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"You don't seem damaged:" Exploring the identities of the daughters of single mothers as they experience higher education as first generation students (0131)

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Many existing widening participation policies are primarily focused on access to higher education and not on participation within higher education, including student achievement, retention, and persistence, after students enter university (Burke, 2012; Kettley, 2007; Burke, 2002; Lewis, 2002). First-generation students are more likely to be from low-income households (Gardner and Holley, 2011). They are less likely to persist through to degree completion compared with their continuing-generation counterparts (Davis, 2010).

The common discourses through which single mother families are socially constructed often suggest that the mere existence of single mothers is the root cause of the social ills with which they are often correlated (Edwards and Caballero, 2011; May, 2004; Phoenix, 1996). The theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this research, including feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and the concept of social exclusion, challenge those discourses. This study is framed in a way that questions the assumptions around single mothers as one homogenous group and challenges the patriarchy that positions single mothers as inferior to married, heterosexual mothers. The weight and impact of the social and political scrutiny of single mother families depends largely on the raced and classed position of the mother herself. The powers and privileges certain single mothers may or may not have access to or be able to exercise depend on their social positions and identities. Working class women and women from minority racial and ethnic groups are more likely to fully experience inequalities than their wealthier, white counterparts (Collins, 2000; Mirza, 1997; Phoenix, 1997; Skeggs, 1997).

Findings from the 2011 census indicate that single parent families represent more than a quarter (26 percent) of all families with children in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2012). Single mothers and their children are more likely to live in poverty than their two-parent household counterparts (Maplethorpe, Chanfreau, Philo, and Tait, 2010). Additionally, single mothers are significantly more likely to have little or no advanced education compared with married and partnered mothers (Maplethorpe et al. 2010). Research focused on family structure as it relates to student identities and the university experience is limited. Some studies have focused on the university experiences of single mothers (Hinton-Smith, 2009; Reay, 2003) and there have been studies suggesting that the children of single mothers are less likely to participate in higher education (Lee, Almonte, and Youn, 2012; Martin, 2012; Ringback Weitof, Hjern, and Rosen, 2004). However, there have not been

studies exploring the experiences of the children of single mothers in higher education.

The available research examining the educational attainment of the children of single mothers primarily focuses on the fact that they are unlikely to achieve as highly as the children raised in two parent families and ignores those students who are able to complete university degrees despite the statistics and the challenges. The gap in the literature that silences the voices and experiences of the children of single parents able to overcome the educational odds is reminiscent of the history of research around black students in education focused solely on their underachievement or their lack of achievement (Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick, 2010; Mirza, 1997). The success of ethnic minority students is often ignored in higher education research. Instead, research focuses primarily on their academic struggles (Mirza, 1997, p. 269). Just as critics have argued for comprehensive research for students from ethnic minority backgrounds, inclusive of the stories of those students who rise above the statistics, this study similarly seeks to fill the gap in the research on the daughters of single mothers and allow the voices of those who are the first in their family to enter into university to be heard.

The research questions for this study are:

1. How do the dominant discourses, created and maintained by the media, politics, and social policy, construct single mother families? How compatible is that social construction with the higher education aspirations and participation of the daughters of single mothers?
2. How do the daughters of single mothers construct their identities when they enter university?
3. Does their family experience shape their identities and their higher education aspirations and experiences and, if so, in what ways?

Data was collected for this doctoral research, under the supervision of Professor Penny Jane Burke, during spring and summer of 2013. Analysis of findings is currently being conducted. The first method of data collection, a preliminary questionnaire, provided some quantitative demographic data from 110 respondents. From the responses to the questionnaires, I engaged in purposive sampling to select 25 students to interview. The 25 interview participants were currently pursuing or have recently completed an undergraduate degree in the United Kingdom. They are or have attended a wide variety of universities and are pursuing or have completed a diverse range of undergraduate degrees. The reasons their mothers have primarily raised them are diverse and include, but are not limited to, divorce, bereavement, and ended non-marital relationships. Some interviewees self-identity as working class and some as middle class. They represent a mix of traditional age and mature students, different race backgrounds, and different sexual identities. When possible, face-to-face interviews were conducted. Alternatively, interviews were conducted via Skype. Additionally, two interviewees asked to provide written interviews. After the interview, participants were provided writing prompts and questions and encouraged to engage in reflective writing as part of the third method of data

collection. Follow up interviews may also be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. The interviews and reflective writings are currently being analysed using thematic analysis, which allows me to organize, interpret, and illuminate the findings through common themes discovered within the data (Frost, 2011; Blaxter et al. 2010; Murray, 2008; Gillham, 2005).

Examining the identities of the daughters of single mothers as they negotiate university life will provide a framework for understanding their experiences. It is intended that this study will inform the creation of new or the improvement of existing social and educational programmes and policies aimed to encourage and support historically underrepresented students in their endeavour to earn university degrees.