

# Chapter 3

## A Media Discourse Analysis of Lone Parents in the UK: Investigating the Stereotype

Emma Salter

### Introduction

Lone parents are a heterogeneous social grouping (May 2006); lone parenthood can have multiple causes, whether divorce or separation, widowhood, lone parenthood by choice or by necessity (Giddens 2006). While the majority of lone parents in the United Kingdom are women, men currently comprise 8% of lone parent families with dependent children (Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2013). The lone parent population increased from 840,000 to 1.6 million between 1979 and 1997 (The Times 1993a; ONS 2013), but has since grown at a slower rate with recent figures putting the number of lone parent families with dependent children at two million in 2014 (Gingerbread n.d.; ONS 2014).

Historically, women who had children ‘out of wedlock’, together with their ‘illegitimate’ children, have either hidden within family myths of daughters growing up as sisters or were sent away to spare the family their supposed shame, with lower-class children often adopted by middle-class married couples (Thane and Evans 2012). In more recent times, with greater variety in family formation and more acceptance of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, with or without children, such views seem outdated and out of place. However, lone parents remain highly stigmatised in the United Kingdom (Hinton-Smith 2015) to the extent that lone parents themselves make a concerted effort to self-identify as ‘good mothers’ to distance themselves from the ‘bad’ sort (Phoenix 1991) while one of the missions of Gingerbread, the charity supporting lone parents in the UK is to “dispel the myths and labels” around lone parenthood (Gingerbread n.d.).

All too often the term ‘lone parents’ is used by politicians and in the media, without defining which lone parents are meant and thereby classifying all lone parents as problematic. For example, lone parents have been labelled “one of our

---

E. Salter (✉)

School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex, Falmer, UK

e-mail: [e.j.salter@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:e.j.salter@sussex.ac.uk)

© The Author(s) 2018

L. Bernardi, D. Mortelmans (eds.), *Lone Parenthood in the Life Course*, Life Course Research and Social Policies 8, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-63295-7\_3

55

greatest social problems” (Tom Sackville, then junior Health minister, quoted in White 1993) and identified as the targets of a Conservative backlash (Moore 2013b). It is unlikely in either case that such a statement was intended to encompass all types of lone parents, of all backgrounds, ethnicity, age and gender, yet this lack of distinction appears to be commonplace in ministerial pronouncements and newspaper articles. This chapter presents the results of an intersectional analysis of newspaper articles from two years spanning two decades in order to uncover which identity factors are most commonly assigned to the lone parents discussed within these media sources and by politicians. First, however, intersectionality theory and its utility for this purpose are outlined.

## Intersectionality

The term intersectionality first gained recognition in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s 1991 article in the *Stanford Law Review*, however, the concept was in existence in a number of forms before this as a response by the Black Feminist Movement in the 1960s to the white, middle-class domination of feminist theory. The criticism was, rightly, that while (predominantly White, middle-class) feminists were fighting for the rights of women; they were not representing the needs and issues of all women, but their own concerns, rather than for example, those of women from the working class or from other ethnic groups. Crenshaw, a lawyer, wrote that while sex discrimination law was providing a legal framework to safeguard the rights of White women and race discrimination law was protecting Black men there was no legal protection where these identities overlapped, that is in relation to Black women (Crenshaw 1991). Her analogy for intersectionality was as roads of discrimination (e.g. race, gender, sexuality) which met at intersections or crossroads, emphasising the multiple identities that intersect. Like others before her, for example Deborah King’s ‘multiple jeopardy’ (King 1988) or Patricia Hill Collins’ ‘matrix of domination’ (Hill Collins 1990), the emphasis was on sites of multiple oppression and the negation of ideas of additive disadvantage, rather they argued, these disadvantages were multiplicative.

While initially the social markers of gender, race and class were the main foci for intersectional scholars, subsequent development of the theory of intersectionality has broadened the categories to include others such as sexuality, age or ability. Each combination of these identifiers positions us on what Yuval-Davis terms a ‘power axis of difference’ (Yuval-Davis 2006). As Yuval-Davis points out, official statistics tend to assign people to one of these power axes, but each individual is in actuality situated on multiple axes, which, depending on the context, assign more or less power to the individual. For example, in the UK, being a member of the privileged categories of male, White, heterosexual and middle-class brings certain advantages, while if even one of these categories changed to a more minority alternative, whether in terms of gender, class, sexuality or ethnicity, this would change the cumulative advantage. In addition, this (dis)advantage would differ according to which social

location was changed and how. Layers of oppression and privilege exist in most if not all societies, which enable a White middle-class woman to enjoy advantages in the UK, which could be lessened, or non-existent, if she were either White and working-class or Black and middle-class, but even these power dynamics are context dependent; for example, a White middle-class woman might feel disadvantaged if she were in a context where she was now in the minority.

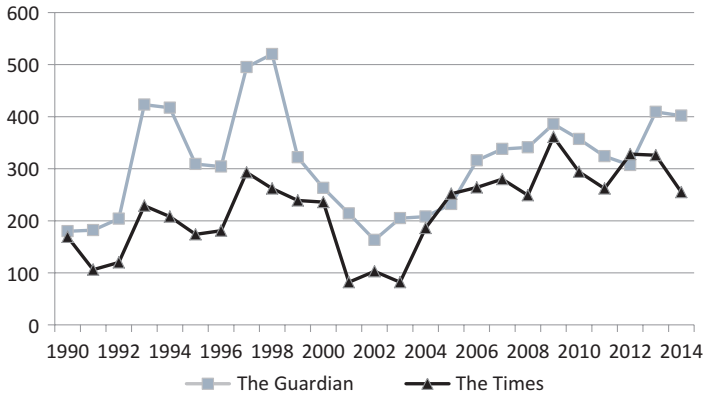
Intersectionality is important in the discussion of perceptions of lone parenthood as it allows us to investigate the intersections of these multiple identities which in turn reveal the power dynamics of the dominant discourse. Modern Britain is not an equal society on many levels (Hills et al. 2009), with those who are outside the norm often constructed as deviant (Wilson and Huntington 2006). As Garner has noted, these norms are “usually class-based, gender-biased and ageist” (Garner 2007; p. 6). Intersectionality as an analytical approach enables the identification of the multiple and interconnected social positions of lone parents and, consequently, where they are located in modern British society.

## Data and Methodology

The corpus for analysis consists of articles from two sources from two years, 1993 and 2013 which frame two decades in which the numbers of lone parents have stabilised in the UK. The sources are two national broadsheet newspapers, *The Times* and *The Guardian*, which represent respectively the two ends of the political spectrum in the UK. *The Times* is a right-wing newspaper with a large Conservative readership (The Independent 2015), while *The Guardian* is the most left-wing of the broadsheets (BBC 2009). Although their distribution figures are smaller than those of the tabloid newspapers, as broadsheets they were less likely to present a sensationalised coverage of lone parenthood.

The years selected for analysis, two decades apart, were chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, 1993 has been described as the ‘year of the lone parent’, a key year in the ‘moral panic’ surrounding lone parents (Mann and Roseneil 1994). A combination of factors not only put lone parent families in the spotlight, but blamed them for both the burden on the public purse and the perceived upsurge in juvenile crime. The increase in the numbers of lone parent families was seen as key to the burgeoning social security budget, with the result that the Child Support Agency was created to recoup money from absent fathers. In addition, concerns about juvenile crime and poor parenting were prevalent in the light of the murder of the two year old James Bulger in February 1993 by two ten year olds (one of whom was from a lone parent family, the other whose parents were separated (Faux 1993)).

As can be seen from Fig. 3.1, there was an upsurge in media interest in lone parents in 1997/98, particularly by *The Guardian*, coinciding with the arrival of the Blair government and a number of policy initiatives focussed on lone parents. However, an analysis of articles from this period, only five years on, would not have had the benefit of taking a longer view on how lone parents were portrayed.



**Fig. 3.1** Number of articles with single parent\* mentioned anywhere in the text in The Times and The Guardian (1990–2014)

Media interest declined soon after in the run up to the millennium, before increasing again a decade later, with the highest number of mentions occurring in 2012 and 2013. The introduction of Universal Credit in 2013, a streamlining of the complex benefits system, and of a benefit cap in the same year (Department for Work and Pensions 2015), both of which have been shown to disproportionately penalise some members of the population, including lone parent families (Whitworth 2013), contributed once more to bringing lone parent families to the media’s attention. Since the numbers of lone parents had stabilised in the intervening years, it might be hypothesised that this would result in a more accepting attitude towards lone parenthood than two decades previously. These factors combined to identify 2013 as an appropriate time point at which to examine whether lone parents were discussed in similar terms as 20 years previously.

To identify the articles for analysis, Nexis® was used to search the chosen sources for articles relating to lone parenthood in the selected years.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, all articles containing major mentions (that is which appear “in the headline, lead paragraph or indexing” (Lexis Nexis 2015)) of the following terms: single parent, one parent, lone parent, single mother, single father, single mum and single dad were identified for analysis; resulting in 1081 articles (see Table 3.1). Subsequently, duplicates, primarily a result of different editions of the newspaper being archived, and all non-news articles, for example, those discussing books, films or television programmes were then deleted. This caused the total for the 2013 corpus in particular to drop considerably, indicating that even if lone parents were not making the headlines to the same extent 20 years later, they remained a subject of considerable interest as the subject of novels and on-screen dramas. Finally, only articles which

<sup>1</sup> In British English, unlike in the case of some European countries, the two terms ‘lone parent’ and ‘single parent’ are interchangeable; both signify a parent who is the sole resident carer of their child(ren), no matter the cause and both allow for the presence of a non-resident father in the child(ren)’s life.

**Table 3.1** Numbers of articles resulting from search and included in analysis by source and date

	Initial total	Final total
<b>The Guardian</b>		
1993	390	293
2013	239	93
<b>The Times</b>		
1993	211	169
2013	241	76
Total	1081	631

discussed lone parenthood in the UK were retained, resulting in a final corpus for analysis of 631 articles, across sources and years.

As can be seen from Table 3.1, there were considerably more articles that fulfilled the search criteria from The Guardian in 1993 than its right-wing counterpart, both initially and in the final analytical corpus, whereas the totals are more comparable in 2013. It remains to be seen whether the discourse on lone parenthood is similar in the two sources and whether there is continuity over time.

The corpus was hand-coded using the NVivo software, with all identity factors that were used in connection with lone parents coded. Following the key identity factors embedded in intersectionality theory, the analysis initially focussed on locating mentions of demographics such as gender, ethnicity and class in relation to lone parents. In the process of coding these factors, it became clear that other social locations such as age, sexuality, income and the causes of lone parenthood were additionally used within the corpus to identify a certain type of lone parent, so these were added to the analysis.

The quantitative results of the analysis are set out in Table 3.A1, detailing the number of references found for each element of identity, disaggregated by newspaper and year. The following section examines each identity factor in turn. Each subsection presents the results of an analysis of the 1993 corpus for both sources, followed by the findings of the 2013 analysis, noting any similarities and differences between the two sources and time periods.

## Identity Factors

### *Gender*

When lone parenthood is mentioned, inevitably women are at the forefront of the discussion, since they represent the overwhelming majority of lone parents, while men currently comprise only 8% of the UK's lone parents with dependent children (Gingerbread n.d.). It was anticipated therefore that an analysis of the corpus would reveal a significant number of references to lone mothers, single mothers and single

mums, and proportionally fewer mentions of single fathers, lone fathers and single dads. Since the gender breakdown of lone parents in 1993 is reported variously within the corpus as 90% and 95% female, it is understandable that there would be a greater focus on lone mothers than on their male counterparts. This was indeed the case; however, the references to lone fathers are even fewer than expected, forming fewer than 2% of all references to lone parents.

Despite their scarcity, these articles provide some noteworthy details about lone fatherhood in the Britain of the early 1990s. One reveals the little-known statistic that, in 1993, Britain had one of the highest incidences of single father families in Europe (Carvel 1993), a fact that is all the more interesting for not being referred to anywhere else in the corpus, either by journalists or politicians. Another article reports survey results in which a third of British women felt that a lone mother could bring up their child as well as two parents, while fewer British women and men agreed that a lone father could do likewise (McKie 1993). While lone fathers were in the minority in the UK's population of lone parents, it is notable that their growth in numbers was not seen to be as of great a concern as the increased numbers of lone mothers, particularly if they were perceived as less able than women in nurturing their children. Unlike lone mothers, there are only a few examples of articles where elision occurs between lone fathers and lone parents; references to lone fathers tended to either to be the focus of an article or in response to such a piece, rarely were they explicitly included in wider discussions of lone parenthood.

The majority of references to lone parents, were made in gender-neutral terms, with references such as lone parent(s), single parent(s) and one parent occurring more frequently than their feminine counterparts in both sources and time periods. While this is explained in part by references to lone parent benefit and other gender-neutral policy terms, the practice also extends to discussions of the lives of lone parents by both journalists and politicians. The majority of female and gender-neutral references occur separately from one another, that is, articles use only one or other of these to refer to lone parents throughout. Nevertheless, over 10% of articles use references to lone parenthood and lone motherhood interchangeably, or use lone parent in reference to a mother. Some of these are for reasons of clarification, for example, "the number of lone parents, 90 per cent women" (Brindle 1993a), yet other articles and quotes from politicians slip seamlessly from gender-neutral to feminised depictions of lone parents for example,

The controversy's roots go back to government attacks on single mothers during the Conservative Party conference back in October. A parade of ministers lined up lone parents as the villains of welfare spending (M. Phillips 1993).

and,

Margaret Thatcher said it would "give the lone parent back her morale and her confidence" (The Times 1993b).

The same phenomenon occurs in headlines in the 1993 corpus of *The Guardian*; on three occasions the gendered nature of lone parent descriptors are changed between

the headlines and subheadings, thereby revealing that it is in fact issues around single motherhood that will be the article's primary focus (Hetherington 1993; Griffin and Younge 1993; Weston 1993).

In terms of shifts in the discourse over time, two decades later, there are noticeable differences in how gender is referenced. Lone fathers make up a larger proportion of the articles than in 1993, although still not commensurate with their proportion in the population. Lone mothers are discussed in nearly two-thirds of articles in *The Guardian*, while *The Times* uses gender-neutral and feminine referencing fairly equally. There are very few elisions between lone parents and lone mothers in the 2013 corpus, with their usage almost completely distinct.

Overall, the quantity of direct references to female lone parents in the corpus, coupled with the number of indirect references where gender-neutral terms become female through clarification or juxtaposition, indicates that when these media sources discuss lone parenthood, their focus is lone mothers rather than lone fathers.

### *Ethnicity*

In the UK, the use of ethnic descriptions tends only to be used to identify people who differ from the majority ethnic group of White British. Whiteness is an assumed, unmarked category, by nature of its normativity (Garner 2007), so we would not expect White lone parents to be identified as such; rather we would expect ethnic markers to be present for ethnicities other than White and whiteness to be marked by an absence of ethnic descriptors.

As can be seen from Table 3.A1, the identification of lone parents in ethnic terms is indeed largely absent from the corpus. Whiteness is referenced nine times in the whole corpus, compared to 13 references to African-Caribbean or Afro-Caribbean single parents and 12 to the more generic Black category. There are no discussions of ethnicity relating to lone parenthood in *The Times* in 2013.

With very few exceptions, ethnic identities are mentioned either when they are the focus of an article or when comparisons are being made about the proportions of lone parenthood between ethnic groups. African-Caribbean families were most likely to be presented as the comparative category of interest, primarily because "in comparison with a 14 per cent figure in the general population, single mothers accounted for 51 per cent of all Afro-Caribbean births" (M. Phillips, 1993). That 'Afro-Caribbean births' are compared with births in the 'general population' is indicative of the normativity of White ethnicity, with other ethnicities situated outside. *The Times* coverage in 1993 refers to more ethnic groups than *The Guardian*: *The Guardian* refers to 'Asian mothers' once in the context of comparing their lower proportion of lone motherhood with the White British population, while *The Times* refers several times to Asian populations, and additionally to Indian and Pakistani families.

In 2013, *The Times* does not discuss lone parenthood in ethnic terms, but *The Guardian's* references to ethnicity are for the same reason as in 1993; comparisons are made between the incidence of lone parenthood in the White population and other ethnicities, with a focus (again) on African-Caribbeans, who are "twice as likely... to grow up in a single-parent household" (Corner and Normanton 2013).

Aside from referring to ethnicity in the context of comparative statistics, articles mentioning ethnicity in a substantive way in relation to lone parenthood all focus on the issues the Black community face. Journalists debate the challenges of changing cultural habits in the Black community such as men with several 'babymothers', with whom they have children but whom they may or may not support (Ford 1993) and question the stereotype of whether Black lone mothers are the passive victims of such Black male behaviour (M. Phillips 1993b). Where ethnicity and lone parenthood, therefore, appeared together in a few articles in the corpus, the norms and behaviours of an ethnic group (in all cases the Black, or more specifically, the African-Caribbean population) were the main subject of the article, with other ethnic groups only mentioned for comparative purposes.

Whiteness is referenced only three times in relation to lone parenthood outside of those articles comparing the proportion of lone parents in different ethnic populations. On two occasions the article is penned by the single parent in question who self-identifies on ethnic lines, yet in both articles whiteness is not mentioned incidentally, but in order to make a point. In the first, the writer is a White middle-class male who on becoming a single parent, suddenly finds himself "to be a minority within a minority" (Bovill 1993), the irony being of course that this is not the usual situation for someone with his particular intersections of class, gender and ethnicity. In the second, the author of the piece is a White single parent to two mixed race girls, and the subject of the piece is about racial identity and dealing with the cultural diversity of her family. In the third article, the situations of two lone parents are discussed: one who is White with "two pretty blonde daughters" and the other who is Jamaican (Norman 1993). So, whiteness is explicitly stated only on those occasions where the fact of being white matters to the piece as either a counterpoint to a different ethnicity or to emphasise the irony of a situation. Otherwise, whiteness is unmarked, for example, in an article about three lone parent families appealing the introduction of the benefits cap. Two of the mothers are identified as being respectively Roma and Orthodox Jew, while the third is not assigned any ethnic identity; the assumption being that she is White British.

In sum, the majority of references to lone parents in the corpus are not ethnically identified, except where a point is either being stressed about comparative numbers of lone parent families in Black or Asian populations or where the cultural stereotypes of an ethnicity other than White are under discussion, though here again the focus is on African-Caribbean families. Whiteness is asserted when it is necessary as a juxtaposition to other ethnicities, or as an ironic aside, otherwise it is absent from the debate. The logical conclusion therefore is that, in both years, and both sources, the unmarked category of whiteness is the assumed normative ethnic identity of the lone parents being discussed, so remains unstated.



## *Class*

An examination of the corpus for explicit references to “class” reveals that direct allusions to class are, with a few exceptions, absent. As can be seen from Table 3.A1, there were 14 explicit references to class in the 1993 corpus, evenly distributed between the two newspapers, and one in the 2013 corpus. Of these 14, only three refer to middle class lone parents, the rest refer to lone parents in the lower classes or working class. A couple of Guardian journalists write, for example, that “most lone parents tend to belong to social economic groups 4 and 5” (McGlone 1993) or “a working class estate with high unemployment and a high proportion of single parents” (Katz 1993). Additionally, there are a couple of indirect references to the classed nature of lone parenthood, for example, the following from a letter in relation to fathers rallying against the Child Support Agency: “The mighty middle classes flex their muscles and the Government considers a U-turn. A pity single mothers don’t have that sort of clout” (Russell 1993) which, indirectly implies that the single mothers are not middle class since they do not have the influence of the “mighty middle classes”. In The Times’ coverage from the same year, a slightly different emphasis emerged. Discussion of class is still largely absent, comprising only six references in total, but four of these six use the term ‘underclass’ applied specifically to lone mothers. The term was introduced to the UK by the American social theorist Charles Murray in The Sunday Times, to refer to those people who exist at the lowest level of society, so it is perhaps anticipated that the term would be taken up by its sister publication in this context. The other two references are to class in general and to “young working-class women living on low incomes” who are identified as comprising the largest proportion of lone parents in contrast with a “small percentage...accounted for by widows and middle-class divorcees” (Dynes 1993).

Similarly, the 2013 articles from The Guardian include three direct references to class and lone parenthood, and in each of these, lone parents are seen as part of the working-class. One explanation for the lack of explicit references to class, is that, “Class hatred has been siphoned off on to chavs, scroungers, benefit fraudsters, single mothers, all the new untouchables” (Moore 2013c), indicating that it is perhaps not class that is relevant now, but different categories of people in society, although associating single mothers in this way with scroungers and benefit fraudsters places them by implication in the same economic category, that of being dependent on the state. There are no direct references to class and lone parenthood in the 2013 corpus for The Times.

While class is not widely referenced, it appears that when it is mentioned, that the lone parents are more often associated with the working-class, lower classes or underclass. Although explicit references to class were few and far between, it became evident while coding the corpus that proxies for class, such as receipt of benefits, housing tenure or income levels were more prevalent in the discussion of lone parenthood. It is to this we now turn.

## *Economic Factors*

It is unsurprising that social security received a great deal of media attention in 1993, since the main thrust of Conservative policy at that time was the reduction of the social security budget. It is unfortunately also the case that relationship breakdown often results in a large and sudden reduction in income, particularly for women (Mortelmans and Jansen 2010) leading to an increased reliance on public funds and resources, even if temporarily. These two factors mean that in 1993 there was a political, and as a result, media focus on lone parents', specifically lone mothers', dependence on state support.

As can be seen from Table 3.A1, there were a large number of references in 1993 to benefits and council housing in relation to lone parenthood, not least due to the proselytizing of Conservative ministers at their Party Conference that these were motivating factors for the increased numbers of lone parents in the UK. Articles in both sources not only reported these speeches, but continued to do so even once it was revealed that a Cabinet paper with evidence that such associations were without foundation had been circulated weeks before the conference (Brindle 1993a). Meanwhile, every repetition of such unfounded statements, even if refuted, only served to reinforce this inaccurate stereotype.

Some journalists took a different approach, with a focus on the issues of benefit dependency and lone parenthood and the need for greater Government spending on childcare in order to provide "a pathway out of the poverty trap" (Taylor 1993) and enable lone parents to (re)enter the labour market. However, there are very few articles in the corpus, even from left-wing journalists, which criticize the raft of policy proposals made by the Conservative Government which were aimed specifically at lone parents: the phasing out of lone parent benefits, cutting benefits to lone parents who had additional children while claiming benefit (Brindle 1993c), limiting access to council housing (The Guardian 1993b), cuts to education funding in those councils with larger numbers of lone parent families (Wainwright 1993), and finally, at the instigation of the Child Support Agency, penalties for lone mothers who refused to name the father of their child, whose benefits could be cut by a fifth for 18 months (Baxter 1993). If there is any criticism it is that the Government and the Child Support Agency were ignoring the impact of such policies on the children of these families, but even these critiques come from external sources, not Guardian journalists. For example, in an article in the Money section the Child Poverty Action Group are quoted as saying that the Child Support Agency had "one rule for the rich, another for the poor" since penalties such as a reduction in benefits for not naming the absent father would (and presumably could) only be imposed on lone mothers who were benefit claimants (Hughes 1993).

This discussion of differentiation by wealth is to be found in two articles in the 2013 corpus, which reveal that little has changed in this regard in the intervening years. In one, Suzanne Moore writes on the Government's 'moralizing' about lone parenthood, remarking that in the view of the Conservative government, lone parenthood is tolerated if you can support yourself, but if you are on benefits, then you

are a “subspecies in need of help” (Moore 2013a). In the other, Zoe Williams reinforces this opinion, accusing the Conservatives of only taking issue with poor lone parent families, while disregarding the behavior of the rich (Williams 2013).

Another theme which emerged from both papers in the 1993 corpus was a propensity to link lone parenthood with deprivation and poverty. Journalists reported statistics, for example, “seventy-five per cent of single parent families live in poverty” (Moore 1993), but also used turns of phrase which implied that the proportion of lone parents added to the deprivation of an area. For example, “The Sixties’ estate bears all the hallmarks of inner-city deprivation – 90 per cent of this year’s nursery intake is from young, single-parent families; 77 per cent of residents receive benefit” (Thomson 1993). A further example goes so far as to place lone parenthood on an equal footing with ‘economic deprivation’ and ‘bad housing’, stating that, “we can argue all around the houses about the relative effects of these three factors on the behavior and development of young people” (A. Phillips 1993). Other articles reported the inclusion of lone parenthood as one of six indicators in the Government’s social deprivation index and one of three “traditional needs indicators” for apportioning education funding to councils (Wainwright 1993). It appears that lone parenthood and poverty had become synonymous.

In 2013 although the number of articles referring to economic factors in relation to lone parenthood are far fewer, these connections between poverty and lone parenthood remain: “the poorest households – such as single parent households with children” (Butler 2013). In fact, despite fewer references in the later corpus, children of lone parent families were “twice as likely to live in poverty” in 2013 than those from two-parent families (Paton 2013). It would seem that the intervening years of social policy from successive Governments had worsened rather than improved the conditions in which lone parents and their children live. In summary, while there are some references to class in relation to lone parenthood, certainly in the 1993 corpus, both newspapers are more concerned with lone parents’ lack of income and consequent dependence on the state.

## *Age*

Age is not often the first aspect of identity that presents itself when considering the different social locations of individuals, but in relation to women and childbearing, it is vitally important. The age of a woman when they have their first child is under constant scrutiny: too young and it is considered a public health problem (Lawlor and Shaw 2002), too old and it could put mothers and their babies at risk medically, while socially, it can be viewed as selfish (Hadfield et al. 2007). That age represents an important issue within the discourse of lone parenthood is supported by the choice of Government statistics contained on the Gingerbread website. The first set of facts relates to the numbers of lone parents in Britain, but the next specifically targets perceptions around age and lone parenthood, with the statements that “less than 2 per cent of single parents are teenagers” and that the “median age of

single parents is 38.1” (Gingerbread [n.d.](#)). The small percentage of teenage single parents is an important reminder to those who believe that teenage sex is rife in the UK; in a recent poll, the British public estimated the percentage of teenage pregnancy as 25 times greater than official figures (Ipsos-Mori [2013](#)). Likewise, the stated average age of lone parents points to a very different life stage from the teenage years. Both facts are aimed at rebutting the misconception that lone parenthood equals teenage parenthood.

In the realms of lone parenthood, therefore, youth is pinpointed as a decisive issue. In terms of the assignation of demographic characteristics within the corpus, age, or more specifically, youth, is the most used identifier in terms of lone parenthood, second only to gender. As can be seen in [Table 3.A1](#), in the 1993 corpus, youth is mentioned 60 times in *The Times* and 81 times in *The Guardian*. Although there is one mention within the 1993 corpus of a significant drop in the numbers of teenage lone parents by 1993, the majority of articles reflect an emphasis on the youth of lone parents in the UK. The repetition of the then Social Security Secretary Peter Lilley’s nonsensical parody which stated that teenage girls were economically-motivated to get pregnant deliberately certainly increased the attention paid to younger mothers. *The Guardian* quoted a number of research reports quashing that notion, but still felt the need to reiterate the established trope that they were contradicting, giving it more column inches in the process.

Not only are these women young, but they are also contradictorily portrayed both as becoming pregnant on purpose in order to receive benefits and preferential treatment for council housing, and pregnant by accident as in this quote from Sir George Young, Housing Minister:

How do we explain to the young couple who want to wait for a home before they start a family that they cannot be rehoused ahead of the unmarried teenager expecting her first, probably unplanned, child? (Young quoted in [Brindle 1993b](#))

As youth is subjective, it might be argued that the numerous references to young mothers (there is no reference in the 1993 corpus to young fathers) are not necessarily a fixation with the teenage years. However, an examination of the corpus reveals that, apart from one statistic denoting the proportion of lone mothers under the age of 30, age was otherwise referred to via a number of descriptors, all of which positioned young parents in the teenage years. Examples such as “under 20”, “before they are old enough to vote” were found, as well as less arbitrary descriptors such as ‘gymslip’, ‘schoolgirl’ and ‘teenage’. One article even differentiated between those who conceived and those who gave birth as teenagers: “research suggests that 25 per cent started as teenagers and 33 per cent first became pregnant when under 20.”([The Guardian 1993a](#)).

In 2013, there are only a handful of mentions of age, yet again, as in 1993, aside from a couple of features about older lone parents – all of whom are successful career women – it is primarily the younger members of the lone parent population who are identified in age terms. The references appear in relation to two main issues, firstly, budget cuts to hostels for the under-25s in a London borough, with the

potential for young parents to be moved hundreds of miles from home. Secondly, and somewhat ironically considering the 1993 rhetoric on young mothers and council housing, a report on proposals by a group of Conservative MPs which threatens to deny social housing to “Britain’s youngest single mothers ... as part of a new drive to reduce teen pregnancy”. Under such proposals these young mothers would be forced to live either with their parents, or in the hostel accommodation currently having its budget cut or risk having their benefits removed. While the age of lone parents in 2013 is not the key concern in these newspapers that it was in 1993, there are signs that teenage mothers have remained in the crosshairs of policy-makers, 20 years on. Finally, the issue of age and lone parenthood rarely refers to fathers: in the 2013 corpus, young fathers are mentioned in one article on young, black fathers. White young fathers are entirely absent from the corpus.

### *Causes of Lone Parenthood*

The causes of lone parenthood are multiple, whether from separation, divorce, desertion, domestic abuse, choice or necessity. I was interested, therefore, to discover which of these were most debated in the selected press, by journalists and politicians, since as we have already seen, the homogeneity of the discourse can belie the multiple identities contained within.

On occasion, politicians were quoted as being aware of the heterogeneity of lone parenthood and pledged that they had differentiated between these categories, for example, this from John Redwood, the then Welsh Secretary:

I was very careful to distinguish between different types of single parenthood. I’ve always felt extremely sympathetic to those who are widowed, to mothers who are beaten up or abused, or to fathers and mothers who are on the wrong side of a losing relationship, often through no fault of their own. (Redwood quoted in Hetherington 1993)

Redwood’s comment was in response to allegations that all lone parents were being labelled in the same way. While he expresses sympathy with those he includes above, he goes on to say that “society has a role to play in encouraging young girls to knuckle down at school, to think about a stable relationship before having babies” (Redwood quoted in Hetherington 1993) which indicates that this trope about young girls having babies outside of marriage, or even a stable relationship, is the real concern when it comes to lone parents.

His remarks are indicative of the stance of the Conservative Right at the time; lone parents as a whole were not seen as a problem, just a subsection, yet they still used generic terminology as shorthand, even if they “know...how furious it makes the divorced, widowed and deserted, struggling alone, when headlines say “Ministers attack lone parents”” (Peter Lilley, quoted in Grove 1993).

Beyond the quotes included above, the broader causes of lone parenthood are little discussed within the corpus. There are only a handful of further mentions of

“deserted/abandoned”, or “abused” lone parents, leaving the majority of references to causes of lone parenthood to focus instead on marital status or family transitions. For example this from *The Guardian*, discussing research using the National Child Development Study: “The children can be divided into four groups: those in two-parent families, or the three forms of single parent families: never married; single but divorced; single by the death of a partner” (Dean 1993). Or this from *The Times*: “In the past decade the number of births outside marriage has more than doubled to one in three, a rise produced by the growing number of single, divorced and separated mothers” (Dynes 1993).

In fact, the discourse on types of lone parenthood in the corpus reflects to a large extent the emphasis of Redwood’s statement. Over half of the references to lone parents’ marital status in the 1993 corpus defined them as ‘unmarried’, although surprisingly *The Guardian* articles included twice as many as the pieces in *The Times*. The unmarried mother was variously “married to the State” (a phrase from the American social theorist Charles Murray adopted by the Conservative Right), or were responsible for ‘spawning’ a “welfare-dependent underclass” (Baxter 1993). Separation and widowhood are mentioned but infrequently. References to divorce tend to appear less in regard to defining the cause of lone parenthood, but more often are positioned alongside lone parenthood in discussions of family trends, for example, “The combined force of single motherhood, children being born out of wedlock, divorce, remarriage and the rest” (Wicks 1993). Aside from the difference noted above in the number of references to unmarried lone parents between the two sources, a more nuanced distinction can be seen in how statistics on the circumstances of lone parenthood are reported. In 1993, in *The Guardian*, the latest statistics were reported as follows, “Welfare groups last night pointed out that the political concern with single mothers, who have never married, obscured the fact that about two-thirds of lone mothers are divorced, separated or widowed” (Wintour 1993), the same facts are reported in *The Times* with a change of emphasis, “Single parents include widows and divorcees, but the fastest growing group are the “single, never partnered”, who account for more than a third of all lone parents” (*The Times* 1993a).

Analysis of the 2013 articles reveals very few mentions of the causes of lone parenthood, in either newspaper, whether family transitions, marital status or other causes. There are so few references even to marital status that it is hard to draw a conclusion about the discourse; it appears that the causes of lone parenthood or the marital status of lone parents is no longer of great interest in 2013, which, it is hoped is a positive step towards a more tolerant discourse. Interestingly, in neither year, in neither paper, is there any discussion on the temporary nature of lone parenthood. Statistics put the average length of time a child spends in a lone parent family as seven years (Gingerbread n.d.) yet the way it is discussed by journalists at both ends of the political spectrum lends it a greater sense of permanency.

## *Sexuality*

It is only since 1999 that the number of dependent children living in same sex couple households has been included in official government statistics about the family and the household and even these estimates are, by their own admission, not reliable (ONS 2014). This suggests that it would be unlikely that sexuality would form a key topic in the discourse on lone parenthood. However, there are now more options available for people of different sexual orientations to become parents and they, like heterosexual couples, are not immune to break-up, so it was possible that the 2013 articles may have included some discussion on this topic.

Nonetheless, the analysis unearthed very few references to sexuality in the corpus in the context of lone parenthood. In *The Guardian* in 1993, the majority of references to sexuality in this context are with regard to the unequal footing of lesbians, alongside lone parents, rather than lesbian lone parents, whether in terms of access to council housing, donor insemination clinics or as the target of the Conservative Right as unfit parents (Neale 1993). Except for one reference to sexuality and lone parenthood in 2013 in *The Times* (Slater 2013), it is not clear whether the lesbian women approaching the clinics are in partnerships or not, but it seems that in general, there were two separate discourses in circulation, one concerning lone parents and another gay parents. In 2013, Suzanne Moore makes the point that in a society where the ideal is still heterosexual marriage then lone parents are as acceptable as gay parents (Moore 2013a). Aside from the one article about a lesbian lone mother, discussion of sexuality is absent from the discourse of lone parenthood in both years. It must be deduced that, just as with ethnicity and gender, the normative of the heterosexual is assumed in these media sources' depiction of lone parenthood.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

I set out to discover whether the generic category of 'lone parent', that is, the lone parent population as a whole, was the intended focus of political and media interest in the early 1990s and 2010s, or if a more nuanced picture would emerge from a detailed analysis of articles in two broadsheet newspapers at the time. I chose an intersectional lens in order to look at the intersections of lone parent identities included in the corpus. As a first stage, it was necessary to identify the prevalence of different identity factors, as discussed above, before seeing if and how these intersected.

A key finding of the analysis is that there are very few occasions where intersectional identities are applied to the lone parents under discussion. An attempt to identify instances of an intersectional identity according to traditional intersectionality

lines, that is gender, ethnicity and class, returns only three results, all of which were discussed in the ethnicity section: one, the self-identified middle-class White male, and the second and third, the lone mothers, one White and one Black, living on benefits.

This is partly due to a lack of references for some social locations, for example, the absence of markers for ethnicity, class and sexuality, together with the prominent usage of gender-neutral terms for lone parents. If the search is broadened to encompass the other social locations discussed such as age, sexuality and marital status, there are a handful more, most focusing on a combination of youth, unmarried and female as identifiers, with additional allusions to benefit receipt or council housing, or youth, class and gender, for example “young working-class women living on low incomes” (Dynes 1993).

Despite the lack of intersectional identities within the corpus, we can conclude that the identity of these media sources’ focus in 1993, the “year of the lone parent”, can be defined in terms of gender, ethnicity, class, income, age, marital status and sexuality. She, for it is a she, is White, from the lower classes and economically reliant on the state. She is young, a teenager, who is unmarried and heterosexual. In 2013, this pen portrait is just as apposite; although the corpus of articles was far smaller than in 1993, the results of the analysis paint the same picture (excepting any discussion on marital status), 20 years on.

Despite the prolific usage of gender-neutral terminology such as lone parents, single parents and one-parent families, an intersectional approach to these sources reveal that the media portrayal is far from being an all-inclusive term which homogenizes the experiences of all lone parents. Rather, hidden beneath the generic terms, is a clear picture of the true subject of the media discourse. The benefit of an intersectional standpoint is in the multiple identities captured within the analysis, which together provide a complete picture of the subsection of lone parents who are the subject of media focus. Of these identity factors, whiteness and heterosexuality are usually seen as positions of privilege within the intersectionality discourse, yet in this instance, the other identity factors remove such privilege one by one. To be female places a lone parent at a social disadvantage, to be young is to be disempowered, to be working-class (or worse, part of the underclass) is to be in a socially inferior position, to be unmarried, is to be without the economic support of a partner and therefore stigmatised by reliance on the State. Together these identity factors result in a multiply disadvantaged social positioning. The analytical framework reveals that the specific identity of lone parents, beleaguered by politicians and the media, is representative of some of the most vulnerable people in UK society, both in 1993 and 2013. As one features writer said, “A teenage mum pushing a pram round a run-down estate is an easy target” (Holmes 1993).

**Acknowledgements** This paper benefited from the support of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES – Overcoming Vulnerability: Life Course Perspectives, which is financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Grant number: 51NF40-160590).



## Appendix

**Table 3.A1** Number of times identity factors were coded in corpus, by year and source

	1993		2013	
	The Times	The Guardian	The Times	The Guardian
<b>Gender</b>				
Gender-neutral	312	479	67	48
Female	242	386	64	85
Male	3	12	8	4
Total	557	877	139	137
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
White	6	2		1
Black	9	2		1
African-Caribbean	5	5		3
Black other	1			
African	1			
Mixed race		1		2
Asian	4	1		
Indian	1			
Pakistani	1			
Orthodox Jew				1
Roma				1
“All ethnic”	1			
Total	29	11		9
<b>Class</b>				
Generic	1		1	1
Middle-class	1	2		
Working-class	1	2		1
Lower class <sup>a</sup>		3		
Underclass	4	1		
Total	7	8	1	2
<b>Economic factors</b>				
Council housing	67	83	4	1
Benefits	139	223	18	16
<b>Age</b>				
Young	60	81	3	14
<b>Causes of lone parenthood</b>				
Abandoned/deserted	4	5		1
Abused		2		
Unmarried/never married	32	63	2	2
Divorce	27	26	3	1
Separation	9	7	2	0
Widowhood	5	7	3	0
Total	73	103	10	3
Sexuality		30	1	18

<sup>a</sup>Variously defined as lower orders, Socio-Economic Group 4–5 and lowest social grouping

## References

- Baxter, S. (1993, July 9). Macho sub-text to the moral panic on the Tory benches. *The Guardian*.  
 BBC. (2009, September 30). *The politics of UK newspapers*. Retrieved from BBC News [online] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/8282189.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8282189.stm)
- Bovill, P. (1993, October 29). Just men: a single father reflects on his role. *The Guardian*.
- Brindle, D. (1993a, November 9). Lone mothers face benefits cut onslaught. *The Guardian*.
- Brindle, D. (1993b, November 9). Curb on lone parents falls foul of facts. *The Guardian*.
- Brindle, D. (1993c, November 10). Lone parents' cash bill £66m a week. *The Guardian*.
- Butler, P. (2013, April 1). Special report: The day Britain changed: The effects: 'A perfect storm ... this risks people facing destitution'. *The Guardian*.
- Carvel, J. (1993, December 2). Britain tops European table for lone-parent families. *The Guardian*.
- Corner, L., & Normanton, K. (2013, March 23). Family: Young, black and proud to be a father: Many African-Caribbean children in Britain are raised by single mothers. *The Guardian*.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Dean, M. (1993). No case for hiding in the bunker. *The Guardian*.
- Department for Work and Pensions. (2015). *2010 to 2015 government policy: Welfare reform*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-welfare-reform/2010-to-2015-government-policy-welfare-reform>
- Dynes, M. (1993, July 7). Two million children are being brought up by lone parents. *The Times*.
- Faux, R. (1993, February 20). Boys aged ten held by police over murder of James Bulger. *The Times*.
- Ford, R. (1993, July 21). Fathers 'touch down' and flee. *The Times*.
- Garner, S. (2007). *Whiteness: An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Giddens, A. (2006). *Sociology* (5th ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gingerbread (n.d.). *Statistics*. Retrieved January 12, 2016, from Gingerbread website, <http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/content/365/Statistics>
- Griffin, J. and Younge, G. (1993, October 22). Mum's the word for confusion. *The Guardian*.
- Grove, V. (1993, November 12). Welfare benefit used to be the last resort. It was a matter of pride to rely on yourself. *The Times*.
- Hadfield, L., Rudoe, N., & Sanderson-Mann, J. (2007). Motherhood, choice and the British media: Time to reflect. *Gender and Education*, 19(2), 255–263.
- Hetherington, P. (1993, November 13). A singular view of single parents. *The Guardian*
- Hill Collins, P. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Hills, J., Sefton, T., & Stewart, K. (Eds.). (2009). *Towards a more equal society? Poverty, inequality and policy since 1997*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Hinton-Smith, T. (2015). Negotiating the risk of debt-financed higher education: The experience of lone parent students. *British Educational Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3201>.
- Holmes, A. (1993, October 29). Commentary: the teenage mum as target. *The Guardian*.
- Hughes M. (1993, February 13). Mother's little helper. *The Guardian*.
- Ipsos-Mori. (2013). *Perceptions are not reality: The top 10 we get wrong*. Retrieved from <https://www.ipsosmori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3188/Perceptions-are-not-reality-the-top-10-we-get-wrong.aspx#top>
- Katz, I. (1993, February 23). Survey of two estates blames 'tiny minority' for most offences. *The Guardian*.
- King, D. K. (1988). Multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness: The context of a black feminist ideology. *Signs*, 14(1), 42–72.
- Lawlor, D., & Shaw, M. (2002). Too much too young? Teenage pregnancy is not a public health problem. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 31, 552–554.
- Lexis Nexis. (2015) *News search form*. Retrieved from [http://help.lexisnexis.com/tabula-rasa/inixis/news\\_companies\\_searchtips-field?lbu=GB&locale=en\\_GB&audience=business](http://help.lexisnexis.com/tabula-rasa/inixis/news_companies_searchtips-field?lbu=GB&locale=en_GB&audience=business)

- Mann, K., & Roseneil, S. (1994). 'Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em': Backlash and the gender politics of the underclass debate. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 3(3), 317–331.
- May, V. (2006). *Lone motherhood in context*. Retrieved from <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/483/>
- McGlone, F. (1993, November 10). Letter: Lone mothers in the front line of Government attacks. *The Guardian*.
- McKie, D. (1993, December 1). Nuclear family fails to explode. *The Guardian*.
- Moore, S. (1993, December 31). She-devils, saints and single mums. *The Guardian*.
- Moore, S. (2013a, March 14). It's tough to be a single parent, and this government's endless moralising does nothing to help. *The Guardian*.
- Moore, S. (2013b, May 2). Feminism's gains benefit all women. Even those 'Gosh, I'm so successful I don't need feminism' types who like to dismiss it. *The Guardian*.
- Moore, S. (2013c, September 12). Sixty per cent of us still identify ourselves as working class. So what happened to collective class action? *The Guardian*.
- Mortelmans, D., & Jansen, M. (2010). Income dynamics after divorce: A latent growth model of income change on the European Community Household Panel. *Cahiers économiques de Bruxelles*, 53(1), 85–107.
- Neale, A. (1993, January 23). Letter: Traditional family values bring little benefit to women. *The Guardian*.
- Norman, M. (1993, July 9). Where daddies are a myth. *The Times*.
- Office for National Statistics. (2013). *Families and households, 2013*. London: Data Analysis Unit.
- Office for National Statistics. (2014). *Families and households, 2014*. London: Data Analysis Unit.
- Paton, M. (2013, August 6) Women: Who would benefit? *The Guardian*.
- Phillips, A. (1993a, November 25). A male disorder. *The Guardian*.
- Phillips, M. (1993b, December 18). Another type of family value that's faring well. *The Guardian*.
- Phoenix, A. (1991). *Young mothers?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Russell, L. (1993, November 5). Letter: Child's play for middle-class muscle. *The Guardian*.
- Slater, L. (2013, November 30). Baking with my daughter. *The Times*.
- Taylor, M. (1993, November 12). Letter: Shouldn't children come first in the single parent debate? *The Guardian*.
- Thane, P., & Evans, T. (2012). *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried motherhood in twentieth-century England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- The Guardian. (1993a, November 9). The facts. *The Guardian*.
- The Guardian. (1993b, November 9). The moral panic and the facts. *The Guardian*.
- The Independent. (2015, April 28). General Election 2015 explained: Newspapers. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/generalelection/general-election-2015-explained-newspapers-10211039.html>
- The Times. (1993a, November 10). *Jobs and better access to childcare show UK lagging behind*.
- The Times. (1993b, December 23). *Keeping the Flaws*.
- Thomson, R. (1993, August 25). Healthcare: The one-stop help centre. *The Guardian*.
- Wainwright, M. (1993, July 9). Shire counties gain at cities' expense. *The Guardian*.
- Weston, C. (1993, March 2). Mothers are left holding the baby and the blame, for breakdown of social policy. *The Guardian*.
- White, M. (1993, July 8). Minister urges more moralistic stand on unmarried mothers. *The Guardian*.
- Whitworth, A. (2013). Lone parents and welfare-to-work in England: A spatial analysis of outcomes and drivers. *Social Policy and Administration*, 47(7), 826–845.
- Wicks, M. (1993, July 5). The party of the family breakdown. *The Guardian*.
- Williams, Z. (2013, May 23). Comment: Why do these Tories think they can rule on marriage? The antis in this week's vote think our sex lives are their business – Yet Boris Johnson seems to escape without censure. *The Guardian*.
- Wilson, H., & Huntington, A. (2006). Deviant (M)others: The construction of teenage motherhood in contemporary discourse. *Journal of Social Policy*, 35(1), 59–76.
- Wintour, P. (1993, July 6). New law on single mothers. *The Guardian*.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40(3), 197–214.

**Emma Salter** is a PhD student at the University of Sussex, investigating the educational and social outcomes of the children of lone parents. She has worked as a researcher at the University of Sussex and the Institute of Education, University of London, with a focus on topics relating to education and social justice.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

