and parenthood, especially in new media contexts. She is the principal investigator for the Marginalised Families Online project, which explores the role of digital media for single and/or LGB (lesbian, gay or bisexual) parents in the UK, and the author of *Language, Gender and Parenthood Online: Negotiating Motherhood in Mumsnet Talk*.

ORCID

Jai Mackenzie  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8137-5485>

References

- Baxter, J. (2003). *Positioning gender in discourse: A feminist methodology*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Ben-Ari, A., & Weinberg-Kurnik, G. (2007). The dialectics between the personal and the interpersonal in the experiences of adoptive single mothers by choice. *Sex Roles*, 56(11-12), 823–833. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9241-1>
- Bernardi, L., Mortelmans, D., & Larenza, O. (2018). Changing lone parents, changing life courses. In L. Bernardi, & D. Mortelmans (Eds.), *Lone parenthood in the life course* (pp. 1–26). Springer Open.
- Bock, J. D. (2000). Doing the right thing? Single mothers by choice and the struggle for legitimacy. *Gender & Society*, 14(1), 62–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124300014001005>
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4–5), 585–614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605054407>

- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed). Sage Publications.
- Correia, H., & Broderick, P. (2009). Access to reproductive technologies by single women and lesbians: Social representations and public debate. *Journal of Community & Applied Psychology*, 19(4), 241–256. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.995>
- Faircloth, C., & Gurtin, Z. (2017). Introduction - making parents: Reproductive technologies and parenting culture across borders. *Sociological Research Online*, 22(2), 6–10. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.4310>
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*. Routledge Classics.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality volume 1: An introduction*. (R. Hurley, Ed.). Penguin.
- Golombok, S. (2015). *Modern families: Parents and children in new family forms*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hertz, R., Jociles, M. I., & Rivas, A. M. (2016). Single mothers by choice in Spain and the United States. In Shehan Constance L. (Ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of family studies* (pp. 1–5). Wiley Blackwell.
- Hinton-Smith, T. (2016). Negotiating the risk of debt-financed higher education: The experience of lone parent students. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42(2), 207–222. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3201>
- Holmes, S. (2018). The solo mum, feminism and the negotiation of ‘choice’. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 69, 40–48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.04.007>
- Hudson, N. (2017). Making ‘assisted world families’? Parenting projects and family practices in the context of globalised gamete donation. *Sociological Research Online*, 22(2), 48–58. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.4246>
- Jennings, S., Mellis, L., Tasker, F., Lamb, M., & Golombok, S. (2014). Why adoption? Gay, lesbian, and heterosexual adoptive parents’ reproductive experiences and reasons for adoption. *Adoption Quarterly*, 17(3), 205–226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2014.891549>
- Lawler, S. (2000). *Mothering the self: Mothers, daughters, subjects*. Routledge.
- Mackenzie, J. (2017). “Can we have a child exchange?” Constructing and subverting the ‘good mother’ through play in Mumsnet talk. *Discourse & Society*, 28(3), 296–312. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926516687417>
- Mackenzie, J. (2018). “Good mums don’t, apparently, wear make-up”: Negotiating discourses of gendered parenthood in Mumsnet talk. *Gender and Language*, 12(1), 114–135. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.31062>
- Mackenzie, J. (2019). *Language, gender and parenthood online: Negotiating motherhood in Mumsnet talk*. Routledge.
- Malmquist, A. (2015). *Pride and prejudice: Lesbian families in contemporary Sweden*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Linköping University.
- Malmquist, A., Björnstad, T., & Thunholm, A. (2019). Swedish children of single mothers by choice, and children of heterosexual couples, reflect on child conception and other paths to parenthood. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 27(3), 166–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2018.1554602>
- Mamo, L. (2007). *Queering reproduction: Achieving pregnancy in the age of technoscience*. Duke University Press.
- McDermott, E., & Graham, H. (2005). Resilient young mothering: Social inequalities, late modernity and the “problem” of “teenage” motherhood. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 8(1), 59–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260500063702>
- Mendonça, P. (2018). Situating single mothers through values-based cartooning. *Women: A Cultural Review*, 29(1), 19–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2018.1425534>
- Poggrund, G. (2019, August). NHS trusts deny single women IVF treatment. *The Times*.
- Riggs, D. W., & Bartholomaeus, C. (2018). “It’s just what you do”: Australian middle-class heterosexual couples negotiating compulsory parenthood. *Feminism & Psychology*, 28(3), 373–389. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353516675637>
- Roberts, G. (2019, August). Denying single women IVF is a cruel policy that belongs in the past. *The Guardian*.

- Salter, E. (2018). A media discourse analysis of lone parents in the UK: Investigating the stereotype. In L. Bernardi, & D. Mortelmans (Eds.), *Lone parenthood in the life course* (pp. 55–74). Springer Open.
- Tyler, I. (2008). Chav mum chav scum. *Feminist Media Studies*, 8(1), 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770701824779>
- Whitehead, K. (2016). Motherhood as a gendered entitlement: Intentionality, “othering,” and homosociality in the online infertility community. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie*, 53(1), 94–122. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12093>
- Zadeh, S., Freeman, T., & Golombok, S. (2013). Ambivalent identities of single women using sperm donation. *Presses Universitaires de Grenoble*, 26(3), 97–123.

Appendix: transcription key

(.)	micro pause (less than 0.3 s)
(1.5)	timed pause
[]	overlapping speech
<u>Underlined</u>	emphasis
wo-	false start or self-interruption
h.	audible in-breath (number of units indicates duration)
:	extended sound (number of units indicates duration)
?	end of intonation unit (rising intonation)
