



Broken homes and 'men deserts': A critical discourse analysis exploring news media constructions of single motherhood in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Single motherhood is a topic that has concerned social scientists and the media for decades, due to research suggesting children growing up without their father's involvement are at risk of various negative behavioural and developmental outcomes. Prevalent social discourses construct what the 'good mother' should be in line with empirical evidence, traditional values and/or religion, while mothers who fail to meet these standards are viewed as deviant, and stigmatised as a consequence. This research project used critical discourse analysis to explore how single mothers are constructed in contemporary UK news media, in order to establish whether marginalisation is taking place as past analyses have concluded. The four interpretative repertoires identified within the articles corroborated previous research findings, with frequent reference to the idealistic nuclear family, welfare dependency, familial breakdown, and mothers' justifications for their circumstances. These findings suggest that single motherhood is indeed still a contentious issue, and the media plays a key role in reproducing - and resisting - dominant ideologies and attitudes.

KEY WORDS:	SINGLE MOTHERHOOD	SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION	DISCOURSE	NEWS	STIGMA
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Introduction

Single motherhood is a topic that has concerned social scientists and the media for decades, due to research suggesting children growing up without their father's involvement are at risk of various barriers affecting their development and behaviour (Jackson et al., 2003; Jaffee et al., 2003). Prevalent social discourses construct single mothers as 'underclass' welfare claimants, some of whom are living and bringing their children up in poverty; a homogenous group inferior to middle-class nuclear families (Huda, 2001; Murray, 1996). Single mothers are deemed morally unfit and undesirable by society as they do not conform to the ideological family structure where both parents are present, and have involvement with their children's upbringing according to the gender roles society places on them (Ajandi, 2011). Duncan and Edwards (1997) draw a distinction between single and lone mothers, describing 'single' mothers as mothers who had children outside marriage and do not live with a male partner, while 'lone' mothers refers to mothers raising their children who may have divorced, become widowed or separated from their partner, indicating that there is a difference in how mothers without a partner are treated depending on these circumstances. This research will use critical discourse analysis to evaluate and place in context the constructions of single mothers in UK news media, and examine whether they are still treated as the 'other' and marginalised as previous research has concluded (Hadfield et al., 2007; Wilson and Huntington, 2006).

The traditional ideology of motherhood, where mothers are primarily responsible for the nurturing and wellbeing of their child, including the contemporary focus on cognitive and intellectual development, has been extensively discussed in the psychological and sociological literature (Jackson and Huang, 2000; Manning and Lamb, 2003; McLanahan et al., 2013). The culturally salient ideology - named 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996) - emphasises the responsibility placed on the mother to raise their child 'properly', drawing on traditional values, scientific knowledge and/or religion to guide parenting practices in order to be considered a 'good mother' (Holmes, 2006). This motherhood ideology is also grounded in the institution of marriage and has deep-rooted effects on the way families work and go about their lives; the good mother is married, monogamous, and largely financially dependent on the father as the main breadwinner (Johnston and Swanson, 2006). However, those who deviate from this ideology are stigmatised and deemed to be falling short of the standards expected of them. Examples of where this stigma is focused include unwed and unemployed women who rely on welfare to support their families in the absence of the father (Secombe et al., 1998), and working mothers who provide for their children financially but are criticised and feel guilt for not spending enough time with their children as prescribed by the intensive mothering approach (Arendell, 1999; Deutsch and Saxon, 2006; Guendouzi, 2006). Physical appearance has also been linked to ideas of the 'good mother', where features of mothers, such as their weight, are described in articles to imply that part of being a capable mother is regular upkeep of appearance and attractiveness (Hadfield et al.,

2007). McRobbie (2006) asserts that discourses of the 'yummy mummy' figure in various media put pressure on young mothers to live up to standards set by celebrities who are attractive, financially secure and have successful careers, which leads to feelings of inadequacy and denigration in 'everyday' mothers (Pitt, 2008).

In other words, what it means to be a good mother is socially constructed; a term defined by Berger and Luckmann (1966, cited in Walls, 2007: 4) as 'ideological constructs which have been established, adopted, and institutionalized by participants in Western culture who act together within a social framework following a set of conventional rules and behaving as if the rules have been agreed upon and are immutable.' Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that knowledge of the world originates and is maintained by social interaction amongst people, and common knowledge about what constitutes 'reality' is reinforced or challenged, resulting in social institutions - such as marriage - entering an objective reality for the people involved in those interactions. According to Burr (2003), social constructionism is the opposite of essentialism upon which many psychological theories are based, whereby a person's development both physically and psychologically is somewhat predetermined and independent of social interaction, for example a woman's biologically predetermined ability to have a baby. Certain constructions of femininity and motherhood on the other hand have become traditional and require maintenance in order to remain dominant (Burr, 2003).

The number of single parents in the UK has remained relatively constant since 2001, where single parents living with dependent children account for 26 percent of households, and within these households, 92 percent of these children live with their mother (Office for National Statistics, 2012). Social constructionism is a dynamic and ever-changing process which relies on interpretation and knowledge to be shared between people, and the media is a commentator shaping this knowledge, affecting people's perceptions and attitudes (Thornicroft et al., 2013). The media - in particular, newspaper journalists - have taken these statistics to form articles that are written to cause mass public concern. Such articles aim to bring single mothers to the forefront of their readership's attention in an effort to drive the publication's moral principles and expose those viewed as deviant (Linné and Jones, 2000; Ram and Hou, 2003). In particular, articles focusing on welfare dependency describe mothers relying on state support as 'immoral' and poor role models for their children (Goodwin and Huppatz, 2010).

The term 'underclass' frequently used in news articles and its association with welfare dependency is not a recent phenomenon (Lawler, 2005); Murray (1990; 1996) commented on the concept that originated in the US in the 1980s and is now used in UK media, framed in discourse of a disease rapidly spreading throughout British society that could develop to a similar extent to the US. The term perpetuates a stereotype of single mothers, and provides right-wing columnists with a group to blame for society's ills and provoke outrage at the dissolution of traditional families

(Hadfield et al., 2007; Hayward and Yar, 2006). The underclass discourse is used as a means of criticising single mother-headed families for producing illegitimate children who often do not have contact with their biological father. In Murray (1996)'s controversial analysis, these children will grow up to become actively involved in criminal behaviour and delinquency. Murray (1996: 38) also claims that the 'underclass' have an element of choice over their circumstances: 'If illegitimate births are the leading indicator of an underclass and violent crime a proxy measure of its development, the definitive proof that an underclass has arrived is that large numbers of young, healthy, low-income males choose not to take jobs. (The young idle rich are a separate problem.)', suggesting that an over-reliance on welfare is part of the issue, and privileged young people do not fit this description. Men choose not to work, and young unmarried women have children despite financial instability (Jones, 2011). Due to this, communities break down and intergenerational welfare dependency occurs, which is suggested to be highly detrimental to children's health and educational outcomes (Shildrick et al., 2012).

Psychologists and sociologists have developed a large body of literature over the past few decades to establish the effects single motherhood can have on a child's development, educational outcomes, general wellbeing and likelihood to go on to abuse drugs or be involved in crime during adolescence and adulthood (Hoffman, 1971; Lamb et al., 1985; Mason et al., 1994; Morgan et al., 1988; Salem et al., 1998). Thomas et al. (1996) examined the effect non-resident fathers' involvement or absence has on adolescent delinquency, drug use, and heavy alcohol consumption and found the highest rates among White male adolescents without their father present, however the opposite was true for Black male adolescents living with their mother with no father involvement, indicating that familial structure is not the only factor that needs to be considered; culture, race, socioeconomic class and gender are also relevant.

These conclusions transcend time, as similar outcomes were apparent in a more recent study by Choi and Jackson (2011), who evaluated the long-term literature. Behavioural problems positively correlated with single mother families with absent fathers, but this study went further to investigate maternal psychological wellbeing and parenting quality, which were found to be linked to the state of the mother's relationship with the father. A large sample of nearly 1000 families was included in the dataset, many of whom living below the poverty line with nearly half unemployed and relying on public assistance. However, the study relied on the mother's self-reports of their child's behaviour and general wellbeing to produce scores for the analysis and did not look at the father's responses to the scale, even in families which had the father's involvement. This study discussed the implications of their conclusions for policymaking, which means that governments will potentially look at studies such as this, in spite of their limitations, to shape future policies that have significant consequences for the families affected.

Despite there being an abundance of scientific literature exploring causality between single motherhood and outcomes for their children, Wilson and Huntington (2006) critique the dominant scientific discourses which inform and inhibit policymaking, as evidence can be selected in accordance with pre-existing motivations and opinions without considering alternative evidence using different methods. For instance, Graham and McDermott (2006) highlighted that qualitative inquiry studies, such as interviewing single mothers to find out about their experiences, are rarely cited in government reports, which can have a negative impact on policy that informs how health and social care professionals practise when working with families who require assistance. Government policy in turn informs ideas about who and what the good mother should be and is reflected accordingly in the media, particularly in the news, television and film (Hadfield et al., 2007).

Topics which provoke strong emotional reaction and debate are newsworthy, and articles about single parenting and its negative effects, with accompanying sensationalist headlines are designed to be a catalyst for a public outcry; the media construct moral panics out of old news and reinvent it by giving the issues discussed a newer, 'unique' take to sell papers (Welch et al., 2002; Phoenix, 1996). Mills and Keddie (2010) comment on the nature of mass media outlets and their focus on mainly negative news stories, unless a hero narrative is used to make the story more attractive to its readers. The media does not harmlessly comment on stories as they happen, its representations of 'other' groups, such as ethnic minorities and single parents, are used within a 'reductionist sociology of culture', placing those considered 'other' into a homogenous group; individuals with different circumstances and backgrounds but all with one factor in common: single parenthood (Mills and Keddie, 2010: 429). Moon and Rolison (1998) argue that the working classes who are considered 'bad' for society are made 'hypervisible' in media reporting: subject to ridicule by the general public, the 'underclass' and benefits recipients are particular targets for fear and disdain.

Tyler (2008) provides commentary on the vilification of young, single, working-class mothers who are viewed as undesirable and frequently mocked as they do not meet the ideological life trajectory which has come about through increased female workforce participation and higher education opportunities. Such 'class disgust' is resonant throughout the media and it is argued that class differences are becoming more polarised with marginalised groups presented in antagonistic ways, particularly in print media and reality television (Tyler, 2008).

Since the 2011 riots, parents of the youths involved in criminal acts became central to media rhetoric of 'bad', 'underclass' parents producing 'feral' children. Single mothers were pulled into the spotlight and the youths' behaviour somewhat blamed on the absence of a father figure; mothers were accused of depriving their children of an upbringing in the idealistic nuclear family and instead their home life is described as chaotic, dysfunctional and lacking in discipline (De Benedictis, 2012). More

recently, controversial documentary series *Benefits Street* (Channel 4, 2014) was broadcast, which followed a community of residents living on a street known for high levels of unemployment. Single mothers amongst other individuals were featured, who were filmed and interviewed to give an insight into their daily lives (Orr, 2014). The series received criticism for misrepresenting those relying on state benefits to support themselves and their children, and the ethics of the production company were questioned for the way footage was sought and presented to the public - argued to have been selected to reinforce 'underclass' 'scrounger' stereotypes (Price, 2014). This suggests that discourse attributing single motherhood to the purported underclass is still prevalent today, despite first coming to the public's attention over two decades ago.

Although there is a large amount of literature exploring the effect single motherhood has on children's outcomes and media discourses of marginalised groups, there is a niche in the research looking into the construction of single motherhood in UK online news media in the current decade. It would be beneficial to critically analyse news articles surrounding single motherhood to explore how and perhaps why mothers raising their children alone are the focus of media scrutiny, and provide commentary on the power relations between the media, their readers and marginalised groups. Therefore, this piece of research will investigate how single motherhood is constructed in online UK news media from 2010-present, and whether these constructions are consistent with previous research findings.

Method

Design

Due to the subjective nature of the study exploring constructions of single motherhood in UK news media, a qualitative research design was employed over quantitative methods as to look at a news article from a quantitative standpoint would not take into account the dominant discourses throughout, appreciate the context within which the text was written or explore power relations between the news and society. A qualitative methodology using critical discourse analysis (CDA) highlights the way knowledge is socially constructed, and exposes values within texts that can be taken for granted and not appear obvious to the layperson. The language used is not neutral as meanings can be created or altered in the process of communicating via the articles (Taylor, 2013). This taken for granted knowledge is used to allow practices to go on - such as the marginalisation of groups considered the 'other' - which lead to social exclusion (Richardson, 2007).

Discourse analytic methods can be used to show these practices are unjust, and are concerned with taking an ethical stance to address abuses of power, inequality, and bringing about social change (Frost, 2011). Discourse is social, and according to

Blommaert (2005) there is no such thing as non-social, non-cultural, non-historical discourse, and analysing discursive practices is worthwhile as it shows where conflicts and social differences are occurring - discourse shapes our perception of the world, and occurs under set rules of what is considered problematic or positive for society, such as raising a child without their father's involvement. In a similar vein, Talbot (2007) argues that studying text as a separate entity from the context is counterintuitive as the link between text and the context needs to be explored to conduct CDA effectively. Constructions of motherhood do not operate outside cultural and social influence, and the use of language in text and talk creates stigmatised groups, which makes the study of prevailing discourses appropriate for this research. Wood and Kroger (2000) explain that one of the assumptions of discourse is language is action; semantically loaded terms serve to have an effect that needs to be investigated as text not only has a meaning, but it also has a force behind it to achieve a certain goal.

Richardson (2007) identifies four key concepts central to CDA; the tension between idealism and materialism, power, ideology and hegemony. Marx, a materialist, argued that the world exists independent of people, and our consciousness is determined by the material reality around us, while the idealistic philosophy believes that reality as we know it is immaterial and constructed out of our perceptions and awareness. CDA, according to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), should be seen as a social practice where there is a dialectical or two-way relationship: the discourse is shaped by institutions and societal norms, but it in turn also shapes them, therefore elements of both materialism and idealism are taken into consideration.

Power and dominance is a central concept to CDA, as it has an effect on the way people produce and understand knowledge, particularly in the news. The concept has provoked an abundance of discussions as to what power is and how it is used throughout daily life. van Dijk (1993) argues that besides direct action to control, such as physical force, the more effective power is in the mind through methods of persuasion and manipulation. These methods serve to change people's opinions on a subject in accordance with those in power's interests, and access to various contexts of discourse - such as newspaper journalism - are an important resource. As van Dijk (1993) goes on to stress, CDA is concerned with abuses of power, and dominance is used as a subtle way to exert power over society which is considered legitimate unless challenged by critics. This links in to the concept of hegemony, which Cox (2004) describes as a condition where those who are governed accept authority without the requirement for force, and involves the leadership of the ruling class over institutions and moral values rather than domination. The ruling class' views, according to Gramsci (1971, cited in Richardson, 2007) are considered legitimate as their ideals are taught to the general public so they go mainly unchallenged. Mainstream newspaper journalists act as mediators between the ruling class and the content of the news articles themselves, thus serving to naturalise and produce common sense knowledge in line with the ruling classes and

potentially marginalising those who do not conform to their ideals (Richardson, 2007). This naturalisation of particular constructions and representations means that any ideology behind the formation of the construction ceases to be apparent and instead appears as neutral (Fairclough, 1989).

Finally, ideologies central to the formation of discourse are a type of social cognition, defined by van Dijk (2001a: 115) as 'the basic social representations of social groups'. Essentially, ideologies are schemata of knowledge and opinions of a group or institution, for example a shared collection of aims and norms amongst the right-wing, where a social hierarchy is naturalised and/or desirable (Goldthorpe, 1985).

Text Collection

Six articles were analysed in total, three from *The Daily Mail* and three from *The Guardian* (see Appendix 1). These two papers were chosen specifically out of the range of newspapers published in the UK as full articles are freely available to access online. They also have a significant readership, with *The Mail Online* being the world's most popular news website and *The Guardian* the UK's second most popular online news source as of 2012 (Greenslade, 2012; Sweney, 2012). The contrasting political stances of the two newspapers is another reason for selecting them; *The Guardian* is a centre-left broadsheet with a reputation for liberal views, while *The Daily Mail* is a traditionally right-wing tabloid with support for conservative values (Bednarek, 2006).

The study involved searching for articles on the newspaper's respective websites using 'single mothers' as the search term and refining the dates from 1st January 2010 to the present day to keep articles within the confines of the research aims; to find out how the media construct single motherhood within the present decade in light of welfare reforms.

The nature of qualitative research means that the sample used is not representative of the newspaper's views as a whole as the researcher must view the texts as context-specific to find meaning (Lapan et al., 2012). However, the articles selected from the many that matched the search criteria provided examples of single mother-headed families, and their stories framed in discourse in accordance with the paper's ideological standpoint.

Procedure

There is a large amount of academic literature exploring how CDA should be conducted and many different ways of analysing text and talk due to its malleability - there is no unitary framework to adhere to (van Dijk, 2001b). CDA allows the

researcher to adapt the theory and method of analysis to suit their study's aims and selection of text, in this case news articles. This study adopted Richardson (2007)'s analytical framework based on Fairclough (1992)'s method of doing CDA, which looks at the dialectical relationship between semiotic elements - such as language and images - and social practices (Fairclough, 2001). Instead of looking at text purely in terms of vocabulary and semantics, the function that the text serves to achieve is what interests CDA researchers and forms the focus of the analysis (Richardson, 2007). Fairclough (1992)'s three-dimensional framework encompasses three stages; description, interpretation, and explanation, which will each be clarified in turn.

Richardson (2007) suggests that it is best to start with the texts themselves, then build outwards to the wider discursive and social practices that are occurring when using this form of CDA on news articles. The first stage is textual analysis; looking specifically at how the text is structured at a micro- and macro-level. Micro-textual analysis is concerned with how individuals are represented and involves looking at individual words, sentence structure and presuppositions - implicit claims within text that can be taken for granted or overlooked. Macro-textual analysis on the other hand looks at the narrative of the text as a whole, taking into account the sequence of events as the journalist tells the reader a story. This forms the description stage of Fairclough (1992)'s framework.

The next stage of Richardson (2007)'s analytical model looks at discursive practices, which forms the interpretation stage and involves analysing the texts as they are produced and consumed. Between the producer - the newspaper, the text itself and the consumer - the reader, the discursive practices work both ways, where the conventions of the genre of text shapes the way new texts are written but the new texts in turn shape the genre. A similar process occurs between the text and reader; when a text is read it is decoded for its meaning in relation to the reader's pre-existing attitudes and knowledge of the topic, and the reader can disagree with or reject the claims if their views distinctly oppose the views expressed in the article. Intertextuality is the key concept to this stage of the analysis process, as text cannot be read and understood in isolation; the context is crucial to appreciate the text's meaning (Blommaert, 2005).

The third and final phase of the analysis is based on the explanation stage and focuses on a discussion of the wider social context the news article is embedded within (Fairclough, 1992). The analyses of the text and discourse which took place in the first two stages are considered, but the insight gained in these phases is now critiqued in relation to institutions such as political practices and the role of journalism in shaping society's attitudes towards a particular social group or event, in this case single mothers. The dialectical relationship comes into focus again at this stage between society and journalism; each in turn shaping each other's knowledge and attitudes. There is a particular interest in power relations at this stage, examining

the role journalism has on reproducing or resisting dominance and the marginalisation of certain social groups considered the 'other' (Richardson, 2007; van Dijk, 2001b).

In conducting the analysis through annotating the articles using the three-stage framework, interpretative repertoires were found and discussed in relation to previous research and the social context. The term 'interpretative repertoires' is commonly used in social psychological research (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008) and was developed by Wetherell and Potter (1988: 172), who described it as the 'building blocks' upon which accounts of phenomena are constructed from a restricted range of figures and patterns of speech. Such constructions remain relatively consistent as the account is communicated to different people. The discussion was integrated into the analysis of the interpretative repertoires so not to appear disjointed, in accordance with qualitative research presentation guidelines (Riley, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

Ethics need to be considered throughout a research project, and extend from within the study to the wider ethical responsibilities to psychology as a discipline. Ensuring guidelines are strictly followed should a moral dilemma occur during the research process is crucial (Wiles, 2013). Ethical approval was sought from the project supervisor prior to the study taking place, and an ethics form included with the completed project. Manchester Metropolitan University adheres to the British Psychological Society's (2009) code for ethics and conduct, and as no participants were recruited, some guidelines were not applicable. All news articles selected for analysis as per the terms of use were freely available to access online.

Analysis & Discussion

The four interpretative repertoires identified when following Richardson's (2007) framework are analysed and discussed in relation to previous research. Due to the nature of intertextuality, the repertoires found cannot be regarded as discrete; they all intertwine in shaping societal attitudes and in turn are shaped by them. (Full analyses of the articles can be found in Appendices 2-7).

'Real' children

Analysis of the articles revealed overt as well as subtle references to the dominant ideological nuclear family structure, regarded as the 'gold standard' to which other families are compared (Graham, 2012). One article in particular discusses 'regular

circumstances' in which to have a baby, implying that a stable marriage is of utmost importance:

"...I should wait and have a "regular baby". What he meant, of course, was that I should wait and have a baby in more regular circumstances... It evoked the word "bastard" - "Something that is spurious, irregular, inferior or of questionable origin."
(Appendix 2: 12-17)

The use of the word 'bastard' is of particular interest. It conjures ideas of illegitimacy and inferiority, as described by the journalist herself when reflecting back on what was said to her in passing. Nowadays used as an expletive to describe someone unpleasant, its traditional meaning is a child born to parents out of wedlock. This suggests that the requirement to be married before having children is still considered a salient ideology, as family structures that deviate from this are deemed 'questionable' or 'irregular', despite opposition from the journalist herself. However, she does not elaborate on what constitutes 'regular circumstances', relying on the reader's pre-existing knowledge and attitudes to understand what is meant by this. The perceived requirement to be married is further compounded by notions of the nuclear family being the 'perfect' solution to raising children:

"... not proud of having two children by two different dads. I always dreamed of having the perfect nuclear family and I feel judged by others." (Appendix 3: 101-103)

It is presupposed that feelings of being judged are a direct consequence of having two children to two fathers outside of marriage, and explicitly stating she is not proud of her situation indicates feelings of shame and guilt. In sharp contrast, the following extract subtly treats the realities of life for one mother as though it were a game, due to her family size being distinctly larger than the statistically 'average' family with two dependent children (Macrory, 2012):

"In the space of 16 years, she has given birth to a list of offspring that reads more like a strangely-named football team than a family." (Appendix 4: 39-43)

The tone of the extract suggests implicit mocking of the mother for having a large number of children in comparison to the societal norm, made explicit by commenting on the unusual names of the children - referred to as 'offspring'; an arguably depersonalised, scientific term. The role of the audience is crucial to the writing of news articles, where expectations and values held by the readership are catered towards and are shaped through a dialectical relationship. The differences in style choice between the above extracts are not to be taken for granted; the views expressed are designed to retain their current readership and produce stories that conform to their respective moral values and political beliefs (van Dijk, 2001b), thus decidedly sympathetic or judgmental narratives are adopted to reflect this.

From these extracts, the overarching repertoire is that children living within an alternative family structure, exemplified in single mother-headed families, are stigmatised as well as the mothers for their circumstances. The level of stigma is however dependent on a variety of factors, some of which are out of their control, including social class, age, race, and cultural traditions of the society in which they live (Bock, 2000). This supports a meta-analysis by Ganong et al. (1990), which critically examined the belief that the nuclear family is a standard by which all other families are compared to, concluding that married mothers are more favourably perceived than unmarried mothers, while children whose parents were married were also evaluated more favourably in terms of personality characteristics and behaviour. Despite the increasing diversity of family structures, stereotyping still occurs when one dominant ideology prescribed by those in positions of power is viewed as superior (Ganong et al., 1990). This suggests that despite the evolving nature of families, there is a notion within the media - and society - that children born to single mothers are in some ways inferior and not as 'real' when compared to children with two married parents.

The stigma attached to the children as well as the mothers is further supported by 'underclass' discourse studies, which make references to illegitimate children who are likely to go on to be involved in criminal behaviour, with recent interest in the London riots (De Benedictis, 2012; Murray, 1996). Despite the strong and controversial assertions made by Murray (1996), it has become apparent that they are still relevant today; research into the effect of stigma has found that the term 'bastard' is still used and negative connotations are still present in children with unmarried parents (Cook and Dickens, 2014). Thus, in order to be considered a 'real', 'regular' family, the social institution of marriage is still a reality for the journalists, which is either resisted or reinforced in line with their political and moral values.

Legitimising single motherhood

The mothers in the articles each felt they needed to justify their positions as single parents by describing their circumstances and being critical of their stereotypical representation in the media and of the fathers themselves:

"I find a lot of men are pretty weak, expecting their partners to do all the chores, and then many of them are unfaithful. I would rather be alone and have control over my life. I don't think Jordan has ever missed having a dad." (Appendix 5: 154-156)

In this extract, the mother is quoted as being critical of men in general rather than the father of her child specifically, relating men's ability to be faithful and reliance on their partner to do the household chores to their competence as fathers. This is associated with the traditional gender roles of men and women; the mother

maintains the home while the father goes to work to provide for the family financially (Ajandi, 2011). However, her belief is that men do not generally support their partners, thus her son does not benefit from his involvement. This commitment to defending her decision is exemplified when she says a lot of men *are weak*, using the verb to matter-of-factly state their weakness as an absolute rather than a possibility. These notions relate back to the media's keenness to expose 'feckless' fathers to demonstrate the existence of the 'underclass' alongside single mothers (Haywood and Yar, 2006). The following quote further supports the underlying prerequisite within the media for mothers to justify their position and status without the need for a man to complete their family in a more direct, defensive manner:

"Maybe the single mother figures are higher here because women are less likely to put up with stupid and incompetent (read gobshite) behaviour from our partners. We know we've got the strength and support to go it alone, thanks very much."

(Appendix 6: 23-26)

There is a strong resistance towards patriarchy here, allowing those who feel marginalised to defend their decision making, no longer wishing to accept control over their lives by men (Duncan and Edwards, 1997). The use of the word 'gobshite' indicates the liberal views of *The Guardian* towards slang, and the presupposition here is that married women are more likely to 'put up' with unsupportive behaviour from their husbands, suggesting that there are indeed flaws to the nuclear family structure and women's ability to assert themselves when they are dissatisfied with their situation.

It is interesting how the mothers in the articles have been selected; in the *Daily Mail*, there is a distinct focus on working-class mothers whose income is purely from government assistance, while *The Guardian* explores middle-class women's stories framed in a distinctly different, more understanding light. Celebrity influence is an important aspect to consider, and in the following extract, a singer discusses her reasoning for being a single mother that goes against stereotypical explanations:

"No woman has an ambition to become a single mother. For me, it was never a choice. Teja's father was violent, physically abusive, and Tiani's father was constantly cheating, and just didn't show me the respect I deserved." (Appendix 3:

14-16)

These views go against the former extract in the suggestion that single motherhood, in her perception based on a violent past experience, cannot be a situation to aspire to. It is within the article that an abusive relationship is suggested to be a legitimate, more socially accepted reason to become a single mother; choosing to raise a child single-handed without solid rationality is not easy to justify and can lead to social exclusion if attitudes do not change (Dowd, 1997). It is no coincidence that a famous singer was chosen to voice their opinions on the subject. The importance of celebrity is due to their power and influence over readers; celebrities who endorse a view that

is generally considered unpopular - such as defending single motherhood - can increase the social acceptability of the perspective and alter people's attitudes, seeking to normalise single motherhood as an accepted family structure and minimise inequality (Jackson and Darrow, 2005).

The impact of social class is crucial to consider here in relation to the authority they have in voicing their experiences. There is a recurring tendency for the journalists to use the verbs 'insisted' and 'admitted' to describe the mothers' speech acts, rather than simply 'said' or 'described' in working-class mothers who receive benefits (Appendix 4, 5). These loaded verbs construct the discursive context where the mothers' opinions are quoted, but it is insinuated that they are being defensive or ashamed of their situation as a counter-argument towards the newspaper's implicit undermining of their status as single mothers. Previous research into marginalised mother's accounts of their construction support feelings of shame and guilt, which the media imply should be felt when they 'admit' to their circumstances (Guendouzi, 2006). In contrast, middle-class mothers have been given the freedom to construct their own identity within the articles without much additional commentary from the journalist:

"I am not the typical single mother, but then there is no typical single mother any more than there is a typical mother. In fact, it's our unbridled fantasies and crude stereotypes of this "typical single mother" (overweight, short-tempered, popping out babies so that she can snare a council flat) that get in the way of our truly apprehending the richness and variety of thriving families... my household is messy, bohemian, warm." (Appendix 2: 2-7)

What is interesting here is the mother begins her article with the statement that she is not *the* 'typical' single mother, already suggesting that she is describing a homogenous group by use of 'the' instead of 'a'. She expands on this assertion by listing the stereotypes that she acknowledges are prevalent in everyday discourse, using the pronoun 'our' when doing so, suggesting that this is a construction that both herself and her readers accept and/or actively engage in. However, in spite of the negative descriptors used to depict single mothers who are viewed as deviant of the normative ideal nuclear family (Saggers and Sims, 2005), she distances herself from them to describe her home as 'messy' and 'bohemian'. Such adjectives frame her circumstances in a more free-spirited, non-conformist manner, which instead encourages the reader to view her as independent, yet 'unorthodox' (Appendix 2: 170).

From this, a dichotomy between social classes and their construction can be seen in the media from the *Daily Mail* and, subtly, *The Guardian's* articles. The dichotomy is apparent from the *Daily Mail's* choice to focus entirely on single mothers who claim benefits without considering mothers who are employed in well paid work, and *The Guardian's* mothers' subtle removal of their situations from the stereotypical explanations for being single. It appears that media ideologies are favourable

towards the middle classes, while prejudices towards the working-class are reflected (Richardson, 2007). This finding corroborates previous research, which discusses the stigma attached to low-paid single mothers and the generalisations made. Mothers are placed into a categorical group without considering diversity of resources, creating the requirement for them to defend their position in the face of criticism (Duncan and Edwards, 1997). In a discourse analysis of young stigmatised mothers, 'fighting back' was found to be a key repertoire when interviewing mothers who recognise that they are a marginalised group, expressing their opposition to the way in which they are constructed in print media and television; demonstrating a counter-hegemonic viewpoint which rejects the dominant discourses of young single mothers as morally inferior welfare abusers (Kelly, 1996). The lack of research into middle-class single mothers' constructions is particularly interesting; despite motherhood without the father's involvement being perpetuated as a cause for societal breakdown and against the 'good mother' ideology, only mothers living in poverty or on low incomes are seemingly selected for research (Holmes, 2006; Seccombe et al., 1998).

'Tsunami' of family breakdown

The third interpretative repertoire identified within the articles revealed prominent references to the breakdown of the traditional family and the rise of dysfunctional, chaotic households in their place, with single mothers at the forefront of social threat discourse. Implicit and explicit narratives that society is in decline are present; the working-class is gradually being absorbed into an expanding middle-class or dwindling into an underclass, who choose not to work and represent the ills of society (Jones, 2011; Lawler, 2005):

"It's the sort of dysfunctional family scenario that would leave Jeremy Kyle Show audiences salivating. Yet amid this tale of teenage mums, casual sex and irresponsible parenting, perhaps the most shocking element is that Joanne feels not a shred of shame about her expanding family. Small wonder, then, that the legacy she has passed down to her daughters is a total absence of understanding about the enormous consequences" (Appendix 4: 87-93)

The journalist immediately references a talk-show famed for hosting guests with a range of personal and familial issues, often judged to be morally dubious and lack responsibility for their actions; qualities which have been deemed symptomatic of an underclass (Jones, 2011; Murray, 1996). The discursive strategy of intertextuality is used, which relies on the reader's knowledge and attitudes about the show to support their point. The narrative of the extract structures the interview in manner of a story, where readers are invited to experience the mother's life vicariously. Her lifestyle is trivialised into a saga for the reader's consumption; a piece of entertainment with a particular interest in commenting on their morals towards sex

and relationships (Kelly, 1996). At this point it is important to remember that a dialectical relationship between the media and readers exists, and the style and content of articles reflects this; thus stories of atypical families are selected for public consumption to provoke a reaction (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Kelly, 1996). Another key aspect identified is the attribution of pregnancy and becoming a single mother to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the implications motherhood carries. This can be interpreted to mean that the blame should be placed on the mother for their ignorance that has been 'passed down' to her young daughter, rather than the wider society where the middle-classes govern education policy and support teenage pregnancy prevention strategies (Mollitor, 2013).

When reporting on the news, discourse tends to be shaped by authoritative sources or 'experts' in the field, where supporting evidence is selected to form 'facts' and presented to the layperson - the newspaper's readers. With this selectivity, a degree of bias on the journalist's behalf arises, supporting a specific political or moral perspective. If the journalist goes against normative values, such as challenging those in positions of power or offers a novel perspective on an established topic, information must be more stringently verified compared to information on the 'powerless', for example marginalised groups (Richardson, 2007). Several of the articles analysed refer to studies into the effects of single motherhood to reinforce - and challenge - notions of societal breakdown and chaos discourse:

"According to Patricia Morgan: 'Children need fathers. It's no coincidence that while we are seeing the breakdown in the family we are witnessing a rise in gangs in Britain. That is where many boys are finding male role models. Where are the fathers for children to look up to?'" (Appendix 5: 137-140)

The expert selected in support of dysfunction discourse is used as an agent alongside the journalist to indicate that there is truth to the claim that single mothers are a cause of a breakdown in society, and it is not simply an opinion of the journalist that goes unsubstantiated. These 'scare quotes' (Richardson, 2007: 87) are used to ensure that reporting of the news - in particular controversial topics - remains non-prejudicial and maintains journalistic objectivity. The authoritative figure chosen makes the link between father absence and gangs, which implies that there is a rise in delinquency and crime occurring, reinforcing ideas of a social threat. This notion is supported by research by De Benedictis (2012), who found that an increase in parental blame is occurring, and due to the changes to women's roles in society through increased workforce participation, a dual-role between motherhood and paid work is expected. However, the feasibility of balancing these two roles whilst being a single mother has led to the 'chav', 'underclass' permeating throughout political and media discourse where this balance cannot be achieved and income from state benefits is required. In the context of social unrest, for example the London riots, deviant lone motherhood is especially depicted as responsible for male delinquency and crime (De Benedictis, 2012; Tyler, 2008).

On the other hand, journalists use their position to deliver an alternative viewpoint on contentious subjects, questioning the validity of research studies and quoting thinktank reports in their critique:

"...a rightwing thinktank, warned of a "tsunami" of family breakdown..." (Appendix 2: 73-74)

"The report will talk of "men deserts"... many children, the report says, now live in an environment where they have no male role models whatsoever. I'm sure there are some children for whom this is the case and that's very sad, but they are, without doubt, rare. Even in the absence of a father, there are often uncles and older siblings to turn to if they ever needed a male perspective." (Appendix 6: 27-33)

The report's phrase 'men deserts' and disaster discourse was published with the aim of capturing the media's attention with emotive language and heavy use of statistical information (Centre for Social Justice, 2013). The above extract considers the role of other male influences within the family; taking the responsibility away from the mother to ensure a male role model is present and considering other options. This serves to give mothers a voice and allow for a balanced and objective viewpoint, taking research and thinktank reports with entrenched political interests into consideration, but writing for the audience who have expectations about the way in which otherwise marginalised members of society are constructed and represented. Articles such as this use their influence as a media source to redress the prevailing negative discourse rather than reinforce it (Richardson, 2007).

'Spongers' - single motherhood as lifestyle choice?

The final repertoire identified surrounds the perception that single motherhood is a 'lifestyle choice' to which working-class women aspire and thus become targets for disdain, due to their association with the stereotype of being workshy, morally tainted, and ignorant (Huda, 2001). Such constructions maintain a social hierarchy in line with the *Daily Mail's* right-wing agenda; the subjects of such articles are portrayed as inferior to their target audience, and either implied or accused of 'sponging' - slang for a person who has a lifestyle at other's expense (Tyler, 2008). The following extracts exemplify the meticulous way journalists break down payments of benefits to reinforce 'welfare sponger' rhetoric:

"She pays a reduced rent of just £27 a week for her home — a tenth of the going rate — the rest being paid for by the State. She receives £565 a week in benefits, comprising a total of £160 family allowance and £405 supplementary benefit, the maximum amount allowed under Bailiwick of Guernsey law." (Appendix 4: 136-139)

"He [the father] contributes nothing financially - which is not a problem as she receives around £400 a week in benefits, made up of child benefit, housing benefit, family tax credit and disability living allowance" (Appendix 5: 98-100)

The key feature of the above extracts is the inclusion of stating that the maximum amount allowed is being claimed; it seems superfluous to include this information as the amounts have already been outlined but it implies that the mother is taking everything she can get without putting anything back into the system. The onus is placed entirely on the mother for her need to claim benefits, while it is 'not a problem' that the father does not contribute financially to his children's upbringing. These findings support Wilson and Huntington's (2006) analysis into welfare dependency and social exclusion discourse, whereby the increase in economic participation of women has arguably led to the decline in value of staying home to raise children, and the stigma attached to requiring state support has led to a paradox. The prevailing traditional view that the 'good mother' should be the primary caregiver contradicts notions of going into paid work, and being a single mother either means that full-time work is necessary while sacrificing time spent with their child, or a reliance on benefits is seemingly the only alternative; placing single mothers at a 'double disadvantage' (Wilson and Huntington, 2006: 69). Further mentions of a 'lucrative' benefits system (Appendix 5: 189) emphasise the ridicule for welfare dependency. 'Lucrative' is usually associated with a profitable business, implying that single motherhood is a career or lifestyle choice for these women, placing them into a homogenous group who are seemingly profiting financially from motherhood.

Physical appearance and comments about the decor of the mothers' homes is also key to interpretative repertoires of single motherhood being a lifestyle choice:

"Cherryl, dressed in a vest top and trousers, and tracksuit-clad Allechia, are watching Jeremy Kyle — yes, really — on the widescreen TV" (Appendix 7: 74-75)

"The latest to become a pregnant teen, Mariah — complete with nose and eyebrow piercings to accompany her visible bump..." (Appendix 4: 95-96)

The mention of tracksuits and piercings incorporated into the narratives encourage the reader to think about what they associate these specific fashion choices with; an opportunity to conjure up a stereotype so the journalist can justify any notions of inequality from there on in (Biernat and Dovidio, 2003). The media's inclusion of physical appearance is purposeful to relate back to everyday knowledge and attitudes of what the 'good mother' is: the implication being that tracksuits and piercings do not fit in with this identity, which has been socially constructed between the ruling classes, the media and the public (Hadfield et al., 2007; Tyler, 2008). The inclusion of describing the television is also purposeful to indicate a sense of wealth and provoke a reaction in readers who have an opinion on the welfare state.

The reference to welfare 'sponging' is not a recent phenomenon; Linné and Jones (2000) conducted a content analysis of broadsheet newspapers to find out how stories of lone motherhood are covered, and, while not meeting all the criteria for a moral panic, the coverage was highly influenced by political agenda and the values held by the media. Both the extracts analysed and Linné and Jones' (2000) research supports the theory that working-class members of society who are considered deviant are made 'hypervisible' in media reporting to create a target for the public's fear and scorn, adding to the social hierarchy between classes (Moon and Rolison, 1998).

Conclusions

This study sought to explore how single motherhood is constructed within UK news media in the current decade using critical discourse analysis (CDA) on two popular newspaper websites, one tabloid and one broadsheet. Upon conducting the analysis, four interpretative repertoires were identified and discussed in relation to previous research: 'real' children, where the normative nuclear family structure was found to still be a prevalent ideology; legitimising single motherhood, where mothers themselves were actors within the articles who were depicted as defending their situation; the 'tsunami' of family breakdown, which described single mother-headed families in a way which contributes to underclass discourse; and finally the interpretative repertoire of single motherhood as a lifestyle choice, discussing the ways welfare recipients are represented and constructed to the target audience.

One of the main conclusions that can be drawn from this research is that a social hierarchy is indeed perpetuated in mainstream newspapers, and depending on the style choice of the respective news source, these constructions and agendas are either explicit - as in the case of the *Daily Mail* - or decidedly underlying and less obvious to the layperson as with *The Guardian*. Interestingly, despite *The Guardian's* apparent support and defence of single mothers, there were contradictions within the texts that indicated that there is still a degree of stigma attached to lone parenthood, and class differences were made overt which were originally easy to overlook. Middle-class mothers were given more of a voice and seemingly quoted much more without the journalist's additional comments, which was an interesting finding that contributes to this conclusion.

Although the concept of the underclass emerged over two decades ago, it is still relevant today. Single mothers are a particular target for attention and disdain for supposed abuses of the welfare system, and not fitting the ideological 'good mother' social construction as prescribed by those in positions of power who are oft quoted in the media - researchers, thinktank experts, and politicians (Holmes, 2006). Aesthetics were also particularly important, which further supports the notion that the media look more favourably upon those who are more attractive with successful

careers, as in the case of celebrities who receive a plethora of media coverage. By way of contrast, certain stereotypes are drawn upon in those viewed as deviant to reinforce negative attitudes. It is the aim of CDA to identify abuses of power and discuss ways to redress the imbalances for those who are marginalised (van Dijk, 2001a). It can be concluded from this research that the media often portrays single mothers as a homogenous group by selecting atypical families for interview in order to shock; it is important to address this by allowing marginalised groups more freedom of expression within the news and not defining mothers by their marital and socioeconomic status alone.

As with all research, this study has its limitations. The nature of qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to use their judgment to determine what is appropriate to include in the analysis. This means that only a relatively small selection of articles were used, due to word limits and time constraints; however this study could be improved by discussing the articles selected with a peer to ensure they are the best suited to the study. Revisiting word limits, the analysis proved to be intensive and considerate of various discursive and social practices, which lends itself to lengthy analyses. However, the interpretative repertoires discussed had to be supported using selected extracts, and some analysis points were omitted from the report.

Whilst CDA was decided to be the most appropriate method to use for this particular research, there are inherent limitations. The researcher is inclined to interpret texts in line with their personal ideological standpoint and political views, meaning that it is possible for the study to include repertoires that confirm these viewpoints, rather than considering alternative arguments - labelled 'interpretative positivism' (Fish, 1981). The focus of CDA is challenging abuses of power and hegemony, however this can fail to recognise the complexities of roles in society between social classes - leading to an 'us' and 'them' which the CDA seeks to avoid and challenge. As the bias of the researcher is unavoidable in qualitative research studies of this nature, reflexivity will be discussed.

When considering the implications of this research, it is important to consider that altering entrenched values and social hierarchies is very difficult, however CDA attempts to redress these imbalances by studying the effects manipulation via the media by dominant groups can have on their intended audience. In terms of future directions for this research, one of the main conclusions was that single mothers are often constructed in a negative light despite being heavily quoted. Further research could benefit from conducting interviews or focus groups with single mothers to explore how they feel about their portrayal in the media and what they would like to change, if anything.

Reflexive Analysis

My personal beliefs will have affected this research, and due to interests in critical and social psychology I strongly believe that different social groups should be fairly treated within the context of media reporting, and the creation of scapegoats eliminated. While objectivity within journalism does not mean the same as objectivity outside this context, my interests lie in exposing the imbalance between the media and marginalised groups who are not given the opportunity to discuss their situations in a non-judgmental environment. Due to this, it is inevitable that my personal attitudes will have had an effect on the analysis process and it is important for transparency to acknowledge this.

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