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**LONE MOTHERS' EXPERIENCES OF STIGMA:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

**NICOLA JANE CARROLL**

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Huddersfield

July 2017

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## **Abstract**

There are two million single parents in the UK, more than nine out of ten of whom are mothers. Despite greater family fluidity and diversity, lone mothers remain materially disadvantaged and subject to derogatory stereotyping.

Media representations, public policy and existing research have tended to focus on young mothers or lone mothers in deprived areas. This study therefore responds to a gap in knowledge by taking a comparative approach in investigating subjective experiences of stigma among lone mothers in a more diverse range of circumstances. This thesis documents qualitative research involving 26 lone mothers in two locations in the North of England, which have contrasting socio-economic profiles. It considers the relative significance of agential and structural factors, particularly social class, in their subjective perceptions of, and responses to, stigma.

Theoretically, this study draws on feminist critiques of normative family and citizenship models, a critical realist perspective on agency/structure interplay and a feminist Bourdieusian approach to class analysis. These theoretical influences are brought together in a bespoke conceptual framework that seeks to explore stigmatisation of lone motherhood in terms of women's subjective mediation of gendered and classed de-legitimation. This thesis thus introduces the notion of 'subjective social legitimacy' (SSL) as an analytical tool. Importantly, SSL aims to examine women's accounts in a holistic way that recognises degrees of stigma, rather than assuming or reinforcing stigma.

Analysis of data from semi-structured interviews revealed the principal factors affecting women's SSL to be: their age; their personal relationship history; whether they were employed or on benefits; reproductive norms in their local area; their level of extended family support; and social connections with people in the 'same situation'. Some women were positioned more favourably than others to mitigate stigma through their access to cultural, economic and social capital.

The women's accounts demonstrate agential behaviour in negotiating stigma as well as responding to practical challenges. Analysis of case dynamics identified 'modes' of SSL among participants which could be deemed 'negative', 'positive', 'defensive', 'performative' or 'transformative'. Women in what might be objectively considered the most stigmatised situations did not automatically display 'negative' SSL. The theme of 'judgement' emerged inductively from interviews and using SSL helped understand women's agential response to stigma in terms of 'what matters' to them personally. This thesis includes case studies which illustrate how a process of 'judgement of judgement' can be pivotal to participants' rejection, resistance or absorption of stigma.

This research offers an empirical contribution to knowledge through its comparative approach involving mothers in a deprived and a more affluent location; a conceptual contribution through development of SSL; and a methodological contribution through exposition of evaluative judgement as a mechanism in agential mediation of stigma.

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Finally, and most importantly, my sincere gratitude to all the women who took part in this research and shared their stories so generously.

## Glossary of key terms and abbreviations

**Lone mothers** are officially defined as mothers who are 'living with their children as a household without a partner' (ONS, 2010). This study involves mothers whose child or children lived with them all or most of the time, who had primary responsibility for the physical and emotional welfare of those children, who were aged under 16.

**Personal Emergent Properties (PEPs)** are agential powers including self-consciousness, reflection, plans, ambitions and pursuit of interests, which 'ultimately enable people to reflex upon their social context and act reflexively towards it' (Archer, 2000: 308).

**Structural Emergent Properties (SEPs)** include social systems, institutions and roles and are related to material resources and their distribution. They are acquired involuntarily and include class, ethnicity, privilege/underprivileged, power/powerless, discrimination/life chances, propertied/propertyless (Archer, 2000: 216-218).

**Cultural Emergent Properties (CEPs)** include ideas, language, theories, values, beliefs, norms, which derive from past chains or interaction and can, 'exercise causal efficacy over the present generation' and be either reproduced or transformed (Archer, 2000: 216-218).

**Subjective Social Legitimacy (SSL)** has been developed as a means of analysing lone mothers' experiences in a holistic way that does not assume they feel stigmatised. The term SSL is introduced for the purposes of this research with reference to consideration of 'social legitimacy' as a general social process by Johnson et al. (2006). It refers to a sense of validity, propriety and self-worth and the subjective perception and agential mediation of a socially de-legitimated identity.

**Capitals** are proposed by Bourdieu (1989) as a multi-faceted form of class analysis. Skeggs offers definitions of economic, social and cultural capital. She writes that: economic capital 'includes income, wealth, financial inheritances and monetary assets'; cultural capital can be 'dispositions of the mind and the body...'cultural goods' or exist in an institutionalised state resulting from education and qualifications'; and social capital is 'resources based on connections and group membership...generated through relationships' (Skeggs, 1997: 8, citing Bourdieu, 1979; 1986; 1987; 1989).

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Introduction

There are some two million single parents in the UK, 42% of marriages end in divorce, 25% of children now grow up in one parent families and 91% of single parents are women (ONS, 2014; 2015). The increasing fluidity and diversity of contemporary family life is apparent in the prevalence of single parenthood, relationship breakdown and rise in step-parenting and same sex parenting (see, for example, Giddens, 1992; Smart and Neale, 1999; Morgan, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Smart, 2007). Yet, despite well recognised demographic, attitudinal and legal changes, a strong body of evidence indicates that lone mothers remain socially and economically disadvantaged (see, for example, Evans and Thane, 2012; Millar and Ridge, 2013; Wenham, 2016). This thesis documents qualitative research comparing experiences of stigma among lone mothers in two locations in the North of England, which further supports that evidence. In taking a comparative approach to explore women's subjective experiences, it extends existing understandings of lone motherhood and stigma by providing analysis of qualitative accounts of mothers in a variety of circumstances living in areas with contrasting socio-economic profiles. As background to the discussion and empirical findings presented in the chapters that follow, this introductory chapter sets out the aims of the research and positions it within the context of prevailing policy and discourse and sociological debates. It then discusses the comparative approach taken, the terminology used and outlines the thesis structure.

### Background and aims

The initial spark of interest in the topic that eventually became four years of postgraduate study arose from a late-night conversation with an old friend. My friend compared how her grandmother had been consigned to a mental institution as a consequence of her 'out of wedlock' pregnancy in the 1930s and her mother was labelled a 'bastard' and brought up in a children's home, whilst she, as a mother who had never married, owned her own home and had recently been made head of department at a prestigious Church of England school for girls. This illustration of social change resonated with me profoundly as the product of three generations of women who brought up children without fathers; my great-grandmother was an 'unfortunate' widow in the inter-war period, my grandmother a 'disgraced unmarried mother' in the 1950s and my mother an 'impoverished' 1970s

divorcee. Social historians Evans and Thane's (2012) summation of shifts in prevailing attitudes over the past century raises important questions as to the relationship between attitudes *to* and subjective experiences *of* lone mothers in the contemporary context, which this study seeks to address:

Before 1918 they were thought of as sinners; after each war as unfortunates; in the 1950s as psychologically damaged; by the 1960s as liberated; and as objects of compassion in the 1970s. They were increasingly stigmatised in the 1980s and early 1990s, but their experience as one of the poorest sections of British society has remained much the same...Attitudes to lone mothers are more relaxed than in the past...but intense divisions and ambivalences continue, as they always have, as does the poverty of too many lone mothers and their children, with public policy always haunted by the fear of encouraging the 'sinner' or the 'scrounger' (Evans and Thane, 2012: 27).

Whether lone motherhood is commonly regarded and subjectively experienced as a 'personal trouble', or 'public issue' (Mills, 2000 [1959]), or indeed affirmed as a progressive choice (Hertz, 2005; Russell, 2015), thus says a great deal about social relations at a particular time. This research took place against the backdrop of a 'political cultural economy' (Jessop, 2010) characterised by welfare reform, fiscal austerity, heightened benefits stigma and proliferation of 'poverty porn' television, which commonly equates single parenthood with benefit dependency (see, for example, Taylor-Gooby, 2013; Jensen and Tyler, 2015). Within this context, three out of four respondents in a poll by single parents' organisation Gingerbread (2014) said they experienced stigma and that this had increased in the previous two years.

The proportion of lone parent families grew by almost 12% between 2004 and 2014, but married couple families remain the most common family type in the UK (ONS, 2015). The British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA, 2007) found 39% of the public agreed that one parent can bring up a child as well as two in 2006, which was only a slight increase over a decade, but the proportion had risen to 49% according to the most recent data on the topic (BSA, 2012).<sup>1</sup> According to Pulkingham et al., lone motherhood may have, 'greater cultural legitimacy than previously', but this 'does not play out evenly...across the economic spectrum' (2010: 284). From personal 'nosiness' initially, I began paying more attention to stories of mothers I know who are all 'single' but in vastly different situations; friends who are happily un-partnered and pursuing 'alternative lifestyles' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999); those who are in demanding jobs and 'co-parenting' with ex-husbands (Smart and Neal, 1999); and my cousin with five children who lives on benefits in the

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<sup>1</sup> British Social Attitudes Surveys are conducted annually by NatCen but do not necessarily ask the same questions every year, which means that 2012 is the most recent year for comparative data on this subject.

proverbial council house in a town deemed 'single mother central' by the *Daily Mail* newspaper (Platell, 2010).

The voices of lone mothers themselves have been conspicuously absent from policy debates and media representations (McDermott and Graham, 2005; Clavering, 2010). Whereas young, unemployed, working class lone mothers in poor areas are commonly subjectivised as 'pramfaced', 'chav mums' bringing up 'benefit broods' (Tyler, 2008; Jensen and Tyler, 2015), those who are older, divorced, employed or living in more prosperous locations seem absent from popular discourse, which is arguably because they are not regarded as a 'problem' for the taxpayer (Reekie, 1998). This research therefore aims to bring an identity that is externally 'conferred' and historically stigmatised 'alive from the inside' (Lawler, 2004; May, 2006). It also aims to explore the relationship between perspectives on stigma and financial, personal and social positions occupied by women from different social backgrounds in different spatial settings. In short, in seeking to investigate common ground and dissimilarities, this study attempts to begin to unravel 'what makes a difference' in mitigating or exacerbating lone mothers' sense of stigma.

The topic pursued in this thesis thus arose originally from my personal background and interests as much as intellectual curiosity. The biases that inevitably follow have been recognised, as far as possible, and reflected upon through a stance of 'theorised subjectivity' (Letherby, 2013), as discussed in Chapter Four. Thanks to the privilege of being able to engage with lone motherhood literature and broader sociological debates in ways that are discussed throughout this thesis, the interest sparked from that initial conversation with my friend has been translated into practicable, pertinent, and hopefully useful, research.

Whilst there is a wealth of excellent material on lone motherhood, which was drawn on extensively in this research, academic studies have tended to focus on young mothers (e.g. Ponsford, 2011; Wenham, 2016) and those in deprived areas (e.g. Gillies, 2007). There is a relative paucity of research involving lone mothers from a wider range of backgrounds (with Duncan and Edwards (1999) and Klett-Davies (2007) among notable exceptions involving some middle class mothers). Research has also tended to concentrate on the practicalities of post-divorce parenting (e.g. Smart and Neale, 1999), lone mothers' intimate relationships (e.g. Morris, 2012) or the impact of government policies (e.g. Haux, 2012; Davies, 2012), rather than the affective impacts of stigmatisation. These are gaps in knowledge that the present study aims to fill.

### **Research questions**

In order to address the foregoing points, the research aims to respond to three central lines of enquiry, which were developed following a literature review and can be encapsulated as:

- To what extent are lone mothers in the contemporary British context still affected by stigmatisation?
- How do agential and structural factors affect lone mothers' experiences of stigma?
- What is the significance of social class and spatial location in lone mothers' experiences of stigma?

In addition to these substantive questions, a conceptual and methodological question arose from the need to investigate stigma without assuming women felt stigmatised or adding to stigmatisation. It was therefore a priority to develop an approach which could contribute towards more holistic understanding of lone mothers' subjective experiences in relation to the prevailing political, hegemonic and spatial context with which they interact.

### **Comparing experiences in two locations**

'Context is crucial in examining the phenomena of lone motherhood', according to Duncan and Edwards (1999: 63). Their work, along with McCormack (2004) and Klett-Davies (2007), shows the value of comparative analysis across locations for researching lone motherhood. The comparative nature of this study enabled effects of national policy and hegemonic discourse to be considered, while also exploring differential impacts of women's local neighbourhood settings and class positions. Referring to comparison as, 'the backbone of good sociological thinking', Becker believes that looking at situations that are alike in some way yet differ in others can be instrumental in creating theories by finding, 'the deeper processes these surface differences embody' (Becker 2010, cited Silverman, 2011: 62). Both the importance of place to social phenomena (Foucault, 1977; Sayer, 2000; May, 2011b; 2011c) and the relationship between class and place (Bourdieu, 1989; Sayer, 2000; Savage et al., 2005; Savage, 2015; McKenzie, 2015) are well recognised. Spatial comparison thus responds to the aim of gauging the significance of lone mothers' social class and location in their experiences of stigma. Semi-structured interviews were therefore carried out in two anonymised areas in the same region, which can be characterised as follows:

- The area referred to as 'Location A' comprises a large estate of predominantly local authority housing on the outskirts of a post-industrial city. It has a high proportion of lone mothers (ONS, 2012a), high unemployment and a series of other indicators of relative deprivation (DCLG, 2012).

- The area referred to as 'Location B' comprises a market town setting bordering on open countryside with good train connections. It has a low proportion of lone mothers (ONS, 2012a), is characterised by home ownership, low unemployment and a series of other indicators of relative affluence (DCLG, 2012).

## **Why 'lone mothers'?**

The women who took part in this study include: a 19 year-old mother with a ten-month old son who had been estranged from her family since becoming pregnant; a 25 year-old woman with a history of violent relationships, who had two young children and was six months pregnant; a 32 year-old who had decided to continue with an unplanned pregnancy and was about to return to her job in a bank after maternity leave; and a 44 year-old teacher with three sons, who was in the process of selling a large house after ending an abusive 20 year marriage (see *Tables 4 and 5: Participant Information*). These women could all be included in the taxonomic group of 'lone mothers', which is officially defined as 'mothers living with their children as a household without a partner' (ONS, 2010). Caution is necessary in placing people from wide-ranging backgrounds and dynamic situations in this totalising category however (May, 2013). This is especially true given that it is a stigmatised category with which women may be reluctant to identify (Crow and Hardey, 1992; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; May, 2010).

Issues of classification relate to questions of discourse, policy and subjective experience that are of central interest in this research. Changes in language reflect changes in attitudes to mothers without partners over time, as discussed in the next chapter. Research Diary notes reflect dilemmas over finding a term that was practicable yet sensitive when drafting participant recruitment materials.<sup>2</sup> This thesis refers to 'lone mothers', except when directly citing academic literature and policy documents or sources that specifically use other terms, such as 'single mothers', 'single parents' or 'lone parents'. It must be stressed, however, that this term was selected after careful consideration as the least objectionable rather than a wholly satisfactory option. While a household comprised of a mother and her child or children is a concrete type of household, lone motherhood has been subject to extensive social construction (Phoenix, 1996; May, 2010). 'Lone' is used here rather than 'single', because this is the most widely used term in academic literature and emphasises parenting alone rather than relationship status

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<sup>2</sup> The terms 'lone mother', 'women bringing up children alone', 'single mum' and 'female single parents' were tried with 'female single parents' proving the least stigmatising and most accurate term, but also being somewhat cumbersome.

(Marsden, 1969; Carabine, 1996). 'Never-married single mothers' were the target of early 1990s 'underclass' vilification (Roseneil and Mann, 1996; Phoenix, 1996; Taylor, 1998), and sources outlined above also indicate continued coupling of 'single mother' with popular press coverage and political rhetoric on deservingness.

Duncan and Edwards (1999) regard lone motherhood as a category but not a substantive group as it includes women of different ages, classes and ethnic backgrounds with different routes into sole parenting. They thus recommend that researchers open up this 'black box' category by studying the differences it contains (1999: 5). While strongly critiquing the lone mother construct, May stops short of suggesting the category should be abandoned altogether because its impact on women's lives makes it an important, 'theoretical and practical tool to counter social and material inequalities' (2010: 433). Making a useful distinction between 'categories of analysis' and 'categories of practice', she points out that despite lone mothers not being a homogenous or self-defined group, there are practical reasons for using a specific term for people facing similar inequalities. While taxonomic grouping was a starting point for this research, exploring women's own stances on terminology, as suggested by May (2010), helps understand distinctions between external categorisation and subjective identity (Taylor, 1998). To this end, asking participants what term they used to describe their family situation proved a useful starting point for the research in revealing how women identify or dis-identify with terminology and their agency in resisting negative associations (Kingfisher, 1996; McCormack, 2004; May, 2010).

### ***What about fathers?***

Debate about commonality and diversity between types of lone parents is a further aspect of the complexity of categorisation (Crow and Hardey, 1992). Parenting alone presents similar demands regardless of gender and there are strong arguments for using a unified category for purposes of promoting equality and lobbying politically (Marsden, 1969), particularly as differentiation can be viewed as 'variation on the deserving vs undeserving theme' (Crow and Hardey, 1992: 144). However, Rowlingson and McKay (2005) question placing lone parents from diverse situations and different genders and ethnicities in the same analytical category.

The focus on mothers in this study is not to discriminate against fathers; and lone fatherhood would indeed offer a rich vein of interest for future research. Notwithstanding strong arguments for adopting an umbrella term, there are a series of reasons this research concentrates on mothers as a sub-group of single parents. Firstly, more than nine out of ten lone parents are female (ONS, 2015) and lone mothers, rather than fathers, tend to be the subject of negative stereotypes. A quantitative study exploring attitudes to never-married custodial parents to determine 'does gender matter?' concluded that

assumptions surrounding lone fathers are much more positive than those about mothers (DeJean et al, 2012). Finally, while lone parents are economically disadvantaged regardless of gender, lone mothers suffer more material hardship on average (Kiernan et al., 1996; Rowlingson and McKay, 2005; Levitas et al., 2006; CPAG, 2010). The persistence of a gender pay gap has been well documented (e.g. Scott et al., 2010). Females still earn 18.1% less for equivalent work (ONS, 2016) and a 'motherhood pay penalty' has been identified (IPPR, 2016). Women also fare worse upon the breakdown of a relationship, with mothers from high-income families seeing especially large drops in living standards (Brewer and Nandi, 2014). Research in England, the USA and Europe (Berkman, et al., 2015) also found that women who have been lone mothers have poorer health in later life than comparative groups.

## **Thesis structure**

The structure of the thesis and contents of each chapter can be summarised as follows:

**Chapter Two** begins by charting the historical stigmatisation of lone motherhood, from ancient taboos surrounding 'illegitimacy' to its reprisal in 'underclass' debates of the early 1990s. Whilst Malinowski's (1930) 'principle of legitimacy' dominated 20th century family policy, critical perspectives on the origin of 'legitimate' reproduction (Engels, 1988; Foucault, 1979; Millett, 1990) are supported by historical and anthropological evidence (Blaikie 1995; Hendrix, 1996; Adair, 1996) rooting the stigmatisation of non-marital birth in material concerns and patriarchal social relations. Grounding the research within this historical overview helps determine the extent to which age-old stigmatisation of lone mothers is being reproduced or transformed in the contemporary context. It also identifies legitimacy as a conceptual resource, which links governmental regulation and legitimisation of power with de-legitimation of individuals whose behaviour does not conform with desirable norms.

The chapter then discusses the impact of well-documented shifts from social to 'worker' models of citizenship on lone mothers (e.g. Haux, 2012). Whilst 'legitimate' citizenship now rests upon performing a worker role, numerous sources demonstrate how lone mothers face disadvantage in the job market and struggle to balance employment with childcare (e.g. Wallbank, 1998). The final section sets out the socio-political backdrop for the study. Increased benefit conditionality under the Welfare Reform Act 2012 coupled with austerity measures have resulted in the deepest cuts to state provision in the post-war welfare period (Taylor-Gooby, 2014; Field and Forsay, 2016). Analysis demonstrates disproportionate effects of these measures on women and lone parents (e.g. WBG, 2013; IFS, 2016). Benefits stigma has increased in this context (Taylor-Gooby, 2014; Tyler, 2013)

and feminists illustrate how classed and gendered 'maternal TV' inculcates associations between lone motherhood and benefits stigma (Wood and Skeggs, 2011; Tyler, 2011).

**Chapter Three** describes how reviewing literature on lone motherhood and stigma shaped the empirical and conceptual approach to this research. It begins by establishing a need to consider both continuity *and* change in family life and the inter-play of agency *and* structure when exploring lone mothers' experiences. While 'individualisation' theorists (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 2002) have argued that intimate relationships have become 'democratised' and open to reflexive choice, significant challenges to this perspective are outlined (e.g. Jamieson, 1998; Duncan and Smith, 2006). Previous studies suggest that while lone mothers display considerable agency, further attention to the role of traditional structural constraints is also required (e.g. Mitchell and Green, 2002; Klett-Davies, 2007; May, 2006). The chapter explains why the theoretical perspective offered by Archer (2000; 2003; 2007; 2012; 2014), was therefore considered the most compatible with the research aims. In viewing time as a variable, Archer's 'morphogenic' model of social change (1996; 2012; 2014), helps consider the extent to which historical stigmatisation of lone mothers persists. Her separation of agency and structure, using 'personal', 'structural' and 'cultural' emergent properties (Archer 2000; 2003; 2007), is also valuable in analysing how their interaction influences mediation of stigma.

The second section of the chapter explains why spatial location and class became foci for this research and discusses the rationale for taking a feminist Bourdiesian approach to class analysis (Bourdieu, 1989; Skeggs, 1997; Gillies, 2007). The chapter concludes by bringing theoretical influences together to look at lone motherhood through the 'prism of legitimacy' conceptual framework. Although Goffman's (1990 [1963]) study of 'spoilt identity' retains its influence in contemporary accounts of lone motherhood and stigma (e.g. Yardley, 2008; Ellis-Sloan, 2014) and is drawn on extensively here, contemporary re-conceptualisations (Link and Phelan 2001; Scambler, 2009) help to address its limitations. The chapter describes how 'subjective social legitimacy' (henceforth 'SSL') was developed as an analytical tool to aid exploration of lone mothers' agential mediation of stigma in a holistic way that does not assume women feel stigmatised within the prevailing structural and cultural context. It draws on a review of 'social legitimacy' as a general social process by Johnson et al. (2006). They regard legitimacy as both a social construct comprised of desirable models and behaviours and a social process that helps create and maintain inequality. SSL refers to the women's subjective sense of validity, propriety and self-worth. It helps break down women's situations, their perceptions of stigmatisation of lone mothers generally, their sense of personal stigma and their agential responses to this. It can thus be viewed as agential mediation of a de-legitimated identity.

**Chapter Four** discusses the research methodology: from philosophical underpinnings; through to data collection and analysis methods; and researcher reflexivity. Archer's (2000; 2003; 2012) theorisation of agency/structure and social change is underpinned by a critical realist philosophical perspective, developed by Bhaskar (1975; 2015). This chapter begins by establishing compatibility between the research aims and key tenets of critical realism and describes how meta-theoretical assumptions were translated into practicable research methods. Bhaskar's 'depth ontology' separates ontological from epistemological issues, which enables realist ontology to be combined with constructionist epistemology, which facilitates exploration of the relationship between actors' perspectives and their situations (Maxwell, 2012: 20). The *critical* aspect also entails a commitment to critiquing social practices in order to 'reduce illusion' about those practices (Sayer 2000: 10), which is of value in examining women's subjective experiences within the context of gender and class inequalities.

The second section of the chapter describes key elements of the research practice including: the 'purposive' sampling strategy (Cresswell, 2007) and selection of locations; participant recruitment; and ethical considerations. It includes reflections on conducting semi-structured interviews with 26 women and analysing the data. The final section explains how theoretical ideas were developed in 'dialogue' with the data (Layder, 1998), by gradually moving from descriptive to more interpretive analysis. Having used thematic coding and Framework Analysis (Spencer et al., 2014a; 2014b) to identify prominent themes and similarities and contrasts between women in the two locations, analysis of case dynamics (Miles and Hubberman, 1994) helped identify processes underlying empirical observations (Sayer 1992; Danermark et al., 2001). The data suggested that participants' propensity for rejection, resistance or absorption of stigma could be loosely grouped as 'modes' of SSL, which can be described as: 'negative', 'positive', 'defensive', 'performative' or 'transformative'. While 'judgement' was an indicator of stigma, uncovering *which or whose* standards women judged themselves *against* suggested the importance of evaluative judgement or, put simply 'judging the judgement', as a pivotal mechanism underlying their agential mediation of stigma.

Having grounded this study methodologically, the next three chapters discuss the research findings. These three chapters explore lone mothers' subjective experiences of stigma in relation to discursive, material and socio-spatial contexts respectively. They are structured in sections presenting key themes, with each section firstly outlining similarities across the data, comparing experiences between the locations, and then drawing on case examples in analysing 'modes' of SSL in relation to these themes.

**Chapter Five** focuses on PEPs (Archer, 2000) in the form of participants' agential negotiation of the CEPs of cultural representations of lone motherhood. The chapter begins by discussing women's ambivalence towards terminology, which automatically prompted objections to 'labelling' and anger at negative stereotyping. Media misrepresentation was regarded as the root of 'judgement' in the majority of cases, regardless of location or situation. Application of SSL explores how women rejected, absorbed or resisted media imagery. The next section analyses women's responses to cultural representations in light of their extra-discursive situations (Maxwell, 2012; Lau and Morgan, 2014). Participants emphasised lack of choice over their situation as a means of distancing themselves from the benefit dependent 'single mum stereotype' and positioned themselves in a 'hierarchy of maternal legitimacy' (Song, 1996) according to: age, route to lone motherhood and sexual morality. Objective situations did not necessarily translate into subjective effects of stigma however, and the role of self-judgement and judgement of 'other' lone mothers in participants' modes of SSL are exemplified. The final section examines women's SSL in relation to class imbued discourse, self-identified social class and deployment of cultural capital as a device in distancing from stereotypes.

**Chapter Six** focuses on experiences of stigma in relation to the SEPs of the labour market, welfare policies and participants' material situations. It explores participants' deployment of PEPs in balancing breadwinner and carer roles within the context of worker citizenship (Haux, 2012) and heightened benefits stigma (Taylor-Gooby, 2013). Women in a diverse range of circumstances across both locations expressed a strong work ethic, which they associated with self-worth and avoidance of stigma. The first section outlines contrasts in qualifications, skills and employment opportunities between the locations. It cites examples of women's frustrated attempts to behave agentially in finding and sustaining childcare compatible jobs. It discusses the impact of employment and unemployment on lone mothers' judgement of their personal value and modes of SSL. The second section uncovers the significance of judgement of deservingness of state resources in lone mothers' internalisation or deflection of benefits stigma. The final section considers levels of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1989) in relation to SSL.

**Chapter Seven** focuses on women's PEPs in terms of their spatial and social context. Burr makes a useful distinction between 'macro' and 'micro' discursive constructs (2003: 21-22). Where macro constructs of nationally hegemonic media discourse are explored in Chapter Five, this chapter focuses on more micro level discourse, local reproductive norms and attitudes encountered during day-to-day interactions, and kinship and social networks. The first section outlines contrasts in local reproductive norms and discusses how, whilst highly aware of the heteronormative two parent 'ideal', participants' judgement of their family form as 'proper' or 'spoilt' depended upon what was 'normal' in their

respective neighbourhoods and their personal relationship history. The second section describes how women in both locations displayed pride in fulfilling the 'good lone mother' role. It discusses the importance of personal resilience and reflexivity in mitigating stigma and illustrates the dynamic nature of SSL using case examples. The final section discusses the significance of extended family networks and knowing people in 'the same situation' and examines the impact of 'social capital' on participants' SSL.

**Chapter Eight** is the Conclusion to the thesis. The chapter begins by responding to the research questions by summing up principal empirical findings and core arguments from the study. It shows how the research adds to understandings of lone mothers' experiences of stigma through introducing SSL as an analytical tool and sets out a theoretical model indicating 'judgement of judgement' as a pivotal process in agential mediation of stigma. It evaluates the research with reference to quality standards (Silverman, 2011) and critical realist knowledge claims (Sayer, 1992). It also offers suggestions for future research in light of the findings.

The concluding chapter establishes how the research makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge. Whilst this will be discussed fully, it can be summarised here as a threefold empirical, conceptual and methodological advancement of knowledge on the topic. Empirically, this research adds to existing knowledge by taking a comparative approach that enables factors contributing towards manifestations of stigma among mothers in diverse situations to be explored. Ways in which the findings support, extend or are at variance with previous studies are discussed in relevant chapters and summarised in the conclusion. Conceptually, drawing on Archer's (2000; 2003) theorisation facilitates investigation of agency/structure interplay in examining experiences of stigma and introducing SSL offers a bespoke approach to exploring stigma in a holistic way that does not assume or reinforce stigma. Methodologically, the research looks beneath empirical observations and applies 'abduction' and 'retroduction' (Bhaskar, 2015; Sayer 2000) in a way which suggests the significance of evaluative judgement as a key mechanism influencing lone mothers' rejection, absorption or resistance of stigma.

Having briefly introduced the research here, its approach, findings and contribution to knowledge will now be fully elaborated over the course of this thesis.

## **Chapter 2**

# **Lone motherhood and stigma in history, policy and discourse**

### **Introduction**

Literature on lone motherhood spans sociology, social history, family, gender and policy studies. This and the following chapter discuss how key sources helped to shape the research, pinpoint gaps to which it aims to respond and explain the rationale for theoretical perspectives and empirical approaches adopted. The most pertinent empirical studies and theoretical insights are revisited as relevant throughout the thesis. This chapter follows a broadly chronological order in discussing key developments in demographics, policies and attitudes affecting lone mothers, along with academic analyses of these changes. Establishing this backdrop helps gauge the extent to which age-old stigmatisation of lone mothers is being reproduced or challenged. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section begins with reference to historical accounts of lone motherhood and discusses how the theme of legitimacy has been recurrent over centuries and was reprised during New Right 'underclass' debates, which targeted lone mothers. The second section delineates the relationship between the state, citizenship and gender normativity, drawing on feminist perspectives on the role of the state in lone mothers' lives, and outlines critiques of New Labour's 'welfare to work' agenda. The final section sets the socio-political and media backdrop against which fieldwork for this study was conducted and examines manifestations of stigmatisation in prevailing discourse on 'deservingness' of state benefits.

### **The long shadow of illegitimacy?**

'The past always impresses itself on the present in some way', according to Layder, who suggests that 'reading history in a sociological way' can add empirical and analytical depth to contemporary research (1998: 69). Beginning with a short overview of historical accounts of the treatment of 'unmarried mothers' reveals how stigmatisation centred around a legitimacy/illegitimacy dichotomy, which can be traced from pre-industrial society, through the introduction of the New Poor Laws in the nineteenth century to 'underclass' debates of the 1990s and a contemporary 'cultural political economy' of 'welfare disgust' (Tyler, 2013). This section touches upon theories concerning the origin of 'legitimate' reproduction and demonstrates the value of critical perspectives offered by

Engels, (1988), Foucault (1979) and particularly feminist analysis (Millet, 1990; Reekie, 1998), in uncovering material concerns and patriarchal interests that lie at the heart of ongoing moralising discourses on lone motherhood.

### **Theories on the origins of legitimacy**

State regulation of private behaviour covers matters including reproduction, abortion, childcare, marriage, and divorce (Rowlingson and McKay, 2002). Principal changes to legislation affecting lone mothers dating from the pre-industrial period to the present are charted in *Appendix A: History of policies affecting lone mothers table*. The Roman concept of 'filius nullius', which regarded children as their father's property and a child born outside of marriage as the 'child of no-one' without recourse to support or inheritance, continued to influence Western law for centuries (Hendrix, 1996). With only fatherhood existing as a legal concept and motherhood having no legally sanctioned status, the child of an unwed mother had no legal rights (Smart, 1996). One historical account (Adair, 1996) shows that questions of financial responsibility for 'bastards' and moral condemnation of their mothers as 'harlots' and 'strumpets' loomed large in C16th parish records. Illegitimate pregnancy was seen as a burden on local ratepayers and historical practices to control sexual behaviour included villagers making 'rough music', which involved shaming an unmarried pregnant woman by throwing stones and singing crude songs outside her door (Bottero, 2011).

MacKinnon's (1983) 'feminist jurisprudence' perspective views legality as constituted in the interests of men with both women's behaviour and reproductive norms being judged from the male perspective. Smart (1984) elaborates a feminist perspective on the relationship between family law and female oppression in legislation on marriage, parental rights and responsibilities, divorce and sexuality. She views the law as oppressive in reflecting and reproducing patriarchal power structures, though qualifying that this does not mean a conspiracy by the largely male body of professionals to administer it. Smart also describes how the subjugation of women was reinforced through regulation of sexuality, legitimacy, marriage and reproduction (1992: 13). She details historical coverage of court cases concerning 'baby-farming'<sup>3</sup> and publication of birth control information during the late C19th as examples of this. Illegitimacy had been 'constructed as a major social problem' by the end of C19th (Smart, 1996).

A brief outline of competing theories on the origins of legitimacy and a selection of sources on the historical treatment of lone mothers offers evidence to support critical perspectives which regard the law as reproducing both patriarchal and material interests. Arguing in

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<sup>3</sup> The practice known as 'baby farming' involved women running businesses charging minimal weekly rates for generally extremely poor standard childcare, which was often the only recourse available for unmarried mothers (Smart, 1992).

the late C19th that legal inequalities were a manifestation of social inequalities, Engels (1988 [1877]) equates the origin of monogamous marriage with the origin of private property. In analysis linking gender and class oppression, he contends that legitimacy served men's desire to both control female sexuality and ensure biological children inherited their property. Malinowski's (1930) functionalist 'principle of legitimacy', put forward some fifty years later, argued that legitimacy is universal and every child needs a 'social father' to confer legal and social status or will otherwise incur stigma. Whilst Engels' (1988) historical materialist account was 'potentially powerful', it was largely overlooked and Malinowski's interpretation came to dominate C20th family policy (Hendrix, 1996).

Millett (1990) provides a feminist challenge to Malinowski's interpretation. She views his social father mind-set as reinforcing patriarchal family relations by placing the status of child and mother as 'ultimately dependent on the male' (1990: 35). Foucault (1979) regards legitimacy as a culturally and historically specific principle to govern transmission of power, circulation of wealth and female sexuality in particular social and historic contexts. Reekie (1998) draws on Foucault to deconstruct the distinction between marital and extra-marital birth. She argues that subsequent welfare policies were 'permeated' with the spirit of C19th demographer Malthus (1988 [1798]), who believed that children whose parents could not afford to support their offspring should be left to starve rather than encouraging population growth and 'immoral behaviour' through financial assistance. 'Malthusian anxieties about over-production of economically dependent citizens', remain at the heart of modern welfare debates, according to Reekie (1998: 58).

Although Malinowski's universalistic principle of legitimacy can be witnessed in subsequent family policy and discourse, historical sources better support critical interpretations which equate *de jure* regulation and social stigmatisation of illegitimacy with control of material resources, sexuality and contextualised power, as offered respectively by Engels (1988), Millett (1990) and Foucault (1979). Adair's (1996) historical survey of records from 500 English parishes between 1538 and 1754, for example, reveals dramatic regional variations in the propensity and toleration of extra-marital birth, which can be directly attributed to local economic circumstances. Another historical account illustrates the connection between local economic context and reproductive norms with an example from C17th rural Scotland: extra-marital birth became 'normative' where a practice of sex preceding wedding banns was disrupted as agricultural holdings became scarce and young men left to 'roam the countryside untrammelled' looking for work (Blaikie, 1995: 653). Rowlingson and McKay (2002) point to localised common-law ceremonial practices that accompanied widespread cohabitation in pre-industrial Britain.

Furthermore, analysis of theories of legitimacy by Hendrix (1996), based on systematic interrogation of anthropological studies across the world and over time, offers empirical evidence to support the correlation between attitudes towards legitimacy and local norms and the association between treatment of extra-marital birth and gender and class relations. His analysis concludes that sanctions against extra-marital birth are most harsh in the most hierarchical societies and where females have least power; and are dealt with in a more relaxed way in classless societies. Based on the foregoing discussion, legitimacy can therefore be said to be accorded in relation to power and linked to control of female sexuality and material resources. Historical materialist (Engels, 1988) and feminist (Millett, 1990) perspectives on legitimacy offer useful background in confirming the relevance of a dual systems feminist stance (Walby, 1990), as discussed in the next section, and in considering the significance of class alongside gender in stigmatisation of lone motherhood.

### **Gendered moral discourses**

Song (1996) describes how class and gender inequalities underpinned treatment of lone mothers at the onset of industrialisation and how notions of legitimacy have continued to resurface in discourse ever since. She makes a convincing case that a stratified hierarchy of gendered 'moral discourse', based on judgements of deservingness remains 'instrumental in legitimising or de-legitimising state assistance' and position never-married mothers as 'least deserving of support' (Song, 1996: 379-380). The New Poor Law in 1834 marked the introduction of a national network of Poor Houses, where social stigma was the price of material relief (Morris, 1994). 'Bastardy Clauses' called upon family and marriage as the means by which rights to assistance could be legitimately determined and consigned mothers without husbands to either punishing physical labour in workhouses or mental institutions (Carabine, 2001). The extreme situation for many pregnant women without male support is starkly revealed in the rise of infanticide at this time (Smart, 1992). The principle of 'less eligibility' created a 'discursive hierarchy' privileging 'widows over separated and deserted wives and all of them over single pregnant women', which has resonated through subsequent debates on lone mothers' entitlement to public resources, according to Carabine (2001: 301).

Malinowski's 'principle of legitimacy' can be witnessed in attitudes towards lone mothers during the first half of the C20th, notwithstanding some tolerance of extra-marital births resulting from family disruptions during wars (Carabine, 2001; Evans and Thane, 2012). According to Reekie, (1998), the unmarried mother in the 1920s was typically viewed as either a naive girl led astray, mentally deficient, or an immoral delinquent. Maternal care was subject to increasing professional scrutiny and moralising discourse (Smart, 1998). 'Attachment' theories of child psychology gained ground during the 1940s and 1950s,

fostering beliefs among a growing band of health and social work professionals that mothers should be at home with their children and emotional development of a child who did not know its father would be seriously hampered (Reekie, 1998). Such theories, which stressed the importance of the two parent nuclear family for socialisation of children, cast unmarried mothers as likely to be 'unfit mothers' and they were commonly encouraged to have their babies adopted (Evans and Thane, 2012: 23). Spensky (1992) describes how mother and baby homes were created on a penitentiary model and served as 'producers of legitimacy' by furnishing childless married couples with babies born in stigmatised extra-marital circumstances. Smart deconstructs socially constructed 'good' and 'bad' mother roles and argues that unmarried mothers 'disrupt the carefully calibrated norms of motherhood':

The boundary between the unwed mother and the married mother...has for so long been presumed to coincide with the boundary between the bad and the good mother' (Smart, 1996: 47).

While the post-war period is commonly portrayed as the 'Golden Age of family life', autobiographical and oral history sources reveal that class and gender conflicts often lay beneath this idealised depiction (Fink, 2011). According to McIntosh, negative stereotypes of lone parenthood 'have as their obverse the idealised images of married parenthood' (1996: 150). Married parenthood can, however, be far from ideal, she adds, and lone motherhood can threaten the ideology.

### **Separating sex, marriage and reproduction**

While the 1960s was a time of cultural shift, sexual revolution and a rapid increase in divorce, Goffman (1990) still included 'bastards' in his categories of stigmatised people in his classic work on stigma published in 1963. Despite the 'sexual revolution', pre-marital pregnancy was still likely to be met with a hasty wedding in the late 1960s, according to Evans and Thane (2012). They describe how non-married motherhood remained stigmatised and 'hidden', with 172 'mother and baby homes' still existing in England in 1968. Two academic accounts from this period – one seeing lone mothers as a problem *for* society and the other highlighting the problems faced *by* them – exemplify contrasting perspectives on the topic. One journal article which decries 'the amazing rise of illegitimacy' attributed this demographic change to a welfare system that diminished citizens' personal responsibility by providing 'cradle to grave' security (Hartley, 1966). In contrast, Marsden (1969) was part of a new generation of social scientists whose focus was on discrimination and social and economic disadvantage. His study, involving qualitative interviews with 116 'mothers alone' in West Yorkshire and Essex who were receiving National Assistance, highlighted the poverty and social isolation they experienced.

Introduction of the contraceptive pill, increases in divorce, the rise of cohabitation and joint registration of births by non-married parents all contributed to a decline in moralising discourses during the 1970s and what Song refers to as the 'normalisation' of lone parent families (1996:383). Mothers who were not married finally gained full legal rights over their own children in 1973 (Gillies, 2007). Lewis and Kiernan (1996) describe how a separation of sex and marriage in the 1960s was followed by a separation of marriage and reproduction in the 1980s. Extra-marital birth rates rose from 5% in 1960, to 12% in 1980, and 28% in 1990 (Lewis and Kiernan, 1996). Divorce trebled and the proportion of never-married lone mothers doubled, leading to a growth in the proportion of lone mother families in the UK from 10% in 1979 to 18% by 1990 (Lewis, 1998). Lewis and Kiernan regard it as significant that boundaries between widows, divorced and never married mothers were 'consciously blurred' during debates on lone parenthood at this time (1996: 379). The National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child changed its name in 1970 to the National Council for One Parent Families. Evans and Thane (2012) view changes in language as a move from moralistic representations towards more of a focus on social disadvantage at this time.

Social scientists such as Marsden helped raise awareness of discrimination and social and economic disadvantage during this period and public policy moved briefly towards considering the 'problem' of lone motherhood more in terms of structural poverty than personal morality (Keirnan et al., 1996). The Finer Committee, established in 1974, was notable in looking at improving conditions for one parent families in a practical way devoid of the moralistic discourse that permeated previous policy deliberations. Although many of its 230 recommendations were not implemented, increases in benefits and better access to housing under the Homeless Persons Act 1977 improved the material situation of many lone mothers (Evans and Thane, 2012).

A qualitative study conducted in the early 1980s (Filinson, 1984: 86) suggests the 'principle of legitimacy' was becoming anachronistic with increasing convergence between the family lives of children of non-married cohabiting parents and divorced parents and questions assumptions as to the deleterious effects of 'fatherlessness'. Evans and Thane (2012) point out that, although lone motherhood became more socially acceptable as non-marital birth trebled during the more sexually permissive 1970s, experiences have always been diverse and there has been no linear journey from stigmatisation to acceptance. As part of its campaign to end discrimination, the National Council for One Parent Families (Derrick, 1986) published letters expressing feelings of shame, difference and inferiority caused by illegitimacy. Children born outside of marriage did not gain full legal equity until the Family Law Reform Act 1987, which also removed the term 'illegitimate' from official discourse and replaced it with 'non-marital' or 'extra-marital birth'.

Reekie (1998) believes illegitimacy has survived in a symbolic form long after legal equity for non-marital birth occurred. Certain forms of parenting, family structure and population growth are repeatedly constructed as 'socially illegitimate', as opposed to others, Reekie argues (1998: 181). Or as Foucault puts it: 'The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law' (1979:3). 'Illegitimacy should not be read in a narrow legal sense', according to Spensky, but positioned within the realm of complex social relations and 'understood as social practice which is constructed as deviant by society at a given period' (1992: 100). In their socialist feminist critique of the family, Barrett and McIntosh (1992) argue that it is an essentially selfish institution. They contend that the prevailing idealised family model is a C19th bourgeoisie model that serves the needs of capitalism and patriarchy and reproduces class and gender inequalities: 'This hegemonic family form is a powerful ideological force' (Barrett and McIntosh, 1992: 33). They describe how this model of family life came to be viewed as the legitimate form, with the popular image of the couple living together with their children, 'constantly projected as the image of normality and happiness' (Barrett and McIntosh, 1992: 76).

### **Illegitimacy in underclass debates**

Following a period of dramatic change in family demographics during the 1970s and early 1980s (Lewis, 1998), stigmatisation of lone motherhood was re-ignited fiercely when never-married mothers became associated with 'underclass' debates during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Illegitimacy was a central theme of the 'underclass thesis', put forward by American neo-liberal political scientist Murray (1984). In Murray's view, state dependent female-headed households were breeding generations of dysfunctional families, characterised by criminality, long term unemployment and lack of adequate socialisation. His invocation of deservingness discourses echoed Malthus' (1988 [1798]) arguments some two centuries earlier that social welfare incentivised undesirable reproduction. Murray's ideas were transported from USA inner-city ghettos to the UK in 1989, sponsored by *The Sunday Times* newspaper, and proved influential among UK ministers and helped fuel vicious political and media attacks on never married mothers (Prideux, 2010). Social security costs associated with supporting lone parents had trebled during the 1980s, making them a prime target for media coverage which portrayed them as a drain on state resources (Song, 1996) and vilification by politicians from the New Right (Millar, 1996).

Feminist literature offers a powerful critique on the underclass perspective, which retains its relevance in the contemporary context of benefits stigma, as discussed in the final section of this chapter. Phoenix (1996) points out that, unlike underclass debates in the USA, which centred upon race, lone motherhood among black women in the UK was largely absent from discourse or viewed as due to cultural differences whereas individualistic

psychological explanations were given to motherhood among single white women. Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), viewed family breakdown as the root of social ills and lone motherhood became tied up in a well-documented discourse of 'moral crisis' and 'welfare dependency' (Lewis and Kiernan, 1996). Quoting a prime ministerial speech claiming young girls deliberately get pregnant to jump housing queues and access benefits, Carabine (1996) argues that 'normalising' ideas about appropriate sexuality explicitly influenced Conservative policy, manifesting as strong messages about respectable married reproduction. Drawing upon Foucault's concept of 'normalising judgement', whereby an individual is compared to a desired norm, she argues that welfare policies perform a normalising role in relation to sexuality, gender and motherhood. Family policy is instrumental in promoting a heteronormative family model which finds single parents wanting in comparison with a desired norm, she believes. Carabine regards the association between Child Support Act 1991 provisions and not knowing or wanting to name their child's father with promiscuous behaviour as part of an attempt, 'to restrict women's sexual and social autonomy' (1996: 67).

The New Right associated divorce with lack of morality (Smart and Neale, 1999) and the Conservative Government's 'back to basics' campaign emphasis on traditional family values and parental rather than state responsibility was enshrined in the 1989 Children Act (Lewis, 1996). The failure of the Child Support Act 1991 to reduce state expenditure by targeting absent fathers or so called 'deadbeat dads' to pay maintenance is well noted (see, for example, Fox Harding, 1996). There is a dearth of studies of non-resident fathers, but during qualitative interviews Bradshaw et al. (1999), found that, contrary to negative stereotypes, many reported faring badly from family break-ups and struggling to maintain contact with their children. Coming from what they termed an 'ethical socialist' perspective, Dennis and Erdos (1992) linked fatherless families with rises in crime, overcrowded housing and children's low educational attainment and called for a return of traditional family values and 'respectable' working class morality. Right wing commentators such as Morgan (1995) perpetuated a view that over-generous benefits for lone parents contributed to family breakdown. Roseneil and Mann's dissection of the vilification of state dependent single mothers in political rhetoric and media coverage states:

The discourse dichotomized women along age-old lines – good women who do the right thing, marry and have children, versus bad women, who have children, don't get married and depend on state benefits (Roseneil and Mann, 1996: 192).

A large body of sociological critique either disputes the existence of an underclass (Greenstein, 1985; Baggeley and Mann, 1992) or acknowledges its existence but attributes it to structural factors rather than individuals' shortcomings (Dahrendorf, 1987).

As well as disputing the rigour of Murray's arguments, critics point out that changes in family structure were occurring alongside wide-scale economic restructuring in the wake of the late-1970s global financial crisis and post-industrial decline in blue collar male employment. An ethnographic study by Kingfisher (1996) documents accounts of women 'trapped' in the USA welfare system due to a lack of jobs and the high cost of childcare, healthcare and transport. The toll of welfare dependency on self-worth unearthed by Kingfisher was in stark contrast with the stereotypical image of a system-abusing 'welfare queen'. Buckingham (1999) examined longitudinal data and concluded there were signs that an underclass existed in the UK, but that lone mothers did not fall within its parameters. While the underclass thesis blamed individuals for their demographic and social situation, unemployment was the main cause of the rise of poverty, according to Dean and Taylor-Gooby (1992), whose empirical examination found lone parents' work and family values no different to mainstream norms. Similarly, Duncan and Edwards (1999) used interview data and Census records to test the validity of theories purporting that lone mothers were a deviant state dependent underclass. They found that people claiming state benefits expressed conformity to dominant cultural norms and 'traditional family values'.

Lone mothers tended to be geographically concentrated in 'hard to let' council properties in areas of high unemployment (Hardey and Crow, 1991; Morris, 1994). Campbell (1984) visited estates deemed 'dumping grounds' for never married mothers in areas with unemployment as high as 50%. From a feminist stance, she documents limitations in young women's choices resulting from patriarchy and poverty and the sense of status and community belonging which motherhood afforded those without employment options. Many of these 'dole queue mothers' became single having fled domestic abuse, she found, and their lifestyle was at odds with the promiscuity depicted by press and politicians.

### **Mothers, workers or both?**

Each government has its own narrative on ways of dealing with poverty, non-conformity and the intervention of the state in private life and Brodie (1997) regards attention to 'meso-discourses' as a way of exploring particular state forms. Contrary to Foucault's view of power as diffuse, Brodie argues that 'identifiable state forms with different logics of governance exist' with historical shifts in the philosophy underlying particular configurations of public and private and meanings of citizenship (Foucault, 1989, cited Brodie, 1997: 227). This can be seen in the shift from 'social' to 'worker' citizenship models underpinning welfare policies over the past three decades, with the accompanying

discursive emphasis on labour market participation, which is well documented in literature on lone motherhood (eg: Driver and Martell, 2002; Pulkingham et al., 2010; Haux, 2012).

***From social citizenship to adult worker model***

Successive UK governments have veered between treating lone mothers primarily as breadwinners and primarily as carers (Lewis, 1998). From analysis of literature, it is possible to discern changing formulations of citizenship and discourses surrounding lone motherhood informing and accompanying these changes over time, which could be described as movements in meso-discourse (Brodie, 1997). *Table 1: Mother, worker or both? Policy, citizenship, discourse and designated lone mother role*, below, summarises relationships between changing welfare regimes, conceptualisations of citizenship, prevailing discourses and state expectations regarding the primary role of lone mothers.

*Table 1: Mother, worker or both? Policy, citizenship, discourse and designated lone mother role*

| PERIOD                             | WELFARE REGIME  | CITIZENSHIP MODEL | PREVAILING DISCOURSE | PRIMARY ROLE                         |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| C19th                              | New Poor Laws   | Civil             | Personal problem     | Worker                               |
| Post Second World War              | Welfare State   | Social            | State responsibility | Mother                               |
| Conservative Governments 1979-1992 | Social Security | Market            | Social threat        | Mother followed by mother and worker |
| New Labour Governments 1992-2010   | Workfare        | Worker            | Social problem       | Mother and worker                    |
| Coalition Government 2010-15       | Welfare Reform  | Worker            | Deservingness        | Worker                               |

In their work on lone parenthood and the state, Rowlingson and McKay view capitalism and patriarchy as among powerful vested interests in the state but believe the extent to which this dictates policy varies according to changes of government over time (2002: 77). As the above discussion of the Poor Laws highlights, lone mothers were positioned firmly as workers within a civil citizenship model that regarded their problems as personal. Marshall (1968) has encapsulated progression from civil to political citizenship followed by the social citizenship model, enshrined in the post-war welfare state, with expanded state responsibilities and social rights for individuals. Women bringing up children alone were

entitled to National Assistance on the basis of motherhood being their 'main responsibility' until children reached 16 years old (Keirnan et al., 1996: 7). Accordingly, they were primarily mothers and the state was fulfilling the absent father's breadwinner role in lone mother households.

As discussed in the previous section, the New Right political culture considered benefits a perverse incentive to undesirable reproduction and lone mothers as a 'social threat' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Commitment to a rollback of the welfare state formulated citizenship increasingly in terms of individual freedoms rather than social rights during the course of successive Conservative administrations, resulting in greater emphasis on means tested rather than universal benefits. When attempts to get absent fathers to accept more financial responsibility for children proved a 'spectacular failure', political focus turned towards encouraging lone mothers into the labour market (Lewis, 1998: 10). Lone mothers' employment had not risen at anywhere near the rate among married mothers between 1970 and 1990 (Keirnan et al., 1996). Policies thus veered back to treating lone mothers primarily as workers, reduced eligibility to housing and introduced a programme to encourage labour market participation (Lewis, 1998).

Following this period of extreme pathologisation, Atkinson et al. describe how the political and media tide turned as the Labour party started to articulate a new discourse which, 're-appropriated and redefined lone parents as chief targets of government aid' (2011: 1). The 'social threat' discourse was accordingly replaced by a 'social problem' discourse (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Lewis (2006) describes how the normative family model moved from the male breadwinner/female carer model towards an 'adult worker' formulation under successive Labour Government policies. Lone parents were targeted specifically for 'welfare to work' through Labour's New Deal for Lone Parents, which was part of its Social Inclusion agenda. The worker citizen norm equated employment with responsible parenting (Lewis, 2006; Churchill 2007).

Whether it is regarded as a problem *for* society or experienced *by* individuals, lone motherhood has generally been problematised by governments in the UK (Song, 1996). Rowlingson and McKay describe how placing lone mothers among other 'problem categories' under the New Labour Social Inclusion agenda meant that 'wider inequalities' were not addressed (2002: 119). May (2006) suggests that individualisation contributed towards the New Deal for Lone Parents advocating employment as the route to 'fully fledged citizenship' without fully acknowledging structural inequalities. According to Churchill, while this agenda could be enabling for some lone mothers in moving beyond economic dependence on men, the conceptualisations of parental

irresponsibility/responsibility it contained, 'problematized those who do not prioritise social mobility via paid work' (2007: 181).

### **Lone motherhood, state and 'legitimate' citizenship**

While Marshall charts progression from civil to social citizenship, with extended rights and equality held up as 'an image against which achievement can be measured' (1968: 84), citizenship is also a contested concept. Marx regarded it as a 'false' concept (1846). In contrast with Marshall's aspirational standard for society, citizenship can be regarded more critically as a standard against which citizens themselves are judged. Lockwood (1996) suggests standing citizenship on its head to gauge class equality rather than holding it up as a standard of equality. Reay (1998) describes its enactment as 'classed' and Plummer (2001) calls for an 'intimate' form of citizenship that recognises sexuality and personal life.

Arguments by feminists, including Walby (1994) and Lister (1997), that citizenship is profoundly 'gendered' despite being formally gender neutral are crucial to the study of lone mothers' experiences. Believing that Marshall's preoccupation with class blinded him to gender inequalities, Lister (1997) points out that citizenship manifests itself in forms of exclusion as well as inclusion. Having been denied formal citizenship status for much of history, women's contemporary inclusion is, 'imbued with the stain of gendered assumptions', she writes (1997: 66). There is no legitimate place for the female, as an embodied and emotional caregiver in the 'public, male' citizenship she characterises as disembodied, rational and active (Lister, 1997:100). She draws upon 'Wollstonecraft's dilemma' to show how women are caught between being recognised as adult worker citizens or having their role as carers recognised. This point recurs in empirical analysis of policies to encourage lone mothers' workforce participation (e.g. Wallbank, 1998).

The view of citizenship as gendered is well substantiated in lone motherhood literature. While social citizenship expanded state responsibilities and furthered social rights, it was premised upon a male breadwinner/female housewife family model and a taken for granted gendered division of labour (Lewis, 2006). As women's exclusion from the state 'gave way to her subordination to the state', lone mothers' standard of living became determined by, 'either the patriarchal state or the patriarchally structured labour market', according to Fox Harding (1996: 139). Patriarchal family relations in the form of unwaged domestic labour disadvantage women in the labour market (Smart, 1984). Hartmann (1979, cited Walby, 1990) views capitalist and patriarchal interests as intertwined. The 'dual systems' exposition of the mutually reinforcing nature of capitalist and patriarchal social structures in lone mother's lives put forward by Walby (1990) thus presents a highly convincing perspective through which to view lone mothers' twofold oppression under a

patriarchal family model and capitalist economic model. Discussing lone mothers' position, she writes:

While they lose their own individual patriarch, they do not lose their subordination to other patriarchal structures and practices. Indeed they become even more exposed to certain of the more diffused public sets of patriarchal practices...It is the anonymous state and market rather than her private patriarch which determines the life of the lone mother. She substitutes private for public patriarchy (Walby, 1990: 197).

Sayer supports this dual systems view and highlights feminist research which exemplifies, 'the way gender is classed and class is gendered' (e.g. Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 1998, cited Sayer, 2005: 17). The impact of intersecting patriarchal social systems and capitalist economic systems on intersecting gender and class inequalities is well recognised (e.g. Bradley, 2014). Scott et al., (2010) highlight the impact of social class on mothers' differential opportunities for secure employment that is compatible with childcare, for example. Whereas Rowlingson and McKay (2002) view capitalism and patriarchy as among powerful vested interests in the state but believe the extent to which this dictates policy varies according to changes of government over time, two studies from a Marxist perspective prove illuminating in examining how employment policies perpetuate the interests of capitalism at lone mothers' expense. Grover (2005) looks at lone motherhood in terms of the Marxist concept of a 'gendered reserve army of Labour' and thereby regards government policy as, 'subordinated to the demands of labour market flexibility' (2005: 68). While the Keynesian welfare state's social citizenship model was concerned with extending the social rights of citizens, he writes, the Shumpeterian approach that followed fostered 'welfare services that benefit business' (2005: 68). Prideux's analysis of lone motherhood contends that policies which emphasise personal responsibility enable people who are marginalised by an exploitative economic system to be portrayed as rejecting the work ethic and 'marginalising themselves' (2011: 91). Wilson and Huntington (2006) similarly argue that the onset of stigmatisation of motherhood at a younger age arose from changing workforce demands, with advanced capitalism requiring increased female higher education and workforce participation.

Pulkingham et al.'s study (2010) is of conceptual significance in dissecting the relationship between lone motherhood, citizenship and legitimacy in contemporary classed and gendered forms. Following longitudinal research in British Columbia, they conclude that despite the 'cultural legitimacy' of lone motherhood having increased overall, this is not the case for lone mothers 'across the social spectrum' (2010: 284). Documenting the effect of the employment imperative underlying worker citizenship norms, they argue that lone mothers who are reliant on welfare risk being positioned as, 'invisible as mothers or moral citizens, and visible only as low waged worker citizens' (2010:284.) Painting a

contemporary picture which harks back to an age-old legitimate/illegitimate dichotomy to underscore the coerciveness of such norms, they write:

The mothers' narratives reveal the more fundamental quest lone mothers face in relationship to their own children: the moral legitimacy to be able to have children in the first place (Pulkingham et al., 2010: 285).

### **Critiques of 'welfare to work' policies**

Returning to Wollstonecraft's dilemma, the price of legitimacy as a worker citizen thus appears to be at the expense of being a carer; a double disadvantage can be thus entailed for lone mothers with responsibility for performing both breadwinner and carer roles. An extensive body of work highlights tensions in lone mothers' positioning within the prevailing 'adult worker' model whereby employment is increasingly regarded as the *only* legitimate route to citizenship (e.g. Haux, 2012; Driver and Martell, 2002). Following on from theoretical critiques of respective state and parental roles and citizenship, the literature also scrutinises 'welfare to work' policies at a more practical level. Policies encouraging the expansion of lone mothers' participation in the labour market, implemented during two Labour administrations, are subject to considerable academic critique, which pinpoints a failure on the part of policy-makers to recognise tensions in balancing breadwinner and carer roles. Firstly, evidence shows that assumptions that lone mothers' employment reduces child poverty are not necessarily founded. At the end of the last century lone mothers working full time earned on average 70% of a full time male salary (Kiernan et al., 1996) and living on a single female income can leave lone mother households prone to poverty (Levitas et al., 2006). Employment does not always equate with material advantage for lone mothers (Millar, 1996; Millar and Ridge, 2013).

Secondly, an extensive body of research on the impact of workfare policies highlights significant obstacles that can impinge upon accessing and sustaining work, particularly for mothers in deprived neighbourhoods. Asymmetrical gender role changes mean that, whilst increasingly active in the labour market, mothers also remain more likely to assume the bulk of responsibility for childcare (Scott et al., 2010). Mothers also tend to assume the majority of responsibility for childcare when relationships end (Walby, 1990; Smart and Neale, 1999; Poole et al., 2016). Other European countries have had a better record on childcare to facilitate lone mothers' participation in the workforce and childcare costs can eat up their earnings (Lewis, 1998; 2006). Policy fails to address the particular demands faced by lone mothers in meeting their children's needs for both financial support and practical and emotional care (Wallbank, 1998; Churchill, 2007). The much-cited investigation of welfare regimes and orientation to paid work among lone mothers by Duncan and Edwards in the late 1990s found that restricted local labour markets and 'gendered moral rationalities' governed choices and constraints, rather than the neo-

classic concept of 'individual economic rationality' (1999: 2). They formulated three orientations for women in their study; primarily mother', 'primarily worker' and 'worker mother/worker integral. They advocate for the replacement of 'welfare to work' programmes with 'welfare and work' programmes that are sensitive to local settings (1999: 22).

Furthermore, a longitudinal, qualitative project by Ridge and Millar, which began in 2003, found lone mothers still struggled to achieve an adequate standard of living after entering employment, despite displaying the 'hard working' behaviour encouraged by government policies (2008; 2011; 2013). During interviews with 43 lone mothers, Churchill similarly found governmental emphasis on employment was not supported by sustainable work opportunities and failed to take on board tensions between paid work and childcare; policy tends to overlook the balance between material and emotional concerns and 'complexity of everyday parenting practices' (2007: 175). Academics in Australia (Gazso, 2009) and Canada (Pulkingham et al., 2010) confirm the shift in emphasis from 'social' to 'active' or 'market' citizenship meant lone mothers there also found balancing work and childcare commitments difficult. These points cast doubt upon the efficacy of the extension of employment conditionality on single parents in respect of benefit receipt under the subsequent welfare reform agenda, which is now discussed.

## **Lone motherhood and welfare state retrenchment**

So far, this chapter has examined empirical and theoretical accounts of lone motherhood and traced the relationship between legitimacy, materiality, policy and discourse over time. Having established the existence of this dynamic, this raises questions as to how it is playing out in the current context and the impact on lone mothers' lives. This section provides an overview of the political context in which the fieldwork for this study took place, which was during the latter part of the Conservative Liberal Coalition administration (2010-2015). It starts by setting out key policy changes affecting lone parents, which were implemented by the Coalition Government and have continued under subsequent Conservative administrations. It then outlines evaluations of these measures and looks at academic critiques of the orthodoxy that underpins a neo-liberal 'discourse of deservingness'. The stigmatisation of lone motherhood within a climate of increased benefit stigmatisation is explored in order to establish the backdrop against which lone mothers' lived experiences are explored.

### **Policy context**

This research offers a qualitative study of experiences of lone mothers living in two locations during an era of political economy characterised by welfare reform and fiscal

austerity. Clarke and Newman (2012) use the 'alchemy of austerity' metaphor to contend that the 2008 banking crisis and subsequent global recession was used to garner consent for state retrenchment that was already under way. Welfare reform measures instigated by the previous Labour administration were introduced to Parliament by the Coalition Government under the Welfare Reform Bill in February 2011. The Welfare Reform Act 2012 set a target of reducing benefit costs by £15bn by the end of its term of office (CSEI, 2013). This restructuring of welfare marks the most dramatic changes to the UK welfare system in fifty years (Taylor-Gooby, 2013). Cuts to social provision planned by the administration for 2010-2015 amounted to the deepest regression in public spending nationally to date (Taylor-Gooby, 2013).

Lone parents experience financial disadvantage (DWP, 2011) and are among millions of people affected by reductions to services and expenditure; localisation of the Social Fund and Council Tax Benefit; withdrawal of SureStart funding and maternity grants; a freeze on child benefits, and caps on benefits (Graham and McQuaid, 2014). In addition to these general changes are a series of measures affecting lone parents specifically (Gingerbread, 2013; DWP, 2013; Graham and McQuaid, 2014). Some half a million single parents have been adversely affected by changes to Housing Benefit rules limiting payments according to number of bedrooms deemed adequate (Gingerbread, 2013). The direction of welfare policy over the past three decades has tended towards reducing state expenditure, increasing compulsion to work and benefit conditionality. This direction of travel was accelerated sharply under the Coalition Government, with reduced eligibility for claimants and greatly increased use of sanctions for those failing to comply (Field and Forsay, 2016). Conditionality on benefits, enshrined in a 'claimant commitment' drawn up by benefits advisors, sets out requirements and conditions for receiving benefits and the consequences of not meeting them (DWP, 2013). According to research for the Department of Work and Pensions, Lone Parent Obligations have prompted more lone parents to move into work than previous government measures and, significantly, this does not appear to have encouraged lone parents to have more children to remain eligible for Income Support (Avram et al., 2013). Two decades of policies to increase lone parents' labour market participation appear to have had a major impact, as the proportion of lone parents in work rose from 44% in 1996 to 66% in 2015 (Labour Force Survey, 2015).

A review of 'grey' literature throws up numerous reports by charities, which raise concerns about the negative impact of public sector austerity and overhaul of the benefits system upon lone parents. Research commissioned by Gingerbread, for example, found a parent working more than nine hours per week and on minimum wage is only £1 an hour better off for working after childcare costs are taken into account (Hirsch, 2012). Other research suggests that single parents are the 'biggest losers' under increasing conditionality on

benefits, particularly as significant employment barriers remain for those attempting to manage work and caring roles (De Angosti and Brewer, 2013). A report by centre-right think tank Policy Exchange (2014) recognises 'significant barriers' to their employment. A National Audit Office report for the Department of Work and Pensions indicated that almost one in four claimants had been sanctioned and questioned the consistency and efficacy of sanctions (NAO, 2014). Analysis by Gingerbread (2014a) found single parents are disproportionately affected by benefits sanctions and are more likely to be wrongly sanctioned than other claimants.

Although policy changes affect lone parents regardless of gender, statistical analysis details the disproportionate impact of recession, austerity and welfare reform on women (e.g. Women's Budget Group, 2013; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012; Fawcett Society, 2013). A study for the Scottish Government found the benefits targeted by the Coalition Government's deficit reduction policy were more likely to be claimed by women and lone mothers were the group most disadvantaged by changes (Communities ASD, 2013). There is then, considerable evidence to suggest that lone mothers incur double disadvantage in the prevailing policy context. Changes that came into force in April 2017 mean that single parents with children as young as three now need to demonstrate that they are actively seeking work (DWP, 2017). The disproportionate impact of additional benefit caps that came into effect on the same date on single parents has been highlighted by analysts and trade unions (Hood and Joyce, 2016; GMB, 2014). A judicial review ruled in June 2017 that the cap discriminates against single parents with children under two, who face prohibitive childcare costs and struggle to find appropriately flexible work for the 16 hours required to escape the cap (Gingerbread, 2017). Campaigners (CPAG, 2017) also warn that limiting Universal Credit to the first two children in a family for new claims, as of April 2017, could create disincentives for single parents to form new, 'blended families'.

The targeting of lone mothers for employment uptake and increasing benefit conditionality now positions them very firmly as 'worker citizens' (Haux, 2012). As with previously presented critiques of New Labour's welfare to work approach, a body of independent academic evaluation of recent welfare reform policies is critical of these measures. Arguments questioning both the practical efficacy and conceptualisations of human agency that underlie this policy framework are supported by analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. Survey findings indicate a substantial proportion of lone parents targeted by policy reform face considerable 'geographically situated structural issues' in accessing employment (Rafferty and Wiggan, 2011:16). Rafferty and Wiggan's analysis highlights the continuing importance of structural constraints and finds that economically inactive lone mothers also remain more likely to have chronic employment barriers. They point out

that such evidence is played down in policies that focus on behavioural drivers towards lone parents' participation in the workforce.

Haux (2012) describes how the shift from 'social' to 'worker' model of citizenship has resulted in additional pressure on lone parents who are struggling to balance employment and child care responsibilities. She assesses women's multiple disadvantages to show that age of the youngest child is an incorrect gauge of their ability to work. She names five factors that are more salient than children's age in affecting opportunities for labour market participation: family composition; health of the child; health of the parent; work orientation; and the local labour market. Davies (2012) also questions the efficacy of re-categorising parents of children aged over five as 'unemployed' in her evaluation of the potential impact of welfare reform on lone parents. This approach, she argues, re-opens, 'old debates about who deserves financial support from the state' by presenting a discourse based on individualisation, which takes 'a moral position advocating the inherent "goodness" of engagement with the paid labour market', without taking specific challenges of running a household on a single income into account (2012: 16-7).

Ridge and Millar's longitudinal, qualitative research, which began in 2003 and produced periodic reports (2008; 2011; 2013), found lone mothers still struggled to achieve an adequate standard of living despite evidence of the 'hard working' behaviour that welfare reform aims to encourage. They found that employment sustainability involves an active agential process of managing work and childcare on the part of the whole family, including children. The support of extended family members also plays an important role. The 34 mothers in the latest round of interviews (2013) lived in the South East and Yorkshire regions and had previously been in receipt of benefits. Although the women in the study reported being better off financially since being in work, their income remained relatively low and they continued to experience financial insecurity; almost all relied on Tax Credits to make up an adequate income. Participants in Ridge and Millar's (2013) research thought lone mothers should be supported rather than compelled to work, and that the timing, type and extent of work was dependent upon individual circumstances. At the time of the first round of interviews, mothers who had children under 16 were not required to work. Ridge and Millar believe that a policy expectation for all lone parents with young children to work, along with cuts in Tax Credits, have severe implications for the living standards for working low income lone mother families.

Analysis of Household Panel Survey Data and a qualitative survey of 20 lone mothers who had some experience of depression found paid work to be strongly associated with improvements in mental health (Harkness, 2013). However, it also emphasised that manageable hours were needed to achieve a satisfactory balance between employment

and childcare responsibilities as a crucial factor in mental health improvements and that this outweighs financial gains. Welfare reforms which increase pressure to take unsuitable jobs may increase cases of depression, it concludes. Kowalewska (2015) also assesses the effects of the prevailing 'make work pay' agenda on lone mothers by calculating two women's modelled incomes and incentives for a range of working hours and wage rates. She concludes that financial returns begin to diminish once work exceeds just six hours at an average wage and nine at minimum wage. While tougher conditionality may still push many lone parents to work longer, lack of jobs could undermine the ability to meet increased work expectations, she argues.

Further academic critique centres around conceptualisations of agency contained in the current policy emphasis on labour market participation, which goes hand in hand with a tendency for policy-makers to underplay structural barriers to employment for lone parents. Wright (2012) examines conceptualisations of human agency drawn from social policy literature and identifies a gap between accounts of agency grounded in the lived experiences of social actors (policy makers, public workers and service users) and hypothetical models of individual agency (for example, 'rational economic man'). She argues that while individualised culpability and personal responsibility have been invoked, agency remains underdeveloped in academic social policy literature. The behaviour of more powerful social actors, such as policy makers and employers also remains unexamined. Contesting the notion of distinct amoral 'underclass' behaviour, she concludes that agency is, 'context specific, negotiated and differentiated in relation to identities' (Wright, 2012:2.2).

Having analysed spatial data at local authority level, Whitworth (2013) also argues that the prevailing policy approach is built upon a highly individualised account of agency, which neglects social and structural contexts within which individuals operate. He highlights an acute shortage of job opportunities that are compatible with childcare responsibilities. This structural situation is more relevant than behavioural factors in preventing lone parents' participation in labour markets, he argues. He concludes by raising concerns about the effect reforms based around such individualised conceptions of agency may have upon parents' and children's well-being. Policy changes that were being implemented whilst the fieldwork was being conducted have continued apace under subsequent Conservative government administrations and evidence suggests that lone parent families continue to be adversely affected under welfare cuts (e.g. CPAG, 2017).

### **Discourse, deservingness and the post-welfare state**

This chronological review of literature on policy and discourse on lone motherhood began by looking at gendered 'moral discourses', which have been reprised over centuries. Before

looking at contemporary hegemonic discourse, it is useful to reiterate Brodie's (1997) point about the role of 'meso-discourse' on poverty, non-conformity and state intervention in private life. Wacquant (2010) argues that neo-liberal democracies in Western Europe have sought transformation from Keynesian 'Nanny States', to authoritarian 'Daddy States'. This shift, he argues, is characterised in policy terms by prioritisation of 'duties over rights, sanction over support' (Wacquant, 2009: 290). This is, in his view, a climate where self-regulation of individuals ensues. Viewing politics as 'hegemonic struggle', Schram believes: 'The power of the discourse of deservingness under grids social welfare policy in the Western world,' (2012: 264). Under this hegemonic discourse, self-sufficient citizens are contrasted with vulnerable subjects without mention of structural poverty, he argues. The relationship between neo-liberal attitudes enshrined in Coalition and Conservative Government policies and prevailing deservingness discourse can therefore be understood in terms of the proximity between 'recognition' and resource allocation noted by Sayer (2012). It is in this context, Prideux contends, that underclass theorists' 'age-old illegitimacy arguments' have been revived (2011:22).

There is clear evidence that negative media coverage and stigmatisation of people who are dependent upon benefits increased in a context of austerity politics and welfare state retrenchment, as demonstrated by a series of sociological and social policy sources. Asking the question 'why do people stigmatise the poor at a time of rapidly increasing inequality?' Taylor-Gooby, describes how 'a decline in sympathy for the working-age poor' occurred during a two-year period in which use of the word 'scrounger' in broadsheet newspaper reports doubled (2013: 35). Baumberg (2016) reports the results of a 2012 nationally representative survey in the UK, which found one-third of claimants reporting some degree of stigma around their claim and one in four people indicating that a stigma-related reason would make them less likely to claim benefits. Contrary to claims that a 'dependency culture' exists, respondents in high-claim areas were more likely to stigmatise benefit claimants, both before and after accounting for other factors, according to this report. Taylor-Gooby (2014) discusses survey evidence of a continued rise in assumptions that benefits function as work disincentives and decrease in support for more spending on the poor. He dissects ways in which communications by politicians and mass media demonise benefit claimants; with distinctions between 'strivers' seeking to take responsibility for their own lives and 'skivers', who are depicted as living by different rules.

This distinction between 'skivers' and 'strivers' was first drawn in a Conservative Party conference speech by then Chancellor George Osborne and circulated in media culture and everyday conversation, according to Jensen (2014). She describes how, 'public debate about the welfare state apparently exploded' with the prevalence of new genre of reality television programmes known as 'poverty porn'. She critically examines how programmes

such as, *We Pay Your Benefits*, *Benefits Britain*, *On Benefits and Proud*, *Britain on the Fiddle* and *Benefits Street* foster new forms of 'common sense' about welfare and worklessness. Support for welfare reform is thereby generated through populist language (Jensen, 2014). Jensen and Tyler (2015) argue for a 'cultural political economy' approach (Jessop, 2010), which directs attention towards mechanisms through which an anti-welfare common-sense is formed and legitimated.

Findings from research by Shildrick and McDonald (2013) indicate that stigmatisation of 'the poor' can be intense among people who are themselves living in material hardship. During interviews with 60 people living in churn between low-paid, insecure jobs and unemployment in the North East of England, participants denied their own poverty and morally condemned 'the poor'. Shildrick and McDonald claim that this reflects long-running stigma and shame that has been given extra force by prevailing forms of 'scroungerphobia'. They believe that discourses around the 'undeserving poor' articulate a more general contemporary prejudice against the working class in the context of depoliticised working class consciousness: 'It is not hard to read hegemonic domination in the accounts we gathered', they write, 'in orthodoxy that blames "the poor" for their poverty' (2013: 300).

These links between stigmatising discourse, welfare state retrenchment and judgement of deservingness thus warrant brief examination of theoretical insights into the legitimation of political power and class inequality. Marx (1846) argues that legitimacy of the ruling class is maintained by controlling what is regarded as moral and desirable and the working class judging themselves and others against this standard. Dissection of the relationship between legitimation of the powerful and self-management of the less powerful became a cornerstone of critical theory (e.g. Althusser, cited Castells, 2010). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), symbolic domination and 'symbolic violence' are tacit forms of social and cultural domination, which create and reproduce inequalities of gender, class and ethnicity by imposition of meaning on groups or classes in such a way that power relations are internalised and experienced as legitimate.

Skeggs and Loveday (2012) draw on symbolic violence along with Bourdieu's concept of capitals to connect legitimation of power with stigmatising political discourse and class delegitimation. They argue that 'class distance' has grown and people are increasingly asked to 'perform' and 'defend' their worth as hegemonic discourse encourages 'moral evaluations' as a way to, 'legitimate the position and interests of those who draw the distance' (2012: 473). Based upon empirical evidence from focus groups involving working class participants, they contend that subjective self-worth and denigration become more significant when the politics of recognition go hand in hand with economic austerity. They

describe how participants in focus groups were angry at being subject to the 'constant judgement' of 'the middle class gaze'. The participants were keenly aware of an injustice of being judged and de-legitimated on the basis of class positioning that was purely 'an accident of birth'. Skeggs and Loveday's study draws upon Bourdieu's (1989) concepts of 'capitals' and 'symbolic violence', to explicitly frame class in terms of judgement and 'de-legitimation' within the neo-liberal socio-political context (2012: 485-7). Atkinson et al. (2012) similarly employ symbolic violence in terms of a legitimacy/legitimation axis within the context of neo-liberal austerity politics:

The dominated class suffer most from both economic violence born of neo-liberal capitalist orthodoxy and the symbolic violence that accompany the means of attaining, in however limited a way, the forms of recognition legitimated by those with the power to legitimate (2012: 29).

Tyler makes a convincing argument that stigma, 'legitimises the reproduction and entrenchment of inequalities and injustices' (2013: 8). She draws upon arguments by Wacquant (2010, cited Tyler, 2013) that class inequalities have gone hand in hand with heightened stigmatisation in neo-liberal democracies. Including working class lone mothers among vilified groups in contemporary Britain, Tyler proposes that 'abjection' is the key mechanism through which, 'public consent is procured' for policies that accentuate inequalities (2013: 5). Current responses to unemployment are 'penal', in Tyler's view, and 'citizenship is not simply a description of status, but a productive concept which pivots on the distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' (2013: 191). Accordingly, citizens are constantly being judged and having to prove their legitimacy with some regarded as 'failed citizens' rather than inequality itself being challenged.

### **Lone mothers at the sharp end of heightened benefits stigma**

Literature discussed so far indicates that a demographic shift towards greater diversity in family forms has not necessarily been matched by improvements in the material and social position of lone mothers. The review of historical attitudes towards lone motherhood at the start of this chapter described how Malthus' (1988 [1798]) pronouncements on the poor as lazy, promiscuous and lacking self-discipline were reinvigorated during underclass debates of the early 1990s (e.g. Reekie, 1998). While a convincing case is made that stigmatisation increased under the prevailing policy and hegemonic framework (e.g. Taylor-Gooby, 2013), it appears that vilification of lone mothers per se may have been subsumed by the inclusion of lone mothers under a broader range of categories of individuals who are stigmatised for dependency on state benefits.

Within a 'discourse of deservingness' dominating political rhetoric and media coverage, portrayals of benefit dependency in popular culture appear to position lone mothers at the sharp end of a 'deserving' or 'undeserving' dichotomy. The proliferation of reality television

shows commonly targets them among people vilified for benefit dependency. The Channel 4 documentary series *Benefits Street*, tag-lined 'one of Britain's most benefit-dependent streets', first aired in January 2014, prior to the start of the research and was still being discussed in the media when the fieldwork was conducted. It is notable that the media emphasised her lone mother status when discussing 'White Dee', one of the street's residents who became the particular focus of their attention after the series aired (Price, 2016).

Women bringing up children alone have long been the subject of negative stereotyping in popular culture. Lawler (2004) uses contrasting coverage of middle and working class mothers to exemplify the media role in perpetuating negative judgement through ascription of 'normalised' and 'pathologised' identities at the expense of attention to structural inequalities. McRobbie (2004) combines feminist theory with Bourdieu's (1989) concept of 'symbolic violence', or the perpetuation of inequalities through the perpetuation of a vision of the world that is regarded as legitimate, to critique the pejorative labelling of working class lone mothers. She describes a dynamic which, 'reiterates a specifically feminine form of symbolic violence as a process of class differentiation' (2004: 101-2). Tyler similarly establishes a clear association between, 'the fetishisation of the chav mum' and reinforcement of class and gender inequalities (2008: 26). The term 'pramface' entered mass circulation in the early 2000s as a term of abuse for a young working class mother on benefits (Tyler, 2011). In her dissection of 'pramfaced girls and the class politics of maternal TV', Tyler describes how the unfortunate young mother of social realist documentaries such as *Cathy Come Home* in the 1960s 'morphed into the pramfaced girl' depicted in more recent programmes such as *Underage and Pregnant*. Tyler draws on Wood and Skeggs' (2011) argument about the role of such programmes in 'normatively mediated' identity. She writes:

In neo-liberal Britain, poverty is not perceived or represented as a social problem but as individual failing, and in the case of teen motherhood as a pathological subjectivity (Tyler, 2011: 211).

Commenting on this subjectivisation, Gillies (2012) shows the downplaying of structural economics as a cause of child poverty and accentuation of worklessness, educational failure and 'family breakdown'. Norms concerning the 'proper family' that are articulated in dominant discourse have remained governed by nuclear family ideals despite the prevalence of divorce and lone parenting (Chambers, 2012). As Prime Minister, David Cameron (2010-2016) notably equated 'Broken Britain' rhetoric with family breakdown (Evans and Thane, 2012). Berrington (2014) points to the inclusion of the proportion of children living with two natural parents as an indicator of 'progress' in his government's indicators of 'progress' as evidence of privileging this family form. Moralising discourse

over family breakdown recalls 'underclass' discourse of the early 1990s even though such moral panics are not substantiated with evidence, argues Savage (2012). A report entitled 'Forgotten Families' by the Centre for Social Justice (2012) also brings to mind earlier New Right pronouncements in decrying demographic trends towards cohabitation, divorce and lone parenthood and equating family stability with marriage. Edwards and Gillies (2011) point out that state involvement in everyday parenting practices offers 'normative guidelines' about how to bring up children based on middle class models of parenting. It is unsurprising in light of this backdrop, that three out of four respondents in a poll by single parents' organisation Gingerbread (2014) said they experience stigma.

Dermott and Pomati (2016) use UK Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey data to critique political discourse that increasingly positions lone parents as 'deficient' parents. Based on a sample of 2,161 couple parents and 373 lone parents, they argue that differences in parenting practices between one and two parent families are negligible. In their view, the two-parent married family is not only a normative ideal but explicitly supported in policies as a model of family organisation (2016: 3). In contrast to being deemed irresponsible, researchers found lone parents were significantly more likely than couple parents to have cut back on expenditure in the previous year. A total of 27% reported having skimmed on food for themselves 'often' compared to 9% of couples, and they were three times more likely to have bought second-hand clothes instead of new ones for themselves. Dermott and Pomati raise an interesting question, which is taken up in the present research:

It is difficult to disentangle the degree to which it is lone parents per se who are being targeted in political statements – which is the impression from references to 'fractured families' and 'broken homes' – or whether lone parents are only positioned as problematic ...if they are also reliant on significant state support because of their poor financial resources? (2016: 6-7).

Given the attention paid to lone motherhood in political rhetoric and media coverage, especially during early 1990s 'underclass' debates, the voices of lone mothers themselves appear strikingly absent from public discourse. Researchers have found a gulf exists between ways in which lone mothers are portrayed and their personal perspectives. According to Atkinson et al.:

Policy agendas, political rhetoric and news interweave to construct a definition of lone parents which bears little resemblance to how they may see themselves (Atkinson et al. 1998: 1).

McDermott and Graham's (2005) review of material on young mothers highlights the absence of insights from qualitative research among mothers themselves as a means of informing policy. The fact that debates on issues affecting lone mothers in the public sphere rarely involve women themselves is symptomatic of their marginalisation, according to Clavering (2010). Presentations of self and status were the focus of a

qualitative study by Oerton and Atkinson (1999) involving 15 non-economically active lone mothers in South Wales. They describe lone mothers as, 'simultaneously lost and excessively visible' within a 'complex matrix of discursive constructions' (1999: 248). They note that stigmatising discourses provided a context for the 'legitimate' introduction of policy changes by the Conservative Government at the time of their research. In a study of New Labour's subsequent 'welfare to work' approach, Churchill (2007) also examines lone mothers' subjective perceptions of ideology, policy and discourse. She argues that policy plays down experiences of everyday parenting.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has positioned the investigation of lone mothers' experiences of stigma within the historical and policy and discursive context. The chapter began by looking at historical stigmatisation of non-marital birth and charting the reprisal of an il/legitimacy dichotomy from pre-industrial times through to underclass debates of early 1990s. Where Malinwoski's (1930) functionalist 'principle of legitimacy' prevailed upon family policy for much of the C20th, exploring critical perspectives on the origins of legitimacy (Engels, 1988; Foucault, 1981; Millett, 1990) illustrated how material concerns and patriarchal interests lie at the heart of reproductive il/legitimacy. These interests have been dressed up in gendered 'moral discourses' (Song, 1996) spanning centuries. Reekie (1998) makes a strong case that, despite the end of *de jure* discrimination against non-marital reproduction, an i/llegitimacy construct has retained significance in a symbolic sense. Carabine argues that while lone motherhood is now more accepted, it is still not awarded the same status as the heterosexual, married two-parent family and a 'hierarchy of maternal legitimacy' positions some lone mothers as, 'more acceptable than others' (2001: 301).

The chapter then went on to delineate how public policies affecting lone mothers are bound up in formulations of legitimate citizenship, which are, in turn, bound up in formulations of gender normativity. Feminist arguments (Walby, 1994; Lister, 1997) that citizenship is profoundly 'gendered', despite being formally gender neutral, are supported by an extensive body of work highlighting tensions between lone mothers' breadwinner and carer roles under the prevailing 'adult worker' model, which regards employment as the route to legitimate citizenship (e.g. Haux, 2012). The final section of this chapter provided an overview of the political backdrop against which interviews with lone mothers involved in this study took place. It outlined welfare reform and fiscal austerity measures and discussed intensification of employment requirements placed upon single parents. It showed how lone mothers are negatively positioned within discourses of 'deservingness'

surrounding benefit claims, whereby inequalities have become individualised as personal failings (eg: Tyler 2013) and to be working class is to be 'judged' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012).

'Legitimation is the key mechanism in the conversion to power', according to Skeggs (1997: 8). In tracing the history of stigmatisation of lone mothers, this chapter has demonstrated how legitimacy is a theme that runs from ancient legal inequity of non-marital birth through to contemporary de-legitimation of benefit dependency. Establishing stigmatisation of lone motherhood in terms of a legitimacy/de-legitimation dynamic also offers a valuable resource for taking forward the research conceptually. The following chapter positions the study in relation to key sociological debates and describes development of 'the prism of legitimacy' as a conceptual framework through which to view the research. The absence of the voices of lone mothers from media and policy discourses underscores the need to counterbalance political and media depictions with women's own subjective viewpoints, which is an aim this research seeks to fulfil. Furthermore, whereas analysis of literature reveals that working class lone mothers tend to be misrepresented in media and policy debates, lone mothers from more affluent areas appear to be largely missing from academic analysis as well as popular depictions. This is an omission the present study seeks to rectify. Whilst discussion here establishes the structural and cultural context in which lone motherhood can be viewed as a 'de-legitimated' identity, the following chapter focuses on lone mothers' agential mediation of stigma.

## **Chapter 3**

# **Lone motherhood and stigma as lived experience**

### **Introduction**

Chapter Two established the historical, discursive and political background for the research. This chapter now situates examination of lone mothers' lived experiences of stigma in relation to pertinent sociological debates and previous empirical studies, and outlines its key areas of investigation. The first section relates discussions of agential behaviour and structural conditions to perspectives on trajectories of change in family life and establishes the need to consider the interplay of agential and structural factors when examining lone mothers' experiences of stigma. The next section considers the significance of class and spatial location when studying lone motherhood. In doing so, it establishes the rationale for conducting comparative fieldwork involving women in two locations with contrasting socio-economic profiles, drawing on feminist applications of Bourdieu's capitals (Bourdieu, 1989; Skeggs, 1997; Gillies, 2007). Whilst literature looking specifically at lone motherhood and stigma in the UK has tended to focus on teenage mothers or those in deprived areas, a more rounded account of stigma is sought through involvement of mothers in a more diverse range of situations. The final section of this chapter examines common themes arising from previous qualitative accounts of lone mothers' agential mediation of stigma and assesses the literature to determine specific conceptual and practical issues to be addressed when researching lone mothers' experiences of stigma. The chapter concludes by encapsulating key conceptual ideas in the 'prism of legitimacy' conceptual framework, which introduces SSL as an investigative tool.

### **Agency, structure or both?**

This section firstly examines perspectives on trajectory of change in family life and conceptualisations of agency and structure underlying those approaches. Having considered perspectives denoted by Gillies (2003) as 'demoralisation', 'democratisation' and 'enduring power relations', it establishes the need to recognise both continuity and change and consider the importance of 'diversity', rather than decline, in family life. It then discusses ways in which the relative significance of agency and structure is addressed in literature on lone motherhood in particular. Empirical studies are drawn on to reveal limitations in the 'individualisation' thesis (Giddens, 1992), upon which the 'democratisation' perspective is based, when exploring lone motherhood. A tendency to

either over-emphasise agency, or to over-emphasise 'enduring power relations' at the expense of recognising agency, can be discerned in policy, media and some academic discourse. The section therefore concludes by establishing the rationale for adopting an approach that enables the inter-play of personal agency and social structure to be examined.

### **'Decline', 'democratisation' and 'diversity' in family life**

Gillies characterises sociological perspectives on British family life as: 'breakdown and demoralisation, democratisation and egalitarianism, or continuity and enduring power relations' (2003: 15). As well as differing on the extent and desirability of change, these perspectives differ in the emphasis they place on the role of structure and agency in women's reproductive, partnering and parenting choices, as summarised in *Table 2: Conceptualisation of agency and structure in perspectives on change in family life* (see p.53). The 'demoralisation' perspective, articulated in underclass theories and New Right political ideology discussed in the previous chapter (Murray, 1984; Morgan, 1995), is associated with a belief in the value of traditional family forms and views lone parenthood in terms of breakdown in familial commitments (Chambers, 2012). Literature discussed in that chapter provided evidence as to material and patriarchal motivations behind such moralising discourses on 'legitimate' reproduction (e.g. Reekie, 1998) and offered arguments that counter a tendency to overemphasise what might be called 'negative agency' on the part of lone mothers. In depicting 'greedy single mothers' having babies in order to manipulate the benefits system, demoralisation discourse implies an intentionality and anormativity that is not borne out in evidence (e.g. Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992).

In contrast with 'demoralisation', the 'democratisation' perspective, put forward by Giddens (1992), Beck (1992), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995; 2002) and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and grounded within 'individualisation' theories, is largely optimistic about the demise of structural constraints and potential for 'de-traditionalisation' to increase equality, increased reflexivity and intimacy in adult relationships. This emphasis on 'the pure relationship', personal choice and 'transformation of intimacy' (Giddens, 1992), centres around changes in gender roles, separation of sex and reproduction, greater female choice, labour market participation and the increase in non-traditional or 'elective' families. Jamieson (1998; 1999) was among the first of many sociologists who have mounted robust challenges to the individualisation perspective. She points out that there is little empirical evidence to support the individualisation thesis and demonstrates how its emphasis on personal choice underestimates the significance of enduring patterns of kinship. Critiquing inattention to gender in Giddens' (1992) portrayal of increased equality and intimacy, Jamieson (1999) describes how personal life remains structured by inequalities. The reflexivity of many mothers can be severely hampered, she argues, by a

need to concentrate on pressing practical and material demands. Having reviewed literature and characterised perspectives on family change, Gillies' (2003) cites strong empirical evidence for the continued importance of family ties and makes the case for a, 'largely enduring status quo, particularly in terms of gender and class dynamics' (2003:19). Crompton (2006), furthermore, demonstrates the inter-relationship between these class and gender inequalities.

Whilst Gillies (2003) characterises three perspectives, drawing further on literature suggests a fourth approach is both desirable and practicable. Important insights into trends towards divorce, cohabitation, lone parenthood, same-sex relationships and 'families of choice' (Weeks, et al., 2001) can be taken from work which views 'new' directions in family relations (e.g. Silva and Smart, 1999; Morgan 1999; Smart and Neale, 1999) in terms of continuity *and* change and emphasises 'diversity' rather than 'decline' or 'democratisation'. Rather than seeing the family as an institution, Morgan's (1999) conceptualisation of 'family practices' has been particularly influential in enabling the dynamism of relationships to be taken on board. Silva and Smart (1999) discuss families in terms of diversity and changing norms, but point out that this does not mean a dangerous decline in family life. Furthermore, Smart and Neale (1999), whose work on divorce is influenced by 'family practices', warn that it is important not to overstate the degree of discontinuity. As Smart puts it, families 'adapt' to divorce rather than 'disintegrating' (2007: 40). Critiquing Giddens' (1992) 'ungendered' conceptualisation of reflexivity, Smart and Neal (1999) stress that personal choices remain connected to social structures. May (2011a) points out that by opting for the term 'personal life' in providing a coherent perspective on diverse intimate relationships in late modernity, Smart (2007) avoids associations with the 'theoretical baggage' of 'individualisation'. May (2011b) also points out that personal life is not separate from social structures and directs attention towards sociological study of the intersection between the two.

Having briefly located lone motherhood research within broader perspectives on family change, this research therefore aims to: recognise family diversity rather than decline; and explore both structural continuity and transformation in family practices. Having considered these demands in relation to broader debates in social theory, the morphogenic/morphostatic model proposed by Archer (1996; 2012; 2014), suggests a means of examining lone motherhood in terms of continuity and change and the value of her theorisation of agency and structure (2000; 2003; 2007) in relation to this research is discussed below.

*Table 2: Conceptualisation of agency and structure in perspectives on change in family life*

| PERSPECTIVE                  | DIRECTION OF CHANGE   | AGENCY/STRUCTURE            |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Demoralisation               | Decline               | Negative agency             |
| Democratisation              | Diversity             | Positive agency             |
| Enduring power relations     | Continuity            | Lack of agency              |
| Continuity <i>and</i> change | Diversity not decline | Agency <i>and</i> structure |

### **Agency and structure in studies of lone motherhood**

Roseneil and Mann (1996) frame perspectives on lone motherhood within the context of agency/structure debates. Whereas individualisation perspectives (Giddens, 1992; Beck; 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) regard actors as reflexive beings dealing with freedoms and risks, 'defenders of lone mothers have found it hard to acknowledge women's agency,' they write (Roseneil and Mann, 1996: 207). Key sources in lone motherhood literature (e.g. Duncan and Edwards 1999; Mitchell and Green, 2002; May, 2006; Morris, 2012) vary in the emphasis they place on agency or structure, but appear to share the view that individualisation has limitations when applied to lone mothers' lived experiences and research requires attention to both agential and structural factors.

Work by Duncan and Edwards (1999) has proved highly influential in lone motherhood research. Their comprehensive research in the mid-1990s featured data analysis and qualitative interviews to explore experiences of women from different countries (UK, USA, Sweden and Germany), social classes, ethnicities and localities. Their investigation of lone mothers' orientation to paid work in relation to both structural factors and participants' subjectivity, found that 'gendered moral rationalities' governed choices and constraints, rather than the neo-classic concept of 'individual economic rationality' (1999:2).

Duncan and Edwards state that 'both sides of the structure agency debate can be seen to be correct' (1999: 109). Klett-Davies (2007) argues that their 'gendered moral rationalities' argument places too much emphasis on agency and undervalues agency however. She used narrative interviews to compare experiences of 70 state dependent lone mothers in London and Berlin in the late 1990s. Having interviewed participants from a range of backgrounds, including mothers who were actively pursuing 'alternative' lifestyles without men, she stresses the diversity of their experiences. She argues for looking at lone motherhood in a holistic way, rather than addressing it only in material terms. Assessing the individualisation thesis, she finds value in its scope for recognising diversity and plots 'ideal types' ('pioneers', 'copers' and 'strugglers') in terms of a

continuum of choice and constraints. She believes that it is possible to be 'pioneering' despite being dependent on state benefits. A number of interviewees involved in her research were much more positive about lone motherhood than dominant discourse suggests and demonstrated resourcefulness and valued time with their children while not working. In terms of the theme of legitimacy, it is interesting to note that some of Klett-Davies' research participants saw welfare payments as 'a legitimate source of income' for their caring role, while others used constraints, including lack of employment or adequate childcare, to 'legitimise' full-time mothering (2007:5)

Despite many examples of her interviewees displaying agency, Klett-Davies (2007) concludes that individualisation offers theoretical insights but is 'too narrow' and the individualisation thesis was not borne out in her data. It does not sufficiently link mothers' experiences to external matters of class, gender, race, poverty, employment and spatial location, which affected women to different degrees, she concludes. She therefore believes further attention to the role of traditional structural constraints is required and suggests a 'new line of enquiry' on the extent to which lone mothers' lives are still constrained by structural factors, including gender, class and ethnicity should be pursued (Klett-Davies, 2007: 138).

Mitchell and Green's (2002) community based action research looking at young mothers' identities and kinship networks led them to critique theories of individualisation. They stress that, while many of the women in the study were reflexive actors, there is strong evidence for the continuing importance of class, gender and locale. Individualism and life-style choice tend to be dependent upon, 'practicalities such as socio-economic resources and opportunities they did not have access to', they found (2002:10). Following research on mothers' intimate relationships, Morris (2012) also draws attention to lack of adequate evidence for the 'transformation of intimacy'. Drawing on Morgan's (1999) concept of 'family practices', May (2004b) shows how lone motherhood is influenced by women's position within 'webs' of broader family relationships, personal, social and historical context.

Duncan and Smith's analysis of family forms suggests structural factors have 'continuing importance', with a lack of empirical evidence to show individualisation occurring and reflexivity instead being hampered by 'lack of choice' (2006:25). Drawing on large datasets including Census information, they contend that family form is, 'deeply influenced by pre-existing local structural conditions' (2006: 29). They argue that this endorses Bourdieu's belief in the 'need to integrate structure and agency in explaining social practice' (2006:30). Furthermore, they argue that the individualisation concept, 'provides intellectual support for neo-liberal ideology' (Duncan and Smith, 2006:31).

Duncan (2011) seeks to examine how people's behaviour connects agency and structure and uses the concept of 'bricolage' to discuss how people use existing reference points to make sense of adaptive behaviours: 'this process of conserving social energy links in with the principle of social legitimation', he argues (2011:8). He further argues that decisions about personal lives are largely pragmatic within given contexts. Cohabiting couples see themselves as the same as married couples, hence 'legitimacy' appears to be socially not legally based in Duncan's schema. Behaviours therefore appear to be, 'structured by external social norms...in the context of local conditions and particular reference groups' (Duncan, 2011:3). This implies that both continuity and change are occurring simultaneously in contemporary British family life.

The case for continuity alongside change is also supported by a systematic review of literature on young motherhood by McDermott and Graham (2005). They found that, rather than being passive victims, young lone mothers could display reflexivity and resilience in the face of negative discourse, but were constrained by financial hardship and other structural factors. Common themes across studies they reviewed were: poor socio-economic circumstances; experience of stigma and judgement when accessing health, welfare and housing services; participants' prioritising the mother/child relationship; and the significance of kinship relations. Despite suffering financial hardship and being positioned outside boundaries of normative motherhood, the studies reviewed commonly found that young mothers displayed high levels of investment in creating a 'good mother' self-identity (McDermott and Graham, 2005). Mantovani and Thomas (2014) conducted research among 15 young black lone mothers, who were or had been in care and are 'positioned at the intersection of social structures of disadvantage' and emphasise the need to address structural disadvantage when exploring stigma. Mantovani and Thomas also note however that, although facing multiple disadvantages and acutely aware of stigma, these 16-19 year-old women exerted agency in pursuing good parenting and educational goals and their efforts to protect their children from stigma. May (2006) argues that reflexivity is dependent upon knowledge and material resources. She suggests that an approach that combines 'the insights of postmodern theory while not losing sight of structural inequalities' is required to understand 'reflexivity and non-reflexivity' (May, 2006: 6)

### **Exploring agency/structure interplay**

The literature discussed thus far contains considerable evidence that structural inequalities still inhibit personal freedom and that socially constructed gender norms and material resources remain significant in lone mothers' everyday lives (Jamieson, 1998; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; McDermott and Graham, 2005; Duncan and Smith, 2006; Duncan, 2011). The status quo is not simply enduring however, demographic change and capacity for

agency cannot be overlooked. This study therefore seeks to examine ways in which roles are both socially ingrained and actively negotiated and how this affects experiences of stigma.

Duncan regards Giddens' structuration theory as 'heuristically valuable' but leading to 'an explanatory impasse' and believes that Bourdieu's habitus concept comes closest to resolving agency/structure intersections, but the problem of how exactly agents both 'follow rules and exercise agency' remains unresolved (Duncan, 2011: 6: 7). Attention is thus required to both individual meanings and actions and societal factors and, crucially, their inter-relationship. For the purposes of this research, the approach to agency/structure dialectics put forward by Archer (2000; 2003; 2007) best chimes with an aim of detailed exploration of agential mediation of structural factors. Archer draws upon realist ontological stratification to distinguish between social agents and the cultural and structural conditions with which they interact so as to adequately explore their inter-connection.

While there is insufficient space to do justice to Archer's elaborate theorisation, ideas that are most germane in considering lone mothers' experiences of stigma in relation to agency and structure can be examined. Archer critiques paradigms which imply either, 'upwards conflation in which the single property of rationality is held to make both human beings and also their society' or, 'downwards conflation in which the effects of socialisation impress themselves' on malleable beings (2000: 5). She argues that efforts by Bourdieu (1989) and Giddens (1992) to move beyond subjectivism and objectivism result in a 'central conflation', whereby agency is collapsed into structure. To overcome this, and take into account the temporal element of agency/structure interplay, Archer develops an alternative 'morphogenic' approach (1998), which involves attention to both human behaviour and social context to consider social reproduction and transformation, or continuity and change, over time (King, 2010). Archer describes 'morphostatis' as the reproduction of social configurations and norms; whereas 'morphogenesis' is transformation of the status quo, with 'feedback' mechanisms encouraging either stasis or change (Archer, 2012; 2014).

Referring back to shifts in material circumstances and cultural representations of lone motherhood discussed in Chapter Two, the 'morphogenic' perspective is relevant in being, 'not only dualistic but sequential' and time is thus accorded a role in social theory as a theoretical variable (Archer, 1996: xxv). When applied to lone motherhood, this has potential to help investigate women's agency in relation to social continuity and social change. The appeal of Archer's approach is its precision in distinguishing between Personal Emergent Properties (PEPs), Structural Emergent Properties (SEPs) and Cultural Emergent

Properties (CEPs) in order to explore their interaction (Archer, 2000: 7). PEPs are agential powers including self-consciousness, reflection, plans, ambitions and pursuit of interests, which 'ultimately enable people to reflex upon their social context and act reflexively towards it' (Archer, 2000: 308). SEPs include social systems, institutions and roles and are related to material resources and their distribution. They are acquired involuntarily and include class, ethnicity, privilege/ underprivileged, power/powerless, discrimination/life chances, propertied/property-less. CEPs include ideas, language, theories, values, beliefs, norms, which derive from past chains or interaction and can, 'exercise causal efficacy over the present generation' and be either reproduced or transformed (Archer, 2000: 216-218). SEPs and CEPs are 'mutually reinforcing', though they remain distinct, and their increasing interconnectivity is propelling accelerated morphogenesis (Archer, 2012; 2014).

In Archer's conceptualisation, agents have their own distinct powers and properties and are influenced, though not determined by pre-existent structures, which have causal powers of 'enablement' and 'constraint' (Carter and New, 2004). The strength of this theoretical approach, according to Archer, is that it, 're-vindicates real powers for real people who live in the real world' (2000: 10). Archer (2000) believes that embodied encounters instil our sense of self and others. This comprises; wellbeing in the natural order, performative achievements in the practical order and self-worth in the social order. It is in our confrontation with these orders that social identity emerges out of personal identity, she argues.

Lack of attention to class and gender may be considered a limitation in Archer's theorisation when examining those issues in this research. However, work by Sayer (2005; 2011), built upon a critical realist foundation and drawing heavily upon Bourdieu (1989) discussed below, is an influence upon examination of class in this study.<sup>4</sup> With regard to gender, New suggests that realist ontic depth can serve feminist interests by affording empirical weight to causal factors contributing to inequalities alongside the agential details of individual women's lives (1998: 368). Clegg (2006) offers a critical realist dissection of agency in feminism, which argues that the ontological primacy afforded by Archer offers a promising alternative when considering actors' subjectivity. Clegg believes that concepts such as PEPs, self-worth in social identity and internal conversations resonate with feminist concerns. Gunnarsson et al. (2016) point to synergies between critical realism and

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<sup>4</sup> Archer (2012) discusses 'concessions' between her work and that of Bourdieu that are proposed by other theorists (e.g. Elder Vass, 2007, cited Archer, 2012). Her reservations appear to centre chiefly upon differences as to his emphasis on 'habitus' to describe internalised social positions in what she sees as an increasingly morphogenic social world. However, it should be noted Bourdieu's concepts of 'capitals' (1989) and 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1992) are drawn upon discretely in this research.

increasing feminist interest in questions of ontology and materiality, which they believe can add weight to empirical investigation of factors contributing to inequality. Given the centrality of feminist values and theoretical insights to the exploration of lone motherhood, a need to synthesise critical realist and feminist commitments was a topic for reflection during data collection and analysis and this is discussed in the section on reflexive analysis in Chapter Four.

### **The significance of social class and spatial location?**

An ironic aside by the editor of a collection of feminist essays on lone motherhood (Silva, 1996) – that the Queen of England's six grandchildren were all living in lone mother households at one point – is a telling comment that lone motherhood spans all social classes. Most accounts refer only to working class mothers however, and recognising the paucity of research involving lone mothers in diverse positions left a gap in knowledge, which this research set about filling. Policy interventions and stigmatising discursive constructions have targeted working class mothers (McRobbie, 2004; Tyler, 2013). Historical sources tend to be limited almost exclusively to examining the lives of poor lone mothers (Evans and Thane, 2012). Middle class lone mothers are not visible in policy and media debates, according to Reekie, because they are regarded as less of a problem to society than so called, 'reckless working class single mothers who seek assistance from the state' (1998: 58). The need to consider the significance of social class to experiences of stigma is therefore highly pertinent in relation to agency/structure debates outlined above.

### **The socio-economics of family forms**

Arguments as to the significance of enduring power relations in the stigmatisation of lone mothers are backed up by a body of quantitative data demonstrating the relationship between socio-economics and family forms. Multivariate analysis by McKay (2003) identified a strong correlation between poor socio-economic background and lone parenthood via both birth to single women and partnership breakdown. Despite teenage pregnancy rates having reduced by the late 1990s, it has remained problematised in discourses and policy frameworks and its incidence remains significantly higher in poor areas (Arai, 2003). Women from poorer backgrounds are more likely to become mothers at a younger age (Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2001). Statistically, working class women in the UK are ten times more likely to be mothers before the age of 20 than middle class counterparts, more likely to be unmarried and more likely to be in receipt of benefits (McDermott and Graham, 2005). Pregnant young middle-class women are less likely to

continue with a pregnancy than working class women due to perceived 'opportunity costs' to education and careers (Turner 2004, cited Perrier, 2013).

In light of discussion of historical discourses surrounding il/legitimacy in Chapter Two, the statistical correlation between socio-economic background and marriage versus cohabitation should be noted. Almost 47% of all babies born in 2010 were to parents who were not in a marriage or civil partnership, compared with 46% in 2009 and 39% ten years earlier (ONS, 2010). In exploring experiences of lone mothers during this research, there is therefore an apparent paradox that while almost half of all births are now non-marital and cohabitation seems to no longer carry stigma in secular UK society, lone motherhood appears to retain negative connotations in a 'hierarchy of gendered moral discourse' (Song, 1996).

Drawing upon quantitative data analyses underscores a view that material, rather than cultural or personal, factors influence family forms. Analysis of birth registration by Graham et al. (2007) makes clear the links between relationship status and socio-economic indicators. They found that cohabiting parents tend to register their child's birth jointly, 7% of births were sole registered, and mothers registering solely tended to be most disadvantaged in terms of housing and education, compared with parents who are cohabiting or married. A strong association between social class and family forms is also found by Duncan and Smith (2006), who draw upon government data to assess socio-economic differences in terms of routes into lone motherhood, marital status and material deprivation, education, employment and support. Almost two thirds of children of never married mothers live in poverty compared with half the children of divorced mothers, they found. Never married mothers tend to be younger and have lower educational qualifications and employment status. Cohabitation is more common for couples with lower incomes and education.

Although moralising discourses have tended to equate lone motherhood with poor parenting, socio-economics also have a greater influence statistically on education and development than family form. Goodman and Greaves (2010) found that, although children brought up with married parents show better cognitive and behavioural outcomes than children living in other family configurations, including cohabiting families, difference in parental income, education and housing tenure are more significant than marriage per se. Sullivan et al. (2013) use quantitative Millennium Cohort data to interrogate the relationship between class and early years school attainment and conclude that class remains important.

In addition to social class influencing the likelihood of becoming a lone mother, statistics also suggest the dissolution of a relationship has an adverse effect on living standards.

Brewer and Nandi (2014) examined longitudinal quantitative data from the British Household Panel Survey, a nationally-representative sample of 5,000 households, between 1991 and 2008 and found that one in five mothers fall into poverty following the end of a relationship. Women and children see living standards decline by more than men, on average, upon separation. The fall in living standards is much greater for those women and children formerly in high-income households as the male wage is not compensated for in maintenance, benefits and tax credits, they found.

Having outlined some telling statistics from quantitative research, qualitative studies are crucial in understanding the lived experiences behind these statistics. Examining existing material strongly suggests a need for further qualitative work on lone motherhood in relation to class. Duncan and Edwards' work (1999) is especially valuable in comparing women's diverse experiences according to social group, ethnicity and location. Interviews conducted for their research in the mid-1990s indicated variations in mothers' orientation towards paid work according to social and spatial location. For example, while statistics show that black lone mothers have much higher rates of employment than other ethnic groups, they found contrasts according to age and location as well as ethnicity.

While Klett-Davies (2007) believes that Duncan and Edwards over-emphasise structural factors, as previously discussed, her application of the individualisation thesis to lone motherhood concedes the importance of spatial location along with other structural factors. She suggests a need for more focus on social class in empirical work. Local networks were also highly important in the coping strategies of working class mothers in Gillies' (2007) research, although her recruitment was not location-based. In response to a shift in sociological focus towards more of a gender and cultural perspective, Rowlingson and McKay (2005) explicitly examine lone motherhood and social class. Using a combination of quantitative datasets and 44 in-depth interviews, they set out socio-economic differences in terms of lone mothers' employment, benefit claims, receipt of maintenance and re-partnering. Their findings indicate that women from working class backgrounds are more likely to become socially and materially disadvantaged than middle class lone mothers. They add, however, that ethnicity, disability and age are also relevant. Class analysis has become more complex generally in recent years and is further complicated when studying lone motherhood, Rowlingson and McKay point out, as occupational status has been traditionally used as an indicator of class and lone mothers are not necessarily in full-time paid employment. The approach taken in the present study is discussed below.

### ***Judgement of parenting against middle class norms***

A further aspect of parenting and class that is of interest in this study arises from evidence that middle class parenting norms are commonly articulated as aspirational standards for all parents (Wallbank, 1998; Reay, 1998; Gillies, 2007). Though not concentrating exclusively on lone mothers, in her study of 'marginalised mothers' Gillies contends that working class parenting is judged for failing to reach 'normative expectations grounded in middle class privilege' (2007:145). Based on her study of working class mothers' involvement in their children's education, Reay found class inequalities to be, 'powerfully internalised and played out as an integral aspect of their subjectivities' (1998:268). Women found themselves judged by middle class, gendered norms and positioned themselves in relation to privileged others along class-based binaries of good/bad parent.

Looking at the Labour government's policy to encourage joint birth registration in terms of gender and power relations, Wallbank (2009) argues that governmental aspirations contrast with actual parental experiences and stigmatise those who did not conform to an ideal. She concludes that encouraging joint registration is based on normative expectations that are mediated by social class. A Family and Parenting Institute publication (Klett-Davies, 2012) asks *'Is parenting a class issue?'* and the consensus among contributors is that it is. Gillies, for example, believes a 'moral hierarchy' exists whereby middle class parenting has been viewed by successive governments as desirable and working class parenting as a 'deficit model' (2012: 57).

With stigma persistently associated with teenage mothers, class is also of interest in terms of reproductive age. Perrier (2013) conducted a small, qualitative study of women who had their first child at a particularly younger or older age than average. She found timing of maternity to be, 'significant for the construction of classed maternal moralities' (2013: 69). Normative discourses about the 'right' time to have a baby were invoked by the women interviewed; delayed parenting among the middle class tends to be associated with higher educational levels, whereas earlier child bearing is typically associated with lower socio-economic groups and regarded as disadvantaging offspring. Drawing on use of the 'good' mother identity as moral validation (May, 2008), Perrier maps processes by which women internalise middle class parenting norms when they 'perform, claim, affirm, seek validation for good mothering' (2013: 70).

Lawler's (2005) juxtaposition of class-ridden portrayals of the 'yummy mummy' and the 'chav mum' in popular culture is insightful in its analysis of maternity, class and normativity. The former is commonly cast in the media as a white, heterosexual, middle-class professional, responsible citizen who participates in the labour market before planning parenthood. In contrast the latter represents, 'a thoroughly dirty and disgusting

ontology that operates as a constitutive limit for clean, white, middle-class, feminine respectability', whose pregnancy is portrayed negatively as the 'unplanned consequence of immoral behaviour that results in welfare dependency' (Lawler, 2005: 30).

### ***'Hidden' middle class lone mothers***

While literature on lone mothers is dominated by research involving those who are young or dependent on benefits, there is a paucity of qualitative data on middle class lone motherhood per se and particularly in terms of middle class lone mothers and stigma. A small study in York found that middle class lone mothers rejected the lone parent label as representing 'failure' (Hardey and Crow, 1991). They tended not to mix with other lone mothers, but felt out of place with the married mothers who surrounded them in suburban home-owning neighbourhoods. The authors report that women in Brighton who were asked to take part did not want to be involved in a study focusing on lone mothers.

Duncan and Edwards' (1999) research involved some interviews with white middle class lone mothers in a suburban area, who tended to be divorced and have experienced a fall in income upon separating from partners. These women used 'othering' to separate their identity from young teenage mothers in social housing and believed lone mothers who were divorced or in employment were viewed as more 'acceptable'. The researchers found these suburban middle class lone mothers tended to be more marginalised from social capital that existed locally than lone mothers in other areas. Gosling (2008) describes specifically gendered forms of social capital among women on a deprived inner-city estate in the North of England. Rowlingson and McKay (2002) point out that middle class lone mothers often experience drops in living standards as a result of separation and can be socially isolated in areas dominated by two-parent families, which suggests stigma may manifest in the form of their exclusion.

A small number of women interviewed by Klett-Davies (2007) for her comparison of experiences in London and Berlin were middle class women who had chosen to parent alone as part of an 'alternative' lifestyle. She found the middle class lone mothers she interviewed were better at using welfare as a 'tool' to 'suit their lifestyle' (2007: 131). Edwards and Alexander (2011) describe difficulties in recruiting middle class lone mothers as research participants in the mid to late 1990s for the previously cited study by Duncan and Edwards (1999). The advent of social media in the intervening years proved useful in recruiting lone mothers living in an affluent location for this study, as discussed in the next chapter.

### ***Single mothers by choice***

Pulkingham et al., whose work involving women in Canada was discussed in Chapter Two, raise the issue of, 'the moral legitimacy to be able to have children in the first place' (2010:

285). Whereas UK studies predominantly cover young mothers' stigmatisation or poverty among benefit dependent lone mothers, there is an absence of academic material looking at lone motherhood as a proactive choice.

Hertz (2005) interviewed 65 women in the USA who had consciously chosen single motherhood. These women tended to be older and from professional backgrounds, which reinforces the need to examine lone mothers' choices in relation to class. Perceptions of the 'legitimacy' of mothering alone as an active choice is explored in two studies from the USA and Canada. Bock (2000) offers a feminist deconstruction of legitimacy regarding the intentional decision by midlife independent single women in the USA to enter 'solo' parenthood. Data collection involved interviews with 26 single mothers by choice, who were all white, college educated, middle-to-upper-class and (in all but two cases) heterosexual, along with participant observation of support groups. She found these 'single mothers by choice' gave economic, moral, and religious justifications to legitimise their decision and cited essential attributes as: age, responsibility, emotional maturity and fiscal capability. The 'choice' label serves as a tool indicating their place 'at the top of the single-parent hierarchy', interviews reveal (2000: 64). Bock writes:

To a large extent, discussions either praising or condemning single parenthood focus on legitimacy: sometimes on the legitimacy of the child, at times on the legitimacy of the mother, but more often on the legitimacy of the decision to have a child without the presence of a father (Bock, 2000: 64).

Wieggers and Chunn (2015) look at the impact of stigmatization on 29 Canadian women who had decided to parent alone through adoption or childbirth. Interviews showed that perceived stigma was based on sexual history, welfare dependency, a lack of parenting capacity and social exclusion. Coping strategies included isolation, secrecy, passing, and attempts to minimize assumed disadvantages. The analysis largely reflects the experience of relatively affluent, well-educated women, most of whom were white and heterosexual, though the authors found differences in experiences aligned with participants' age, race, sexual orientation and reliance on welfare.

### ***Spatial and class position***

While class is downplayed by 'individualisation' theorists expounding enhanced fluidity in intimate relationships (Giddens, 1992; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), literature on lone motherhood outlined here suggests its continued relevance in examining lone motherhood (e.g. Rowlingson and McKay, 2005). Arguing that individualisation arguments underestimate the significance of class in family life, Crompton (2005), for example, demonstrates an intricate inter-relationship between class and gender inequalities in patterns of behaviour. Importantly, findings by Duncan and Edwards (1999) also suggest a need to explore the significance of spatial location in lone mothers' experiences of

stigma. As Sayer puts it: 'The spatio-temporal situation of people and resources affects the very nature or constitution of social phenomenon' (2000: 114).

Sayer points to an emphasis on the structuring of space in Foucault's analysis of power (1977, cited Sayer 2000); reminding us that spatial settings are inherited, actions are influenced by settings and disparities in spatial mobility affect social processes. He suggests that, 'conducting qualitative research in more than one setting can be helpful in identifying the significance of context and ways in which it influences behaviour and ways of thinking' (2012: 402). The tendency for people in similar class positions to share geographical space is noted by Bourdieu (1989), while Savage et al. believe localised research can 'recharge class analysis' (2005: 96). Geographical areas can be subject to impacts of structural economics whose cultural interpretation causes stigmatisation (Campbell, 1984). McKenzie (2015) relates class, place and stigma in her ethnography of a council estate in Nottingham. She depicts how being working class has become a source of stigmatisation over the last 30 years and living on a council estate is now commonly associated with unemployment. The relationship between class and place is increasingly significant in the British post-industrial landscape, according to Savage, who believes that, 'subjective notions of class identity are bound up with place and location' (2015: 295).

### **Cross-fertilisation of feminism and Bourdieu**

Crompton draws on Wright (2005, cited Crompton, 2008) to argue that a researchers' definitions and elaborations of the concept of class should be shaped by the type of questions they are pursuing. A feminist Bourdieusian approach (e.g. Skeggs; 1997; Reay, 1998; and Gillies, 2007) was thus deemed the most pertinent in examining lone mothers' positions and perspectives in relation to stigma. Although occupation based stratification has dominated official analysis in the UK, with an adapted version of the Goldthorpe Class Scheme (1980) used by National Statistics' Socio-economic Classification (ONS, 2005), Wright (2000) highlights contradictions in defining women's social class according to occupation. Sociologists' objections to the lack of nuance in equating class with occupation are well documented (Milner, 1999). Reay (1998), for example, argues that locating class analysis within occupation fails to acknowledge the, 'complexity inherent in the relationship between gender and social class (1999: 260). Rowlingson and McKay (2005) raise specific problems in classifying lone mothers occupationally when objective categorisation according to type of employment is unsuitable for exploring situations of lone mothers, who may not work or may earn a part-time wage. Limitations of traditional stratification, together with the relevance of subjective and symbolic manifestations of class to the study of stigma, therefore suggested that cross fertilisation of feminist theory with Bourdieu's concept of 'capitals' (1987; 1989; 1994), as applied by feminists (including Skeggs; 1997; Reay, 1998; and Gillies, 2007) examining the intersection of class and

gender, was more compatible with the aims of this study. The operationalisation of economic, cultural and social capital is outlined in the next chapter. Drawing on a study involving working class women, Gosling argues that they benefitted from social capital, that is both 'gendered' and actively maintained rather than passively possessed. Furthermore, she distinguishes between 'bridging' and 'bonding' forms of social capital (Putman, 2000 cited Gosling, 2008) as does Canton (2015). Different forms and formations of capitals are recognised (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 2004), with Reay including the quasi-therapeutic 'emotional capital' (Nowtotny, 1981, cited Reay, 2004) as a gendered form of social capital.

Bourdieu (1989) segregates 'dominant', 'intermediary' and 'dominated' classes and distinguishes classes according to amounts of economic, social, cultural 'capitals', economic being the most significant. Savage et al. (2005) see distinct advantages in Bourdieu's multi-faceted stance for exploring class domination and legitimation of power. Bourdieu argues that the power to produce and impose a legitimated vision of the world lies in possession of 'symbolic capital', which is the form the other capitals, 'assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate' (1989: 17). While there is not sufficient space to critique it meaningfully here, it can be stated that Bourdieu's (1989) notion of habitus appears too deterministic and Archer's more explicit separation of structure and agency (2000; 2003) better meets the purposes of this research, as discussed above. His class analysis concepts are, however, highly relevant. Wainwright (2000: 8) believes, 'realists can draw upon Bourdieu's conceptual armoury to become more effective empirical researchers' and regards symbolic violence of particular benefit in analysing how dominant culture, 'possesses the power to make itself legitimate' (2000: 20). Sayer (1992; 2000), a prominent contributor on critical realism and methodology, also draws extensively upon Bourdieu in his analysis of 'the moral significance of class' (2005). The role of 'symbolic domination' and classed and gendered 'de-legitimation' in the 'prism of legitimacy' conceptual framework for this study are illustrated below.

Though regarding Bourdieu's approach as the 'best available', Savage et al. (2005) are aware it is not without shortfalls. Bourdieu's tendency to take the normative family for granted has been noted (Silva, 2005). His failure to afford gender and ethnicity sufficient emphasis as a result of treating them merely as aspects of cultural and symbolic capital is also critiqued (Sayer, 2005). Devine and Savage (2005) describe how this limitation has been addressed by feminist academics cited above, who offer a gendered stance on capitals. Skeggs (1997), for example, found capitals useful metaphors in, 'understanding how access, resources and legitimation contribute to class formation', when studying the lives of young, working class women.

## **Investigating stigma in lone mothers' everyday lives**

Having positioned this study in relation to broader agency/structure debates and class inequalities, attention now turns to more detailed dissection of empirical research that concentrates specifically on lone mothers' first-hand accounts of stigma. This section firstly discusses mediation of stigma as agential behaviour and draws together recurrent themes from a series of studies of lone motherhood and stigma. The literature discussed here offers valuable insights into agential responses to stigma, but is largely confined to experiences of young mothers or studies from North America. The paucity of empirical research on stigma from the subjective perspectives of a more diverse range of lone mothers in the contemporary British context is an absence which the present research seeks to address. Having assessed existing studies of lone motherhood and stigma, this raises the need for examination of the experience of women from diverse backgrounds in a non-stigmatising, multifaceted way that facilitates investigation of agency/structure dialectics.

### ***Mediation of stigma as agential behaviour***

Despite being positioned as passive 'subjects' in popular discourse (Atkinson et al., 1998) and being significantly constrained by structural inequalities (e.g. Gillies, 2007) findings from a series of studies demonstrate the agential qualities that lone mothers' subjective mediation of stigmatisation can entail. Bringing together common themes from empirical research suggests that principal tactics identified are: awareness of a need to avoid stigma when making decisions (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Churchill, 2007; Morris, 2012); consumption strategies (Ponsford, 2011; Clavering, 2010; Hamilton, 2012); and responding to adverse judgement by contrasting one's own 'good mother' identity with stereotyped 'others' (Mitchell and Green, 2002; Ponsford, 2011; Ellis-Sloan, 2014). It is also important to note that studies highlight how lone mothers unintentionally reproduce stigma in their efforts to resist it (Kingfisher, 1996; McCormack, 2004; Mitchell and Green, 2002). Goffman's (1990) point that stigma lacks its sting for those who have different values from normative society, is reiterated by Yardley (2008). Empirical evidence reviewed here suggests, however, that lone mothers largely adopt normative values while strenuously resisting the application of negative discourse to themselves.

### ***Decision-making***

Scambler (2009) includes 'anticipation of stigma' among its affects and a number of studies whose ostensible focus was on another topic proved pertinent in examining how the desire to avoid stigma influences behaviour and thought-processes in other aspects of lone mothers' lives. The significance attached to avoidance of stigma in decision-making processes therefore warrants consideration. For example, although Duncan and Edwards'

(1999) primary focus was employment and childcare, they detail how rejection or absorption of local and national discourses contributes towards mothers' decisions on employment and childcare. Churchill (2007) performs a similar function in assessing policy discourses that equate labour market participation with being a 'good' lone mother in relation to lone mothers' childcare priorities. Interviews conducted for doctoral work by Morris (2012) exploring 'intimacy narratives of single mothers' also includes data on negative stereotypes in relation to sexual identities. Stigma had not been foregrounded in her research but it emerges as a theme portrayed in terms of shame/pride narratives.

### **Consumption**

Three pieces of work on the consumption strategies used by lone mothers (Clavering, 2010), young mothers (Ponsford, 2011) and low income single parents (Hamilton, 2012) offer useful insights into how consumption is used as a means of responding to a stigmatised identity. Clavering (2010) reveals differences between local 'community' values and national discourses of 'respectable citizenship' based on her ethnographic account of consumption among lone mothers reliant on state benefits during the introduction of New Labour's workfare initiatives. She explores negotiation of identity among six mothers in detail through artefacts such as clothes, hair, jewellery, tattoos, children's clothes and home décor and argues that they use commodities as a means of challenging negative stereotypes in the popular media.

The commercialisation of motherhood is particularly important to young mothers who are positioned outside the boundaries of normative mothering, according to Ponsford (2011). With reference to literature on consumer culture, Ponsford describes ways in which poor and marginalised young mothers use consumption of designer brands to try to attain a 'respectable' image and undermine negative stereotypes and public attitudes. A focus group and interviews with 33 young mothers in Bristol found their display of maternal care, 'is legitimated within their own local contexts but is not comprehended more widely.' Importantly, Ponsford's research reveals differences between values of the young women and policy values emphasising paid work. Everyday encounters with parents, peers and people on buses and in shops were more significant to them than media and policy discourses, though they were acutely aware of such discourses.

Hamilton (2012) conducted qualitative interviews with 30 families living on low incomes, 25 of whom were headed by single parents, and found conspicuous consumption was a common coping mechanism to mask poverty in an attempt to avoid stigma, with parents making sacrifices to avoid their children being stigmatised for not having the right clothes or shoes, for example. It is noted that this conspicuous consumption could, however, further fuel stigmatisation based on 'chav single mother stereotypes with consumption

practices added to the list of undesirable traits', in what she calls a 'new version of underclass discourse' (Hamilton, 2012:46).

### ***Normativity and judgement***

Stigmatisation of lone motherhood can be viewed in contrast with 'good mother' constructs (Smart, 1996) and idealised heterosexual, married, two-parent family norms (Barrett and Mackintosh, 1992; Reekie, 1998). Feminist analysis (Carabine, 1996; Wallbank, 1998) of lone motherhood, hegemonic discourse and family norms has drawn upon Foucault's (1977) concept of 'normalising judgement', which 'compares, differentiates, hierarchies, homogenises, excludes' (Foucault, 1977:183). It is deemed 'normal to have a father and a mother', according to Carabine, and normalising judgement 'establishes the measure by which all subjects are judged to conform or not' (1996: 61). Wallbank describes how, 'a network of discourses about the idealised two-parent family' becomes a form of 'self-regulation' (1998:63:87).

Studies involving young lone mothers show they are especially susceptible to the adverse effects of judgement according to a normalised/stigmatised dichotomy (e.g. Mitchell and Green, 2002; Ponsford, 2011; Wenham, 2016). Young mothers in Wenham's longitudinal qualitative study, for example, told of feeling their maternal capabilities were 'judged' in relation to traditional two-parent families and 'drew on conventional norms to counteract stigma' (2016: 141). These young women spoke of public spaces as sites in which they felt 'particularly vulnerable to the negative judgements of others' (2016: 135).

The literature reveals that lone mothers commonly feel a need to emphasise their 'good mother' credentials (e.g. Mitchell and Green, 2002; Klett-Davies, 2007; May, 2008; Mantovani and Thomas, 2014) as a self-legitimation technique in the face of normative judgements based around two-parent ideals. May (2008) analyses how women in Finland who were either lone mothers or had contemplated divorce present themselves in terms of the 'good motherhood identity' in written life stories. While their 'highly moralised' accounts emphasise efforts in putting their children first, providing a good home and encouraging them to do well at school, an assumption that children do better in two-parent families goes unquestioned and their retention of mainstream beliefs as to what constitutes a 'proper family' accentuates strong social norms delineating everyday mothering practices (2008: 480). Differences in attitudes between women's accounts according to age-group, identified by May, might also be said to demonstrate adherence to generational norms surrounding 'good' motherhood.

In analysing factors that 'neutralise or exacerbate' stigmatisation, Wenham (2016) stresses the pressure young mothers were under to prove they were good mothers, in opposition to the teenage parent stereotype. Women's anxiety to display their 'good

mother' identity features in a number of other studies in the contemporary British context (Clavering, 2010; Ponsford, 2011; Ellis-Sloan, 2014). These studies also recognise distancing from stereotypes as a form of agency whilst simultaneously criticising 'others' who fall short of this normatively ascribed role. Clavering (2010), for example, points out that her research on lone motherhood and consumption confirms Goffman's view that people who are stigmatised 'may attach stigmatising labels to others' (1990: 130). Phoenix remarks that during interviews with 16-19-year old mothers, they did not reject constructions of young mothers as being problematic, but did not include themselves in the same, stigmatised category:

The statements some women made about other welfare claimants directly fitted into discourses that stigmatize 'teenage mothers' and 'lone mothers' even as they distance themselves from the associated stigma (Phoenix, 1996:180).

While distancing themselves from negative accounts of teenage parenthood, a number of participants in Ponsford's (2011) study also believed there were 'other' young women who got pregnant deliberately to access social housing and benefits or were unable to cope with the responsibility of motherhood.

### ***Resisting and reproducing stigma***

An observation from studies involving young mothers discussed above is that emphasising their own 'good mother' identity and derogatory comparison or 'othering' (Lister, 2004) can be two sides of the same coin. In addition to Carabine (1996) and Wallbank (1998) applying 'normalising judgement' in discussing lone mothers' deviation from idealised family norms, as discussed in the previous chapter, other work draws upon Foucault to discuss the paradox that resisting stigmatisation on a personal level can mean reproducing it socially (see, for example, Kingfisher, 1996; Mitchell and Green, 2002; McCormack, 2004). Mitchell and Green (2002) undertook community based action research examining young mothers' identities and kinship networks. Their research with young working class mothers, most of whom were lone mothers, in North East of England found that they viewed attention to dress, socialising habits and supervision of children as important to their 'respectability' in distancing their identity from people they regarded as socially undesirable. Mitchell and Green draw upon Foucault's (1977) exposition of surveillance to argue that their research participants were arguably exercising social control upon each other by differentiating themselves from 'other' young mothers they perceived as less worthy.

Two studies in the USA (Kingfisher, 1996; McCormack, 2004) apply Foucault's ideas in considering ways in which welfare dependent lone mothers accommodate or challenge stigmatising discourses. Kingfisher's ethnographic account points to 'every day and hidden forms of dissent' (Kingfisher, 1996: 531). Employing Foucault's notion of 'reverse

discourse' as a form of resistance in her poststructuralist analysis of agency, she argues that the women she encounters assert 'counter-hegemony' through re-constructing deserving/undeserving binaries in a way that affirms their status (Foucault, 1980, cited Kingfisher, 1996). The limitations of this form of resistance are not lost on Kingfisher, however, who acknowledges lack of power to influence systemic change among the women concerned. She furthermore concedes that, as opposed to focusing on structural inequalities, a tendency for welfare dependent mothers to reverse discourse via accentuating their personal difference from negative constructions can unintentionally reproduce hegemony.

McCormack (2004) also explores tactics used by welfare reliant lone mothers in two contrasting locations in the USA to resist negative discourse. She remarks that the power of hegemony is such that, in their discursive tactics lone mothers unintentionally, 'echo the judgements made against them' (2004: 359). Her interviews with 36 mothers in two locations reveal dramatic contrasts in experiences between women living in rural small-town communities with below average poverty rates and those living in an inner-city location characterised by poverty. She describes negative interactions with neighbours and internalisation of dominant imagery among women in the former area, who took steps to distance themselves from putative welfare mother imagery. By contrast, interviewees in the inner city were aware of dominant discourses but created meanings surrounding welfare receipt that contest dominant constructions. McCormack's analysis also appropriates Foucault's (1977) ideas on surveillance to argue that women occupying a space that is remote from hegemonic discourse, as a result of being surrounded by others who are poor, experience less stigma and are, 'more able to counter the effects of dominant discourse' (2004:375). Her division of women's agency in resisting stigma into 'instrumental' and 'discursive' strategies is also of interest. As found in other studies that have been cited, discursive tactics used by women she interviewed reinforced stereotypes whilst challenging application of stereotypes to themselves.

The application of Foucauldian analysis in these studies offers insights for examining internalisation of normative family models and Carabine (1996) points to its value in 'small scale' settings. Whilst useful to theorising in specific cultural and historical contexts (Wallbank, 1998), its limitations in attending to agency/structure dialectics and gender and class inequalities must also be recognised. Where Foucault (1977) views power and discourse as inseparable, as discussed above, this work requires analysis of relationship between discursive and extra discursive factors (Lau and Morgan, 2014), or between people's situations and their perspectives on those situations (Maxwell, 2012) with the aim of more fully understanding women's absorption, resistance or rejection of normative judgements and stigmatising discourses.

Invocation of 'the other' runs alongside de-legitimation and judgement as recurrent themes in Skeggs' (1997) analysis of intersecting gender and class inequalities. Although influenced by Foucault's work on judgement, Skeggs (2005) raises a caveat that judgement should not be regarded as only a top-down process. With reference to the focus on class in this study, it can also be argued that Foucault's view of discourse and power as inseparable does not yield sufficient explanatory potential in terms of the influence of political, patriarchal and material interests upon gendered moral discourses on lone motherhood, which were demonstrated in Chapter Two (e.g. Brodie, 1997; Song, 1996). Lister (2004) argues that derogatory comparison or 'othering' needs to be examined in relation to a tangible power nexus in the contemporary context, whereby stigmatisation of benefit dependency detracts attention from structural realities. Hartstock (1987) critiques Foucault's perspective for inattention to gender, an absence which is restated by Smart (1992). Nor does it take into account the impact of class inequalities, which was demonstrated earlier in this chapter (e.g. Skeggs, 1997; Raey 1998; Gillies, 2007).

Sources drawing on Bourdieu's (1989) ideas of 'symbolic domination' and 'symbolic violence' in explicitly linking reproduction of stigmatising discourse with reproduction of gender and class inequalities help address the aims of this research. In his application of 'symbolic domination' (Bourdieu, 1989), Sayer links 'misrecognition' with attention to subjective experiences of class (2005). For reasons outlined here, the conceptual schema outlined as the 'prism of legitimacy' framework below, therefore incorporates normalising judgement along with symbolic domination and classed and gendered de-legitimation as they have complementary value in understanding women's experiences of normativity at a subjective level within localised settings and the wider structural and cultural context.

### **Research considerations: investigating subjective experiences of stigma**

The foregoing discussion highlights agential strategies for the mediation of stigma, which are discussed in empirical studies on the topic. Mining these studies for insights on ways in which researchers have conceptualised and investigated stigma, as well as their substantive themes, helped define key considerations to be addressed in this research.

Goffman's conceptualisation of stigma is explicitly applied in studies of lone motherhood cited above (Yardley, 2008; Clavering 2010; Ellis-Sloan, 2014) which confirm the value of aspects of his approach including: emphasis on relationality and normativity; recognition that those in a stigmatised category may support wider norms to which they do not themselves conform; and a tendency to 'stratify' others in the same category (1990: 130). Ellis-Sloan (2014), for example, draws on Goffman in attempting to understand how teenage mothers manage a stigmatising identity. She found that stigmatisation leaves little space for young women to claim 'legitimacy', for an active decision to continue with

their pregnancy. She describes how 'impression management' was therefore evident in ways in which the young women presented themselves to deflect judgment.

Goffman defines stigma as, 'disqualification from full social acceptance', and a stigmatised person as, 'possessing an attribute that makes him different' and 'reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (1990: 12). He paints an abject picture of difference, exclusion and inferiority causing 'chronic feeling of the worst sort of insecurity' (Goffman, 1990: 24). However, the literature signifies how motherhood can be regarded as a positive experience and source of pride and fulfilment despite difficult circumstances, and lone motherhood therefore should not be viewed simply as a 'spoilt' identity. Examples of research involving young mothers reveal how participants emphasise positive aspects of motherhood as well as incidences of stigma. In a qualitative study, which comprised of interviews with 12 young mothers and local teenage pregnancy co-ordinators, Arai (2003) found child-bearing could be presented as a positive, rational option by women who had experienced family problems in childhood. Shea et al. (2015) also challenge views of policy-makers who problematised teenage motherhood. Following interviews with young mothers in Australia, they present themes that emerged in contradiction of negative discourse: pride in motherhood; autonomy, and resilience as a result of overcoming challenges.

It therefore needs to be recognised that lone mothers may not necessarily experience stigma at all, or experience much more 'subtle' forms of stigma than the acute variety conjured up by some of Goffman's more arcane language. This is linked with a priority to develop an approach to stigma which does not risk positioning research participants as the 'pathologist other' (Oerton and Atkinson 1999: 237) or enter the field with the view of studying stigma per se. Instead, the present research sought to explore factors affecting diverse experiences in more rounded terms of presence or absence of stigma in first-hand accounts. The conclusion in Link and Phelan's (2001) re-conceptualisation of Goffman that stigma is a matter of 'degree' is thus highly germane to this study when the size, diversity and complexity of the category under analysis is taken into account.

A key question that arose when engaging with literature on empirical research on lone motherhood and stigma discussed above was the variety of forms stigmatisation can take. The need for distinction between discourse, stereotyping, exclusion, discrimination and incidences of personally directed comments and behaviour when considering stigma was also apparent from the variety of forms exhibited in empirical work that was reviewed. Some studies (Phoenix, 1996; Mitchell and Green, 2002) offer examples of impacts of discourse, stereotyping, or local reputation in relation to nationally articulated agendas. Yardley (2008) also refers to participants' examples of direct personal incidents. She

carried out interviews with 20 benefit dependent 16-19 years old mothers in the Midlands about effects and ways of coping with stigma. Using Goffman's (1990) definition of being 'less desirable', 'tainted' or having a 'spoilt identity', she found stigma was manifested through: labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination. In addition to awareness of media portrayals of teenage mothers as lazy and benefit dependent, Yardley's participants said they had experienced disapproving looks and comments from the general public and discriminatory attitudes from health service staff.

A further point of interest arising from the literature is the relative salience of localised compared with meso-level discourse. Evidence from Duncan and Edwards' (1999) comparative research, along with McCormack's (2004) analysis in two contrasting USA locations, reveals that dominant national discourses can carry more or less weight among lone mothers according to their locality and social and ethnic backgrounds. Mitchell and Green (2002) also recognise multi-dimensionality of discourse and differentiate between political, media, populist and academic tropes. Morris (1994) documents how government rhetoric spreads through popular culture and Tyler extends Hall's (1978, cited Tyler, 2013) explanation of how discourse relies on 'street level' repetition to social media in the contemporary setting. This prompts questions as to the kinds of discourse picked up or employed by research participants in the two contrasting locations. This study aims to consider the *why* as well as looking at *whether* and *how* lone mothers experience stigma and the foregoing discussion indicates a need to consider the relative significance of agential and structural factors in the mitigation or exacerbation of stigma. Yardley (2008) examines why some teenage mothers were better able to 'resist or absorb' stigma than others in relation to personal circumstances. Wenham (2016) also considers factors that 'neutralise or exacerbate' young mothers' experiences of stigmatisation. The emphasis these works place on looking at features in women's lives that make them more likely to be adversely affected by stigmatisation suggests a promising direction for research among mothers in diverse situations.

Notwithstanding strengths in Goffman's (1990) approach, a serious limitation for the purposes of the present research was his lack of attention to broader social structural matters (Bourdieu, 1989; Link and Phelan, 2009; Scambler, 2009). While viewing stigma as a form of social control, Goffman's analysis of 'management of a spoilt identity' does not take actors' structural position into account; he barely touches on class and does not refer to gender at all. Omission of attention to structural factors causes Bourdieu (1989) to note that while strategies of presentation of self are well analysed by Goffman, he overlooks position in social space. As Scambler comments: 'It is not so much that Goffman was wrong as that there were questions he did not ask' (2009: 441). He gives the example of welfare-to-work policies to illustrate how stigmatisation can be infused with oppression.

This is highly relevant to ideas about legitimisation, symbolic domination and misrecognition, as detailed in Chapter Two. As Tyler's (2014) analysis shows, stigma needs to be considered in terms of the effect of classification within the context of neo-liberal 'political cultural economy'. Goffman's seminal study was published in 1963 and contemporary re-conceptualisation of this work by Link and Phelan (2001) and Scambler (2009) places useful emphasis on the exercise of power and reproduction of inequalities in manifestations of stigma.

With the above considerations in mind, a conceptual and practical approach was required to fulfil several criteria. In short, a framework for investigation of lone mothers' experiences of stigma needed to: build upon insights into characteristics of stigma offered by Goffman (1990), Link and Phelan (2001), Scambler (2009) and Tyler, (2013); enable analysis of agency/structure interplay as offered by Archer (2000; 2003; 2007) with particular attention to gender and class (Skeggs, 1997; Gillies, 2007); be non-stigmatising and not contribute towards stigmatisation; recognise 'degrees' of stigma and positive affectivity such as maternal pride as well as negative impacts of stigmatisation; explore how stigma manifests in different cases and locations; and in doing so consider agential and structural factors that mitigate or exacerbate stigma in a conceptual framework which aims to respond to these demands.

### **Looking at lone motherhood through 'the prism of legitimacy'**

This chapter began by situating the research within sociological debates and explaining the rationale for focusing on agency/structure interplay in exploring lone mothers' experiences, with specific attention to social class and location. Examining existing conceptualisations of stigma alongside specific demands for investigation of lone mothers' first-hand accounts, as discussed above, led to the development of the 'prism of legitimacy' as a conceptual framework, which introduces 'subjective social legitimacy' (SSL), as a tool for analysing stigma in women's everyday lives. This section sets out the key components of the framework. Chapter Two identified legitimacy as a central theme in discussions of lone motherhood in history, policy and discourse. Its value as a theoretical resource lies in its multiple meanings; law as a noun; to make legal or acceptable as a verb; and being approved, proper and according to standards, justified or valid in its adjectival form (OED, 2014). The framework centres around examining agency and structure interplay via a de-legitimation/subjective legitimacy dialectic.

The key elements of the 'prism' and 'SSL', and the inter-relationship between the two, are set out in the two related diagrams which follow. *Figure 1: 'The prism of legitimacy'* illustrates key ideas which can be loosely aligned with structural emergent properties or 'SEPs' and cultural emergent properties or 'CEPs' (Archer, 2000) within the prevailing

socio-political-discursive context. SSL is further refracted in *Figure 2: 'Subjective social legitimacy' as an investigative tool*, which illustrates women's agential behaviour or people emergent properties, or 'PEPs', within this context. Following Swedberg's (2016) suggestion that visual sketches can be produced and discarded as an aid to theory development, it must be noted that the diagrams presented here are the result of an evolutionary process during the research. This iterative approach used for the refinement of provisional conceptual ideas 'in dialogue with the data' (Layder, 1998) is outlined in the next chapter. In particular, the significance of 'judgement' in various forms became more prominent conceptually and explanatorily as its significance emerged empirically, as also discussed in Chapter Four.

Figure 1: Lone motherhood through the 'prism of legitimacy'

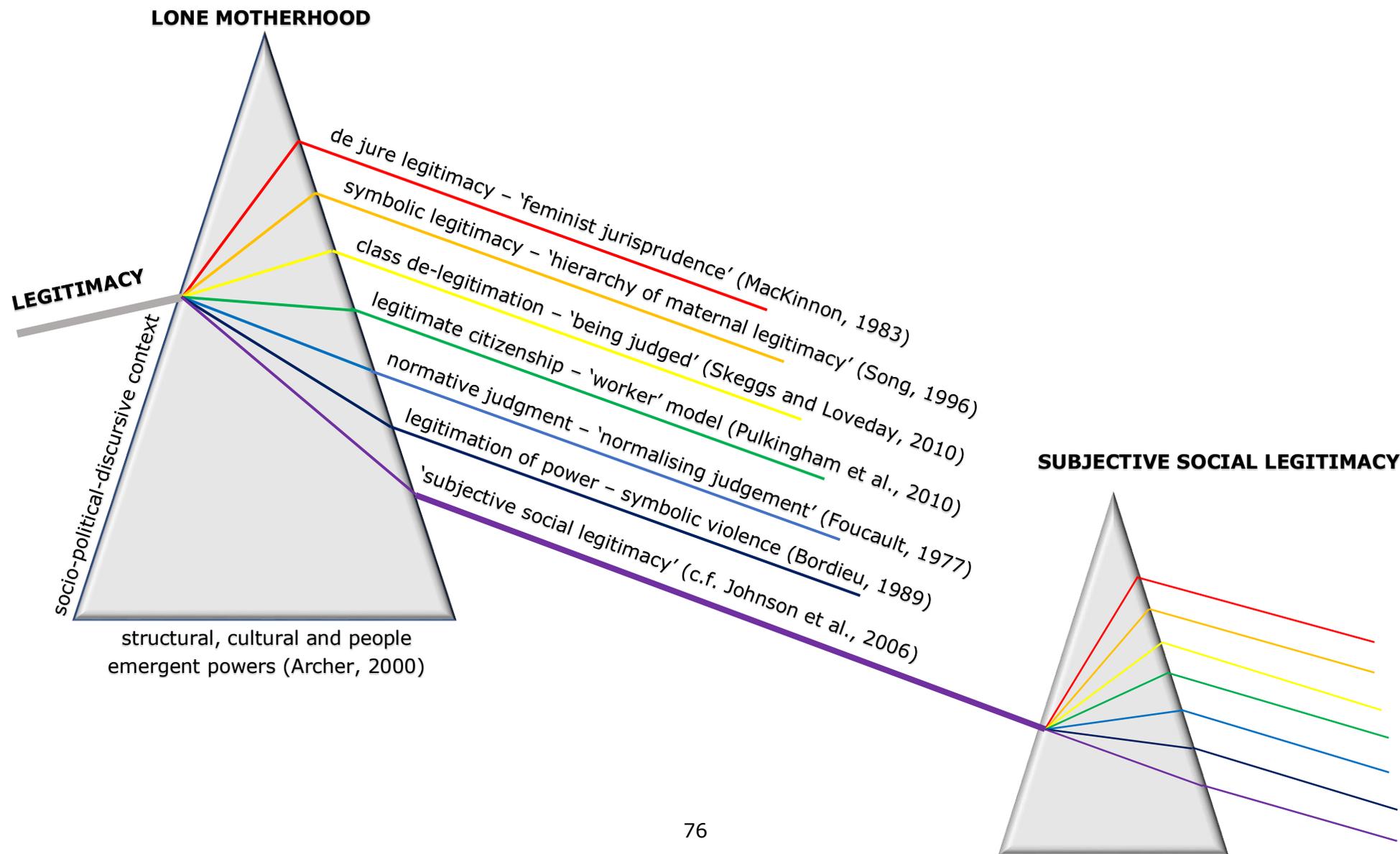
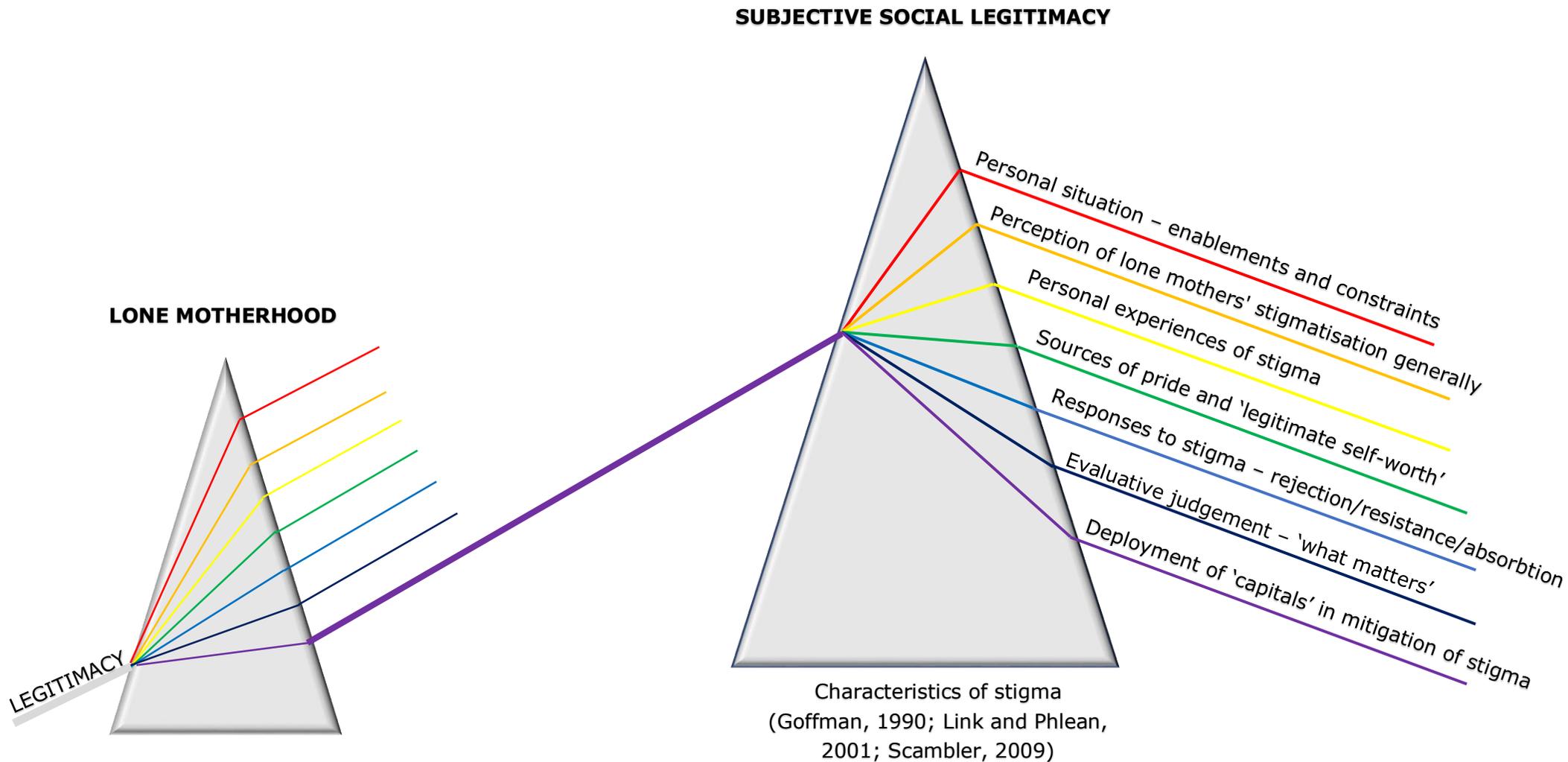


Figure 2: 'Subjective social legitimacy' as an analytical tool



## **Legitimacy, legitimation and de-legitimation**

As indicated in *Figure 1*, legitimacy as a core theme in this study can be viewed through the inter-related strands of: *de jure* legitimacy; symbolic legitimacy; legitimate citizenship; legitimation and symbolic violence; normative judgement; 'de-legitimation' and being judged; and, most importantly, subjective experience of social validity or stigma among lone mothers making claims on recognition and resources within this context or 'subjective social legitimacy' (SSL). SSL is introduced as a tool to aid exploration of lone mothers' diverse situations and differential propensities for resistance and reproduction of stigma through attention to a de-legitimation/personal legitimacy dialectic, in the prevailing socio-political-discursive context. Briefly re-capping upon key theoretical insights and incorporating additional ideas that contributed to the conceptualisation of this research helps explain the key elements of the framework.

***De jure legitimacy*** - Chapter Two traced stigmatisation of lone motherhood historically and described how, until the 1980s, a child without a legally accorded father was 'the child of no-one', a second class citizen with fewer rights (Hendrix, 1996). While C20th family policy was undergirded by the 'principle of legitimacy' belief that a child needs a 'social father' (Malinowski, 1930), historical accounts reveal material and patriarchal motivations behind the inequity of non-married motherhood. Evidence cited supports Engels' (1988) historical materialist and feminist interpretations (Millett, 1990; Smart, 1992) of compulsion towards lawfully sanctioned procreation. Examples of patriarchal interests in legislation given by Fox Harding (1996) and Smart (1992) support MacKinnon's (1983) 'feminist jurisprudence' arguments that the law is instrumental in subordination of women. Though formally constituted as gender neutral, she contends that the state, 'coercively and authoritatively constitutes the social order in the interests of men, through its legitimising norms, relation to society, and substantive policies' (MacKinnon, 1983: 644).

***Symbolic legitimacy*** - Crompton and Scott (2005) and Sayer (2005) emphasise the proximity between symbolic recognition and distribution of material resources. A strong case is also made in the literature that the vestiges of historic illegitimacy survived in a symbolic form, as argued by Reekie (1998), through continued stigmatisation and economic disadvantage of lone motherhood. Despite the demise of *de jure* illegitimacy, discrimination against extra-marital birth persists in gendered moral discourse or a 'hierarchy of maternal legitimacy', which remains 'instrumental in legitimizing or de-legitimising state assistance', according to Song (1996: 380). Normative family models premised upon gendered roles and middle class values serve the needs of capitalism and patriarchy and reinforce structural inequalities, Barrett and MacIntosh (1992) contend.

**Legitimate citizenship** - Chapter Two also delineated successive governments' formulations of citizenship and lone mothers' ascribed roles in terms of 'meso-discourses' (Brodie, 1997). Walby (1994) and Lister (2004) highlight the 'gendered' nature of citizenship and a series of studies examine lone mothers' position in relation to the prevailing 'worker' citizen' model in terms of 'legitimate citizenship' (e.g. Haux, 2012; Pulkingham et al., 2010). Tyler's (2013) study of abjection is valuable in establishing legitimacy and citizenship as axes upon which stigmatisation turns in the context of neo-liberal 'discourses of deservingness' (Schram, 2012). Including working class lone mothers among vilified groups, Tyler describes how people in contemporary Britain come to be deemed 'failed citizens', rather than inequality itself being challenged because stigmatisation, 'legitimises the reproduction and entrenchment of inequalities and injustices' (2013: 8).

**Legitimation and symbolic violence** - Emphasising that he is not suggesting 'conscious conspiracy', 'propaganda' or 'brainwashing', Bourdieu (1989) argues that 'symbolic domination' is power to impose a vision of the world that is regarded as legitimate. Drawing upon Bourdieu in her analysis of gender and class, Skeggs argues that 'legitimation is the key mechanism in the conversion to power' (1997: 8). Sayer's (2005) examination of misrecognition as a form of classed symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1989) is pertinent in light of stigmatising cultural representations of lone mothers (e.g. Tyler, 2008). Atkinson et al. (2012: 11) emphasise the role of symbolic violence within the context of neo-liberal austerity politics in terms of a legitimacy/legitimation axis.

**Normative judgement** - Goffman (1990) makes clear the role of normative expectations in the stigmatisation of individuals who 'fall short' of a culturally accepted standard. In his history of sexuality, Foucault argues that, 'the legitimate couple imposed itself as a model, enforced the norm' (1979: 3) and his (1977) concept of 'normalising judgement' helps understand how lone mothers internalise that norm. Carabine describes normalising judgement as a standard by which individuals are measured according to how closely they conform, so that aspiration towards this norm becomes a form of 'self-regulation' (1996: 63). The concept is applied in a number of previously discussed studies of lone motherhood (e.g. Mitchell and Green, 2002) to explain a tendency towards self-surveillance and denigration of 'other' mothers as a means of resisting stigma.

**De-legitimation and 'being judged'** - Arguments by Skeggs and Loveday (2012) which frame 'de-legitimation' and feelings of 'being judged' in terms of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) and possession of capitals were outlined in Chapter Two and touched on in the previous section of this chapter. This proved a key work for this study conceptually in locating de-legitimation and the emotional effects of classed judgement or 'feeling judged' within the prevailing socio-political-discursive context. Significantly, Skeggs and Loveday (2012) argue that, in a climate of judgement, people are required to 'perform' or 'defend' their value in a bid

for legitimacy but require a cache of cultural, social and economic capitals (Bourdieu, 1989) to do so. Where 'normalising judgement' (Foucault, 1977) entails personal pursuit of a desired norm, 'de-legitimation' leaves those who do not possess appropriate capitals struggling against unjust social judgement, suggesting they may be regarded for the purposes of this study in terms of 'carrot and stick' complementarity.

### **Introducing 'subjective social legitimacy'**

Looking at lone motherhood through the 'prism of legitimacy' helps consider women's experiences in the context of state policies, prevailing family and citizenship norms and hegemonic discourse, which can be described as SEPs and CEPs (Archer, 2000). Attention now turns to PEPs, or agential mediation of these factors in women's everyday lives, which is the crucial component of this framework for purposes of empirical investigation. As discussed above, examining existing material on lone motherhood and stigma identified specific considerations in studying lone mothers' experiences. SSL is introduced here as a means of responding to those issues and addressing the research questions by analysing the role of agential and structural factors in mitigating or exacerbating stigma. SSL aims to explore lone mothers' subjective experience of social validity in relation to what is regarded as approved and proper standards within the prevailing context. Being socially 'legitimate' means being approved, proper and according to standards, justified or valid (OED, 2014).

Continuing the metaphor of the prism helps break down SSL into perceptions, experiences, responses and outcomes. As indicated in *Figure 2: 'Subjective social legitimacy' as an investigative tool*, SSL can be explored analytically as a series of over-lapping aspects which contribute towards each participant's sense of social legitimacy or her overall 'mode' of SSL. These are denoted as: enablements and constraints of participant's 'personal situation'; her 'perception of stigmatisation of lone motherhood generally'; her 'experience of being personally stigmatised' or indeed not experiencing stigma; her 'sources of pride and personal legitimacy'; her agential responses in the form of 'rejection, resistance or absorption of stigma'; her 'evaluative judgement' of prevailing norms and 'what matters' personally; and use of resources or 'deployment of capitals in mitigating stigma'. Briefly outlining the evolution of SSL, indicators of stigma and the role of 'evaluative judgement', helps understand its application in this research.

### **Social legitimacy**

SSL evolved out of a review of 'social legitimacy' as a social process by Johnson et al. (2006). Although the term is used in social psychology and organisational studies, they believe it is under-examined sociologically. They find that accounts of legitimacy commonly emphasise, 'implicit and sometimes explicit consensual beliefs about how things should be or are typically done' (Johnson et al., 2006: 72). They describe how legitimacy is both a social construct and a process that can operate at different levels of analysis; regulative, normative and cognitive. They

draw on Bourdieu to show how the social legitimacy process creates and reinforces inequalities, which is significant in relation to elements of the 'prism of legitimacy' previously discussed denoting legitimation and de-legitimation. The advantages of one group enable it to be more 'influential' and thereby reinforce its status by appearing consistent with notions of 'worthy and unworthy individuals' (2006: 61). Validation of traits that receive advantages is followed by deference accorded to those possessing such traits and this is, in turn, followed by the social enforcement of such patterns, according to Johnson et al. (2006). A circularity between legitimation and legitimacy can consequently occur.

### ***Investigating 'degrees' of stigma***

SSL aims to explore lone mothers' diverse situations holistically without assuming that they feel stigmatised and allows space for indicators of positive as well as negative affectivity to emerge during interviews. It approaches this analytically through considering, indicators of 'degrees of stigma' (Link and Phelan, 2001) recounted by women in different locations and class situations. Characteristics of stigma identified by Goffman (1990) include: 'spoilt identity', shame, lack of respect, differentness, inferiority, not being accepted equally and 'self-derogation' for 'falling short' of normative expectations. Link and Phelan write that they, 'apply the term stigma when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold' (2001: 376). Scambler defines stigma as, 'a social process, experienced or anticipated, characterised by exclusion, rejection, blame or devaluation that results from experience, perception or reasonable anticipation of an adverse social judgement about a person or group' (2009: 441). Whilst characteristics cited by these authors offer a guide to common indicators of stigma, it must be stressed that the research seeks to analyse indicators of stigma from women's own perspectives. It is also important that women's expressions of pride and validity and sources of what Archer terms (2003) 'legitimate self-worth' are recognised as positive indicators of SSL.

### ***Evaluative judgement and SSL***

The following chapter will describe how 'judgement' was initially identified as an empirical indicator of SSL and gradually emerged as a key process underlying lone mothers' absorption, rejection or resistance of stigma. Consideration of the conceptual status of judgement was therefore required, as per *Appendix H: Analytical memo on revisiting the provisional conceptual framework*. This memo shows how the emphasis that Cooley (1902) places on judgement of others in his 'looking glass self' analogy was among the alternatives considered. However, an approach that can be termed 'evaluative judgement, which is built upon Archer's (2000; 2003; 2007) conceptualisation of agency discussed at the start of this chapter, was deemed more consistent with the research aims. In particular, Archer's (2000) emphasis on individuals' 'judgement about what they find worthwhile' (Archer, 2012: 106) has potential to facilitate understanding of the interplay of PEPs, SEPs and CEPs.

From a critical realist stance, discourses and norms are not simply handed down deterministically; people are, 'able to judge for themselves and adapt their perspectives and practices' (King, 2010: 257). Archer (2007) argues that PEPs enable actors to react differently to the same circumstances and subjectivity is therefore the 'missing link' and is the mediation between agency and structure. Reflexivity enables agents to 'deliberate about their objective circumstances in relation to their subjective concerns' (Archer, 2007: 28). Archer's (2000) view of social identity, which exists in relation to status, moral evaluations and norms in the social realm, is relevant to the investigation of lone mothers' experiences of what can be regarded as a de-legitimated or 'spoilt' identity. She makes four points that can be closely related to SSL. Firstly that, 'concerns about self-worth cannot be evaded in a discursive environment' (2000: 198). Secondly that, 'judgements or approbation/disapproval...are rooted in social norms' (2000: 215). The third is the importance of probing, 'how the self-conscious human being reflects upon his or her involuntary placement' (2000: 199). The final and crucial point is that, while our concern about 'legitimate self-respect' is vested in, 'projects whose success or failure we take as vindicating our worth or damaging it', Archer is clear that, 'it is our own definitions of what constitutes our self-worth that determines which normative evaluations matter' (2000: 219). Sayer (2011) stresses that we are 'evaluative beings', whose judgement of 'what matters' centres around personal, subjective meanings. In his investigation of 'lay normativity', he uses Archer's (2000) notion of 'internal conversations' to examine how people judge 'what matters' to them personally, or what they 'invest in'.

### ***Deployment of capitals and SSL***

Skeggs (1997; 2005) and Skeggs and Loveday (2012) add a further dimension to the idea of judgement by linking it to gender and class. Stressing that judgement is 'not just a top down process', Skeggs draws attention to 'struggles between those who are judged and those who are positioned to judge' (2005: 975). The theme of judgement was predominant in research by Skeggs and Loveday, who draw on symbolic violence to demonstrate how working class research participants were 'constantly aware of how they were judged and de-legitimated', and importantly for the attention to agential responses in the present research, they explore 'the struggle against unjustifiable judgement' that ensues (2012: 473). Furthermore, Skeggs and Loveday demonstrate how, in a socio-political climate of individualisation, people lacking in economic, cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu, 1989) can be judged as lacking in public value and personal legitimacy. Skeggs and Loveday (2012) argue that, in this climate of judgement, people are required to 'perform' or 'defend' their value in a bid for legitimacy but require certain capitals in order to do so. Looking at participants' levels of capitals (as outlined above) can therefore help to understand the impact of women's positioning and resources on the degree of stigma they experience and their mediation of stigma.

## Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed empirical material on lone motherhood and stigma as lived experience, which helped hone the research focus and questions and determine the theoretical and empirical approach adopted. The first section critiqued individualisation perspectives on family life and presented arguments that structural inequalities prevail. The status quo is not simply enduring however; the literature reveals that lone mothers' capacity for agency should not be under-estimated. The need for investigation into the interaction between agency and structure in provoking or impeding stigmatisation is therefore recognised. It showed how examination of inter-play between agential and structural factors can be facilitated using a critical realist approach. Having examined material on lone motherhood in relation to class, the question of the extent to which stigmatisation of lone mothers may be rooted within class inequalities became an important point to explore. Studies of lone motherhood and stigma in the UK have predominantly involved teenage mothers and mothers in deprived areas. The absence of research involving mothers in more diverse circumstances and more affluent locations provoked interest in how stigmatisation plays out according to social class and location as well as age, route to lone motherhood and other factors. Taking a comparative approach in two locations with contrasting socio-economic profiles enables similarities and differences between experiences of women placed in the same taxonomic category but situated in different spatial and social contexts to be examined.

The importance of relationality and normativity in Goffman's conceptualisation of stigma has been established and ways in which contemporary updates complement his conceptualisation have been outlined. Having examined studies of lone motherhood, a series of specific issues arise for consideration when investigating the phenomena specifically in relation to its experiential manifestation among lone mothers. These can be summarised as: the need for caution in categorisation and a non-stigmatising approach; recognition of degrees of stigma; differentiation between stereotyping, exclusion, discrimination, direct and indirect incidences of stigma; and assessment of factors that contribute towards or militate against subjective experiences of stigmatisation. Accordingly, SSL has been introduced as a tool for investigating lone mothers' experiences which takes on board: complexity in manifestations of stigma; agential negotiation of stigma; and factors influencing rejection of, absorption of, or resistance to prevailing norms and discourses.

## Chapter 4

# Methodology: From meta-theory, to practice, to knowledge

### Introduction

Chapters Two and Three established the principal lines of inquiry to be pursued in this study and set out its conceptual framework. This chapter now describes the methodological approach taken in order to address these research questions. It is written in the first person in recognition of the situated nature of sociological knowledge (Smith, 1990) and the importance of reflexive practice to feminism (Harding 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Letherby, 2013) and critical realism (Sayer, 2000). The research is grounded in broadly critical realist philosophical principles. This position was determined through refinement of the research focus in conjunction with reflection upon my personal stance, which suggested coherence with critical realism in its widest sense.<sup>5</sup> Although critical realism offers a philosophical perspective rather than procedural guidelines and was not implemented in a dogmatic fashion, making meta-level assumptions explicit helps set the research within a coherent ontological and epistemological framework (Cruickshank, 2011). The first section of this chapter therefore describes how key critical realist principles were put into practice in an iterative research design. The second section documents the research process in practice: through from choice of locations and data collection methods; to recruitment of participants and consideration of ethical issues; and reflections on the interviews. The final section discusses data analysis methods, which stayed close to the women's accounts initially and gradually became more interpretive, and offers reflection upon that process.

### Translating meta-theory into research design

The previous chapter explained how Archer's (2000; 2003) morphogenic model of social change and theorisation of agency/structure inter-play were regarded as the most suitable approach in pursuing the research aims and form the basis of the conceptual framework. Archer's theoretical perspective is underpinned by a critical realist philosophical position. This section establishes the key tenets of critical realist meta-theory and discusses its value in addressing the research aims through combining realist ontology with constructionist epistemology and encouraging 'critical'

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<sup>5</sup> Whilst the realist paradigm encompasses 'subtle' (Hammersley, 1992), 'agential' (Barad, 2007) and other forms, and variations on critical realism itself exist, the broadest principles accepted by all versions of critical realism are adopted here, as per Maxwell (2012). This means that Bhaskar's early work conveying its key tenets is drawn upon, although this study follows Cruickshank (2003), among others, in divergence from his later 'transcendental dialectical' turn (2000).

social inquiry. In the spirit of pre-eminent critical realist Bhaskar's (1975: 2015) commitment to philosophy as an 'under-labourer' for research, this section explains how the philosophical assumptions adopted were translated into practicable research design. Having discussed knowledge claims arising from the critical realist position, it goes on to show how the tenets of the approach were enacted in an 'iterative' research cycle.

### **Combining realist ontology and constructionist epistemology**

Cruickshank (2011) describes how critical realism has gained ground in social science philosophy and its empirical application is increasing. With distinctions between objectivism and subjectivism in social research broken down in recent years (Cunliffe, 2010), it claims to respond to limitations of both, 'the materialist-physicalist reductionism of positivism and the idealist-mentalist reductionism of hermeneutics' (Dean et al., 2006: 8). Bhaskar (2014) regards collapsing ontology into epistemology as the 'epistemic fallacy'. This distinction between ontology and epistemology is a fundamental principle of critical realism, which is more concerned with ontology than epistemology and thus methodologically pluralistic (Danermark et al., 2001). In distinguishing between the 'intransitive' domain – of 'real' structures and mechanisms – and the 'transitive' domain – of knowledge acquired, discourses and theories, Bhaskar (1975; 2014) draws a line between questions about the nature of social reality and our knowledge of that reality. According to this 'depth ontology', social phenomena, 'exist and act independently of descriptions, but we can only know them under particular descriptions' (1975: 250).

Whereas constructionism is of value in exploring stigma and lone motherhood, a limitation for the specific purposes of this research can be lack of sufficient attention to questions such as, 'what precisely a construct is, who is doing the constructing, how or what sustains it?', according to Fleetwood (2005: 202). He believes critical realism aids attempts to look behind constructions: in this case those constructions encoded in discourse surrounding lone motherhood. As Chapter Three concludes, the 'prism of legitimacy' conceptual framework and 'subjective social legitimacy' (SSL) have been developed to help explore how extra-discursive factors (including material resources, enablements and constraints and spatial location) affect how lone mothers position themselves in relation to hegemonic discourse, which symbolically de-legitimatises non-normative family forms. A differentiation between discursive and extra-discursive factors is stressed by Lau and Morgan (2014) in their discussion of attempts by realists and constructionists to assimilate each other's positions epistemologically. While believing that discourse can exert real effects, these authors persuasively contrast discursive with non-discursive factors and argue that the relative importance of these factors varies in different situations.

For the purposes of this study, the relative significance of discursive and extra-discursive factors is of interest in investigating ways in which lone mothers' subjectivity and agential powers interplay with 'external ideational and material ones' (Iosifides, 2011: 15). On this point, it is

useful to remember that there are two parts to the research questions. The first part asks if and how lone mothers experience stigmatisation in the current UK context and requires a descriptive answer as to their subjective perspective. The second part asks why in exploring elements in their personal situation or the wider social context which might mitigate or exacerbate stigmatisation. Critical realist meta-theory is applicable in regarding hermeneutics as a means *to* rather than end *of* knowledge (Wainright, 2000). Archer sums up neatly: 'There are always two stories to tell, one explanatory, the other interpretive' (2000: 30).

### **Critical social enquiry**

The literature review traced material concerns and patriarchal interests underlying gendered 'moral discourses' on lone motherhood (Song, 1996) and provided insights into unequal power relations through which stigmatisation of lone mothers is perpetuated (e.g. Tyler, 2008). It also offered evidence that the individualisation thesis (Giddens, 1992) is largely unfounded (Duncan, 2011) and class and gender inequalities endure in the lives of lone mothers, despite their enactment of agency (e.g. Klett-Davies, 2007). The *critical* aspect of critical realism is therefore pertinent to investigation of the inter-relationship between lone mothers' subjective experiences of stigma and wider contextual and socio-cultural factors. This critical position entails a commitment to looking for ways of explaining beliefs and critiquing normative social practices to 'reduce illusion' about those practices (Sayer 2000: 10).

The value of feminist perspectives on lone motherhood was established in Chapter Two. Walby et al. (2012) believe critical realism can help overcome some current dilemmas when looking at the intersection of inequalities resulting from factors including gender, class and ethnicity. In their view, it can reflect complexity, offer 'new ways of thinking about ontological depth' and allow analysis to take place on both a micro and a macro level (2012: 225). A 'dual systems' approach helps address overlaps between a patriarchal social system and capitalist economic system affecting lone mothers' experiences (Walby, 1990). The previous chapter discussed how feminist synthesis of Bourdieu's concepts of capitals and symbolic violence (e.g. Skeggs, 1997; Gillies 2007) has been drawn on in considering gender and class in lone mothers' lives. Feminism also provides ethical guidance for conducting research that is 'for' not just 'on' women (Harding, 1987). Potential tensions and synergies between feminist and critical realist commitments required attention however, as discussed in the final section of this chapter.

### **Critical realist knowledge claims**

Cunliffe highlights the importance of understanding, 'how our philosophical commitments influence the logic behind our research methods and knowledge claims' (2010: 648). Without scope to do justice to the nuances of Bhaskar's deliberations, it can be loosely stated that the foundation for his mode of argumentation is based upon the Kantian 'coherence' theory of truth founded upon rationality, rather than a Humean 'correspondence' theory, which rests upon constant conjunction (Bhaskar, 2014). Critical realism accepts 'weak' constructionism (Sayer,

1992). It does not accept extreme relativism however, as this 'delegitimises knowledge claims' (Cruickshank, 2011:13) and implies there are no grounds for adjudicating between interpretations or forms of knowledge (Sayer, 2000:202). Instead, this 'middle way' (Sayer, 2000:46) responds to my personal acceptance of the view that knowledge is socially situated and fallible but, 'not all knowledge is equally fallible' (Danermark et al, 2001:15). It claims to reconcile 'ontological realism' with 'epistemological relativism' while retaining 'judgemental rationality' (Archer et al., 1998: xi, cited in Danermark et al., 2001: 10).

The inherent order of things is mind-independent in this schema (Meyer and Lunnay, 2012), which does not share the 'naive' realist belief that reality can be directly accessed and regards ontology as open, complex and comprising, 'strata that are not directly observable or comprehensible' (Iosifides, 2001:9). Archer's (2000) morphogenic approach also emphasises the temporality of social structures. Without being idiographic in the extreme relativist sense, critical realism therefore does not seek regularities or generalisability in the positivist or deductive sense (Sayer, 2000; Danermark et al, 2001; Maxwell, 2010). Its focus is on processes that lie beneath correlations that can be observed empirically (Cruickshank, 2003). The 'intensive' research questions (Sayer 2000) posed in this study explore process underlying lone mothers' experiences of stigma in a limited number of cases.

Whilst critical realist literature refers to 'causality', it must be stressed that this is limited to specific contexts and that processes are considered in a local rather a generalisable way (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This is facilitated in the present study via a comparative approach involving women in two locations, which enables examination of situations that are alike in some way yet differ in others (Bryman, 2012), as explained in discussion of data collection in the section which follows.

### **Positioning myself in the research**

Having established the view of knowledge as provisional and partial – in the sense of being both partisan and incomplete – it is important to situate myself as researcher within the research process. Harding (1987) is among feminist scholars who have unmasked how white, male, middle-class, western, heterosexual bias can masquerade as objectivism. Harding's quest for 'strong objectivity' demands that 'subjective' elements of 'class, race, culture and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviours of the researcher' are brought into the analytical frame to enhance research objectivity, as opposed to claims of 'objectivism' which hide such information (1987:9). Letherby (2013) makes a good case for preferring the term 'theorised subjectivity' on the grounds that Harding's phrase implies that objectivity can be redefined. She believes that reality may be 'out there', but traditionally defined objectivity is impossible and subjectivity should therefore be taken as a starting point and drawn upon as a resource. The term 'theorised subjectivity' best reflects my own understanding of my position in relation to research participants and my hopes of furthering knowledge of lone mothers' experiences of stigma.

Theorised subjectivity requires 'critical interrogation' of the influence our personal and intellectual position has upon knowledge production (Letherby, 2013: 80).

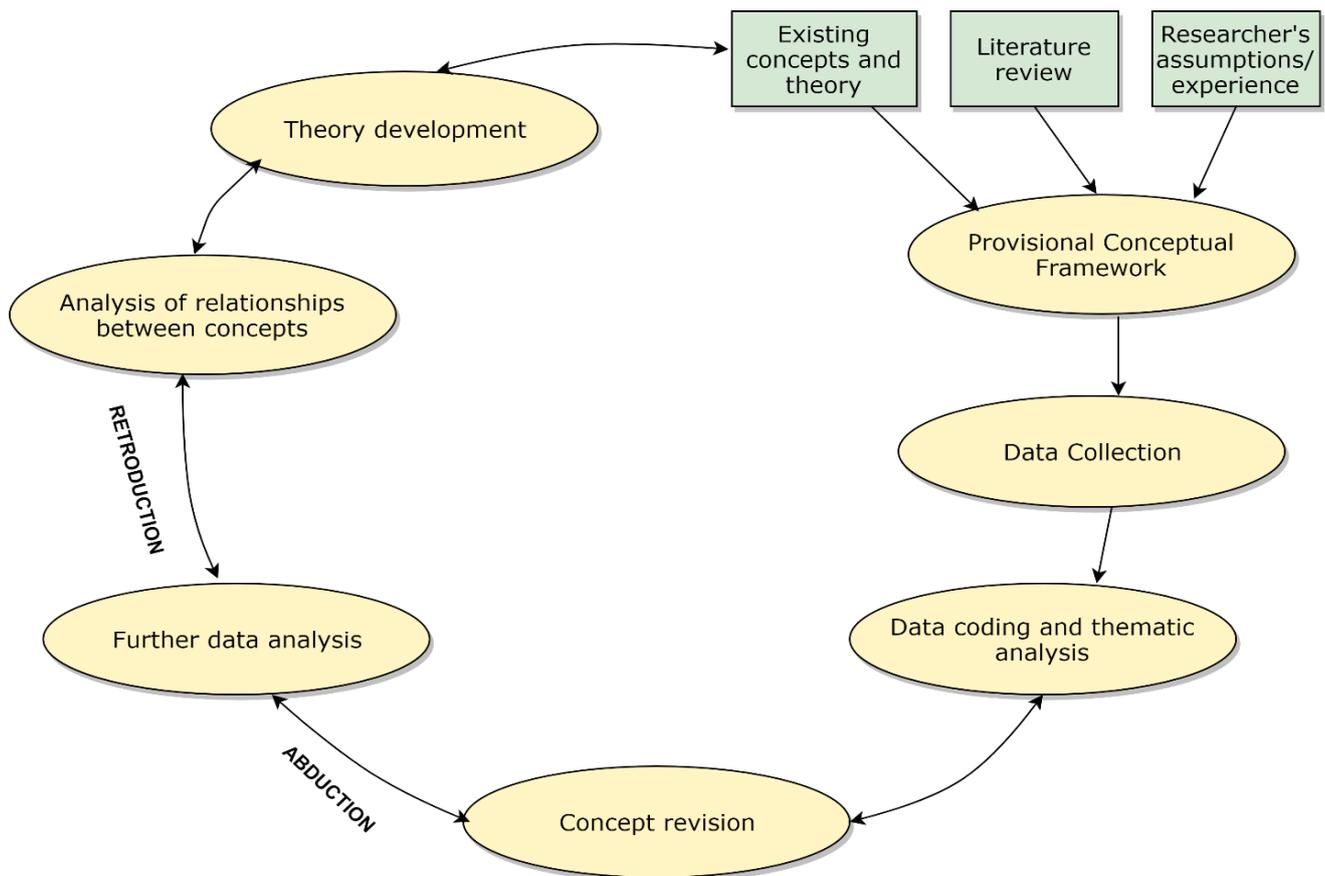
Reflexivity is a central tenet of both feminist (Harding, 1987) and critical realist (Sayer, 1992) research and reflexive practice helped critically assess decisions and outcomes throughout the research journey. Feminist researchers have led the way in epistemological and empirical approaches that call upon the researcher to be as transparent as possible. Demonstrating how the 'process' affects the 'product' is essential for accountable knowledge, according to Stanley and Wise (1993). Reflexivity is also central to critical realism, with Sayer urging researchers to examine their own standpoint reflexively, 'so as to guard against forms of projection and selection which misrepresent' (Sayer, 2000: 53).

King and Horrocks (2010), who describe conceptualisation of the role of the researcher as part of the reflexive process, believe that documenting reflexivity aids accountability and judgement of research quality. In line with Mills' (2000) suggestion, a Research Diary recorded methodological issues along with personal impressions during the fieldwork and analysis. Matters covered in the Research Diary are referred to as appropriate in this chapter. Analytic Memos documented thought-processes during data analysis, as suggested by Maxwell (2012) and Layder (1996), and selected examples are referred to as relevant and available as appendices.

### **Lone motherhood research as an iterative cycle**

Critical realist philosophy endorses a wide range of methods in the belief that methods are best dictated by the aims of a particular project. While not specifying methods, 'careful conceptualisation', 'retroduction' and 'abduction' tend to be used as tools in what Sayer (1992) describes as 'iterative' approaches. This facilitates, 'a dialogue between ideas and evidence' when developing theory (Meyer and Lunnay, 2013: 5). Guidance on methodological implications of critical realist philosophy by Sayer (1992; 2000), Danermark et al (2001) and Maxwell (2012) proved valuable when considering the design of this research. The research designed for this study, which was developed with reference to these sources, is depicted in *Figure 3: Lone motherhood research as an iterative cycle*, below.

Figure 3: Lone motherhood research as an iterative cycle



**Provisional conceptual framework** - Because the world can only be known under descriptions, social phenomena are 'concept dependent' and 'careful conceptualisation' is therefore an important facet of this approach (Sayer, 2000: 2: 19). If we accept that social phenomena including power relations, class and patriarchy, existing independently of concepts, discourses and beliefs used to identify them, the sociologist's role is to 'tease out' that identification (Fleetwood, 2005). Taking an 'abductive' stance meant articulating concepts on a provisional basis at the outset, but allowing sufficient scope for relationships between concepts to freely emerge during the study (Robson, 2011). Legitimacy emerged as a central theme during the literature review (as discussed in Chapter Two) and was therefore used as a starting point in considering lone mothers' experiences within the prevailing normative context. The idea of SSL also emerged as an investigative tool in attempting to capture women's experiences, values and perspectives. Together with Archer's conceptualisation of agency/structure dynamics, these formed *a priori* theoretical and conceptual approaches, which were set out in a 'Provisional Conceptual Framework'. A provisional framework establishes what the researcher believes they know but leaves the way open to charter what is unknown (Maxwell, 2012). Hart et al. (2004) warn of potential for the use of *a priori* concepts to be falsely misinterpreted as illicit

hypothesising. To this end, it must be emphasised that there was neither a notion of what empirical findings might reveal nor any preconceived theories at this point.

**Data collection and analysis** - The comparative, place-based approach in this study is consistent with critical realist emphasis on investigating causality in the local context (Sayer, 1992). Details of how locations were selected, the interview topic guide, and participant recruitment are elaborated upon in the next section. The final section of this chapter discusses the compatibility of the Framework Analysis method with the comparative nature of the study and indicates how data analysis moved from low inference description to increasing higher levels of interpretation and abstraction (Spencer et al., 2014a; 2014b).

**Abduction** - Lay accounts form the grounding for knowledge, but at the same time, 'must be surpassed and surveyed in a theoretical form' if new knowledge is to be created (Danermark et al. 2001: 37). Following initial analysis of the data, abduction was applied to support 'theoretical re-description' (Sayer, 1992). This enabled the Provisional Conceptual Framework to be adapted and refined and new ideas to be introduced in light of new evidence that emerged. Refining the conceptual ideas 'in dialogue with the data' (Layder, 1998) over the course of the study resulted in final version of the 'prism of legitimacy' and 'SSL' framework, which is set out at the end of Chapter Three (see Figures 1 and 2 pp.76-77).

**Retroduction** - Retroduction involves working backwards from empirical observations to determine underlying processes or mechanisms, according to Bhaskar (2015), who views it as central to theory construction. Having identified the most pertinent features and patterns in lone mothers' accounts, this meant investigating possible mechanisms underlying their subjective experiences of stigmatisation. Archer describes a mechanism simply as, 'what makes something work' (2014: 94). Comparative analysis can facilitate retroductive inference by, 'describing conditions that make a phenomenon what it is' (Danermark et al., 2001: 45). Sayer (1992) also recommends investigating 'candidate mechanisms' to determine which have the strongest explanatory powers.

**Theory development** - The conceptual framework helps to: provide a bridge between research strategy and conceptual ideas; create a context for interpretation of data; and show how the findings contribute to existing knowledge (Leshem and Trafford, 2007). Casanave and Li differentiate between the fluidity of the 'conceptual' framework and development of 'theory', which 'makes clear how the concepts are related' (2015: 107). Using the 'prism of legitimacy' helped bring together key concepts in a fluid framework whilst a theoretical 'model' with a 'series of connected propositions that specify a number of components and the relations among them' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 145) was developed at the end of the analysis. While critical realists stress that all knowledge is fallible, researchers can apply judgemental rationality to discriminate between explanations, aiming for 'the most satisfactory explanations within their situated understanding' (Danermark et al., 2001: 148).

**Evaluation** – Reflexive evaluation of the research can be viewed as a further stage of its design. Quality criteria offered by Silverman (2011) were deemed the most appropriate in relation to the meta-theoretical perspective and research aims. The specific 'checklist' criteria and their use in evaluating the quality of the research and its contribution to knowledge are discussed in the Conclusion chapter.

## **Participant recruitment and data collection**

Having outlined the philosophical grounding and research design for this study, this section now moves on to describe participant recruitment and data collection. It discusses: data collection methods; sampling and participant recruitment strategy; and practical and ethical considerations entailed in carrying out semi-structured interviews with 26 lone mothers. It also includes reflexive commentary on the research interview process.

### **Sampling strategy**

The role of qualitative sampling is to elucidate rather than generalise and uncover 'depth, nuance and complexity' (Mason, 2002: 121). Selecting particular spatial locations from which to recruit meant taking a 'purposive' stratified approach (Bryman, 2012). The participants all shared taxonomic status but locational sub-groups were recruited to meet the research aim of exploring factors that might exacerbate or inhibit stigmatisation. When Baker and Edwards (2012) posed the question 'how many qualitative interviews is enough' to eminent methodologists, they responded that the answer depends upon matters including; time and resources, access to participants, the research problem being considered, epistemological approach; quality of explanation; reaching data saturation and producing sufficient depth and range of detail on the phenomena of interest. For this research, the number of respondents was determined according to access to participants, reaching a point of data saturation, and providing sufficient richness to allow quality analysis without being overwhelmed by quantity of data. I was keen to interview an equal number of women from each location to balance the sample, which totalled 26 participants. Bryman (2012) suggests 20-30 as a minimum sample size for publication of findings from an interview-based qualitative study.

Chapter Three explained the unsuitability of employment-based class stratification (e.g. Goldthorpe, 1980) for a study involving lone mothers and related the rationale for a place-based comparison to exploration of stigma in terms of social class. While there is obviously diversity in participants' situations and experiences, people who are close in geographical space are more likely to share material and social circumstances, according to Bourdieu (1989). So, taking a place-based approach by recruiting lone mothers in areas with contrasting socio-economic profiles made it more likely that women in contrasting class situations would be included. A place-based approach was also more practical than attempting to define social class in terms of income brackets or employment and recruit according to that schema. Moreover, asking women

in the study to self-identify their social class helped avoid imposing an externally-defined classification upon them. This was important in investigating their subjectivities in relation to discursive and material factors, in order to make clear both the lived experience of class and external features contributing towards it. Purposive sampling, 'illustrates sub-groups and enables comparison' (Cresswell, 2007: 127). In this study it meant strategic selection (Mason, 2002) of particular locations from which to recruit.

### **Choice of locations**

The locations chosen were within the same sub-region to allow consistency in a macro-economic sense, but had contrasting socio-economic profiles to enable comparison at a localised level. The anonymised locations were chosen using quantitative data from: Office of National Statistics Census Data (ONS, 2012a), Department for Communities and Local Government Indices of Multiple Deprivation (DCLG, 2012) and local authority ward profile data (ONS, 2012b). This provided information in terms of area deprivation, average income, housing tenure, proportion of lone mothers in the population and ethnic composition of residents. Locations in the North of England were chosen so as to be more readily accessible for fieldwork and enable familiarisation, building contacts and frequent visits at the convenience of participants.

**Location A** is a local authority electoral ward in a city which falls within the top 50 local authority areas for proportion of lone mothers according to latest Census data (ONS, 2012a). It is predominantly comprised of a large estate of local authority owned houses and some low-rise flats, with some housing association owned and privately rented properties on its outskirts. More than 14.5% of households in this area are headed by lone mothers (ONS, 2012a). Almost 70% of its population falls within the most deprived Local Authority Super Output Areas (DCLG, 2012). The mean gross annual income is £26,700, a total of 36% of residents live in socially rented housing and almost 16% in privately rented housing<sup>6</sup>. Crime rates are relatively high in comparison with national averages and a low proportion of schools have favourable Ofsted ratings. Approximately 93.6% of the population are White British and a 6.5% Black and Minority Ethnic population is comprised of approximately 2.6% people describing themselves as Mixed, 2.1% Asian or Asian British, 1.5% Black or Black British and 0.4% Other Ethnic Groups (ONS, 2011; 2012b).

**Location B** was selected because of its proximity to A along with its contrasting socio-economic characteristics. The original area chosen is a single small town within the same local authority boundary as Location A, which borders it. Data indicates that 4.1% of households there are headed by lone mothers (ONS, 2012a). None of the population are in the most deprived Local Authority Super Output Areas (DCLG, 2012). The mean gross annual income is £45,000, there

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<sup>6</sup> Figures on average income and housing provided are from individual local authority statistical sources, full referencing of which would identify the locations, the anonymity of which was promised to participants.

is a predominance of owner occupied properties and only 6% are socially rented<sup>7</sup>. Owing to the low proportion of lone mothers from which to recruit, lack of progress in engaging gatekeepers there and the existence of a social media group for single parents in a nearby town with very similar characteristics, the geographical boundary was expanded into the neighbouring borough, from which a further four participants were recruited. Data shows 2.1% of households there are headed by lone mothers (ONS, 2012a). The average income is £42,000 and the majority of residents live in owner occupied properties<sup>8</sup>. Both towns have low unemployment and crime rates compared with national averages and a high proportion of schools with favourable Ofsted ratings. According to statistics, aggregated across the location, approximately 98% of the population are White British, with a BME population of approximately 2% spread largely evenly between Mixed, Asian or Asian British, Black or Black British, Chinese or Other Ethnic Groups (ONS, 2011; 2012b).

### **Recruitment of participants**

The first step in participant recruitment was producing the detailed Participant Information Sheet and recruitment leaflets, which summarised information in a more succinct and engaging format (see *Appendix B: Participant recruitment information leaflet* and *Appendix C: Participant recruitment information sheet*). The matter of payment was looked at within the dynamics of the researcher/participant relationship (King and Horrocks, 2010). Participants were offered £20 vouchers as a 'thank you gift' to ensure their time and input was valued. This sum was considered sufficient to help incentivise participation and reciprocate their investment of time, effort and expense without being enough to encourage them to take part in something they were uncomfortable with.

Desk-based research identified professionals or community leaders at community-based organisations, venues, groups, projects or services who may have been able to assist in recruitment. 'Gatekeepers' with, 'power to grant or withhold access,' to participants (Burgess, 1993: 48) were approached by phone and/or email with information about the research and sent copies of the recruitment information. Much communication went unanswered and some organisations expressed initial interest but had not assisted in any tangible way after several meetings. Budget reductions meant cuts in public services were apparent in Location A as the library, youth club and community centre were in the process of closing down. While meetings with a local authority community development officer took place, he was unable to offer assistance as he was working out a redundancy notice. Ultimately, professionals in two organisations in this location proved invaluable in helping identify and recruit research participants. The director at the local Children's Centre helped recruit the majority of participants by asking her staff to distribute information, broker introductions and they also set up meetings in some cases. (Two members of staff who were lone mothers offered to take part in interviews).

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Staff who run a parent and toddler group at a local church allowed me to come along to their group, from which I recruited five further participants.

Approaches to a range of community organisations in Location B went unanswered. The local Children's Centre did not engage but displayed a recruitment leaflet, which resulted in recruitment of one participant. There was no response to leaflets displayed at community venues and other public notice boards in the area. A decision was therefore taken to try social media, which was more fruitful. Recruitment of participants using a local social media platform and a social media group specifically for single parents proved a successful recruitment tool. The administrator of this group said she was happy to post information about the research because she would welcome any counterbalance to media and policy emphasis on lone mothers on benefits. It is not possible to estimate the impact that using social media as opposed to third party organisations had on the study, but it allowed scope to establish a rapport with women who contacted me in the run-up to interviews. For instance, despite there being no reference to stigma in recruitment material, some participants referred to it immediately during these initial phone conversations.

### **Choice of semi-structured interviews**

Face to face interviews were carried out with 26 women over an eighteen-month period in total, concentrating on repeated visits to Location A and then Location B. The people who took part in interviews are referred to here as research 'participants' as this reflects a more active role than the terms 'subjects' or 'interviewees' imply (Edwards and Holland, 2013). The interviews lasted just over an hour in most cases and the longest was two and half hours. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the means of collecting primary data for this study because this allows the researcher to learn about participants' experiences and views first hand and 'capture people's individual lives and stories' (Robson, 2011: 110). While the design of the research was fixed to enable comparison across sites, semi-structured interviews can strike a balance between comparability (as the same topics were addressed with all participants) and flexibility (as the perspective of participants was able to emerge through more fluid ordering and wording of questions). This enabled participants' perspectives to emerge and questions to flow naturally instead of taking a mechanistic approach. As Edwards and Holland write, these interviews 'allow space for interviewees to answer on their own terms' but also 'provide some structure for comparison across interviewees in a study by covering the same topics' (Edwards and Holland, 2013:29).

### **Ethical and practical considerations**

An application to the University of Huddersfield's School of Human and Health Science Research Ethics Panel was approved following its satisfaction that research would be carried out in an ethical manner. Interviews were conducted with informed consent and in accordance with the

principles of: not harming participants; safeguarding their interests; integrity; trust; accuracy; transparency; reciprocity; and respect for equality and diversity (BSA, 2004; ESRC, 2012).

Participants were given the Information Sheet to read and fully briefed verbally before the interviews got under way. They were told how long to expect the interview to last, what its purpose was, what would happen to the information and how it would be used. I assured them that information provided would be confidential and anonymised. As well as pseudonyms being used so no one other than myself knows participants' identities, any locations or other identifying information was removed from transcripts. This included explaining how matters that might be disclosed during the research which could bring confidentiality into question would be dealt with (as covered in the Information Sheet). I made sure that they understood the nature of informed consent and knew they could withdraw at any point without giving a reason. Participants were told that they did not need to answer any question they were not comfortable answering. The Consent Form (*Appendix D: Consent form*) covered these matters. Digital voice recording was used with participants' permission and some notes were taken.

The question of how much to tell participants prior to the interview arose because I wanted to be as open as possible without prejudicing the findings and this matter is elaborated upon in the 'reflections on interviews' section which follows. The word 'stigma' was not used in the recruitment flyer or information sheet, nor in interviews unless and until participants raised it, which was justified both in the name of sociological enquiry and in not assuming participants should be the subject of stigma. Similarly, class was not mentioned until towards the end of interviews unless raised by participants beforehand. Participants were made aware, however, that the research was being conducted in locations with different profiles. A number of participants in both locations commented that they were pleased that the study was not only focused on a deprived area.

I sought interview venues which were convenient for participants, where they would feel safe and comfortable, where there was sufficient privacy and interruptions would be minimised (Edwards and Holland, 2013). The interviews in Location A took place either in a meeting room at the Children's Centre, a room at the church or in the homes of four women. Interviews took place mainly at participants' homes in location B, with two taking place at quiet cafes. I sensed a more relaxed dynamic during interviews arranged directly or where I went to participants' homes or met them in public places than those at the Children's Centre. Children were at home in some cases and either asleep or playing in another room, but a child waking up meant one interview ended a little sooner than I would have preferred. A slight drawback of meeting at their homes was that in two cases participants seemed eager to regard the meeting as more of a social occasion, so boundaries were in danger of becoming somewhat blurred. Having subsequently read Oakley's (2016) position on the false dichotomy between the formal and

informal, I pondered whether this anxiety over boundaries was more of a personal concern than a drawback for the research itself.

I was aware of power and emotional dynamics that can exist in the interview situation (Stanley and Wise, 1990; Standing, 1998). I aimed to establish a rapport with participants, made every effort to ensure they were put at ease and was as sensitive and empathetic as possible. I took care to minimise a sense of anxiety among participants. The topic guide was applied in a flexible way so as to reflect participants' priorities. This meant sometimes covering points that were not of direct relevance to the research questions as it seemed more respectful to attend to issues that were important to them. I also made sure sufficient opportunities were included to ask if there was anything the women wished to raise or add.

I checked that participants were comfortable with the questions mid-way through the interviews and that they had not been upset in any way at the end. Participants were debriefed at the end of the interviews. They were offered a sheet with contact information for national and local support organisations covering a range of issues, should they find it useful. I asked how they had found the interview. None of the women said it had been a negative experience. Some said they enjoyed it and a few said they found it beneficial to have an opportunity to talk and reflect. One woman became tearful when discussing the stress of working full-time while being a lone mother, but soon rallied and was happy to continue the interview. Some related painful historic situations involving relationship break-up, illness or domestic abuse but did not become upset as these events appeared to be in their past. Only one woman seemed still in the midst of a currently emotionally distressing situation. Emma was awaiting a *Decree Absolute* following a 20 year marriage that was emotionally and physically abusive and ruminated constantly on her ex-husband's behaviour and she became upset towards the end of the interview. I responded as sensitively as possible, ascertained that she had support from her mother, friends and her doctor and gave contact information for relevant support organisations. Although she said talking to me had been beneficial and I was aware that I neither had counselling training nor was this appropriate for a research interview, I remained concerned and a lengthy Research Diary entry records feelings and dilemmas from a personal perspective. In research terms, Emma's constant rumination on the abuse she had suffered also indicated the impact upon reflexivity that may occur for someone who may still be experiencing trauma, as Archer suggests (2000), as discussed in Chapter Seven.

### **The participants**

The criteria for taking part in interviews was that participants should be female and be living alone with a child or children under 16, be their primary carer or have joint custody and have them resident some or all of the time. The majority of participants were the sole or main carers for their children the majority of the time, with some children staying with their fathers for one or two nights a week. Participants could be never-married, divorced, widowed or have previously

cohabited. Five had formed 'new' relationships with non-resident males but none were cohabiting.

A total of 13 women from each location took part in the study. Participants are listed in the following *Tables 3 and 4: Participant Information for Location A and B*, by pseudonym with information on: the number, ages and gender of their children; route to lone motherhood and current relationships; paternal input; housing tenure; employment; education; and their self-identified social class. The women in the study were aged between 19 and 54, with most in their 20s-30s. They had 1.5 children on average, the youngest of whom was eight months old, the majority were aged under 8 years and the oldest was aged 15.

It should be noted that whilst the intersection of ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class and disability is well-documented (e.g. Taylor, 2010), the specific focus of this study was on gender and class. Although the sample reflects the average proportion of women from black and minority ethnic background in the areas covered, at 6.6% and 2% respectively, which is relatively low level in both areas in comparison with national average (ONS, 2011; 2012b). One participant in Location A was from an African-Caribbean background and one from a British Asian background, while one was from Germany and her children's father was Nigerian. One participant in Location B was from an African-Caribbean background. Ethnicity is discussed in the findings chapters in relation to points raised by participants. Women in the study were not specifically asked about their sexuality. All participants referred to previous male partners and some to current non-resident male partners and none gave indication that they identified as lesbian or bi-sexual. None identified as disabled. Whilst the focus was on the intersection of gender and class, due to the complexity of these two factors alone in relation to the project scope, work examining ethnicity and sexuality and lone motherhood could be interesting for future study.

The results of responses when participants were asked to self-identify their social class are summarised as part of the *Table of Participants*, along with basic information on their housing tenure, education level and employment. This indicates that participants in Location A identified themselves mainly as 'working class' or 'none' and those in Location B were more likely to identify themselves as 'middle class' or 'mixed'. Responses when asking participants to self-identify reflect the complexity of lone mothers' situations and produced valuable empirical data. A tendency to not want to be categorised as working class is documented in a series of studies (e.g. Skeggs, 1997; Savage, 2015). Distinction between class and class identification made by Sayer (2005) and Tyler (2013) thus proved pertinent in analysing comments that were prompted by asking the women to self-identify their class, as detailed in Chapter Five.

Table 3: Participant information – Location A

| PSEUDONYM | AGE | CHILDREN                | RELATIONSHIPS              | PATERNAL INPUT CONTACT/FINANCIAL     | HOUSING               | EMPLOYMENT               | EDUCATION              | IDENTIFIED CLASS |
|-----------|-----|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| BELLA     | 36  | Twin girls 8            | Divorced                   | Regular contact and financial        | Private tenant        | Unemployed               | Secondary              | None             |
| CARRIE    | 44  | Girl 4, Boy 23 - left   | Never married or cohabited | None                                 | Council tenant        | FT family support worker | Secondary              | Working class    |
| CLARE     | 32  | Girl 4, Boy 5, Girl 8   | Previously cohabited       | No financial and regular contact     | Private tenant        | Unemployed               | Secondary              | None             |
| DEBBIE    | 22  | Girl 1                  | Never married or cohabited | No contact, limited financial        | Council tenant        | Unemployed               | Secondary              | None             |
| GEMMA     | 24  | Boy 2                   | Never married or cohabited | None                                 | Private tenant        | PT nursery assistant     | Secondary              | None             |
| GINA      | 31  | Boy 8                   | Previously cohabited       | None                                 | Owner occupier        | FT hair salon proprietor | Secondary              | None             |
| JULIE     | 27  | Boy 18 months           | Never married or cohabited | None                                 | Council tenant        | Unemployed               | Starting Access course | None             |
| KATHRYN   | 35  | Girl 7                  | Previously cohabited       | Regular contact and financial        | Private tenant        | PT self-employed caterer | A'Levels               | Working class    |
| LUCY      | 25  | Girl 3, Boy 4, pregnant | Previously cohabited       | Daughter's father contact, not son's | Council tenant        | Unemployed               | Secondary              | None             |
| MARTA     | 40  | Girls 3 and 8           | Divorced                   | No contact, limited financial        | Council tenant        | Unemployed               | Secondary              | None             |
| NADIRAH   | 19  | Boy 10 months           | Never married or cohabited | None                                 | Social housing tenant | Unemployed               | Secondary              | None             |
| SHEILA    | 54  | Boys 15, 17             | Divorced                   | None                                 | Council tenant        | PT warehouse worker      | Secondary              | None             |
| THERESA   | 22  | Boy 3                   | Previously cohabited       | None                                 | Council tenant        | Unemployed               | Secondary              | None             |

**Note** Full time employment classed as more than 28 hours per week. Contact with children's fathers was reported to be erratic in some cases, but is based here on the situation at time of interview

Table 4: Participant information – Location B

| PSEUDONYM | AGE | CHILDREN                | RELATIONSHIPS   | PATERNAL INPUT  | HOUSING                | EMPLOYMENT                       | EDUCATION                    | CLASS IDENTITY |
|-----------|-----|-------------------------|---|---|------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------|
| ALISON    | 45  | 4 children 6, 8, 10, 11 | Divorced  | Very limited contact, regular financial                       | Owner occupier         | Unemployed                       | Degree                       | None           |
| CIARA     | 33  | Girl 3 Boy 5, Boy 7     | Divorced - In non-cohabiting relationship             | Regular contact, no financial                                 | Owner occupier         | FT family development manager    | Taking degree modules        | None           |
| DELLA     | 33  | Boy 5                   | Divorced  | Regular contact and financial                                 | Private tenant         | FT sales manager                 | A'Level                      | Mixed          |
| EMMA      | 43  | Boys 8, 11, 15          | Separated – In non-cohabiting relationship            | Regular contact and financial                                 | Owner occupier         | PT teacher                       | Degree                       | Mixed          |
| HANNAH    | 23  | Girl 4                  | Previously cohabited                                  | None  | Private tenant         | PT family support officer        | Studying for degree          | Mixed          |
| JASMINE   | 36  | Boy 12 , Girl 13        | Divorced - Has non-cohabiting 'boyfriend'             | Regular contact and financial                                 | Owner occupier         | FT teacher                       | A'Level and vocational qual. | Mixed          |
| JOANNE    | 35  | Boy 4                   | Divorced  | (Abroad) Very limited contact                                 | Private tenant         | FT operations manager            | Degree and post-grad.        | Middle class   |
| LAURA     | 36  | Boy 9, Boy 13           | Divorced - In relationship and considering cohabiting | Regular contact and financial                                 | Private tenant         | FT university administrator      | Degree                       | Mixed          |
| MANDY     | 25  | Girl 11 months, Boy 6   | Never married or cohabited                            | Daughter's father – supervised contact<br>Son's father - none | Private tenant         | Unemployed – starting university | Starting degree              | Mixed          |
| MENA      | 32  | Girl 8 months           | Never married or cohabited                            | (Abroad) Occasional contact                                   | Rents from her parents | PT bank clerk                    | Degree                       | Mixed          |
| MOIRA     | 34  | Girl 5, Boy 8           | Divorced  | (Abroad) No contact or financial                              | Private tenant         | FT librarian                     | PhD                          | Middle class   |
| SONIA     | 35  | Boys 2, 4, Girl 6       | Previously cohabited - In relationship                | Contact, no financial   | Private tenant         | FT psychologist                  | Degree and post-grad.        | Middle class   |
| VALERIE   | 35  | Girls 2 and 4           | Separated   | Regular contact and financial                                 | Private tenant         | PT social worker                 | Degree and post-grad.        | Mixed          |

### **The interview topic guide**

The topic guide set out broad topics whilst providing flexibility as to order and wording of questions (King and Horrocks, 2010; Bryman, 2012). An initial guide was piloted on friends and colleagues who are lone mothers and honed during early interviews with participants until a final version was arrived at (see *Appendix E*). This was referred to occasionally during interviews, mainly towards the end to ensure principal issues had been addressed. While flexibility was retained over order and wording of questions, this tended to become more similar in light of what elicited the most pertinent and comprehensive responses as more interviews were conducted.

Questions were 'open' and a mixture of factual, 'grand tours' and 'topical probes' (Robson, 2011; Edwards and Holland, 2013). Asking participants to tell me about an average day or weekend seemed to work well in finding out about employment, kinship and social networks. Prompts such as: 'can you give me any examples of that?', 'how did you feel' and 'what was going on in your head at the time?' drew out details of incidents and thought-processes. In particular, probing who was being referred to when the word 'they' was used helped in unpicking the reality of stigmatising experiences and attempting to differentiate between external events and internal affects.

The general order of questions in the topic guide began with the participants' personal situation, span out to perspective on the local area and moved on to views on media portrayals of lone mothers and national policies. Women often spoke about stigma or media portrayals spontaneously when answering other questions, so this natural flow was followed. The interview structure was intended to encourage 'warm up' by asking general factual questions about number and ages of children etc., then move into potentially more emotive issues, and finish with a 'cool off' (Robson, 2011).

### **Operationalising key concepts**

Moving from abstract ideas of 'subjective social legitimacy' (SSL), class and citizenship to researchable human experience (White, 2008) involved breaking these key concepts down into components and thinking through how to translate them into indicators and everyday language that was meaningful to research participants, without being patronising.

Chapter Three discussed points that prompted the development of SSL as an exploratory tool. Research Diary notes indicate how the idea was introduced with the intention of beginning fieldwork without assuming participants felt stigmatised and facilitating more fine-grained distinctions than a 'spoilt identity' (Goffman, 1990) implies. SSL aims to explore participants' sense of social validity. Operationalisation sought to determine what participants believe normative expectations of individuals, families and citizens to be in order for them to be considered 'valid' or 'proper'; how they think themselves, their family form or situation are

regarded socially; and how they feel about this and respond to it subjectively. The interviews did not foreground stigma but sought to ask women about different aspects of their lives and to help gain a holistic account of experiences in different contexts and understand interaction between situations and perceptions. The Topic Guide aimed to gain a picture of women's 'personal emergent properties' in relation to 'structural' and 'cultural' emergent properties (Archer, 2003), as detailed in Chapter Three. Lines of questioning tried to determine sources of stigma and weight assigned to various sources and participants' sense of ability to mediate these sources. These matters became 'researchable' in relation to points covered in the topic guide and manifested through dilemmas and incidents the women recounted. Research Diary notes record a sensation of knowing when interviews were getting to the nub of the research topic when feelings, and thought-processes concerning status and stigma, or indeed pride were revealed.

Feminist application of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of class (e.g. Skeggs, 1997) was in keeping with theoretical and empirical priorities of the study, as discussed in Chapter Three. Operationalisation of class involved: recruiting women in contrasting locations; asking them to self-identify their social class; and seeking indicators of economic, cultural and social capital. Whilst the first two aspects proved relatively straightforward, operationalisation of capitals is more complex. Bourdieu regards concepts as 'polymorphic, supple and adaptive, rather than defined calibrated and used rigidly' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 23). Silva and Edwards (2004) note a difference between using capitals in a generic or specifically defined way and the former was the case in the present study. They suggest capitals can be broken down into broad components. During interviews with lone mothers this involved: asking about housing tenure, employment and financial situation to denote economic capital; education, leisure pursuits and media consumption to denote cultural capital; and social life and networks to inquire about social capital. Asking women about how they were doing financially proved more fruitful than asking their income, which could give an inaccurate impression of the research focus and potentially undermine other aspects of the interview. Furthermore, sources of income could be a complex and fluctuating mix of salary, benefits, maintenance. Asking instead about covering basics (food and bills), clothes and treats/outing, then luxuries such as holidays as indicators opened up a rich source of information on attitudes to money and lack of money.

Citizenship is a prominent concept in literature on lone motherhood, but Research Diary notes record attempts to use it sounded 'forced' and generally fell on stony ground. It either lacked meaning amidst more practical concerns or was met with an 'exclusionary' (Lister, 1997) understanding in terms of migration in some cases. Considering relationships with the state in terms of relative state and parental responsibilities for children was more apt as was asking about political engagement, including whether they voted.

Research Diary entries indicate that being led by participants' priorities and gaining a holistic overview of individual circumstances and perspectives was sometimes at the expense of systematic operationalising specific concepts in a trade-off required to keep interviews within a reasonable time-frame. Also, as Edwards and Gillies (2011) argue, concepts are 'relational'. In practice, this meant that overlap between SSL, class, citizenship was inevitable during interviews, but the concepts were explored more discretely when analysing the data. Inter-relationships between, for example, personal priorities and structural constraints or factors affecting resistance to stigma (Yardley, 2008; McCormack 2004), were explored during analysis.

### **Reflections on conducting the interviews**

Entries in the Research Diary concerning interactions with women who took part in the research were extensive and offered a valuable means of processing my own feelings as well as recording ideas and impressions following interviews. These reflections can be broadly grouped into three types: thoughts on the utility of interview style in eliciting pertinent data; ways in which my own biography and subjectivity may have influenced exchanges; and ways in which meeting the women affected me personally.

Feminists (e.g. Stanely and Wise, 1990; 1993; Standing, 1998) have highlighted potential power imbalances between researchers and participants and a wish to minimise such imbalances had a bearing on how I approached the interviews. When setting up interviews and during face to face interactions I was also conscious that participants were potentially able to impair the research through deciding to: not take part; cancel or not turn up (which happened in a small number of cases); withhold information (though not necessarily consciously); or withdraw from the research. With these delicate dynamics in mind, interviews were centred around participants' priorities, with empathy and natural conversational flow taking precedence over following a set formula for questions. A positive outcome of this approach was that women often segued spontaneously into relevant subjects via connections I might not have envisaged.

When I reviewed initial interviews however, I found they had produced a high volume of material that was superfluous to the research focus and the tone seemed overly informal and the lines of questioning less consistent than I may have preferred. While Oakley suggests that moving beyond false dichotomies between formal and informal interview stances can assist in fuller understanding of the 'interactional politics of research' (2016: 197), I needed to balance an empathetic manner with addressing research aims. Questions thus became more formulaic in light of what worked well, as detailed in a discussion of reconciling feminist and critical realist commitments in the next section. The interviews became increasingly standardised as the research progressed due to: sharper focus on the nub of the research; increasing confidence and enhanced skills as interviewing experience grew; and a better sense of how to phrase questions to provoke detailed responses.

As discussed at the start of this chapter, recognition of the inevitability of researcher subjectivity as a valuable starting point for research is central to both feminist (Harding, 1987; Smith, 1990; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Letherby, 2013) and critical realist (Sayer, 2000) perspectives. My feminist perspective and interest in the research topic grew out of coming from three generations of women who brought up children without fathers. Whilst acknowledging the inevitable biases this engendered, I was aware that researchers should attempt to make questions non-leading (King and Horrocks, 2010). Reflection following the earliest interviews registered a tendency to unwittingly 'lead' the participants upon occasion, for example unintentionally communicating negative assumptions about paternal behaviour or being too garrulous when trying to illicit information from a participant who was reticent. Following this, I made an effort to appear more neutral and keep questions more open-ended and leave gaps in speech to see if participants elaborated, even if it felt uncomfortable.

Also, rather than my views influencing participants' responses, it was more the case that during some interviews participants expressed views which contrasted with my own. Whilst I felt genuinely respectful of the women who shared their stories and do not believe I behaved in any outwardly judgemental way, I found it troubling upon certain occasions when participants voiced critical opinions about: matters such as lone mothers' parenting, appearance, smoking and drinking; or about migrants to the UK claiming benefits. In these situations, I remained impassive as challenging them was inappropriate under the circumstances and doing so would have prevented me from listening to their lines of thought. Whilst no comments were made that could be considered overtly racist, I found it frustrating when women were simultaneously annoyed by being stereotyped yet stereotyped others, especially when I asked about sources of information upon which opinions were based and this appeared vague or unsubstantiated.

Research Diary notes indicate that some participants in A appeared reticent. During these interviews, I tended to repeat questions in different ways to 'draw them out' and was concerned that this might come across as patronising. I noted however that asking participants to relate examples of specific events offered insights into situations through stories told in a 'she said/I said' format. Sheila (A), for example, did not identify with a social class but told of how she felt when people she worked with talked about buying their children things she could not afford for her own. This reflects Smith's (1990) point that women often possess tacit knowledge which is unarticulated and unacknowledged, or Alvesson's view that participants can be 'knowing' without being able to be 'telling' (2011: 30).

Interviews in Location B seemed to generally flow more smoothly than some in A. The greater fluency was partly due to having learned what wording elicited the most pertinent responses by the time fieldwork began in the second location. I was also aware that participants in B tended to have had more formal education, the majority having been in higher education, and were more vocal and confident and generally gave the impression of being more au fait with the

interview situation. There were a number of instances when I asked questions they said they had reflected upon previously, such as what term they preferred to use to describe their situation and why. Alvesson (2011) notes that people with less education may have more trouble communicating their feelings and thoughts and that those who are better educated and more accustomed to using certain kinds of language can be more voluble in interviews. Although women in Location B were on the whole more talkative, I ensured that all participants' views were given equal weight during analysis. Where some participants are quoted more frequently or extensively than others, it is because they either spoke at length on particular topics or spoke about a wider range of topics that affected them.

Reciprocity is an aspect of both feminist approaches to interviewing women (Oakley, 2016) and ethical behaviour generally. I was happy to share information about myself, related to participants with an open and friendly demeanour and responded fully when asked questions. I was aware how infrequently I was asked about myself however. This may have been because this did not arise naturally as my personal situation was different to participants' or more possibly because time did not allow it, with most interviews only around an hour long and focus was very much on the participants.

While the participants were all very pleasant, I felt guilty in some cases as I was conscious that they were doing me a favour in giving up their time and sharing private feelings and thoughts when some were in difficult situations. Although I told them I hoped the research would help to influence perceptions and policies, I was aware of a lack of tangible benefit to them. Letherby (2002) suggests that being involved in research can increase reflexivity among some respondents. One woman remarked that it had made her think about things she had not considered and thought that a good thing. Another discussed a dilemma she had been facing and said that speaking about it had helped her "clarify" things.

Participants were all offered transcripts of their interview and seven said they would like this. Debriefing took place with the 'gatekeepers' and I suggested an event to feed initial findings from the interviews back to participants, but they thought this would place additional demands on the women. Feedback to participants in Location B took the form of a short post for social media used for recruitment and outlining findings at a group for lone mothers followed by a discussion, as referred to in the concluding chapter.

## **Reflexive analysis: from data to knowledge**

This section documents how data from the interviews was analysed and new knowledge was developed. This aspect of the research is elaborated upon in detail in order to facilitate transparency in distinguishing between the participants' and the researcher's standpoints (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003) and as a quality check in documenting links between empirical

observation and theorisation (Horrocks and King, 2010). The section begins by addressing reflexivity in analysis (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003), which became increasingly importunate during the research journey. The compatibility of the Framework Analysis method (Spencer et al., 2014a; 2014b) with the aims and comparative nature of the study is established. This section also outlines how elements of the Provisional Conceptual Framework and SSL proved useful in understanding the interplay of agential and structural factors in lone mothers' experiences of stigma but 'orienting' concepts were also adapted, abandoned and extended during a 'dialogue' between data and theory (Layder, 1998) to develop theoretical understandings of the data. Analytical Memos, which aided this 're-shuffling and re-thinking' process (Layder, 1998: 61) are referred to as appropriate.

### **Reflexivity and data analysis**

Mauthner and Doucet (2003) point out that reflexivity has been widely debated in relation to theory, epistemology and the data collection stage of qualitative inquiry but consideration of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis has been much more limited. In approaching the analysis of interview data, I found their view that reflexivity in data analysis is underestimated highly salient. Whilst aiming to be reflexive about the personal biases I was bringing to the research, how my lines of questioning and my own demographic characteristics and demeanour might influence the outcome (Harding, 1987), I found that interpretation of the data was the most demanding aspect of the research in terms of researcher reflexivity. I needed to reconstitute data in a theoretically meaningful way in order to move from data to knowledge and produce 'legitimate' social research, but at this point I became highly conscious of the 'power balance' between researcher and participants (Stanley and Wise, 1990). I was especially concerned not to contribute towards 'judgement' as this was a prominent theme in participants' accounts and I was uneasy that I might present their stories in ways they might not approve of. Finding a way beyond this was a crucial point in my research 'journey', which was resolved in a practical way by adopting an analytical strategy which took distinct steps in moving from descriptive towards more interpretive analysis. These dilemmas formed recurrent entries in my Research Diary and it is useful to briefly address a series of inter-related issues that were of analytical significance before moving on to discuss data analysis. These can be summarised as: the reconciliation of feminist and critical realist priorities; balancing the standpoint of research participants with that of the researcher; and the role of interviews as a site for 'impression management'.

### ***Reconciling feminist and critical realist priorities***

The value of feminist perspectives on lone motherhood and on social class have been referred to above and discussed in previous chapters. The potential for cross-fertilisation between feminist and critical realist research was debated in a series of articles by Lawson (1999; 2003) and Harding (1999; 2003). In response to arguments by Lawson (1999) on the compatibility of feminist epistemological insights and realist ontological insights, Harding (1999) conceded that rejection of judgmental relativism in favour of a judgmental rationality could enable ontological

realism and epistemological relativism to be combined. Harding (2003) later stated however that ontology itself is located in the social structure of time and place and critical realism therefore pays too little attention to cultural aspects of knowledge production. Put briefly due to lack of space, the first part of this statement might be countered by reiterating arguments around 'epistemic fallacy' (Bhaskar, 2015) and an example from New (2005) in which she parses sex and gender in terms of ontological and epistemological separation; and the second by the view that the critical aspect of critical realism suggests potential for inveighing against prevailing cultural norms (Sayer, 1992). Pointing out that realism recognises the historicity of knowledge claims in the 'transitive' dimension (Bhaskar, 2014), New (1998) employs the idea of ontic depth to suggest that feminist interests can be served by affording empirical weight to the agential details of women's individual lives while attending to causal mechanisms contributing to inequalities at the 'real' level (1998: 368). Synthesis between feminism and critical realism was addressed more recently in a series of articles considering ontological, epistemological and empirical synergies and challenges (Gunnarson et al., 2016).

Whilst these points suggest potential bridges between feminism and critical realism at an intellectual level, the Research Diary records deliberations concerning practical and ethical implications. The research topic and the focus were motivated by feminist concerns. Ethical and sensitive measures, as recommended by Stanley and Wise (1990), such as listening attentively, came as second nature during interviews, and the semi-structured format enabled women's priorities to be accommodated flexibly. A practical point was that reflecting the diversity of participant's priorities gave less control over interviews and resulted in less consistency, which made comparative analysis more challenging, although the interviews became more systematic, as previously indicated. Dilemmas also arose around presenting women's stories respectfully, whilst also theorising about their lives in a way that was consistent with a critical realist emphasis on abstraction and explanation. I could relate to Parr's anxiety about 'data raid' (Wandsworth 1984, cited Parr, 2015) and warnings about avoiding 'sociological imperialism' (Meyer and Lunnay, 2012).

### ***Balancing standpoints***

Addressing dilemmas around 'sociological imperialism' centred upon seeking an appropriate balance between the 'standpoint' of research participants and my own as a researcher. Original feminist standpoint theory stresses the epistemic advantage of women as the experts on their own lives (Harding, 1987). However, Smith (1990), rightly, recognises multiple standpoints from which knowledge is constructed. Furthermore, poststructuralist feminists (e.g. Butler, 1990) point out challenges in arriving at a definitive feminist stance when shared gender does not equate with a homogenous group regardless of factors such as class, ethnicity, age, physical ability and sexuality.

The extent to which the standpoint of the 'most oppressed' should be regarded unquestioningly as the 'most real' source of knowledge also requires consideration (Letherby, 2013: 85). While recognising the achievement of standpoint theory in centring knowledge production around women's experience, Skeggs (1997) cautions against its risk of collapsing being into knowing. From a social realist perspective, Sayer believes that hearing previously unheard voices can lead to new knowledge, but that epistemic privilege should be given to the standpoint most able to answer the research question. In his view, Haraway's emphasis on situated knowledge is compatible with critical realist conceptual selectivity (1991, cited Sayer, 2000). Archer claims it is possible to present participants' narratives with 'a first-person authority, whilst avoiding the excessive claims that have been made about first-person epistemic authority' (2007: 26).

Walby (1990) commends qualitative feminist techniques for capturing women's voices as faithfully as possible, while adhering to the view that underlying social structures with emergent properties exist but are not immediately knowable. She believes it is necessary to be systematic and theoretical in order to elucidate structures underlying social life, which are outside lay experience. Parr (2015) also combines feminist and critical realist concerns during her research involving mothers receiving intensive family support. I found Parr's approach instructive in my work involving lone mothers. Like her, I used prior theoretical ideas to guide interview questions but worked flexibly during interviews to prioritise respect and empathy. As with Parr (2015), I applied the topic guide flexibly and allowed space for women's own perspectives to emerge and remained focused on the participants and data at this stage, which meant critical realist meta-theory was revisited once again during analysis.

### ***Interviews as 'impression management'***

Alvesson points out that interviews may be more about 'role-playing and adapting to social standards in the name of impression management' (2011: 3). This view that interviews can be an opportunity to defend and/or repair self-identity was pertinent in examining stigmatisation of lone mothers. A tendency for young mothers to distance themselves from others in the category rather than regarding the construct itself as problematic is reported frequently in the literature (e.g. Phoenix 1996; Ponsford, 2011). This appeared to be the case during some interviews I conducted, when certain participants made moralistic and 'classist' distinctions between themselves and other lone mothers or economic migrants with reference to stigmatising stereotypes while simultaneously voicing anger at stereotypes. The Research Diary notes dilemmas on how to discuss such impression management techniques in a way that does not portray participants negatively, but is at the same time true to what they said. I noted ambivalence in that even participants who identified themselves as 'feminists' distanced themselves from lone mother stereotypes whilst at the same time being acutely aware of the unjust, gendered and classed nature of such stereotypes.

The extent to which research participants were telling me what they really thought, what they wanted me to hear, or what they thought I wanted to hear was a further Research Diary topic. May (2008) contends that analytical interest in moralistic narratives does not necessarily lie in whether the image that people are presenting is fully authentic, but in how social norms are being negotiated. She argues that this is not taking a cynical stance towards mothers' motives but is more analytically productive than questioning the authenticity of actors' accounts of morality. Impression management might therefore be studied as a manifestation of stigmatisation. This can be witnessed in Ribbens McCarthy et al.'s (2003) attention to participants' 'moral tales' in presentations of their conduct in accounts of step-parenting. Alvesson also believes impression management can be less of a problem for researchers if it is taken as indicative of pressures posed by prevailing social norms and a desire to produce 'morally adequate accounts' (2011: 17). I ultimately needed to accept what people said at face value, while analysing their accounts from my own standpoint and aiming to transparently distinguish between the two.

### **Data analysis methods**

In order to make clear the demarcation between participants' standpoints and my own 'theorised subjectivity' (Letherby, 2013) as a researcher, I followed an analytic path which began with close examination of participants' emic accounts and progressively became more interpretive and theoretical. This also helped to ensure that theoretical understandings were firmly rooted in empirical data (Spencer et al., 2014a).

### ***Thematic coding and framework display***

To prepare the data for systematic analysis, recordings of the interviews were transcribed with identifying material removed to preserve anonymity and format standardised (as set out in Flick, 2014). Basic information about participants was collated to enable an overview of similarities and disparities between women's situations in the two locations. This comparative overview is presented in the form of tables in the three chapters that follow. Organisational coding was then undertaken, which involved reviewing transcripts to establish broad categories, which loosely reflected subjects covered in the Interview Topic Guide but did not replicate them. The data was then coded descriptively, which involved assigning codes to passages and sentences based on recurring words, phrases, ideas, views or metaphors. NVivo software was used during thematic coding for purposes of speed, ease and consistency (Spencer et al., 2014a). Versions of coding lists were captured as codes were expanded, refined, merged and deleted and transcripts were revisited to ensure relevant material was incorporated into a final coding scheme. (For further details see *Appendix F*).

Having coded the transcripts according to descriptive themes, Framework Analysis (Spencer et al., 2014a; 2014b) was deemed the best way of managing, organising and displaying the data in a coherent fashion. Data was arranged in matrices comprising a row for each participant and

columns denoting themes and sub-themes. This enables examination *within and across cases* and *between* locations. Working with the data in this 'cross-sectional' way provides a 'systematic overview' and helps develop conceptual categories, make comparisons and identify connections, according to Spencer et al. (2014a: 272-3). In light of King and Horrocks' emphasis on the importance of 'auditability' for demonstrating quality (2010: 152), the framework approach also aids transparency by making 'analytical building blocks' accessible (Spencer et al., 2014a: 280).

Data that had been 'descriptively' coded using NVivo software was arranged in a series of A3-sized Context Matrices according to topic, themes and sub-themes with each matrix divided by location. The matrices contain direct extracts from transcripts to retain the voice of participants as far as practicable, with summaries to reduce data volume where appropriate. Although producing matrix summaries was necessary for discerning trends and relationships in the data, I was aware when doing so of reducing people's situations to single phrases and boxing complex opinions into neat columns. Several iterations were tried out before arriving at the most coherent arrangement of substantive themes in relation to the research questions in nine matrices. These situated participants' descriptively coded comments according to contextual factors. Thinking through relationships between themes and deciding which were most logically related was a fruitful aspect of analysis. A summary of each contextual matrix was created to reduce the bulk of the data in order to discern emerging trends. This enabled broad patterns in situations, locations and perspectives to be identified (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The most significant themes and points of comparison from these Context Matrices were summarised in a table (see *Appendix G: Summary of Context Matrices*).

### ***Interpreting the data***

As Bryman notes, to make sense of the data once it has been broken down it needs to be reconstituted to provide, 'a basis for theoretical understanding of the data that can make a theoretical contribution to literature' (2012: 580). Returning to the *Iterative Research Cycle* (see *Figure 3* above), 'abduction' was used to bring together descriptively coded data with existing sociological knowledge, while 'retroduction' was used to help unearth processes underlying empirical observations (Sayer, 1992; Danermark et al., 2001). Analysis does not follow a linear path (Spencer et al., 2014; 2014b) and abductive and retroductive aspects of the cycle became highly inter-dependent during the practice of analysis.

The preceding discussion stressed the need for reflexivity in balancing participants' and researcher's standpoints and transparently distinguishing between the two (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Lau and Morgan, 2014). This was supported by arranging descriptively coded data into Context Matrices before undertaking interpretive analysis, as described above. Silverman (2011) notes the importance of striking a balance between sticking too rigidly to 'in vivo' language and jumping too quickly to academic concepts. The Research Diary recorded deliberations over the point at which etic analysis became necessary. While participants are

obviously the best 'experts' on lone motherhood, researchers' insights come from accessing multiple standpoints and sociological knowledge (Bygstand and Munvold, 2011). Starting to use my own phrases to summarise trends along with academic terms where their value was apparent was part of the gradual return to existing knowledge and theoretical ideas (Spencer et al., 2014a; 2014b). It allowed analysis to move, 'beyond empirical information and engage with the general organising principles of social reality' (Layder, 2013: 133), thereby starting to address the 'why' of stigma as well as 'how' lone mothers' experience it.

### ***Revisiting the provisional conceptual framework***

Following organisational and descriptive categorisation, the next element of the iterative research design was 'theoretical categorisation' (Maxwell, 2012) or 'conceptual re-description' (Sayer, 1992). An abductive approach meant that participants' accounts were re-examined with reference to the original 'orienting' concepts (Layder, 1998). Having the coded data arranged in the nine Context Matrices made it readily accessible for moving back and forth between: the concrete and abstract and the concepts and empirical observations they indicate (Danermark et al, 2001; Layder, 1998). While *a priori* theoretical ideas encapsulated in a Provisional Conceptual Framework helped to guide analysis and SSL was a useful investigative tool, I was conscious that theoretical understandings should arise from lived experience rather than being forced to fit with preconceived ideas (Skeggs, 1997; Layder, 2013). Relevant elements of the provisional framework were therefore expanded or supplemented whilst those that did not withstand confrontation with empirical evidence were abandoned and replaced until the versions of the conceptual framework used in this thesis were arrived at (see *Figures 1 and 2*, Chapter Three). This process is outlined in *Appendix H*.

### ***Using case dynamics analysis to determine 'modes' of SSL***

The interviews uncovered women's perceptions, attitudes and responses to stigma in relation to a wide range of factors including their age, route to lone motherhood, employment, finances, family support and social networks. Having revisited the provisional conceptual framework, 'theoretical categorisation' (Maxwell, 2012) involved returning to the data and focusing in on women's accounts in relation to indicators of SSL, class identity and capitals and analysing relationships between factors and outcomes in individual cases. Miles and Hubberman recommend creating a case dynamics matrix as a means marrying 'story' with 'concept' approaches (Ragin, 1987, cited Miles and Hubberman, 1994). Producing Case Dynamics Matrices helped narrow focus and map comments in relation to key concepts for each participant and to seek out relationships between factors. By preserving in-case coherence, this also addressed a risk that the narrative flow from interviews can be fragmented during thematic analysis, as raised by Bryman (2012).

Having explored the propensity for rejection, resistance or absorption of stigma in each participant's case, the data suggested outcomes could be loosely grouped under headings to

reflect women's overall 'mode' of SSL; namely 'positive', 'negative', 'performative', 'defensive' and 'transformative'. The use of 'positive' SSL where women expressed pride, autonomy and displayed little or no degree of being affected by stigma and 'negative' SSL where they expressed a high degree of absorption of stigma is self-explanatory. The other types of SSL require definition. The 'performative' designation grew out of observation of cases where women believed theirs was a stigmatised family form but displayed personal legitimacy through performing to normative expectations of citizenship through employment and compensating for coupled parenthood. Goffman refers to cases where people have 'a record of having corrected a particular blemish' (1990: 20) and this could serve as a description of 'performative' SSL.

Skeggs and Loveday stress the importance of 'performing' and 'defending' in making one's stake for value and legitimacy (2012: 472-3). Where some participants emphasised their performative achievements in relation to dominant norms, the 'defensive' designation grew out of observation of cases where women created meanings to defend their position against dominant discourse. These participants were aware of stigmatisation due to having children at a young age and claiming benefits, but centred their SSL around their own mothers and their maternal role. Participants whose mode of SSL was defensive overall tended to state that they were "not bothered" about other people's opinions and deflected criticism onto other mothers or migrants, who they regarded as being poor mothers or not deserving of benefits. SSL was deemed 'transformative' where women described a journey from which they emerged with a new perspective after a period of adjustment when their relationships ended and grew to value their independence. Participants' perception of stigma, their agential responses to it, along with indicators of personal legitimacy and indicators their 'mode' of SSL were summarised and set out in matrices. (See *Appendix I: Excerpts from SSL Case Dynamics Matrix Summary*).

I was aware of having picked up on non-verbal information during the interviews, which were noted and influenced my interpretation of participants' SSL. Embodied expression of feelings in voice, expressions and gestures can be lost during research (Skeggs, 1997). Yet, as Smart (2009) points out, non-verbal communication is not to be underestimated. Sheila, for instance, was not talkative but made a gesture that spoke a thousand words about the end of her relationship with her ex-husband; simultaneously miming raising a glass to her lips to indicate his drinking, rolling her eyes to imply her annoyance and shuddering with relief that he was gone. Non-verbal cues could be indicative of individual participants' expression of SSL. For instance, Clare's expression appeared downcast and she indicated negative perceptions of herself as well as her situation, whereas Ciara's demeanour was confident and she voiced positive comments throughout the interview.

### **Identifying 'judgement of judgement' as a process underlying SSL**

Swedberg (2014; 2016) believes a typology can be a heuristic device but that it should be linked to explanation where possible. He suggests that reflexive theorising should move from a central

concept, to a typology and towards an explanatory model based around social processes. I ultimately decided that women's 'mode' of SSL was beneficial as an aid to further analysis rather than developing a firm typology as an end in itself. Investigation from a critical realist perspective aims to move 'from manifest phenomena to generative structure' (Bhaskar, 2015: 129), as discussed at the start of this chapter. Women's comments on 'adverse social judgement', (Scambler, 2009) were highly evident in the data. Focusing on 'clusters of meaning' (Spencer et al., 2014a: 271) allowed points of coalescence between women's structural positions and their agential responses to stigma to be grouped. As 'judgement' was such a prominent theme in participants' accounts, its value as a mechanism in promoting or impeding lone mothers' sense of stigmatisation was investigated. Judgement bears a metaphorical relationship to legitimacy and also has resonance in the evaluative sense of decision-making and value judgments. Judgement in its entirety was found to be too general a mechanism for explanatory purposes however. Analysis of the data found that judgement could better explain stigma when broken down into constituents. Further case dynamics matrices were used to summarise: indicators of participants' modes of SSL; their propensity to feel judged, judge others and internalise judgement; their levels of capitals and perceived class position; and other significant enablements and constraints (see *Appendix J* for excerpts from Judgement and SSL Case Dynamics Matrix Summary). Further attention to the conceptual status of judgement was also required. As previously detailed, this work is informed by Archer's (2000) theorisation of agency/structure interplay. Archer argues that social identity is bound up in decisions as to 'which normative evaluations matter' to individuals' self-worth (2000: 219).

Exploration of the process of judgement in participants' experiences of SSL required comprehension of variations in women situations and perspective. Retroduction helps clarify processes responsible for observed trends (Bryman 2012) through, 'postulating mechanisms capable of producing them' (Sayer, 1992: 107). Layder (1998) cautions that retroduction is conjectural however. Looking backwards from the manifestation of modes of SSL suggested that a process of 'judgement of judgement' seemed to be a pivotal mechanism around which interaction between women's personal situation, norms and resources and stigma turned. 'Candidate mechanisms' (Sayer, 1992) were also considered but did not offer sufficient 'practical adequacy' (Sayer, 2000), as noted in *Appendix H: Analytical note on revisiting the provisional conceptual framework*. Retroductive reasoning suggested that a process of 'judgement of judgement' was central to subjective experiences of stigma among lone mothers in this study. The chapters which follow provide extracts from the data, which support this interpretation. The principal characteristics of the modes of SSL identified from this analysis are presented in *Table 5: 'Judging the judgement' as a process underlying modes of SSL*. The theoretical model is presented in the concluding chapter.

Table 5: 'Judgement of judgment' as a process underlying modes of SSL

| Context                             | 'Positive' SSL  | 'Performative' SSL  | 'Defensive' SSL  | 'Negative' SSL  | 'Transformative' SSL   |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|--|---|--|
| Awareness of lone motherhood stigma | Aware   | Highly aware  | Aware but 'don't care'   | Highly aware  | Previously highly aware  |
| Personal attitude to stigma         | Rejects it as not applicable  | Resists by demonstrating her performative achievements  | Resists by defending herself and criticising others                            | Absorbs stigma  | Has moved beyond it  |
|                                     | Aware of stereotyping but does not regard it as personally relevant                 | Very conscious of stereotyping, but critiques and distances through performative achievements | Conscious of stereotyping but defends deservingness and deflects judgement     | Negatively affected by stereotyping                                 | Formerly very conscious of labelling and stereotyping                |
| Employment and benefits             | Pride in job  | Believes having a job is necessary to avoid stigma  | Believes she deserves benefits but some others do not                          | Frustrated work orientation and highly conscious of benefits stigma | Previously worked but believes benefits are deserved where necessary |
| Normative family models             | Minimal investment in the two parent model.   | Invested in the two parent model and overcompensates to ensure children are not disadvantaged | Strong 'good mother' identity without having invested in the two parent model. | Investment in a two parent family ideal which has been 'spoilt'.    | Family ideal was 'spoilt' and has been repaired                      |
| Social life                         | Active or adequate and attributes limitations to lack of time rather than exclusion | Some exclusion or prioritises demands of career, children and home                            | No social life or very limited but not concerned                               | Limited social life, isolated or excluded                           | Excluded from previous social network and now has a new one.         |
| Sphere of mobility and reference    | Limited in A<br>Extensive in B  | Extensive   | Confined to extended family. Close relationship with own mother                | Limited   | Extensive  |
| 'Judgement of judgement'            | Minimal negative judgement  | Judges self and performs to the standard  | Defends herself against judgement  | Internalises judgement  | Judges self by a new standard  |
| Capitals                            | High social capital in A.<br>High cultural, social, adequate economic in B.         | High cultural and social capital and adequate economic capital.                               | Low economic, cultural capital, high 'bonding' forms of social capital.        | Low economic, cultural and social capital.                          | High cultural and social capital, adequate economic                  |

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the research methodology in three sections covering stages of the research. The first section established the philosophical underpinnings of the study and described how central tenets of critical realism were translated into practicable research design. The second section described how participants were recruited, included a table showing participants' situations and characteristics, and established the rationale for using semi-structured interviews in two locations. It also offered reflections on conducting interviews with 26 women in a range of situations. The final section described an analytical path that began with descriptive coding and became increasingly more interpretive. It discussed compatibility of the framework analysis method with the research aims and explained how Context and Case Dynamics Matrices were used to aid abduction and retroduction. The final section of this chapter suggested that a process of 'judging the judgement' can play a significant role in lone mothers' mediation of stigma.

Whilst the 'messiness' of research in the 'open system' of the social world (Sayer, 1992) means inevitable overlaps, attempts have been made to abstract factors out where practicable in order to attend to the research questions. In summary, these concern the *how* of lone mothers' experiences of stigma and the *why* of the relative significance of different agential and structural elements in promoting and impeding stigma. The need to simultaneously reflect thematic trends in the data, commonalities and differences between locations, individual case dynamics and underlying processes when presenting the findings and analysis was a challenge arising from the comparative nature of the study. In discussing the research findings, each of the following chapters begins by setting out commonalities in women's accounts regardless of their geographic location or personal situation, before comparing experiences both between and within locations. The next three chapters are organised in a way that responds to the research questions by exploring lone mothers' agency in relation to discursive, material and socio-spatial contexts. The value of 'judgement of judgement' as a mechanism underpinning women's mediation of stigma has been set out here and forms analytical thread throughout the chapters that follow. This core theme is explored relation to SSL and in terms of locational and class comparators and agency/structure dialectics at key points in each chapter. Excerpts from interviews are quoted to evidence themes and interpretations. Although some participants' accounts are used extensively where they are representative or offer contrastive illustrations of particular points, the voices of all of the mothers were taken on board during interviews and analysis. Miles and Hubberman (1994) distinguish between different purposes in case analysis and my principal aim was exploration of associations between circumstances and attitudes. This enabled a theoretical 'model' to be developed, which is presented in the concluding chapter of the thesis and draws upon evidence and arguments put forward in the three chapters which now follow.

## Chapter 5

### Negotiating the “single mum stereotype”

#### Introduction

Chapter Two established the discursive context in which the research was conducted. This chapter examines participants’ agential negotiation of what they overwhelmingly regarded as stigmatising media depictions of the “single mum stereotype” within this context. Negative language and images in newspapers and television programmes, and their circulation via social media, were regarded as the principal source of ‘adverse social judgement’ (Scambler, 2009) among lone mothers involved in this study, regardless of their location or personal situation. The first section of the chapter illustrates reluctance among most of the women to identify with what they viewed as a de-legitimated category. Asking participants about their preferred terminology automatically prompted associations with media misrepresentation and comments on ‘labelling’ and ‘stereotyping’ (Goffman 1990; Link and Phelan 2001) and feeling unfairly “judged”. Examples of women’s tendency to reproduce the ‘teenage mother who became deliberately pregnant to live on benefits’ stereotype whilst distancing themselves from such portrayals are provided, which support the argument that media misrecognition of lone motherhood is a damaging form of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

The second section shows how participants commonly positioned themselves in a ‘hierarchy of maternal legitimacy’ (Song, 1996) according to age, route to lone motherhood and sexual morality. Comparing women’s responses to media misrepresentation across and within the two locations illustrates how their objective situations did not necessarily translate into subjective impacts of stigma however. Participants’ mediation of cultural constructs can be described as inter-play between ‘personal emergent properties’ and ‘cultural emergent properties’ (Archer, 2000; 2003). The previous chapter detailed how ‘judgement of judgement’ was identified as a key mechanism underlying participants’ ‘modes’ of SSL. This chapter provides examples of SSL case dynamics analysis to argue that the women’s propensity to reject, resist or absorb discourse depended upon their self-judgement and judgement of others. Savage claims that ‘single motherhood is a proxy for class,’ (2015: 378) and feminists have used symbolic violence to explain the reproduction of class and gender inequalities (Lawler, 2005). Whilst most women in Location A were reluctant to discuss class, those in Location B tended to deploy ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1989) as a means of dis-identifying from classed lone mother stereotypes. The final section thus explores participants’ SSL in terms of their ability to disregard, ‘perform’ or ‘defend’ themselves against the media’s ‘middle-class gaze’ (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), showing how those who judged themselves by standards they could not reach experienced ‘negative’ SSL.

## **Labelling and misrepresentation**

This section presents excerpts from the data which illustrate that, despite vast diversity in their circumstances, the majority of women across locations A and B had ambivalent reactions to classification in what they commonly viewed as a negative category. The question of terminology almost invariably led to comments on derogatory media stereotyping. Indeed, stigma and stereotyping appeared to be regarded as one and the same thing by many women in the study. The women's tendency to reproduce negative stereotypes in their anxiety to distance themselves from them was consistent with a number of previous studies (e.g. Phoenix, 1996; Kingfisher, 1998; Mitchell and Green, 2002; McCormack, 2004; Clavering, 2010). 'Judgement' was a common theme when women spoke about stereotyping and applying SSL as an analytical tool using case examples helps explore the relationship between judgement and their rejection, resistance or absorption of media misrepresentation.

### **Mothers' views on terminology**

The ages of women who took part in this study ranged between 19 and 54 and they come from a wide variety of backgrounds and are in a broad range of situations (See *Tables 4 and 5: Participant Information*). Capturing women's individual agential responses to homogenising categorisation that overlooks the diversity and dynamism and of family life (May, 2010) was the first step in opening up the 'closed box' category of lone motherhood (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Concerns surrounding classification of women in terms with which they may not identify (Crow and Hardey, 1992; Song, 1996; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; May, 2006; 2010) were outlined at the start of this thesis, along with reasons for using 'lone mother' to reflect structural commonalities. Discussion here focuses on participants' personal reactions to phraseology in interrogating the effects the categorisation on women's lives, 'situated self-understanding' and 'connection to a group' (May, 2010: 435). Simply asking participants their preferred term at the start of interviews prompted a rich vein of thoughts and feelings about how they believe they are regarded socially. Importantly, it provoked comments on how they did *not* want to be regarded. The word 'stigma' was used recurrently and typical comments from women in the two locations associating terminology with negative representation include:

*"It's a label." Gina (A)*

*"It's got a stigma attached to it." Katherine (A)*

*"Single mum's the stereotype, typical council estate, spends every weekend going out drinking." Clare (A)*

*"You're typecast." Jasmine (B)*

*"There is that image of single mothers, like you've somehow failed or you've gone wrong somewhere." Valerie (B)*

Opinions expressed by women in both locations aligned with literature revealing ambivalence surrounding categorisation (Crow and Hardy, 1992; Song, 1996; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; May, 2006; 2010). Two women emphatically did not want to be distinguished from mothers in other family configurations:

*"I'm not a single mum. I've got my family, I'm not on my own...I'm just a mum. End of."*  
*Debbie (A)*

*"I'm a mum. I wouldn't refer to any of my married friends as 'married mums' or 'cohabiting mums' or you wouldn't call someone a 'lesbian mum' because they were in a lesbian relationship, but it's ok to call me a single mum or a single parent. And I'm not, I'm just a mum." Mena (B)*

The majority of participants distinguished theirs from a two parent family but voiced ambivalence about phraseology. Some preferred 'single parent' and stated the pragmatic reason that this included fathers. Ciara (B), for example, regarded it as "more inclusive". Jasmine (B) preferred the emphasis on parenting alone it implied. Notwithstanding these points, the most commonly cited reason by those preferring single parent was the negative connotations of 'single mother' or 'single mum'. Mandy (B) generally did not like any categorisation but used 'single parent' where necessary:

*"I would never ever, ever, ever describe myself as a 'single mum'...If I'm ever speaking about it, I always say 'it's just us three' and don't go into any more details than that."*  
*Mandy (B)*

Use of the term 'single mum' was as ubiquitous as it was unpopular in both locations however. A number of participants stated that they do not like the term and yet used it frequently when referring to themselves and mothers in similar situations. The complexity of the category (May, 2006) was also underlined by the same women using a range of terms to refer to themselves and others interchangeably throughout the interview in an apparently subconscious way. This underscores May's point (2010) about categorisation being simultaneously unwelcome yet difficult to abandon. Categorisation seemed to occur as a practicality in many cases despite symbolic objections to it.

When participants were asked what they thought about the term 'lone mother', although some said it was "better" and it was generally regarded as "less stigmatising" than other alternatives, it was not perceived positively either. The words, "depressing", "sad" and "lonely" were the most frequent assigned to it, with Sheila (A) saying it sounded, "like you've got no-one, you're desperate". The lack of any satisfactory term was apparent when women asked if there was any

alternative they would prefer and only two women made suggestions. Gina (A) jokingly said she thought "survivor" was the most apt description. Valerie (B) thought "solo mother" the best way to describe her parenting situation, "as that's more positive than single mother". While several women in Location A commented that they had not previously considered terminology, women in Location B were more likely to have contemplated the matter. Interestingly however, Emma (B), who was awaiting finalisation of her divorce, had not thought about terminology until she saw recruitment information on social media for this research.

Participants were asked about who, when and how they might tell of their family situation.<sup>9</sup> Taylor's attention to differences between lone motherhood as an externally imposed 'totalising' categorical identity and an 'ontological identity' providing a 'coherent sense of self' proved valuable in analysing responses (1998: 340). Only four women stated categorically that they would tell people they first met their family situation. The majority of mothers across both locations said that they were unlikely to tell people they met in a social context. For example, Clare (A), who formerly cohabited and has three children under 8, said she would not tell anyone as it was "none of their business". Significantly, given Taylor's (1998) point about external and internal identity, a number of women from both locations said they identified themselves privately as a "single mum" or "single mother", but would not propagate this externally. This suggests they self-identified without wishing to be externally categorised, which concurs with observations made by Goffman (1990) on 'disclosure etiquette' among stigmatised groups. While no-one in the sample practiced 'concealment', a number of mothers used what he calls 'information control', as the following comments illustrate:

*"Being a single parent is a massive part of me, but I don't go round and say that's what I am." Ciara (B)*

*"If I were to go out there and openly say to everybody 'I am a single parent', then I think I'm already helping them to put a label on me and I don't approve of labels." Della (B).*

Although she would not use the term externally, Sonia (B) said she used 'single mother' internally to give her "strength" and as "validation" for having found courage to end an abusive relationship:

*Nicola: "In what way?"*

*Sonia: "Because of the sort of relationship I'd come out of, it was like 'I'm doing this by myself' kind of thing...I was actually quite proud that I wasn't in that situation any more, although I wouldn't go and explain my circumstances to anybody else."*

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of scenarios such as social events, job interviews and going on a first date were used. Most of the women would not tell people they met in a social situation or prospective employers they were lone mothers as they thought this would create a prejudice. However, they would tell a prospective new partner immediately.

For a number of women, dislike of terminology was closely linked to lack of choice over their situation (which is discussed below). Some mothers also described how they found the terminology less jarring as they became more accustomed to their new situation and personal 'journeys' taken by certain participants over time are explored in detail in Chapter Seven. Alison (B), for example, found labelling "painful" initially because her husband left her with four young children to be with someone else, but describes developing a "thicker skin" over the years. She said her motivation for taking part in the research was the exclusion of people in her situation from popular depictions of lone motherhood:

*"You always read it as if 'you got yourself pregnant because you wanted a council flat and you wanted your benefits so you didn't have to go out to work', that's how it always seems to be portrayed in the media...[At first] it was just horrendous. It just turned my stomach to think I was a single mum because it was so not what I wanted to be. I was very aware that I was in this situation and that was how it was portrayed." Alison (B)*

### **Pervasiveness of media stereotyping**

The well-documented role of the media in fuelling the demonisation of single mothers and benefits stigma (e.g. Roseuil and Mann, 1996; Tyler, 2013) was discussed in Chapter Two. It is therefore unsurprising that participants in diverse situations across both locations unanimously viewed contemporary media depictions as problematic. Fieldwork for this research started in Location A in the same year after the broadcasting of *Benefits Street*<sup>10</sup>, which came to epitomise the 'poverty porn' television genre and spawned extensive debate in national newspapers and on social media (e.g. Price, 2014). Against this background, some participants commented on stigmatising media portrayals of lone motherhood before interviews had even begun and women all referred to the media spontaneously when asked about terminology. "There's a huge stigma to women on their own with children," was an assertion by Mena (B), for example, which she immediately followed with, "they get negative press." Characteristics of the archetype described by participants were: benefit dependency, sexual promiscuity, laziness, scruffy appearance, swearing, smoking, drug and alcohol use and inadequate parenting. Women in both Location A and Location B spoke overwhelmingly of annoyance at media representations and used the phrases such as "unfair", "focusing on the negatives", "lumping us all together" and "tarred with the same brush" repeatedly.

In addition to expressing anger at what is covered, a number of women raised objections to cultural representations of lone motherhood in terms of what is *not* covered in the mainstream media. Mothers in this study pointed out that "they only show one side" and "success stories" are seldom, if ever, featured in the media, confirming Tyler's (2011) point that first-hand testimonies are missing from highly editorialised 'maternal TV' productions. Laura (B), for

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<sup>10</sup> The documentary series *Benefits Street* made by Love Productions was filmed in James Turner Street, Birmingham and the first series was first broadcast on Channel 4 in 2014.

example, said there were no examples in the media of lone mothers who are, “strong and holding it all together and working a triple shift”.

### ***Circulation of discourse***

Mitchell and Green (2002) draw attention to the multi-dimensionality of discourse and differentiate between political, media, populist and academic discourses. Media representation was the type of discourse that was invariably cited when participants were asked to clarify what they meant by 'stereotypes'. Some alluded non-specifically to “the media” or “the press” and others named specific television programmes and newspaper articles. Reality television programmes were most frequently referred to as the source of 'judgement'. *Benefits Street* was the most frequently named programme, followed by *the Jeremy Kyle Show*<sup>11</sup>. “Tabloids”, “the press” and “newspapers” were mentioned but *The Daily Mail*<sup>12</sup> was the newspaper named specifically in promoting an association between lone motherhood and benefit dependency. While “the media” was spoken about in general terms, when participants were asked about their media personal consumption it was generally low among mothers in both locations. A number of women in Location A said they regularly watched soap operas and a character called Lola, a troubled 16-year old lone mother on *Eastenders*<sup>13</sup>, was referred to several times. Several women across both locations said that they purposefully did not watch certain television programmes because of the way lone mothers are depicted.

Comments made by a number of women in this study suggest that circulation of negative stereotyping via Facebook and other social media had heightened their awareness of stigmatisation. This corresponds with Tyler's (2013) comments on circulation of discourse via social media in the contemporary setting replacing the 'street talk' of previous generations (Hall et al., 1978 cited Tyler, 2013). Katherine (A) for example linked television programmes with social media repetition and a perception of “judgement”:

*“If there's anything like that on TV, I won't watch it because I feel as if there's nothing I can do. I just feel at the bottom of the pile...I see nasty things about single mums being scroungers spread after they've been on TV, like on Facebook for instance people post comments and I just think 'how can you comment on somebody else's situation just from something you've seen in a programme'. So there's a judgment there definitely.” Kathryn (A)*

Women frequently referred to “people” making “judgements” and, when sources were probed, rooted such judgements in media depictions. Bella (A) typifies an intrinsic

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<sup>11</sup> The Jeremy Kyle Show is a daytime talk show produced by ITV Studios and broadcast on ITV since 2005.

<sup>12</sup> With a circulation of circa 1,440,000, The Daily Mail is the UK's most widely read national daily newspaper, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations.

<sup>13</sup> The fictional character Lola Pearce appeared in the BBC soap opera Eastenders and story lines featured her teenage pregnancy and battle to keep her daughter out of care.

conjunction of media stereotypes with complaints about being “judged” in a number of women's accounts:

*"I think we get judged a lot being on our own. By the media and that. I think that's portrayed badly. People are judged because they are seen as having kids so they don't have to work and things like that." Bella (A)*

### **Media mis-recognition, judgement and SSL**

Participants in both locations connected unflattering images originating from television and newspapers with prejudice in literal terms of pre-judgement. Case dynamics assisted in analysing the propensity to feel 'judged' in relation to reactions to stereotyping and women's individual SSL matrices, as discussed in the previous chapter. Skeggs (1997) regards the media as an instrument of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), whereby the status quo is legitimised through internalisation of dominant ideology. Analysis of the data suggests the salience of the concept, as outlined in the 'prism of legitimacy' framework, in understanding participants' responses to media depictions of lone motherhood. Examples of women's absorption of judgement stemming from the media, and its impact on their 'mode' of SSL, discussed here support the argument that the media is culpable in perpetuating 'symbolic violence' upon lone mothers

### **Location A**

Women who displayed 'positive' SSL when discussing their work, social networks and other issues during interviews tended not to use the term 'judgement' and, whilst aware of stereotypes, showed no signs of being affected by them personally. In Location A, Carrie for example indicated 'positive' SSL and spoke cheerfully about her experiences of raising a five years-old daughter whilst doing a job she enjoys. However, as a 44 year-old woman who had previously brought up a now grown up son alone whilst on benefits, she provided an interesting perspective on stigma in different eras and personal situations. She referred to her experience working at the Children's Centre to refute myths about lone mothers emanating from the media saying: "I see lots of them doing a fantastic job". Whilst stating that media portrayals can make single parents "paranoid", she believes there is less stigma than 20 years ago and did not seem to regard the stereotype as applicable personally now she is older and employed. Her 'positive' mode of SSL appeared to result from both being further from the stereotype and also unconcerned about other people's opinions:

*"I don't care now [laughing]. I just get on with it. It's like 'so what'." Carrie (A)*

Unsurprisingly, the sense of 'feeling judged' was strongest among women in both locations who indicated 'negative' SSL. These women were most prone to viewing media representations in terms of 'judgement' and appeared most severely affected by adverse social judgements. For instance, Julie referred repeatedly to stereotypes and indicated 'negative' SSL during her

interview. Media images might be said to offer a distorted 'looking glass' on lone motherhood and, in her 'imagined judgments of the other mind' (Cooley, 1902: 152-3), Julie believed that the population generally bases their assumptions about lone mothers on such images. She insisted that "people believe what they see" and when asked who "people" were replied "everyone". Her frustration with stereotyping illustrates what Skeggs and Loveday describe as, 'engagement in a struggle against unjustifiable judgement' (2012: 472):

*"They shouldn't stereotype people the way they do...I think everybody gets judged the same and it's not fair. People think us single mums just sit on our bums all day...When people look at you and think 'there's another single mum' but they don't know the story behind it, it doesn't help, even though you know it's not true." Julie (A)*

Although Julie had not had any incidents of stigma at an interpersonal level, like many other women in the study, she appeared compelled to repeat negative discourse in order to refute these assumptions. She pointed to having known her son's father for many years, being shocked when he left after she became pregnant and having worked "solidly" before being on benefits. Bourdieu (1989) argues that symbolic domination is most effective when internalised; and damage to SSL from internalisation of negative representations was evident in Julie's case. She appeared visibly upset as she connected prejudice with self-judgement, saying she "blamed" herself for her situation despite knowing it was not her "fault" and expressed powerlessness in the face of negative attitudes since she was not able to work (which is discussed in the next chapter).

### **Location B**

The previous chapter described how 'judgement' emerged as both an empirical theme and an 'underlying process' (Sayer, 1992; 2000; Danermark et al., 2001) in agential mediation of stigma. In a number of cases in Location B, women indicated a strong sense of 'being judged', but a process of bolstering their SSL through demonstrating their achievements could be also discerned. While very conscious of stereotypes, women whose SSL could be deemed 'performative' went to great lengths in their 'discursive' and 'instrumental' tactics (McCormack, 2004) to resist application to them personally. The word "judgement" was used frequently by Hannah, for instance, who indicated 'performative' SSL throughout her interview. Hannah was especially sensitive to stigmatising of young parents, having had her daughter when she was 19, and her comments suggest 'information control' (Goffman, 1990):

*"I'm happy to call myself a single mum and wouldn't say I'm ashamed, but...I wouldn't want people to know necessarily. Obviously, my friends and people know but I don't think it's something I would broadcast really." Hannah (B)*

Discourse relies on repetition, according to Hall (1997) and, like most mothers in this study, Hannah conjured the 'chav mum' caricature (Tyler, 2008) of lone motherhood from popular

culture whilst also being critical of, "the way the they edit [programmes] and make them look bad". She was studying part-time for a degree, had an interest in social issues and commented that media representations are "aggravated by all the political arguments." She was concerned about the impact of misrepresentation on people's 'judgement' of herself nonetheless. Hannah's resistance of stereotyping by emphasising that she is working is characteristic of her 'performative' mode of SSL:

*"That sort of thing definitely gives single mums more of a stigma. It's quite upsetting really...I think everybody gets judged the same and it's not fair. Like you've just gone and had a baby to have an easy life on benefits or something. I think people do have that judgement...Before they know your circumstances, that you are working and that you are providing the same for her as she would have otherwise, then they can judge. It made me want to build a better life and people see I'm not that sort of person."* Hannah (B)

Judgement was an extremely prominent theme throughout the interview with Laura, who offers another example of 'performative' SSL in her response to media portrayals. Self-judgement and media stereotyping are interconnected in Laura's account, as the following excerpt illustrates:

*"I fell into the whole stigma of broken families and I punished myself about that. I felt judged, massively judged...I was judging myself but I was judging myself because I'd listened to the opinions out there in society."*

*Nicola: "What do you mean when you say, 'out there in society'?"*

*Laura: "The media, hugely the media. Policies as well at government level I think, but hugely the media."*

In accordance with Skeggs' (2005) point that judgement is not just a top down process, Laura was among the women who were critical of the stereotype itself however. Giving an example of a programme she had recently watched, she pointed out that, "the attack was all on the mum" left "literally holding the baby" with no mention of the father and commented:

*"At the government level they create policies to demonise the 'broken family'...The media incorporates benefit dependency and single parenthood as one thing. They use a really small sample group to negatively reinforce stigma and then everyone suffers for that stigma."* Laura (B)

Laura's 'performative' SSL was evident throughout her interview. She cited numerous actions in her efforts to resist stigmatisation following her divorce, including embarking upon a degree (as explored below). She showed insight into her internalisation of dominant symbolism, describing in an ironic tone how, in her efforts to avoid the stereotype, she was "still doomed by these stigmas and stereotypes".

## **Judgement in a 'hierarchy of maternal legitimacy'**

The insidiousness of the '17 year-old on a council estate who deliberately became pregnant to live off benefits' trope was evident in almost visceral reactions to media stereotyping among women in this study. Analysis of the data suggests that agential negotiation of stigmatising representations can be understood relationally in a 'hierarchy' of maternal legitimacy, as denoted in analyses by Song (1998), Carabine (1996; 2001) and Pulkingham et al. (2010). With the commonly conjured "single mum stereotype" positioned firmly at the bottom of a 'legitimacy ladder' (Bock, 2000), participants tended to assert their moral legitimacy through emphasising their: work ethic;<sup>14</sup> lack of choice over family situation; relationship history; and age. However interviewing women in a more diverse range of situations revealed more complex relationality than implied in previous studies involving only young mothers, which equate distancing with denigrative 'othering' (e.g. Ponsford, 2011; Wenham, 2016). Attention to 'clusters of meaning' (Spencer et al., 2014a: 271) in participants' modes of SSL reveals nuanced patterns in women's sense of being 'judged' personally, their 'mode' of SSL and their attitudes towards 'other' lone mothers, as exemplified here through case studies.

### **Legitimacy and lack of choice**

Chapter Two discussed ways in which 'legitimate' reproduction served patriarchal and material interests (Engels, 1988; Millett 1990) and lone motherhood has been constructed as 'socially illegitimate' (Reekie, 1998). Such arguments are supported by the continued conjunction of sexual morality and demands upon resources in participants' comments in the contemporary context. For almost every woman in the study, insistence that she did not consciously opt for lone motherhood appeared key to legitimising her situation. Use of phrases such as "popping kids out so they don't need to work" when describing media representations indicated that participants believed lone motherhood is generally regarded as less 'deserving' of moral approbation and public resources if it is intentional.

The anxiety of most of the women to differentiate from the stereotype by stressing lack of choice demonstrates their internalisation of symbolic domination (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). For instance, although Alison (B) said going through tough times during her divorce had made her "more compassionate", she still distinguished between the intentionality of women who, "got themselves in that position because they wanted the council flat", and those such as herself, "who were married but just found themselves in this position", with the latter being, "through no fault of their own". Such statements support arguments by Pulkingham et al. (2010), who found that lone mothers, particularly those who are reliant on public welfare, have to defend

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<sup>14</sup> Negative stereotypes almost universally link lone motherhood with stigmatisation of benefit dependency and it can be difficult to extricate the two. While difficult to disentangle, this chapter focuses on women's reactions to cultural depictions and material circumstances and policy impacts are the focus of Chapter Six.

their 'moral legitimacy' to have children in the first place' (2010: 285). Most participants detailed how their former partners' behaviour precipitated a situation over which they had little or no control, as found by Morris (2012), which is typified in the following comments:

*"The only reason I'm in the situation I'm in now is because his dad left us...I didn't choose to be a single mum like some people think."* Julie (A)

*"I feel bitter that I had no control because it was her dad that left and then people are judging."* Katherine (A)

Klett-Davies notes that whereas Giddens (1997, cited Klett-Davies, 2007) divides lone mothers 'by choice' and those 'in poverty', situations are more complex in reality. None of the women involved in this study had consciously set out to be sole parents and thus none defined themselves or could be defined as 'single mother by choice'. Whereas the image of irresponsible underclass fecundity (Osgood and Allen, 2009; Jensen and Tyler, 2015) was ubiquitous, only two women referred to an alternative incarnation of lone motherhood as agential behaviour, or 'lifestyle change' discourse (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Studies show that 'single mother by choice' are likely to be older, middle class professionals (Bock 2000; Klett-Davies, 2007). Jasmine (B) and Joanne (B) both referred to this as an agential counterpoint to their own situation:

*"Some people are single parents through choice who decide 'I'm going to have a child' and that's fine. But I wasn't a single parent by choice...I kept thinking 'I don't want to be a single mum'."* Jasmine (B)

*"When we decided to start a family, it was more a sort of bringing us together sort of thing. I did not sign up for this. I did not get pregnant to be a single mother. I don't think anybody does apart from those women who have the artificial insemination and more power to them."* Joanne (B)

In repeatedly using the words "no choice" and "lack of control", there is an irony that participants arguably help de-legitimize lone motherhood socially when seeking approbation personally. Participants tended to underplay the agency involved in leaving relationships in order to protect themselves and their children, which may be in response to desperate situations but is agential nonetheless. Bella (A), for example, left her husband when her twins were babies following domestic violence. Sheila (A) divorced her ex-husband due to his drinking. It is telling that, as the only participant who spoke of initiating her divorce in terms of agential behaviour, Ciara (B) underscored how she had "tried" to stay in the relationship for "the sake of the kids" and commented:

*"It's taken quite a bit to think 'my own happiness and views are kind of valid'."* Ciara (B)

Mena, whose eight-month old daughter was born following a “fling” with an ex-partner, was the only woman in the sample who voiced a belief that, though unplanned, her decision to continue her pregnancy at the age of 32 was active. In the following comment, she simultaneously takes responsibility for her actions and positions previously married mothers hierarchically as more worthy of sympathy than herself:

*"The last thing I wanted to be was a single mother. But at the end of the day, it was my choice to have my child on my own. So I can't then go and whinge...because mothers who are married and are then on their own have every right to say how hard it is...because that's not what they bought into."* Mena (B)

Indeed, Mena's point about what mothers had “bought into” was iterated by a number women who had been in relationships that had broken down and investment in the 'two parent ideal' (Barrett and MacIntosh, 1992) is pursued fully in Chapter Seven.

### **Route to lone motherhood**

While mothers in both locations stressed absence of choice over their family form, a key comparative point was that more fathers in Location A had ended relationships during the pregnancy, whereas mothers in Location B were more likely to have been bringing children up in a relationship that broke down subsequently, as indicated in *Table 6: Factors in route to lone motherhood by location*. Carabine (2001) argues that some forms of lone motherhood are commonly ranked as more socially and morally 'acceptable' than others. This point is supported by a tendency for women in this study recount their relationship history as a means of demonstrating sexual morality in reaction to promiscuity suggested by 'single mother' caricatures, which was evident among women in both locations.

*Table 6: Factors in route to lone motherhood by location*

| Location | Unplanned pregnancy | Relationship ended during pregnancy | Relationship broke down due to arguing | Domestic violence/abuse | Divorce prompted by male infidelity | Mother initiated divorce |
|----------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|--|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| A        | 7                   | 7                                   | 3                                      | 2                       | 0                                   | 1                        |
| B        | 10                  | 3                                   | 9                                      | 2                       | 2                                   | 0                        |

### **Location A**

In Location A, three women had been married previously; five had formerly cohabited and five had never married or cohabited. More than half of the participants in Location A had become mothers as the result of unplanned pregnancies. In speaking about lack of choice over their situation these women indicated that termination had either not been an option or had not been seriously contemplated. These qualitative accounts reflect statistical evidence that while young women from all backgrounds are as likely to become pregnant, abortion is less common among

those from less affluent backgrounds (Turner, 2004, cited Perrier, 2013; Rowlingson and McKay; 2005). Lucy was pregnant with her third child at the time of the interview, saying of her children's fathers that she had experienced "domestic violence all the way through with all three of them". Although she did not find out about her current pregnancy until it was too late for termination, Lucy said she never considered the option during her pregnancies:

*"It would be alright if everybody was sterilised at birth but they're not and it happens...I wouldn't change it myself."* Lucy (A)

Whereas young women in A who had become unintentionally pregnant told of how their parents were shocked initially but supportive once they became accustomed to the idea (as found by Wenham, 2016), Nadirah became estranged from her Muslim Pakistani family as a result of an unplanned pregnancy at 18. She set out her view on termination:

*"It's like some of the people I've known they'd rather have abortions than have a baby because of what their family would say, but the way I think of it is you shouldn't punish a child for your own mistakes."* Nadirah (A)

Whether their pregnancies had been planned or not, participants in Location A all cited their relationship history as a means of distancing themselves from the promiscuity implied by media portrayals. While marriage per se was not necessarily vaunted in Location A as in B (and this contrast will be fully explored in Chapter Seven), women who had been in long-term relationships emphasised this fact. Statements used to illustrate their own sexual morality in opposition to stereotypes include:

*"It's one thing I've always been proud of is that my three have all got the same dad."* Clare (A)

*"I refuse to watch Jeremy Kyle coz he gets me so mad and he does put single mums like that, who don't know who their kids' dads are, in the same category as us that do."* Lucy (A)

*"I don't think it's right that children should be growing up like that. Relationships should happen first. I was with his dad for eight years before he was born."* Gina (A)

### **Location B**

Nine out of 13 women in Location B had been married and were divorced or separated at the time of their interview and two had previously cohabited. Three women Location B spoke of becoming lone mothers as the result of unplanned pregnancies, compared with six in Location A. When Hannah became pregnant at 19 whilst co-habiting, she did not find out until it was too late for an abortion. Despite it being "a complete surprise", she became "excited" when she found out, but the relationship "went downhill" after her partner lost his job and became mentally ill. In contrast with women in Location A, whose parents had not advocated termination, Mandy

described how her “very middle class” parents had encouraged her to have an abortion when she became pregnant at 18 while studying for ‘A’ Levels.

There was a stronger equation of motherhood marriage in Location B than A and Chapter Seven pursues the consequences of this distinction. The language and tone used by certain participants in B when relating their relationship histories held remnants of a historical hierarchy situating widows most sympathetically, followed by divorcees, with never married mothers lowest in the hierarchy (Adair, 1996; Song, 1996; Carabine, 2001; Evans and Thane, 2012). For example Joanne, whose marriage ended whilst she was pregnant due to her husband's infidelity, spoke of her anxiety to demarcate her situation from conception outside of a marriage, while Della believes her divorcee status elevates her above negative categorisation:

*“Back in the day it was 'unwed mothers' and that's why I always used to take the time to explain to people 'my ex-husband' or 'I'm divorced' because in the back of my mind I wanted them to know that my son hadn't been some sort of, erm, the product of a one-night stand.” Joanne (B)*

*“I don't like people to just put me in a pigeon hole because that's about a 17 year-old girl who got pregnant on purpose for a council house. I don't want people to think that of me because I was married. They're disgusting.” Della (B)*

### **Maternal age**

Young motherhood features prominently in media stereotypes and almost all literature on lone motherhood and stigma concentrates on young mothers (e.g. Mitchell and Green, 2002; Yardley, 2008; Ponsford, 2011). Associations between teenage motherhood and stigma were made repeatedly by mothers in this research. Women who had their first child while in their late teens or early 20s and spoke about stigmatisation in relation to age, whilst older mothers used their age as a hierarchical device in distancing themselves from stereotypes.

Perrier (2013) makes a point that timing of maternity is part of a classed construction of gendered morality. According to Ellis-Sloan (2014), stigmatisation leaves little opportunity for young mothers to claim 'legitimacy' for their decision to have their baby. Women in more affluent Location B were generally older when they had their first baby than those in Location A, which concurs with statistics on maternal age and socio-economic background (McDermott and Graham, 2005). However, while this sample makes no claims to be statistically representative, participants' age profiles were more evenly spread than the commonly portrayed image might suggest, as *Table 7: Mother's age when first child was born by location* shows.

Table 7: Mother's age when first child was born by location

| Location | Under 20 | 20-25 | 25-30 | Over 30 |
|----------|----------|-------|-------|---------|
| A        | 2        | 5     | 5     | 1       |
| B        | 2        | 3     | 4     | 4       |

### **Location A**

While women in Location A had their first child at a younger age overall than those in B, a general view that young parenthood is less socially acceptable could be identified. Clare, for example compared her own experience of having her first child when she was 24 with her sister being 'judged' negatively:

*"Teenage parents are judged. My sister had her daughter when she was 15 and she was judged, my step-mum was judged and there was a lot of trouble about it."* Clare (A)

There were some echoes of Malthusian (1988) arguments that reproduction should occur when parents are old enough to provide for children in comments which coupled age with financial stability. Julie, for example, brought her age together with material considerations, stressing that she had worked and was financially established before becoming pregnant:

*"I was a decent age and I was more than providing for myself when I had him and I could afford to have a baby...I wasn't 16 or 17 and wanting to be a single mum pushing a pram."* Julie (A)

Marta was the only mother in Location A who was over thirty when she had her first child and believed this brought greater parental stability. Carrie, whose daughter was the result of an unplanned pregnancy following a brief reconciliation with a former partner at 38, gave a perspective on lone motherhood at different life stages, having previously brought up her son alone in her twenties:

*"There's no right time to have a child, but I think as you get older, you know what you want and you can become a little bit more financially stable, so it's better in that sense."* Carrie (A)

Although mothers generally cited maternal age as facet of hierarchisation, analysis of SSL case dynamics, which follows, shows how relative age was a factor in the accounts of some participants in Location A, and two women in this location emphasised the positives of having had their children whilst young.

### **Location B**

Eight women in Location B were over the age of 25 when they had their first child. In contrast with the experiences of participants in Location A, participants in Location B identified a

tendency among women in their affluent neighbourhood to have children at a later age. This supports the argument by Wilson and Huntington (2006) that delayed childbearing has become normalised as a result of middle class expectations for women to enter higher education and pursue careers. Mena confirmed that age was a crucial factor when she found out about her unplanned pregnancy:

*"If I'd have been any younger I wouldn't have [continued with her pregnancy], because I wouldn't have coped, I wouldn't have been strong enough. But I was over 30." Mena (B)*

Those participants in Location B who had become mothers at a younger age commented that it was uncommon in their area. Hannah said that being young, "adds to the stigma". Jasmine, who was 22 when her daughter was born, told an anecdote about people assuming she was the nanny when she first took her to nursery. Mandy was especially conscious of her age as she became pregnant while taking A'levels at a prestigious school in Location B. Her description of her middle class parents' disappointment reflects a well-documented tendency of such parents to engender values of academic achievement and delayed motherhood to reproduce middle class status (Allen and Osgood, 2009). Now in her mid-20s, she attributes her determination to continue the pregnancy to "sheer stubbornness". Speaking about how her bank manager father had become embarrassed when she took her new baby into his bank, she commented:

*"Being a teenage parent is not the done thing in this town. Although I did go to that school here and I got pregnant at 18, but I was one of very few...So, I don't know, I think it's mainly fear why it doesn't happen to a lot of girls."*

*Nicola: "What do you mean 'fear'?"*

*Mandy: "Fear of what people will say, whereas in some areas it's just the done thing so nobody would bat an eyelid if a 16-year old girl got pregnant. Here if that happens it would be an absolute scandal and I don't think anyone would want to put themselves in the centre of that."*

### **Imagery and actuality**

May (2010) suggests exploring lone mother categorisation in terms of 'connection to a group' as well as self-understanding. Women's comments on terminology outlined above reflect arguments (e.g. Taylor, 1998; May, 2004; 2010) that lone motherhood does not appear to be a unified category. Evidence of Goffman's (1990) assertion that people do not want to belong to a stigmatised group was apparent in some cases, as indicated above. To some extent, however, lack of group identity may also be attributable to the size and diversity of the 'group' in question and friendships with mothers in the 'same situation' are explored in Chapter Seven.

Previous studies, predominantly involving young mothers (e.g. Mitchell and Green, 2002; Ponsford, 2011) and welfare recipients (e.g. McCormack, 2004), have coupled distancing with 'othering', which is defined by Sayer as derogatorily 'contrasting one's identity with a stigmatised other' (2005:54-55). Accounts from the diverse sample in this study suggest a more nuanced picture than straightforward derogation might suggest however. Goffman's point that stigma is directed at the image rather than the person (Goffman, 1990: 82) proved helpful in attempting to unravel complex and sometimes contradictory attitudes towards women in the same taxonomic category. Analysis therefore attempted to separate participants', often overlapping, tactics of: distancing from stereotypes, legitimising their position through hierarchising and derogatory othering (as outlined in *Appendix K: Analytical memo on attitudes to 'others'*).

Incidences of out and out denigration were, in fact, limited. The relationship between individual participants' SSL and their attitudes towards 'other' lone mothers is explored using case examples below. A broad trend could be observed in that those participants who knew lone mothers in a range of circumstances, either personally or through their professional role, generally tended to express less harsh judgements of them. As a 54 year-old divorcee, Sheila, for example was aware of discourse on "kids having kids" but pointed to a 17 year-old mother living in a flat nearby, whom she thought was a very good mother and said, "sometimes the younger ones make better parents." Emma said her attitude towards other mothers had changed since her circumstances had changed:

*"I've judged single mothers and I've used that label [in the past]. I've presumed that they didn't want to be in a relationship...and judged them because they'd chosen not to." Emma (B)*

Analysis of the data revealed that some women drew on 'social problem' discourses (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) when discussing other lone mothers. Katherine (A) said she, "tries not to judge really because there's so many other people judging them". Jasmine (B), who had developed "alternative ideas" since her divorce and attends a women's group, made reference to gender inequalities throughout her interview and attributed the "scapegoating" of lone mothers to "living in patriarchal, capitalist society". She questioned, "this social lie that it's a huge drain on our resources with these young girls getting pregnant so they don't have to get a job". She pointed out that, "having a baby's a big deal" and "it would actually be easier to get a job".

Whereas the majority of participants denied the veracity of media representations, the antipathy towards 'other' lone mothers expressed by Gina (A) and Della (B) was rare were among the sample. Their views on the prevalence of exploitation of the benefits system could be read in terms of 'social threat' discourse (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) and deservingness of benefits is discussed in the next chapter. Gina (A) was highly critical of women on the estate she saw claiming benefits, whilst she worked hard. Della (B) insisted that, "most single parents in this

town are hard-working" and was aggrieved that mothers portrayed on television give those such as herself "a bad name", whereas older, employed, divorcees are absent from popular discourse. However, when asked whether she thought the media exaggerates the propensity of lone mothers on benefits, she replied forcefully: "Oh they exist alright".

### **SSL and judgement of self and others**

As discussed above, analysis of the data established that distancing and positioning in relation to stereotypical imagery did not necessarily mean negative judgement of 'other' lone mothers in actuality. Attention to 'clusters of meaning' (Spencer et al., 2014a: 271) in participants' modes of SSL reveals patterns in women's sense of being 'judged' personally and attitudes towards other lone mothers<sup>15</sup>, as exemplified here through case studies.

#### **Location A**

Participants whose overall SSL could be grouped as 'positive' generally did not speak about feeling judged and they did not express negative judgments of others. In Location A, Gemma, for example, frequently said that she was content with her situation and appeared to gain legitimacy from her job and her extended family and friendship network (which are discussed in chapters to follow). Her positive SSL was underscored by her assertion that she is "proud" to be managing well on her own:

*"I am a single mum I don't mind that. I don't care. I just think 'we're happy so I'm not bothered'." Gemma (A)*

Having become a mother at the age of 21, Gemma positioned herself in relation to women she knows who had children at a younger age and are not working, but did so without showing signs of 'othering' as denigration (Lister, 2004):

*"My friends from school, they've all got five year-olds. It seems to be a normal kind of thing now." Gemma (A)*

While the sense of 'feeling judged' was most prevalent among women who displayed 'negative' SSL when speaking about their personal or work situation during their interviews, these women tended to absorb that judgement without deflecting it onto other lone mothers. Nadirah was highly conscious of stigma as she had left home at 18 without telling her parents she was pregnant for fear their reputation in their Muslim community would be "ruined by gossip", which contributed towards her 'negative' SSL. She associated media coverage of young parents with child neglect. She described how she had related to a television character from *Hollyoaks*<sup>16</sup>, whose well-founded concerns over her baby's health were ignored by doctors due to her age.

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<sup>15</sup> Case dynamics matrices assisted in considering participants' propensity to 'feel judged', 'judge others' in relation to their individual SSL. (See Appendix J for excerpts from summary matrices).

<sup>16</sup> *Hollyoaks*, a soap opera aimed at young adults, airs on Channel 4.

Her comments echo studies of young mothers who feel their parenting capabilities are judged (e.g. Wenham, 2016):

*"They point their nose up at you and don't value you as much as someone who's older and in a stable relationship." Nadirah (A)*

Nadirah's attitudes towards lone mothers had changed since becoming one herself, saying she had "judged single parents on benefits" previously but now sees it, "from the other side":

*"I used to look at young parents and never thought that would be me...But now I kind of get when they go on these Jeremy Kyle shows and they're kind of struggling and stuff like that I kind of feel for them more." Nadirah (A)*

In contrast with Nadirah, the two other younger mothers in Location A, Debbie and Theresa, indicated 'defensive' SSL during their interviews. These women forcefully defended themselves against negative stereotypes, rather than internalising them, and stated their lack of concern for other people's opinions. Their accounts reflect empirical studies which have uncovered positive aspects of young parenting that are at odds with assumptions of the press and policy-makers (e.g. Arai 2003; McDermott and Graham, 2005; Wilson and Huntington; 2006). Debbie instantly ascribed the word "judgemental" when speaking about attitudes towards young lone mothers but spoke of the fulfilment gained from her maternal role, as with research involving young parents (e.g. Aria, 2003; Ponsford, 2011). She did not refer to other lone mothers at all, but deflected judgement for benefits dependency onto migrants (which is discussed in the next chapter). She defended her decision to have her daughter whilst young insisting that, "it's made me grow up a lot faster".

Like Debbie, Theresa did not appear to internalise negative stereotypes. She appeared inured to stigma and spoke defensively throughout her interview about being a young parent and her reliance on benefits. Also like Debbie, she did not mention other lone mothers but deflected criticism of benefit dependency onto migrants. She took issue with critical posts on social media after programmes about single parents on benefits had aired. Insisting that she did not take on board other people's judgements, she displayed a 'defensive' stance while stressing benefits of young parenthood:

*"Some people can be really, really nasty and slate young mums to the ground...But my personal opinion is that I'd rather have the kid young because then you've got the rest of your life to live then. I've got a kid, so what. If people don't like that it's tough. I tell people straight away. I really don't care to be honest. I'm not bothered." Theresa (A)*

Whereas participants displaying 'positive' and 'negative' SSL in a range of other ways tended to have neutral or non-judgmental views of lone mothers generally and those displaying 'performative' SSL commonly deployed 'social problem' discourses when speaking about them,

Lucy invoked 'social threat' discourses (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) in ways that could be deemed to indicate 'defensive' SSL. As a 25-year old mother with children from three ex-partners who relies on benefits, Lucy (A) was conscious of judgement and used the word frequently. She indicated 'defensive' SSL by saying throughout the interview that she did not care what people thought of her and was concerned only about her children. She gave examples of brushing off criticism and took pride in her 'good' mother identity (May, 2006) as self-legitimation (as explored in more detail in Chapter Seven). Lucy could also be said to show agency in 'meaning-making' by deflecting judgement, as the following excerpt shows. The 'fantasy' of the 'other' can become 'part of the construction of self' (Skeggs, 1997: 90) as she defends her own sexual morality, maternal age, deservingness of benefits and, above all, her dedication to her children and legitimises her position through criticism of 'other' lone mothers:

*"We get judged because there's little lasses out there in their teens wanting to go out partying and not even bother with their kids...The majority of the single mums, there's several potential fathers...that doesn't make single life any easier, all these single mums, because then it all goes into one category with those that don't know who the kids' dads are....I love me kids to bits, but there is a lot of people out there that think of the money and not the kids. One of my friends...she just has kid after kid after kid and y'know don't bother with them. She's never worked in her life." Lucy (A)*

### **Location B**

In Location B, Ciara provides an example of a mother who gave clear indicators of 'positive' SSL throughout her interview and expressed empathy towards lone mothers whom she regarded as being in less fortunate situations. Ciara's demeanour was cheerful and confident during her interview and she spoke of self-esteem from her career achievements, kinship network and social life. Working with families in different situations in her job as a family development manager in Location A, Ciara recognised she was "lucky" to have support from her parents and her ex-husband and showed an understanding attitude towards mothers in more difficult situations:

*"I sometimes go out and see people and they might have three kids and I'll think, 'how on earth can you manage, how do you do it, day in, day out on your own and they might not even get a break when kids go to their dad's either'. So I do have a lot of time and empathy for the single parents who do have to do that." Ciara (B)*

Women whose accounts indicated that they "felt judged" but believed themselves to be fulfilling the demands of the standard against which they were being judged were deemed to have 'performative' SSL. These women tended to cite criteria by which they distanced themselves from the stereotype hierarchically without necessarily expressing moral judgements about other lone mothers. In accordance with Skeggs' (2005) point that judgement is not just a top down process, however, they also tended to be critical of the stereotyping itself. Women who displayed 'performative' SSL in other parts of their interviews were most likely to draw upon a 'social

problem' discourse (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) and the relationship between SSL and 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1989) is discussed below.

Judgement was a prominent theme during Valerie's interview and she associated the term 'single mother' with, "those connotations that link with those feelings you want to distance yourself from really, because you don't identify with that yourself". Valerie's 'performative' mode of SSL is evident in her view that she is less stigmatised due to being in work and previously married. Her description of "different levels of judgement" reflects the 'hierarchy of maternal legitimacy' (Song, 1996). When making the following comment and positioning herself in relation to her friend, she used a reflective rather than a critical tone and had, in fact, founded a supportive group for lone mothers locally (and relationships with friends in 'the same situation' will be discussed in Chapter Seven):

*"I think you do get judged anyway but I think there's a different level of judgement if you're erm, there's different levels of judgement for everything, 'are your kids to different men' and all that kind of thing...you still do feel that kind of you know, that thing of failure. I mean, I don't because I feel like I'm an educated person and I'm working and everything, I feel like I'm somewhat cushioned from the stigma. I think if I wasn't working it would be more. I've got a friend and she's a single mother who hasn't been married and she's got two children to two different men and she's on benefits and I feel that if I was in her position I would feel a lot more judged." Valerie (B)*

Mena (B) had chosen to work part-time so as not to be fully reliant on benefits and this was among the indicators of 'performative' SSL displayed during her interview. Reflecting Goffman's (1990) point that stigma is directed at the image, not at the person, she related her stance on media coverage to her experiences of self-judgement and judgement of other lone mothers the following way:

*"I'd judge somebody I read about in a magazine but then when I've met somebody in that situation I haven't judged them. So you think you would judge somebody that's a single parent on benefits in the situation I'm in with her dad. But then, actually, when that person is in front of me then I don't judge them. So I don't know why I think [people] are going to judge me." Mena (B)*

## **Dis-identifying from classed stereotypes**

This section describes how certain participants in this study dis-identified from portrayals of lone mothers in terms of social class, in addition to the hierarchising criteria outlined in the previous section. Faced with symbolic domination which de-legitimises lone motherhood, these women used what cultural resources they possess to legitimate themselves by underlining their lack of resemblance to classed caricatures (Tyler, 2008; 2011). Contrasts in self-identity of class and

levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989) between women in Location A and Location B are outlined here. Drawing on case study examples, SSL is used to consider the relationship between participants' class identification and their deployment of cultural capital<sup>17</sup>. Analysis of case dynamics elucidates the role of 'judgement' as a pivotal mechanism in participants' negotiation of stigmatising discourses, which are both gendered and classed (Lawler, 2005).

### **Class identification, cultural capital and SSL**

Although Goffman is critiqued for inattention to class position in his dissection of stigma (Bourdieu, 1989; Scambler, 2009), he briefly states that 'social valuations' are based upon 'a virtual middle class ideal' (Goffman, 1990: 173). Stigma is predicated upon 'tribal' affiliations, 'blemishes of character' or physical 'abominations', he writes (Goffman, 1990: 14). Participants' employment and housing situations and educational qualifications are summarised in *Tables 3 and 4: Participant Information Location A and B*, along with the social class with which they identified. Discussion here concentrates on women's comments on their education, clothes and other aspects of 'taste' (Bourdieu, 1984).<sup>18</sup> When participants were asked what social class, if any, they would identify with, a striking contrast was that women in Location B generally appeared much more comfortable talking about the topic than those in A. *Table 8: Participants' self-identification of social class by location* summarises their responses. Nine out of 13 women in A did not identify with a social class, compared with two in B. This is consistent with Savage's (2015) point about people's willingness to engage in discussions about class being largely dictated by their position in their class position.

*Table 8: Participants' self-identification of social class by location*

| Location | Working class | Middle class | Mixed | None |
|----------|---------------|--------------|-------|------|
| A        | 2             | 0            | 2     | 9    |
| B        | 1             | 3            | 7     | 2    |

Savage draws attention to, 'judgements of others based on values and morals associated with the dominant class' (2015: 367), while Sayer (2005) argues that culture is used to misrepresent class as morality. Moral judgement and misrepresentation can be witnessed clearly in the imbrication of class in derogatory media stereotypes of lone motherhood (Tyler, 2011: Skeggs and Wood, 2011) through emphasis on appearance, public comportment and 'taste' (Bourdieu, 1984) as well as reproductive behaviour. Analysis of data from the present study revealed that certain women drew upon their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989) in response to such stereotypes.

<sup>17</sup> Whilst not always easy to separate out (Savage et al., 2013), 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1989) is pertinent to the current discussion, while the 'economic capital' is used in the next chapter to consider the relationship between class and stigma in the material-structural context.

<sup>18</sup> These aspects of cultural capital are focused on here as they are most relevant to negotiation of stereotypes. Cultural products were only referred to occasionally and leisure activities, where relevant, are discussed in Chapter Seven.

Sayer believes that people have 'remarkably sensitive class antennae even if they cannot always articulate the distinctions they make' (2005: 15). References to class during interviews were not necessarily explicit and analysis of data uncovered numerous examples of mothers in B deploying their background, education, accent, home décor, appearance and 'values' as markers of middle class cultural capital. Examples of 'dis-identifiers' from associations of lone motherhood with 'underclass' culture (Tyler, 2008) were also revealed. Comments on how *not* to behave centered on; not smoking, not shouting or swearing, not drinking or going out partying. In addition to references to matters such as presenting themselves and their children in a clean and tidy way and household cleanliness, women cited indicators of appropriate 'feminine' behaviour, which Skeggs' (1997) encompasses under the umbrella of 'respectability'.

For women in Location A, displaying 'what they were not' (Skeggs, 1997), was largely interlaced with previously discussed allusions to sexual morality, or 'good' motherhood, which is explored fully in Chapter Seven. Perceptions of class signifiers in stereotypes and deployment of cultural capital as a distancing device were much more prominent in the accounts of mothers in Location B. They often used words such as "rough", "chavvy" or "uneducated" as a counterpoint to "a good upbringing", "the right values", "nice" and "proper". Some participants appeared to be unconsciously reproducing class-ridden stereotypes to distance themselves from unfavourable representations, whilst others were aware that they were repeating sentiments associated with class prejudice. This is demonstrated for example, by Laura prefacing her remarks with "I'm embarrassed to say", Mena with "I'm not being funny" and Mandy noticing that her comments sounded, "incredibly stuck up". Sonia thought "single mother" sounded more "proper" and "less downtrodden than single mum". Explaining that she made a subconscious association with the terms being used by working and middle classes respectively, she added with an embarrassed laugh, "but that sounds really judgemental".

While women in B were more likely to draw upon their cultural capital to dismiss or challenge stereotypes than those in A, differences in perspectives within as well as between locations were identified. It is therefore useful to look at participants' class identification in order to more systematically examine their use of class *dis*-identification to refute cultural misrepresentation and reinforce their SSL. Investigation of 'distribution of perspectives' (Flick, 2014) revealed that deployment of cultural capital was most pronounced among those participants whose self-identified class was 'mixed'. Case examples show how these women also tended to indicate a strong sense of 'being judged' but were able to display certain attainments against this standard, resulting in 'performative' SSL.

### **Location A**

In Location A, only two women identified themselves firmly as belonging to a particular social class. When asked about class affiliation, Carrie and Julie stated instantly and clearly that they were "working class". Both of these women had lived in council owned properties on the estate

for most of their lives. Both had a long history of employment, which they cited to reinforce their class identity. Carrie said she was “working class and proud of it”. Comments by Julie concurred with Skeggs' (1997) point that loyalty and not aspiring to be middle class are valued in some settings:

*"I'm working class. I wouldn't ever pretend to be something I'm not. I just wouldn't do that. I do live on a council estate. If I got the opportunity for a job or something I might move, but not because I'm a snob or anything."* Julie (A)

Barring these two participants, there was little evidence of class attachment in Location A. Most participants in this location appeared to find class, to use Skeggs' terms, 'ambiguous, vague and embarrassing' (1997: 76). Savage argues that working class people do not wish to engage with discussions of class, with sensitivity to negative classification arising from experience of being, 'on the receiving end of its judgements' (2015). The women's reluctance to discuss class extended into reticence when asked about reasons for not identifying with a class. Conjectures that this might be because they were not working or because working class identity has been re-engineered as underclass discourse (Atkinson et al., 2012; Savage, 2015) were therefore difficult to explore. The majority of participants in A were strongly resistant to the idea of classification. Marta, for instance, expressed derision of those who, “try to make a class system”, whereby “some people try to be posh and some people try not to be posh.” Comments by Debbie and Sheila were also representative of a distain of classification witnessed among women in this location:

*"I'm just me. Take me as I am."* Debbie (A)

*"I don't take an interest. I am who I am and if they don't like it, well [trails off]."* Sheila (A)

When participants in A staunchly declined to identify with a particular social class, attempts were made to tease out their views by asking whether they believed there was a “class system” most replied affirmatively. Katherine, for instance, did not think she belonged in any class and resisted pursuit of the matter on personal terms. But she also stated that she “definitely” thought a class system existed in the UK and equated this with negative media depictions. Her comments suggest being 'knowing' without being confident of possessing language through which to be 'telling' (Alvesson, 2011):

*Nicola: "So, if you think there's a class system, how do you think that shows itself?"*

*Kathryn: "I don't really know how to answer. I just think there's a certain class that gets picked on all the time and gets portrayed negatively."*

Writing of difficulties in denoting categories in her influential study of gender and class, which employed a Bourdieusian capitals approach, Skeggs found it 'easier to identify the young women

by what they were not' (1997: 81). She concludes that they were 'not middle class as identified culturally and economically', nor were they, borrowing Bourdieu's words, 'in a position to construct distances from necessity' (1997: 81, Bourdieu, 1984: 6). This could also be said of most women in Location A, whose levels of economic or cultural capital were almost invariably low. From their scant comments on class, women in A generally regarded it in terms of the presence or absence of money and their perspectives on financial positions are discussed in the next chapter, which examines economic capital.

While women in A generally did not refer to cultural signifiers of class, Nadirah and Clare were the exceptions. Both of these women appeared conscious of class, though seeming ambiguous in understandings of it, and attempted dissociation. Both also displayed 'negative' SSL during their interviews. Nadirah was dressed very smartly when she came to the research interview with immaculate hair and make-up. When complimented on this, her reply indicated it was a means of 'impression management' (Goffman, 1990):

*"I make an effort to look smart because I feel like if people see me in tracksuit bottoms and pushing a pushchair the first thing they'll think in their head is, 'she's a single mum and she's scrounging on benefits'." Nadirah (A)*

Equating being working class with having a job, she explained that she wanted to "look like a working class mum, like I've got a job". She became upset however that she had, in reality, struggled on benefits since having a baby alone at 18, as she went on to explain. Her sense of 'negative' SSL was visible in her distress that she had not been able to fulfil her intention to, "have a career first".

Clare spoke of having a "middle class upbringing with the best of everything and two holidays a year". However she also spoke of not completing her education due to suffering from depression and conveyed signs of 'negative' SSL throughout the interview, predominantly through speaking about her 'low self-esteem' and admonishing herself for depending on benefits, as elaborated upon in the next chapter. Having lived in a council house on the estate but been conscious of "not fitting in" and being "judged as a snob", she had moved to a privately rented property in what she called a "lower middle class area" on its outskirts. She conceded that she was "very judgemental" of those she referred to as "estate people", whom she described as "scruffy looking", "swearing a lot", going out drinking and not keeping their homes clean. She offered insight into her attempts to establish distance and how this could backfire as she was unable to find work or fulfil the expectations her middle class childhood had engendered. At one point during the interview for example, whilst criticising the appearance of people on the estate, she gestured towards her own clothes sneeringly and said, "but then, who am I to talk". Clare offered valuable insight into a process of turning judgement inwards:

*"You just pick up on what you see and how you judge somebody else, erm. So, you've got*

*the flip the table. If you think that somebody else must as well.” Clare (A)*

### **Location B**

Unlike the 'evasiveness and embarrassment' (Sayer, 2005) that tended to arise when the topic of class was broached in Location A, the majority of participants in Location B spoke at length about social class and how they would position themselves. The ease with which most women in B talked about class in this analytical way could be regarded as indicating a certain level of cultural capital in itself (Savage, 2015). Several participants pondered upon whether class is determined by “background, education, salary or postcode”, as one put it, and explained why they did not place themselves firmly in any particular class.

Gillies believes that possessing middle class cultural capital enables people to 'attach value to themselves' through 'particular identifications and dis-identifications' (2007: 35). Tellingly, acceptance of middle class taste as the legitimate and aspirational standard (Atkinson et al., 2012) could be found in the accounts of those participants in Location B who appeared most eager to distance themselves from classed assumptions surrounding lone motherhood. While some could be seen to deploy cultural capital in the form of education and knowledge as a resource in resisting or challenging stereotypes, a tension was evident, particularly in the cases of Laura and Jasmine for instance, who simultaneously dis-identified from classed elements of stereotyping whilst also critiquing stereotypes.

Only three participants in this study identified themselves unambiguously as “middle class”; Joanne, Moira and Sonia, all of whom lived in Location B. Their comments indicate that their sense of being middle class was based on their family background, university education and what they termed “values”, as well as being “comfortable” or “privileged” materially. They also indicated that they saw their middle-class identity as attributable largely to cultural rather than economic factors. Moira's class attachment was evident when she explained that she had continued to regard herself as middle class during the period when she was living on benefits because her parents were “terminally middle class” and this was “deeply ingrained”:

*“I think my class is obvious from I don't know, I've got [pause] I think it's cultural things and values”. Moira (A)*

Having deliberated upon whether class is determined by income, education or “mentality”, Sonia concluded:

*“I was brought up middle class so I suppose that's what I would identify with really. I certainly don't think that life's a struggle and I'm educated to a certain level. I guess it's to do with my aspirations and things like that.” Sonia (B)*

Significantly, Moira and Sonia were untypical in that they barely referred to negative stereotyping and did not voice feelings of being affected by it or appear to have internalised

negative discourse. They appeared indifferent to media portrayals and did not exhibit a need to distance themselves personally from them. Moira said she used the term "single mum" to describe herself and, unusually in the sample, was "happy with it as an identity". Moira dismissed reality television as "exploitative" and Sonia said she avoided "the gutter press". Both women had considerably higher levels of cultural, economic and social capital than most mothers in this study, including having post-graduate qualifications, being in employment and being members of organised single parents' groups. They both consistently expressed indicators of 'positive' SSL throughout their interviews and factors which appeared to influence this, such as pride in career achievements, are referred to as appropriate in the chapters that follow.

Moira and Sonia's disinterest in stereotypes suggests their formal cultural capital in the shape of educational qualifications, along with embodied dispositions of accent and appearance led them to deem themselves far enough from stereotypes as to render such depictions irrelevant. While most participants reproduced stigmatising discourse, Sonia and Moira both drew upon wider cultural resources. Sonia set out political arguments to challenge the "demonisation of single parent families". Moira, who described herself as "quite a big feminist", was proactive in setting up a local single parents' group, has a doctorate and was a member of a choir. She said she described herself as a "single mum" when she met people and on social media, "even though that's probably the most stigmatising term". She was the only woman in the sample who fixed upon a positive single mother figure from the media, author J.K.Rowling, rather than concentrating on negative stereotyping:

*"J.K. Rowling is a sort of single parent hero because she pulled off an amazing success from being a really poor single mother and it's nice to see role models, both for us and for our children, to see women being strong and doing stuff. I can say [to the children] 'the lady who wrote Harry Potter'<sup>19</sup>, she's a single mum' and I like to be able to say that."*  
Moira (B)

Joanne (B) was the third mother in the study who identified herself unequivocally as "middle class". She spelled out factors to which she attributed this identity as: her father being a senior civil servant; her "privileged" upbringing; her educational attainment; and her managerial career. Referring to her African-Caribbean background, Joanne also described what she sees as dual "single mother ethnic minority pressure" however. She was highly conscious of not wanting to conform to that stereotype. Joanne articulated a process of internalisation of adverse social judgement in explaining that she believed media representations prejudiced people's opinions, even though has never personally experienced any negative incidents:

*"Perhaps that's not what they're thinking at all, but you think 'that's what they're*

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<sup>19</sup> J.K.Rowling, author of the series of books featuring fictional character Harry Potter has told of her life as a single parent on benefits prior to becoming a best-selling author in numerous media interviews.

*thinking about me'... in my head I think, 'I don't want them to look at me like that'."*

*Joanne (B)*

Joanne said that she had sought out novels and films about lone mothers rebuilding their lives after relationship break-ups when she was going through her divorce, which had provided comforting perspectives. Where Moira and Sonia, the other two women identifying clearly as middle class, appeared to consider the stereotype so far removed from themselves as to be personally irrelevant, Joanne used the word 'judgement' frequently during her interview and gave indicators to suggest her SSL could be deemed 'performative'. In addition to taking pride in being "a successful person" in balancing a demanding full-time job with parenting, which is discussed fully in Chapter Six, she signified her cultural capital as a means of distancing from stereotypes:

*"I do sometimes think 'I want you to understand that I'm not that stereotype'. Now I think if you spend five minutes talking to me you'll realise that I'm not an uneducated single mother." Joanne (B)*

In stark contrast to Location A, the majority of participants in Location B spoke extensively about class and most referred to combinations of middle and working class identities, which is denoted as 'mixed' in *Table 8*, above. This complexity was due to a stated lack of clarity over how class in itself is defined and, more crucially, to ambiguity surrounding their specific class position. In most cases their mixed class identity arose from coming from what they saw as a 'working class' family background and their subsequent education, employment and neighbourhood being more 'middle class'. Significantly, those women indicating "mixed" or "complex" class identity also appeared to be the most conscious of the classed-infused nature of stigmatising cultural representations of lone mothers and gave strong indications of a desire to 'perform' against standards required of 'middle class motherhood' (Gillies, 2007). In addition to Joanne's case discussed above, analysis of the case dynamics of Hannah, Laura, Mena and Valerie could all be said to indicate 'performative' SSL. These women all used the word 'judgement' or 'judged' frequently and were highly attuned to adverse social judgement. Importantly in the context of negative media stereotyping, they deployed their cultural capital as a means of distinguishing themselves from class-ridden cultural stereotypes of lone motherhood. Examples of pride in career achievements and maternal credentials by which they evaluated themselves are cited as relevant in further chapters of this thesis.

Savage (2015) points out that boundaries between the middle and working classes have historically been the most permeable and consequently the most assiduously defended. Analysis of case dynamics underpinning Laura's narrative demonstrate the relationship between: 'mixed' social class identity; her sensitivity to stigma; internalisation of judgment; and use cultural capital in reaction to dominant discourse as 'performative' SSL. Taking these points in turn, firstly

Laura spelled out her pre-occupation with class along with her uncertainty over her positioning:

*"I don't know where I'd place myself if I'm honest. I still see myself as working class, but the fact that I've been into higher education, got a degree and I'm working at a uni means I've moved forward a little bit. I do place a lot of emphasis and recognition upon class and looking at where I fit in if I'm honest."* Laura (B)

Secondly, when asked about positive role models, Laura referred to what she called "feminist pop anthems" by Christina Aguilera<sup>20</sup>, but stressed that this was an exception in the media. Thirdly, and crucially, judgement was a prominent theme throughout Laura's interview and the first section of this chapter details how she related this to negative media representations. Fourthly, Laura offered prescient insight into tensions between her intellectual perspective on correlations between state policies and media representations, gained from her social science degree, and her subjective responses to mis-recognition. In the following passage, she appears to feel the need to 'legitimise' her situation in reaction to perceived 'judgement' and uses her cultural capital to do so, in a way that is suggestive of 'knowing how to display one's subjectivity properly' (Skeggs, 2005: 973):

*"I've gone to a doctor because there's something wrong with the children or something, I never felt [pause]. Because I'm kind of well-educated and I've got a good family backing and I've kept a nice home, I never felt judged because I felt I could always articulate myself well."* Laura (B)

Valerie made repeated reference to 'judgement' throughout her interview. In addition to her 'performative' SSL in positioning of herself according to "levels of judgement", described above, she also drew on cultural capital in referring to books and her knowledge of psychology and parenting styles. She viewed her class identity as complex and she attributed this to being brought up "in a working class way" then going to university, being a social worker and living in a middle class area. She commented:

*"I would consider myself to be middle class in the sense of who I mix with and where I live, but I still would feel a little bit like I'm not fully middle class...there's some things, like the unwritten rules of classes, so I don't really feel like I fit in fully."* Valerie (B)

A pattern of mixed class identity, awareness of judgement and assertion of cultural capital as an aspect of 'performative' SSL could also be observed in the case of Mena. She described herself as "somewhere between working and middle class" and explained that her father had been in the police force and she had been to university but neither she nor her parents were well off financially. The aesthetic invoked by Mena, having raised the issue of "all the bad connotations"

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<sup>20</sup> Songs by Christina Aguilera featuring empowering themes for women include *Can't Hold Us Down*, released in 2003, which comments on gendered double standards.

attached to the term "single mum" is reminiscent of 'chav mum' caricatures (Tyler, 2008):

*Nicola: "And what are those connotations would you say?"*

*Mena: "I've got to admit that it's the ones that I've seen [on TV], so it's that kind of erm bleached blonde hair tied up in a bun, whatever labels are on their clothes, trailing one, two, three children behind them with a cigarette, with an idea what their house is like. And that's just so not the case here. [Gesturing to herself, her clothes and around her lounge and speaking with strong emphasis]." Mena (B)*

Mena was highly conscious of cultural cues that differentiated herself from working class stereotypes, and signified an implicit view of herself as middle class:

*"I think what's really interesting is that, I'm not being funny but I think I'm referred to as quite well spoken and quite articulate, and I think people are shocked that it's just me and her or that I'm not in a relationship or married or things like that." Mena (B)*

Spatial and class positioning were clearly inter-connected for a number of women in Location B. In their frequent references to it being a "nice area", participants appeared to equate 'nice' with middle class. Hannah, who grew up in the centre of a large city, identified herself as "working class" but stressed how much she likes living in a "nice area" where her daughter and herself "fit in well". Hannah's 'performative' SSL, was evident in comments such as saying that "presentation" was highly important to her, which was why she made sure her daughter had, "nice clothes and everything". She also differentiated her from stereotypes of single parents on "council estates", whom she characterised as, "smoking and [laughs] wearing trackies and that sort of thing, shouting and swearing at their kids and stuff". Her comments on behaviour along with sartorial choices, echo Savage's (2015) view that smoking and excessive drinking are commonly regarded as markers of class position:

*"I wouldn't really say money separated people but I think your morals and your values and stuff do...I think it's how people portray themselves really." Hannah (B)*

Finally, in looking at classed dis-identification from stereotypes, Mandy's case provides a strong example of 'negative' SSL involving a sense of being judged, ambivalent class identity and frustration at not being able to meet the middle class parenting criteria by which she judges herself. Mandy was particularly conscious of class and adverse social judgement as a young mother on benefits in a location where she was surrounded by affluent two parent families. Comparing her "well off" background with her present situation, she defined herself as "middle class but with a six year gap" since having her son at the age of 18. She positioned herself within the affluent neighbourhood where she lived in the following way:

*"There's a higher class and there's a very, very small sort of lower class. And I would, if it was just an automatic natural selection, I would almost automatically be in the lower*

*class. I'm on benefits, I'm young erm [pause] but I'm absolutely fighting to not be seen like that. I don't want to be seen as a slag, a scruff, I don't want to be seen as, I don't know, just chavy. Anything like that I would just hate because I know how judgemental people [in this town] can be...I think in the eyes of sort of actual status and money, I'm absolutely working class but what I want to be and who I am is slightly different."* Mandy (B)

This passage is illustrative of comments throughout the interview where Mandy voiced aspirations towards the standard of living and social networks of affluent couple families locally, which she was unable to fulfil due to being a young single parent dependent on benefits. Mandy appears to have absorbed fears of 'misrecognition' (Sayer, 2005) and to be judging herself according to standards she was unable to meet, resulting in negative SSL, further examples of which are provided in chapters that follow. She was about to start university and believed that gaining a degree and pursuing a career would ultimately enable her to return to her original class position, which suggests achievements through which she might display 'performative' SSL in the future.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has responded to the question of whether lone mothers remain affected by stigma by exploring participants' perceptions of cultural representations of lone motherhood in the contemporary context. Evidence presented here has confirmed clearly the stigmatising effects of what women involved in the study regarded as negative media discourse. This chapter began by exploring participants' views on terminology, which highlighted their ambivalence towards lone mother categorisation and prompted associations with what they invariably regarded as stigmatising stereotypes in popular culture. Women in both locations expressed strong objections to 'labelling' and 'stereotyping' (Link and Phelan, 2001), which was commonly related to a sense of 'adverse social judgement' (Scambler, 2009). Analysis of the data revealed that media misrepresentation was the most significant single factor leading participants in a diverse range of situations to comment on "being judged". This chapter has presented evidence to support the argument that women's reactions to vilifying media portrayals confirm the salience of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) in understanding how lone mothers internalise symbolic domination or 'misrecognition' (Sayer, 2005).

The chapter also considered media stereotyping in relation to the question of how lone mothers' experiences of stigma are affected by agential and structural factors. Where stereotypical representations of lone motherhood can be described as 'cultural emergent properties' (Archer, 2000), analysis of the data showed how women who took part in this research deployed 'personal emergent properties' (Archer, 2000) in their agential responses to those representations. With the benefit dependent young mother positioned at the bottom of the discursive 'legitimacy

ladder' (Bock, 2001), the second section of this chapter described how participants appeared to feel compelled to position themselves in relation to a 'hierarchy of maternal legitimacy' (Song, 1996; Carabine, 2001; Pulkingham et al., 2010). Women cited lack of choice over their situation, their age and their relationship history to reinforce their 'moral legitimacy' (Taylor, 1998). Evidence from interviews presented here thus supports two key observations by Goffman (1990): that stigma is a relational phenomenon; and that someone in a stigmatised category might stratify people in the same category.

Locational contrasts in participants' circumstances have been set out. Examples of case analysis using SSL have also illustrated how subjective impacts of discourse were not automatically equated with age or route to lone motherhood, but varied according to individuals' agential mediation of discourse. In addition to participants' sense of 'being judged', attention to 'clusters of meaning' (Spencer et al., 2014a: 271) in women's 'modes' of SSL has demonstrated the significance of self-judgement and judgement of others in being critical of, and distancing themselves from, media stereotypes. A tendency towards 'othering' identified in previous studies (eg: Phoenix, 1996; Mitchell and Green, 2002) was reflected in cases of 'defensive' SSL, where judgement was deflected. It is proposed, however, that exploration of attitudes towards women in the same taxonomic category proved more complex than straightforward derogatory 'othering' might suggest. Finer grained analysis of connections between participants' mode of SSL and judgement as a key mechanism revealed how some women expressed empathy for 'other' lone mothers, thus indicating how distancing tactics participants adopted could be complex.

The final section of this chapter responded to the question of significance of social class in lone mothers' experiences of stigma by investigating the relationship between participants' class identification, their levels of 'cultural capital' and their responses to stigmatising cultural representations. McRobbie points to 'a specifically feminine form of symbolic violence', which is reproduced via 'a process of class differentiation' (2004: 101-2). Correlations between participants' situations, their access to cultural capital and reactions to stereotypes could be discerned in the data. It can be suggested that reluctance among women in Location A to identify with a particular class is related to the stigmatising effects of classification (Tyler, 2013; Savage, 2015). Women in this location did not generally cite signifiers of cultural capital as distancing devices, with the exception of two women who appeared to turn class-based judgments upon themselves, resulting in 'negative' SSL. The tendency to distance from class-based elements of stigmatising stereotypes was much more pronounced in Location B, where several women referred directly to class as a means of bolstering their SSL. This tendency appeared most pronounced among women who saw their class identity as "mixed", who were conversant with class boundaries but uncertain of their own class identity, and displayed 'performative' SSL.

The overall argument presented in this chapter is that women's experiences of media stigmatisation were affected by both their situation and their 'judgement about what they find worthwhile' (Archer, 2012: 106). It can therefore be concluded that, whilst media depictions of lone motherhood proved the most commonly cited source of "judgement", women's individual situations, attitudes and levels of cultural capital interacted to influence their 'judgement of judgement' and 'mode' of SSL, hence their propensity to reject, resist or absorb misrepresentation. In concluding this chapter, it must also be noted that participants were highly aware that media coverage almost universally links lone motherhood with benefit dependency. The emphasis the women placed on employment, along with a need to attempt to disentangle symbolic depictions from material circumstances analytically, means the topic is analysed in detail in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6

### Balancing competing demands

#### Introduction

The thesis began by discussing how ill/legitimacy functioned for centuries as a means of both controlling female sexuality and limiting demands on resources (Engels, 1988; Millett, 1990; Smart, 1992; Reekie, 1998). This chapter explores lone mothers' experiences of stigma within the contemporary socio-political context of the worker model of 'legitimate' citizenship (e.g. Pulkingham et al., 2010) and increased benefits stigma (e.g. Taylor-Gooby, 2013). The first section highlights the strength of work orientation expressed by participants regardless of their location or circumstances. Comparing local labour markets, qualifications and skills reveals sharp contrasts between the two locations however. Whereas most women in Location A voiced frustration at not working, women in Location B were much more favourably positioned to access jobs that could be balanced with childcare. Dermott and Pomati (2016) raise the important question of whether lone parenthood itself remains subject to stigma or benefit dependency is a key differential. The second section presents strong evidence to confirm that lone mothers who rely on benefits are indeed prone to the greatest degree of stigma. Using SSL as an analytical tool demonstrates the importance of employment to self-worth among participants displaying 'positive' and 'performative' SSL. It also shows how inability to access work that can be balanced with childcare was compounded by self-judgement among those women displaying 'negative' SSL. Conversely, certain women indicating 'defensive' SSL judged themselves deserving of benefits, rather than internalising adverse social judgement. These case examples illustrate how a process of 'judging the judgement' impacts on individual experiences of stigma.

The chapter argues that, despite participants' agency in seeking work and managing limited budgets, 'structural emergent properties' (Archer, 2000), in the form of lack of suitable jobs and policies that fail to recognise lone mothers' childcare responsibilities, can present significant constraints. The final section focuses on social class through consideration of participants' SSL in relation to 'economic capital' (Bourdieu, 1989). This demonstrates that some women could convert the cultural capital of educational qualifications into employment and hence financial stability, which further enhanced their sense of 'positive' or 'performative' SSL. Participants in Location A were likely to be 'struggling' financially and effect of this on their SSL is discussed. Whilst women in Location B generally had higher levels of economic capital, living on a single income among affluent dual income families adversely affected SSL in certain cases.

## Employment and 'legitimate' citizenship

Changes to conceptualisations of citizenship underlying shifts in welfare policies affecting lone mothers were set out in Chapter Two and analysis of accounts of lone mothers involved in this study suggest that the prevailing citizenship model, which positions them firmly as workers (e.g. Lewis, 2006; Pulkingham et al., 2010; Haux, 2012), has become lodged hegemonically in both locations.<sup>21</sup> Benefit dependency is a central component of negative stereotypes and strength of work orientation was a resounding factor in participants' differentiation of themselves from stigmatising cultural representations. The 'prism of legitimacy' framework helps understand how, while ostensibly gender neutral, state policies disadvantage women (MacKinnon, 1983; Walby 1994) and data from this study supports Tyler's (2013) claim that people who do not work feel 'de-legitimised' as 'failed citizens'. Women in both Location A and Location B uniformly expressed a belief that people are evaluated in terms of being employed or otherwise. Ability to access employment was, however, affected by dramatic variations in labour markets, qualifications and skills between the locations. Case studies detail how 'positive' or 'performative' SSL is strongly associated with women's personal pride and sense of social value stemming from their work. Conversely, with policies accentuating individual culpability (Wright, 2012), women who did not work believed they were not valued as legitimate citizens and internalised this judgement, resulting in 'negative' SSL.

### Strength of work orientation across locations

Discussion of operationalisation of concepts in Chapter Four explained that whilst the term 'citizenship' itself had little, if any, salience among participants, questions concerning work orientation and entitlement to benefits proved meaningful. Mothers are much more likely to retain responsibility for childcare when relationships end (Smart and Neale, 1999; Poole et al., 2016) and the mothers who took part in this research were all the primary carers for their children. Contrary to New Right arguments that the state is expected to fulfil the absent father's role as provider (Millar, 1996), or media depictions of mothers cynically 'scrounging' off the state (Tyler, 2011), participants also clearly identified themselves as responsible for their children's material well-being. Examples of frequently voiced comments to this end include:

*"I'm responsible for my children, not their father and not the state." Clare (A)*

*"I want to work so I can provide for her. She's my child." Debbie (A)*

*"I want to provide a better life for him." Julie (A)*

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<sup>21</sup> Although it was sometimes difficult to separate out women's belief in the intrinsic value of work from their desire to avoid benefits stigma, in an attempt to untangle views on the intrinsic value of employment and their responses to unemployment from attitudes towards benefits stigma, this first section concentrates on former and the second section concentrates on the latter.

*"The onus is on me...if I want to give them a decent life." Sonia (B)*

Levels of financial input from fathers varied greatly, but in all cases this was regarded as a 'contribution' rather than being the family's main source of income. Where mothers were receiving benefits, they viewed this as a substitute for their *own* salary, not that of an absent father. Notwithstanding flaws in 'workfare' policies and a belief among some of her participants that work was detrimental to children's welfare, Churchill (2007) points to enabling aspects in lone mothers believing they had moved beyond economic dependence on men. Participants' view of themselves as breadwinners went hand in hand with a strong work ethic, which was witnessed among women in Location A and B and regardless of individual circumstances:

*"I've never had a day off sick in 13 years. I've worked 12 days out of the last 14." Sheila (A)*

*"I love what I do. I'm quite passionate about it. I'm one of those people who would never have been a stay at home mum. I get my thrills and I get to socialise at work." Della (B)*

Evidence of commitment to employment among participants from both locations is somewhat at variance with findings from two key studies conducted in the late 1990s (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Klett-Davies, 2007). Klett-Davies (2007) identified 'pioneers' of independent 'man-free' lifestyles among ideal types of benefit-dependent lone mothers in London and Berlin during her research. These women regarded state benefits as means of fulfilling desires to pursue 'professional mothering', artistic or educational ambitions whilst caring for their children. There was no indication in the present study of women having chosen to live on benefits for such purposes. Nor did any participants in the present study invoke 'alternative lifestyles' discourses, as identified among some participants in Duncan and Edwards' (1999) research. Duncan and Edwards (1999) found that maternal identity was more important than material gain for most of their respondents, with a high proportion of white working class mothers in particular viewing motherhood and paid work as incompatible. Whilst the present study is much smaller in scale and not directly comparable, it is significant that, unlike Duncan and Edwards' research (1999), none of the participants believed that working would be damaging to their children or mentioned external disapproval of them for working. In fact, a number of women across both locations pointed out that their decision-making was influenced by a work ethic ingrained in them by their own parents, as illustrated by the following comments:

*"I don't think my mum and dad would bother with me if I didn't work. That's been drilled in from an early age." Gina (A)*

*"Like my mum and everything, we've always worked. She's got five kids and she still works." Gemma (A)*

*"That's a cultural thing in my family. I know my dad in particular is very proud of me for having worked hard and having got myself off benefits." Moira (B)*

This pro-work sentiment appeared particularly strong among participants whose own mothers had been working single parents, such as Della (B):

*"My mum was also a single parent with me and my mum did not have a good job back then. She was a waitress but she still worked. I've been brought up with that." Della (B)*

Many women believed they were setting a good example to children by working and women without jobs worried that their children were being disadvantaged by not having this "role model". Their comments were in accordance with arguments suggesting that being employed is increasingly equated with being a 'good' parent (Lewis, 2006; Churchill, 2007):

*"It's making me crazy because you think 'if my child doesn't see me work, how will she learn to work?'" Marta (A)*

*"I like the fact that my son knows I go out to work and I earn a living." Della (B)*

Wallbank makes a pertinent point that popular discourses on working lone mothers emphasise the need to work to provide for children, yet rarely refer to advantages of mothers working for 'their personal fulfilment' (1998: 85). Personal fulfilment was referred to by the majority of women in this study who work, however. The inter-connected virtues of working that were cited included; self-esteem, confidence, getting out of the house, alleviating boredom, having "a break from the kids" and social interaction with other adults. Examples below show how these perceived merits of employment contributed towards participants' self-worth and SSL.

Data from this study confirms that pressure in balancing the demands of employment with their children's needs was prominent among women in both locations. Participants' work orientation was accompanied by accounts of difficulties in accessing work that was compatible with childcare for women in Location A in particular. Women's accounts support feminist arguments that citizenship is gendered (Walby, 1994; Lister, 1997) and that the adult worker model ignores tensions between lone mothers' carer and breadwinner roles (e.g. Millar and Ridge, 2013). Jasmine (B) sums up comments by a number of participants on contradictory expectations engendered through hegemonic discourse, echoing feminist views that lone mothers face a 'double burden' (Wallbank, 1998):

*"You're breadwinner and carer, it's a job designed for two people...if you don't work and you're a single mum it's like 'what a lazy cow', if you do work and you're a single mum it's like 'her kids come home on their own and who is looking after them'." Jasmine (B)*

## Locational variations in employment

Measures by successive governments to encourage employment uptake among lone parents were summarised in Chapter Two, with changes arising from the Welfare Reform Act 2012 resulting in increased benefit conditionality for lone parents (e.g. Graham and McQuaid, 2014). The foregoing comments demonstrate the strength of work orientation displayed by women across the data. However, vast differences in employment levels are shown in *Table 9: Employment by location*. Nine out of 13 women in A were not currently in paid employment and all but two of the women in B were in paid work, one of whom was about to start a university degree.

*Table 9: Employment by location*

| Location | Working full-time                    | Working part-time                    | Not in paid work |
|----------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------|
| A        | 2<br>(inc. 1 self-employed)          | 3<br>(inc. 1 recently self-employed) | 8                |
| B        | 7<br>(+ 1 to start full-time degree) | 4<br>(inc. 1 on maternity leave)     | 2                |

Although this research is focused on perceptions rather than practicalities, analysis revealed the two to be closely inter-connected in participants' experiences of un/employment and stigma. In understanding women's situations and perspectives on those situations (Maxwell, 2012), it is therefore worthwhile outlining constraints that prevented most women in Location A from working before looking at the impact of un/employment on SSL.

### **Local labour markets, qualifications and skills**

Barriers to employment for all lone parents are well documented (e.g. Whitworth, 2013; Graham and McQuaid, 2014), but some face more insurmountable barriers than others. The disparity in labour market participation between women in the two locations is reflective of spatial macro-economic factors and concurs with emphasis placed on disparities in local economies in employment-centred studies of lone motherhood (e.g. Rafferty and Wiggan, 2011). Lone mothers have tended to be geographically concentrated in areas of high unemployment (Morris, 1994) and the restricted labour market in Location A proved a readily identifiable barrier. As a large estate of predominantly local authority owned housing on the outskirts of a former industrial city with high levels of unemployment (DETR, 2012), Location A has a distinctly disadvantaged local economy. Duncan and Edwards' (1999) finding that middle class lone mothers were more likely to be situated in better labour market locations and were able to access wider employment markets was borne out in the present study.

Availability of affordable childcare locally (as found by Rowlingon and McKay, 2005) was an issue raised by women in A. Scott et al. (2010) note that middle class mothers are generally more

likely to use professional childcare, which appears to be reflected in differences between women in the contrasting locations. Disparity in participants' labour market competitiveness is apparent in *Table 10: Qualifications and skills by location*. Whereas only one woman in Location A had A'Levels, educational and professional qualifications were a major enabler in accessing jobs for those in B, which meant they were better placed to negotiate flexible employment and/or earn sufficiently high salaries to be able to afford childcare. Analysis of the data indicates that women in both areas behaved agentially in their approach to employment but that, as Davies (2012) and Whitworth (2013) argue, agency needs to be examined within the context of structural constraints. Participants in Location B tended to be better positioned geographically and educationally and were able to capitalise on this through their decision-making and action-taking, whereas options for most women in Location A were severely limited.

*Table 10: Qualifications and skills by location*

| Location | Educational and qualifications  | Vocational qualifications      | Gaining qualifications   |
|----------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| A        | 10 secondary (poor GCSEs)<br>1 secondary (good GCSEs)<br>1 post-16 (A'Levels) | 4 NVQs                         | 1 starting Access to HE course<br>2 literacy and numeracy sessions |
| B        | 5 degree<br>5 post-graduate professional<br>1 PhD                             | 1 NVQ<br>1 specialist teaching | 2 part-time degree<br>1 starting full-time degree                  |

### **Employment and SSL**

One of the reasons for introducing SSL as an analytical tool in this research is that it captures positive expressions of women's sense of social validity, rather than simply presence/absence of stigma in participants' accounts, as discussed in Chapter Three. Women who felt satisfied in their ability to balance worker/maternal roles and gained external validation for their achievements indicated 'positive' or 'performative' SSL. In contrast, despite citing proactive attempts to find suitable employment, most women in Location A spoke of frustration at significant barriers that hindered their agential behaviour, resulting in 'negative' SSL. A process of 'being judged' and internalising adverse social judgement is also illustrated, whereby those mothers who conveyed 'negative' SSL tended to judge themselves severely for not working, despite rationally attributing this to factors beyond their control, thus confirming Skeggs and Loveday's point that, 'powerlessness is compounded by moral judgment' (2012: 483).

### **Location A**

Although women in Location A generally expressed a strong work ethic during interviews, Carrie and Gina are the only women there who work full-time. The link between pride in fulfilling her career ambitions and 'positive' SSL was highly evident in the case of Carrie. She was extremely

chatty, cheerful and confident throughout the interview and spoke enthusiastically about how much she “loves” her role as a children's speech and language worker. Carrie had a previously been reliant on benefits and had found it, “degrading”, but described her agential strategy in acquiring vocational skills to work with children:

*“I was bettering myself at every step of the way because I knew I had an end goal. Everything worked out exactly...you have to have a goal...you can't just sit and feel downtrodden.” Carrie (A)*

Carrie referred frequently to “feeling good” and said, “I'm where I should be” when discussing her job and appreciated the flexibility of being able to reduce her hours when her daughter was born and return full-time when she started school. Her SSL was clearly enhanced through a sense of being “valued”, having spent a decade working with local families. Statistics confirm that African-Caribbean lone mothers have the highest employment rate among ethnic groups (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Rowlingson and McKay, 2005). Although the dangers of reproducing the black lone mother stereotype must be recognised (May, 2008), Carrie's own mother had brought up three children alone whilst working full-time and her account confirms Duncan and Edwards' (1999) qualitative findings that women in her ethnic group displayed the most fluidly integrated mother/worker orientations.

Sheila and Gemma, who work part-time, both conveyed indicators of 'positive' SSL, which appeared to be based on being employed and also having solid family and friendship networks locally (as discussed fully in Chapter Seven). Gemma emphasised that even though she was no better off materially for working, she was fulfilling her family's work ethic and saw financial independence as important to her self-esteem. Reduced hours as a nursery assistant allowed her to balance her job and time with her two year-old son. Sheila, whose youngest son was 15, spoke about being “happy as I am”. The importance of work ethic to her SSL was evident through statements such as feeling “better for working”. She had been in her sales assistant job for 13 years and had viewed it as “a break from the kids” when they were younger.

The majority of women in A did not have jobs and there were considerable overlaps in their comments on not working and being dependent on benefits. Participants' views that timing of work is vital to combining employment with their maternal role concurs with evidence from Ridge and Millar (2008; 2011) and Millar and Ridge (2013). Accounts of women in this study also support the point that age of a mother's youngest child is an inadequate gauge of a lone mothers' ability to work (Haux, 2012). Women voiced frustration that Benefits Agency staff did not understand restrictions that responsibility for children placed on work options. This confirms Davies' (2012) argument that welfare reform accentuates moralistic interpretations of deservingness without recognising challenges in accessing childcare compatible employment.

The situation described by Bella, who has eight year-old twins, is a case in point. Speaking about being troubled by boredom and "lost confidence", Bella exemplifies how the endogenous effects of unemployment can be combined with a sense of exogenous 'judgement', resulting in 'negative' SSL. She had worked for some fifteen years before being made redundant from her job in a school, two years previously. Bella's account confirms Pulkingham et al.'s (2010) point that contemporary conditions placed upon 'legitimate' citizenship render lone mothers' parental responsibilities invisible institutionally. Her case reflects analysis showing that lone parents can be most vulnerable to benefits sanctions (Gingerbread, 2014a). Claimant obligations (DWP, 2013) meant she had been threatened with benefits sanctions if she did not apply for five jobs each week<sup>22</sup>, but she voiced frustration that JobCentre staff did not understand the limitations on jobs she could feasibly undertake:

*"They're asking me to take cleaning jobs at six o'clock in the morning. There's nobody that's going to come at five thirty in the morning to watch the kids, it's silly times."* Bella (A)

Using SSL as a tool to break down Bella's subjective perception of her situation and response to stigma, enables us to see how judgement appears to function as a means by which citizens regulate themselves and each other, in what Wacquant calls the punitive 'daddy state' (2009: 290). Bella displayed 'negative' SSL and used the words "judged for not working" repeatedly. When asked about sources of judgement, she gave direct examples, which illustrate a lack of sympathy for worklessness (Taylor-Gooby, 2013):

*"People I know are judging me for not working...I've got family and friends that say, 'oh come on, surely it's not that hard to find a job'. One of my friends definitely judges, she's always commenting, like 'haven't you got a job yet' and 'have you applied for so and so?' I say 'yes I do, I do apply, I've got my CV with all the agencies'."* Bella (A)

With most people Bella knows being in work and having been employed for many years herself, such norms clearly 'matter' (Sayer, 2011) to her. Despite re-iterating that she would "choose to work" if she could, Bella was not only highly sensitive to stigma of not having a job, she also recognises self-judgement in her 'subjective reflection upon her involuntary placement' (Archer, 2000: 199):

*"When I have doctor's appointments with the kids I sometimes feel uncomfortable saying 'I'm unemployed at the moment'. Because I judge myself as well because I've always worked."* Bella (A)

Numerous studies highlight tensions in balancing employment and childcare (e.g. Harkness,

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<sup>22</sup> The number of jobs Unemployment Benefit claimants are expected to apply for varies under current policy and the number participants in this study were expected to apply for each week differed.

2012; Hirsch, 2012; Kowalewska, 2015) and this was highly apparent during the research. It can be seen, for example, in the experiences of two women in Location A. Both Julie and Marta had returned to their jobs after maternity leave but been unable to sustain them. Julie displayed 'negative' SSL during her interview and used the word 'judgement' frequently. Her keen sense of adverse social judgement arising from media stereotyping, discussed in the previous chapter, was compounded by a sense of injustice at her former employers' lack of flexibility when she returned to work after maternity leave. She had worked in a major clothing retailer's warehouse for ten years after leaving school at 16. She went back at work for a year after maternity leave but asked to move to an earlier shift as she "wasn't coping" with timings, which also meant nursery fees were £152 a week. Julie believed increased use of zero hours contracts made the company less disposed to accommodate permanent staff such as herself and said she was treated "like an inconvenience" and ended up having to leave. Whilst telling her story, Julie was visibly upset and her 'negative' SSL was evident. Her comments on the company's lack of flexibility despite working "like a dog" for a decade support Skeggs and Loveday's (2012) points about impacts of feeling a lack of 'value'. However, as she had good GCSE grades, she was planning to start an Access to Higher Education course. As well as "providing a better life" for her son, she explained that her motivation was to pursue a job with "a social purpose", so she would be "valued". This agential action suggests she was pursuing 'performative' SSL for the future.

Although Julie and Marta both found their jobs unsustainable, Julie's GCSE grades gave her a marginal advantage. By contrast, Marta came from Germany 15 years ago and had no qualifications that were recognised in the UK and struggled with written English. Having worked in a frozen food factory for 12 years, she returned from maternity leave after her second child but her job had been relocated to the other side of town. She built up £3,000 credit card debt paying for taxis, as public transport was unreliable. Her situation is consistent with Duncan and Edwards' (1999) findings that lack of transport is an employment barrier and Lewis' (2006) findings on the dearth of affordable childcare.

Like Julie, Marta pointed out that the company had little incentive to keep her as a permanent employee when they could use cheaper agency workers. Such experiences reinforce arguments that lone mothers become marginalised due to capitalist demands for labour market flexibility (Grover 2005; Prideux, 2011). The relationship between structural conditions and subjective affectivity was clear in Marta's case. Her description of the impact of not working on her self-worth supports Sayer's (2005) emphasis on dignity in his investigation of 'what matters to people'. Marta referred repeatedly to feeling "judged" and the severe impact of unemployment on her 'negative' SSL is evident as she articulates a process of intertwining self-judgement with perceptions of other people's attitudes towards her:

*"I judge myself 24/7. When you are on benefits you are non-stop blaming yourself...I think*

*people are judging me too. A person who doesn't work has no status. If you don't work they see you as a second class citizen...Now I'm not working, if my youngest starts kicking off in the supermarket I feel ashamed and think that people will be seeing me as a slag on benefits who can't control her kids." Marta (A)*

### **Location B**

While there is not sufficient space to detail all of the arrangements mothers made in juggling employment and childcare, interviews with women in both locations highlighted challenges in working, caring for children and running a home single-handedly. A fundamental difference was that participants in Location B were generally better qualified than those in Location A and could thus secure work which could be more easily balanced with childcare responsibilities and/or paid sufficiently well to cover childcare. Commanding a stronger labour market position, in turn, fostered personal validation and social approval, which favourably impacted upon their individual SSL.

Sonia was one of the few participants in this study who identified themselves unequivocally as 'middle class' and she cited her university education as part of this identity. Sonia displayed 'positive' SSL during the interview. Her role as a mental health specialist appeared central to this and she spoke in a self-assured manner, stressing how much she enjoys work and stating, "my career is a big part of my identity". When evaluating 'what matters' (Sayer, 2005), Sonia's career and children appeared equally important to her self-worth and her remarks indicate an 'integral mother/worker orientation' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Significantly, Sonia was able to work flexibly around three children aged between three and six, including working from home part of the week. She found returning to work stressful after her last maternity leave but had managed to find an equilibrium:

*"It's quite full on. I've had to let things go like my house is never tidy, I never put the washing away [gesturing at untidiness in her lounge and laundry on the table and laughing]. I think erm I think when I first started back at work I thought I was shit at both because I didn't have enough time for either. But now I think I identify with both of them really." Sonia (B)*

Designation of the 'performative' mode of SSL grew out of observation of cases where women believe lone motherhood is stigmatised generally but that their personal legitimacy is bolstered through evaluating their performance favourably according to 'judgements....that are rooted in social norms' (Archer, 2000: 215). Employment appeared vital to SSL for these women. For example, Joanne identified strongly as a worker and spoke proudly of her professional advancement as a business administrator at a transport company. Joanne's 'middle class' identity was discussed in the previous chapter. She described having her routine down to the minute in order to fit everything in. Her narrative made clear the struggle she had been through in adjusting to lone motherhood, with concerns about "judgement" featuring prominently. The

impact of Joanne's performative achievements in her dual role as mother and worker appear to have restored her sense of self-worth however:

*"Now I think 'd'you know what, I'm quite happy with being a successful person in my job and I think my son has turned out to be a lovely little boy."* Joanne (A)

Archer (2000) argues that social identity emerges out of personal identity through agential deliberations on: well-being in the natural order, performative achievements in the practical order and self-worth in the social order. Joanne's performative achievements appeared to be at the expense of self-care however. It was unsurprising that she spoke of being, "just permanently tired trying to fit things in"; and when asked if she ever had time to herself she responded, "bed and bath, that's it".

## **Benefits stigma: perspectives and experiences**

Chapter Two described how 'discourses of deservingness' (Schram, 2012) and heightened benefits stigma (Taylor-Gooby, 2013; Baumberg, 2016) formed the socio-political backdrop for this study and participants overwhelmingly viewed dependency on benefits as being a source of adverse social judgement. Participants made an automatic association between having a job and avoiding benefits stigma and sensitivity to benefits stigma played a significant role in their decisions around balancing employment, finances and childcare. While benefits were more likely to be the sole source of income for mothers in Location A, almost all of the mothers in Location B had claimed benefits previously or still relied on state support to some extent. In weighting rights against responsibilities, participants generally believed that benefits should be provided in the absence of other options but judged 'other' lone mothers' deservingness according to their willingness to work. Exploration of case studies shows that, whereas awareness of external judgement or self-judgement motivated those mothers who were able to do so to move off benefits, mothers with 'negative' SSL absorbed negative judgement. Mothers whose SSL could be deemed 'defensive' resisted stigma, however, by justifying their deservingness.

### **Avoiding benefits stigma**

The majority of participants across both locations were markedly concerned about incurring social disapproval or, to use their oft repeated word "judgement", for reliance on benefits. Consciousness of benefits stigma appeared to be more pronounced in this study than among lone mothers interviewed for research during the late 1990s (Klett-Davies, 2007; Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Whilst Duncan and Edwards (1999) found that local discourses had greater bearing on lone mothers' work orientation than nationally hegemonic discourse, data from this study indicates that an employment imperative, which has been enshrined in national policies and strongly underpinned by 'scroungerphobia' discourse (Shildrick and McDonald 2013), had resonated in both fieldwork locations, despite their contrasting socio-economic

profiles. Scambler (2009) regards 'anticipation of stigma' as an important attribute of stigmatisation. It is significant that, in a climate characterised by deservingness discourses (Schram, 2012) and 'anti-welfare common sense' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015), participants explicitly equated a work imperative with avoidance of benefits stigma. The following comments typify the powerful permeation of the 'strivers or skivers' construct (Jensen, 2014); with the binary implication that if you are not the former you must be the latter manifesting in participants' accounts:

*"I like to have a job. I like people to think, 'she's got a job'. I don't want people to think 'she just stays at home and lives off benefits'."* Gemma (A)

*"I haven't felt that [being a lone mother] is a problem nowadays, especially when people see you are just getting on with life and not wallowing or scrounging or anything."* Moira (B)

A number of participants shared their deliberations on returning to work after maternity leave and avoidance of stigma appeared prominent in that decision-making. Comments by Valerie (B) are illustrative of evaluations in which the anticipation of ill-treatment and judgement featured prominently in women's accounts. She furthermore made the point that even though roughly half of her income is in the form of Child Tax Credits, this gives her more privacy and "leeway" than claiming unemployment-related benefits:

*"With one daughter having to go to nursery and the other to my mum, I thought 'well I could just jack my job in'...But then I thought, 'I don't want to be on benefits' because you're beholden then to the state aren't you. They treat you like muck. And people judge you."* Valerie (B)

### **Locational variations in state support**

The previous chapter detailed participants' reactions to the stereotyping of lone mothers as young, working class and dependant on benefits (McRobbie, 2004; Tyler, 2013). In reality, most lone parents are financially dependent upon the state to some extent (Rowlingson and McKay, 2002), not only working class mothers. The previous section demonstrated that most participants in this study either worked or were willing but unable to find work. State benefits were the main source of income among most women in Location A, as shown in *Table 11: Main income sources by location*. Income among mothers in Location B was more likely to come from salaries, or combinations of salaries and benefits or maintenance and benefits<sup>23</sup>. This complexity of income sources reflects observations in other studies (e.g. Ridge and Miller, 2008).

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<sup>23</sup> Use of the term 'benefits' in *Table 11: Main income sources by location* includes where mothers who spoke about Child Tax Benefit as this is classed as a benefit by Department of Work and Pensions. As indicated, participants generally perceived a major difference between this as an 'in-work' state payment and being not working and being reliant on benefits. This study focuses on perceptions of benefits in relation to subjective experiences of stigma rather than details of types and amounts of state support.

Table 11: Main income sources by location

| Location | Salary | Benefits | Salary/<br>Benefits | Maintenance/<br>benefits | Salary/<br>maintenance |
|----------|--------|----------|---------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| A        | 2      | 8        | 3                   | 0                        | 0                      |
| B        | 6      | 1        | 4                   | 1                        | 1                      |

Interviews revealed that experiences of reliance on benefits were more diverse than this snapshot might imply however. The majority of women who took part in this study had claimed benefits at some point since becoming lone mothers, regardless of their location or situation, and a number of women in Location B still received state support, albeit in the form of Child Tax Credits rather than Income Support or Unemployment Benefit, along with salaries or maintenance payments from ex-partners. While populist welfare discourse concentrates on worklessness, only 2.6% of national benefits expenditure is on the unemployed and 20.8% supplements earnings from employment (Brown and Hood, 2013, cited Savage, 2015). Ridge and Millar (2008) found that although the tax credits system can be highly complex, it helps make work viable for lone mothers. A key difference expressed by mothers in this study of stigma was that when payments from the state were combined with salary or maintenance this was a private matter; whereas participants with no other source of income saw their reliance on benefits as a more public matter. A number of women spoke of feeling especially visible having to go to the JobCentre, for instance.

Another key difference was observed between: experiences of those women in this study who were positioned so as to use benefits as a stop-gap or 'stepping stone'; and long-term reliance among women whose options were more constrained by structural impediments. Strategic use of benefits was much more common in Location B, which concurs with Klett-Davies' (2007) finding that more advantaged lone mothers are better enabled to use benefits strategically.

### **Judgement of deservingness**

The words "scrounging", and "sitting on their backsides" were commonly used when participants expressed anger at media portrayals, as discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas many participants in Klett-Davies' (2007) research regarded welfare as a 'legitimate' payment for looking after their children, this was not the case in the present study. The overwhelming majority of women believed strongly that the welfare system should support mothers who were left without alternatives, however. A number of women voiced gratitude for state provision based on their own painful experiences. For example, Jasmine (B), who now works as a teacher and had just bought a house, received Income Support and Housing Benefit after her ex-husband left her bankrupt and penniless with two small children:

*"I was destitute and I just turned up at the Job Centre...I just thought 'I'm here because there's nothing else I can do'. So, I remember thinking what a lifeline and how fortunate I was." Jasmine (B)*

Wacquant (2009) argues that citizens' rights have been outstripped by responsibilities in punitive neo-liberal welfare ideology that has come to dominate Western European political economy; and women in the sample placed a strong emphasis on responsibility. Many made a moral distinction between mothers who are unable to work due to "circumstances" and those who are not willing to do so. The former were evaluated as using benefits "in the right way". Carrie (A) believes mothers are now more work orientated than in the past and points out that there are "usually reasons why people are on benefits". Gemma (A), who works part-time and also receives benefits, reflects a common attitude in participants' balancing of rights with responsibilities:

*"I do think people should get benefits to help them if they can't work, but I also think you should get a job as well." Gemma (A)*

It was sometimes difficult to separate out participants' comments about benefits generally from their views on policies and public resource allocation affecting lone mothers specifically. To return to May's (2010) point that lone motherhood is not a self-defined group and Taylor's argument that it is not an ontological identity in the sense of a coherent self-identity, women in this study in no way viewed lone motherhood as a 'base for political agency' (Taylor, 1998; 40). Comments by mothers in this study suggest that their lack of political engagement may also result partly from a more general lack of political agency. Women tended to express cynicism about politics, regardless of their location or situation, and there was no evidence of political engagement to further the ends of lone mothers as a group.<sup>24</sup> None of the participants were politically active and most seemed more preoccupied with immediate practical and emotional concerns. They also expressed an overriding belief that they could not influence political decisions.

When asked about political participation, most women in Location A insisted that they were "just not interested" and stated that there was "no point" as politicians are "all the same". A number of women pointed to the closure of the library and community centre on the estate as evidence of powerlessness in the face of political decisions. Sheila, the oldest mother in the study, was the only woman in Location A who voted regularly. Nadirah, who was the youngest, sums up a commonly expressed sense of futility:

*"My mum's voted for years but what difference is there? Nothing's changed...the community doesn't have much power over what happens at all." Nadirah (A)*

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<sup>24</sup> Four women in Location B were members of a national single parents' organisation. They did not necessarily connect this with political activity however, and regarded it as a way of meeting other parents in similar situations for social purposes, which is discussed in the next chapter.

Women in Location B generally tended to be more interested in politics than those in Location A, with most saying that they voted regularly in local and general elections. When participants were asked their views on policies affecting single parents, women in B were also more likely to proffer opinions on welfare reform, benefits eligibility and other policies than women in A. Most thought they could do little to influence political decisions however. Those who were interested in reading and talking about politics said the demands of childcare and employment left insufficient time and energy to engage more proactively.

While participants generally expressed distain for politicians, analysis of their personal perspectives on lone mothers' deservingness suggests this was informed by the extent to which they: looked beyond individualisation perspectives of human agency enshrined in policy instruments and discourse (e.g. Haux, 2012; Davies, 2012) and attributed reliance on benefits to economic and gender inequalities; drew on their own experiences or empathy to attribute reliance on benefits to personal misfortunes; or, as documented by Taylor-Gooby (2013) and Shildrick and McDonald (2013), blamed individuals for their poverty (including themselves in some cases, as demonstrated in cases discussed above and below).

Gina (A) was dismissive of politicians but her comments on exploitation of the benefits system were redolent of the 'social threat' discourses (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). She was vehement in her opinion that many people on the estate were not deserving of state support, saying there was "no incentive to get off your arse and make something of yourself". She believed that some mothers only claimed to be living alone, "for the benefits" and her portrayal of women collecting benefits at the post office who are "pissed at 9am" and "just rinsing the system" conforms with an anti-welfare 'underclass' (Murray, 1984) perspective.

Della (B), who said she votes Conservative, held equally strong views about entitlement to benefits. Whereas most participants in Location B had been in receipt of benefits at some point or were currently having their salary supplemented by tax credits, working full-time Della earned slightly over the threshold for state support. She told of how her mother had worked as a waitress after having her at the age of 17 and she herself had done secretarial work after school and worked her way up to her current sales manager's role. There are echoes of Malthus (1988) in her judgement of those lone mothers whom she believes, "get pregnant on purpose to get a council house":

*"Personally I feel, get off your backside, go and get a job and then when you've got some money behind you then go and have a child. Don't just do it because you want something given to you for free and it's not fair on the child."* Della (B)

The perspective on entitlement to benefits expressed by Sonia (B) was in stark contrast to Gina and Della's views however. Sonia (B) voted Labour and described herself as "quite left wing" and her perspective on deservingness of benefits emphasised structural inequalities, believing people

on benefits are treated like "second class citizens". Sonia was critical of anticipated restrictions limiting Child Tax Credit to two children (CPAG, 2017) and her point that state policies prioritise business interests was consistent with the Marxist analysis of employment of lone mothers offered by Grover (2005) and Prideux (2011). Sonia put forward the argument that a vast proportion of the benefits bill arose from the government having to top up low wages with tax credits and she believed that, "big profit-making companies should be paying proper wages", instead.

Where Sonia (B) put forward socialist arguments on deservingness of benefits, Jasmine (B) reflected feminist perspectives (e.g. Fox Harding, 1996), arguing that the reason the state "has to step in" is because fathers often refuse to take responsibility for their children. Ciara (B) who lives in Location B but works as a family development manager in Location A made points that are akin to 'social problem' discourses (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Her appreciation of structural barriers to securing employment leads her to question government policies, rather than judging people who are on benefits as underserving:

*"I think there's still massive, massive things about if you claim benefits...they call them 'dole dossers' and things like that. Professionally I see people that are trying to get into work and can't get jobs and policies don't reflect the reality for diverse families."* Ciara (B)

### **Benefit dependency and SSL**

Maxwell (2012) highlights the importance of capturing the relationship between people's situations and their perspectives on those situations. Application of SSL helped unpick the relationship between participants' perspectives on their reliance on benefits and their rejection, resistance or absorption of benefits stigma. Examples here detail how sensitivity to adverse judgement prompted women who were able to take action to move beyond benefit dependency to do so. However, the need to consider agency in a contextual way (Mitchell and Green, 2002; Wright, 2012; Whitworth, 2013) is apparent in cases where self-judgement impacted severely on women's 'negative' SSL but their ability to act agentially within a competitive labour market was constrained. Furthermore, whilst women were aware of being 'judged and de-legitimated', as with respondents in Skeggs and Loveday's research, participants in this study who displayed 'defensive' SSL voiced their own understandings of 'value, what matters and what counts' (2012: 472). Examples show how this enabled them to reject stigma and justify the legitimacy of their entitlement to state support.

### **Location A**

Structural barriers to employment in Location A were discussed in the previous section. Participants were all aware of benefits stigma, but the extent to which they were affected by it and their responses to it varied considerably, as examples of cases of 'negative' and 'defensive' SSL demonstrate.

Katherine indicated 'negative' SSL during her interview and used the word "judgment" repeatedly. She spoke at length about becoming upset when reading negative comments about single parents on benefits on Facebook. She had recently responded agentially to her situation however, in deciding to become self-employed, doing catering from home on a part-time basis as this could fit around her seven year-old daughter's school day. Her case demonstrates how marginal advantages positioned her to act agentially in moving beyond a stigmatised situation. She was the only woman in Location A who had left school with A 'Levels and had gained an understanding of accounting when working in a building society and developed catering skills as a hobby. She had found going to the JobCentre distressing as it was difficult to find eight suitable jobs a week to apply for with no car and no childcare support. School holidays were a particular problem for her, as identified by Ridge and Millar (2008). Although the threat of sanctions loomed, she attributed her decision to become self-employed more directly to "feeling judged" for being on benefits. Her articulation of being motivated by imagining other people's opinions can be read as holding up a societal 'looking glass' (Cooley, 1902). Here she gives an example of the difference that becoming self-employed makes to her self-perception, which suggests her SSL might become 'performative' in future:

*"I found I'd just be the same [financially] so I thought 'I might as well do that than be reliant on them really for benefits'. If I'd been into town...and walked in the playground with shopping, I'd think that somebody would be looking and thinking 'how can she go out shopping when she doesn't work'. Whereas now I've told people I'm going self-employed, I'd feel comfortable doing something like that because I'd earned it."* Kathrine (A)

Clare had not completed her education due to mental health problems when she was younger and despite stating repeatedly that she was "a worker", she had been unable to find a job and spoke of "lack of confidence" and "low self-esteem". Whilst she indicated little sense of stigma due to being a lone mother, she displayed strong indicators of 'negative' SSL during her interview which centred around her reliance on benefits. She said that being on benefits makes her feel like, "a second class citizen" and her absorption of benefits stigma supports Shildrick and McDonald's (2013) findings that 'scroungerphobia' results in people blaming themselves for their poverty. She described a complex process of being "very judgemental" of people who claim benefits and then turning that judgement inwards. Her expressions of self-blame also support Gillies' (2012) view of the 'subjectivisation' incurred by policies that focus on individual behaviour as a means of combatting worklessness. Rather than recognising structural factors behind unemployment, she appears to make a moral judgement against herself, believing that she is literally taking money from taxpayers, whom she personalises:

*"I feel awful for getting benefits...You think of all the people that's put taxes in and you're just taking the money from it and you're considering 'right, this person's spent so many hours working to get money to survive to put the money into the tax'." Clare (A)*

Clare was patently aware that lack of qualifications and skills reduced her employment options and was attending literacy and numeracy classes. Clare's ability to enact agency in the labour market must be looked at contextually (Wright, 2012; Whitworth, 2013). Her attempts to behave agentially in accessing training via the JobCentre proved fruitless and her body language when describing the futility of her efforts conveyed a sense of powerlessness:

*"I've been asking about doing on a training course in health and social care for over a year and they say 'oh we'll let know when one comes up', and you never hear anything. I ask every time I go in [sighs deeply and lowers her head]." Clare (A)*

In direct contrast with Clare, Lucy felt her claim on state resources to be legitimate and exhibited 'defensive' SSL throughout her interview. Lucy believed lone mothers are stigmatised and used the word "judgement" constantly during her interview. Crucially, in Lucy's case applying SSL as an analytical tool separated her awareness of stigmatisation from her agential response and outcomes, revealing that she was able to resist other people's judgements. Her frequent use of the phrase "I don't care" when referring to "judgement of us single mums" appeared genuine. She used humour throughout her interview and was heavily focused on practicalities of bringing up young children alone. Goffman (1990) suggests that stigma does not affect those who do not adopt mainstream norms, but this did not seem to be the reason for Lucy's rejection of stigma. She voiced mainstream values in saying she would have preferred to work and aspired for her children to have good jobs, own their homes and not be on benefits. This is consistent with findings by Dean and Taylor-Gooby (1992) and Duncan and Edwards (1996), which refuted 'underclass' theorists' claims of anormativity among benefit claimants and lone mothers. Lucy had enjoyed working at a dry cleaners' in the years between leaving school at 16 and having her first child at the age of 22 and differentiated herself from people who have, "never done a day's work". The crux in Lucy's defence of deservingness of benefits was her strong commitment to her 'primarily mother' orientation (Duncan and Edwards, 1999):

*"If I could go to work tomorrow, I would. But the day I turned into a mum me life changed forever." Lucy (A)*

Pulkingham et al. (2010: 285) argue that lone mothers have to 'defend their moral legitimacy to have children in the first place' and Lucy staunchly defended her legitimacy to get the financial support she needs to fulfil her maternal responsibilities. She regarded benefits as 'legitimate' payment, as with women interviewed by Klett-Davies' (2007). Lucy specifies that she is using benefits for "what it was intended for" and compares this with mothers who, "go out partying with their benefit money and leave the kids with nothing". When validating her position by

responding to accusations by non-specific "people", who she believes are "sat there judging", her tone was defiant and proud:

*"People think single mums just keep having kids after kids because of the benefits and they get everything for free. But we're not getting everything for free, we're getting paid to look after our kids. And making sure they've got what they need...Sometimes I'm in a crowd of people...it could be people on a bus and you just hear it. Sometimes it makes me want to say something and I think, 'no I'm not gonna say something, I'm just gonna bite me tongue because I know I aren't doing it for the benefits'."*

*Nicola: "And does that make you feel in any particular way?"*

*Lucy: "I don't care what other people think. Y'know everybody's got their own opinion and I've got mine and I think I'm doing ok on me own." Lucy (A)*

Theresa also displayed 'defensive' SSL during her interview. She used the word "judgemental" to describe attitudes she had encountered in the media and in public places. She defended her entitlement to benefits by stressing that she would prefer to work and described having done waitressing jobs in the past. Theresa's defensive stance is apparent in her awareness of being in a stigmatised section of society but refusing to absorb negative judgements for what she recognises as a structural situation beyond her control and insists she is unaffected by other people's opinions:

*"You hear stuff about working people what they say about single parents...They don't say stuff, it's just, just the way that they look at you...A lot of people do judge people on benefits. Which is wrong because they've gotta think there is no jobs out there. If you're a single parent, what can you do, d'you know what I mean...I just don't care what people think to be honest with you. I'm just one of those where, 'if you've got something to say, say it', 'if you don't like that I have a child that's tough'." Theresa (A)*

Theresa also uses deflection of judgement as a form of defence. She apportions blame for lack of jobs to migrants, whom she contradictorily believes are both taking jobs and receiving benefits for doing nothing. She had never voted but voiced support for UKIP, believing that ending migration would mean, "there would be loads of jobs going, so there wouldn't be as many people on benefits then".

### **Location B**

While there were few women in Location B who relied purely on benefits, the majority had been on benefits previously. Application of SSL demonstrates the significance of judgement in the decision-making of two women whose SSL could be deemed 'performative', as analysis of their case dynamics exemplify. An example is also provided of a mother whose SSL was deemed 'transformative', to illustrate how perspectives can change as material situations change.

Judgement was a major empirical theme in Laura's account of her experiences and the mechanistic role of judgement in prompting instrumental agency was also prevalent in her display of 'performative' SSL. She said she felt "massively judged" and the word 'judgement' was peppered throughout her account of how going to university and embarking upon career after her divorce was propelled by a strong desire to escape stigma. Now a full-time university administrator, she said it was rare that she told people she had been on benefits in the past as she was "embarrassed". Her 'performative' mode of SSL was evident in her understanding of the relationship between adverse social judgement of lone mothers and her self- judgement:

*"The judgement was coming from me, because I never told anybody...I'm shocking at that, just judging myself...I think there's always a demonisation of classes as well. So I think that's one of the reasons actually that I pushed myself more to go to university because I wanted to fit into that pocket of single mums that were actually in a different economic group or a different social group so I didn't fall into that single mums claiming benefits group. And I'm embarrassed to say that, but I feel like even subconsciously I was identifying that I wanted to move away from that so I didn't feel stigmatised. If I couldn't change the situation I'd change the way I was perceived."* Laura (B)

Examination of Laura's situation, perspective and abilities to effect changes in Archer's (2000) terms helps understand interplay between 'people emergent powers' and 'structural emergent powers'. Laura's agency in going university also required strategic use of the benefits system to help fund the move. Laura's 'performative' legitimacy encompasses both maternal and academic achievements when she comments on her sons: "In my graduation photo they look so proud."

Mena was also highly sensitive to benefits stigma, which she regarded as "huge" and she spoke of her "embarrassment" at having to depend on benefits since her eight month-old daughter was born. Mena displayed 'performative' SSL in her view that returning to work rather than remaining on benefits was essential to her positive self-worth and social identity. She explained that she voted Conservative and her values hinged around accepting personal responsibility. Illustrating this, she contrasts ownership of her decision to proceed with her unplanned pregnancy with what she regards as a lack of responsibility for their situation among some lone mothers:

*"They're always 'woe is me' and 'how hard it is' and none of them have taken ownership of the fact that, at the end of the day, they had a choice. I knew going into this that I would be on my own. I knew that I would have to change the way I spent my money."*  
Mena (B)

Her negative judgment of benefit dependency extended into self-consciousness and her 'performative' SSL was apparent in her imminent return to her job in a bank on a part-time basis at the end of maternity leave. She indicated more of a 'primarily mother' than 'primarily worker'

orientation (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) saying she would have preferred to stay at home with her child. She was returning to work in order to avoid both external judgement and self-judgement even though she would be no better off financially and would also be reliant on benefits to supplement her salary:

*"It bothers me that people know that I'm on benefits, because of the bad press and the way people look at it and they look at it that I'm getting some kind of free ride. I just feel that they're looking down on me. But obviously it's not something that you drop into conversation. I think I judge myself...I don't want to go back to work at all. But my view is that if I'm going to take out, I need to put back."* Mena (B)

Alison's SSL was deemed 'transformative' because dramatic changes in material circumstance were accompanied by a major change in her outlook. Since her divorce, Alison had gone from living on a high income in a six-bedroom detached house to claiming benefits and her financial situation is discussed below. She had given up her job as an accountant after having four children in five years as her ex-husband had earned enough to support the family. She indicated a 'primarily mother orientation' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) and justifies receiving benefits because it is "not physically possible" to work with four primary school aged children and no paternal input. She receives minimal maintenance and, whereas she used to be upset about depending on benefits, she spoke of her attitude having changed:

*"I remember when [ex-husband] first left that he held the bank account purse strings and it was really scary... I just felt like I was a highly educated person who was put into this position by no fault of my own and here I was claiming benefits, and it took me a long time to get over that. Erm, but I look it now that actually the benefits help and if we didn't have them we really would be, y'know, on beans on toast every night kind of thing."* Alison (B)

## **Feeling financial disadvantage**

The literature review established both the association between lone parenthood and child poverty (Crompton, 2008; DWP, 2011; Dermott and Pomati, 2016) and the particular material disadvantages faced by mothers (Kiernan et al., 1996; WBG, 2013; ONS, 2016; IPPR, 2016). First-hand accounts cited above support 'dual systems' feminist arguments that lone mothers can be disadvantaged by demands of the mutually reinforcing capitalist economy and patriarchal state (Walby, 1990). Having explored participants' agential behaviour in relation to this labour market and state policy context, attention now turns to mothers' subjective experiences of the attendant SEPs (Archer, 2000) of material inequality and social class. The material disadvantages of lone motherhood featured prominently in accounts across the two locations. Two very different pictures emerged when comparing women's standard of living across these

locations however and this section begins by outlining those contrasts before examining the impacts of material situation on SSL.

### **Location, disadvantage and social class**

The adverse financial impact of lone motherhood was evident in both locations; in restricting women's potential to work and earn, as evidenced above, or having only having one income coming into the household. None of the women who took part in this study could be considered 'affluent' or 'elite' (Savage, 2015). Savage (2015) cites examples of divorce being a catalyst for downward social mobility. According to quantitative research by Brewer and Nandi (2014) women's living standards suffer much more than that of men at the end of a relationship and all but one of the participants in this study who had previously been in a couple were worse off. A commonality across situations and locations was the agency exhibited by mothers who were managing limited budgets (Lister, 1997; Gillies, 2007), with some giving extensive details of lengths they went to in order to stretch scarce resources. A further point of similarity was anxiety among mothers in both locations to protect their children from material disadvantage and the associated stigma of having less than their peers, which is exemplified below.

While the financial disadvantages of lone motherhood were evident across the sample, locational differences were also highly apparent, further substantiating feminist arguments as to the double disadvantage of intersecting gender and class inequalities (e.g. Skeggs, 1997; Bradley, 2014). Scott et al. argue that differential educational attainment and employment opportunities mean mothers' ability to balance work and family life is 'polarised by class as well as gender' (2010: 10) and the foregoing exposition of locational contrasts in employment can be framed according to class position.

Discussion of participants' class identification and indicators of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989) in the previous chapter revealed that most mothers in Location B emphasised their university education or other forms of cultural capital and identified their class as either 'middle' or 'mixed'. Bourdieu (1984) states that middle class education enables reproduction of other advantages and Savage (2015) describes how cultural capital is converted into economic capital. Previous sections of this chapter have shown how the formal cultural capital of educational qualifications positioned women in Location B more favourably in the labour market. A broad relationship between education qualifications, employment and the economic capital of a salary can be traced in the above tables: *Table 9: Employment by location; Table 10: Qualifications and skills by location; and Table 11: Main income sources by location.*

Millar and Ridge (2013) point out that employment does not necessarily equate with prosperity for lone mothers and this was borne out in Location A, as excerpts from interviews below testify. By contrast, most women in Location B had 'converted' their 'middle class education' into more remunerative employment. Rowlingson and McKay (2005) emphasise differences in lone mothers' qualifications, employment opportunities and financial situations according to socio-

economic class and such contrasts were reflected in the present research.<sup>25</sup> Although by no means affluent, women in Location B were generally considerably more financially secure than those in Location A. Savage points out that spatial concentration of economic disadvantage is especially pronounced in former industrial areas, consolidating the relationship between place and disadvantage, so that 'class is geographical' (2015: 261). This spatial concentration of disadvantage was apparent in Location A, which is on the outskirts of a former industrial city.

### **Housing**

Lone mothers have tended to be highly dependent on rented accommodation (Crow and Hardey, 1992; Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998) and this was the case in the present study. Property is a key indicator of economic capital (Savage, 2015) and home ownership was low across both locations, as indicated in *Table 12: Housing tenure by location*. Most women in Location A were council or housing association tenants and most women in Location B were private tenants. All but two participants had to move when their relationships ended and most of the women referred to obstacles in finding suitable accommodation before they became "settled".

*Table 12: Housing tenure by location*

| Location | Owner occupier | Social housing | Private tenant | Former owner |
|----------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| A        | 1              | 6              | 6              | 3            |
| B        | 4              | 0              | 9              | 1            |

### **Perception of financial situation**

Economic capital can be understood as property, wealth, income and financial assets (Skeggs, 1997; Savage et al., 2013). Bourdieu's concept of capitals (1989) was operationalised in this study in a generalised sense (Silva and Edwards, 2004), as discussed in Chapter Four, with questions put to women about their living standards. As *Table 13: Perception of financial situation* indicates, women in Location A generally reported much greater material hardship than those in B.

*Table 13: Perception of financial situation by location<sup>26</sup>*

| Location | 'Doing ok' | 'Getting by' | 'Struggling sometimes' | 'Always struggling' |
|----------|------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| A        | 1          | 3            | 4                      | 5                   |
| B        | 5          | 6            | 2                      | 0                   |

<sup>25</sup> Rowlingson and McKay (2005) refer to 'socio-economic background' in terms of class of origin. It should be noted that class identity in the previous chapter established that a number of women in Location B had come from what they termed 'working class backgrounds' but had 'middle class' educational attainments. As such they could be described as having 'overcome early disadvantages' (Scott et al., 2010), rather than being from middle class family backgrounds.

In Location A only one woman, who was in full-time work, said she was 'doing ok' and most said they were 'struggling' to pay for rent, bills and food some or all of the time. Ridge and Millar's interviews with children of lone mothers found that they were, 'fearful of being seen as poor or somehow as 'other' by their peers' (2008: 65). Mothers in the present study were highly attuned to this fear and much of the financial anxiety they expressed centred around trying to ensure their children did not feel "different" or stigmatised. This study is consistent with findings by Hamilton (2012) about parents attempting to protect their children from feeling stigmatised due their lack of money.

Unlike findings in previous research (Hamilton, 2012; Clavering, 2010; Ponsford, 2011) however, women in the present study did not voice a need to acquire particular brands in order to save their children from embarrassment. Sheila (A) for example, expressed relief that her children, had "never asked for branded stuff". Women in Location A all stressed how they put their children's needs before their own. For a number of women in this location, attempts to keep knowledge of their hardship from their children meant going without themselves. Bella (A) had seen her financial situation deteriorate dramatically since her divorce and redundancy. She calculated "what to cut back on each week" but tried to make sure her eight year-old twin daughters did not feel "left out" among their peers. As reported by Dermott and Pomati (2016), buying new clothes for their children but second-hand clothes for themselves was a frequently cited example among women in this study of prioritising their children's needs, as illustrated by Clare (A):

*"Every penny we get goes on bills, food, clothes for the kids but the kids have never noticed, that's the main thing. It's usually me that's going without...I get charity shop clothes." Clare (A)*

In contrast with Location A, although some women in Location B described extremely precarious financial situations when their relationships first ended, most reported that they were not "well off" but were now either 'doing ok' or 'getting by'. This meant they had adequate resources for housing, food and bills, clothes for themselves and their children and could run cars, have days out and holidays. Rowlingson and McKay (2005) use holidays as an indicator of financial situations among lone mothers from different socio-economic backgrounds and data from this study conforms with their findings. None of the participants in Location A had had a holiday in the previous year and only one woman was planning one in the foreseeable future. In contrast, all of the women in Location B had either had a holiday or were expecting to take one in the months ahead.

Women involved in this research also confirm Brewer and Nandi's (2014) findings that mothers who were formerly in high income households experience the sharpest decline in living standards. Sonia (B), for example, was considerably worse off since splitting with her ex-partner, who earned some £100K a year and had refused to pay anything since they parted. She

explained, however, that his earning more had contributed towards some abusive aspects of the relationship. Her ex-partner refused to contribute financially, she said:

*"So, I've kind of used all my saving to pay for the last year of living basically...I mean everything's sort of covered each month. I'm not, I wouldn't say I'm in poverty or anything like that... I have to think more about what I'm spending money on and things like that."*

*Sonia (B)*

Although in a stronger financial position than women in Location A, a number of mothers in Location B were anxious about their children missing out when compared with their more affluent peers however, as examples below illustrate.

### ***Input from fathers and grandparents***

According to Rowlingson and McKay's (2005) statistical analysis, mothers from less privileged backgrounds have less chance of receiving maintenance from ex-partners or support from better off relatives and friends. Both of these factors were reflected in the present research. The majority of fathers in Location A made no contribution. Fathers in Location B were more likely to contribute but almost half paid no maintenance, as shown in *Table 14: Financial input from father and grandparents by location*. A number of women in Location B complained that their children's fathers paid a minimal amount required by the Child Support Agency despite earning decent incomes. Jasmine (B) was especially aggrieved that her ex-husband paid only £20 a week for their two children as he was self-employed and did not declare all his earnings.

*Table 14: Financial input from fathers and grandparents by location*

| Location | Regular adequate paternal contribution | Regular minimal paternal contribution | No paternal contribution | Grandparents help out financially |
|----------|--|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| A        | 2                                      | 2                                     | 9                        | 1                                 |
| B        | 1                                      | 6                                     | 6                        | 7                                 |

According to Rowlingson and McKay's (2005) statistical analysis, middle class lone mothers had a better standard of living than mothers from less privileged backgrounds even if they were on Income Support, as they were able to draw on a wider range of material resources. The difference in level of financial support by women's parents was indeed a key point of locational comparison that emerged during interviews for this research. In Location A, Debbie was the only woman who said she received financial support from her parents. Her interview took place at her parents' home as she was staying there for a few days until her benefits arrived as she had no money for food or electricity. Financial help from parents was not only far more common in Location B, but also on a larger scale. More than half of the women in Location B spoke of financial help from their parents with examples including: help buying properties; substantial loans; help buying or repairing cars; being taken out for meals; and being taken abroad on holiday.

## **Financial situation and SSL**

SSL was applied to help ascertain participants' subjective understanding of their financial situation in relation to experiences of stigma.<sup>27</sup> Consideration of judgement as a mechanism in exploring the relationship between participants' financial resources, or 'economic capital' (Bourdieu, 1989), and SSL highlights the importance of spatial location to the stigmatising effect of material disadvantage. The anxiety and misery of *feeling* poor, (as documented for example in work by Wacquant, 2009) undoubtedly contributed to cases displaying 'negative' SSL in Location A. Although women in Location B were objectively better off than those in A, many were affected by feelings of financial inferiority or 'relative disadvantage' (Runciman and Merton, 1996 cited in Taylor-Gooby, 2013) and relative financial situation affected women's SSL in this location.

### **Location A**

None of the participants in Location A had a high income and more than half had debts or were in arrears with rent and utility bills. These women could all be said to have low economic capital (Bourdieu, 1989) and when discussing what they could and could not afford, the majority were 'struggling'. All of the women in Location A who indicated 'negative' SSL were faring poorly in material terms and the affectivity of poverty (e.g. Bourdieu, 1989, cited Crompton, 2008; Wacquant, 2009; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) was evident in their accounts. Agential responses to structural economic positions were far from uniform however. Pride in employment and strong kinship and social connections led certain women to indicate 'positive' SSL, despite low economic capital, whilst others became angry and 'defensive' about their material situation rather than internalising inequalities.

Only one woman in Location A reported that she was in a stable financial position. Carrie, who indicated 'positive' SSL when discussing all areas of her life, said she was relieved to feel financially secure after being in her job for ten years. Speaking of plans to take her daughter to the West Indies for her cousin's wedding, she commented that: "It feels good to be able to do that after struggling for so long".

Carrie was atypical in Location A in speaking of 'doing ok' materially however. Accounts of the three other women there who were working were consistent with Ridge and Millar's (2011; 2013) findings that employment does not necessarily equate to financial security for lone mothers. Analysis of Sheila's situation revealed that being in work and having family and social networks locally appeared to somewhat mitigate stigma associated with poverty however. Sheila was 54 and divorced with five older children. Without minimising her financial difficulties and allowing for an element of 'impression management' (Alvesson, 2011), it can be said that she indicated

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<sup>27</sup> Details of income and financial situation were proffered spontaneously by some participants rather than being collected systematically, as per discussion in Chapter Four.

'positive' SSL, despite her low economic capital. Sheila did not give any indication of feeling stigmatised during her interview. She did, however, describe how her financial position had deteriorated gradually since her divorce ten years earlier and viewed being a lone mother very much in the material terms of "a bigger role" in providing for her family. The house she owned with her ex-husband had to be sold and she now rents from the local authority. She lived on £600 salary from her part-time retail assistant job along with benefits. Sheila was pre-occupied with financial worries, which she said had been made worse by the 'Bedroom Tax', and gave an exhaustive list of figures to illustrate how she tries to make ends meet. Having put an Individual Voluntary Arrangement in place to consolidate her debts, her ambition is to be "clean of them" before she retires.

Despite these financial troubles, Sheila's SSL could be determined as 'positive' as she seemed to regard lack of money in practical terms and did not associate it with stigma. She referred to equally hard-pressed friends on the estate, whom she had known most of her life regularly "helping each other out" with loans of £5 or £10. A friend who had borrowed bread the previous day had texted to say she would drop off a loaf. Sheila's description of mutual support recalls ethnographic work by McKenzie (2012). Her disinclination to identify with any social class conforms with Savage's description of 'close identification with what is local' (2015: 351) as a means of neutralising attention to class inequalities.

In contrast with Sheila, a number of women in Location A who were dependent on benefits, indicated 'negative' SSL and appeared to internalise their deprivation. Given intensification of benefits stigma in the contemporary context (Taylor-Gooby, 2013) and the foregoing discussion about its impact on SSL, it was sometimes difficult to disentangle experiences of benefits stigma from distress and stigma arising from material hardship (Wacquant, 2009). The 'negative' SSL indicated by Nadirah throughout her interview could also be attributed to a combination of benefit dependency and poverty. Unlike most women in Location A, she viewed being 'working class' as an aspirational identity associated with having a job: "I want to be seen as working class, as a working person."

Nadirah had lived in a hostel and relied on food banks when she first left home pregnant at 18. She received no money from the father of her ten month-old baby and relied on Income Support. She was extremely anxious about her financial problems and her sense of social isolation exacerbated her material concerns as she had no safety net. Her negative SSL manifested in reflections that combined regrets about not having done things "properly" in having a career and getting married before having a child, with anxieties over "money troubles". Here she reflects on how things might have "gone differently":

*"I wouldn't have struggle as much, whereas when you come from home with nothing but your clothes you're left to build your own life...It's always in my head thinking, 'I've got to get him this and I've got to pay the bills off. I think 'well, I'll get him this and worry*

*about myself later'. But later never comes because then there's the bills."* Nadirah (A)

Rather than internalising their financial struggles, as Nadirah and other women in the study appeared to do, women in this study who displayed 'defensive' SSL expressed anger at their situation and, 'refused to authorise those they consider lacking in value but with a position to judge' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012: 472). Debbie, who rents a council flat near to her parents, calculated that she had to find £200 a month for rent and £200 for gas, electric, water and other bills, which left £200 for "everything else", including food and nappies. When asked about class, she responded by distinguishing between herself and people with money and then emphasising the value of family, which formed a central strand of her 'defensive' SSL. Her comments reinforce Skeggs and Loveday's (2012) analysis of class, loyalty and inversion of judgement:

*"There's them and then there's me...Well with them it's money coz they're like solicitors and stuff and then there's me and it's like 'well, I don't need money to be happy. I've got me family, that's worth more than money'."* Debbie (A)

Theresa, likewise, was 'defensive' in saying that she she did not "see it like that" when asked if she felt she could identify with a class. Although she was finding it difficult to live on Income Support and had fallen behind on all her bills, she refused to be cowed. Recounting interactions with utility companies chasing payment, she insisted that "they can wait" because feeding her son is her principal concern. She instantly associated class with being "looked down on", not having a job and defending herself for not having a job:

*"The more money you have, the more you look down on people, that's what I think. And I just think, if you're working you're working and if you're not you're not and there's a reason and that's that."* Theresa (A)

### **Location B**

Women in Location B largely enjoyed a 'distance from necessity' (Bourdieu, 1984: 55) that was not possible among mothers in Location A. A feeling of financial inferiority or 'relative disadvantage' (Runciman and Merton, 1996 cited in Taylor-Gooby, 2013) was, however, a prominent theme during interviews with the majority of women in B. This was usually the result of having to move house and live on a single income, which was constrained by childcare demands, in an area where the majority of the population are home owners with an annual average salary of some £45,000 per person (DCLG, 2012). Significantly, Gillies believes that maternal standards are 'grounded in middle class privilege' (2007: 145) and judging what they could provide for their children against the standard of living of affluent couples nearby impacted on the 'performative' and 'negative' SSL of women in this location, as case examples demonstrate. Moreover, analysis of case dynamics also confirmed Rowlingson and McKay's (2005) point that women whose families of origin are middle class can be cushioned against

some of the financial disadvantages associated with lone motherhood, which serves to support 'positive' SSL. Links between class position, material circumstances and SSL can thus be traced in the accounts of women in this location.

Della related living on a single income directly to her social class position. As a full-time sales manager, who displayed a range of modes of SSL during her interview, she thought she would be "middle class" if she was with a partner earning a similar salary. Here she sums up complexities in identifying lone mothers' social class and argues that working single parents such as herself are "in a class of our own":

*"They categorise people into classes...and I don't think it's fair to put us into any of those. Because we're certainly not lower class. I haven't been brought up that way and I'm not middle class because I don't have the money. So, I'm in the single parent class. Your annual income is always going to be lower but you still have to pay for a whole house and whatever." Della (B)*

The complexity in categorising lone mothers' class in material terms was further underscored by women in this study who had experienced a sharp fall in income at the end of relationships, reflecting findings by Brewer and Nandi (2014). Alison was the participant who had seen the most dramatic change in material circumstances. Alison spoke of adopting a new perspective, which accompanied her change in marital situation, which can be described as 'transformative' SSL (further aspects of which are explored in the next chapter.) Having moved from a "huge" house in the most prestigious part of town, she was aware of the difference in "status" since her divorce, especially as her children had gone from a private to a state school. She had had to explain the "change in lifestyle" to them as they had previously gone skiing in the winter and abroad in the summer and could no longer do things their friends did. She believed they had now adjusted and stressed that any disadvantage was purely "relative":

*"I'm a single mother of four children but I'm also very fortunate in that I have enough money to survive and erm we have a lovely home...we do have enough to eat, we're kept warm, we have enough clothes. Y'know we've got Netflix and we've got all those things children want and we have an Ipad and a Kindle and I think those are the luxuries. The luxuries we do without now are the holidays abroad...or I wouldn't now go and buy food at M&S when I was just in there all the time before...It's just totally different." Alison (B)*

Alison was one of two participants in B who declined to identify with a social class and her comments on having "been everything" at different points in her life cohere with her 'transformative' mode of SSL. She believed that her "values" came from her working class parents, but that she "became middle class" when she got married. Archer pinpoints a difference between personal and social identity and stresses the importance of people's evaluations of what they 'care about most' (2012). Alison indicates that she no longer judges her social identity in

terms of her former class position:

*"I probably felt we were higher than what I feel now...I look back and yeah we were 'aspiring' and now I don't aspire, if that makes sense...[laughs] I'm probably back to being what I was originally. It's much better." Alison (B)*

Following Rowlingson and McKay's (2005) statistical analysis, Moira's case illustrates how being from a middle class background made life as a lone mother more materially comfortable and contributed towards her 'positive' SSL. Moira spoke of having been through a difficult time financially as well as emotionally after her marriage ended. It is significant that Moira's SSL is bolstered by taking credit for being highly pro-active and emphasised her own agency in moving from Income Support into part-time and then full-time work. Whilst not undermining this achievement, the importance of her being able to 'convert' the cultural capital (Savage, 2015) of her Oxbridge degree and PhD into employment must be acknowledged. This structural advantage made a substantive difference in keeping her dependency on benefits short-term. Moira regarded herself as firmly 'middle class' and an absence of a sense of stigma or self-judgement underpinned her 'positive' mode of SSL throughout her interview. She equated now being in a full-time job in a library with social "respectability".

Moira cited examples of being highly attuned to her lack of money whilst on benefits, for example when socialising with friends after choir practice and anxious about not being able to buy a round of drinks. She voiced relief at having sold the house she had owned with her ex-husband, paid off debts and now having £12,000 savings. She remained vigilant about her spending, and said she is shocked at "how casual" some people she knows are with money; she budgets carefully and hopes to save a deposit for a property. Moira described her solicitor father and teacher mother as "terminally middle class" and felt extremely fortunate that they had loaned her substantial sums during her "hairy" period on benefits and had bought a house for her to rent from them. Importantly, she also believed that their taking her and her children on holidays and out for meals had staved off a sense of exclusion, because it meant, as she put it: "I haven't been on the outside looking in."

Whereas Moira received assistance from her wealthy middle class parents, Valerie was conscious of her working class parents' inability to help her financially. She identified her class as 'mixed', having been "brought up on benefits" then gone to university. The 'performative' SSL she derived from her education and professional role as a social worker appeared to be undermined by negative self-judgement concerning her relationship breakdown and maternal performance (which will be discussed in the next chapter). Valerie was the only woman in the study who was better off financially since splitting up from her husband because she had been the "breadwinner" and subsidised his failing business. She felt a material difference between herself and two-parent families, who could afford to buy properties locally however. The following passage, in which she draws her class background, together with her financial and her marital situations, suggests an

agential perspective on social structure which recalls Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (1984), yet is also tinged with self-blame:

*"So my friends who I went to uni with are now living in very nice houses...They've married the right man, that's the rule book thing of knowing what man to marry, which I don't and I'm clueless about...They've got a house, their husband works and earns a lot of money and they've given up jobs to look after children. They've got that security and they've got, I don't know, a level of confidence and stuff that I don't have." Valerie (B)*

Looking at the case of Mandy, she is statistically anomalous as her father is a bank manager and women with fathers in professional jobs have a low chance of becoming teenage or lone mothers (Rowlingson and McKay, 2005). She was about to start university and said her hopes of having a career, buying a house and providing a 'solid' base for her children had been spurred on by embarrassment at being unable afford the standard of living of middle class two parent families that surrounded her. Mandy indicated 'negative' SSL during her interview and her account was riddled with the word "judgement". She was anxious to avoid stigma as a younger, single parent in the midst of affluent, older couple families and her sense of financial inferiority was an over-riding theme. Her hurt was palpable as she spoke about her son bringing home a friend, who had commented negatively on their flat:

*"He said 'oh, this is small' and immediately it felt as if somebody had just sort of punched me. I felt sick for [her son] that that's what the reaction was and since then we've never had anybody back...When I first got this flat I really liked it...but it just absolutely pales into insignificance compared to theirs and so that's hard." Mandy (B)*

Mandy explained that she put herself under pressure to give an illusion of a lifestyle she could not afford in order to be accepted socially. She gave an example of having spent a week's benefits budget in order to "keep up" during a trip with mothers and children from her son's school. Whilst attempting to live only on her benefits, she was also conscious of the extent to which called upon her parents' financial support.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has responded to the question of how agency and structure affect lone mothers' experiences of stigma by exploring participants' perspectives on the 'structural emergent properties' (Archer, 2000) of labour markets, government policy and financial resources. It has confirmed that the socio-political climate of worker citizenship, increased welfare conditionality and benefits stigma (e.g. Haux, 2012; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Baumberg, 2016) impact forcibly on lone mothers' experiences. Scambler (2009) views 'anticipation of stigma' as a feature of stigmatisation. It is thus significant that, participants in this research voiced a clear association between being in work and avoiding stigma. This chapter has presented evidence that

anticipation of stigma motivated a number of participants to move off benefits or remain in work despite being no better off financially.

The chapter began by establishing a strong 'breadwinner' identity among women in both locations. The proportion of lone parents in work rose from 44% in 1996 to 66% in 2015 (Labour Force Survey, 2015). The majority of women involved in this study said they would prefer to work if they could and none of the mothers believed doing so would be detrimental to their children. On the contrary, most participants believed going out to work provides a positive role model for children. Attitudes among mothers involved in this study thus suggest greater prioritisation of paid work than research during the late 1990s (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Klett-Davies, 2007), when there was less state compulsion towards employment.

Despite participants universally stressing their work ethic, this chapter has demonstrated how structural inequalities affected some women's ability to access suitably flexible jobs, which consequently increased their susceptibility to stigma. According to Archer's (2003) theorisation of social identity, people are in communication with themselves to strike a balance between competing demands. This chapter has demonstrated how contrasts in qualifications and local job opportunities meant women in Location B were better positioned to strike a balance between the demands of work and childcare than those in Location A. Analysis of the data also showed that un/employment was closely connected to women's sense of 'being judged' and their 'mode' of SSL. Women who felt pride in their job and satisfied in their ability to balance worker/maternal roles gained external validation for their achievements and displayed 'positive' or 'performative' SSL. Case examples furthermore illustrate the dynamic nature of SSL among participants who had moved off benefits and into jobs.

It is important to reiterate that most women in Location B had been reliant on benefits previously and many still claimed in-work benefits. In contrast with this, women in Location A spoke of frustration at barriers hindering their agency in seeking work and adverse social judgement for being reliant solely on state support. This confirms arguments that increased benefit conditionality does not acknowledge the reality of lone parents' diverse situations (Davies, 2012; Kowalewska, 2015). A process of internalising social judgement has also been illustrated, whereby those mothers who conveyed 'negative' SSL tended to judge themselves severely. This tendency to accept self-blame, rather than recognising structural inequalities can be viewed in light of promotion of individual responsibilities over rights in what Wacquant terms the 'daddy state' (Wacquant, 2009).

Dermott and Pomati (2016) raise the pertinent question of whether lone parenthood *per se* is stigmatised or whether claiming benefits is the source of stigma. Being reliant on benefits was found to be the most significant factor influencing individual participants' experiences of stigma overall. The second section of this chapter showed how women judged their own and other people's deservingness of resources in light of either their personal experiences or political

perspectives however. Prioritising what matters personally or 'which normative evaluations matter' (Archer, 2000; 219) can be interpreted in this study of stigma as mothers' agential behaviour in 'judging the judgement'. Analysis of SSL identified how certain participants who were objectively positioned in the most stigmatised situations focused on their caring role and displayed 'defensive' SSL. These women asserted their legitimacy in claiming benefits, and judged other lone mothers and migrants as less deserving, rather than absorbing benefits stigma.

The final section of this chapter traced the conversion of cultural capital into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Savage, 2015). Comparing the material situations of women in the two locations supports Walby's (1990) 'dual systems' feminist arguments that lone mothers are disadvantaged by both gender and class in a patriarchally structured capitalist labour market. The affective impact of money worries on the SSL of women in Location A was apparent. Relative financial disadvantage was a factor affecting SSL among women in Location B, where women cited numerous examples of being financially disadvantaged compared with dual income families nearby. Overall, the chapter has argued that stigmatisation of lone mothers remains tied to material and gender inequalities in a policy context where worker citizenship expectations delegitimize their claims on state resources.

## Chapter 7

### Being a "proper" family in the local context

#### Introduction

This chapter explores participants' use of 'personal emergent properties' or PEPs (Archer, 2000; 2003) in mediating stigma within the context of local reproductive norms, kinship networks and social connections. The first section compares women's perceptions of what is considered a "proper" family in Location A, where almost one in six households are headed by lone mothers, with Location B, where the proportion is less than one in twenty (ONS, 2012a). Although the nationally hegemonic two parent family was found to serve a 'normalising judgement' (Foucault, 1977) function, analysing 'modes' of SSL shows how women in this study also judge the legitimacy of their family situation agentially in relation to local normative expectations and their own personal relationship history, as examples illustrate.

A strength of the SSL approach is that it enables sources of self-worth to be explored, rather than capturing only unpleasant stigmatising experiences. The second section of this chapter discusses participants' pride in their children, their personal resilience and their autonomy. Women in this study did not resist the 'good mother' construct (Smart, 1996; May, 2008) or contest assumptions that two parents are better for children. They instead emphasised how they fulfilled what can be described as a 'good lone mother' role, which includes minimising perceived disadvantages to children by "being mum *and* dad". This section concludes by illustrating how personal reflexivity and pride in dealing with problems can enhance SSL. The dynamic quality of SSL is also demonstrated through examples of decreased sensitivity to stigma over time. The third and final section of the chapter explores the impact of kinship and social networks on SSL. The support of a small circle of family members, especially their own mothers, appeared more valuable to certain participants' SSL than the 'social capital' (Bourdieu, 1989) of extensive social connections. While stigma was mitigated for many of the women through being embedded in extended families or developing friendships with parents in 'the same situation', lone motherhood led some to be socially isolated, while others felt "left out" amidst couple families.

#### Normalising judgement and local reproductive norms

Norms concerning the 'proper family', which are articulated in dominant discourse, have remained governed by nuclear family ideals despite the prevalence of divorce and lone parenting (Chambers, 2012). Participants were highly aware of the coupled model of family life (Klett-Davies, 2007) that casts single parent families as, in Goffman's (1990) terms 'inferior' or 'less

desirable'. Foucault's (1977) concept of 'normalising judgement' is an aspect of the 'prism of legitimacy' framework which proved valuable in understanding the pull that the heteronormative family model can exert. The women did not automatically view their family as 'spoilt' (Goffman, 1990) however. Analysis of SSL showed that the extent to which mothers judged their maternal identity as 'proper' or 'spoilt' depended on both local context and level of personal investment in the two parent norm.

### **The 'proper' family model**

Carabine (1996; 2001) and Wallbank (1998) argue that normalising judgement establishes a standard by which lone mothers are judged and found wanting and their argument was borne out with evidence of internalisation of the idealised two parent model in accounts of participants in the present research. Women's perspectives on desirable family forms appeared predominantly traditional; unlike the 'alternative lifestyles' discourse found among some of Duncan and Edwards' (1999) participants, or 'pioneering' attitudes articulated by some of Klett-Davies' (2007) participants. Women's accounts generally reflected an understanding of the male/female couple and their offspring as the socially desirable family form. The hegemonic family norm can thus be regarded as a 'cultural emergent property', or CEP (Archer, 2000). Katherine (A) for example stated forcefully: "The stereotype two parent family is better thought of". When asked by whom, she replied "everybody" and explained that by this she meant the press, the government and "people just generally".

Use of the phrase, "proper, you know, two parent families" by Joanne (B) appeared unconscious yet suggests she did not view herself and her son as a socially legitimate family. Joanne's following comment hits upon a point by Goffman (1990) that normative expectations guide a 'common value system', which is 'ubiquitous yet hard to pin down' (1990: 153):

*"You can't put a name on it but there's this background thing that's everywhere in society, in children's TV and everything." Joanne (B)*

Examples of statements that similarly reflect the permeation of 'powerful nuclear family ideology' (May, 2008: 471), which were made by women in both location, include:

*"Children should have two parents. That's the way a family should be." Marta (A)*

*"My whole life has been set up to be in a marriage so when I put my two kids to bed in my house and sit on the sofa it's all been designed to have a husband there, who isn't fucking well there anymore, 'silly you' sort of thing. Everything is designed for a family of four, even a car...Our whole existence is built around being in a partnership and procreating." Jasmine (B)*

Several women referred to lack of diversity in media portrayals of family situations as inevitably influencing normative expectations, which can be viewed as the obverse of negative stereotypes

of single parents discussed in Chapter Five. Gemma (A), for example, said the predominance of couple families on television, "makes out like that's how you're supposed to be". Women also expressed concern that their children were constantly presented with images of the two-parent family:

*"If you watch TV it's all about 'mum and dad'. All your cartoons and stuff. All the happily ever afters."* Gina (A)

*"Even things like Peppa Pig<sup>28</sup>, there's Mummy Pig and Daddy Pig, there's always a mummy and a daddy...I just think 'what do they think, their friends all have daddies and they see things on telly and it's all about mummy and daddy', hmmm."* Valerie (B)

### **Generational attitudes**

This thesis began by outlining the historical stigmatisation of lone mothers (e.g. Evans and Thane, 2012) and a number of participants pointed to this historical legacy during interviews. While believing that attitudes had loosened considerably, vestiges of stigmatisation of 'unmarried mothers' were explicit in women's references to attitudes of "the older generation". Such comments support a morphogenic perspective on social change, whereby values and norms from the past can be viewed as CEPs, which influence contemporary social life without necessarily being reproduced (Archer, 2000). Ciara (B), for example, believes ideas that are passed down generationally can still exert an influence:

*"Even back 20 years ago or 30 years ago there was a massive stigma to being a single parent and if you got pregnant you had to get married and stuff, so I do think times have changed...I think the older generation coz they were brought up in it, so if they say things they pass it down to their family...that's kind of what you get brainwashed into thinking."* Ciara (B)

In the following examples from each location, women refer to their grandparents' disapproval, while their own parents had been supportive:

*"When [her grandmother] found out I was pregnant, she automatically thought I was getting married to the lad. And I had to go 'it's not like that now grandma'."* Theresa (A)

*"I told my granddad [I was pregnant] and his first comment was 'but you're not married, that's disgusting' [laughing]...My grandma turned to my sister, patted her on the arm and said 'I'm so glad you're married'. So, it's kind of like 'well, it's happened, so you're just gonna have to get used to it'. And they were completely smitten with her when they saw her."* Mena (B)

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<sup>28</sup> The animated television series *Peppa Pig* is aimed at pre-school children and broadcast on Channel 5 in the UK.

### ***Being situation conscious***

Unlike research involving young mothers who felt highly visible in public spaces (e.g. Ponsford, 2011; Wenham, 2016), only a small number of participants recounted incidents of explicit, face-to-face criticism or overtly discriminatory behaviour. Although stigma featured in the accounts of almost every participant in this study, upon closer inspection, this could often be traced to negative discourse and stereotyping (as detailed in Chapter Five). Among those women for whom stigma was 'embodied', this generally took the form of overheard comments or "funny looks". When probed as to specific examples, women often indicated that experiences of stigma or "being judged" were impressionistic rather than clearly defined. This is not to diminish the impact of stigma, but rather to stress how subtle its manifestations can be.

Attempts were made during interviews to uncover where participants encountered stigma as well as from whom and their accounts reflected Goffman's (1990) point that people in stigmatised groups can be 'situation conscious'. May (2011b) emphasises the role of interactions with strangers and acquaintances in public places in our sense of social self. Parenting increases use of neighbourhoods services, shops, nurseries and schools (May, 2011c) and the women referred to doctors' surgeries, public transport, supermarkets, leisure facilities as sites where interaction with strangers had proved uncomfortable upon occasion.

Some women described feeling conscious of being "different" when attending parent and toddler groups. Meeting other parents at the school gates or school events were the most frequently cited encounters where participants felt self-conscious. Children starting school was a turning point in becoming more conscious of coupledom for some mothers. Hannah (B), for example, had been relieved when her relationship with her ex-partner ended as he was a "bad role model" and spoke of things being "nice as they are" in her mother/child dyad. With her daughter aged five and due to start school, however, she had been self-conscious as the only single parent at an induction event, which had prompted her to seek out children's books depicting diverse families to help explain their situation to her daughter:

*"It worries me a bit because I know she's starting school in September and it's quite a well-off school and when we've done the settling in day. And you do notice there is a lot of mums and dads there together and I think she'll start picking up on it a bit more when she starts there."* Hannah (B)

### **Contrasts in local reproductive norms**

While the foregoing discussion shows the two parent family was generally viewed as normative among women in both locations, recognising the importance of place to social phenomena (Foucault, 1977; Sayer, 2000; May, 2011b; 2011c) facilitated more fine-grained analysis of differences in attitudes and experiences in this research. With 14.5% of households in Location A headed by lone mothers compared with 4.1% in Location B (ONS, 2012a), it is unsurprising that this was reflected in participants' perceptions of their family as being "normal" or "different"

and "looked down on" in their respective neighborhoods, as these examples of comments from each location illustrate:

*"You can see people in the same situation as you. I think if you live in an area where there are a lot of couples they might tend to look down on you or look at you differently."*

*Katherine (A)*

*"There's a lot of aspiring middle class people here who would look down on single mums...I mean, there's a road here and they call it 'Single Mum Street'...this is the worse road if you know what I mean, so there's definitely a bit of something critical."*

*Alison (B)*

Carabine (1996) regards normalising judgement as useful for analysis at the small scale and this proved to be the case in assessing 'buy in' to the two parent ideal in present study. While media communication has a long 'reach', especially in an era of social media (Tyler, 2013), Duncan and Edwards (1999) point out that lone mothers' mobility can be restricted due to lack of time and money. In this study, local frames of reference featured prominently when analysing participants' accounts of family life. Analysis of data indicated that the higher incidence of lone motherhood in Location A meant it was regarded as more 'acceptable' overall, whereas there was greater gravitation overall towards a married, two parent family norm in Location B. This is consistent with findings from a series of studies (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Duncan and Smith, 2006; Clavering 2010; Duncan, 2011), which highlight the significance of location in attitudes towards lone motherhood.

While married and unwed mothers were historically 'presumed to coincide with the boundary between the bad and the good mother' (Smart, 1996: 47), the expectation of marriage within normalising discourse nationally was not resounding at the local level in Location A. Having children did not seem to be tied up in expectations of marriage, whereas participants reported that marriage remains vaunted in Location B. *Table 15: Relationship history by location* shows that most women in A had either previously cohabited or had never married or cohabited, whereas women were more likely to have been married in B. This is consistent with documentation of a historical relationship between local economic context and local reproductive norms (Adair, 1996; Blaikie, 1995) and contemporary correlations between marriage and socio-economic indicators (Duncan and Smith, 2006; Graham et al., 2007).

Carrie (A) commented: "I couldn't even imagine being married." By contrast, participants in B indicated that they faced expectations for motherhood to be accompanied by matrimony. Mena (B) for example, said she had noticed people "looking for a wedding ring" when out with her baby. Sonia (B) commented on attitudes encountered in her neighbourhood:

*"People seem more shocked that I've had three children without being married than by me being a single parent in itself. That kind of surprised me. They just seem to assume*

*that if you've got three children you're divorced, rather than that you've never been married." Sonia (B)*

Table 15: Relationship history by location

| Location | Never married or cohabited | Previously cohabited | Divorced or separated |
|----------|----------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| A        | 5                          | 5                    | 3                     |
| B        | 2                          | 2                    | 9                     |

### ***Paternity and legality***

Historical changes in legislation surrounding extra-marital birth were outlined at the start of this thesis along with feminist perspectives on family law (MacKinnon, 1983; Smart, 1984; 1992). Locational variations in routes to lone motherhood were discussed in Chapter Five, with more incidences of men ending relationships when women became pregnant in A, (see *Table 6: Factors in route to lone motherhood by location*), although three women in B were also sole parents from the outset. Despite *de jure* il/legitimacy dichotomies having died out, differences existed in women's legal ties with their children's fathers between the two locations. Legal involvement appeared minimal or non-existent among women who had not been married, which was largely the case in Location A. Information from the interviews was consistent with analysis linking higher incidences of sole birth registration with poor socio-economic indicators (Graham et al., 2007). The fathers in the cases of Julie (A) and Gemma (A) had demanded DNA tests and specifically did not want their names on birth certificates, which is reminiscent of disputes over paternal responsibility in historic records (Adair, 1996). In other cases, the fathers did not attend the birth registration so the birth could not be registered jointly. Conversely, Gina (A) pointed out that her son now shared a surname with a father he never saw and from whom there was no financial support.

In contrast with absence of legal involvement in Location A, a number of women in B told of lengthy court disputes during their divorces. The association between patriarchy and women and children being subsumed under men's surnames was evident in the comments of number of women in this location, which reinforces the argument that patrilineal surnames are linked to patriarchal property rights and gendered citizenship (Pitcher, 2016). Emma saw it as highly symbolic that she would be able to revert to her own surname once her divorce was finalised and she was "free" of her ex-husband. Valerie (B) regretted that registering her children under her ex-husband's surname meant they had a different name from her. Laura (B) recognised retaining her ex-husband's name as an aspect of managing a 'spoilt' family identity:

*"I still use my married name. A really big motivator for that was I didn't want a different name from the boys, probably the sole motivator, but again that was creating the image of the right family, you know all got the same surnames, that was really big for me." Laura (B)*

When participants recounted the breakdown of their relationships, the assumption was that children would live with their mothers. Participants' accounts thus reflect assumptions that are centred upon gender roles that are so ubiquitous as to appear 'natural' (Millett, 1990; Walby, 1990; Smart, 1992; 1996; Lewis, 2006). None of the family situations the mothers discussed could be described as equal 'co-parenting' (Smart and Neale, 1999) and fathers had regularly contact in less than half of the cases, as show in in *Table 16: Paternal contact by location*. Fathers featured in lone mother households in this research mainly through the 'presence' of their absence, as women in both locations bemoaned lack of responsibility on their part. As the table indicates, there was less paternal involvement with children overall in Location A than B and divorced fathers tend to have more contact with their children than never-married fathers, reflecting statistical data (Amato et al., 2009, cited Poole et al., 2016).

*Table 16: Paternal contact by location*

| Location | Regular contact | Occasional contact | No contact |
|----------|-----------------|--------------------|------------|
| A        | 4               | 1                  | 8          |
| B        | 7               | 4                  | 2          |

### **SSL and investment in the two-parent norm**

Archer's conceptualisation of agency/structure interplay proved useful in comparing mothers' subjective responses to the two-parent norm as it recognises the importance of people's judgement of 'which norms they support' as a key facet of PEPs (2012: 106). Applying SSL as an analytical tool demonstrates how the women's judgment of their own family against the two-parent 'ideal' was an agential choice of *which* family norms they support. Sayer (2011) investigates what 'matters' to people and, importantly, what they *invest* in. Women who became lone mothers at an earlier stage generally had weakest investment in patriarchal coupled parenthood. The sting of stigma appeared strongest overall among women who had invested emotionally in what some described as a "romantic" or idealised version of family life that had subsequently been 'spoilt', as case analysis reveals.

#### **Location A**

With almost one in six households in Location A headed by lone mothers, the 'normalising judgement' of the nationally hegemonic 'ideal' family generally had less impact among participants in this location. Comments by Gemma and Carrie for instance regard lone motherhood as normative locally:

*"It's normal round here...not frowned upon like it might be in some places." Gemma (A)*

*"Single mothers are the norm round here, not necessarily a good norm, but the norm. Because there are so many single parents and because I work in childcare I see a lot of it." Carrie (A)*

Data from this location supported Gillies' (2007) view of motherhood as a means of gaining self-worth and legitimacy among women with limited material resources who can otherwise feel de-legitimated. While women in both locations emphasised their sexual morality, as discussed in Chapter Five, marriage in itself was barely mentioned by women in A. Investigation of SSL case dynamics enabled a 'cluster of meaning' (Spencer et al., 2014a: 271) to be determined among women in this location who had neither been married nor cohabited for long periods. These women used the same or similar wording repeatedly when speaking about their reaction to what other people think of their lone parent status: "I just don't care"; "It just doesn't bother me"; "I'm not bothered." They were largely able to eschew nationally hegemonic expectations of coupledness by judging their family form according to extended family members' opinions and asserting their personal value (Kingfisher, 1998) based on fulfilling a 'good lone mother' role (which is discussed fully below).

It might therefore be argued that 'family practices' (Morgan, 1999) remained strong in cases where being a 'proper family' did not require an institutionally constituted entity. Two of the mothers, Carrie and Gemma, displayed evidence of 'positive' SSL throughout their interviews rather than adverse social judgement. The positive impact of employment on their SSL was discussed in the previous chapter and the personal legitimacy they gained from strong family and friendship networks is discussed below. Theresa, Debbie and Lucy adopted a more 'defensive' stance in responding to perceived "judgement" due to being on benefits, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Case analysis concurs with research involving young mothers (e.g. Mitchell and Green 2002; Yardley 2008) stressing the importance of female kinship for young working class mothers whose caring role is valued in their extended families. In the case of Debbie, her one year-old daughter's conception with her ex-partner of five years had been planned, but he "got scared" and left shortly after she was born. She was very close to her mother and had minimal contact with anyone outside a limited family sphere:

*"I don't give a damn so long as me daughter's ok...That's my priority, me daughter. Me daughter and me family, that's it." Debbie (A)*

Debbie used verbal defense as well as privacy as a coping mechanism, as found by Yardley (2008). Her reference to "judgemental" attitudes emitting from "the older generation" supports a morphogenic perspective on social change (Archer, 2012). She articulated the largely implicit character of stigma but went on to describe a response to being pre-judged when she had been on a train with her own child and her younger sister, who is only a few years older than her own daughter:

*"It's not like some places say 'you can't come here coz you're a single mum' [pause while thinking] there is, there's definitely the way people look and like I said about the older*

*generation and stuff, there is a difference...There were this horrible woman and she looked at me and said 'look at her with a child at that age'. Well, the way I am, I turned round and said 'excuse me, it's me little sister'. She looked away then embarrassed and I thought 'don't judge before you know'." Debbie (A)*

Strong relationships with their own mothers seemed highly significant among those women who were "not bothered" by nationally normative judgements. The women in question were all close to their mothers emotionally and spatially and voiced cynicism about men's lack of commitment to relationships or inability to accept responsibility for children. This 'cluster of meaning' (Spencer et al., 2014a: 271) could, then, be interpreted in terms of their family relations being more matriarchal than patriarchal, although this appeared largely a result of circumstance rather than consciously 'escaping patriarchy' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) or pioneering social change (Klett-Davies, 2007).

It should however be stressed that, although the data showed that lone motherhood incurred less adverse judgement overall in Location A, analysis of case dynamics identified differences in SSL within the locations that could be strongly attributed to the women's particular personal situations. Nadirah was an exception among younger women in Location A, for example, appearing to have internalised traditional patriarchal family norms from her Muslim background. She had been estranged from her parents since becoming pregnant and spoke of a "ruined reputation" in their community. Nadirah's 'negative' SSL was evident during her interview. Here she describes her disappointment when her son's father left her alone in a hostel while pregnant, was then in prison for several months and had no contact upon release:

*"If I'd had his dad's support and his dad would have married me, things would have gone perfect...It's like a fairy tale, you always think of, when in reality it's different." Nadirah (A)*

Unlike Ponsford's (2011) research among young mothers, Nadirah was the only mother in this study who reported negative experiences among medical and other professionals. Relating an incident with an older female patient, who quizzed her about age and whether she was married when waiting in the doctor's surgery while pregnant, she said she had been anxious to avoid negative judgement:

*"I said 'yeah', but I feel as if I have to say that to people so they don't think badly." Nadirah (A)*

Analysis of case dynamics also indicated how, having originally invested in a conventional nuclear family structure, women who had been married or in long-term relationships were less likely to judge their current family form as living up to a 'proper' or 'legitimate' standard, concurring with findings by Morris (2012) and sentiments expressed by women in Klett-Davies' (2007) 'coper'

and 'struggler' ideal types. For example, Katherine, who displayed 'negative' SSL when speaking about other matters during her interview, had been in a relationship for a decade and internalised the normalising judgement of the traditional family:

*"This stereotypical family with mum and dad...That's what I had and it will never happen to me again so it makes me quite sad really." Katherine (A)*

Gina expressed 'mixed' indicators of SSL during her interview. She was highly 'positive' about her proactivity in setting up her business and stated defensively that her own mother's opinion is, "the only judgement that counts". She also displayed 'negative' SSL however when judging her family situation against her unfulfilled expectation of a traditional nuclear ideal. She became upset as she described how she had tried to make the relationship with her son's father work but frequent arguments had created a "bad environment" for her son:

*"My parents were childhood sweethearts and have been together ever since. I think morals have changed a lot but I've still got old fashioned values...I wanted everything proper. You don't think you're going to end up like this. I wouldn't have a child with somebody else. Why should that child have their mum and dad and be a happy family if my first one couldn't have that." Gina (A)*

### **Location B**

As outlined above, participants' accounts suggested that nationally hegemonic nuclear family ideals exerted a much stronger 'normalising' role overall in Location B than A. With less than one in twenty households headed by lone mothers, women there were highly conscious of an expectation of married coupledness. They consequently reported a much stronger sense of their family being "different" than participants in A. In fact, several women in B said that feeling in a minority was what motivated them to take part in this research.

Moira, who displayed 'positive' SSL when speaking about all aspects of her life, was an exception in remarking that there "just happened" to be an unusually high proportion of children from single parent families in her nine-year old son's class at school. As a "big feminist", she was keen to show her children that "women are capable of all sorts of things" rather than reinforcing traditional gender roles. While other factors that positioned Moira well to mitigate feelings of adverse judgement have been discussed previously, she explained that having children in different family circumstances in her son's class had proved particularly "reassuring":

*"I wasn't sure whether he would be stigmatised or erm, I mean this area can be a bit, you know with that sort of culture [trails off]. But it was absolutely fine because in my son's year group half the children are from single parent families. I mean it's commented on, it's an anomaly." Moira (B)*

Moira's particular case dynamics were a rarity in Location B however, where there was generally a much stronger gravitation towards the two parent norm. For a number of women who had been married previously, the expectation of coupledom was firmly embedded and analysis indicated that they tended to feel their maternal identity had been 'spoilt'. For example, Joanne, whose 'performative' SSL through her job and cultural capital has been illustrated in previous chapters, described how her marriage had begun as "this great love", which had broken down traumatically while she was pregnant as her husband was involved with someone else. She also referred to her "traditional" family background, with her still-married parents having had, "2.4 kids and a normal family life".

Joanne's concerns about adverse judgement and her 'performative' SSL were evident as she explained about purposefully not wearing any rings, "so the absence of a wedding ring isn't obvious". Pondering upon marital breakdown becoming more common over the generations, the morphostatic (Archer, 2012) effect of generational attitudes could be seen in Joanne's concerns that older people tended to "hold onto their older mentalities". Coupled with being from a minority ethnic background, this had made her especially sensitive to older people's judgement when in public places:

*"There have certainly been times when he's been throwing these tantrums in shops when I haven't been able to control him. And I think 'I don't want people looking at me thinking 'there's another black single mother, can't control her child, we all know where he's headed'. Being in an all-white, or predominantly white, neighbourhood...I don't want to perpetuate that." Joanne (B)*

Valerie also displayed 'performative' SSL during most of her interview and was confident when discussing her education or career. Her SSL appeared much more fragile however when discussing her family situation and she used the words "failure" and "judgement" frequently when describing bringing up her two and four year-old daughters as a lone mother.

*"The cultural representation of a family is two parents, a man and a woman and 2.4 kids isn't it. And I think if you're outside that norm, whether you're a single mother or any other kind of family, you probably feel a bit abnormal and all wrong." Valerie (B)*

Valerie's mother, who lives next door, had been "mortified" about what neighbours might think when she split with her husband. Despite pointing out, "I don't live my life according to what people think", Valerie appeared to have internalised the two parent norm and makes insightful reference to "some sort of internal dialogue", which might be likened to 'internal conversations' (Archer, 2000):

*"It comes from somewhere, but it isn't actually from people saying it to you because the only thing that anyone's ever said to me is 'you're doing really well'...and I say, 'I'm not'...Some days I'm really shit at what I'm doing... I feel really conscious of it and I don't*

*know if underneath that it's from this underlying feeling of 'you haven't got a husband and you're on your own and you're doing it all on your own and you're failing'." Valerie (B)*

Recounting her ex-husband's behaviour, including disappearing for a week when her younger daughter was born, she said things would be "harder still" if she was still with him. Valerie's disillusionment with a 'spoilt' nuclear family ideal reinforces McIntosh's (1996) point that lone motherhood exposes marriage and dual parenting as 'dangerous fantasies', rather than the more optimistic expectations of coupledness suggested by the democratisation perspective (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995):

*"It's tragic really when you can't have a relationship with somebody, when you've got married to have a family with them...So that dream's gone. I think that's why people split really, because they can't handle the reality. It's the romanticising of it, even at this age as toddlers they're being fed this model, this ideal of something to aim for between men and women. It's a little bit of a con and a bit of a myth I think." Valerie (B)*

In contrast with Joanne and Valerie, who were in their mid-30s and had previously been married, Mandy became pregnant at 18 and had never lived with a partner. Indicators of Mandy's 'negative' SSL have been cited in previous chapters and analysis of her case dynamics recalls arguments (Reay, 1998; Gillies, 2007; Edwards and Gillies, 2011) on judgement of parenting according to normative standards of middle class privilege. Having grown up in a "very middle class" family in Location B, she moved to Location A while pregnant and going through a "rebellious phase". Contrasts in area profiles and parenting norms were closely entangled in Mandy's account of returning to Location B in an attempt to "beat the cliché" of single parenthood, which she views as:

*"That single parents, especially young single parents, that their children, will amount to nothing. But I think it's definitely, and this is a fact, that less children from single parents end up going on to higher education, I think there is definitely a stigma attached...I just knew that I had to make the decision to get out of it, come to a nice area to give him a good shot at getting a good education with children I want him to be around." Mandy (B)*

The personal cost of this instrumental agency was that Mandy's narrative included numerous examples of 'negative' SSL resulting from a process of internalising the 'normalising judgement' (Foucault, 1977) of middle class family life locally but struggling to meet the "intensive parenting" standards among older, affluent married partners who surrounded her. Describing "wanting the ground to swallow me up" as the only single parent among 30 couples at an induction event when her son started school, for example, she articulates an acute sense of 'difference':

*"I felt so self-conscious and so erm panicky [asking myself] 'will these children want to play with my child?'...A woman whose daughter's in [son's] class, the first thing she ever said to me was, 'what does your husband do?' So, I immediately said 'oh I don't have a husband' and she looked, genuinely sort of aghast. It opened my eyes to some of the sort of people that are there." Mandy (B)*

Mandy cited numerous incidences of suffering as a result of "judgmental" behaviour among fellow parents, which severely dented her SSL, but feels it is necessary to give her children a "better" environment to grow up in:

*"I don't reject that judgement for the sake of my children. I don't want them to grow up and look back and think 'I missed out in any way because my mum was a single parent'. I want them to have the same opportunities as everyone else." Mandy (B)*

## **Pride and resilience**

The previous section confirms the importance of local context and personal expectations to participants' own judgement of what constitutes a 'proper' family. Data from this study also supports May's (2004b; 2008) argument that lone mothers' understandings of 'good motherhood' are contextual and more complex than simply seeing theirs as 'less than' families. Whilst Chapter Five details participants' fierce contestation of "single mum stereotypes" and the previous section includes comments indicating ambivalence to nuclear family ideology, none of the participants contested 'good mother' constructs (Smart, 1996). Women in both locations did, however, emphasise their endeavors to compensate for those perceived disadvantages and expressed intense pride in "doing a good job" with their children. It can therefore be argued that they judged their parenting as meeting a good *lone* mother standard. Drawing on Archer's conception of social identity/agency as subjective deliberation on objective circumstances whereby our 'legitimate self-respect' is vested in 'projects' that vindicate or damage our self-worth (2000: 13), analysis suggests that displaying good lone motherhood helps vindicate 'legitimate self-worth' among women involved in this study.

## **Being a good lone mother**

Data from this research reflects findings from previous studies, which showed that lone mothers (Klett-Davies, 2007; May, 2008) and young mothers (Mitchell and Green, 2002; Yardley 2008; Ponsford, 2011; Wenham, 2016) responded to normalising judgements based around the two parent model by emphasising how they fulfill a 'good' mother role. Interviews with women from both locations concur with findings by May (2008), who describes how lone mothers seek moral validation through demonstrating their 'good' mother identity. Whilst stigma is the focus of this study, much criticism of 'fatherless families' centres upon putative harm to children who grow up in 'broken homes' (Morgan, 1995; Centre for Social Justice, 2012) and it is important to note

that participants' views on parenting were not necessarily, or primarily, concerned with their own social status. Participants did not generally question the assumption that a two parent family is preferable and commonly expressed anxieties about potential damage of divorce and single parenting to their children's well-being<sup>29</sup>, which echoes findings from previous research (Smart and Neale, 1999; May, 2004a; May, 2008). Della (B), whose own mother had been a single parent, was the only mother in the study who strongly stated:

*"I don't believe a single parent does any worse or a better job than two parents." Della (B)*

Importantly, the majority of women in this study believed that being a good *lone* mother entailed a need to compensate for perceived disadvantages children incur as a result of growing up in single parent families. Thus participants generally did not appear to judge themselves inadequate mothers, despite negative constructs and normalising discourses. Instead, they voiced pride in fulfilling the demands of parenting without a partner and detailed extra lengths they went to in working harder and making greater sacrifices. Jasmine (B), for example, described how lone mothers "overcompensate":

*"We're having to go that extra mile to say, 'well actually we are conscientious with our kids and they do their homework' because straight away it's like 'she's a single parent, oh well hmmm' [making a disapproving face]." Jasmine (B)*

It should be reiterated that, in focusing on mediation of stigma, this study is concerned with participants' representations of their maternal role rather than mothering practices. Furthermore, accounts were analysed in terms of women's understanding of cultural expectations, rather than their veracity (May, 2008; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003). Archer (2000; 2007) views agential powers, or PEPs, as subjective deliberation on social structures, with social identity emerging out of personal identity in relation to status, norms and moral evaluations. From this perspective, investing in good lone motherhood can be viewed as a 'project' whose success enhances their 'legitimate self-respect' (2000: 219). Being a good lone mother can thus be seen as both a personal priority and a resource in resisting stigma, with participants in both locations keen to display examples of: being "mum *and* dad"; putting their children first; and taking pride in doing a "good job" with their children.

### ***Being "mum and dad"***

Whilst practicalities of parenting are beyond the scope of this study, it should be briefly noted that the women had broad-ranging views as to how much more demanding lone parenting was compared with being in a couple. Some participants in both locations spoke at length about

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<sup>29</sup> These views are notwithstanding lack of evidence that outcomes for children of one and two parent families are different, other factors being equal (Stacey, 1994, cited McIntosh, 1996) and statistical evidence that socio-economics have a greater bearing on children's education and development than family form (Goodman and Greaves, 2010).

additional practical demands of "doing it all on your own 24/7", as Marta (A) described it. Joanne (B) for example emphasised the "sheer physical tiredness". However, other mothers from across the sample believed single parenthood was "no different" than being in a couple family on a practical level. Theresa (A) said: "You do all the work anyway." Della (B) joked that her ex-husband was, "like a chocolate fireguard really".

What Hartstock (1987) calls 'the sexual division of labour' in families appeared stark in accounts of lone mothers in this research. Participants were aware of gender inequalities that had left them quite literally 'holding the baby' in many cases. They largely appeared to regard the presence of a father as desirable rather than essential however. Reflecting analysis by Dermott and Pomati (2016), which shows that actual differences in parenting practices between one and two parent families are negligible, women in this study did their utmost to do the work of two parents in order to give the children a "proper" upbringing. The phrase "doing two jobs" was used to describe sole responsibility for their children's physical and emotional well-being whilst also providing for them financially, as detailed in the previous chapter. Crucially, whether the children saw their fathers or not, being a good lone mother entailed responsibility for being "mother *and* father' for most of the women and that phrase was used repeatedly by women in both locations, as illustrated by the following comments:

*"I feel as if I've got to do more for him because of his dad not being around."* Nadirah (A)

*"I know I can't be his dad as well as his mum, but I'll do whatever I can."* Julie (A)

*"He's got me so he doesn't need anybody else, so...you're mother and father."* Theresa (A)

*"It made me fight even more to come across as a very in control family, y'know show that it didn't matter if there was a dad involved or not, we were financially ok, the boys were happy...but I was still adhering to those expectations by trying to be the perfect family and to be dad and mum."* Laura (B)

As suggested by May (2008), 'good' motherhood seems to cover responsibility for the quality of fatherhood. This was demonstrated with a poignant anecdote from Laura (B) about taking her sons paint-balling when their father forgot on Father's Day. Several mothers told of having attempted to encourage their children's fathers to have more input but becoming resigned to their lack of involvement. Participants in both locations expressed concern over the lack of a father in their children's lives. Typical comments included:

*"I don't like the fact that his dad don't have nothing to do with him, that he hasn't got that dad figure."* Gemma (A)

*"I think having a boy is harder, that male influence is massively important so I have to over-compensate for the fact that he doesn't have that."* Mandy (B)

*"I find myself apologising to her for the fact that her dad isn't around." Mena (B)*

Some mothers spelled out measures to compensate for the lack of "male role model" through contacts with grandfathers, uncles and friends' partners. Support from grandparents and/or being part of an extended family made an essential difference to mothers in both locations and this is explored in the next section.

### ***Putting the children first***

If lone mother archetypes have been constructed in historical discourse along the lines of 'sinners, scroungers or saints' (Evans and Thane, 2012), participants' emphases on self-sacrifice might be read as an attempt to resist pathologised 'bad mother' constructs. Some of the women recounted moving examples of overcoming adversity for the sake of their children. Indeed, such forms of agency appear to have been enacted when others forms were unavailable in some cases. Some women said lone motherhood had created a "closer bond" with their children, as predicted by Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2002) and reflected empirically by Smart and Neale (1999). May (2008) shows how 'putting the children first' is a key aspect of lone mothers' 'moral presentations of self' and participants in both locations underlined that their children were their chief priority, with statements such as:

*"I gave up my life to be a single mum. I think that when you've got a kid you've got to think about them more than yourself and your own happiness because they're your responsibility." Nadirah (A)*

*"I think as long as your child's happy to me that's what it's about." Hannah (B)*

A number of women described ending marriages and relationships in order to protect children from domestic abuse or frequent arguments as a form of prioritising their needs, as identified by May (2008). Bella (A), who left her husband following an incident of domestic violence, said: "I'd never put my kids through that". After three violent relationships Lucy (A) decided she would "do a better job" parenting alone. Sonia (B) told of finding the "strength to leave" her ex-partner, whose mental health issues manifested in physical abuse and "controlling" behaviour in the family.

Examples of putting the children first when making employment decisions or balancing limited budgets were included in the previous chapter. Examples of limiting their social life due to prioritising their children are cited below. None of the women in Location A currently had relationships, compared with five women in B. This locational difference concurs with statistics showing that the length of time spent in lone parent households is shorter, on average, for middle class women generally (Rowlingson and McKay, 2005). Lack of space precludes discussion of comments on dating, but protecting the children was the most commonly cited reason for not pursuing relationships. Those women who were interested in meeting a new partner were adamant about prioritising their children.

### ***Pride in "doing a good job"***

Returning to the distinction between lone motherhood as an externally imposed categorical identity or coherent personal ontological identity (Taylor, 1998; May, 2010), although many participants resisted single or lone mother categorisation, they all made it clear that motherhood in itself was a positive aspect of their self-worth. Della (B), for instance, would not tell people she was a lone mother as she saw it as a stigmatised identity but said: "I tell everyone I've got a five year old son and he's brilliant." Participants' expressions noticeably brightened when talking about their children, sometimes in stark contrast to recounting otherwise stressful situations.

A body of empirical research involving young mothers emphasises that they found motherhood a positive experience and source of self-worth notwithstanding difficulties they encountered (e.g. Arai, 2003; Shea et al., 2015). The present study finds this to also be the case among women of more diverse ages and situations. Pride in their children and in themselves for doing a "good job" featured prominently in accounts of women across the sample, with typical statements from both locations such as:

*"I'm proud of bringing them all up, five of them on my own. They've never once brought a policeman to the house, never once." Sheila (A)*

*"I've got three [children] and they were one, three and five at the time and I coped extremely well...a lot of people are quite proud of the way I've managed." Ciara (B)*

The data also indicates that being a 'good' lone mother involves pride in their children's progress, as well as attempts to minimise perceived disadvantages in their future education and careers, as suggested by Wieggers and Chunn (2015). Prioritisation of their children's education was evident among women in both locations. There appeared to be some additional pressure in Location B, as women spoke of trying to give their children equal material standards and leisure activities as affluent two parent families nearby, as discussed in the previous chapter.

### **Pride in resilience**

Pride in their personal resilience seemed to accompany pride in "doing a good job" with their children for many of the women. Whilst the nuclear model is the cultural epitome of the 'proper' family, in reality it can be a site of conflict and abuse (Campbell, 1984; Barrett and McIntosh, 1992; McIntosh, 1996). Some women used of the words "dream" and "fairy tale" to describe their disillusionment with "love", "romance" and idealised images of family life, as illustrated above. Some participants recounted painful stories of domestic abuse, being abandoned whilst pregnant or ex-partners' infidelity, mental health or alcohol issues, whilst others described more prosaic but no less unsettling breakdown of relationships. Although none of the participants in this study consciously invoked an 'escaping patriarchy' discourse (Duncan and Edwards, 1999),

some recounted quite literally fleeing domestic violence, emotional abuse or volatile relationships and had come to prefer being single.

Where the individualisation thesis is largely optimistic that 'de-traditionalisation' of family life means enhanced reflexivity and greater equality between partners (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 1995), accounts of women in this research better support arguments that individualisation theories underestimate enduring gender and class inequalities (Jamieson 1998; 1999; Crompton, 2006). Men are more likely to remarry after divorce (Smart and Neale, 1999). Lack of paternal responsibility, outlined above, offers evidence that democratisation of family life can mean more reflexive opportunity for fathers than mothers (Klett-Davies, 2007). This was apparent, for example, in comments by Katherine (A), whose daughter's father has "moved on" and married someone else, whilst she is "still single and on my own", carrying the bulk of responsibility for their seven-year old daughter's needs. Jasmine (B) also commented in this vein:

*"One of the most difficult things for me coming to terms with my divorce was the sheer injustice of that a man and a woman could get together and create a family and the man could just walk away any time he wanted and not be held accountable whatsoever. He just takes them for tea once a fortnight and pays me about £20 a week." Jasmine (B)*

This recognition of structural constraints is not to suggest by any means that the women involved in this research are not agential. Finding lack of adequate evidence for the 'transformation of intimacy' thesis (Giddens, 1992) during research on lone mothers' intimate lives, Morris (2012) characterises their stories as primarily 'survival' narratives. When women in the present study spoke of how they had survived practical and emotional troubles they did so proudly. Archer's (2000; 2003; 2007) conceptualisation of PEPs helps explore how participants could be reflexive whilst also constrained to varying extents, through subjective evaluation of priorities in responses to objective conditions in the form of 'internal conversations'. Thus where reflexivity for some women meant deciding to move to new towns, take degrees or conscious self-development, for those in the most disadvantaged situations it could mean mustering resolve to survive adversity and finding the energy that went into meet their children's basic needs and 'preventing backward slippage', as found by Gillies (2007: 144). The phrase "I just get on with it" was used by women in a range of situations across both locations to indicate their coping strategy. They commonly associated the phrase with looking ahead, focusing on the positives and being pragmatic, with typical comments from women in both locations including:

*"Even though you didn't want that, you've got to make the best of things...just to get on with day to day." Katherine (A)*

*"My attitude, and I think it comes from my mum, is 'just get on with it, whatever life throws at you, you just deal with it'." Carrie (A)*

*"I think it's one of those things where you don't dwell on it, you just get on with it. And then it's not a problem." Della (B)*

### **Pride in autonomy**

While revealing how lone mothers' choices are inhibited by gendered and heteronormative ideas, Morris (2012) found some women were proud of moving beyond feeling compelled towards coupledom. Similarly, for a number of women in this study, pride in their autonomy was an important aspect of resilience and being independent was an advantage of their family situation. Those who had been parenting alone from the outset were accustomed to autonomy. Carrie (A), for example, thought she had done, "a pretty good job" with her children and would not want a man living in her house. Hannah (B), who had been a single parent since her daughter was a baby, said she enjoyed the "control" it afforded her in, "doing things my way".

Post-divorce re-evaluation is common (Smart and Neale, 1999) and several women described emerging from relationships feeling stronger after a period of adjustment. The end of their relationship led some participants to focus on personal growth and independence, as reported by May (2004a). Valerie (B) and Ciara (B), for example, were among those previously married women who described feeling happier and more self-directive since becoming independent of their former spouses:

*"I can make decisions for myself and I feel in control of my life where I didn't before."  
Valerie (B)*

*"There's been a massive change, I'm much more positive now." Ciara (B)*

### **SSL and resilience**

Exploring the themes of pride and resilience in women's stories revealed how doing a "good job" with their children and surviving adversity could help repair damaged self-image and mitigate stigma. Archer (2007) stresses that subjectivity is dynamic and examining trajectories of SSL showed how some women developed a "thicker skin" and felt less concerned about other people's judgements over time. Examples are included here of cases that suggest shifts in mode of SSL as participants moved beyond practical and emotional difficulties when they first became lone mothers and became more "settled".

### **Location A**

While mothers in Location A were generally less expansive about their reflexive process than those in Location B, Lucy appeared more comfortable sharing examples of her 'internal conversations'. Lucy was six months pregnant with her third child from her third violent relationships at the time of her interview and case analysis offers a strong example of her reflexivity and resilience within constrained circumstances. Explaining how she had resolved to remain single in future, her assertion of independence can be interpreted as a pragmatic version of 'escaping patriarchy' discourse (Duncan and Edwards, 1999):

*"I've had bad experiences. It's just been violence all the way through. So I think I'll just stay on me own and bring the kids up on my own. I think I'll do a far better job. It's hard but I can do it." Lucy (A)*

Lucy's refusal to be cowed was apparent and indicators of her 'defensive' SSL in responding to adverse judgements have been discussed in previous chapters. Her self-worth was heavily invested in her 'good' mother identity (May, 2008) and the word 'mum' was tattooed on her arm. She reiterated how much she "loves being a mum" and cited examples of prioritising her children's needs, stating: "It's all about me kids. I never really think about myself." Such comments reflect Skeggs and Loveday's description of how working class mothers, 'defend their value by inverting moral judgment by making investments in caring as the only accessible and primary source of value' (2012: 484).

For Lucy, her children were visibly 'what matters' most (Sayer, 2011). As her four-year old daughter was born prematurely and her three-year old son is disabled, Lucy had coped with their medical problems along with domestic abuse. She voiced pride in both her mothering and dealing with difficulties, as found by McKenzie (2015). Maternal dedication and personal resilience seem intertwined in the following passage:

*"I've have had a hard time with them both, it's like hospital appointments, moving, domestic violence, the police being involved and I'm like 'I can do this on me own' and I sit there and I think to myself, you know I do sometimes break down and cry and stuff, but I think like 'me kids, I've got to do it for them'...I like look at them sometimes and think, 'I've done a pretty good job with you two on my own'." Lucy (A)*

Nadirah was the youngest and most socially isolated participant in the study and had very limited material resources or opportunities and indicators of her 'negative' SSL have been illustrated previously. A glimmer of pride in her resilience emerged towards the end of her interview however, as she reflected on surviving difficulties, saying: "It was just me against everything. I got this far by myself." Reflecting on her journey and referring to her parents, she said she would no longer "take anyone's shit", which suggests she might develop a more 'defensive' mode of SSL in the future:

*"I've definitely turned into someone I don't know because I was someone who'd cry at summat little but now it takes a lot to make me cry." Nadirah (A)*

### **Location B**

There were a number of cases in Location B where women indicated that their mode of SSL would have been 'negative' when going through emotional trauma but they felt less sensitive to stigma since they had "adjusted" to their new situation. Joanne, for instance, told of feeling acutely aware of stigma when she first moved back to the UK, divorced, depressed and pregnant. Joanne's 'performative' SSL has been discussed previously and having proved she could do a

"good job" seems to have lessened her concerns about being negatively judged. It should be noted that her path was not linear however. She adds that her sensitivity to stigma recurs according to being 'situation conscious' (Goffman, 1990) or her fluctuating level of tiredness:

*"I think initially [pause] erm, maybe it was coming out of like the whole mind-set and just not really wanting to accept the situation. So, I think I'm mostly doing a good job and also I don't have time to spend much time thinking about what other people are thinking anymore...Early on when I was perhaps a little bit more emotionally unstable I thought more about that, whereas now not so much."* Joanne (B)

Exploring women's reflexive responses to becoming lone mothers revealed how some developed new perspectives once they had become "settled" in their new family situation. For Laura (B), divorce was the start of a highly reflexive journey lasting almost a decade, during which she took pride in becoming independent and completed a university degree:

*"I became very self-aware, a lot of reflection. At the time [of the divorce] it just felt like everything was over and ended when actually it was all just starting really and that was my, the start of my growth and becoming who I am."* Laura (B)

As recounted by two other women in the study, Laura also became more comfortable identifying herself as a "single mum" as she adjusted to a new family situation. Some of Laura's comments suggested that having displayed 'performative' SSL, as examples in previous chapters indicate, her mode of SSL was becoming 'transformative' as she felt less bound by conventional family norms. The fluidity of family life means lone motherhood is often transient (Silva, 1996). Statistically, around half of all lone parents are in a new cohabiting partnership within five years of dissolution of their previous relationship and around 70% within ten (Berrington, 2014). At the time of the interview, Laura was considering moving in with a man she had met at work the previous year. Questioning how she might identify herself in future further illuminates both the complexity of categorisation and role that pride in autonomy and resilience can play in SSL:

*"It's so different to the perception I had initially after the divorce...I was keen to be married and to come across in a certain way in the past, but now I actually prefer to be recognised as a single mum who's made it on her own to being seen as in a relationship."* Laura (B)

Alison offered an example of 'transformative' SSL, having been through a personal reflexive journey which resulted in a dramatic change in her attitude towards her situation. Alison spoke of being highly conscious of media portrayals of single mothers when her ex-husband left to live with someone else five years previously, using the words such as "raw", "painful", "embarrassed" and "failure". From this nadir, she embarked upon a consciously reflexive journey, concurring with observations by Smart and Neale (1999) about post-divorce re-evaluation, which led to new priorities and values. Alison was able to make use of her economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu,

1989) in taking the children abroad for a year for "an adventure" to help ease the adjustment:

*"I needed to find myself because I was very much under his influence...In needed to make that break and find who I wanted to be again and remember the old me that was there before I ever got married and had children and to be brave enough to bring the children up on my own. Because I knew it was going to be difficult." Alison (B)*

In speaking at length about the "fall in status" that accompanied single parenthood in her area, Alison was the only participant who made explicit reference to 'status loss', a characteristic of stigma listed by Link and Phelan (2001). She recounted being "quietly dropped" from her former social circle of affluent couple families and her social life now comprises of family activities with other lone mothers. Whereas media coverage and people's attitudes used to upset her, she said that her "skin is thicker" now she is "settled". Alison displayed a strong 'good mother identity' (May, 2008) when speaking at length about her dedication to her children and building a new life for them after her divorce: "We're all much happier...I can take a bit of pride now in how far I've come." Alison's PEPs (Archer, 2003) are demonstrated in her reflexive determination to move beyond her relationship breakdown:

*"It was very tough but life moves on...It's how you view yourself and if you view yourself as a single mum who's not got a lot of cash and 'poor you and what he's done to you' for the rest of your life, you're never going to get out of that trap." Alison (B)*

In contrast with women who spoke of being "settled" after emerging from difficult situations, Emma described being stuck "in limbo" whilst awaiting her *Decree Absolute* after ending 20 years of physical and mental abuse. Archer (2012) includes divorce in life-changing events that can prompt 'fractured reflexivity' and the effects of trauma were apparent during the interview with Emma (see reflections on interviews p.103). She judged herself negatively as a mother for failing to protect three sons from growing up in a "toxic atmosphere" and had sought counselling services for them. Her reference to "low self-esteem" and her constant rumination on "mistakes" were indicative of the aftermath of domestic abuse (Smart and Neale, 1999). She displayed 'negative' SSL throughout the interview and referred to being "judged" by colleagues and people locally. Her negative SSL despite being better positioned in material and practical terms than most mothers involved in this research illustrates the importance of subjectivity to perceptions of stigma. She had met a new partner but felt this was overshadowed by her past experiences. Emma's comment that her divorce being finalised would be a "turning point" suggests her situation and perspective on it might brighten over time. When asked if she had any future plans, she responded: "To survive. You have to keep hoping and keep going don't you."

## **Family networks and social connections**

Bourdieu (1989) views social capital as networks of bonds, connections and social obligations and analysis of the data showed that extended family networks and social connections with friends were highly significant in mitigating stigma among lone mothers in this study. Social networks tend to be grounded in class, locality and gender (Savage, 2015) and a series of studies (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Mitchell and Green; 2002; Klett-Davies, 2007; Canton, 2015) found this to be especially the case among lone mothers. This section begins by identifying differences in types of social capital between women in Location A and Location B. It then goes on to explore the role of social capital in individual participants' modes of SSL. Drawing on case dynamics, it argues that the process of agential evaluation of social judgement is influenced by the sphere of participants' social connections and geographical mobility.

### **Contrasts in social capital between locations**

Whilst the present research explores stigma in relation to a holistic picture of lone mothers' lives, rather than concentrating on their social capital, comparison of accounts in Location A and Location B broadly reflects work by Gillies and Edwards (2006, cited in Gillies, 2007), who found that working class parents generally had narrow but deep networks of supportive relationships whilst middle class parents had wider, more dispersed and less 'bonded' networks. Savage et al. (2013) focused on the 'bridging' advantages of 'weak' social ties when using social capital as an indicator of class in the Great British Class Survey. However, research involving working class women (Gosling, 2008) and lone mothers (Canton, 2015), contrasts 'bonding capital', as a means of 'getting by', with 'bridging capital', as a means of 'getting on' (Putman, 2000 cited in Gosling, 2008). Drawing on these examples, distinguishing between the two proved useful in examining substantive impacts of both types of social capital in mitigating lone mothers' sense of stigma. Whereas both Gosling (2008) and Canton (2016) found 'bonding' capital was not the 'right' type of social capital to help women out of poverty, it was found to be the right type of social capital to provide many mothers in the present study with the emotional and practical support they needed. There was generally more evidence of 'bonding' capital based around women's extended families on the deprived estate in Location A, whereas more access to 'bridging' activities could be observed in Location B, where women also had access to a wider spatial domain.

### ***Kinship networks and spatial mobility***

The role of families in generating and maintaining social capital is well recognised (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 cited in Gosling, 2008; Raey 2004). The value participants in both locations placed on their parents' emotional and practical support is consistent with Morgan's (1999) emphasis on 'family practices', as opposed to family as an institution. One mother gave the example of her son including his grandparents in his drawing of his family whilst his father was nowhere in the picture. As discussed in the previous section, being embedded in extended family

relations (May, 2004b) could help engender a feeling of being a 'proper family'. Local kinship networks appeared to be especially important for women in Location A, reflecting previous research among less affluent parents (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Rowlingson and McKay, 2002; Gillies, 2007). The majority of women in Location A had grown up locally and had extended family members on the estate, whom they saw on a weekly, if not a daily, basis as indicated in *Table 17* below. The lines between family, friends and social life could be blurred among women in Location A, whose social activities mainly centred around parents, siblings, cousins and tended to include their children. Two women, for example, spoke of "friends", whom they then clarified were cousins.

In stressing the importance of inherited geographical settings, Sayer (2000) draws attention to relative spatial mobility. Duncan and Edwards (1999) point out that lone mothers' spatial mobility might be especially limited due to lack of time, money and transport. This tended to be the case among women in Location A and was especially the case among mothers of younger children.

The data indicates that extended family networks also remain important to women in Location B, although less than half had grown up locally. Two participants had initially gone to live with their parents after their marriages ended, two had moved to the same street as their mothers and more than half of the women in Location B had parents or siblings living in the same town or a nearby town. Participants in this location spoke of emotional support from their parents, even where there was limited face-to-face contact (Mitchell and Green, 2002). Women in B had much wider geographic mobility than those in A. Most had lived in different parts of the region or country and three had lived overseas. They all travelled outside their immediate area either for work or to see friends and relatives elsewhere and had regular holidays in the UK and abroad. Differential levels of cultural capital in the two locations were discussed in Chapter Five. Bourdieu believes that cultural capital can be translated into social capital (1986 cited Reay, 2004; Savage et al., 2013).<sup>30</sup> This appeared to be the case in Location B, where women had higher levels of cultural capital and a wider spatial remit than in A. They were thus better placed to behave agentially in developing and using 'bridging' capital to make new social contacts and expand their social connections or spheres of reference, as shown in *Table 17* below.

*Table 17: Extended family contact by location*

| Location | Grew up locally | Sees extended family weekly | Limited/no contact with parents | Parents abroad/ in other area |
|----------|-----------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| A        | 10              | 9                           | 4                               | 0                             |
| B        | 6               | 7                           | 0                               | 6                             |

<sup>30</sup> Demarcation between cultural and social capital can present difficulties (Savage et al., 2013).

### **Friendship and social life**

It must be acknowledged that participants in this study were specifically recruited as 'lone mothers' and discussion so far has focused on their mother and worker roles; rather than seeing lone motherhood as only one aspect of their lives (May, 2004). This is because maternal and employment roles were found to be the areas where normative expectations and indicators of stigma were most apparent in the data. A number of women spoke of socialising with other adults as "time to just be me". The majority of lone mothers in this study described a limited social life, however, which they attributed to practicalities of lack of time, money and childcare, particularly those with younger children. One woman joked that being a lone mother is "like being on tag" as she never left the house in the evenings. Only a small number of participants expressed a belief that this was due to being 'judged' personally or actively excluded, however. For many of the mothers in Location A, a stated lack of desire to socialise was accompanied by comments that they would feel guilty leaving the children to go out in the evenings. This suggests their limited social life was linked to validating their 'good lone mother' identity.

Whilst still constrained, women in Location B generally had much more active social lives and wider range of social connections than those in Location A, as shown in *Table 18* below. Level of input from children's fathers and grandparents along with finances remained enablers or constraints in their social lives. While family seemed equally important to many of the women in both locations, friendship networks were much more extensive and prominent among women in Location B than those in Location A. Most women in B spoke about a variety of friends and activities that showed their use of 'bridging' capital. Six of the participants in this location had joined organised groups specifically for the purpose of making connections and undertaking social activities with other single parents and their children.<sup>31</sup> Others had forged informal contacts with women in the "same situation", which they regarded as vital in easing a sense of exclusion when social activities locally were oriented around a 'couples culture' (Skeggs, 1997).

*Table 18: Social connections by location*

| Location | Regular social activities with friends | Member of a single parents' group | New non-cohabiting relationship <sup>32</sup> |
|----------|--|-----------------------------------|---|
| A        | 4                                      | 0                                 | 0   |
| B        | 9                                      | 6                                 | 5   |

<sup>31</sup> As discussed in Chapter Four, women in Location B were recruited mainly via social media, including a Facebook page of a single parents' group, which inevitably skewed the sample in this direction. However two women who were recruited via a local social media platform were members of another lone group and women in A who were not in formal groups still had more informal contacts with other lone mothers than women in B.

<sup>32</sup> 'New' relationship in this table refers to a relationship with someone other than the father of the women's children.

## **Social capital, sphere of reference and SSL**

Case study examples are drawn on here to discuss the relationship between participants' position within extended families and wider social networks, or level of social capital, and SSL. Analysis of case dynamics suggests that the process of judgement within particular spheres of reference is key to participants' individual mode of SSL. Those women who felt deeply embedded within a narrow sphere of reference were buffered by validation within that sphere. Those participants who were able to make wider social connections, especially with parents in "the same situation", were better placed to mediate judgements and exclusion from coupled family life. The women who were able to draw on neither 'bonding' nor 'bridging' social capital (Putnam, 2000, cited Gosling, 2008) were most isolated and excluded and displayed 'negative' SSL.

### **Location A**

Carrie, Gemma and Sheila, who spoke of strong family ties and having good friends, were the women in Location A who consistently indicated 'positive' SSL during their interviews. When asked how long she had been "on her own" with her daughter, Carrie, corrected the assumption by stating: "Without the dad, not on my own". Carrie made a clear association between being surrounded by "like-minded people", with close ties to sisters, cousins and friends who are single parents, and her positive experiences of single parenthood. Whilst care is needed not to contribute towards racial stereotyping (May, 2006), Carrie's description of her extended family network is akin to findings among African-Caribbean mothers (Pheonix, 1996; Duncan and Edwards', 1999). She spoke of her grandmother as "very much a matriarch" and said her father and brothers provided male role models for her children. Carrie's account indicated access to 'bonding' effects of kinship and friendship, including spending a lot of time with a lone mother from work who lives nearby. Her job at the Children's Centre also gave her access to wider opportunities of 'bridging' capital, including attending a weekly dance group. She was keen to share the benefits that making social connections can bring:

*"It's massively important to have people surrounding you and outside influences...just to be an adult, just to be a person, to be a woman and not just to be a mum all the time."*

*Carrie (A)*

Like Carrie, Sheila did not express signs of feeling stigmatised, demonstrated 'positive' SSL during her interview, which appeared connected to having high levels of social capital. She had grown up on the estate and spoke of an extensive network there. As her youngest child was 15, she was able to visit friends and participate in community organisations and displayed 'bridging' as well as 'bonding' capital. Sheila was involved in various groups at the local church (although she did not attend services). She took part in activities every night of the week, including volunteering at youth clubs and community groups. As opposed to feeling left out among couples, she described having a "better" social life than when she was married because her ex-husband, "used to whinge if I went out of the house". She believes staying busy is key to her

positive outlook, saying: "I don't have time to mope about".

Ways in which having extended family locally contributed towards Gemma's 'positive' SSL was evident during her interview. Her description suggests strong 'bonding' forms (Putman, 2000, cited Gosling, 2008):

*"I've got a big family we're all close if I ever needed 'owt there's always somebody there for me...never mind all my aunties and so on...My sister's got two [children] a girl the same age as [son] and a boy that's a bit older and they're all like little pals all of them. They all play together every day." Gemma (A)*

Gemma's 'positive' SSL was aided by her sense of "fitting in" locally, having grown up there and speaking of a strong circle of friends and "really friendly neighbours". Her mother babysits once a month, but invoking a 'good' mother identity (May, 2008), she explains that her son is her "priority" now and she would not leave him every weekend to go out socially, "even if I could afford it and had a babysitter."

As with Yardley's (2008) study, most mothers in Location A attributed their limited social life to circumstances and choice, rather than seeing it in terms of exclusion or stigma. Theresa, Debbie and Lucy, who indicated 'defensive' SSL throughout their interviews, had little or no social connections beyond their extended families. As shown in the previous section, relationships with their parents were closely tied to a localised form of normalising judgement (Foucault, 1977) for these women, and their defensive stance seemed to be maintained by remaining within this limited sphere of reference. These women commented that they did not like drinking alcohol and were not interested in going anywhere without their children. As their children were under five, this seemed tied to investment in being a 'good' mother.

Gosling (2008) highlights the 'gendered' nature of social capital and close relationships with their own mothers were crucial to these three women. Theresa, who sees her mother two or three times a week and commented that her mother wants to be "the father figure" to him. Debbie felt lucky to have her family, saying single motherhood must be "horrendous" otherwise. She appeared to prefer deep family ties, rather than extensive social contacts: "I'd rather get a DVD and a take-away and spend time with the family." These cases suggest the women benefit from what might be described as 'emotional capital' (Nowtotny, 1981, cited Reay, 2004), a gendered form of social capital in which women perform 'quasi-therapeutic role'. Lucy had moved next door to her mother, who appears to have instilled a sense of 'bonding' capital in her family: "She brought us up to respect people and do what we can for each other". Lucy had relied on her mother's emotional support in dealing with issues that were outlined above: "I just speak to me mum if I've got problems...she sits and she listens and that's what mums are for." Again, as with other women in Location A, Lucy's investment in her 'good mother' role meant was unable to relax during an extremely rare evening out without her children: "I couldn't settle. I went out

for a meal and I were just like 'I wanna go home'."

The contribution of practical and emotional support from family was highlighted by cases where this was absent, confirming McIntosh's point that lone mothers with few or weak family connections are, 'even more socially disadvantaged' (1996: 155). Unlike cases discussed thus far, where women indicated 'positive' or 'defensive' SSL, a 'cluster of meaning' (Spencer et al., 2014) was discerned among four of the women who displayed 'negative' SSL during their interviews, who did not have extended family or did not view themselves and their children as embedded in a wider family network. Lack of employment and absence of family support seemed to coalesce for Katherine, whose mother had died when she was 14 and father had re-married. Marta, whose family are in Germany, spoke of being isolated. Clare did not grow up on the estate and her comments on not "fitting in" there were discussed in Chapter Five and she was "not close" to her mother but saw aunts in the city centre regularly. Although Julie was comfortable on the estate and had extended family there, she was "not close" to her mother and preferred to, "deal with things on my own". Her negative SSL surrounding not working was discussed in the previous chapter. Like other cases discussed, although she had welcomed her son spending time at a nursery while she was at work she felt too "guilty" to leave him with a babysitter and to go out socially.

Nadirah was the most isolated mother in the sample and her 'negative' SSL has been discussed previously. She had only one friend she spoke to by phone and extremely restricted spatial mobility. She spoke of lack of confidence to go out alone; although her family did not live locally, she feared being spotted by them and had had racist comments directed at her on one occasion in the predominantly white area. Staff at the Children's Centre had encouraged her to take part in this research and to attend young parents' groups. She found being in groups difficult but added: "I know that I'm not doing myself no good staying at home all the time."

Bella was the fifth woman from Location A whose case analysis indicated 'negative' SSL. She had an extensive family network locally and had stayed with her mother and had support from aunts after her marriage ended, reflecting points by Gosling (2008) on the importance of female relatives for women who experience domestic violence. During her interview, it became apparent that the proximity to her family also seemed to engender feelings of being "judged" however. She told of how her mother had been happy to look after her daughters if she went out in the evening when she had worked and been in a relationship, but was now reluctant. Bella's mother's disapproval suggests a need to conform with expectations of feminine 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997):

*"I mean like, if I want to go out one night...and I ask me mum to babysit it's like 'should you be doing that?' When I had a partner I didn't seem to get judged."*

The price of family support in Bella's case seems to be accepting censure. Lack of wider social

connections suggests that having a limited sphere of reference beyond this made it more difficult to reject or resist their judgements. She said: "I feel like I'm judged more with me being on my own". Expanding on this further when questioned, she described a 'couples culture' (Skeggs, 1997) among her sister and other family members:

*"It's awkward because sometimes I don't get invited out if it's all coupley things...with my sister and stuff sometimes it's like 'well do you really want to come coz you'll be on your own'." Bella (A)*

### **Location B**

Women in Location B received support from their parents, but also generally had considerably more access to 'bridging' social capital than women in Location A. While lack of time, money, energy and childcare were cited as barriers to social activities by all women in Location B, the extent to which this impinged upon their SSL varied. A sense of "exclusion" (Goffman; 1990; Link and Phelan; 2001; Scambler, 2009) was much more evident in this location than in Location A. Most of the women in B responded agentially however, in broadening their sphere of reference to develop social connections with women in the 'same situation'.

Moira, who also indicated positive SSL, had moved near her parents after returning to the UK when her marriage ended and she was very grateful that they have been emotionally and practically, as well as financially, supportive. Moira expressed 'positive' SSL throughout her interview and was active in a single parents' group locally. She had a wide range of social contacts and was friends with several mothers from her children's school. She described having a social life without the children as "tricky" however, due to lack of time and money rather than feeling actively excluded. Having joined a choir, for example, she was unable to take part in a performance as she had no childcare:

*"This is my kind of fun thing...that's not study or work that I can do or see people and be not a mum for a while. But it turns out that actually it's not possible." Moira (A)*

Sonia, who also displayed 'positive' SSL, said she had been too stressed at the end of her relationship to be concerned about social life and believed she was hindered practical obstacles: "I don't think it's too much about the erm, what's the word, social stigma". Having lived all over the country and moved to B from a large city, she has a wide sphere of reference and regarded the area as "insular" rather than taking on board local norms and judgements, saying: "I'm too busy to care what people think". She had used 'bridging' capital to join a lone mothers' group, where she had made friends she described as "non-judgemental" and "like-minded". She had also started a new relationship. Unlike mothers in Location A, who spoke about feeling guilty if they went out in the evenings and could not afford childcare, Sonia pays a babysitter one evening a week to give her time to do "something for myself". Unlike some of the women with younger children in Location A quoted above, Sonia did not seem to think this jeopardised her 'good'

mother identity (May, 2008).

Not to be in a couple could be experienced as cultural exclusion (Skeggs, 1997) in Location B. Whereas Bella was the only woman in Location A who made explicit reference to being excluded from events involving couples, this was a common theme among women in Location B, corresponding with the normative nuclear family model discussed above. Duncan and Edwards' (1999) found middle class lone mothers in an affluent suburb of Brighton felt marginalised from the social capital that existed locally among 'traditional' nuclear families around them. This was echoed in the present study. Recalling Goffman's (1990) reference to the 'in-group' and 'out group', most women commented on feeling "left out" when couple families do things together at weekends in particular.

Valerie, whose 'performative' SSL has been discussed previously, said, "people want to spend the weekends with their husbands and that's just how it is". Although Valerie grew up locally and has family nearby, she still experienced lone motherhood as "socially isolating". Valerie behaved agentially in using social media to set up a group for women in similar situations, to "try to get away from the negativity and isolation". This can be understood as drawing on cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989) gained through her education and job as a social worker to enhance her social capital. She referred to what could be deemed 'emotional capital' (Nowtotny, 1981, cited Reay, 2004) in sharing problems within the group, but also enjoyed the opportunities it provided for trips and activities together with their children.

Della gave indicators of 'mixed' SSL during her interview. She regarded her own mother, who was a single parent and now has a successful career, as a role model and her positive attitude to her own career was discussed in the previous chapter. While aware that her family situation is becoming "more regular", she found, "there is still a stigma with certain classes of people around single parents" in the town. She described feeling "embarrassed" going to a parent and toddler group after she first split up with her ex-husband: "There were all these cliquy mums talking about their husbands...so I never went again." Della displayed what might be regarded as 'defensive' SSL, in her response to overhearing her situation being discussed by a group of married mothers at her son's birthday party. She described how, whilst, "quite a confrontational person", she decided to laugh it off as it was her son's party. Having a wide sphere of reference through work helped her to look beyond local coupled families and dismiss such judgements. Joining a single parents' organisation had also enabled her to form friendships with a number of women in the "same situation", who met regularly and had outings with their children.

The principle of homophily could thus be witnessed in Location B as social connections with people in "the same situation" were highly valued. Six women in B were members of single parents' organisations. Those who were not members proactively engaged with other lone mothers. Joanne, for example, was not a member of a formal group but had approached two

lone mothers from her son's nursery. She called them the "single mum's club" and said they felt less outnumbered by couple families when they met up with their children at the park.

Jasmine also gave indicators of 'mixed' SSL, displaying 'performative' SSL in her desire to match up to middle class two parent standards, along with 'transformative' SSL. At times she voiced a tension between the two, which she described as a difference between "head and heart" in wanting to be "normal for my kids' sake" but also having come to question those norms. Disillusionment with the nuclear family norm after her divorce led her develop new social connections and attending a weekly women group had given her a feminist frame of reference from which to question negative judgements. Thus cultural and social capital were entwined in her case. Speaking of "ingrained prejudices", she gave examples of a neighbour telling people she was a "single mother on drugs" when she first moved in and being excluded from social events:

*"I might not get invited to something, my kids might not get asked to this or that...A lot of people don't even realise they're doing it...Because we're women we take responsibility for everything I'd think 'I'm not surprised they've not invited me because I'm not married' rather than thinking 'judgemental wankers what is wrong with you?'."*

Mandy indicated 'negative' SSL and spoke of feeling 'judged' and excluded from the affluent couples culture locally. In contrast with previously discussed cases, she seemed to draw only on this limited sphere of reference, rather than other single parents or people her own age and judged herself accordingly. She had developed relationships with certain mothers from her son's school, but felt excluded by most parents there:

*"There are still some who definitely do deal with me completely differently to how they deal with other people. I mean a lot of the parents at school will get together for Sunday lunch as families, but because I am on my own I won't be included. And I find things like that hard, mainly because I don't want my son to be excluded." Mandy (B)*

## **Conclusion**

The literature review established the hegemonic dominance of the heterosexual two parent model as the 'normal' and symbolically 'legitimate' family form (Foucault, 1979; Barrett and MacIntosh, 1992; Song, 1996; Reekie, 1998) along with discursive constructions of lone motherhood as 'bad' motherhood (Smart, 1996). Whilst Chapter Five detailed participants' *push away* from negative 'single mum' stereotypes, this chapter has shown the counterpoint of a *pull towards* this normative family model was also evident in women's accounts. Parenting norms can be regarded as 'cultural emergent properties', or CEPs (Archer, 2000), which establish a 'proper' family standard against which lone mothers believe their own family is judged.

The first section of this chapter demonstrated how, whilst lone mothers were highly conscious of the 'stereotypical' two parent norm, 'judging the judgement' can be viewed as a key agential mechanism in absorbing, resisting or rejecting stigma. Application of SSL illustrated how mothers' evaluation of their situation was influenced by both localised family norms and differential levels of personal investment in the two parent 'ideal'. Generational changes appear to be occurring and the nationally hegemonic married version of family life held less sway overall in Location A, where participants described lone motherhood as becoming "the norm". This concurs with Foucault's (1977) ideas on structuring of space and surveillance, as applied by McCormack (2004), who found that dominant national discourse carried less weight among lone mothers in poorer neighbourhoods in the USA. The prizing of a caring maternal identity among women indicating 'positive' or 'defensive' SSL also reflects studies involving mothers in working class neighbourhoods (Gillies, 2007; McKenzie, 2015) and Skeggs and Loveday's focus on 'understandings of value, what matters and what counts' (2012: 472). Contrasts within locations were also found, whereby women who had previously been married or in long-term relationships were more likely to feel their family was 'spoilt' and, consequently, indicate 'negative' or 'performative' SSL. Women in Location B, where there was more 'buy in' to a patriarchal family structure overall, commonly experienced a sense of 'difference' in their neighbourhood.

A strength in using the SSL approach to investigate 'degrees' of stigma (Link and Phelan, 2001) is that lone mothers' positive comments on their pride and resilience were captured as positive indicators of personal legitimacy, rather than focusing only on negative experiences. The second section of this chapter showed how analysis of 'modes' of SSL confirms the significance of agency in determining 'which normative evaluations matter' to women's 'legitimate self-worth' (Archer, 2000: 219). Archer recognises evaluation of what people 'care about most' as a key facet of 'personal emergent properties' or PEPs (Archer, 2012: 106); and what participants said they cared about most, regardless of location or situation, was their children. Although participants did not reject the 'good mother' discursive construct (Smart, 1996), a common response lay in meaning-making through exerting their 'good *lone* mother' credentials. Interviews with women in both locations, many of whom were literally 'left holding the baby', underline critiques of 'detraditionalisation' and 'individualisation' (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) in underestimating restrictions that gender and class inequalities place upon reflexive choices for lone mothers (eg: Mitchell and Green, 2002; May 2006; Klett-Davies, 2007; Morris, 2012). Archer's conceptualisation of reflexivity (2007) was useful in recognising women's agency in coping with what were often challenging practical and emotional troubles and embarking upon reflexive journeys. Examples of the dynamic nature of SSL were provided, whereby women indicated 'performative' or 'transformative' SSL and 'judged' themselves by new standards.

The final section of this chapter confirms Duncan and Edwards' view that, 'context is crucial when examining the phenomena of lone motherhood' (1999: 63). The data suggests that stigma can manifest in quite subtle forms of exclusion, rather than direct incidents, with examples of 'funny

looks' from the 'older generation' in Location A and being unthinkingly excluded from social events in Location B. Data analysis considered the extent to which lone mothers are connected to, or excluded from, family and friendship networks, or how social capital (Bourdieu, 1989) impacts on their understanding of leading a 'proper' family life and their mode of SSL. Case examples illustrated how different forms of capital (Reay, 2004; Gillies, 2007) were valuable in mitigating stigma depending upon the social and spatial 'sphere of reference' against which participants felt judged and judged themselves.

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

This thesis has documented research involving lone mothers in two locations in the North of England. The concluding chapter now rounds up the research findings to summarise how evidence presented in the thesis addresses the research aims and adds to existing knowledge of lone mothers' experiences of stigma. It begins by bringing together key empirical findings to respond to the research questions. It provides a model which encapsulates key findings and theoretical understanding of lone mothers' experiences of stigma arising from this study. The chapter describes how the research extends insights into lone mothers' experiences of stigma and makes a significant and original contribution to sociological knowledge. It briefly evaluates the quality of the research and considers strengths and limitations of approaches that were taken and offers suggestions for taking forward ideas that have been developed.

#### Responding to the research questions

Chapters One to Four established why the research topic is important and how it was approached. Chapters Five to Seven addressed the research questions through presentation and discussion of findings from semi-structured interviews with 26 lone mothers. These findings can be summed up as follows:

***- To what extent are lone mothers in the contemporary British context still affected by stigmatisation?***

Based on data collected in the two locations, there is evidence that lone mothers remain affected by stigma to a significant extent. Having outlined theories on *de jure* reproductive legitimacy and the chronology of stigmatisation of lone mothers, it can be argued that a legacy of historical stigma persists in the everyday lives of most women who took part in this research. Principal indicators of stigma observed among participants were perceptions of: labelling; stereotyping; difference; exclusion; inferiority; prejudice and adverse social judgement. These indicators reflect characteristics of stigma cited by Goffman (1990), Link and Phelan (2001) and Scambler (2009). Women's accounts did not reflect Goffman's emphasis on shame, however. Using SSL proved more appropriate in investigating 'degrees' of stigma (Link and Phelan, 2001) among a diverse sample of mothers than Goffman's abject depiction of 'spoilt identity' implies. It must be stressed that, along with women's comments on stigmatisation, the data also showed positive aspects of lone motherhood. Analysis captured incidences of women expressing self-worth and

pride in their children, autonomy and resilience and valuing their kinship networks and social connections. Furthermore, whilst aware of social stigmatisation of lone motherhood generally, a minority of the women were unaffected by this personally.

Labelling was found to be a prominent facet of lone mothers' perceptions of stigma. Ambivalence towards terminology was clear in that a number of women used the terms "single mother" or "single mum" privately, but were reticent about doing so publicly. Only small number of women would happily introduce themselves as a "single mum", supporting points by May (2010) about agential dis-identification from the category. Labelling was strongly linked to media stereotyping by all participants. Examples of lone mothers' absorption and reproduction of media misrepresentation in this research confirm that it can amount to a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) that is classed and gendered (McRobbie, 2004; Lawler, 2005). Media stereotyping was a source of stigma that was cited universally by participants, who commonly voiced anger at its detrimental impact, as illustrated in Chapter Five. Negative discourse, and its circulation via social media, was clearly associated with participants' frequent comments on 'being judged'.

Participants did not believe media coverage reflects the reality of their diverse circumstances, as argued almost two decades ago by Atkinson et al. (1998), suggesting lack of progress towards more realistic cultural representations. If, as Archer (2014) argues, beliefs and ideologies are lodged in a 'cultural archive', then historical attitudes, attacks on single mothers during underclass debates and recent incarnations of 'chav mums' and 'benefit scroungers' (Tyler, 2008; 2011) seem to have been lodged firmly in that archive. Analysis of interview data highlighted eagerness to emphasise their work ethic among women in both locations. This is discussed in Chapter Six and concurs with perspectives on the 'cultural political economy of welfare disgust' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015). Bottero (2011) writes of taxpayers in medieval villages making 'rough music' outside of the houses of unwed mothers they saw as a financial burden and it might be argued that reality television now serves this function. In this context, those women who were not working generally experienced stigma to the greatest extent, as covered more fully below.

Evidence from the interviews also suggests that a historical 'hierarchy of maternal legitimacy' (Song, 1996; Carabine, 1996) has persisted, as discussed in Chapter Five. In their anxiety to resist prejudice, most participants reproduced stigmatising discourse and ranked their deservingness of moral approbation and public resources according to: route to lone motherhood, relationship history; age and work ethic. Work orientation among participants in the contemporary context appears much stronger than those involved in studies some 20 years ago (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Klett-Davies, 2007), suggesting that political emphasis on worker citizenship (Haux, 2012) has increased normative expectations upon lone mothers to be 'breadwinners'.

This research found that lone mothers' feelings of stigmatisation are often compounded by idealisation of 'good' motherhood in a married, heterosexual nuclear family (Foucault, 1979; Barrett and MacIntosh, 1992; Smart, 1996). Participants were anxious to compensate for perceived inferiority though displaying what can be described as 'good *lone* mother' credentials, as discussed in Chapter Seven. Some incidences of direct interpersonal stigma were reported by participants in this research. Disapproving looks and comments were much more rare among mothers from a broader range of ages in this sample, however, than in studies involving young mothers (Yardley, 2008; Ponsford, 2011). Examples from the data show how some women challenged disapproval expressed by 'the older generation'. Although growing family diversity is changing normative expectations (with the introduction of a single parent family emoticon (Barrie, 2016) a lighthearted example of this), participants' experiences suggest this is occurring at a generational pace. With reference to 'feedback mechanisms' in Archer's morphogenic/static model (Archer, 1996; 2012), stigmatisation can arguably be viewed as negative feedback on non-normative family forms.

Stigmatisation is also occurring unevenly, the data suggests. The research demonstrates how lone mothers' experiences of stigma varied greatly according to personal circumstances, social class and location, confirming Pulkingham et al.'s (2010) view that acceptance of lone motherhood is linked to social and economic position. Analysis of agential and structural factors that contributed towards individual participants' rejection, resistance and absorption of stigma, and hence the extent to which they are subjectively affected by stigma, is addressed by responding to the next research question.

#### ***– How do agential and structural factors affect lone mothers' experiences of stigma?***

Chapter Three discussed the approach taken in exploring agential and structural factors affecting lone mothers' experiences of stigma. This approach uses Archer's (2000; 2003; 2007) conceptualisation of agency/structure interplay and SSL as an analytical tool. The most significant factors that commonly affected women's experiences have been discussed in the previous three chapters. In summary, key factors that can be described as cultural emergent properties (CEPs) were: political discourses of deservingness, cultural stereotyping of 'single mums on benefits' and two parent family norms. Key factors that can be described as structural emergent properties (SEPs) were: government policies enshrining worker citizenship and benefit conditionality, local labour markets and financial situation. The most significant personal and socio-spatial factors were: age, relationship history, local reproductive norms, extended family support or knowing people in the same situation.

Many of the women felt judged and de-legitimated for a situation over which they had no control and engaged agentially in 'a struggle against unjustifiable judgment', as identified by Skeggs and Loveday (2012: 472). Exploring participants' personal emergent properties, or PEPs, revealed that their common agential responses to these factors were: 'meaning-making' in

distancing from stereotypes; hierarchising themselves in relation to other lone mothers; emphasising their work ethic; and voicing pride in their 'good mother' role and personal resilience. Women also took instrumental action in seeking work, pursuing education or deciding to work even if it left them no better off financially in order to avoid benefits stigma. This reflects Scambler's (2009) inclusion of anticipation of stigma as an effect or indicator of stigmatisation. Comparing experiences revealed significant contrasts in participants' class position, which can be viewed in terms of SEPs, and access to resources between the two locations. This is further discussed below.

Case analysis considered each woman's subjective perception of stigma, agential response to stigma and relevant factors in her rejection, resistance and absorption of stigma and determined her resulting 'mode' of SSL. Whether participants were working or not was the most significant structural factor affecting experiences of stigma overall and there was a clear association between un/employment and SSL, as shown in Chapter Six. Women who were in work tended to display self-worth and 'positive' or 'performative' SSL, while those who were reliant on benefits tended to feel 'judged', internalise that judgement and display 'negative' SSL. Participants in what might be regarded as the most stigmatised situations structurally did not necessarily indicate the greatest degree of stigma subjectively however. Certain participants prioritised their 'good mother' role and displayed 'defensive' SSL in asserting their legitimate claim to benefits, rather than absorbing negative social judgements. The degree to which women experience stigma therefore varied according to both their situation and their agential perspective on that situation.

Application of SSL in Chapter Seven showed how women's judgement of their family form as 'proper' or 'spoilt' was influenced by their relationship history, along with local family norms, which are discussed below. Participants commonly expressed cynicism about gender relations and many had come to enjoy their autonomy in living alone with their children. Most women appeared to hold largely traditional views on family life overall however. They stressed that they did not choose lone motherhood and would have preferred to be bringing their children up in a 'normal' family. Only three participants made any reference to feminist perspectives. There was scant evidence in this research of reflexive lifestyle choices suggested by the individualisation thesis (Giddens, 1992), confirming findings in previous studies (Mitchell and Green, 2002; Klett-Davies, 2007; Morris, 2012). One case was a strong example of 'transformative' SSL as the participant had developed a new perspective since her divorce, whilst others voiced tensions between transformative aspirations and still judging their family situation according to normative expectations.

Archer's (2007) perspective on reflexivity was useful in examining how participants could be reflexive whilst also structurally constrained to varying extents. People's evaluation of what they 'care about most', 'which normative evaluations matter' (2003: 219) and 'judgement about what

they find worthwhile' (Archer, 2012: 106) are key facets of Archer's description of PEPs. The previous three chapters have given examples of participants' agential mediation of norms surrounding two-parent family ideology, normalising judgement (Foucault, 1977) and the worker model of citizenship. Agency/structure interplay might therefore be seen to be occurring through the process of the women in this study judging 'what matters' to them personally, using what resources they have to achieve it, and rejecting, resisting or absorbing stigma accordingly. Indeed, it must be recognised that feelings about being in a stigmatised category might be a low priority among women dealing with more pressing demands. Their neighbours' opinions might simply 'not matter' to mothers with a wider sphere of reference, whilst mattering intensely to some of those who are in a relatively advantaged financially but are excluded from activities involving wealthier couples around them. The role of 'judgement of judgement' as a mechanism in lone mothers' mediation of stigma is further elaborated and illustrated visually in *Figure 4: Understanding lone mothers' mediation of stigma as a process of 'judging the judgement'* which follows (p.222).

#### **- What is the significance of social class and spatial location in lone mothers' experiences of stigma?**

This study set out to explore what makes a difference in lone mothers' experiences of stigma. Purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012) enabled commonalities and differences in experiences of women in diverse situations and contrasting locations to be compared, as outlined in Chapter Four. Evidence from this research indicates that social class and location are highly significant in lone mothers' experiences of stigma. The issues of place and class were approached simultaneously and there were correlations between spatial location, levels of economic, cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu, 1989) and women's responses when asked to identify their social class. There was a reluctance to identify with a particular social class among most women in Location A, whilst most women in Location B saw their class as 'mixed' and some as 'middle class', as discussed in Chapter Five. The reluctance of women in A to identify with a class reinforces arguments as to the effects of class de-legitimation (Atkinson, 2012; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012; Tyler, 2013; McKenzie, 2015). It also illustrates the relationship between people's possession of capitals and willingness to discuss social class (Savage, 2015).

Application of SSL revealed that although all of the women involved in this study behaved agentially in mediating stigma and access to capitals did not automatically dictate subjective experiences of stigma, it did position some participants much more favorably than others to negotiate stigma. This research offers evidence to support arguments by Skeggs and Loveday (2012), who emphasise presences and absence of capitals in people's ability to 'perform' or 'defend' their legitimacy in a 'climate of judgement' (2012: 473). The data reveals how women who identified their social class as 'mixed' and displayed 'performative' SSL deployed cultural capital to resist cultural stereotyping of 'single mums' as working class and on benefits, as

discussed in Chapter Five. That chapter also offers examples of mothers who judged themselves according to class expectations they were ill-equipped to meet, resulting in 'negative' SSL.

Dermott and Pomati (2016) question whether lone parents are only positioned as problematic if they are reliant on state support. Overall, the research suggests that being on benefits is more significant to women's SSL than being a lone mother *per se*. This recalls arguments as to the patriarchal, material base to historical stigmatisation of lone mothers (e.g. Reekie; 1998; Carabine, 2001), discussed in Chapter Two. The data shows how cultural capital in the form of education among mothers in Location B was used to secure work that could be balanced with childcare. Being in work was then 'converted' into economic capital. The study also demonstrates that the emotional effects of class de-legitimation led many women in Location A to judge themselves harshly for being dependent on benefits despite limited job opportunities locally. A sense of financial inferiority affected the SSL of some mothers in Location B, where they felt compelled to 'perform' against middle class parenting standards.

Distinction between macro and micro constructs (Burr, 2003) proved useful in considering the significance of spatial location during this research. Women commonly drew upon nationally hegemonic discourse as their frame of reference when discussing their perception of benefits stigma and emphasizing their work orientation, as discussed in Chapter Six. Local norms were the common frame of reference when discussing family forms, however, as discussed in Chapter Seven. Lone motherhood appeared to be considered less acceptable in Location B, where married, two parent families were more prevalent. In their analysis of social legitimacy, Johnson et al., argue that legitimacy, 'constructs the object as consistent with cultural norms and beliefs and values that are presumed to be shared in a local situation' (2006: 57). The correlation between reproductive behaviour and participants' perceptions of local attitudes towards marriage and single parenthood in the sample reinforces critiques of Malinowski's (1930) functionalist 'principle of legitimacy'. It is not possible to 'prove' any of the specific critical perspectives on the origins of familial legitimacy (see Chapter Two), nor was that the aim of this research. The value of critical perspectives on the origins of legitimacy is, however, supported by the data. Excerpts from women's accounts indicate that judgement of reproductive legitimacy is contextual according to place as well as time and culture (Foucault, 1977; Hendrix, 1996). Whilst sexual morality was emphasised by women in Location A, the higher incidence of marriage in Location B, where people are generally more wealthy, could be interpreted as supporting Engels' (1988) argument as to the material roots of reproductive legitimacy. Millett's (1990) challenge to the principle of legitimacy also appears well-founded in light of evidence from this study of differences in mothers' perception of stigma according to their personal investment in the patriarchal family form.

Findings illustrating the significance of local social networks in this research support those from Duncan and Edwards' (1999) comparative research among lone mothers. Case examples in

Chapter Seven illustrated how different forms of social capital were valuable in mitigating stigma and depended upon the social and spatial 'sphere of reference' against which participants felt judged and judged themselves. Some women in what might be objectively viewed as stigmatised situations were bolstered by extended family support, as found in previous studies (Yardley, 2008; Ponsford, 2011) and displayed 'defensive' SSL.

### **Lone mothers' mediation of stigma as a process of 'judging the judgement'**

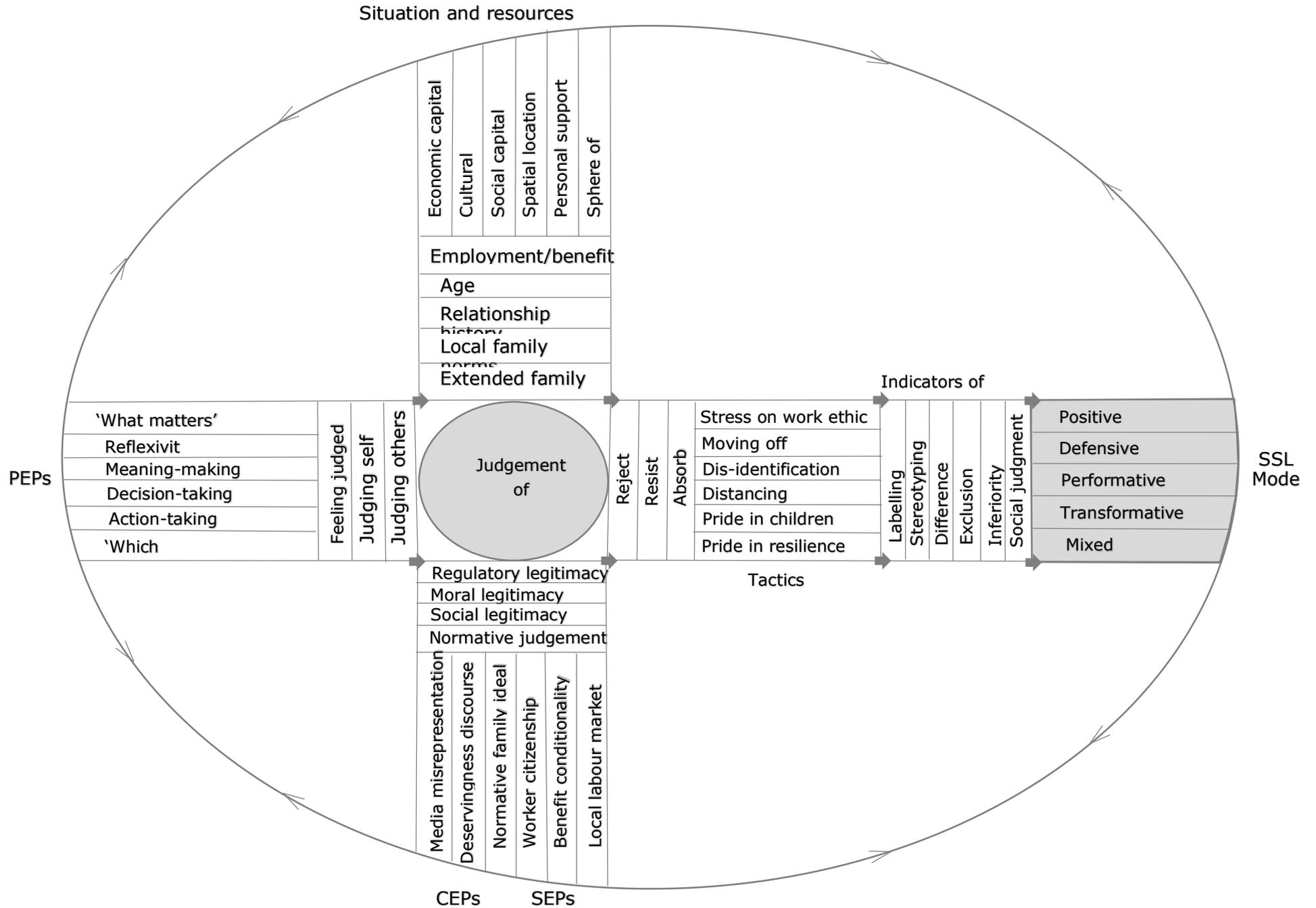
*Figure 4: Understanding lone mothers' mediation of stigma as a process of 'judging the judgement'* helps clarify theoretical interpretation of lone mothers' experiences of stigma arising from analysis of the data. Chapter Four described the role of 'retroduction' in seeking out processes underlying empirical observations (Bhaskar, 2015; Sayer, 2000; Danermark et al., 2001), as illustrated in *Figure 3: Lone motherhood research as an iterative cycle*. Working backwards from the 'modes' of SSL designated from participants' accounts helped investigate processes underlying their experiences of stigma. As discussed in the methodology chapter, judgement was a prominent indicator of stigma during the research, with women making frequent references to 'being judged', judging themselves and, in some cases, voicing judgements of others. Analysing case dynamics suggests a process of evaluative judgement or 'judging the judgment' underpins lone mothers' rejection, resistance or absorption of stigma. Evidence of this process at work has been demonstrated in excerpts from women's interviews throughout the three previous chapters. Importantly, 'judgement of judgement' reflects not only passivity in 'being judged' but the agential act of evaluating external judgement and de-legitimation. Judgement is not just a top down process, according to Skeggs (2005). 'Judgement of judgment' might therefore be described as the point of interaction between agency and structure in lone mothers' mediation of stigma.

Concepts are 'words that describe', whilst 'theories' are 'links or models that explain relationships', according to Layder (1998: 73-120). Where the 'prism of legitimacy' set out the conceptual framework that was used to address the research questions and interpret the data, *Figure 4* illustrates a theoretical model, which has been developed to suggest relationships between key concepts and variables (Leshem and Trafford, 2007; Casanave and Li, 2015) that have been discussed in this thesis. The model illustrates how, 'the interplay between pre-existent structures...and people, possessing distinct causal powers and properties of their own, results in contingent yet explicable outcomes' (Carter and New, 2004: 6).

*Figure 4* encapsulates those CEPs and SEPs that have been identified as key factors in mitigating or exacerbating women's sense of stigma, discussed in previous chapters and summarised above. It also breaks down PEPs into elements and tactics that were found to be relevant in mediating stigma. Analysis of the data revealed how personal position and resources at participants' disposal influenced their capacity to reject, resist or absorb stigma. Key indicators of stigma and tactics in mediating it are included, along with resultant 'modes' of SSL. Case

examples in this thesis have evidenced how lone mothers' individual sense of SSL can be affected by a mis-alignment between judgement of 'what matters' to them personally and their situation or resources. Access to economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1989) and personal support from extended families and people in the same situation are thus indicated as factors affecting lone mothers' mediation of stigma. Looking at processes, rather than focusing only on variables, is therefore helpful in understanding experiences of mothers in diverse situations.

Figure 4: Understanding lone mothers' mediation of stigma as a process of 'judging the judgement'



## **Demonstrating the contribution to knowledge**

This research has considered the lived experiences of lone mothers in a socio-political climate of welfare reform and heightened benefits stigma. Its findings are of value in extending understanding of issues affecting the stigmatisation of lone mothers in the contemporary British context. While the empirical findings, conceptual tools and methodological approach taken in this research are inter-related, they can be separated out in order to demonstrate its threefold contribution to knowledge.

### ***Empirical contribution***

Looking firstly at the empirical contribution of this study, the foregoing summary of findings has addressed research questions concerning the extent to which lone mothers experience stigma; the role of agency/structure dynamics; and the significance of spatial location and social class in those experiences. These findings respond to a gap in knowledge by taking a comparative approach and recruiting women from a more diverse range of backgrounds and situations, whereas most previous research has tended to focus on mothers who are young, on benefits or in deprived areas. Edwards and Alexander (2011) describe difficulties in recruiting middle class lone mothers as research participants some twenty years ago for Duncan and Edwards' (1999) research. The widespread adoption of social media in the interim period helped facilitate access to a wider sample of participants in this study. The ages of women who took part ranged between 19 and 54. They had between one and five children aged between eight months and 15 years old. Some were highly qualified and worked in well-paid jobs, while others have no qualifications and have never been in paid work. Ex-partners were still heavily involved in certain cases whilst there was no paternal contact in others. Some participants were well supported by extended family networks while others were bringing up children completely alone. Some women travelled extensively and had active social lives, whereas others had few social contacts and rarely left their neighbourhood.

The comparative nature of this work is of value in enabling 'social distribution of perspectives' (Flick, 2012) to be investigated in relation to individual circumstances, location and access to capitals (Bourdieu, 1989). Women in Location A commented that they were pleased that the research was not only concentrating on a deprived area, whilst women in Location B said they had been motivated to take part because lone motherhood was "not the done thing" locally and they wanted to share their views. A poll by Gingerbread (2014) found that three out of four single parents experienced stigma and findings from the present study offer qualitative depth to supplement such statistical information. Conducting semi-structured interviews with a locational cross-section produced new empirical knowledge by enabling comparisons to be made on matters including social class identification, access to employment and local reproductive norms. Analysis of case dynamics has offered insight into processes occurring at the individual level

through comparing experiences *within* the locations. The research is of value not only in exploring the everyday lives of lone mothers in different situations, but also in exploring their perceptions of stigmatisation in relation to cultural, structural, material and socio-spatial contexts.

The sample therefore offers a distinct empirical contribution to knowledge in uncovering the extent to which women from different circumstances and backgrounds feel affected by stigma, whereas a substantial body of studies has concentrated primarily on stigma among young mothers (e.g. Yardley, 2008; Ponsford, 2011; Ellis-Sloan, 2014; Wenham, 2016). This research extends knowledge in elaborating upon manifestation and mediation of stigma among mothers in more diverse situations. Of particular note in doing so is the extension of exploration of factors affecting absorption or neutralisation of stigma among young mothers by Yardley (2008) and Wenham (2016) to mothers of a broader age-range. Further examples of note, where this work reinforces existing research include those studies showing: the significance of local contexts (Duncan and Edwards); and limits to individualisation arguments in lone mothers' lives (Klett-Davies, 2007; Morris, 2012); and tensions in balancing work and childcare (Davies 2012; Haux 2012; Millar and Ridge, 2013). Based on the data, it can be argued that further welfare benefit conditionality (DWP, 2013; 2017) and policies that neglect to understand that ability to act agentially is contextual (Wright, 2012; Davies, 2012), can lead to self-blame and exacerbate stigma. A particularly useful contribution to knowledge from the present research lies in using Archer's (2000; 2003; 2007) conceptual separation of agency and structure to enable the interplay of agential and structural factors to be subject to more detailed investigation. Doing so has provided evidence as to *how* lone mothers suffer stigmatisation and attempted to unpick the *why* by considering factors that are most salient in contributing to or mitigating stigma, which are summarised above.

Briefly outlining where findings from the data collected are at variance with previous studies further demonstrates its contribution to knowledge. There were five main areas where differences could be seen. Firstly, in drawing on a more wide-ranging sample, this research suggests that distancing from stereotypes can be more complex than studies which highlight 'othering' as a part of women's tactics to distance themselves from stereotypes (Phoenix, 1996; Mitchell and Green, 2002; McCormack, 2004; Clavering, 2010). Analysis showed that participants in this study did reproduce stereotypes but tended to position themselves in relation to an image rather than an actuality. Examples of empathy and neutrality towards lone mothers are cited in Chapter Five, in addition to occasional incidences of derisory 'othering'.

The strong evidence of work orientation found among lone mothers in both locations in this research also suggests that shifts in the policy and discourse environment have increased lone mothers' emphasis on employment since two key studies conducted in the late 1990s (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Klett-Davies, 2007). Participants in the present study did not see

employment and childcare as intrinsically incompatible and were keen to work, as discussed in Chapter Six. This is a difference from authors who found that many of their research participants prioritised their maternal role and either viewed employment as detrimental to their children (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) or wished to pursue education or 'alternative lifestyles' whilst caring for children (Klett-Davies, 2007).

Fourthly, this study demonstrates how participants displayed good *lone* mother credentials. The good lone mother role is a development upon studies which have shown that lone mothers (e.g. Klett-Davies, 2007; May, 2008) and young mothers (e.g. Mitchell and Green, 2002; Yardley 2008; Ponsford, 2011; Wenham, 2016) respond to two parent norms by emphasising their 'good mother' identity. Chapter Seven describes how most women in this study took pride in being "mum and dad", fulfilling the breadwinner role, doing a "good job" with their children and putting their children first. Whilst only a slight variation on the 'good mother identity', unpacking what being a good lone mother entails helps underscore how participants in study believe their role differs from partnered motherhood.

Finally, in building upon feminist application of Bourdieu's capitals (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 1998; Gillies, 2007), this work has uncovered the significance of particular forms of social capital for lone mothers for different purposes in different contexts. Work by Gosling (2008) and Canton (2015) distinguishes between 'bridging' and 'bonding' types of social capital (Putman, 2000 cited in Gosling, 2008). Both conclude that bonding capital is not necessarily beneficial in helping women in deprived class areas move out of poverty. The present research found that bonding capital, in the form of family ties was highly significant for young mothers in Location A, as exemplified in Chapter Seven. By contrast, bridging capital enabled mothers in Location B to make connections with women in the same situation.

### ***Conceptual contribution***

In addition to the substantive research questions, a further aim was to develop a means of researching lone mothers' experiences of stigma that did not assume or reinforce stigma. To this end, the development of SSL can be viewed as an original, significant and also a practical contribution to sociological research. SSL offers a valuable analytical tool to aid examination of attitudes *to* and experiences *of* lone mothers. The specific ways in which it responds to a conceptual need are discussed in Chapter Three. The specific ways in which it responds to an analytical need are discussed in Chapter Four. Using SSL extends existing knowledge in the sense that it accommodates the complexity of competing demands within lone mothers' lives, and offers a conceptual approach which has potential for examining stigma in a more nuanced way. In using agency/structure interplay in a way that examines a de-legitimation/personal legitimacy dialectic, as demonstrated in this thesis, it also contributes towards critiquing, rather than reproducing, stigmatising.

Crucially, SSL did not foreground stigma as a starting point for investigation. Rather, it aimed to take a multi-dimensional approach in exploring subjective experiences and features that contribute towards or militate against experiences of stigma. This thesis demonstrates its value in aiding analysis of agential mediation of stigma in relation to women's personal, spatial and social situation, enablements and constraints and levels of 'capitals'. A strength in using this approach to investigate 'degrees' of stigma (Link and Phelan, 2001) is that lone mothers' comments on their pride and resilience were captured as positive indicators of personal legitimacy, rather than focusing only on negative experiences. SSL facilitated comparison *between* and *within* locations by breaking down women's situations, perceptions of stigmatisation of lone mothers generally, perceptions of personal stigmatisation and legitimacy and their responses and resources available to them in negotiating 'judgement'.

### ***Methodological contribution***

The methodological approach taken in this study is a contribution to knowledge to the extent that, while empirical application of critical realist principles is growing (Cruickshank, 2011) this remains relatively limited in qualitative sociological studies involving women, compared with feminist and constructionist approaches. This work is original in using the critical realist tools of 'abduction' and 'retroduction' (Sayer, 2000), as illustrated in *Figure 3: Iterative Design Cycle* (see p.89) to explore stigmatisation of lone motherhood. As quoted in Chapter One, Becker believes comparison can help generate theories by uncovering 'deeper processes' (2010, cited Silverman, 2011: 62). Application of abduction and retroduction, along with Framework Analysis (Spencer et al., 2014a; 2014b) and case dynamics analysis (Miles and Hubberman, 1994) in ways described in Chapter Four, helped identify participants' individual modes of SSL as: 'positive', 'negative', 'performative', 'defensive' and 'transformative'. It furthermore helped in working backwards from manifestations of SSL to seek out processes beneath empirical observations (Bhaskar, 2015). This led to identification of 'judgement of judgement' as a key mechanism, as detailed in the methodology chapter.

## **Evaluating the research**

The themes of legitimacy and judgement have been discussed extensively in this thesis. In evaluating the research, it is therefore important to reflect on the 'legitimacy' of the knowledge that has been gained, the standards by which it can be judged and how the work meets those standards.

### ***Logic and legitimacy of knowledge***

A brief recap on critical realist knowledge claims is helpful in clarifying what might be regarded as legitimate knowledge from this meta-theoretical perspective. Firstly, accepting that all knowledge is partial, fallible and provisional (Sayer, 1992; 2000) means any knowledge claims must be couched in caveats. Secondly, coherence is favoured over correspondence as a basis

for argumentation (Bhaskar, 2015). This means seeking out processes underlying empirical observations rather than Humean regularities in the data (Sayer, 2000). With reference to the question of what can be inferred from the sample (Bryman, 2012), it must therefore be stressed that processes have been considered in a local sense and are regarded as context specific rather than generalisable (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). As human behaviour is chaotic and the social world is a vast 'open' system (Sayer, 1992), processes cannot be isolated and causality is complex as well as temporal and spatial, all of which means explanations always remain 'open'. Furthermore, having attended to realists' debates about 'contingency' and 'necessity', this thesis follows authors who accept contingency rather than demanding nomic necessity (Carter and New, 2004; Williams and Dyer, 2004). Finally, a reflexive position of 'theorised subjectivity' (Letherby, 2013) accepts that knowledge is partial and situated as well as fallible and contingent.

Notwithstanding these (extensive) caveats as to what this research *cannot* infer, regularities can be observed and mechanisms can be identified that go, 'beyond sheer association' (Spencer et al., 2014a: 274). The findings from this study have been encapsulated as a theoretical model in *Figure 4: Understanding lone mothers' mediation of stigma as a process of 'judging the judgement'* above. This proposes that 'judgement of judgement' is a pivotal mechanism in lone mothers' mediation of stigma, as discussed. Whilst all knowledge is fallible, it is not all equally fallible and some knowledge has '(relative) practical adequacy' (Sayer, 1992: 205). Layder (1998) believes that theory can be evaluated 'according to the extent to which it sheds light on the empirical world' (1998: 95). I believe that this offers a theoretical understanding of the research findings which has, in Skeggs' words, 'explanatory purchase' (1997: 24). Clarifying agential and structural elements in this way helps promote a 'deeper understanding of phenomena' (Danermark et al., 2001: 148) of stigmatisation of lone motherhood. In addition to its practical adequacy, this interpretation of the data holds value in having emerged from women's own words and offering resonance in the 'real world' (Robson, 2011), as touched on below. These knowledge claims are supported by being grounded in quality standards that are now discussed.

### ***Evaluating quality***

Having considered questions as to appropriate evaluation criteria (Bryman, 2012) and consulted a number of 'checklists', Silverman (2011) offered the most relevant standards against which to assess the quality of this work in relation to the meta-theoretical principles adopted and the research aims. These criteria are: importance of topic; contribution to existing research and theoretical debates; logical reasoning; clarity of writing and argumentation; conceptual rigour through explicit specification of concept and theoretical perspectives; methodological rigour through use of appropriate methods, appropriate and sufficient data; and rigorous and innovative analysis (Silverman, 2011: 355).

The importance of topic was established at the outset of the thesis and the women's stories confirm the importance of extending knowledge on the topic and of taking a critical stance in doing so. The contribution to existing research and theoretical debates has been demonstrated over preceding chapters and summarised in this chapter. Ideas that have been articulated in this thesis, along with foregoing discussion, indicate how 'logical reasoning' and clarity of argumentation have been addressed. Pains have been taken in writing this thesis to make what were, at times, complex ideas as clear as possible. Presenting what was an iterative process in a linear structure was challenging. The thesis format also, necessarily, breaks women's narratives down into thematic chapters and this sometimes felt like fitting people's complex lives into neat abstract boxes.

Clarity of writing and argumentation also relates to evaluation of 'conceptual rigour', as required in Silverman's (2011) list above. The critical realist approach demands 'careful conceptualisation' (Sayer, 1992). Separating ontology from epistemology means accepting that social phenomena including power relations, class and patriarchy, exist independently of concepts, discourses and beliefs used to identify them, which means the sociologist's role is to 'tease out' that identification (Fleetwood, 2005). Chapter Four describes how concepts were teased out using an *Iterative Research Cycle* design. This meant a Provisional Conceptual Framework was adapted and refined 'in dialogue with the data' (Layder, 1998). This resulted in the version of the 'prism of legitimacy' and 'SSL' framework, which is set out at the end of Chapter Three (see *Figures 1 and 2*).

On more practical matters, the evaluation criteria call for research to draw on 'appropriate and sufficient data'. Bryman (2012) suggests 20-30 as a minimum sample size and Baker and Edwards (2012) give pointers on 'how many qualitative interviews is enough'. Conducting 26 interviews offered an appropriate balance between providing sufficient breath of situations and perspectives to identify trends and enable sufficient 'depth, nuance and complexity' (Mason, 2002: 121) in analysis without being overwhelming. Silverman's criteria also judges research quality according to 'use of appropriate methods' and 'rigorous and innovative analysis'. As discussed in the methodology chapter, semi-structured interviews offered the most appropriate data collection methods and excerpts from interviews have evidenced arguments made in the findings chapters. In accordance with a position of 'theorised subjectivity' (Letherby, 2013), I acknowledged an inevitable bias ensuing from my personal and academic perspective, but have treated the data in as rigorous a way as possible through systematic analysis. Chapter Four details how three stages of analysis became gradually more interpretive. Initial thematic coding stayed close to verbatim data. Framework Analysis matrices offered transparent analytical building blocks (Spencer et al., 2014a). The analysis was also innovative in looking at case dynamics to uncover women's modes of SSL and processes at work in participants' subjective negotiation of stigma. Thematic analysis would have been appropriate and possibly a less demanding option in certain ways, but I believe that also analysing case dynamics offered additional insights in uncovering and evidencing 'judgement of judgement'.

## **Resonance**

Having outlined how the research responds to knowledge claims and meets the selected quality criteria, briefly noting the resonance of the focus on 'judgement' supports its contribution to knowledge. The theme arose from the participants' accounts and seems to have resonance in the contemporary context. I have now become sensitised to its use in people's speech, blogs, in newspaper columns and television dramas. 'Judgement' was a prominent theme in a recent *BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour* series (Healey, 2017), which featured interviews with lone mothers in a range of situations and highlighted the persistence of stigma. Arguments about 'judging the judgement', self-judgement and standards people feel judged against are therefore relatively easy to communicate when communicating findings of this research in lay terms. During an informal presentation and discussion of the research findings with women in a lone mothers' group, they confirmed that judgement was a prominent theme in their lives and stressed the practical and emotional value of having 'non-judgmental' friends in the 'same situation'.

## **Limitations**

Whilst I believe the research has been conducted thoroughly and competently, as a novice researcher with a finite time and wordcount, there will be inevitable theoretical oversimplifications, empirical compromises and analytical ellipses. I am also aware that another researcher might have approached the research questions quite differently. A feminist constructionist approach would have sat comfortably with my own values, enabled more extensive use of feminist insights and avoided challenges in synthesising these influences with critical realist influences (Parr, 2015), which were discussed in Chapter Four. Drawing on critical realist sources did, however, expand the contribution to knowledge offered by this research, as shown in the foregoing discussion.

While the sample provided sufficient and appropriate data, there were some limitations in the sample composition. Scott et al., (2010) point out that examining intersectionality is not always possible, despite its appeal. Although the sample reflected the proportion of people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds in two predominantly white areas, this did not enable any meaningful examination of the role of ethnicity or intersection of disadvantages in this study. Ethnicity is referred to as relevant when discussing specific women's cases. The three women in question offered interesting perspectives in coming from very different backgrounds and situations and their contrasting experiences of stigma have been discussed. Women who took part in interviews referred only to relationships with male partners and sexuality was not within the specific scope of the study. While two women had made a decision to go it alone when they found out they were pregnant, none of the participants had actively set out to be lone parents. The comments of one participant on her parents' religion affecting their views on her becoming pregnant whilst not married are included. Religion was not otherwise mentioned by the participants in relation to stigma in any way. Targeted recruitment was necessary for practical

purposes, but the impact of foregrounding that aspect of women's lives, rather than looking at it as just one aspect of their lives (May, 2004), must be acknowledged.

While comparison enables conditions that promote or impede processes to be assessed (Bryman, 2012), potential limitations to comparative approaches must be recognised. Lawson points out benefits of comparative research, but adds that *a posteriori* contrasts are evident in many situations. This research was undertaken with an open mind as to how women in the two locations might regard stigma. While contrasts on matters such as labour markets between the two locations were evident previously, qualitative detail offers understandings of affectivity in response to the research questions and the analysis offers valuable theoretical insights. A limitation of the sample was that none of the participants in the council estate or market town settings could be seen as living 'alternative lifestyles' (Klett-Davies, 2007), which recruitment from an inner-city or other location might have provided.

### ***Moving forward***

This work has gone as far as it can with the time and resources available but offers potential for its ideas to be consolidated and taken forward in the following ways:

- With interest in cross-fertilisation of feminism and critical realism increasing and 'expanding dialogue' between the two (Gunnarsson et al., 2016), opportunities to contribute to this dialogue would be welcomed.
- Participants' case dynamics have been broken up into thematic chapters and comparative points in this thesis. Writing up full case studies based on the stories of a selection of women who displayed examples of 'modes' of SSL would help demonstrate the factors and dynamics contributing towards and militating against stigma and illustrate the process of 'judgement of judgement' in detail.
- Further refining the concept of SSL and looking at its potential as an approach for researching stigma among a wider range of single parents is suggested.
- Similarly, the focus on judgement as a process emerged from the data. Further investigation of judgement as a general sociological process and theoretical resource could be warranted.

Based on limitations of the sample and ideas generated during the study that could not be pursued, suggestions for future research include a number of areas:

- Research involving a wider range of people who are parenting alone, including fathers, Black and Minority Ethnic, 'alternative' and lesbian mothers and also 'single mothers by choice' is recommended. Experiences of women without children in a family-oriented society could be also possibly be explored.
- When discussing the research findings informally with the group of lone mothers, they made interesting points, which echoed comments by the research participants, about having given their children their father's surnames and now having different surnames

from their children. This suggests potential for empirical feminist research on patrilineal naming practices (Pitcher, 2016).

- The reluctance of women in the deprived area to engage in discussion of class conforms with observations by Savage (2015), among others. Addressing a need to consider innovative methods to engage participants who resist classification in conversations on class, in ways that sensitively explore dis-identification from their subjective perspectives, would be of interest in any future research on class.

## **Conclusion**

The thesis has reviewed literature and presented data from an original study using qualitative methods to investigate lone mothers' experiences of stigma in the contemporary UK context. This concluding chapter has brought together key findings and arguments from the research and evaluated its strengths and limitations. Ways in which the research contributes to knowledge have been evidenced through discussions, analyses and presentation of empirical evidence throughout this thesis. That contribution has been summarised in this chapter.

The introductory chapter established my motivations in undertaking this research. Furthering understanding of lone mothers experiences of stigma is can be beneficial in helping address the effects of stigma on women who may be doing their utmost to bring up children in challenging circumstances and require support rather than criticism. It is to be hoped that, in addition to disseminating these research findings in academic fora, demonstrating the damaging impacts of the persistence of stigmatisation of lone mothers will contribute in any modest way possible towards challenging that stigma. Whilst there is not sufficient space here to do justice to policy considerations, findings from this work will be disseminated to appropriate bodies and might help inform future policy development and campaigns. As one research participant commented: "We need to bust these myths".

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## Appendix A: History of policies affecting lone mothers table

| DATE | ACT/POLICY  | SIGNIFICANCE  |
|------|---|---|
| 1601 | Poor Law for England and Wales                          | Unmarried mothers had to go through 'bastardy examinations'   |
| 1610 | Bastardy Act  | A mother who was not married could be imprisoned              |
| 1834 | Poor Law Amendment Act                                  | Made it more difficult for mothers alone to claim money       |
| 1843 | Poor Law Commission                                     | Treated widows and unmarried mothers differently              |
| 1913 | Mental Deficiency Act                                   | Allowed local authorities to certify unmarried pregnant women |
| 1918 | National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child | Established to pursue legislative reform and accommodation    |
| 1923 | Bastardy Act  | Doubled maximum weekly amount payable by named fathers        |
| 1926 | Legitimacy Act  | Legitimised children whose parents married after their birth  |
| 1929 | Public Assistance                                       | Introduced as renamed Poor Law                                |
| 1948 | Creation of Welfare State                               | National Insurance and Family Allowance paid to mothers       |
| 1948 | National Assistance                                     | Means tested payments for lone mothers with no work condition |
| 1949 | Adoption of Children Act                                | Tightened laws against informal adoption                      |
| 1959 | Legitimacy Act  | Legitimised children whose parents later married              |
| 1966 | Supplementary Benefits                                  | Introduced as renamed National Assistance                     |
| 1967 | Abortion Act  | Widened the grounds for a legal abortion                      |
| 1969 | Divorce Act   | Made divorce easier to obtain and led to increase in divorces |

|      |   |  |
|------|---|--|
| 1974 | Finer Committee Report on One-Parent Families         | Review of laws and welfare relating to lone parents                          |
| 1977 | Homeless Persons Act                                  | Allowed pregnant women and single mothers access to housing                  |
| 1987 | Family Law Reform Act                                 | Ended distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children               |
| 1989 | Children Act  | Focused on parental responsibility   |
| 1991 | Child Support Act                                     | Aimed to reduce state intervention and force fathers to pay                  |
| 1996 | Family Law Act  | Aimed to make divorce less adversarial                                       |
| 1996 | Department of Social Security assessment scheme       | Aimed to help lone parents into employment                                   |
| 1996 | Housing Act   | Reduced lone mothers' access to accommodation only                           |
| 1998 | New Deal for Lone Parents                             | Interviews focused on getting lone parents into work                         |
| 2000 | Part-time Workers' Regulations                        | Requires part-time work contracts to be comparable to full-time              |
| 2003 | Child Tax Credit                                      | Tax credit for people with dependent children                                |
| 2003 | Employment Act  | Rights for parents of young or disabled children to work flexibly            |
| 2008 | Social Security (Lone Parents Amendments) Regulations | Lone parents go from Income Support to Job Seekers Allowance                 |
| 2010 | Changes to benefits                                   | Lone parents with children over 7 go to Job Seeker's Allowance               |
| 2012 | Welfare Reform Act                                    | Increased requirement for lone parents to look for work                      |
| 2013 | Universal Credit                                      | Lone parents of children over 5 go on to Job Seekers' Allowance              |
| 2014 | Child Support Agency replaced                         | Child Maintenance Service introduced   |
| 2017 | Lone Parent Obligation change                         | Lone parents with children under the age of 3 required to actively seek work |
| 2017 | Limits on benefits for third child                    | Benefit payments for third child in family born to be stopped                |

## Appendix B: Participant recruitment information leaflet



### Are you a female single parent in the [REDACTED] area?

Would you be willing to share your views with a female researcher - in confidence?

#### About the study

While one in four children now grow up with single parents, previous research has tended to focus on mothers in deprived areas. This study aims to reflect wider experiences of mums living in different parts of [REDACTED].

The research involves private interviews to ask your views on topics such as: support and social life; media coverage; employment opportunities and childcare.

It is funded by the University of Huddersfield and Research Ethics Panel approved. It is not for any commercial, official or government purpose.

#### What's involved?

I would need around an hour of your time for a face-to-face interview. This would be at a convenient time for you in a quiet community space or suitable venue of your choice.

#### What about confidentiality?

Everything talked about will be confidential. Your name, location and any way of identifying you will be removed from interview material to keep it anonymous.

#### Who can take part?

Any woman in the area who is single, widowed, divorced, separated or who previously cohabited and lives alone with a child or children - some or all of the time - is welcome to get in touch.

#### About me

I am a mature PhD student at Huddersfield's School of Human and Health Science. I am CRB/DBS checked. I am a sensitive listener, who is keen to hear about your experiences.

#### What are the benefits of taking part?

The opinions of single parents are very important, but often missing from debates. This is a chance to voice your opinions.

The interviews offer a safe, private space to reflect on the ups and downs of what being a lone mother in your area means to you.

Results from the study will be sent to groups wanting a better deal for women and children.

Participants will receive a £20 gift voucher for a leading shop of their choice as a 'thank you' for doing the interview, with reasonable travel and childcare costs covered where necessary.



#### CONTACT ME

If you think you might be interested, please contact me. I am happy to provide more information and answer any questions:

**Nicola Carroll**

**Tel: 01484 472581**

**Email: [nicola.carroll@hud.ac.uk](mailto:nicola.carroll@hud.ac.uk)**

**Text / mobile: 07507 215075**

**TEXT 'MUM' TO THIS NUMBER AND I CAN CALL YOU BACK**

Room 1/12, Human and Health Research, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH

## **Appendix C: Participant recruitment information sheet**

### **HUDDERSFIELD UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INVOLVING LONE MOTHERS INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS**

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You are being invited to take part in a study of the experiences and views of female single parents living in different parts of XXX. Before you decide to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with me if you wish. Please do not hesitate to ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

#### **What is the study about?**

The purpose of the research is to look at the first-hand experiences of mothers who are single, widowed, divorced, separated or who previously cohabited and are now living alone with their children some or all of the time. It will gather and compare views of mothers in different locations on issues such as; media portrayals of single mothers, local social networks, employment and childcare opportunities and ways in which government policies impact upon their lives.

#### **Who is doing it?**

I am a student at Huddersfield University and I will be carrying out interviews with lone mothers for my PhD research. The research is funded by the university and is not for any commercial or official government purpose. It is supervised at the School of Human and Health Science.

#### **Why I have been approached?**

You have been asked to take part because you have been identified as a lone mother who may have experiences and opinions you are willing to share that will make a valuable contribution to the study.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

It is your decision whether or not you take part. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will be free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision not to take part or to withdraw at any time will not affect you in any way.

#### **What will I need to do?**

If you agree to take part in the research, you will be asked to take part in a confidential interview with me, which will last for around an hour and take place at a time and place that are convenient for you. The interview will be recorded on a voice recorder with your permission and some notes will be taken. Participants will be given a £20 retail voucher following the interview as a small token of appreciation. The researcher has a list of contact information for appropriate national and local organisations which you can be given if you wish.

#### **Will my identity be disclosed?**

Your name and any means of identifying you will be removed from material gathered during the interview, so your identity will be kept anonymous. All information shared during the interview will be kept fully confidential, except where legal obligations or significant danger to yourself or someone else would require disclosure by the researcher to appropriate personnel.

#### **What will happen to the information?**

All information collected from you during this research will be kept secure and any identifying material, such as names or locations, will be removed in order to ensure anonymity. You will be offered a transcript of the interview to review, should you wish to do so. It is anticipated that the research may, at some point, be published in an academic journal or report. If this should happen, your anonymity will be ensured, although it may be necessary to use your words in presentation of the findings using a pseudonym in place of your real name, and your permission for this is included in the consent form.

#### **Who can I contact for further information?**

If you require any further information about the research, please contact:

**CONTACTS:**            **PhD researcher:**            **Nicola Carroll**  
**Email:** nicola.carroll@hud.ac.uk    **Telephone:** 01484 472581    **Text/Mobile:** 07507 215075

## Appendix D: Consent form



**Project:** PhD research involving lone mothers

**Researcher:** Nicola Carroll

It is important that you read, understand and sign the consent form. Your contribution to this research is entirely voluntary and you are not obliged in any way to participate.

If you are satisfied that you understand the information and are happy to take part in this project please put a tick in the box next to each sentence and print and sign below. If you require any further details or clarification please ask the researcher.

I have been fully informed of the nature and aims of this research

I consent to taking part in it

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reason

I give permission for the interview to be recorded

I give permission for notes to be taken

I give permission for my words to be quoted - by use of pseudonym

I understand that the information collected will be kept in secure conditions for a period of five years at the University of Huddersfield

I understand that no person other than the researcher will have access to the information provided

I understand that my identity will be protected by the use of pseudonym in write-ups of the research and that no written information that could lead to my being specifically identified will be included in any materials produced or published following the research

I understand that information provided will be confidential, but that if during the interview, myself or another person is revealed to be in significant and immediate danger, the researcher will be obliged to take action in response to that disclosure

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

PRINT NAME

PRINT NAME

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(one copy to be retained by Participant / one copy to be retained by Researcher)

## **Appendix E: Topic guide for semi-structured interviews with lone mothers**

### **Introduction**

Introduction, briefing and consent form, anonymity.  
Participants have scope to set the agenda  
No need to answer anything not comfortable with or can come back to questions later.  
Support organisation contact information list available.

### **Circumstances**

Number/age of children. Age of mother. How long a lone mother.  
Route to lone motherhood. Paternal input.  
Any other relevant factors such as ethnicity, disability or sexuality (if raised by participant).

### **'Lone mother' identity**

Route to lone motherhood. Term preferred. Telling people their family situation.  
Similarities/differences and difficulties/advantages of parenting alone.  
Attitudes expressed by extended family, friends, employers, colleagues, professionals or general public.

### **Background and area profile**

Time in area and where previously, geographic mobility.  
Knowing people locally and/or fitting in locally.  
Views on area profile and services.  
Perception of proportion of lone mothers locally and attitudes towards lone mothers locally.

### **Social/kinship networks**

Average day, evening or weekend. Family nearby, friends nearby. Frequency of contact. Practical and emotional support.  
Family structure of friends and extended family.  
Participation in community events/organisations/church/social events or isolation. Barriers to social contact.  
Significance of lone motherhood to social life. Adult/child orientated activities. Hobbies/relaxation.

### **Financial situation**

Housing type and tenure.  
Main source of income. Sense of financial hardship/survival/security/affluence.  
Coping/struggling financially - debt/rent arrears/ covering basics - food and rent/disposable income eg outings, holidays.

### **Employment/childcare**

If employed: Type of job. How work and childcare are balanced.  
If unemployed: Last job and reasons it ended. Feelings about not working. Experience of benefits. Job opportunities.  
All: Education level. Work orientation/aspirations. Barriers to employment. Availability of childcare.

### **Media**

Views on media portrayal of lone mothers.  
Personal consumption of media/sources.

### **National policies**

Personal impact of government policies.  
Rights and responsibilities - own/paternal/state responsibility for self and child.  
Views on policies towards lone parents generally.  
Ability to influence situations/make changes or otherwise. Political interest/participation/voting.

### **Status of lone motherhood**

Perception of public attitudes to lone mothers generally - locally and nationally.  
Attitudes of neighbours/public/in shops/professionals/employers/using services - personal egs.  
Importance of other people's opinions.

**Reflections on situation**

Coping - attitude and strategies.

Contentment/discontentment with situation/choices.

Sense of self-worth/fulfilment in relation to motherhood/employment/networks/self/society.

**Class**

Identification with a particular class or group. Perceptions of class generally.

**Future**

Priorities, plans and aspirations for self and for child/ren.

Sense of ability to change and improve situation.

**Round-up**

Thanks. Debriefing. Check how participant feels. Check whether anything was not covered they would like to discuss.

Voucher. Offer support organisation contact list. Offer to send transcript of the interview.

## **Appendix F: Analytical memo on thematic coding of data**

The data was coded thematically using NVivo software, for purposes of speed, ease and consistency (Spencer et al., 2014a). This was done on a 'selective' basis in relation to the research questions, but aimed on the side of inclusivity so as not to overlook data which did not accord with preconceived assumptions (Bryman: 2012). Three transcripts from each location were used to establish codes at the outset, some of which were superseded or supplemented as further transcripts were coded. Coding was initially paper-based to allow flexible interaction with the texts but this was quickly replaced by Computer Aided Qualitative Data

Substantive themes which emerged from coding at this stage included: 'lack of choice' over circumstances, negative associations with the 'single mum stereotype'. A tendency towards emphasising characteristics by which women distanced themselves from stereotype was apparent. Participants appeared eager to display their 'good mother' credentials, which included comments on 'pride', 'being mum *and* dad' and examples of putting the children first. There were frequent references to being different from the 'normal family'. The data reveals the women's strong 'worker' orientation. Strong work orientation coupled with inability to access or sustain employment among many women in Location A lead to a new 'frustrated worker' theme. Women in both locations articulated a strong sense of being 'judged' according to standards implied by normative family and employment expectations.

Where participants referred specifically to 'stigma', this was broken down contextually according comments on matters such as benefits and maternal age. Codes were also attached to material that reflected characteristics of stigma (as identified by Goffman, 1990; Link and Phelan, 20011) such as 'labelling', 'stereotyping', 'isolation' and 'exclusion' from social events. 'Judgement' was readily identifiable as a core theme. For comparative purposes, material was also placed in codes which reflected varying and contrasting comments on a topic; for example positive and negative feelings about 'parenting alone'; and 'managing' or 'struggling' financially. Some passages were assigned multiple codes as they contained compounds of information and opinion which were at the heart of issues under scrutiny; for example where participants referred to deliberations over balancing work and childcare and feeling judged for their decisions in the same sentence.

## Appendix G: Summary of Context Matrices

| CONTEXT/<br>CONTENTS  | LOCATIONS A AND B:<br>POINTS OF COMMONALLITY AND CONTRAST  | KEY THEMES   | CHAPTE<br>R<br>FOCUS |
|---|--|--|----------------------|
| Discursive -<br><br>preferred term; associations with terms; media stereotyping; distancing from stereotype.  | Questions about terminology prompted strong views in both locations - 'single parent' preferred overall.<br>Negative association with 'single mother' and 'single mum'.<br>Ambivalence as these terms was also used by women<br>Negative media stereotypes prevail and are strongly associated with: age, benefit dependency, appearance and behaviour, laziness, promiscuity, poor parenting.   | Media as key source of judgement.<br>Anger at media stereotyping.<br>'Maternal hierarchy'.<br>Judging self and others in hierarchy.  | 5                    |
| Discursive (on relationships) -<br><br>route to lone motherhood; choice; relationship history; maternal age.  | Mothers in B tended to be divorced, whereas in A they tended to have cohabited.<br>5 relationships in A ended while the participant was pregnant, 2 in B<br>Some younger, never married mothers in A and some in B did not share the patriarchal ideal.<br>Labelling   | Emphasis on lack of choice.<br><br>'Judged for a situation you can't control'.   | 5                    |
| Material -<br><br>housing tenure; financial situation; main income source; managing/getting by/struggling   | The majority of participant had to move house after splitting up and become 'settled' again.<br>3 women in A were former home owners; 1 home owner, mainly council tenants; 3 home owners in B, mainly private tenants.<br>Mothers in both areas worse off financially since split.<br>Some in B were significantly worse off. '<br>Relative' financial inferiority in B.<br>Benefits main source of income in A, women's salaries in B.<br>Income commonly a combination of salary, benefits and maintenance in both.<br>More fathers pay maintenance in B than in A.<br>More financial support from grandparents in B than in A. | Agency in 'managing' limited resources.<br>Being the 'provider'.<br>Some materially less well off than when in a relationship; 'Worse off' in comparison with two parent families.   | 6                    |
| Employment/benefits -<br><br>worker identity - worker identity frustrated; enablements/constraints; balancing; decision-making; non-financial positives | Strong work orientation among participants in both locations.<br>Parents' work ethic.<br>Majority of women in B work; only 3 in A work FT and 2 work PT.<br>Much higher educational qualifications and skills in B.<br>Lack of suitable jobs in A and lack of childcare a barrier for many mothers.<br>Participants experienced a strong sense of being judged for not working, despite constraints.<br>Age of children;   | Strong work orientation – own parents working.<br>Work ethic 'frustrated' for some.<br>Balancing mother/worker roles.<br>Non-financial benefits of work: 'confidence'; 'other adults'; 'break from kids'; 'role model' for children. | 6                    |
| Policies -<br><br>Attitude to politics; state role; experience of claiming  | Stigma associated closely with claiming benefits.<br>Very strong sense of benefits stigma among participants in A who were not working.<br>Most participants in B had also claimed benefits at some point or were now getting Tax Credits.   | Deserving/undeserving.<br>Response to benefits stigma.<br>Judging self if unemployed.<br>Judging others for lack of work   | 6                    |

|  |  |  |             |
|--|--|--|-------------|
| benefits; benefits stigma.   | Low political interest or sense of ability to influence - higher in B than A.  | ethic.   |             |
| Parenting -<br>Perception of 'normal' family;<br>Maternal identity; paternal input; grandparents' and friends' support; parenting alone; | Many participants in A and B share strong normative views on two parent family model.<br>Two-parent family ideal less strong in A than B; less strong among those who were never married or cohabiting.<br>Maternal identity -<br>Mothers in both locations the main carers with responsibility for children.<br>Importance of grandparents' support stressed repeatedly.<br>Parenting alone is 'not that different' and has positives as well as difficulties for some. | 'Good mother identity'; 'putting children first', 'mum and dad'.<br>Pride in children.<br>Local reproductive norms.<br>'Spoilt' family ideal for some.<br>Judging self and others in performing parenting role.      | 7           |
| Spatial -<br>local area profile; sense of local belonging; mobility outside of area.   | Perceptions of A and B show contrasts in area profiles and norms.<br>Much greater affluence in B, higher proportion of single mothers in A<br>Women in A had limited mobility outside of the area compared with those in B.  | Conscious of local affluence/ council estate' stigma.<br>'Fitting in' locally/'not fitting in'.  | 7           |
| Social connections -<br>social life; experiences of being excluded; negotiating exclusion; face to face incidents.                       | Women in B generally have a much more active social life than those in A.<br>A number of women in A had no social connections beyond immediate family; some said they had no interest in socialising.<br>Social life more difficult when children are younger.<br>Lack of social life due to lack of childcare/money for some in B rather than active exclusion.<br>Importance of knowing other single parents was stressed.   | 'Time to just be me'.<br>'Left out' from social events.<br>Importance of knowing people in the 'same situation'.   | 7           |
| Personal -<br>attitudes; coping; journey or transition; new relationships.   | Matriarchal - support from mothers, family and friends<br>As well as external factors, attitude/relationships/personal problems affect perspectives.<br>A journey for some becoming less sensitive to stigma over time and more pragmatic.   | Self judgement - blaming self and internalising stigma.<br>Pragmatism: 'just get on with it'.<br>Pride in coping and resilience.<br>Pride in autonomy.<br>'Journey' to independence.<br>Developing a 'thicker skin'. | 7           |
| Social class -<br>class identity; capitals (see respective matrices).  | Complexity of class identification - avoidance of classification.<br>Most in A did not identify with any class, 2 identified as 'working class'<br>More class identification in B - 3 identified as 'middle class', the majority as 'mixed'.<br><br>Dis-identification from classed stereotypes.   | Participants' own class identity and indicators of;<br>Cultural capital<br>Economic capital<br>Social capital  | 5<br>6<br>7 |

## **Appendix H: Analytical memo on revisiting the provisional conceptual framework**

*Figure 3: Iterative Research Cycle* shows how taking an 'abductive' stance meant developing a loose 'Provisional Conceptual Framework' which could be returned to as the research progressed. Following initial analysis of the data, abduction was applied to support 're-conceptualisation' (Sayer, 1992). This enabled the initial provisional iteration of the 'prism of legitimacy' framework to be adapted and refined, with some ideas abandoned and new ideas introduced in light of evidence that emerged from the data. Several months passed between producing the provisional framework and analysing the data, and it was not referred to until the data had been coded descriptively, as described. Although I was inevitably conscious of the ideas it contained, I was aware of a need to keep as open a mind as possible rather than 'forcing' the data into this framework. Revisiting the provisional framework revealed that whilst some elements were of value, descriptive and explanatory inadequacies were also apparent.

Firstly, Archer's separation of PEPs, SEPs and CEPs (2000; 2003; 2007) was valuable in analysing their interplay in women's accounts. Some characteristics of stigma cited by Goffman (1990) and Link and Phelan (2001) and Scambler (2009) were more prevalent as indicators of stigma than others. After looking for evidence of degrees and manifestations of stigma in women's accounts, the most frequently cited characteristics of stigma were found to be: labelling, stereotyping, and adverse social judgement, with indicators of exclusion and a sense of 'difference' and financial or financial inferiority. Notably 'shame' was a characteristic of stigma highlighted by Goffman (1990) which was referred to only twice. The women saw adverse social judgement as manifesting in discourse, and in prejudice about them based on stereotypes. Incidences of direct comments or unpleasant looks were cited by some women, but appeared to be infrequent. Indicators of capitals (Bourdieu, 1989) were also evident in the data.

Thirdly, elements of the provisional framework were revelatory in parts, without providing comprehensive explanations. Aspects of the framework were applicable to different aspect of the data. For example, 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) was remarkably salient when examining media stereotyping of lone mothers without fully explaining women's subjective absorption of stigmatising rhetoric. A 'hierarchy of maternal legitimacy' (Song, 1996; Carabine, 2001; Pulkingham et al., 2010) could be discerned in participants' tendency towards distancing from stereotypes. Normalising judgement (Foucault, 1977) was helpful in relation to women's differential investment in the two-parent family model. However, previous studies have coupled normalising judgement and 'othering' in analysing self-surveillance and distancing from stereotypes (e.g. Mitchell and Green, 2002; McCormack, 2004), when the active denigration of women in the same taxonomic category was only evident in certain cases in the present study and some women were empathetic. Subtle differentiation between hierarchisation, distancing and othering was therefore required.

Fourthly, while SSL had strong descriptive value as a site of agency/structure interplay using Archer's concepts of PEPs, SEPs and CEPs (2000; 2003; 2007), its application to women's stories revealed it to be dynamic and subject to underlying processes, rather than being as a process in itself. Fifthly, the framework did not fully reflect the importance of 'judgement', which emerged as a very strong theme in the data. This therefore required attention conceptually. A rudimentary search for appropriate sociological literature using the term 'judgement' suggested a lack of material that could be deemed more pertinent for the

conceptualisation of judgement than its treatment by Archer's (2000), Skeggs (2005), Sayer (2005) and Skeggs and Loveday (2012). Cooley's 'looking glass self' connects external judgement with internal affectivity whereby we imagine our appearance to others, imagine their judgement of that appearance and the pride or mortification resulting from that judgement (1902, cited in Schubert, 1998). This offers insight at an inter-personal or social psychological level but was not appropriate when the need to consider stigma in relation to structural power relations (Link and Phelan 2001; Scambler, 2009; and Tyler, 2013) had been identified. Archer's (2000) focus on evaluative judgement in relation to social norms and subjective concerns is useful in questioning which or whose standard people believe are being judged against. Skeggs (1997), Skeggs (2005), Sayer (2005) and Skeggs and Loveday (2012) attend to judgement in terms of gender and class. The provisional framework included Skeggs and Loveday's (2012) work on de-legitimation, judgement and class, which was highly salient.

The prevalence of judgement in the data, which manifested in self-judgement and judging others as well as feeling judged, also suggested its potential as a 'candidate mechanism' (Sayer, 1992) underpinning women's experiences of stigma during the 'retroduction' phase of the Iterative Research Cycle. Comparative analysis can facilitate retroductive inference by, 'describing conditions that make a phenomenon what it is' (Danermark et al., 2001: 45). Sayer (1992) recommends investigating candidate mechanism to determine which have the strongest explanatory powers. As discussed above, whilst elements of the provisional conceptual framework were highly relevant to aspects of the data, none of these held sufficiently explanatory powers to be regarded as mechanisms underpinning women's experiences of stigma. Bygstand and Munvold (2011) suggest that mechanisms should be neither too general nor too specific. Although the breadth of 'legitimacy' gave it value as an overarching theoretical resource, it proved too general to hold sufficient explanatory power at the more ideographic level. Judgement proved powerful explanatorily because it arose from women's own words and was meaningful to them and had potential for 'synthesising' (Layder, 1998) with analytical interpretation. It is also a somewhat general process however. In considering experiences not only normative judgement, but women's own judgement of the norms was what led to feeling subjectively stigmatised or not. Analysing women's mode of SSL showed some women internalised judgment and others did not and 'judgement of judgement' therefore offered more precision.

I was conscious that thematic prominence of judgement in lone mothers' accounts weighted evaluation of alternatives in its favour. Whilst judgement was readily identified as a theme in participants' accounts and appeared a forceful process in promoting or impeding experiences of stigma among people interviewed, Sayer (1992) suggests investigating a series of 'candidate mechanisms'. Among these was 'stratified reproduction' (Colen, 1986, cited McCormack, 2004; Pulkingham et al., 2010), which was of interest in highlighting the 'political economy of reproduction' but could not sufficiently reflect experience of mothers from affluent backgrounds who took part in the study. 'Moral value' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) has emotional resonance but was found to rest ultimately upon evaluative *judgement* of morality. Consideration of merits and limitations of alternative 'candidate mechanisms' arrived at no stronger alternative than 'judging the judgement', which held sufficient 'practical adequacy' (Sayer, 2000) and coherence for the purposes of this study. I am, however, aware that alternatives were confined to what I had been told by research participants, observed or ascertained from literature whereas social systems are 'open' and complex and it is not possible to achieve 'closure' in social research.

## Appendix I: Excerpts from SSL Case Dynamics Matrix summary

| LOCATION/<br>NAME/<br>ROUTE/<br>PREFERRED<br>TERM | PERCEPTION OF STIGMA  | AGENTIAL RESPONSES<br>TO STIGMA   | PERCEPTION OF<br>PERSONAL LEGITIMACY   | INDICATING 'MODE' OF SLL  |
|---|---|---|--|---|
| GEMMA<br><br>'Single<br>mum'<br><br>NM or C       | <p><b>Labelling</b> 'it's the 'single' – what does it matter if I'm single'.</p> <p>'I'm not bothered but some people it must though'.</p> <p><b>Stereotype</b> 'young girls with babies and they don't know who the dads are' and not working. When asked, not overly conscious of media 'why are there no single parents on tv? I've never thought of that before.'</p> <p>Does not refer to adverse social judgement, being different, excluded or inferior.</p> | <p><b>Distancing from stereotype</b> of 'young girls with babies who don't know who the dads are' and 'girls at school who had kids when they were 14 or 15' Does not seem personally relevant at all.</p> <p>Stresses that being a young single parent norm locally, relativity of her age and being in employment.</p>                  | <p><b>Good mother</b> has low income and puts son first financially.</p> <p><b>Lack of choice</b> as partner ended the relationship and denied paternity.</p> <p><b>Pride in her work.</b> Strong work ethic in her family fulfilled.</p> <p><b>Local norm</b> Single motherhood is 'normal round here'.</p> <p><b>Social connections</b> with large family and close circle of friends.</p> | <p>No indicators of feeling stigmatised or adverse social judgement. 'I just feel like it don't bother me. I'm a single mum. I don't mind that.'</p> <p>Cheerful and laughs a lot during interview. Says frequently that her and her son are 'happy as we are'. Says frequently: 'I'm not bothered what people think' Says she is unusual in having a job as most of her neighbours don't work. Work is important to her view of herself: 'I like people to think 'she's got a job' and I'm not just on benefits.'</p> <p>Not conscious of class.</p> <p>Grew up locally speaks fondly of her large extended family and close circle of friends nearby. Appreciates friendly neighbours.</p> <p>Is not concerned about not being with a partner - was going on a date that evening and said she would make it clear that her son was her priority.</p> <p><b>Overall 'positive'</b></p> |
| HANNAH<br><br>'Single<br>parent'<br><br>C         | <p><b>Labelling</b> - had daughter at 18 and conscious of young single mum image.</p> <p><b>Stereotyping</b> – Conscious of media images and upset by TV programmes - 'young girls in trackies', smoking etc. 'age adds to the stigma'. Says frequently that 'people judge young single parents'.</p> <p><b>Adverse social judgement</b> Refers to 'judgement' frequently. Until people know your circumstances, that you're working and providing, they can</p>    | <p><b>Information control</b> Would not 'broadcast' that she's a single parent.</p> <p><b>Critical of media stereotyping</b> for 'stirring it up' and believes it's politically motivated.</p> <p><b>Distancing</b> – based on employment. Is very aware of benefits stigma and makes sure people know she is working and 'providing'</p> | <p><b>Good mother</b> – says how much she enjoys time with her daughter.</p> <p><b>Pride in good mother role</b></p> <p><b>Pride in her work</b> – feels 'valued' in her job. Working towards a degree part-time and sees 'opportunities' for career progression.</p> <p><b>Social connections</b> – member of single parents' group.</p> <p><b>Role model</b> – her own</p>                 | <p>'We're happy'.</p> <p>Moved to the area from the city because it is a 'nice area' and'. Pleased there are 'good schools' and it's a better environment for her child. Aware of being in an affluent area and eager to dis-identify from class stereotypes.</p> <p>Grew up in a working-class area but feels her and her daughter 'fit in well' in their new area.</p> <p>Emphasises that she is working. Emphasises her 'values' and 'morals'.</p> <p>Pride that she dresses her daughter well.</p> <p>Is very aware of 'how people portray themselves' and behaving 'properly', not smoking or swearing etc. clothes etc.</p> <p>Believes that not being on benefits helps negate stigma of being a young single parent.</p>  |

|  |  |  |   |  |
|--|--|--|---|--|
|  | <p>judge'. 'When people at work talk about single mothers, there's that judgement'.<br/> <b>Difference</b> Conscious of being in the minority as a single parent in the area. Felt 'awkward' at school open day as the only single parent.<br/> <b>Excluded</b> 'it's at weekends when people are doing family things you notice it more'.</p> | <p>for her daughter.<br/> <b>Instrumental</b><br/> Judgement of young single parents 'made me want to build a better life and people see I'm not that kind of person'.<br/> Makes an effort with 'presentation'.</p> | <p>mother was a lone mother who trained as a social worker while she was a child.</p> | <p>In control financially and speaks of managing well on her income.<br/> Wide sphere of reference – takes her daughter to visit friends and relatives around the UK and on holiday abroad. Member of single parents' organisation.<br/> Has internalised social judgement from the media to some degree but is bolstered by being able to demonstrate that she is different from the stereotype.<br/> <br/> <b>Overall 'performative'</b></p> |
|--|--|--|---|--|

Note: 'NM' is an abbreviation of never married, C is formerly cohabited, 'D' is divorced and 'S' is separated pending divorce.

Note: Many of these points are précises rather than verbatim quotations and full excerpts of passages which support them are available in the relevant context matrice

## Appendix J: Excerpts from Judgement and SSL Case Dynamics Matrix summary

| LOCATION A PSEUDONYM/ TERM/ ROUTE     | OVERALL MODE OF SSL                           | BEING JUDGED   | JUDGING OTHERS   | SELF JUDGEMENT  | NORMATIVITY  | IDENTIFIED CLASS/ CAPITALS                                | AGENCY  | OTHER CONTRIBUTING/ MITIGATING FACTORS  |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|--|---|--|---|---|---|
| CARRIE<br>'Single parent'<br>NM or C  | Positive                                      | Single parents' 'paranoid' due to media stigma.  | Empathy and distancing   | 'I just don't care'   | No patriarchal family ideal – single parents 'the norm' locally                  | Working Stable E, high S                                  | Proactive in decision-making around work and social life  | Older, flexible employer, likes job, strong social network, support of extended African-Caribbean family                          |
| DEBBIE<br>'Just a mum'<br>NM or C     | Defensive                                     | Incidents – 'looked down on' due to age by 'the 'older generation'                       | Critical of migrants on benefits. Wants to work  | 'I don't care what people think'  | No patriarchal normative family ideal. Work ethic                                | None Low ECS  | Focused internally – meaning-making in maternal identity  | Family lives locally, stays with them when she has no money. Mother very supportive.  |
| GINA<br>'Single mum is a label.'<br>C | Mixed<br>Negative maternal<br>Positive worker | No sense of being judged   | Strong judgement of others 'rinsing the system' - feels superior to local 'benefit dependency' | 'My mum's is the only judgement that counts' Angry about situation rather than self-judging,                          | Strong traditional family ideal, feels son misses proper family life. Work ethic | None Complex E - owns home, runs salon but also struggles | Proactive in decision-making around setting up business. Pride in her resilience.                                     | Has family locally but has no social life and feels 'lonely'  |
| JULIE<br>'Single mum'<br>NM or C      | Negative                                      | Highly conscious of media stigma. Very conscious of benefits stigma.                     | Distancing by age, ten-year work history, relationship history.                                | Blames self for trusting partner who left when pregnant. Feels victimised for having to leave her job after 10 years. | Family ideal. Strong work ethic frustrated.                                      | None Low E and C  | Returned to work but inflexible employer made job unsustainable. Proactive decision to start Access course next term. | Partner left when pregnant, illness and post-natal depression. Not working.   |
| NADIRAH<br>'Single mum'<br>NM or C    | Negative                                      | Conscious of media stigma. Incidents due to age and not being married. Racist incidents. | Distancing in presentation – judged young parents, now sees it 'from the other side'           | Compares her situation with her aspirations Lack of confidence to go out.   | Strong family ideal.   | 'I want to look like a working-class mum.'<br>Low ECS     | Agency in coping with no family or friends and little money after becoming pregnant at 18.                            | Partner left when pregnant, estranged from British Pakistani Muslim family, isolated in a flat on her own, struggles financially. |

Abbreviations: 'NM' is an abbreviation of never married, C is formerly cohabited, 'D' is divorced and 'S' is separated pending divorce. 'E' is an abbreviation for 'economic capital', 'C' for 'cultural capital', and 'S' for social capital' (Bourdieu, 1989). 'DV' is an abbreviation of domestic violence

| LOCATION B PSEUDONYM/ TERM /ROUTE  | SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL LEGITIMACY | BEING JUDGED   | JUDGING OTHERS   | SELF JUDGEMENT  | NORMATIVITY   | SELF IDENTIFIED CLASS /CAPITALS | AGENCY   | OTHER CONTRIBUTING/ MITIGATING FACTORS  |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|--|--|---|---|---------------------------------|--|---|
| SONIA<br>Single mother<br>C        | Positive                     | No sense of stigma. Does not see stereotypes as personally relevant.                     | Non-judgemental – has a critical political perspective.          | Proud to have left abusive relationship. Critical of the 'system' rather than herself.                              | Assumption of marriage locally but has wider sphere of reference.                       | Middle Stable E, high C and S   | Left abusive relationship. Member of lone mothers' group. Balances work and childcare.                   | Emphasis on work and education, recently met a new partner.   |
| CIARA<br>Single parent<br>D        | Positive                     | None   | Non-judgemental – sees diversity in her job and is empathetic    | Judges her parenting.   | Normative family expectations but sees diversity in her job.                            | None Stable E, high C and S     | Made decision to end marriage. Plans career. Balances childcare with responsible work.                   | Employed, ex-husband involved in childcare, family support, new partner.                              |
| JASMINE<br>Single mother<br>D      | Performative/ Transformative | Conscious of 'ingrained' judgement. Comments from neighbour, excluded from social events | Distancing but non-judgemental as criticises fathers not mothers | Judged herself after husband left, doesn't challenge people who excluded her but also conscious of injustice of it. | Had strong traditional family ideal and was distressed but now has feminist perspective | Mixed Stable E, high S and C    | Was left with debt after divorce and proud to now own home, feminist values and member of women's group. | Has an 'alternative' and feminist perspective.  |
| HANNAH<br>'Single mum'<br>C        | Performative                 | Awkward among two parent families at child's school                                      | Distancing not judgemental as sees diversity in her job.         | Worries her daughter will be the odd one out at school.   | Sees family diversity in job. Conscious of being only lone mother at school events.     | Mixed High S                    | Focus on presentation, takes trips away with daughter, likes the 'control'                               | Enjoys job and motherhood. Work mitigates stigma.   |
| EMMA<br>'Never thought of it'<br>S | Negative                     | Excluded from social events, comments from other teachers                                | Distancing – but not judgemental                                 | Judges self harshly for staying in an abusive relationship and not doing more for her children                      | Feels out of place in the affluent area   | Mixed Stable E, low S           | Coped with DV, finally ended abusive relationship after 20 years.  | Low self-esteem after abusive marriage, feels she ruined her life, stressed about divorce settlement. |

## Appendix K: Analytical memo on attitudes to 'others'

Although participants were critical of television programmes and newspapers, lack of channels through which to challenge stigmatising stereotypes instrumentally (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) appears to have resulted in most of them feeling compelled to differentiate themselves from them personally. Analysis shows they positioned themselves in a 'hierarchy of maternal legitimacy' (Song, 1996; Carabine, 2001):

### Top of hierarchy - Two parent ideal

Planned parenthood  
 'Decent age'  
 Married/stable couple  
 Employed  
 Middle class parenting standard  
 Clean, smart,  
 'Respectable' public behaviour

### Bottom of hierarchy - 'Single mum' stereotype

Intentionally having babies to live on benefits  
 Young  
 Sexual morality – multiple/unknown fathers  
 Lazy 'scroungers'  
 Irresponsible/poor parenting  
 'Scruffy'/'chavvy' appearance  
 Smoking, drinking, drugs, shouting and swearing

'Othering' (Lister, 2004) is identified as a device in negotiating stigma shown in several studies (e.g. Phenonix, 1998; McCormack, 2004). Skeggs observes that women in her research judged themselves by measuring against 'real and imagined others' (Skeggs, 1997: 90). Sayer writes that people, 'define themselves in relation to others, by attributing negative properties to them' (2005: 58). Analysing the data suggests that distancing and hierarchisation does not necessarily involve denigrative 'othering' however. Most women seemed to either be neutral or express empathy despite distancing tactics. Analysis reveals greater complexity and nuance in women's attitudes to 'other' lone mothers (and to benefit claimants generally) than straightforward 'othering' suggests. This prompts questions of:

- Do ways in which participants cite differences from stereotypes connect to modes of SSL?
- When distancing and hierarchising, are participants referring to lone mothers (LMs) they know personally or 'imagined others' (Skeggs, 1997)?
- What distancing criteria are used by women in different situations/with different modes of SSL?

### Attitude to others: Judging, hierarchising or othering?

| Location A: Name | SSL       | Judges self | Judges others | Views on stereotypes                                 | Real or imagined others?           | Attitude to others | Distancing tactic - criteria      |
|------------------|-----------|-------------|---------------|--|------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Bella            | Negative  | Yes         | No            | Links media to judgement                             | One friend who is LM on benefits   | Neutral            | Work ethic, good mother role      |
| Carrie           | Positive  | No          | No            | Links media with 'paranoia' in the past but less now | LMs known through work/family      | Empathy            | Age/work                          |
| Clare            | Negative  | Yes         | Yes           | Not overly focused on media                          | Refers to 'council estate people'  | Critical           | Hierarchises - age/relationship   |
| Debbie           | Defensive | No          | Neutral       | Media - 'blackens your name'                         | Little reference to other LMs      | Critical           | Work ethic - othering of migrants |
| Gemma            | Positive  | No          | No            | 'Young girls who don't know who the fathers are'     | Girls from school had babies at 15 | Neutral            | Relative age/work                 |

|           |           |     |     |   |                                   |          |   |
|-----------|-----------|-----|-----|---|-----------------------------------|----------|---|
| Gina      | Mixed     | No  | Yes | Hardly referred to                                  | People locally on benefits        | Critical | Denigrative othering - Work, relationship       |
| Julie     | Negative  | Yes | No  | Upset by stereotypes - links to judgement           | Focuses on stereotyping           | Neutral  | Hierarchises - age, work, relationship          |
| Katherine | Negative  | Yes | No  | Upset by stereotypes - links to judgement           | Aware that other LMs live locally | Empathy  | Instrumental - came off benefits                |
| Lucy      | Defensive | No  | Yes | Angry at stereotype but reproduces them             | Known LMs and imagined 'others'   | Critical | Hierarchises - denigrative othering             |
| Nadirah   | Negative  | Yes | No  | Stereotype of young parents                         | On TV and out in public           | Empathy  | Appearance, maternal capability                 |
| Marta     | Negative  | Yes | No  | Mentions but not main focus                         | Little reference                  | Neutral  | Little hierarchising - Age                      |
| Sheila    | Positive  | No  | No  | Focus on age and benefits                           | Knows LM locally                  | Neutral  | Not seen as personally relevant                 |
| Theresa   | Defensive | No  | Yes | Angry at social media circulating judgement from TV | Little reference to other LMs     | Critical | Wants to work. Denigrative othering of migrants |

| Location B: Name | SSL            | Judges self | Judges others | Views on stereotypes                          | Real or imagined others?                         | Attitude to others | Distancing tactic - criteria                        |
|------------------|----------------|-------------|---------------|---|--|--------------------|---|
| Alison           | Transformative | No          | No            | Upset her at first - less so now              | LM friends locally                               | Neutral            | Hierarchises - multiple factors                     |
| Ciara            | Positive       | No          | No            | Stereotype not representative                 | Knows LMs through job                            | Empathy            | Not seen as personally relevant                     |
| Della            | Mixed          | No          | Yes           | Angry at stereotype but reproduces it         | Believes the stereotype exists - but not locally | Critical           | Hierarchises - denigrative othering                 |
| Emma             | Negative       | Yes         | No            | Hardly mentions stereotype                    | A few LM friends                                 | Neutral            | Complex due to being stressed                       |
| Hannah           | Performative   | Yes         | No            | Upset at stereotype                           | Sees family diversity in job                     | Neutral            | Hierarchises - work, behaviour                      |
| Jasmine          | Mixed          | Yes         | No            | Angry, critiques media from feminist stance   | LM friends                                       | Empathy            | Challenges stereotype but still 'overcompensates'   |
| Joanne           | Performative   | Yes         | Yes           | Conscious of 'black single mother' stereotype | A few LM friends                                 | Neutral            | Hierarchises - education, work, class, relationship |
| Laura            | Performative   | Yes         | No            | Conscious of stereotype                       | LM friends                                       | Neutral            | Hierarchises - education, class                     |
| Mandy            | Negative       | Yes         | Yes           | Very conscious of stereotype                  | Young LMs in previous area                       | Neutral/critical   | Hierarchises - not 'chavy'                          |
| Mena             | Performative   | Yes         | Yes           | Links stereotype to judgement                 | Refers to TV and LMs she knows                   | Mixed              | Hierarchises - work, behaviour                      |

|         |              |     |    |   |   |         |  |
|---------|--------------|-----|----|---|---|---------|--|
| Moira   | Positive     | No  | No | Cites JK Rowling as role model                  | Media is 'exploitative'                   | Empathy | Does not seem personally relevant            |
| Sonia   | Positive     | No  | No | Aware but not focused on stereotype             | Critical of stereotype itself not mothers | Neutral | Does not seem personally relevant            |
| Valerie | Performative | Yes | No | Compares reality with ideal family in the media | LM friends                                | Neutral | Hierarchises – work, education, relationship |