Considerations of Equality in Heterosexual Single Mothers' Intimacy Narratives

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Abstract

This paper explores experiences and expectations of equality within the intimacy narratives of UK single mothers. A perceived lack of equality was often cited by participants as a contributing factor in relationship breakdown, contradicting notions of increasing democracy (Giddens, 1992). For those who had grown up aspiring to egalitarian relationships, experiences of inequality engendered disappointment. Yet narratives simultaneously contained longings for the perceived certainty of traditional gendered roles associated with more stable, committed, enduring relationships - an ideal model of intimacy against which intimate lives were measured. Narratives were therefore marked by ambivalence as participants navigated their way through different understandings of intimacy, while managing challenging situations. While equality in intimate relationships was viewed as a possibility by some, participants often felt it was out of reach due to a lack of suitable potential partners. For others achieving stability in relationships was the main priority. This article therefore argues that commentators who two decades ago heralded a brave new world of equality in intimate lives (Giddens, 1992) were overly optimistic; the narratives discussed here reveal a more contextualised, complex and uneven picture of contemporary intimacies.

Introduction

1.1 This research explored the 'intimacy narratives' of 24 heterosexual single mothers. The term 'intimacy' encompasses broad domains of personal life (Smart 2007) which include - but are not limited to - family practices and care, physical proximity, sex and sexual relationships, emotional connection, communication and relating and the provision of emotional and practical support. The notion of 'intimacy narratives' refers to the stories participants tell about intimacies in their lives. The existing body of research on lone parenthood has tended to focus on the realms of work and care, rather than entailing in-depth investigations into everyday intimate lives and the ways in which single mothers narrate their experiences and so my research attempts to address this lacuna. In line with this special section, the article focusses on how heterosexual single mothers themselves perceive and experience gender and equality in their intimate relationships with men.

1.2 The stories heterosexual single mothers have to tell about perceptions and experiences of intimacy constitutes a relevant topic for research on several levels. Firstly, while there is a substantial body of work which investigates lone parenthood, studies have tended to focus primarily on issues around work, welfare, care and broader policy contexts (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Ford and Millar 1998; Klett-Davies 2007; Millar and Rowlingson 2001) rather than specifically focussing on their intimate lives. Secondly, single mothers are typically at a transitional period of their lives, usually temporary[1], and at a time where they can reflect on their previous intimate lives and their aspirations as to what they want as part of a period of self-discovery (Smart 2000). Thirdly, those who have recently come out of long-term relationships and started forming new intimacies may have insights into ways in which intimacy and relationships between men and women have changed or endured over the past generation. Finally, they are likely to be experiencing socio-economic constraints which adds a further layer of complexity to their ability to make choices about their intimate lives[2].

1.3 To this end, I interviewed women who had grown up between the 1960s and 1980s, a time of increasing equality for women in the public sphere (Lewis 2001), to explore how far these increasing equalities had imported into women's intimate lives. I sought to relate these individual stories to their wider cultural and historical context, often viewed as a period of transformation in terms of intimacy and gender roles. A rising divorce rate and changed economic circumstances of women have, as some have seen it, signalled the decline of patriarchy in Western societies (Giddens 1992;Therbon 2004). It has been argued that intimate lives changed dramatically towards the end of the twentieth-century due to enhanced gender equality, individualisation, increased choice and experimentation and the absence of regulative traditions and norms (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995;Giddens

1992). The notion of the 'modern' relationship, within this line of thinking, is epitomised by the 'pure relationship'; based on mutual satisfaction and pleasure, partners are free to move on as soon as at least one is no longer fulfilled (Giddens 1992).

1.4   Such positions have been critiqued for overstating gender equality (Jamieson, 1998). They underplay the continuation of gendered divisions of labour, unequal power relations and domestic abuse in intimate relationships which disproportionately affects women[3]. Moreover, the focus on individual choice underplays the experiences of those with dependents and who are operating within socio-economic constraints (Gabb 2010;Jamieson 1998). The 'transformation of intimacy' (Giddens 1992) thesis does not account for the continued political and cultural prominence of the notion of 'the family' as ideally headed by a heterosexual couple. By extension, single parent families (and mothers in particular) have frequently been portrayed in UK popular culture and in political discourse as non-normative, damaging to children and threatening to 'family values' and fathers' roles (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Evans and Thane 2012; Land and Lewis 1998; Smart 1992; Tyler 2008; Wallbank 2001)[4]. While sociologists have observed some shifts in practices of intimacy and families such as the loosening of connections (Gabb 2010; Roseneil 2004), it is recognised that the normative ideal of 'family' has retained and even increased its significance in terms of cultural, political and personal imaginaries and practices in recent years (Gabb 2010; Edwards and Gillies 2012; Ribbens-McCarthy, Hooper and Gillies 2013).

1.5   Continuities, as opposed to radical changes, in intimate life have been observed by Duncan (2011a). Comparing data between the 1950s and 2006, he argued that people tend to act pragmatically, adapting to current circumstances and improving on past practices with some taking up more 'traditional' or 'progressive' positions than others. The notion of 'bricolage' (Duncan 2011b) is put forward as a possibility to explain the process of decision making about intimate lives whereby choices are made reflexively but also habitually, drawing on a range of social and cultural resources and influenced by existing traditions and sanctioned social relationships. An example is the adaptation of traditions and norms of marriage, romantic love and commitment, even in what may be perceived as unconventional arrangements such as 'living apart together' (Duncan and Phillips 2010; Roseneil, Phillips, Duncan 2013). Plummer (2003) contends that in contemporary life we simultaneously inhabit traditional, modern and postmodern worlds. Therefore polarising notions of past and present are not necessarily helpful in understanding intimate lives. The single mothers discussed here are as likely to internalise hegemonic norms, aspire to traditional practices and be influenced by inter-generational understandings as to engage in intimate experiments and pioneer alternative forms of intimacy (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

Methodology and methods

2.1   The research entailed 24 interviews with heterosexual single mothers aged between 30 and 55 in the South-East of England in 2011 - 12. For the purposes of this study, I defined a single mother as someone who is not in a relationship with the father of her children and who identifies as a single mother. This relatively simple definition encompasses a complex range of intimate connections and caring arrangements. Incorporating an element of self-identification reflects the importance of researchers listening to the stories people tell, drawing on their own definitions and understandings, in recognition of the complexity of intimate lives (May 2004). Childcare was sometimes shared with the children's biological or step-father (although in one case there was an equal co-parenting arrangement in place) and some was occasionally shared with a current partner. However, participants saw themselves as single parents when they had primary responsibility for childcare, especially when not cohabiting or in an established relationship. One participant had recently moved in with a partner but identified as a single parent as she was the sole carer for her child. Participants became single mothers through relationship breakdown of varying kinds (none were single mothers by choice). Many reported that relationship inequalities contributed to the breakdown and eight disclosed physical and / or emotional abuse from the fathers of their children. Several had experienced abuse in subsequent relationships (it is estimated that single mothers are three times more likely than other women to have experienced domestic abuse[5]). However, fear of single motherhood made it difficult to leave even the most abusive relationships. This encompassed the fear of being alone; the consequences of taking the children away from their father; facing uncertain economic futures and the anticipation of stigma.

2.2   In terms of class, participants mainly self-identified as either working-class or middle-class, although some were uncomfortable about identifying with a particular class, feeling that such labels did not apply to them. Classed identities were complex within this sample which included women originally from middle-class backgrounds but *who* were now struggling financially, unemployed and living in social housing. Conversely, some participants originally from working-class backgrounds had been to university and were now employed in professional roles. The majority of participants, regardless of background, had experienced relative poverty at some point in their trajectory, particularly when transitioning to single motherhood.

2.3   The study specifically set out to examine the experiences of heterosexual women; usually deemed to be a 'normal,' taken-for-granted, unproblematic category (Jackson 2005; Hockey, Meah and Robinson 2010; Van Every 1996). The intention was to make this category visible, recognising it as an institution which contains its own hierarchies (Van Every 1996). Heterosexuality can entail the continued subordination of women, casting them in limited and restrictive gendered roles (Jackson 1999; Rich 1980; Van Every 1996).

2.4   However, as a category, heterosexuality is not clear-cut and contains much diversity of experience and

blurring of boundaries; some participants disclosed bisexual and same-sex sexual experiences in the course of the interviews and one, it transpired, now identified as gay although the majority of her intimate experiences had been lived out as a heterosexual woman. Further features of the sample are detailed in the table below.

Table 1.

Participant / time as single mother	Route to single motherhood	Age (or approximate)	Number and age of children	Occupation & Level of Education	Social background	Housing / Location	Relationship status
1 (10 yrs +)	Escape from domestic abuse	45	2 (teenager / under 25)	Full-time professional (Degree)	Working-class	Rural, renting	In a relationship - boyfriend
2 (5 – 10 yrs)	Abandoned during pregnancy	43	1 (9)	Unemployed, re-training (Professional)	Middle-class	Suburban, own house	Single (Occasional dating)
3 (1 – 5 yrs)	Divorce	50	3 (2 under 10, 1 teenager)	Unemployed, part-time volunteer (Vocational)	Working-class	Urban (gentrified inner-city), own house	In a relationship - boyfriend
4 (5 – 10 yrs)	Escape from domestic abuse	Late forties	2 (under 10), 2 estranged	Unemployed (Secondary)	Working-class	Urban, homeless	Single
5 (10 yrs +)	Divorce	55	1 (under 16)	Full-time employed (Unknown)	Working-class	Unknown	Single
6 (5 – 10 yrs)	Domestic violence, separation and bereavement	Mid-forties	2 (under 10)	Unemployed, part-time volunteer (Secondary)	Working-class	Urban, renting	Dating
7 (under 1 yr)	Escape from domestic abuse, divorce	34	3 (under 10)	Unemployed (Professional)	N/A	Urban (Gentrified inner-city) renting	Single
8 (5 – 10 yrs)	Divorce	Late forties	5 (between 9 and 30)	Unemployed (Vocational)	Working-class	Urban, social housing	Dating
9 (0 – 5 yrs)	Divorce	Early forties	2 (1 under 16, 1 under 20)	Part-time professional	N/A	Suburban, own house	In a relationship
10 (5 – 10 yrs)	Relationship breakdown	31	1 (under 10)	Unemployed, in part-time postgraduate study	N/A	Urban, renting	Single
11 (5 – 10 yrs)	Relationship breakdown	33	1 (under 10)	Full-time employed (Secondary)	N/A	Urban, social housing	Single
12 (5 – 10 yrs)	Divorce	50	3 (between 10 and 22)	Full-time professional (Postgraduate)	Working-class	Suburban, own house	Dating
13 (0 – 5 yrs)	Separation	33	2 (under 16)	Full-time professional	Middle-class	Rural, own house	Single
14 (5 – 10 yrs)	Divorce	37	1 (under 10)	Full-time employed (Degree)	N/A	Suburban, renting	In a relationship – LAT partner
15 (10 yrs +)	Abandoned during pregnancy	42	1 (under 16)	Full-time professional	Middle-class	Suburban, own house	Dating

16 (0 – 5 yrs)	Separation	49	1 (under 16)	Full-time employed (Unknown)	N/A	Urban, renting	Single
17 (0 – 5 yrs)	Unplanned pregnancy	49	1 (under 10)	Unemployed (Professional)	Middle-class	Suburban, renting	Dating
18 (0 – 5 yrs)	Relationship breakdown	42	2 (under 10)	Full-time employed (Degree)	Middle-class	Suburban, renting	Single
19 0 – 5 yrs)	Relationship breakdown	39	2 (under 12)	Full-time professional	N/A	Suburban, renting	Dating
20 (5 – 10 yrs)	Divorce	42	1 (under 16)	Part-time professional	Middle-class	Urban, own house	Dating
21 (5 – 10 yrs)	Relationship breakdown	33	1 (under 10)	Part-time professional	N/A	Unknown	In a relationship – cohabiting
22 (0 – 5 yrs)	Abandonment	39	2 (under 6)	Unemployed (Unknown)	N/A	Urban, social housing	Single
23 (0 – 5 yrs)	Illness, Divorce	Mid-forties	2 (under 12)	Unemployed (Degree)	Middle-class	Urban, social housing	Single
24 (10 yrs +)	Divorce	55	2 (under 25)	Full-time employed (Unknown)	N/A	Suburban, renting	In a relationship - boyfriend

2.5 A variety of strategies were employed to recruit research participants: An invitation was posted on a local lone parent online network; the research was introduced on a locally run course for unemployed lone parents; flyers were distributed at local schools, community and children's centres in a variety of settings and a snowballing technique (Bryman 2012) was employed to recruit further participants. The most successful techniques were those when participants were approached face to face, possibly due to the sensitive nature of the topic area. The fact that I was an 'insider', also being a single mother, helped to break down initial barriers.

2.6 Feminist researchers have long employed narrative methods, beginning with the conviction that *'women's experiences were inherently valuable and needed to be recorded* (Berger, Gluck and Patai 1991, p. 1). Single mothers in particular are marginalised in that there are few forums in the UK through which their experiences can be shared, recorded and heard[6]. The narrative approach enabled explorations of processes of transition for single mothers who have experienced relationship breakdown and/or divorce and some of whom are coping with the 'after effects' of living with domestic abuse. As Smart and Neale's study of divorced women (1999) suggests, they may well be engaged in rediscovering a sense of selfhood. Single motherhood is likely to be experienced as a temporary rupture in the life course, providing a moment to re-evaluate intimacy - a process ideally captured through narrative. It is recognised that the narratives discussed here are unlikely to be purely objective and based on verifiable fact. However the overarching purpose of this study was not to gain a reliable, accurate historical account or objective truth but rather to capture particular perspectives at a particular moment in time. Plummer (2001) likewise sees narratives as flow of actions between tellers, coaxers, texts, readers and contexts than stories that carry a set of 'facts'. Rather, they give profound insights into how single mothers understand, experience and negotiate intimacies.

2.7 Ethical approval was granted from the University of Sussex and informed consent sought from participants. Interviews included an introductory section where information about the research and definitions were introduced and some background questions were asked; an unstructured narrative section; a follow-up section whereby participants were invited to reflect or enlarge on aspects of their narratives prompted by the researcher and a semi-structured section. Interviews usually took place within participants' homes, were between one and three hours long, audio-recorded and transcribed.

2.8 I employed a multi-layered approach to data analysis (guided by Riessman 1993), analysing the data at structural, thematic and discursive levels. This enabled the approach of seeking an in-depth understanding of the intimate lives and perceptions of single mothers. The first stage involved looking at the overall structure of the narratives and observing whether they drew on specific, recognisable genres and to what extent they shared common features. The second stage identified broad common themes within and across the narratives as a whole. This stage incorporated content analysis, drawing out themes from narrative and semi-structured data

responses. The final stage entailed attending to the discursive resources participants drew on in shaping their narratives. I now move on to discussing research findings.

Perceptions of equality in intimate relationships

3.1 Many participants grew up anticipating greater gender equality in intimate relationships than their parents. However, while most had expected to participate in employment, they perceived ongoing social expectations that they would take primary responsibility for domestic life (Fineman 2004; Jamieson 1998). Becoming a single mother was not part of any of the participants' life plans, rather the majority grew up anticipating normative couple-centred family life. While Giddens (1992) argued that intimate relationships have become more transient in a new democratic order defined by increased choices, participants tended to aspire towards permanence and commitment. Narratives emphasised that this path was not chosen and they would have ideally preferred to stay with the father of their child(ren). It should be noted that this may be in part due to widespread negative depictions of single mothers as irresponsible and threatening to normative values (Klett-Davies 2007; Tyler 2008).

3.2 The process of becoming a single mother was narrated as challenging at economic and emotional levels, not least because it was not the intimate life participants had anticipated. Nevertheless, where they had instigated the separation they were convinced that it was the right decision. Indeed they often felt that they had no choice and it was necessary for their and their children's safety and welfare to leave abusive relationships. As one participant, Chloe, a 34 year-old, unemployed, ex-professional mother of three stated, *'I don't really feel that I chose this – I wanted to have a happy ever after life… I didn't plan to be on my own… it's not as if I didn't try to make it work'.* While the 'transformation of intimacy' thesis (Giddens 1992) suggested that people would move on from relationships more easily, participants wanted security, frequently stating that they had intended their relationship with the father of their children to last. Such terms as 'happy ever after' suggests that participants were also influenced by romantic ideals of finding and staying with the right partner (Evans 2003; Kaufman 2008).

3.3 Having grown up with expectations of gender equality, participants often experienced disappointment when this did not manifest itself in reality. 'Disappointment', as experienced within heterosexual intimate lives, was also observed by Hockey, Meah and Robinson (2010). This could be linked to highly romanticised expectations of relationships but in this research it was more explicitly related to hopes of an equal division of domestic labour. Ideal partners were cast in the egalitarian model as someone who respects women and does not expect them to do the majority of domestic chores. However, suitable male partners were often perceived to be in short supply, in terms of both stability and equality, and so these ideal relationship types were not necessarily available. Yet for some, gender equality remained a possibility for future relationships, despite observations of continuing inequalities:

> *'There's still a lot of people who still have very archaic views of relationships as you can tell by the numbers of domestic violence that still goes on but… I think that it is possible to have the kind of relationship that I want which is, you know, two individuals who care about each other and want to be together… but you're still your own person – it's not a relationship where you're the woman, you're the man; you've got to fit in this role, he's got to fit in that role… you know we're just two people who want to be together.'* (Emma, aged 45, full-time employed working-class mother of two)

3.4 Experiences of gendered inequalities within intimate relationships were evident from depictions of previous relationships. Karen, for example, described how she and her husband had an ongoing dispute about whether she could go back to work as he was attached to his 'breadwinner' role and saw providing for his family as a source of pride. Karen was unemployed, the mother of five children and from a working class background. For her, single motherhood was initially experienced as emancipatory, meaning she was able to engage in paid work. As with many participants, she had been exposed to controlling behaviour from her partner, linked to unequal gendered power dynamics and she observed that such inequalities are widespread: *'As we got divorced, that was it for me, I was straight out the door working and working really hard and I love the independence, I think it's great but there's still a lot of men out there who don't want to see women working.'*

3.5 Controlling behaviour by male partners took a more extreme form in cases of domestic abuse, experienced by a third of participants. Participants tended to underplay some of these painful experiences, possibly due to the sense of shame associated with being a victim (as with Smart's participants, 2000), alongside not wanting to relive traumatic episodes. They tended rather to speak of the effects of the abuse. The link with male power and desire to control women and 'keep them in their places' recognised as a key aspect of male to female violence[7] was apparent. Anita described how her every move in the home was subject to control. She focussed on these details rather than describe the 'punching and fighting', saying she would rather describe the 'bits in-between'. The sense of male ownership of Anita and 'his children' also comes across strongly here: *'I don't know… He used to give me the menu on Monday and I used to have to cook the menu and it used to have to be ready at a certain time. I was never allowed to do anything. As long as his house was spotless and his children were spotless. So all his towels were straight and that's how he lived and that was it… apparently I used to cut cabbage wrong'* (Anita, late forties, mother of two, working-class, homeless and unemployed).

Gendered parenting inequalities

4.1 Inequalities most often emerged in the assumption of gendered roles in terms of parenting. Some

participants described how they felt like single mothers prior to separation, due to unequal caring responsibilities. Fathers' lack of support was a source of (often unexpected) disappointment. While participants grew up in a culture where equality was advocated and they expected to develop careers, they suggested that men did not seem to hold a corresponding expectation that they would play an equal role in parenting (Fineman 2004; Jamieson 1998; Lewis 2001). Jamieson (1998) observes that rigid gendered roles create tension and destabilise relationships - thereby contributing to relationship breakdown - and this was borne out in these narratives which are indicative of deep-rooted gendered expectations regarding parenting.

4.2   Susan (55, full- employed working-class mother of one) explained how, even though her husband seemed to be good with children prior to becoming a father, he was unwilling to play an active role in the care of his child. While on the birth of their child, she realized her whole life would change and the child's needs would come first, there was not an equivalent transformation in her husband who continued as before, expecting his needs to take precedence. The anticipated experience of being in a family unit and a sense of 'togetherness' with shared parental responsibilities did not come to fruition. Unequal parenting thereby impacted negatively on the closeness and sharing aspect of the relationship, often understood as a central feature of contemporary intimacy (Jamieson 1998): *'I think I became a single parent as soon as she was born actually. I don't think her dad ever really engaged with the idea of parenthood – which surprised me… I really expected him to be a great dad and he really wasn't… He seemed to think that his life could just carry on like before… It was always me who was feeding her, getting her up and dressed, planning things for her to do in the day and he wasn't part of the family.'*

4.3   The extent to which the gendered division of labour was perceived by participants to have changed over the past generation therefore remained s tenuous due to ongoing cultural expectation that childcare is ultimately the responsibility of women. As suggested here by Susan, this is borne out in the fact that the majority (over 90%) of lone parents are women[8]:

> *'Probably some people would say yes they have [an equal relationship] and well that's not my experience of being in a relationship… and it's not what you observe at the school gates is it really? I know male lone parents do exist but I think generally it's still women and that says something about the relationship that they've come out of and the expectation that they will be the main carer.'*

4.4   For women who grew up being career orientated it had been a difficult choice to stay at home with their children. Chloe described how full-time motherhood entailed being dependent on a partner who held the higher status of being the breadwinner. This impacted on gendered power dynamics, with the household income seen as 'his' because she was not deemed to be 'working'. Other participants experienced ongoing negative attitudes towards working mothers generally, underlining the complexity of socio-cultural influences and constraints. Jacquie (aged 43, full-time professional, middle-class mother of one), received expressions of pity from women in her social circle who were economically supported by their husbands to enable them to focus on caring for their children. This reflects the continued idealisation of motherhood and expectations that it should be labour intensive (Hays 1996). Jacquie encapsulates current pressures on women to work but retain primary responsibility for childcare and domesticity whether they are in a partnership or not (hence single mothers are unlikely to invoke sympathy as they are simply carrying out the roles expected of all women): '*The female is still likely to be doing the cooking, the washing, the ironing, the cleaning and everything else that needs to be done… you may have a man who's more willing to take on more roles than he used to but the expectation is that you'll just get on and deal with this – deal with work and school and the house and do it yourself*.'

4.5   Biological fathers tended to be narrated as peripheral to single mothers' lives and associated with their past. Father-child relations were often carefully managed, as was the relationship with subsequent ex-partners. This echoes Smart and Neale (1999) who found mothers tended to be still overwhelmingly responsible for childcare and the management of relationships after divorce, again reflecting wider gendered inequalities. In my research, several fathers looked after their children on a regular or occasional basis, which meant participants had some freedom and opportunities to pursue other relationships. Where fathers were absent or non-contributing (as was commonly the case) the willingness to manage the relationship could subside. Elizabeth (49, an unemployed, middle-class mother of one) eventually made the decision to withdraw from this role, leaving the responsibility for the relationship to the father:

> *'Now it's got to the stage where I've said, 'so far I've done all the running, if you want to continue to see your son you've got to make the effort to come over and see him' because I'm not even working at the moment – and you know he's never contributed a penny to his upkeep – so I'm going to put the ball in his court, he knows how to get in contact with him…'*

4.6   In the majority of cases, there was an absence of practical, emotional and material support from fathers[9] with participants solely responsible for childcare, although one participant described a co-parenting arrangement which worked well. Accounts highlighted everyday survival which often took precedence over intimacies outside the immediate family unit, especially in the earlier phases of single motherhood due to coping with poverty, unemployment and insecure housing while caring for young children. A lack of time and financial resources for those participants operating in more challenging circumstances, without access to computers, childcare or social support, found they were not in a position to consider dating or re-partnering.

Perceptions of 'traditional' gender roles

5.1 While the possibility of more equal relationships was generally viewed positively, for some the priority was to achieve stability which is unsurprising given such high levels of financial and emotional vulnerability (Smart 2000). Alongside disappointment about a lack of equality were examples of idealisation of perceived traditional gendered roles, including suggestions that families with clear-cut gender roles worked better. Some participants tended to look nostalgically to previous generations, with their perceived stable, enduring relationships (Gross 2005; Jamieson 1998; Kaufman 2008). For example, one participant discussed how family life did not work as well without the mother as the '*solid person in the centre of the family*'while another described a couple she knew who retained rigid gender roles with the man making all the decisions and suggested that this was to best way to make a relationship last.

5.2 Parents and grandparents retained an important influence in participants' lives. Certain values about relationships and family life, such as the importance of marriage, continued to be transmitted inter-generationally (Duncan 2011a and b; Gross 2005). Some participants felt they were perceived negatively by their families and at times internalized suggestions that they should ideally re-partner and marry (Wallbank 2001). There was a suggestion from Karen, for example, that in contemporary life people are too quick to get married and divorced whereas in the past once married you 'stuck with it'. She attributed this to the proliferation of choice about relationships, echoing more pessimistic theses regarding the disposability of contemporary relationships (Bauman 2003). Karen reflected on being labelled the *black sheep of the family*', questioning her own choices about not 'settling down' and committing herself to a life-long marriage at a young age like her relatives. Inter-generational ideas shaped ideas of how relationships 'should' be and the roles men and women 'should' play, influencing aspirations and choices around intimacy.

5.3 Some participants considered that a primary purpose of re-partnering was to enhance their children's upbringing by re-introducing a father figure, viewed as an authority figure. It was therefore a source of frustration where there were barriers to this. Disadvantages of parenting alone, without a father figure, were frequently cited and included dealing with the challenges of disciplining children as well as coping with financial difficulties; having to make decisions alone and, for some, social isolation. Where a father figure was sought, the emphasis was primarily a good male role model and more discipline for their children as opposed to a 'breadwinner'. While some idealisation of gendered 'breadwinner / homemaker' roles (Lewis 2001) was apparent, conversely, single parenthood was seen as an advantageous in that one parent could make decisions for their family. Participants valued the freedom this afforded, alongside the time they could devote to caring for and building strong relationships with their children. In resistance to normative expectations they thereby actively defended their choices and circumstances and highlighted the positive aspects of single motherhood.

Future aspirations for intimacy

6.1 Participants were operating within very different contexts and at different points in their trajectories. The possibility of forming new intimate relationships remained uncertain for many participants due to more pressing needs for survival, especially pertinent for those who had recently left relationships. Decisions to leave difficult relationships were not regretted, despite the harsh personal and material consequences which ensued. However, transitioning to single motherhood was experienced as emancipatory for some on a personal (if not economic) level and, as a result, they were able to successfully care for children and begin to meet their own needs. Nevertheless, the majority of participants anticipated that they would repartner in the future. As previously touched on, there could be barriers to this for those with few resources – in particular for those caring for young children, unemployed and isolated with few opportunities to socialise. Several were ambivalent about the prospect of re-partnering due to negative experiences of relationships or perceptions about a lack of suitable partners.

6.2 Negative depictions of single mothers, based on gendered assumptions about appropriate sexual and procreative behaviour, placed further complexity on possibilities for developing intimate relationships. Participants were frequently concerned about how others judged them for their sexual behaviour, relationship status and respectability (Skeggs 1997). Participants were sensitive to media stereotypes of single motherhood which they felt represented them in turn as lazy, manipulative and promiscuous (Carabine 2001; Evans and Thane 2012; Land and Lewis 1998; Skeggs 1997; Smart 1992; Tyler 2008). At times such attitudes carried over into intimate relationships with men. Natasha (aged 39, a full-time professional mother of two) described an encounter where her date suggested that having children by different fathers made her less viable as a romantic prospect. This left her feeling she was 'on trial', judged about her sexual behaviour. Natasha responded to such assumptions by emphasising that her choice would have been to have a stable, married couple-centred family life. Participants often underlined conventional, heteronormative positions in relation to intimacy, stressing that they ideally wanted a committed partnership: '*Yes I've got two children with two different men but they were 10 years apart, they were both with men I lived with, the first of whom I planned to marry, the second with whom I was planning to have a family and stay together forever*'.

6.3 Re-partnering entailed carefully managed gradual familiarization. It was essential that anyone introduced to children did not pose a physical, sexual or emotional threat. Children's welfare and safety was paramount in terms of prospective partners, reflecting a heightened awareness of the potential threat from men towards women and children (Walklate 2004). This was especially pronounced for participants who had experienced physical violence in previous relationships. Gendered roles in relation to childcare was an extremely complex

area for negotiation. While some felt strongly that children should have a father figure, prospective partners did not always wish to take on this role or found it challenging. There were additional tensions reported between romantic / sexual partners and children.

6.4   Caitlyn, a 33 year-old, full-time employed middle-class mother of one, had recently moved in with her partner but still felt like a single mother as it was difficult establishing clear roles in terms of parenting responsibilities. She recounted her experience of managing the relationship between her child and new partner which was fraught with difficulty. There were layers of complexity due to him resenting her child and blaming her for having a child with an unsuitable partner at a young age. While the majority of single mothers do re-partner, creating blended or step-families is unlikely to be a straightforward process (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003). New partners, however, did not necessarily have to take on a parenting role. Sandra (aged 50, a working-class volunteer and mother of two) indicated the importance of partners understanding children's needs but she appreciated her boyfriend's valuing her ability to parent alone. Rather than positioned as prospective 'father figure' he was a friend of the family who did not interfere with parenting. It was important to Sandra to retain autonomy as a parent and so maintaining clear roles and boundaries in her intimate life was essential.

6.5   A positive version of single motherhood emerged as a valid alternative to unequal relationships for some participants. Wallbank (2001) likewise highlighted the possibility of single mothers constructing alternative, positive identities. Participants often experienced newfound independence, being able to make decisions and have control over their resources to benefit themselves and their children. Remaining single was considered as one possible long-term option for several participants. Those who sought relationships based on equality found it difficult to locate a suitable partner. Susan had a strong sense of wanting an equal relationship but felt that this was rare, based on her experience and observations of others. She understood that she would be financially better off with a partner and occasionally felt lonely but did not see these as good enough reasons to re-partner. As her child grew older and she had more freedom and time, her priorities were not re-partnering but focusing on creative pursuits. She compared herself now to her younger self who sought long-term relationships because '*that's what you were supposed to do, that's what was normal*' Now at 55, she felt she had 'been there, done that' and was ready to prioritise her own needs. Echoing other participants, her perception of male partners was that they would need looking after. As a woman, much of her life had been spent in the service of others - in relationships, her marriage, caring for her child and in the workplace – so the prospect of becoming a caregiver again did not appeal.

6.6   Budgeon's (2008) research similarly suggested a potentially positive outlook for single women; some participants in her research constructed singleness as a positive identity, even though they were at variance with dominant social expectations. While Budgeon's participants, as with mine, highlighted advantages of being single, most did not rule out (re)partnering in the future. Yet, the experience of being single and the questioning it entailed opened up the possibility of managing intimate lives outside heteronormative practices in the future – for example, refusing cohabitation, living apart together, focussing on ties with friends and choosing emotional but not sexual fidelity (Budgeon 2008) and this was reflected within my research. There were moments of resistance to conventional heteronormativity including questioning of the role of 'wife' and primacy of 'the couple'. Several participants chose what they perceived as less conventional way of doing intimacy – such as 'living apart together' (Duncan and Phillips 2010), refusing co-habitation and marriage. In some cases, experimentation was possible, moving away from what they previously understood as 'normal' towards embracing new ways of doing intimacy or remaining 'happily single'.

6.7   Nevertheless, there were still instances within the same narratives where participants measured themselves negatively against perceived ideals of being part of a heteronormative couple-centred family. This was manifested in comparisons between their situation and what they considered to be 'normal,' with some lamenting the absence of a father figure in their family unit. Several still found it hard to see themselves as being in a 'proper family'. Deciding to remain single, despite the perceived benefits, was perceived as culturally contentious due to heteronormative ideals of coupledom. As Natasha stated, '*I still think we live in a world where married or otherwise, the relationship dominates – so that as a single women or a single mother, you get excluded*' while another participant stated that *marriage is still the way to go*. While single parent families are now a significant family type in the UK[10], these narratives suggest that single motherhood is not yet accepted as normative. Straying from conventional modes of intimacy required justification to friends and family; several felt they were judged as morally defective for not being married. As previously touched on, participants stressed in their narratives that their situation was not chosen. Ultimately, heteronormativity and its associated gendered assumptions retained a regulatory force, shaping participants' understandings of their intimate lives and delineating what is considered acceptable for women. The process of choice-making about intimacy was extremely complex and shaped by cultural, emotional, experiential and material circumstances.

Conclusions

7.1   Participants' accounts conveyed ambivalence around the notion of equality, with tensions between a desire for equality and longing for the perceived certainties of clearly defined gender roles. Wider cultural narratives of romantic coupledom and conventional nuclear families were invoked as a measure against which other relationship forms were judged. The break from an anticipated intimate life often came as a shock, undermining culturally informed expectations of romantic partnership and ideal family life. Yet, while participants viewed couple relationships as ideal and sometimes measured themselves negatively against this, some did

begin to find new ways of 'doing intimacy' or resisting heteronormative ideals of romantic coupledom. In many cases, however, there was a complex range of barriers to developing intimacies, not least some of the profound gender inequalities previously experienced. Expectations that women are ultimately responsible for childcare was contrasted with the ability for men to choose their level of involvement. Participants reported difficult experiences of relationships, including abuse and traumatic relationship breakdown. Their immediate priorities on becoming single mothers were protecting their children, basic economic and emotional survival. In the current challenging economic context of austerity, it is likely that single mothers will continue to feel stigmatised and marginalised and have even less access to economic and social resources[11]. This may in turn impact on their ability to make choices about intimate lives. Yet, given the challenging and unequal nature of some heterosexual relationships, for some participants the transition into single motherhood was ultimately an emancipatory experience, enabling them to meet their own needs and provide positive role models.

7.2   Narrative telling provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on their intimate trajectories, consider their present and project towards future possibilities for intimacy. They explored their personal trajectories in the light of shifting historical and cultural contexts, spanning time, place and generations. There was ambivalence within and between these accounts, with both 'traditional' and more contemporary formulations of intimacy co-existing and often in conversation with each other. Narratives moved through a range of often contradictory positions, suggesting that participants were drawing on range of cultural, discursive resources (Duncan 2011) in navigating and making sense of their intimate lives. Participants held shifting positions, moving between heteronormative, romantic couple-centred ideals, 'traditional' versus egalitarian gender roles and experimentation - in some cases seemingly conflicting positions were held simultaneously. A perceived de-stabilising of gender roles brought possibilities for more equal relating into view for some participants, in line with detraditionalization theories (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Newfound independence and the seeming increase in choices around intimacy are perceived as emancipatory for some. However, actual experiences of intimacy for many participants indicated rather a lack of choice about available relationships and suitable male partners, in terms of both sharing equally in domestic / childcare responsibilities and providing stable 'father figures'. This suggests that the narrative of democratisation and gender equality within intimate relationships in contemporary society, while powerful, is not unproblematically reflective of lived experiences. These narratives evidenced continued gendered inequalities alongside increasingly complex paths to negotiate when making choices about intimate relationships.

Notes

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

2   42% of children in single parent families live in relative poverty, around twice the risk of relative poverty faced by children in couple families (23%): ONS (2014) Families and households, 2014.

3   It is estimated that one in four women in the UK experience domestic violence and this is worse than that experienced by men in terms of frequency, severity and repetition: Walby, S. and Allen, J. (2004) Domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey (London: Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate)

4   It should be noted that evidence suggests there marital status / family structure have no direct negative impacts on children's cognitive or emotional outcomes:

   1. Crawford, C. et al (2013) Cohabitation, marriage, relationship stability and child outcomes: Final report. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.
   2. Harkness, S. (2014) 'Time to shift the policy spotlight off single parents'. Society Central.
   3. Rabindrakumar, S. (2015) Challenging the costs of relationship breakdown. London: Gingerbread.

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

6   Lone parent charity Gingerbread is one notable exception: http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/

7   http://www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic-violence-articles.asp?section=00010001002200410001&itemid=1275&itemTitle=What+is+the+cause+of+domestic+violence(Accessed March 2014).

8   Office for National Statistic (2014) Families and Households, Table 1.

9   This is corroborated by evidence which suggests that less than half (38%) of lone parents receive child maintenance: Maplethorpe, N. et al (2010) Families with children in Britain: Findings from the 2008 Families and

Children Study (FACS). London: DWP.

10 There are approximately 2 million single parents, making up a quarter of families with dependent children in the UK, ONS (2014), Families and Households 2014.

11 (i) Browne, J. and Elming, W. (2015) The effect of the coalition's tax and benefit changes on household incomes and work incentives. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.
(ii) De Agostini, P., et al (2014) Were we really all in it together? The distributional effects of the UK coalition government's tax-benefit policy changes. London: Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics.

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