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**INDEPENDENT MOTHERHOOD: THE LIFE  
EXPERIENCES OF NEVER MARRIED  
WORKING-CLASS SINGLE MOTHERS IN NEW  
YORK CITY**

by

**SUSANNA JONES**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Social Welfare in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The  
City University of New York**

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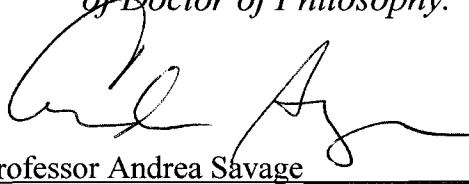
SUSANNA JONES

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*This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Social Welfare in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.*

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## Abstract

# INDEPENDENT MOTHERHOOD: THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF NEVER MARRIED WORKING-CLASS SINGLE MOTHERS IN NEW YORK CITY

by

Susanna Jones

Advisor: Professor Andrea Savage

This study examines the lives of never married working-class single mothers, a population that has not been systematically or adequately studied. The main focus of the dissertation is to explore the decision-making processes of single mothers, how they came to be, how they think and feel about their current unpartnered marital status, how they manage and cope, and what social work practices and social welfare policies might aid them in their lives. This dissertation approaches single motherhood as a social construction, meaning, it is produced and constructed through a dynamic set of historical and interactive forces and processes. The aim of this research project is to explore territory beyond previously held conceptions and misperceptions of single mothers. Single mothers have been placed in what Polakow (1993) refers to as the “zone of suspicion, the horizon of potential depravity.” This research examines the intersections of their “singleness” and their “motherness” while paying equally close attention to race and class and how these particular identities help to shape their lives, circumstances, and responses to single motherhood. Single mothers parallel what Mintz & Kellogg (1988) said about families traveling west, “[t]he story of pioneer families on the Great Plains is a

tale of poverty, unremitting toil, and ceaseless effort, but a story too of successful innovation and adaptation to new and challenging circumstances” ( p. 98).

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First and foremost this dissertation is dedicated to Ron and baby girl. I cannot yet call you by your name because I have not named you or given birth to you, but you will be entering this world in a few short days. How apropos that I give birth to my first baby – my dissertation – which is about motherhood, while I await the birth of my real baby. Baby girl you gave me the courage and strength to finish. I could not have done it without you or your dad. You are both precious to me.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Single motherhood is a family form that is increasingly global and cross-cultural (Gordon & McLanahan, 1990; Mencher & Okongwu, 1993; Mullings, 1997). For instance, the United States, Sweden, and the former Soviet Union have a high prevalence rate of single mother-headed households (Burns & Scott, 1994). Australia, the United Kingdom, France, West Germany, and Japan, have also seen a steady increase in single mother households since the early 1970s (ibid). A profound shift has changed the way that many countries define “family.” In many European countries children born to unmarried mothers are the new social order and perceived in a different, more acceptable light. This trend is heavily pronounced in the Nordic countries where 49 percent of all births in 1999 were to unmarried parents. In Iceland, the figure is 62 percent, France 41 percent, Britain 38 percent, Ireland reported 31 percent (NY Times, March 24, 2002) and the United States reports that 33 percent of all children are born to an unmarried mother (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

In the United States single mother families have increased from 3 million in 1970 to 10 million households in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, America’s Families and Living Arrangements). In addition, the proportion of single mother households grew larger, while that of two-parent families dropped. The U.S. Census reports, “The proportion of all families that were married-couple families with children declined from 87 percent in 1970 to 69 percent in 2000. Meanwhile, the proportion of single-mother families grew to 26 percent...from 12 percent in 1970” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, Current Population Reports). In 1960, 1 in 20 babies were born out of marriage; today

that figure is 1 in 3 (New York Times, November 4, 2000). “Demographers now predict that more than half of all youngsters born in the 90s will spend at least part of their childhood in a single parent home” (Kantrowitz and Wingert, 2001, p. 48)

Unlike the numerous studies of single mothers, relatively little is known about the life experiences of never married working-class single women. Previous studies have focused predominantly on middle and upper-class women (Bock, 2000; Hertz & Ferguson, 1998; Mannis, 1999; Mattes, 1994; Miller, 1992; Renvoize, 1985), teenage single mothers (Horowitz, 1995; Kaplan, 1997; Ludtke, 1997; Solinger, 1992), poor single mothers (Edin & Lein, 1997; Gladow & Ray, 1986; Mulroy, 1995; Schein, 1995; Seccombe, 1999; Wijnberg & Reding, 1999), or explored the lives of black single mothers (Franklin, 1990; Jackson et. al, 1998; Omolade, 1986; Savage, et. al. 1978). Past research has exclusively examined their motherhood status while making invisible their identity as single women and their feelings about their status. Even the phrase “single mother” can be problematic in its use and/or misuse.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The most commonly relied upon statistics of single parent families are reported as follows: 12 million single parent families, 10 million of whom are single mothers and 2 million of whom are single fathers. It is important to clarify the inconsistency in categorization and reporting of single mother families. The use of statistics can often distort and misrepresent this social phenomenon, depending on which statistics are reported and how they are used. Below, I attempt to clarify the number of single mother families and synthesize the data from the Census Bureau.

The U.S. Census Bureau uses both the term “household” and “family group” when providing statistics about families. A family group includes multiple subfamilies within a household, whereas, a household counts as one family. Therefore, the term household is typically an undercount of the actual or real numbers of single mothers. For instance, a single mother householder could have a daughter who is 17 years of age who has a child as well. This would translate in Bureau terms as *one* single mother *household*, but *two* single mother *families* or *family groups*. The breakdown of families and households in the United States is as follows:

- There were 105 million households<sup>1</sup> in the U.S. in the year 2000.
- Of the 105 million households, 72 million were family households - 33 million were nonfamily households.
- Of the 72 million family households:
  - 54.5 million were married couples with and without children:
    - 29.7 million of whom were married couples without children
    - 24.8 million of whom were married couple families with their own children under 18 years of age

To better understand this phenomenon, an exploration into the lives of this subgroup of single mothers is crucial. As social workers who work with this population and as professionals who influence and develop policies and programs we must ask ourselves the following questions: Why have single mother headed households proliferated? What are the conditions that help to explain this rise? What do the women think about their family structure and what forces do they believe contribute to their circumstances? What kinds of services would be most beneficial to this population?

Understanding this shift in families will ultimately make us more responsive social workers. Policy and practice are shaped by and contingent upon what we know about single mothers, which makes it more essential to talk with the women themselves about their lives yet scant literature exists that grapples with these questions. Furthermore, even fewer studies have been conducted that examine the lives of never married working single mothers.

Historically, social welfare policy has treated single mothers according to the origins of their singleness (as defined in relation to a man): widowed, deserted, divorced, separated, or never married (Abramovitz, 1996; Gordon, 1994). For instance, at the turn of the twentieth century, widows were deemed “deserving” of aid, hence the

- 
- 4.4 million were male household families:
    - 2.2 million were male householders with no wife present and had no children
    - 2.2 million were male householders with no wife present and children under the age of 18
  - 12.9 million were female household families:
    - 5.3 million were female household with no husband present and they had no children
    - 7.6 million were female household with no husband present and had children under 18 years
  - There were 9.8 million single parent families with children under 18. That is the figure 2.2 million single father households plus 7.6 million single mother households, both with children under the age of 18.
  - There are 10 million single mother family groups in the U.S. in the year 2000.
- (Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary file 1 – Table PAT18 and telephone conversation, August 15, 2002 with Martin O’Connell at the Bureau)

institutionalization of the Mother's Pension in many states by 1910.<sup>2</sup> Today, however, a large number of single mothers are never married or cohabiting (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). We are witnessing a social and cultural backlash in regard to both welfare state policy and marriage. Single mothers are at the center of the controversy. It appears single mothers today are more often categorized as "undeserving" precisely because of the increased likelihood that they are never married or cohabiting. "In much the same way that woman is Other, mother-headed families are the Other of family in the United States today. Their nonconformity with the family ethic and ambiguous relationship to the cult of domesticity place them outside conventional thinking about the family" (Sands and Nuccio, 1989, p. 28).

Single mothers are, therefore, in an unusually vulnerable position. They have been placed in what Polakow (1993) refers to as the "zone of suspicion, the horizon of potential depravity." They are *single women*, while simultaneously *single mothers*, a social location that makes them additionally burdened and suspect. The conservative right views single mother families as a threat and culpable for the decline of the family (<http://www.heritage.org/research/welfare/bg1606es.cfm>). Furthermore, conservatives tend to blame single mothers for their poverty, dependency on the welfare state, juvenile delinquency, and other social problems. We live in a culture that demonizes the single mother and, more importantly, erects institutional barriers and structures that disadvantage her in employment, housing, and childcare to name but a few areas (Burns & Scott, 1994).

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<sup>2</sup>The Mother's Pension Program of 1910 was a victory for a homogeneous, select group of women, who were white and the wives of working and upper-class men. However, many women did not reap the benefits of the program, it racialized and discriminated against poor and working-class families.

Add to economic discrimination cultural stigmatization and it becomes more evident that single mothers face intense scrutiny. Nowhere is this more evident than in the current “family values” rhetoric surrounding welfare “reform.” Among other things, reformers tout the importance of marriage. “Marriage is sort of like a life preserver or a seat belt...we can put [marriage] in exactly the same category as eating a good diet, getting exercise and not smoking” says Linda Waite, Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago (NY Times, October 22, 2002). Recently, the House has reintroduced legislation that includes \$100 million federal dollars to fund what they call “healthy marriage promotion grants” (<http://www.congress.gov>). The proposed legislation of has already been implemented in states such as Oklahoma, Arizona, Louisiana, Michigan and Utah who have allocated welfare funds for marriage promotion activities (Parke & Ooms, 2002). Marriage in itself is not a long-term solution for making women more responsible and self-sufficient; nor is it a remedy for ameliorating poverty (Furstenberg, 2002; Sandfort & Hill, 1996). The issue of marriage and mothering has contributed greatly to many contentious debates about related social issues, such as: public spending, welfare, childcare, education, crime, poverty, and healthcare (Giddens, 2001).

But there is another version of the single mother family. It tells us how these women “make ends meet,” (Edin & Lein, 1997) how they are one of many family forms in a postmodern world (Coontz, 1999; Stacey, 1994), and how resilient they can be (Polakow, 1997). Hertz & Ferguson (1997) sum it up: “women who head families are marginalized culturally, politically, and economically, women who parent without a

marital partner do little to undercut family life. Indeed, they seek to mobilize and reinvigorate kinship and community” (p. 35).

This study explores the lives of a small sample of never married working single mothers. More specifically, it explores how these women became single mothers, what they think and how they feel about their current unpartnered marital status, how they manage and cope, and what social work practices and social welfare policies might aid them in their lives. This dissertation fills a void in the literature in two areas: (1) the life experiences of this subgroup of single mothers, and (2) how they became and how they feel about their single mother status.

By exploring the life experiences of never married working single mothers, this research project offers their story told through their voices. The study contributes to the literature on single mother families, decision-making processes and coping mechanisms. This study also has implications for future public policies that support pluralist family structures. As Jeter (1995) suggests we need to develop new ways to understand and assist single parent families that “help to elevate typical views of the single parent family form from that of a stereotype of victimization to one of responsible archetype” (p. 533). This dissertation adds empirical evidence about the lives of single mothers.

### **Research questions**

The main research question the dissertation examines is: What are the life experiences of never married working single mothers? Embedded in this overarching research question are five key areas of focus:

- How did they become single mothers? Was “choice” an element in their decision-making process? If so, how is choice constructed and understood?
- Do the single mothers of this study feel as though they have made choices about their single mother lifestyle, like some of their middle-class and upper-class counterparts? How does choice affect these women, if at all?
- What do single mothers think and how do they feel about their current unpartnered marital status? How do the women feel about being single given the cultural climate that is pro-marriage? Do they think there are advantages, disadvantages?
- What strategies do they develop to help them manage and cope? Do the working-class single mothers of this study operate differently than what the literature informs us about single mothers from other class groups?
- What social work services/social benefits do they use, if any, and how do they regard these services?

### **Rationale**

Why is it important to explore these issues? Family in the United States has been and continues to be mischaracterized and misrepresented as a monolithic and universal institution. When family is defined using this ideological framework, single mothers as well as many other alternative family forms fall into the category of “abnormal” or “atypical.” To expose the fluidity of family life reveals the legitimacy of various family

forms. Furthermore, single mothers have increased dramatically in the past several decades and the numbers continue to increase. It is important that we understand why this sociodemographic trend continues. Single mothers are the targets of much negative attention and are a stigmatized group in our society. It is not surprising therefore that the lived experience of working single mothers is an area of research that is understudied. And lastly, social welfare policy and social work practice need informed standpoints upon which to develop recommendations for both policy and practice. As Hanson (1995) states, “We are in need of research that challenges current myths that exist regarding single parent characteristics and practices” (p. 19).

#### The fluidity of the family in the United States

Changes in both marriage and the American family have been traced by scholars who offer theories for understanding how these changes are affected by economic, political, social, and cultural forces (Coontz, 1999; Mintz & Kellogg, 1988; Skolnick, 1991; Shorter, 1975; Stacey, 1994). This literature posits that the family is fluid and shaped by race, class, and gendered relations as well as the current political economy.

The fluidity of the family in the United States highlights that single motherhood is merely one of many family forms. In U.S. contemporary culture we hear a lot about what it means to be a “healthy” and “functional” family and there is cultural pressure to subscribe to that ideal. That cultural ideal/icon portrayed - in the 1950s television hits to today’s continued romanticization of the fantasy family of the working father and the caregiving mother - is no longer the statistical norm. There is no universal family type;

moreover, there never was. It is important to expose the multitude of family forms that have always existed and dismantle the notion that one form is “right.” It is important to study family forms that fall outside the purview of “normalcy” in order to fully understand how these family groups survive and often thrive and to find out what internal and external conditions explain their emergence. As Hetherington (2002) articulates, it is critical today to explore “postnuclear” family pathways. Families are not simply or solely victims of structures and conditions, nor are they free standing individuals isolated from those structures. Rather they are both. This study recognizes the both/and element of family formation.

More specifically, family structure is not defined solely by an individual set of circumstances, rather, it is shaped by larger social forces, such as, but not limited to, marital trends (marriage, divorce, remarriage, cohabitation), changes in fertility and mortality, the state of the economy, the moral discourse of the day, the social organization of work, the structure of the labor market, sexual orientation, and socially constructed gender roles. In addition, individuals make choices in many instances about what they want their family to be and work towards achieving that goal.

Families have dramatically changed in the U.S. during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are a multitude of factors that explain the changes. For instance, a decrease in marriage rates; an increase in divorce rates; a decrease in remarriage rates; a rise in the age of first marriages; an increase in labor force participation by women and shifting labor force participation for men; and delays and declines in childbearing are to name a few (Hanson et. al., 1995). Stacey (1994) has coined the term the “postmodern” family to refer to contemporary family forms that have emerged as a result of these social changes. Single

motherhood is one of the postmodern family forms. Although it is hardly a new structure, its numbers are on the rise.

### The rise in single mother families

Social values and cultural norms have established a hierarchy of marital status. Couples in a heterosexual marriage fall on the top of the hierarchy, while single mothers fall on the lower rungs. Despite these hierarchical categories, the number of men and women who do not marry as well as those who do not marry *and* have children continues to rise. “The proportion of unwed births among women, 20-24, has gone up, from 48.2 percent in 1990 to 61.7 in 2001” (The National Marriage Project Report ‘The State of Our Unions’ 2003).

How women become single mothers has also changed. Historically, single mothers were more likely to be widows, due to war, disasters, migration and slavery. In the past, the most common pathway toward single motherhood was for a woman to marry, give birth to a child, and experience a separation, a divorce, or the death of a spouse. Since 1960, however, there have been substantial changes. Today, many single mother families are a by-product of divorce and an increasing number are women are not married (sometimes cohabiting) and having children. “In mother-headed single parent families there has been an enormous increase in the percentage of mothers who have never been married, from 4 percent in 1960 to more than 40 percent today. In earlier times, most single mothers were divorced or widowed. But the number of never married single mothers is not higher than that of divorced single mothers” (The National Marriage

Project, p. 31, 2003 citing Hoffman & Forster, 1997 pp. 255-275). Fathers are more likely to be alive and not too far away, (Burns & Scott, 1994) and in some cases fathers are unknown (i.e. donor insemination).

When racial differences are taken into account, paths toward single motherhood also look different. For example, today white single mothers are more likely to be divorced (42.2%) than separated, widowed or remarried, whereas, black single mothers are most likely to be never married (48.5%). There has been a large increase in the percentage of Asian and Hispanic single mothers who are never married (34.3% and 37.3% respectively) (See Appendix A). Despite racial differences, it is more common today for women across races to give birth to children out-of-wedlock and raise the children on their own. Bianchi reports, “increasingly, mother-child families are formed by a birth to an unmarried mother rather than because parents divorce” (Bianchi, 1995, p. 80).

There are several reasons for the rise in single motherhood that are related to changing marital patterns. One reason for the rise is due to the postponement of marriage. Since 1970 the median age of marriage has increased for both women and men. From 1970 to 2000, the median age of marriage for women increased from 20.8 to 25.1, and for men the figures are 23.2 and 26.8 respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). These figures mean that women are spending more of their adult years single, which increase their chances of having a child while unmarried.

A second reason for the rise in single motherhood is that fewer individuals are getting married; the proportion of the population that is married has decreased. Never married single mother households rose from 4 to 31 percent of all single mother

households between 1960 and 1992 (Bianchi, 1995). In fact, the never married single mother makes up the largest percentage of one-parent family groups, maintained by mother of all races with own children under 18 years of age (U.S. Census Bureau, June 29, 2001). Roughly 42 percent of one-parent family groups maintained by a mother with children under 18 years is never married, compared to 35.3 percent who are divorced, 18.3 percent are separated, and 4.0 percent are widowed (See Appendix B). In 1970, 28 percent of adult men over the age of 15 years were never married, whereas in 2000 that number has increased to 31 percent. For women over the age of 15, in 1970, 22 percent were never married, while in 2000, that figure rose to 25 percent (America's Families and Living Arrangements, 2000). "The proportion of women 20 to 24 years old who had never married doubled between 1970 and 2000 – from 36 percent to 73 percent. This increase was relatively greater for women 30 to 34 years old; the proportion of never married women more than tripled over this time period from 6 percent to 22 percent" (U.S. Census Bureau, America's Families and Living Arrangements, 2000, p. 9). And the changes were similar for men. The average American spends most of her/his lifetime unmarried (Zill & Rogers, 1988). In 1999, there were currently 91 million unmarried adults, up from 67 million in 1980, and 37 million in 1950 (See Appendix C for racial differences of unmarried adults).

A third reason for the rise in single motherhood is due to an increase in divorce rates. Since 1960 divorce has been on the rise, though it leveled off in the 1990s. In 1970, 5.7 percent of women aged 15 and above were divorced or separated. In 2000, the figure grew to 12.6 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March Supplements, 1970 to 2000).

A fourth reason is that, along with the increase in divorce rates, there has also been a decrease in rates of remarriage for women. One significant trend during the past half century is that women who were once married and now divorced are less likely to remarry or cohabitate. Only half of the women marry again or cohabitate after five years. This figure has dramatically decreased since the 1950s when two-thirds of divorced women remarried ([www.cdc.gov/nchs/cohabitation](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/cohabitation)).

A fifth reason is that some women are choosing to bear children outside of marriage. It has been posited that many women today enter into single motherhood by choice (Bock 2000; Hertz & Ferguson 1998; Mattes 1994; Miller 1992). That is not to say that being and becoming a single mother is always the first choice for women. In some cases, women are actively choosing to parent alone and in other cases women want to marry but feel as though the marriage option might be more risky to their children than staying single (Furstenberg, 2002; McLanahan, 2002). Regardless, a growing number of women are becoming mothers without marriage.

#### Giving voice to working-class single mothers

Hearing from working-class single mothers in order to better understand the social, economic, and interpersonal dynamics of their life experiences enhances our understanding of this growing demographic group. Relying on social construction as a theory and model for research, this project seeks to understand women's lives through the lens of their subjective experience. Most of the literature assumes that poor single mothers are victims of circumstance (sometimes understood as a consequence of personal

problems and sometimes understood as a by-product of structural conditions), rather than single mothers by choice. But, in fact, little is known about how working single mothers actually feel about their status and whether or not they chose, favor or disparage their current lifestyle/conditions. As an economic subset of single mothers, they have been lumped into the same category as poor single mothers, the differences are identified and explored throughout this dissertation.

How to proceed: Social welfare policy and social work practice recommendations

Social work needs practical recommendations and public policy solutions that reflect and acknowledge single motherhood as a legitimate family structure. Policies that address actual rather than perceived parental and familial relationships will be more effective. Pollitt (1993) states, “instead of forcing women to adapt to an outmoded institution, society should adapt institutions to the lives people are actually living. Single mothers deserve fair economic and social policies, not sermons on morality” (p.147).

Single mothers in this study were asked about which benefits and social work services they rely upon and what programs and services would be advantageous to them. Hanson writes, “given the demographic predictions of a major increase in the incidence of births by unmarried mothers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, far beyond the current 30% estimate, a new paradigm for [social work] practice is now required” (Hanson, et. al. 1995, p. 19). For these reasons, scholars, policy makers, and social workers need to (re)examine single motherhood more closely.

## **Theoretical frameworks: Social construction, feminism, and Marxism**

### **Social Constructionism**

Single motherhood is viewed as a social construction, meaning, it is produced and constructed through a dynamic set of historical and interactive forces and processes. Furthermore, social constructionism challenges assumptions about the “natural” family. The goal of the social constructionist approach is to “empirically document the myriad social processes through which persons in the course of everyday life produce and organize ‘family’ as a meaningful designation for social relations...taking the position that the family is socially constructed leads researchers to study family as a constellation of ideas, images, or terminology that is used to assign meaning to aspects of everyday life” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999, p. 5). The aim of this project is to explore territory beyond previously held conceptions and misperceptions of single mothers, to uncover the “ideas, images, [and] or terminology” never married working single mothers utilize to make sense of their lives.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) explain that the way society understands social phenomena is through the act of habituation and institutionalization. This leads to viewing phenomena as objective. If applied to the family, habituation and institutionalization teach us to view the family as a given, as something that is objective, unalterable and ahistorical. Berger and Luckmann, however, critique this view and in its place offer the theory of social construction. Their theory conceptualizes the family as a social construction, meaning there is no innate, essential or given quality or characteristic

of the family but rather the family (and more importantly, its form) is a concept that is reflected in social discourse, which is historically situated and created. The complex social trajectory that creates institutions - confounded by the process of habitualization and institutionalization - can lead to viewing institutions as objective reality. They state, “the paradox that man [sic] is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a human product” is problematic from the standpoint of social constructionism. “It is important to emphasize that the relationship between man, the producer, and the social world, his product, is and remains a dialectical one” (Berger & Luckmann, p. 39).

Although social constructionists view the family as a fluid institution and historically situated, dominant culture portrays single mother-headed families as deviant and problematic. In order to more fully understand this family form, it is crucial to talk to women themselves about their experiences as single mothers.

### Feminism & Marxism

Adopting a feminist orientation is a critical part of this dissertation because it places at the center of analysis women, and women’s lives. Given that this dissertation seeks to understand the experience of single motherhood through the voices of the women themselves, this research is feminist in its orientation because it allows the women the opportunity to speak openly about their lives, choices, decisions, and challenges as well as moments of empowerment.

In addition, this dissertation relies on Marxist theory because it places an emphasis on class as an important variable that contributes to and influences women's everyday lives and helps to shape their experiences as single mothers. Class is a social force that helps shape people's lives and we need to explore how that force operates in the lives of these particular women, beyond an ideological and theoretical understanding. While middle and upper-class families, particularly single mother families, typically see positive reflections of themselves in society, working-class and poor single mothers are characteristically brutally portrayed. We need a more accurate portrait of working-class single mothers (working-class as specifically defined for this study). As we are fully aware, income levels and class position often help shape, if not determine, what choices, expectations, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors one exhibits. Some theorists discuss the power of class in its cultural and symbolic configurations, as opposed to a strictly economic interpretation of class (Lawler, 1999). According to Lawler, the symbolic and cultural aspects of class are used as the arena in which to pathologize the working-class. "Class relations are...relations of superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality, judgment/shame. But the apparently personal, private pain which these relations engender is a manifestation of political inequalities" (Lawler, p.3, italics mine).

We live in a new class society where class has taken on a different meaning yet is just as important in determining one's life chances. There is little doubt that lines between classes, particularly the working-class and middle-class, have blurred during the past several decades, but those lines have not yet disappeared (Rubin, 1992). Differences continue to exist *between* classes and *among* classes due to race, ethnicity, and sexual

orientation to name a few. As Rubin (1992) states, we have not “conquered the invidious distinctions of class” as many would like us to believe.

The lives of working-class single mothers have not been a topic of much inquiry. Furthermore, the lives of working-class women have been understudied more generally or as Lois Rita Helmbold wrote, “most histories of working-class women rely on government studies and statistics, observations by middle-class reformers and journalists, or a small number of autobiographical accounts and oral histories. With the exception of a tiny handful of famous or infamous working-class women who left records of their lives, these sources offer working-class history only as mediated through middle-class, usually white, and sometimes male biases and assumptions” (1989, p. 41).

Lastly, the definition and criteria of working-class used for this dissertation was developed exclusively for this study. It does not purport to speak for all working-class women, nor all working-class single mothers. Rather the findings are applicable only to the women who have generously shared part of their life stories. For a detailed description of the criteria for working-class, see the Methodology chapter.

The next chapter is a review of the literature that explores both (a) the history of single motherhood, black family life, and working-class family life and (b) presents contemporary empirical studies of single motherhood, more specifically how single mothers are depicted in society and how they make decisions about motherhood in their specific contexts as well as how they manage. Following the literature reviews is the presentation of the research methodology. Chapters 4 – 7 are the data chapters that present the voices of the women followed by the summary and discussion chapter, which

synthesizes the material and presents an overview of the key findings. This includes lessons learned and insights that emerged on both a theoretical and practical level.

## CHAPTER II

### The review of the literature on single motherhood

#### SECTION I: THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF SINGLE MOTHERHOOD IN THE U.S.: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS<sup>3</sup> FROM 1880 TO THE PRESENT

Like contemporary studies that examine the lives of single mothers (described later), historical evidence also proves useful and informative. Single mothers have been and still are a topic of personal and public conversation. How single mothers survive and thrive in everyday life is influenced by the way they are depicted in society and therefore the way they are treated. This dissertation highlights a few of the major patterns of how single mothers were portrayed and how they were treated in the past. This brief exploration into the past helps us more fully understand the stage upon which single mothers operate today.

The purpose of this section is to provide a brief backdrop and historical understanding of single motherhood. Single motherhood has a history and the roots of their history are detailed below. This section analyzes how single mothers are described, reflecting attitudes towards and treatment of them. It also traces changes in the number of single mothers, showing discernable trends and patterns where they exist. It helps to

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<sup>3</sup> A discourse analysis can be an academically rigorous project if applying a particular method, for instance using Wittgenstein or Foucault. Although this level of analysis is interesting and fruitful, for the purposes of the proposed study, I use the term discourse analysis as a simple way to explain how language is applied and used in reference to single motherhood and the implications it had on the treatment of single mothers.

make the connection between constructions of the self and how the use of language combined with dynamics of power and domination contribute to developing notions of subjectivity. Even though the topic of this project is not who is deserving and undeserving of aid, it is important to note because of the impact that it has on this population.

The changing images of single mothers in public discourse provide evidence to support the theory of social construction, which this study draws upon. The information you will read below reveals a social constructionist perspective because it highlights the fluid and changing nature of family life, particularly single motherhood. Furthermore, the “reality” of single motherhood differs depending on the location of the individual who is describing the phenomenon and their subjectivity.

This section begins with a description of single mothers in the 1880s – which was the same time the topic of single motherhood was first publicly discussed – and ends with a look at how single mothers are depicted today. It is important to note the periods highlighted below do not represent a comprehensive history of that timeframe; nor are the dates of each period rigid. After reading the literature, trends became evident and general time periods were created that best represent the literature. In fact, precise figures about single mothers were not available prior to 1940, which makes it more difficult to truly assess the changing nature of single motherhood and in addition shows the invisibility of this group (Gordon and McLanahan, 1990). Also, this snapshot approach of single motherhood can be limited and can lead to misperceptions. Nevertheless, this categorization is useful in that it offers a rich historical overview of who single mothers were, how they were discussed, how they were treated, and can reveal tendencies that

emerged in the past and have reemerged in the present. Through the process of tracing the history of single mothers, a clearly delineated hierarchicalization of motherhood becomes apparent - one that is entrenched in our culture and still evident today.

***How the literature historically characterizes single motherhood as a “social problem”:  
changing views***

***The “deserted” mother: 1880 – 1910***

It was around 1880 that single motherhood became a major public concern. Gordon (1994) reports, “While single mothers had been the objects of charity and moral reform for centuries, in the first two decades of this century reformers created an alarm that single motherhood was a major social problem. In an agitation that continued for three decades, subsiding somewhat in the 1920s and resurfacing again in the 1970s with the rise in the divorce rate, reformers convinced many that single mothers represented both a symptom and a cause of threatening social breakdown” (p. 24). Single mothers were becoming more visible at this time because women were actively seeking assistance and going public with their needs. This newer family form – single motherhood – required immediate attention to avoid further deterioration of proper “family values.”

Gordon and McLanahan (1990) found that the number of single parent families in 1900 approximated that of 1960. One of the major differences between 1900 and 1960 was that single parents in 1900 were more likely to live with extended family. In 1960 single parents were more likely to head the household. In 1900, 8.5 percent of children

resided with a single parent (Gordon and McLanahan, 1990, p. 2). Today that figure is 33 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Initially, deserted wives were the focus of attention when reformers<sup>4</sup> began talking about single motherhood. During this period (1880 – 1910) a moral discussion centered around the “deserted” mother; despite the fact that most single mothers were widows they were characterized as deserted. Widows made up 77 percent of single mothers during the turn of the century, while 16 percent of single mothers during this same period were women with alive but absent husbands. Women had always experienced widowhood. What was relatively new during this period, due heavily to industrialization, immigration, migration, and urbanization, was desertion. Social workers called desertion the “great evil” that caused family breakdown and required serious attention that needed to be remedied (Gordon, 1994). It became an important strategic device to describe single mothers as women who were deserted. This was during the first wave of the women’s movement when women were fighting for equal rights. To describe single mothers through the lens of desertion meant that the blame was more easily placed on absconded fathers, thereby, making it easier to provide public aid or so it was thought.

However, it was not that simple. There were mixed reactions about single mothers, varying from blaming the woman for her husband’s desertion to finding fault with the husband for abandoning his family.<sup>5</sup> The remedy suggested would depend upon

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<sup>4</sup> The term reformer is used throughout this section of the paper and appears in other sections as well. I use the term to mean individuals who were engaged in public debate and influential in public policy arenas. Some reformers were people who held official roles in formal government, while others were advocates and activists who were often outside of institutional roles.

<sup>5</sup> There was much controversy as to who was at fault for the husband’s departure from the family. There were cases in which blame was neutralized, for instance, when the father is forced to migrate in order to find work. This case scenario was much easier to accept as a noble act. Then there were cases where the

which side of the debate one stood. Despite that, social reformers who were advocating aid for single mothers leaned toward depicting single mothers as “deserted” victims, products of structural shifts that involved rapid changes in the labor market, and victims disappearing and irresponsible men. It was thought that this characterization would ultimately benefit these women, when in fact it turned out that it was more easily agreed upon that widows were deserving of aid, and entitlements for deserted women were more ambiguous and contested.

*The “widowed” mother: 1910 - 1920*

Even though widows formed the largest segment of single mothers from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 1930s, it was not until 1910 that their presence dominated the discussion of reformers. The shift from desertion to widowhood “did not result from belief that widowhood was increasing. Rather welfare reformers redrew the image of the single mother...for reasons of welfare-state-building strategies” (Gordon, 1994, p. 27). It was in 1910 that the first Mothers’ Pension, also known as Widows’ Pension, was instituted. “Between 1911 and 1921, forty states enacted Mothers’ Pensions” (Abramovitz, 1996, p. 60). Because of the restrictive conditions placed on entitlement to the pension - those deemed “worthy” as determined by their household, childrearing and sexual practices - mothers that received assistance were predominantly widowed, white, and native born. Despite its serious drawbacks - low benefits, moral scrutiny, behavioral

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woman was blamed for her husband’s departure because of her lack of and inability to keep “proper” house, her laziness, and her unattractiveness. When men were blamed the rationale typically assumed an individualist approach, ignoring or placing in the background the structural causes of single parenthood and rather blaming him for abandoning the family.

scrutiny, and poor management, to name a few - the Mothers' Pension did indeed provide aid to some women and children in need. However, it failed to assist many others who were in need yet deemed ineligible for aid. That withstanding, Mothers' Pension continued for the next several decades.

Important consequences, however, accompanied the shift in the way single mothers were characterized. These consequences included the way other categories of single mothers became demonized, compared to the blameless widow. The production of the *good* mother versus the *bad* mother now meant that reformers began referring to all single mothers as widows as a strategy to get around demonization. "Social insurance advocates Abraham Epstein and Isaac Rubinow classified the entire problem of 'dependent' mothers as one of widows well into the New Deal" (Gordon, 1994, p. 28). Yet, to name a mother a widow did not mean that she was exempt of scrutiny. There were practices to ensure she too was still eligible for aid.<sup>6</sup> There was deserving widowhood and undeserving widowhood. The deserving widows were those of fit moral character who possessed qualities that made them "good" mothers. The undeserving widows were identified as either "viscous" or "defective" (Brush, 1997). "The criteria of physical, mental and moral 'fitness' made expert case assessment all the more important both in the lives of poor mothers and in the political projects of reformers" (Brush, 1997, p. 728).

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<sup>6</sup> Just because a mother was a widow did not mean that she automatically was entitled to support. There were still barriers to her receiving aid. She was subject to scrutiny in reference to her domestic and reproductive activities (Gordon, 1994).

*The unmarried mother: 1920s*

Evidence suggests it was no coincidence that unmarried mothers became the focus of social policy concern during the 1920s. After all, it was the period of the First Sexual Revolution with key players who were radical feminists - Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman - fighting for women's increased sexual freedom and reproductive choices. Planned Parenthood and the birth control movement were flourishing (Hunter College Women's Studies Collective, 1983). The change in public policy focus from deserted and widowed to unmarried is attributed to, and driven by, a fear of sexual promiscuity and "immoral" behavior of the mother (Gordon, 1994). Until this decade, out-of-wedlock births were less likely to be discussed in public forums. Reformers worried that if attention shifted to the unmarried single mother then the chances of attaining public support for single mothers would be seriously compromised. Widespread discussion of this population began only after Mothers' Pensions were underway. Public discussion of unmarried mothers tended to split into two factions: one group focused on the mother and the other group focused on the child. When the focus was on the mother, she was considered to be a "fallen woman" and her child was in dire need of rescue. When the focus was on the child, her/his well-being was called into question. Either way, the unmarried mother was suspect. In response to this change in the way single mothers were discussed, solutions to grapple with the social problem moved away from social reform models (macro practice) into individual treatment models (micro practice). With the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, single mothers were placed on the back burner of public discourse and according to some

scholars became virtually invisible (Brush, 1997; Gordon, 1994). A similar pattern emerges during the 1960s and 1970s.

*The (not-so)invisible single mother: 1930 – 1950s*

The attention paid to single mothers has a cyclical history. During the 1930s, 40s and 50s, we witness a repression of the social problem of single motherhood (Brush, 1997; Gordon, 1994). “Most social problems have a short public life, of course, but the major reason for the decline in interest in this problem was the decline in energy of the women’s rights movement” (Gordon, p. 33). In addition to the temporary dispersion of the women’s movement there were other political and economic crises that were more pressing and needed attention. In 1935 the Social Security Act, in particular Title IV and Title V<sup>7</sup>, attempted to alleviate some of the hardships that women and children were facing. The federal government stepped in to assist those in need and in doing so, increased their role and purpose. This contributed to government sponsored and sanctioned social reform, which moved slightly away from an individualist approach. Responsibility now fell largely on the state and less on private charities, hence the formation of the liberal welfare state.

Interestingly, from the 1930s to the 1950s, the numbers of single mothers did not decline. One-parent families changed little in the 40s – mother-child families increased by a mere 6 percent. The increase of mother-child families in the 1950s, however, rose

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<sup>7</sup> Title IV of the Social Security Act is the “Grants to States for Aid to Dependent Children” and Title V is the “Grants to States for Maternal and Child Welfare.” Both of these titles supported and enhanced the lives of many women and children, albeit not thoroughly (Jansson, 1997).

by 43 percent (Bianchi, 1995, p. 75). This statistic challenges widespread perception of the quintessential nuclear family.

Unlike previous decades, but not so different from today, paths to single motherhood changed. By the 1930s widows had decreased to 55 percent of the single motherhood population, down from 77 percent at the turn of the century. In 1930, 1.3 percent of single mothers were divorced and by 1950 that figure had risen to 25 percent (Abramovitz, 1996, p. 70; Gordon, 1994, p. 21). Divorce became an increasing cause of single parenthood. Marital disruption occurred more commonly within the white community while black single mothers during this same period were more likely to be never married mothers. “Widowhood and desertion virtually disappeared as categories” (Brush, 1997, p. 734).

The identification of single mothers by race was a fairly new practice that emerged in the 40s and 50s (Brush, 1997). Differences were identified within the single mother population in regard to race. White single mothers tend to have been formerly married, while black single mothers were more likely to have never been married. In 1950, less than 2 percent of white single mothers were never married as compared to 9 percent of black single mothers. Racial differences in the way we treat single mothers exacerbated during this period. “White women received deep psychological care, anonymity-preserving shelter during pregnancy, and adoption services. Surveillance to prevent dependency, mortality, and infant mortality, including man-in-the-house rules, work requirements, and prenatal care, were the main offerings for Black women” (Brush, 1997, p, 735).

Barring these racial differences, perceptions surrounding single motherhood throughout this period and the way that social workers dealt with this social issue became more benevolent; it moved away from a moralistic tone and adopted a more accepting sympathetic attitude. That is not to say that single motherhood was deemed an acceptable practice and/or lifestyle choice, hence the subheading the (not) so invisible single mother; we were still paying attention to her, yet the kind of attention changed. Stigma was still attached to single motherhood as stated above, it was also racialized.

*The visible & racialized single mother: 1960 – 1980s*

The 1960s through the 1980s was a tumultuous period for single mothers. Greater attention was paid to divorced, separated, and never married single mothers as well as teen mothers. In 1964, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan published his infamous treatise on the “Negro Family” that placed the spotlight on black single mothers. He argued that they were a significant cause of the breakdown of the black family, therefore, the black community. This triggered debate which continues today regarding the epistemology (origin and source) of single motherhood. Moreover, both culture wars and political movements of the time brought about shifts in the way single mothers were described and the factors that were used to explain their persistence. The late 60s and 70s also witnessed the Sexual Revolution which enabled women more sexual freedom to make decisions in regard to reproduction.

In the 1970s, with the rise of the Second Wave of the Women’s Movement, many single mothers themselves advocated for an overhaul in the way single mothers were

treated. They brought into the public arena a new gendered understanding of single motherhood and the structural conditions (i.e. poverty, sexism, violence against women, stigma, lack of affordable housing and childcare to name a few) that made living difficult for many single mothers. Advocates and single mothers themselves attempted to normalize the experience of divorce, and out-of-wedlock births (Gordon, 1994). Despite their efforts, discussions by policy makers relating to single motherhood were still couched in racial terms, often implicitly, and in many cases, explicitly. Prior to 1960, the meaning of single mother and the policies implemented in the Social Security Act reflected the white experience. In earlier welfare state development the exclusion of blacks in welfare policies reflected their treatment and exclusion in wider society. It was when single motherhood was (re)discovered in the 1960s that the problem was more explicitly defined in racial terms. The racial attack grew steam from the earlier decade. Stigmatization grew rampant and the culture and cycle of poverty was used as a weapon to further demonize single mothers. Along with the racialization of single motherhood, the rise in teen motherhood became a politically hot topic in the 1960s. These movements altered the way single motherhood was perceived. Despite these tensions, advocates strove for a more comprehensive, institutional approach to social problems in general and single motherhood in particular.

Despite all the attention black single mothers were receiving, single parent family growth was dramatic for both whites and blacks during the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, these two decades saw the largest increase of single motherhood regardless of race. From 1960 to 1970 there was a 37 percent increase of white single mothers; the percentage was identical for black women. From 1970 to 1980, single motherhood increased for white

women by 40 percent, while increasing 35 percent for black women. For white women, this was due in large part to the rising rates of divorce during these two decades. Black women, who were less likely to be divorced during any decade, were more likely to be unmarried than white women. As Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986) document, during this period the rise in single motherhood for white women was due to increased labor force participation for women, which meant that some women became more financially independent, and no longer relied on marriage as they once had. For black women - who were already more likely to be employed - single motherhood was more a product of the lack of employment opportunities for black men because they were less likely to financially contribute to the household. Black women were therefore more likely to stay single. Overall, during a forty year period from 1950 to 1990 there was a 280 percent increase of single mothers among whites and a 543 percent increase for blacks (Bianchi, 1995, p.78).

During the decade of the 1980s, however, there was a decline in the rate of growth of single parent families. Although they continued to grow, it was at a significantly slower rate than the previous three decades (Bianchi, p. 75). When single parent families did grow, it was a result of delayed marriage and out-of-wedlock births for single mothers (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986). Marital disruption (divorce) was less a factor (Bianchi, p. 71). This newer route to single motherhood produced alarm bells that dominated public debate and brought about a revival of attacks on single mothers, much like those during previous periods, but with an added flare – a much stronger and explicit racist, sexist and classist tone. Also during this period there was a fear that welfare was the cause of family dissolution and an incentive not to marry.

During this conservative wave, policy makers, scholars, journalists, among others, brought to center stage the single mother that spared the public from responsibility and instead blamed her for her lot in life and played into stereotypical fears.

*The mainstreamed single mother: 1990 - Present*

Even though single mothers were consistently experiencing vilification – the 1990s gave rise to the mainstreaming of this social phenomenon. Around the late 1990s and into the new millennium, the tide shifted. While it remains contested terrain, the tone has lightened. Single motherhood not only dramatically increased across the board but, in fact, for some women of privilege single motherhood became *en vogue*. In some cases our culture holds up as an icon the “successful” single mother. When single motherhood is discussed today, it carries a different connotation than we have seen in the past. We see today less of an attack on these women and more sensational stories about who is doing it and why.

In 1990 there was a 26 percent increase in single parent households (Bianchi, 1995). The increase in single mother families contributed dramatically to the increase in single parent families. The statistics regarding *how* women became single mothers shifted dramatically as well (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001; Kantrowitz and Wingert, 2001). In 2000, 48 percent of all householders were unmarried. In 1992, 55 percent of Black single mothers were never married while 21 percent of them were divorced, 18 percent were separated, 2 percent had an absent spouse, and 4 percent were widowed. As for white single mothers, the respective figures were 18 percent never married, 51 percent

divorced, 21 percent separated, 3 percent absent spouse, and 7 percent widowed (Bianchi, 1995). Children living with a divorced mother declined 5 percentage points from 42 percent in 1983 to 37 percent in 1992. During this time an increasing percentage of white women were doing what black women had done throughout the century – giving birth to a child while never married. Additional statistics reveal there has been a decrease in the number of children who live in a two-parent family according to race from 1970 to 1998. The largest decrease in two-parent family structures occurred in the black family with a decrease from 58 percent to 36 percent (a 38 percent decline), followed by the white family with a decrease from 90 percent to 74 percent (an 18 percent decline), and finally the Hispanic family where children raised in two-parent families went from 78 percent in 1970 to 64 percent in 1998, resulting in a 18 percent decrease as well. As indicated, the greatest decline has been in the black family.

We have seen a tremendous amount of academic scholarship, mass media stories, newspaper accounts, and census information that centers around the changing structure of the family, both in the U.S. and internationally. Some of these look specifically at single mothers. The predominant framework to explain this phenomenon has been a cultural model – the pathological nature of the black family, most typically as a product of the “culture of poverty” (Mead, 1992; Murray, 1995) or as remnants of slavery (Franklin, 1992; Gutman, 1978; Omolade, 1986; Wilson, 1987). What is interesting is the number of white children growing up and being raised in single parent households. This is precisely why all of the attention is being paid to families today. When white families deviate, it becomes more of a social issue and is typically linked to economic and political forces, which tend to make it more acceptable.

An ambivalent moment arises as contradictory and conflicting forces clash. On the one hand, there exists a moral argument about the fear and threat of alternative families (single motherhood) as the source of family decay. On the other hand, there is a romanticization of single motherhood as a new “legitimate” family form (at least for white, professional women). Praise (good) and criticism (evil) are simultaneously occurring.

## SECTION II: CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF SINGLE MOTHERHOOD

### FROM THE *OUTSIDE*: HOW SINGLE MOTHERS ARE TALKED ABOUT

A review of the contemporary literature is necessary to more fully understand the lives of single motherhood and what previous research has taught us about this population. This chapter begs the question, how are single mothers depicted today and how, if any, has this changed from the past? This literature review offers an in-depth look at the literature on the contemporary single mother; it provides a more nuanced typology of single mothers that is indicative of the complicated terrain they negotiate today and the fluidity of how they are depicted from an *outside* perspective.

Exposing how a society ideologically constructs single mothers is crucial for an understanding of how single mothers construct their own identities, how they behave, and how and what public policies are enacted. The literature on single motherhood centers around various explanations about how and why single mother-headed families exist. Typically, the description of single mothers comes from an outside perspective, meaning, we more often than not hear about the lives, struggles, and even triumphs of single mothers from an “expert” vantage point. It is rare to hear about single mothers through their own stories with their own voices. An *inside* perspective is presented later in this paper where empirical studies of single mothers and the findings are presented.

## **Typology of single mothers**

The researcher developed a typology of single mothers that comes directly from emerging patterns in the literature that tend to depict single mothers as either deviants, victims, heroines, or single mothers by choice. These typologies tend to explain how women become single mothers, the reasons for their single mother status, and what should be done about this new emergent family form. The review of the literature below is partially organized around these typologies. Edward and Duncan (1997) similarly identified four competing discourses on single motherhood, they are: “single mothers as lifestyle change, single mothers as women escaping patriarchy, single mothers as social problem, and single mothers as social threat” (ibid). Edward & Duncan’s classifications are paired alongside my typologies and discussed in greater detail below. These categories and typologies offer various explanations about the origins as well as the hardships single mothers face. Moreover, the typologies reinforce the contested landscape of their lives.

- **DEVIANT (Single mothers as a social threat)** - Explains single motherhood as violating social norms regarding proper women’s roles. Edward & Duncan claim that the view of single mothers as a social threat emerged in the mid 1970s with the rise of the New Right, whose partial mission has been to promote the reassertion of patriarchy and rearticulation of racial ideology. As made evident in the historical section, single mothers were seen as a social threat much earlier than 1970. This typification of deviant also blames women for their single mother

status. Black single mothers are placed in this category as well. A section of this chapter is devoted to a literature review of the black family.

- VICTIM (Single mothers as social problem) - Explains the existence of single motherhood as a product of social and economic forces beyond their control.
- HEROINE (Single mothers as women escaping patriarchy) - Explains single motherhood as challenging patriarchal norms regarding women's traditional roles and being freed from the "family ethic." Single motherhood, from this perspective, is viewed as freeing women from the patriarchal past of pure identification with a man.
- CHOICE (Single mothers as lifestyle change) - Explains that changes in gender roles and sexual norms contribute to more tolerance and less stigmatization for single mothers. This view focuses on intention, autonomy, individual rights, and self-fulfillment, along with changing notions and expectations of marriage. The conscious decision-making of this group is what separates them from the heroine group. It also highlights that the possibility of single motherhood by choice is due in part to growing economic independence for some women.

### *The single mother as deviant*

The literature that typifies single mothers as deviant relies on an individual model of pathology. Most of the literature in this area applies a deficit approach to single mothers and prescribes solutions, most notably marriage promotion. The deviant typology focuses on the personal, psychological, developmental, behavioral, and moral

aspects of their lives. This literature views single mothers as scapegoats, a cause of poverty, failing to adhere to marital norms – therefore lacking legitimacy, producing illegitimate children who place a burden on society, relying on the public dole and blamed for their substandard material conditions. Many authors who adhere to this view study domestic arrangements and the effects of family formation on both parents and children as well as to the larger society (Mead, 1992; Moynihan, 1965; Murray, 1995; Popenoe, 1988, 1989; Wallerstein, 1989; Wilson, 2002). The authors blame the mother for her failure to subscribe to the two-parent norm or the idealized family. They advocate for the “traditional” heterosexual, two-parent arrangement as a vision of family happiness and success. The deviant single mother, therefore, does not fit within the paradigm that has circumscribed what it means to be a “good mother.” She is blamed for her own material conditions of poverty. From this perspective “poverty has been artfully reconfigured as a social/cultural/psychological pathology, corroborated by a public educational discourse of deficiency and remediation” (Dowd, 1997, p.18). Those in the deviant camp believe single motherhood is a result of the woman’s irresponsible decisions regarding marriage as well as her inability to adhere to a strong work ethic, which ultimately leads to the breakdown of the family. Some view single mother headed households as unable to cherish and love children in a way that two-parents can (Hewlett & West, 1998).

Mead (1992) locates the root of poverty in the nonworking ideology of the “underclass,” many of whom are single mothers. He attributes the breakdown of families as a major cause of poverty. He states, “To some, the reason for non-work and poverty is very simple – increasing breakup among American families in general and especially

among the poor” (p.53). Like Mead, Murray (1995) also blames single mother families for many of society’s ills. He suggests the way to reduce social ills is to make it more difficult for female-headed households to survive, “make unwed motherhood contemptible.”

Not all descriptions of single mothers painted as deviants are as explicit as those presented above. There are also discussions that appear liberal, but once decoded, become evident that the single mother is blamed for the substandard conditions of her life. These depictions of single mothers represent her as a deviant in behavior, while simultaneously acknowledging institutional barriers to equity and equality (Hewlett & West, 1998). Hewlett and West attribute “benign neglect” of capitalist America to the breakdown of the family. They view single mothers as both deviants and victims. They argue society created her position because we no longer culturally value the family as we once did. Destruction of the parental role, liberal divorce laws and lenient welfare policies that support teenage mothers all contribute to the demise of the family. Unfortunately, because of the silent war that has been waged against parents, children are no longer provided with an “armor” – an armor that protects them from the apparent hardships, thereby producing “dangling and dangerous” children.

Hewlett and West hold both the conservatives and the liberals responsible for either simplistically blaming the single mother or adopting a libertarian line that supports the single mother form and “destroys the parental role.” They argue that it is not just the conservatives destroying the parental role but the liberals are unsettling the family structure as well with their ideals and policies. “Many on the left fail to understand that we need to rein in untrammled individualism if we are to recreate the values that nurture

family life. The extraordinary emphasis in left-wing circles on the rights and freedoms of the individual has seriously compromised those altruistic, other directed energies that are the stuff of parenting” (Hewlett and West, 1998, p.34).

### *Developmental explanation*

The developmental explanation is rooted in the idea that single parent families are psychologically unhealthy due to inadequacies of the women themselves, thereby producing and causing harm to children. They believe that children of single parents are at-risk emotionally and developmentally (Mead, 1992; Murray, 1995). Mueller and Cooper (1986) look at how children fare in two-parent families as opposed to single parent families and how this experience affects the children in their adult years. They find that young adults who were raised in single parent (primarily single mother households) tend to have lower educational, occupational, and economic attainment. They are also more likely to experience marital instability and the timing of parenthood occurs at a younger age than their counterparts who were raised in two-parent families. An overwhelming number of reports and studies highlight the detrimental affects of single motherhood on the level of performance and functioning of children (McLanahan, 1994). Wallerstein (2002) studies the devastating effects that divorce has on children adding that children who are raised in any family other than two heterosexual parents are doomed for emotional and psychological trauma well into their adult years. Hertherington (2002) presents an alternative view of Wallerstein. This discussion is detailed in a later section (see Overall Well-Being Section).

*Moral explanation*

Morality has been a lynchpin and critical virtue that lays the foundation for the demonization of single mothers. The moral argument, in this case, attaches to sexuality arguing that women become single mothers because of their inability to control their sexual urge (Murray, 1995; Mead, 1992). The hyper-sexuality of single mothers has a racist tone as well explaining that she is the prey of the uncontrolled black male predator who is a feature of inner city youth culture (Wilson, 2002). Sexual behaviors and practices of single mothers have also been racialized. The term Jezebel has loaded meaning related to the sexuality of black women. Single mothers are often thought of and portrayed as sexually promiscuous women who cannot control their libido. Within the Black community there are disproportionate incidences of single motherhood, which feeds the myth of the hypersexual Black woman.

Legitimacy is another moral argument used against single mothers. The status of children has always been a highly charged and politicized process, whereby, determining their “legitimate” or “illegitimate” legal status (Malinowski, 1962; Millet, 1990). For Malinowski (1962) legitimacy and fatherhood are crucial components of social cohesion and children that are born out-of-wedlock should be granted illegitimacy status. Contrary to Malinowski, Millet (1990) argues the dependence of the mother and the child upon the father is fraught with patriarchal assumptions that must be challenged, beginning with definitions of legitimacy.

*The single mother as victim*

Unlike the deviant category that places blame on the mother's personal inadequacies, the victim category places blame on the system which unjustly discriminates against these women, who are depicted as victims of a classist, racist, sexist and antiquated society. Single mothers are simply a consequence of changing structures and institutions and they are one of many different configurations of these massive changes (Mulroy, 1995). The modern conventional family has been supplanted by a multiplicity of family forms, including step-families, extended or multigenerational unmarrieds, double-ups or communal family/households, what Stacey (1990) calls the postmodern family.

Why is it that single mother families are more likely to live in conditions of economic and social disparity? Dowd (1997) argues that "the economic circumstances of most single parents are not caused by family form but rather by the consequences of a complex combination of entrenched gender roles, failure to acknowledge and deal with dependency, and the debilitating consequences of ongoing racism" (p. xiv). When single mothers are portrayed as the victims it is understood that structural barriers prevent them from achieving a quality standard of life. The majority of texts written about single motherhood focus on the substandard conditions they face and the structural barriers in place impeding their quality of life. For example, the absent father, systemic domestic violence, limited employment for women, and housing concerns are several reasons for the discrimination of single mothers (Mulroy, 1995; Schein, 1995).

Dowd (1997) examines how institutional race and gender discrimination in the labor market negatively affects single mothers, which influence their access and opportunity to good paying jobs. Opportunities for jobs that accommodate the needs of single mothers are rare and unusual. Most jobs are not family friendly – yet 80 percent of single mothers are currently in the paid labor force.

Schein (1995) studied thirty single mothers exclusively focusing on the hardships they face. She identified three common factors that all the women faced. She refers to them as the ABC's of poverty: the Ab<sup>s</sup>ence of the education and training to qualify for a good paying job, the Betr<sup>a</sup>yal by her mate, the father of the children, and negative Childhood experience and non supportive family influence. Schein exposes the complex dual roles that single mothers play as both mother and provider. She recognizes the commitment and the difficulty of this status. Her status is conflictual in nature. If the mother assumes the provider role, it often means the loss of a mother figure for the children. If she assumes the mother role, it often means living in poverty. Her conclusion is that the work-family dilemma cuts across all class lines but to varying degrees with qualitatively different issues and concerns that arise.

Another aspect of the victimization that single mothers experience is a consequence of her marginalized position that she occupies in our society; she is understood as transgressing the “laws of nature” and of public morality (Polakow, 1993). Single mothers and their children are culturally referred to as “social asphyxia.” The single mother could never reach the “straw man [sic]” of motherhood that has been set up. She is essentially doomed for failure. “The poorer and less patriarchal the

household, the more imperative the need for state sanctioned intervention to ensure the correct upbringing of the family” (Polakow, p.51).

Class discrimination highlights the double standard of motherhood and contributes to our understanding of certain groups of single mothers, lower-class, as victims. The double standard sets up a hierarchy of single motherhood, placing middle-class and upper-class women against their lower class counterparts, ultimately pitting them against each other (Mulroy, 1995). Class is intertwined with gender and race and on occasion single mothers themselves reproduce hierarchical categories of white upper and middle-class single mothers being more entitled to being single mothers than poor women of color (Bock, 2000).

### *The single mother as heroine*

Unlike the deviant and the victim, the heroine is described as the single mother who has “made it against all odds.” She is the same victim who lives in the unjust world, yet she transcends the structural barriers; she makes it in a world that neglects her. The heroine is not a passive victim, but is an active agent negotiating the world.

When described, the heroine single mother is depicted as a resourceful woman who locates ways to compensate for and overcome the structural barriers that impede her family’s well-being. Often times this means finding alternative child care arrangements, creating and developing “fun” activities for children and resourcefulness in everyday life necessities (Bock, 2000; Hertz & Ferguson, 1997; Ludtke, 1997).

The heroine single mother locates strategies that shape and reshape, define and redefine “traditional forms of solidarity, reflexivity, and the shaping of new identities” (Bak, 1998, p. 3). Bak developed the “strategy concept,” that many other scholars rely upon (Mulroy, 1995; Polakow, 1993; Schein, 1995) which sees the individual as reshaping the structures to her benefit, rather than being determined by the structures. Two different family strategies became apparent in Bak’s interviews. Single mothers either identified with a traditional model of family (linked to the condensed family arena), or they assumed a more heroine framework of a self-reliant family strategy (which is linked to and tends to create an extended family arena). The women who constructed the self-reliant strategy were more proactive in creating and maintaining resources for themselves as well as for their child(ren). The women that identified with the traditional model felt as though their family was lacking a father figure. They felt they needed to fill a void and could not feel whole and satisfied until the family assumed a “traditional” form.

*The single mother “by choice”*

The fourth typology, single motherhood by choice, situates single mothers in the most progressive light. This body of literature offers a different and unique interpretation of single motherhood; it is unique in that it foregrounds the “deliberate choice” element in becoming a single mother. It tells the story of women exercising agency and autonomy, it develops a deconstruction of legitimacy, and it offers new insights into positive features single mother families possess. They arduously highlight the agency

involved in the decision-making. The “by choice” category openly challenges the critics of single mothers and the cultural mythology that accompanies “the traditional family.” Women in this category are seen as deploying and securing cultural and social power. It is also this particular type – the one that openly exercises agency – that is most frequently associated with feminism, sexual liberation, and pro-employment projects and politics.

Women choosing to exit what society deems as “normal” families is a central tenet in the “by choice” category (Bock, 2000; Dowd, 1997; Ludtke, 1997; Mattes, 1994; Mannis, 1999). Single mothers by choice often voluntarily exit the “normal” family structure and create family to their specifications. Single motherhood is threatening to wider society in part because it is about women seizing power. The power of protest allows these women to construct family forms differently - rejecting the modern form for a postmodern reality.

Some scholars have argued that single parents serve as positive role models for their children. Single mothers can offer a possibility for less hierarchy in the family, resulting in having more liberated and tolerant children. There are also added benefits for the parent. “Parenting alone I could parent without negotiation, consultation, or conflict with a partner” (Dowd, 1997, p.103).

In summary, the majority of the “by choice” literature, much like the heroine typology, exclusively examines white, middle and upper-class women. Although the by-choice category is useful and informative, it has limitations beyond its class bias. The authors who examine women who made deliberate choices to become single mothers define choice too narrowly. In the summary and discussion chapter, I have expanded on the definition of choice using the women in this study as exemplar cases.

## FROM THE *INSIDE*: HOW SINGLE MOTHERS TALK ABOUT THEMSELVES

### Empirical studies of single mothers

In addition to the conceptual work which offers explanations of single motherhood, many other scholars have engaged single mothers themselves to hear their perspectives. This section reviews the literature that tells the story of single motherhood from this *inside* perspective – using the voices of the single mothers themselves. This section is a summary of the empirical studies. This section is foundational to this inquiry because it addresses how single mothers think and what they feel about themselves. Some of the reported findings relate to this project, while some findings from this study differ from previous studies and offer new insight into the lives of single mothers. This summary of the literature offers perspectives in the decision-making processes of single mothers, then explores how they self-identify, and concludes with coping and managing strategies they develop.

### **Decision-making processes: “To be or not to be”**

The process of becoming a single mother is psychologically complex. Along with the psychological component there are other dimensions that impact her choice. As a single mother, being confronted with and having to make, the complex decision to have a child is complicated by her unpartnered marital status. In addition, numerous variables influence and factor into her decision. Three different levels of sociological analysis

(micro, middle/mezzo, and macro) are helpful when attempting to understand this complex issue of choice. The different analyses refer to, and offer, different levels of complexity to understand the lives of single mothers. A micro-level analysis is concerned with behaviors of individuals, face-to-face encounters of everyday life and interpersonal behaviors in small groups. Micro analysis examines psychological elements as well as patterns of interaction. A middle level analysis looks at social phenomenon in a way that is smaller than macro, but bigger and more encompassing than micro. It incorporates wider influences such as family, friends and community. It looks at how they affect the behaviors of the individual. A macro-level analysis examines structural forces – social, cultural, economic, and political factors – that contribute to the options and circumstances that help to shape, and sometimes dictate, individual choices. Despite the suggestive separation between the three levels of analysis, there is overlap among and an interconnectedness between them. In fact, there is a dialectical relationship that contributes to each shaping the other.

*Micro analysis: Decision-making as a result of individual behaviors*

The micro-level analysis that follows focuses on single mothers shaping their family structures (Bak, 1998; Mannis, 1999). “Families should be seen as settings in which people are agents and actors, coping with, adapting to, and changing social structures to meet their needs” (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2001, p. 382). There are four areas that fall into the micro category: personal empowerment, personal attributes, pathways

toward pregnancy shapes feelings about pregnancy and therefore the decision, and general concerns about becoming a single mother.

### *Personal empowerment*

For some single mothers the decision-making process of becoming a single mother is a personally empowering choice. For example, some scholars describe single mothers, most notably single mothers by choice, as acting subjects, exercising agency and escaping patriarchy (Bock, 2000; Edward & Duncan, 1997; Hertz & Ferguson, 1998; Ludtke, 1997; Mannis, 1999; Mattes, 1994; Miller, 1992; Potter & Knaub, 1988).<sup>8</sup> This is not to say in all cases single motherhood was their first choice. But regardless of first, second, or third choice, it is, nonetheless, a decision they made about how they want to proceed under the circumstances.

Empowerment also took the form of optimistic thinking about the advantages of parenting solo. The ability to parent alone without the hassles of negotiating with a partner influenced decision-making for some women (Ludtke, 1997; Mannis, 1999; Mattes, 1994). That is the ability or luxury of not having to decide between meeting two competing sets of needs – those of the baby and those of your lover/spouse – was a consideration for some women when choosing single motherhood. Bak (1998) found that the experience of the single mother family had allowed some mothers the “opportunity

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<sup>8</sup> The scholars who look exclusively at the subset of single mothers that consciously made the decision to parent alone are important to acknowledge. Each of the authors listed deliberately selected subjects who self-identified as single mothers by choice. This population is unique in that they have the resources, both materially and emotionally, to consciously decide to parent solo. Their capacity for autonomous action may indeed be unique to this subset, but further research is needed in this area, hence, part of the rationale for my project with working-class single mothers. This line of reasoning is discussed further below.

for developing solidarity and new social skills for mothers and children alike” (1986, p. 3).

### *Personal attributes*

When women are faced with the decision to parent alone, they often set up justifications that legitimate their choice. When asked, they themselves identify certain attributes that make some women more qualified to be single mothers. Bock (2000) who studied white, middle-class single mothers by choice found that women identified four qualities they believed were required for successful single mothering: age, responsibility, emotional maturity and fiscal capacity. These women, most of whom were in their late thirties and forties, believed that they had “paid her dues” or “earned the right to be a single mom” by establishing a work life and a social life - both making it more respectable and feasible to raise a child on her own. They saw responsibility as highly regarded and a critical qualification for single motherhood. The ability to be self-aware, self-reflective, and self-confident in terms of one’s emotional maturity all helped these women reach a decision about becoming a mother and coming to terms with their single status. The women stated emotional maturity requires self-confidence, psychological health, assertiveness, and integrity. Fiscal capacity to raise a child on one’s own was another primary qualifier in determining the readiness for single motherhood.

The ability to develop economic, moral, and religious justifications to counter the attacks and public disapproval that often accompany single motherhood was also seen as a necessary personal strength the women would greatly benefit from (Bock, 2000; Dowd, 1997). Along with this need to develop strategies to “go public,” many single mothers

were nuanced in how they told their story and which version they told to whom. They were fully informed about the social pressures that dictated their public responses and grew savvy to the task of telling their story. This task requires that women have to develop the ability to overcome a potentially personal and culturally pervasive ideal of the “best” family. Getting beyond the notion that there is only one right way often frees women to follow through with their decision. For Ludtke this personal freedom she found, and the pride she felt, only came after she recognized that her “ability to become a mother doesn’t begin nor end with marriage” (p.439).

#### *Pathways toward pregnancy and decision-making*

The literature suggests that how a woman gets pregnant often determines how she feels about her single motherhood status. Davies & Rains (1995)<sup>9</sup> raise the important issue of choice, examining under what context women make choices to become single mothers. The study analyzes two separate choices: the first choice is the decision to avoid the pregnancy through contraception or not. The second choice is the decision about whether or not to have the child. All of the women in the study were using birth control, but half of them were taking risks and got pregnant “accidentally on purpose.” The other half were taking more direct measures to avoid a pregnancy. Nevertheless, once pregnant all the women expressed a surprise and unwarranted negative reaction from the father. The unintended pregnancy brought to light a gendered difference in the assumption that the women and the men held about responsibility surrounding birth

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<sup>9</sup> Davies & Rains (1995) conducted a qualitative study of eight never married single mothers between the ages of 28 and 36. All eight of these women were self-supporting, while four of eight held “high paying” jobs.

control. The men failed to take responsibility for birth control and expressed anger about the woman's decision to move forward with the pregnancy. In all the cases, women articulated frustration and disappointment in the father's failure to get or stay involved - despite the fact that on some level they never expected the relationship to lead to marriage. In summary, the "pregnancy and the decision to have the child brought these unstated assumptions to light, producing surprise and anger on both sides" (p. 547).

These findings are consistent with Siegel's (1998) study, which found that the pathways toward motherhood influenced her premotherhood thinking about the role of the father. The single mothers who conceived through intercourse reportedly were more affected by the absence of the father than the other single mothers who adopted or were inseminated. "The findings suggest that single motherhood per se is not associated with difficulties but that the adjustment to motherhood is influenced by whether the choice to become a single parent occurs before or after conception" (Siegel, 1998, p. 75).

Bock (2000), like the previous two studies, found that "overall, even though these mothers claim happiness with their decisions and with the opportunities made available to them, they are not necessarily championing a cause in which two-parent models of family life are overthrown. In some sense, they appear to be 'unwilling warriors' who, on the one hand, stress the importance of having the option of single motherhood, yet, on the other hand, cling to hegemonic fantasies of normative family structure" (p.70). This raises the important issue that decisions that challenge society do not have to be conscious or intended. Mattes raises a similar issue and concern about women's ambivalence about making the decision to parent alone, but concludes with "[i]f you feel

guilty at first, you need to get beyond that stage and realize that a less than ideal situation is not necessarily synonymous with a bad situation” (1994, p. 135).

#### *General concerns related to decision-making*

In addition to the three previously stated micro issues that relate to decision-making, other psychological concerns about becoming and being a single mother are presented. Many researchers of single motherhood found that the mothers asked practical questions like, “Is this right for me? Is it moral? Do I have the resources?” (Bock, 2000, Ludtke, 1997; Mattes, 1994). They often ask themselves if they can do it all. Will the child suffer with one parent? Who do you look toward as a role model? Are there any workable models? Their own family of origin does not always help them to answer the questions they struggle with. “The road maps for family life many of us carried out of childhood no longer seem adequate to guide our travels today; even when two-parents are in the home” (Ludtke, 1997, p. 20). Many women sought support and guidance from outside sources, such as, friends, family members, clergy, therapists, etc. to help them make a decision about becoming a single mother.

Women expressed concerns about the affect that not having a father present would have on the child. Mattes refer to this as the “daddy issue.” They also wondered whether or not their own social life would be negatively affected by becoming a single mother (Mattes, 1994). Furthermore, the decision to bear children is more complicated for single women. In a study that compared single mothers with married mothers, eight themes emerged for the single mothers, while two concerns emerged for the married mothers (Siegel, 1995). Single mothers were most concerned about wanting to be a mother, concern about her marital status, readiness for motherhood, mothering ability,

finances, time, job/career, and other relationships. The two concerns of married women were wanting to be a mother and readiness for motherhood (Siegel).<sup>10</sup> In general, single women spent much more time contemplating their decision to become mothers and had additional variables to consider. Numerous studies also reveal that another personal quality that appears to be essential in the decision-making process is the “desire to nurture” (Hertz & Ferguson, 1998; Ludtke, 1997; Mannis, 1999, Mattes, 1994).

In sum, the micro analysis of decision-making informs us about the difficult task that single women confront when deciding to move forward with a pregnancy and the complicated internal mechanisms they develop to both help them make a decision as well as to justify and legitimate it.

*Mezzo analysis: decision-making as a result of life experience and circumstances*

A mezzo level analysis offers perspective about how both interpersonal factors as well as familial, social and community factors influence the decision-making process for single women. Social and familial support, which most often took the form of encouragement from family and friends, was a key factor in the decision-making process (Bock, 2000; Hertz & Ferguson, 1997; Ludtke, 1997, Mannis, 1999; Mattes, 1994). Family of origin, both their support and what form one’s family of orientation took, influenced the way in which many single mothers made their decision to parent alone (Mannis, 1999). Taken together, these factors greatly influence how and why women become single mothers.

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<sup>10</sup> The themes are in order ranging from the most frequently reported concern/motivation for motherhood to the least.

Lastly, feelings about relationships and how single mothers view relationships are two additional components that aid women in their decision-making process of motherhood. Some women report having “bad” relationships with their own fathers, or having “bad” parental role models, which negatively influenced her decision regarding single motherhood (Siegel, 1995).

*Macro analysis: Decision-making as a result of structural forces*

A macro level analysis refers to the external, structural conditions that help to shape decisions. This analysis places at the center the structural, political, and historical forces that aid in the rise of single motherhood which in turn produce conditions for women that place them in positions where they are faced to deal with decisions about mothering. When single motherhood occurs, there are many lens in which to interpret the rationale for and reasons behind the decision. For instance, when single motherhood is examined through a race lens, racial demographics and historical conditions become central to understanding single motherhood in the African-American community (Miller, 1992; Omolade, 1982/86; Taylor, 2001). The legacy of slavery, the imbalanced sex ratio (black women outnumbering men), increased incarceration rates, and high mortality rates of black males are all structural features that have impacted the rise in the phenomenon of single motherhood and had a tremendous impact on the decision-making processes of women, particularly women of color.

Other structural factors impact on decision-making. Some factors cross racial categories and are a product of historic shifts and conditions. For instance, the trend

towards getting married at a later age; advances in reproductive technology; increased economic independence for women; expanded workplace opportunities; increased educational opportunities for women; the women's movement (particularly the second wave); and changing cultural values and social mores (Stacey, 1996; Coontz, 1999). In addition, shifting cultural values, as a product of changing institutions and media influence, have offered many women the opportunity to be able to make varied decisions about having children or not.

Similarly, massive demographic shifts have brought about conditions that affect different behaviors and outcomes from the past. It is no wonder that we have been witness to an increase in different family forms – including single motherhood – given the major changes, upheavals and progress our society has made.

This look at macro level societal changes is not meant to suggest that women do not make decisions themselves and are merely subjects of larger structures, but rather it highlights the decisions they make do not occur in a vacuum and are influenced by structural changes and patterns.

### **How single mothers self-identify**

It is important to ask: how do single mothers self-identify, particularly in light of recent public debates about marital status that develop and reinforce social norms. The literature in this area offers insight into the personal lives of single mothers; documenting how they feel about their status, their lot in life, about their role; how they personally

make sense of their social location especially when they have been ignored or demonized. This information sheds light on the relationship between the social and cultural construction of single motherhood from the *outside* as well as the personal construction from the *inside* – highlighting the dialectical relationship between how individuals understand their own conditions and how their conditions are characterized by society.

### *Personal perceptions and reconciliations*

How do women reconcile becoming and being single mothers? Single mothers have characterized their lives as, “involving a paradoxical bind which emerged from their needs to survive in the male-oriented work world and succeed in their roles as heads of households while searching for the ideal of the ever-happy two-parent family they feel they have been promised” (Quinn & Allen, 1989). Most of the time women reconcile becoming a single mother once they make the decision to move forward with the pregnancy. Many women have expressed ambivalence and uncertainty about assuming such a responsibility and role, yet overcome their ambivalence about how the pregnancy came to be through the act of having the child (Ludkte, 1997; Mattes, 1994). Women have articulated being torn with the decision to become a single mother and feeling as though they never ideologically fully worked it out. Yet they find themselves moving forward with the process. Ambivalence is a recurring theme in the literature and this ambivalence can affect how they perceive themselves.

One method that single mothers use to enhance their self-perception is known as “social comparison” or more specifically, “downward comparison.” (This strategy of

making oneself feel better was also evident in findings presented earlier.) Downward comparison is the mechanism of self-evaluation whereby one compares oneself with someone worse off (Festinger, 1954; Siegel, 1995a). Downward comparison is most frequently used by stigmatized groups for the purposes of self-enhancement. It is the method or way of “generating positive emotions, and restoring or repairing one’s sense of subjective well-being” (Siegel, 1995a, p. 1954). In a study comparing single mothers by choice (considered to be a voluntarily stigmatized group) with married mothers who were demographically similar, Siegel (1995a) found that when single mothers compared themselves with other single mothers they were more likely to use downward comparison - claiming they felt better off than their counterparts.<sup>11</sup> When married mothers compared themselves with other married mothers they were more likely to view their situation as the same.<sup>12</sup> When cross comparing, single mothers “were less likely than were the married mothers to endorse that the stressors of single mothers are worse than are the stressors of the married mothers” (p. 1964). In fact, 33 percent of the single mothers said their position as single mothers was better than the married mothers, 33 percent said their position was the same, and 33 percent stated they were worse off. In contrast, 77 percent of the married mothers thought their level of stressors better than the single mother, 19 percent said the same, and 4 percent said worse off. Overall, taken together, single mothers more generally thought their life situation was better than other single mothers but felt that they fared worse than the married mothers. In comparison, married mothers saw themselves as the same as other married mothers and better off than single mothers. The findings suggest that downward comparison is used more readily by single mothers

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<sup>11</sup> The research consisted of 51 single mothers by choice and 51 married mothers, matched for resemblance of demographic characteristics.

<sup>12</sup> Mothers were self-reporting and cross comparing on levels of stress, self-esteem, and depression.

(a stigmatized group) when comparing oneself to someone who is similar. “Single mothers tended to choose a dimension on which they felt superior, a strategy that has also been observed among persons with cancer” (p.1967). In conclusion, both types of mothers equally described the same type of stressful events – everyday life hassles, managing the work and family dilemma – yet in the end both groups said being married generally makes parenting easier.

### *Attitudes towards marriage and mothering*

Single mothers talk more openly today than ten years ago about both the costs and benefits of marriage and parenting (Bak, 1996/1998; Mattes, 1994; Ludtke, 1997, Siegel, 1995b). As the literature reveals single mothers have mixed views about marriage and its impact on her level of happiness and satisfaction. Studies have determined that both viewpoints exist within the single mother community. Some single mothers view their single mother status as liberating and empowering, while others perceive their stress and feelings of inadequacy to be a result of their longing to be married and view themselves and their children as lacking (Bak, 1986). Some women fall somewhere in between these standpoints (Mendes, 1979; Siegel, 1995b).

The literature on marriage reveals that there is not consensus about what marriage means and what women - single mothers - want from the institution. Today, however, single mothers are more likely, than in the past, to reject relationships they determine to be “unhappy” (Siegel, 1995b). Single mothers can be less likely to “accept the give-and-

take” part of marriage. Siegel<sup>13</sup> (1995b) found that women’s skepticism of marriage generated from two concerns. First, single mothers articulated that relationships can be too demanding and stifle one’s personal freedom and autonomy, along with their unwillingness to make a compromise; and second, many women have constructed an idealized image of marriage which presented other problems. In the mainstream public’s personae single mothers are women who want to be married, have looked for Mr. Right, and for a variety of reasons have been unsuccessful. In reality, about half of the women in Siegel’s study reported being satisfied with their singleness, while the other half reported wishing their life, in relationship to marriage, was different. The single mothers who said that they were satisfied with their current single lives either viewed marriage as a low priority or felt that marriage was not for them. As far as the mothers who reported wishing life had been different, they wanted to be married and stated that marriage was a sought after goal they had attempted to achieve. In spite of the desire to be married this group reported a sense of uncertainty about the institution of marriage.

These findings by Siegel echo Bak’s (1995/1998) findings in relation to the “traditional” typology. The “traditional” women in Bak’s study reported feeling like her family was deficient, incomplete, and lacking the necessary rewards that accompany having a husband/father around. To the contrary, the “self-reliant” single mother reported feeling competent, strong, and able to make it on her own. These two typologies mirror Bock’s (2000) findings as well. On the one hand, one mother stated, “I have mixed feelings...I don’t think this is an ideal way to have a child...I don’t think I would

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<sup>13</sup> Siegel’s study examines why older single women wanted to become mothers and how their “premotherhood motivations” compare to married women. In her study, Siegel compared 51 single women with 51 married women.

have picked it to happen this way in any life scheme,” while another mother said, “I love being a single parent and really recommend it” (p. 69).

Another example of the ambivalence single mothers feel about marriage became evident in The Fragile Families Research (2002) which produced findings from a study of nearly 5,000 children: 3,712 of the children were born to unmarried parents, while 1,186 of the children were born to married parents. When the parents were asked about their attitudes towards and expectation of marriage, most unmarried parents were quite positive about the benefits of marriage for both themselves and their children. Fifty-one percent of unmarried mothers and 50 percent of unmarried fathers interviewed agreed that it was better for the *couple* to get married than to “just live together.” While the remaining unmarried mothers did not feel that marriage was the answer (Fragile Families Research Brief, July 2002, p. 1). Furthermore, the unmarried parent cohort reported two necessary elements that they believed would make a “successful” marriage: a steady job for the father and the need for both parents to be emotionally mature. Additionally, spending time together and money were two frequent responses. The report identified major barriers that stand in the way of marriage for the group of unmarried parents. They are, low levels of education, unemployment and underemployment, low income, health limitation, incarceration of the father, and substance abuse on the part of both parents, although substance abuse was more prevalent with the father.

Gibson, Edin, and McLanahan (2003) also studied what unmarried parents said about their plans and expectations to marry. Research revealed that low income, unmarried parents who just gave birth to a child report the desire to marry but in actuality they were not married at the time the child was one year of age. The authors explain that

it is the marital expectations themselves that preclude the couples from getting married. The high expectations, however, do not keep the parents from cohabiting. Of the 75 couples who were interviewed after the birth of their child, an overwhelming majority stated the desire to marry. Overall, new unmarried parents tend to have a pro-marriage attitude. “The qualitative data confirm the finding that parents hold positive views and high expectations about marriage. More importantly, the qualitative data suggest that these views may actually prevent them from marrying (similar to Siegel’s hypothesis). In sum, the study concludes that unmarried couples highly value the institution of marriage and due to their rigorous expectations of this institution it often means that marriage is put on hold.

Views on marriage are also embedded with cultural norms and values. An interesting study compared women in the United States with women in India to determine the role that marriage plays in determining satisfaction and psychological stress (Sastry, 1999<sup>14</sup>). Given that marital expectations are high (as confirmed by Siegel and others) for women in the U.S., the author hypothesized that marriage would be a stronger predictor for satisfaction and stress in the lives of American women, as opposed to Indian women. The findings confirmed her hypothesis. For Indian women, education and paid work were the strongest predictors for satisfaction and low levels of stress. The findings are rooted in historical contexts and cultural expectations of marriage. In the U.S. marriage focuses more on “individual autonomy” and “self-gratification” compared to Indian culture where marriage is based on practical socioeconomic criteria.

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<sup>14</sup> The Sastry (1999) study relied on the work of the 1990 World Values Survey. A random nationwide survey was conducted with 2500 subjects from India and 1839 subjects from the U.S. All interviews were conducted face to face with subjects over the age of 18 years.

In conclusion, the literature reports a mixed bag about attitudes toward marriage for single mother families as well as two-parent families. It is clear that marriage as an institution has historically changed (Cott, 2000) so have the feelings and thoughts of single mothers in regard to this institution.

### *Overall well-being*

There is a small body of literature that explores the general well-being of single mothers. In most instances, their well-being is measured or compared to married mothers as witnessed above. Well-being is a difficult concept to measure with a variety of variables that constitute one's general well-being. Personal happiness, self-esteem, depression, stress levels, role strain, emotional state, and psychological distress are the variables that are most frequently used to measure well-being.

Demo & Acock (1996) conducted a study that compared mother's well-being (measured by her level of personal happiness) across four family types: mothers in their first marriage, mothers who were remarried, divorced mothers, and continuously single mothers. They developed predictors for determining the personal happiness for the various mother type groups. Happiness for remarried and married mothers depended upon the child's well-being, marital stability, and level of marital conflict, whereas, the divorced mothers were more concerned with their employment and number of hours worked (the greater number of hours spent working, the lower her level of personal happiness). The "only significant influences (for the continuously single mother) are the frequency of enjoyable interactions the mother has with the child and the child's well-

being” (p. 402). Overall, across all family types, the greatest predictor for a mother’s happiness and well-being is the well-being of her child. These findings suggest strong role expectations among other things (Demo & Acock, 1996). Additional factors of well-being have been identified by Colbry (1995). For single mothers who are attending college the length of time as a single parent,<sup>15</sup> social support networks, and a low socioeconomic level - combining education, income, and occupation - are additional variables related to general well-being.

Gladow & Ray (1986)<sup>16</sup> studied the impact of informal support networks on the well-being of single parents and found that friendship support and relative support reduce problems in the lives of single parents, yet the support that one receives from a friend plays a distinctly different role than the support one receives from a relative. The assistance from relatives tends to provide a more hands-on, material type of help as opposed to assistance from a friend corresponding more strongly with personal happiness and reducing loneliness.

Well-being can also be linked to stressors that were identified by the women themselves (McAdoo, 1995).<sup>17</sup> The stressors were often determined by class position. For instance, middle-class single mothers reported child care and household tasks as their

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<sup>15</sup> In Colbry’s (1995) study, all the single mothers had been without their partners for over one year, therefore, there was no association with length of time as a single parent and general well-being. However, according to a previous study if a women reported being a single parent for less than six months it had a negative impact on her level of well-being as opposed to those who reported being a single mother for more than six months had little or no impact on well-being (Buehler, 1988). Colbry’s study was conducted with 51 single mothers enrolled in school, living apart from their husband or partner for at least 6 months, and have custody of at least one child. The mean age was 30.8 years, 70 percent were white, 50 percent were protestant, 45 percent relied upon welfare payments as their primary source of income, while 43 percent used financial aid (Colbry, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> The study was conducted with 63 low-income single parents, mostly white, in rural Washington state who were living below 125% of the nationally established poverty rate. The sample was one male and 63 females, yet the male was dropped from the analysis. Of the 63 females, 53 were divorced or separated, 2 were widowed and 8 were never married. They ranged in age from 20 to mid 50s with the mean age being 30-34 years.

<sup>17</sup> McAdoo (1995) conducted a study of 318 middle and working-class African-American single mothers.

primary stressors, whereas, working-class single mothers reported poverty, crime, and poor educational facilities as their highest stressors. Many other stressors were independent of class: lack of time, solo responsibility, high divorce rates for black women, unlikelihood of remarriage, depression, and poor health. The overall findings reveal that both groups experienced intense and frequent levels of stress. The younger mothers had higher stress levels than the older mothers and mothers with younger children reported higher stress levels as well. The college educated women had higher stress levels than mothers without a college degree.

There is a relationship between employment and well-being for black single mothers (Jackson, 1992). How women juggle the work/family dilemma and the overall stress of work exacerbates role strain. Even though all mothers in the study were currently employed, two groups were examined: those that preferred employment and those that desired to stay at home. Those who wanted work experienced significantly lower role strain; yet emotional well-being was mixed and not dependent upon working or wanting to stay at home. Working mothers were more satisfied but no less depressed. The mother's level of education and sex of the child were stronger predictors for depression than the desire for paid employment or unpaid work in the home. Lack of schooling beyond high school and having a preschool aged boy were the greatest risk factors for lower levels of well-being of the mothers (Jackson, 1992).

## **Coping and managing strategies**

How do single mothers manage and cope? Who do they rely on? What strategies do they develop to make their lives more manageable? A family's resources are "strongly influenced by the number of parents in the household. Of the 12 million one-parent families, the 10 million maintained by a woman were more likely to include more than one child...More likely to have family incomes below the poverty level (34% compared to 16% of single male households). Women maintaining one-parent families are also more likely than men in similar situations to have never been married (43% and 34%, respectively)" (America's Family and Living Arrangements, 2000, p.8). These statistics reveal the need for single mother households to develop creative coping and managing strategies to overcome the structural disadvantages they face. The literature in this area offers insight into how single mothers actually manage and cope.

### *Resource mobilization: Getting by with a little help*

For centuries mothers, both married and single, with great strength, stamina and ingenuity have contributed to the functionality of their families. Economic resources, both financial as well as human and social capital, are strong predictors for explaining how single mothers make ends meet (McLanahan, 2002). Economic support among single mothers comes from a vast number of sources. The Fragile Families Survey (2002) identifies four sources of economic support of unmarried mothers: employment of the mother, financial contributions made by the child's father, assistance from other

family members and friends, and finally, public assistance. Most mothers worked in the year after the child's birth (67%), and two-thirds of the unwed mothers report income from the year before the child's birth, 58% of the mothers worked full-time. Unmarried mothers who are cohabitating with the baby's father are much more likely to receive financial assistance from him than those unmarried mothers who do not reside with the father or have no relationship with him. More than half of the unmarried mothers interviewed received financial assistance from other family members and friends.<sup>18</sup> Some programs of public assistance are heavily relied upon sources of support. The most commonly utilized program is Women, Infants, and Children (84%), as opposed to the least utilized program TANF (35%). Other programs that unmarried mothers use are Medicaid (71%) and foodstamps (50%) (Teitler, Reichman, Nepomnyaschy, 2001). Sources of income support are highly connected to notions of self-sufficiency. Sandfort & Hill (1996) conducted a research project using data sets from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) and looked at 302 single mothers ranging in age from 16 to 22. The project explored the question, "What are the associations between the economic support that young, unmarried women receive soon after the birth of their first child and their later self-sufficient income?" (p. 322). One of the many findings (and the one relevant to this project) was that child support and shared housing are two important types of economic support that are predictors for self-sufficiency.

Additional types of assistance are equally important for coping in single mother families. "More impressive than economic aid given by relatives is the social role they play. For some families, relatives provide their sole experience of group membership"

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<sup>18</sup> One study of urban working-class women, both black and white, during the Great Depression revealed that women reported that they received more financial assistance from friends than they received from family members (Helmbold, 1987).

(Komarovsky, 1962, p. 238). Bak (1996,1998) explores how some single mothers are more willing to seek out assistance from others. The “self-reliant” mothers used their family form as a means to capitalize on and develop new and unique opportunities. They developed the “new extended family arena” whose key feature is the reliance on mutual care and support from extended family, neighbors, work mates, and close friends. This allows both the mother and the child(ren) to access other adults for “mutual activities and reliable emotional relations” (p. 8). The “traditional” family relies upon the “condensed family arena,” meaning they do not invite innovative ways to seek closeness for either the mother or the children. This condensed family arena is comprised of the mother and her child(ren) with one or two close relatives. “The mothers with a traditional family strategy see many barriers for believing in other adults than just a new partner for mutuality, support, and closeness. They experience their family as lacking a part of its safety walls, and the mother tries to close in on herself and the children. Some of the mothers attempt to be both the mother and the father for their children, they spend all their free time with the children and put their own adult life aside for the sake of the children” (p. 9). Nine out of twenty-five women interviewed fell under this traditional strategy while sixteen were categorized as self-reliant. In most cases families would traverse both strategies - or types of families - moving out of one and into the other (depending on many variables). Furthermore, single mothers in Denmark develop innovative strategies of everyday life that allow them to “combine autonomy with care and commitment” through the help of comprehensive and universal welfare state policies.

As Bak looks only at single mothers and identifies varying degrees of support networks, numerous other studies have compared social networks of single mothers with

married mothers (Gunnarsson & Cochran, 1990; Hertz, 1999; Jayakody, 1993; Nelson, 1995; Siegel, 1998). These studies have found and corroborate that single mothers are more likely to develop multifunctional relations than married mothers, relying more frequently on what Bak (1998) calls the “new extended family arena.” Single mothers have a greater number of contacts with their social networks than did their married counterparts (Gunnarsson & Cochran, 1990). They report receiving more community, personal, and instrumental support (Nelson, 1995).<sup>19</sup> A study conducted by Hertz (1999), compared the work/family divide between two-parent earners and single mothers and found that the single mothers adopted three strategies to place their family at the center (1) “financing their own mother time,” restructuring work, taking in renters, being financially resourceful, (2) holding multiple jobs, resembles more the experience of working-class and poor mothers, and (3) reliance on community supports. Single parents are also more likely to believe that it is the responsibility of the workplace and the community to develop resources to promote children and family life, such as, lengthening of the school year, and after school programs (Hertz, 1999).

Jayakody, Chatters & Taylor (1993) found that sources of support differ for African-American single mothers and African-American married mothers.<sup>20</sup> They found three sources of support - financial assistance received from family, emotional support,

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<sup>19</sup> Nelson (1995) conducted a study comparing the changes in social support networks and social support of 30 low-income single mothers that had been separated for less than 8 months with 20 low-income married women, and 40 high-income married women. He found that the 30 low-income single mothers initially had smaller family networks due to the loss of the husband and his family, but they rebuilt social networks with time. He also found that single mothers received increased levels of social support, both personal and instrumental, from family, friends, and the community more than their married counterparts, regardless of income levels.

<sup>20</sup> Jayakody et. al. (1993) conducted face-to-face interviews with 2,107 individuals. The sample criteria for the study included: mothers of at least one minor under the age of 17 who resides with them in the same household. This criteria yielded 620 cases: 40% of the mothers were unmarried or common law (n=248), 25% were divorced or separated (n=154), 15% widowed (n=90), and 21% were never married (n=128). All of the women in the study were African-American women.

and assistance with child care from family members - differed depending on marital status (married, divorced/separated, widowed, and never married mothers). Never married single mothers (24 percent) were more likely to receive financial assistance from family members than any other group of mothers. Sixteen percent of the married mothers reported receiving financial aid, 19 percent of the divorced/separated mothers, and 21 percent of the widowed mothers state they get monetary help. All the mothers, regardless of marital status, report high levels of emotional support from kin (all mother groups self-reported that they receive approximately 80 percent of emotional support). Overall, the majority of African-American mothers – both married and unmarried - lived close to other relatives, spoke to them on a daily basis, and reported feelings of closeness to and satisfaction with their next of kin. Yet, “The claim that the social and economic difficulties faced by black single mothers are largely mitigated by virtue of extended family involvement overstates the prevalence of aid provided to these women. In contrast, emotional support is the one area in which kin networks appear to provide the most extensive support to mothers; roughly four out of five of all mothers received emotional assistance. These analyses demonstrated that four dimensions (support, proximity, interaction, and affinity) are important in specifying kin networks and assessing their degree of viability” (Jayakody, p. 273).

Much like Jayakody, et.al., Burden (1986)<sup>21</sup> reports that single mothers families work approximately 10 fewer hours per week on home related responsibilities than married mothers. These findings match those of Sanik and Mauldin (1986) who report that single employed mothers had the least amount of time to spend in most activities,

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<sup>21</sup> Burden (1986) studied 293 employees - both parent and non-parent, married and single - in a large New England corporation.

including household tasks (food preparation, dishwashing, and cleaning), personal care (sleep and rest), childcare, recreational activities and volunteer work<sup>22</sup>.

A classic qualitative study by Presser (1980) offers an in-depth view of coping strategies of unmarried mothers, mostly black, for 45 months post the birth of their first child.<sup>23</sup> As many other scholars have found (Bak, 1986; Jayakody, 1993; Nelson, 1995) unmarried single mothers rely heavily upon the resources of family and friends in order to pay the costs of living. Presser found that role responsibilities increase at the time of birth of the first child and that survival is dependent on the aid of parents and public assistance. Unlike the Fragile Families Study (2002), Presser found that fathers play a minimal role as far as assisting with economic and emotional support. In fact, the key player for the women in this study was their own mother. The role of the child's grandmother and the services and support she provided made it possible for the women in the study to survive.

### *Child care*

Another major issue that most single mothers, and all working single mothers, face is childcare. A major difference between upper and middle-class single mothers and working-class single mothers is the flexibility of the workplace and the resources/money they have to devote to childcare. The upper and middle-class women tend to have

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<sup>22</sup> Sanik and Mauldin's sample included 202 mothers who were both unmarried and married, employed and unemployed. There were four groups that made up the sample: employed single mother (n=33); employed spouse present (n=34); nonemployed single mother (n=25); and nonemployed spouse present (n=110).

<sup>23</sup> The interviews were conducted exclusively with black and white single mothers in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens. All mothers ranged in age from 15-29. Interviews were originally conducted with 408 mothers, but the analysis consisted of only 69 unmarried mothers completed all three phrases of interviews.

expanded workplace opportunities. As opposed to low income mothers and those that work in the service sector who find it harder to deal with issues of childcare because of workplace discrimination and nonsupport (Mannis, 1999; Quinn & Allen, 1989). The social policies, or lack thereof, for day care are essentially non-existent and do not provide adequate care for families who need the services. “Among the nation’s 19.6 million preschoolers, grandparents took care of 21 percent. About 17 percent were cared for by their father (while their mother was employed or at school); 12 percent were in day-care centers; 9 percent were cared for by other relatives; 7 percent were cared for by a family day-care provider in their home; and 6 percent received care in nursery school or preschools. More than one-third of preschoolers (7.2 million) had no regular child-care arrangement and presumably were under maternal care”

(<http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p70-86.pdf>). What’s more, the Census report highlights that poor families who have an employed mother spend three times as much of their income on childcare than families who are not poor. The data informs us about the difficult nature of childcare arrangements for all parents, especially poor families and single mother families.

### *Role of religion*

Religion is thought to be a critical and instrumental tool to help some individuals cope and manage, particularly during difficult times. It has been well documented that religion has been a strong force in the African-American community and in the lives of many black women. The church and the church community have historically been a site

where people mobilize resources. Despite popular belief, the impact of religion in the lives of single mothers is more complicated. When McAdoo (1995) studied the stress levels of middle-class and working-class African-American single mothers, she found a correlation between stress and religion. She states, “Although one would expect religiosity to have a direct and positive effect on stress and coping, the women who are very stressed have the greatest religiosity (McAdoo, 1988). A high religious orientation has a direct relationship with depressive symptoms in mothers; that is, the more religious a mother is, the greater her depression. Women high in religiosity tend to be less involved in their social support network (Taylor, 1991), and a religious orientation seems to have a culturally oppressive rather than a liberating effect on women. This finding was corroborated in two other large-scale studies: Jackson, 1991; Taylor & Jackson, 1990” (McAdoo, 1995, p. 429). The role of religion is more complicated than is suggested by many scholars, particularly the role of religion in the black family.

#### *Living arrangements of single mothers*

In addition to the various forms of coping stated above, strategies to make life easier and more manageable for single mothers can take the form of creative living arrangements. These creative living arrangements are often methods that single mothers rely on to help with the serious financial strain of doing it independently. The economic status of one’s family “varies tremendously by living arrangement” (Winkler, 1993, p. 1). The cost of housing impacts on the living arrangements of single mothers. Due to high market rents and stagnating wages, the probability of single mothers living alone is

significantly reduced. This is especially true with women under the age of 36 (Winkler, 1992). Living arrangements are also strongly correlated to age, level of education, parity, relationship quality, and substance abuse history (of both mother and father). Single mothers are more likely to cohabit with their parents because cohabitation is significantly related to the reduced likelihood of public assistance for both white and black single mothers (Fox Folk, 1996) and it increases the likelihood that women will become employed (Hao & Brinton, 1997). Although moving in with family/parents is a helpful way to avoid welfare, it is mostly white single mothers who move in with their parents that have fewer time demands in relationship to household labor (Fox Folk, 1996). For black single mothers, regardless of the financial convenience and rewards, there is no difference in time spent engaging in household chores. Part of the explanation for this difference is that the majority of white single mothers reside with two-parents, while for black single mothers they are more likely to reside with one parent.

Winkler (1993) found, the poorest household was the related single mother families doubling up.<sup>24</sup> Doubling up is much more common in cities that have high housing costs and nuclear living arrangements (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002). The striking reality of this picture is that doubling up means shared shelter, food, child care, and emotional support, which enables both mothers to reap benefits from each other, yet despite this they still live in conditions of poverty and if living alone would experience an even lower economic status and standard of living. The single mother who resides with a married couple fares the best economically with a median income of 2.3

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<sup>24</sup> The work by Winkler (1993) was conducted using data from the Current Population Survey. She states that previous research that categorize the living arrangements of single mothers rely solely on data from the Census Bureau which obscures the actual diversity of living arrangements. She instead provides a detailed taxonomy of single mothers' living arrangements that moves beyond previous categories identified by the Census Bureau.

times the poverty threshold. The findings are inconclusive with the single mother who resides with an unrelated male because his financial contributions are unknown. In the event that he does contribute financially, it is likely that her status would be measurable to that of a young married couple with children (Winkler, 1993).

Understanding the living arrangements of unmarried mothers can shed light on family formation processes. According to the Fragile Families Study (2002) “just under half of all unmarried mothers are living with the fathers of their baby at the time of birth. One third are living in a “nuclear” household – one in which the mother, father and child are living together with no other adults, while 15 percent live with at least one other adult in a “partner plus” arrangement. Of the 51 percent of unmarried mothers that are *not* living with the baby’s father, two-thirds are living with other adults and one-third are living alone” (“The Living Arrangements of New Unmarried Mothers” June 2002, Number 7, Current Population Survey).

### **Additional typologies derived from the literature**

In a Massachusetts study of 50 women who decided to parent alone,<sup>25</sup> Hertz and Ferguson (1998) explore the multiple ways in which women have constructed specific strategies necessary to ensure the best environment for their children. This issue is typically referred to as balancing the work/family dilemma (Hertz, 1999; Hochschild, 1989/1997). Hertz and Ferguson establish four typologies that “demonstrate the factors

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<sup>25</sup> Hertz & Ferguson (1998) spell out their methods and categories of inclusion for determining which single mothers were eligible to participate in their study. Women were eligible if they “were unmarried and not living with either the father of the child or a romantic partner who is defined by the mother as a co-parent at the time of birth or adoption and at the time of the interview” (p.15).

leading to, and consequences of, differing combinations of economic and social support for childrearing marshaled by the mothers” (p.13). The four typologies explain how these single mothers maintain everyday life to the best of their abilities for both themselves and their child(ren). Each typology addresses financial resources that the women have, or lack thereof, and social resources. The first typology is referred to as “going it alone.” This category parallels Bak's (1998) “traditional strategy” in that the women are most typically on their own in their “condensed family arena.” They do not have extensive support networks and do not have the luxury of relying on familial ties that are emotionally or geographically close. They struggle financially to make ends meet and feel as though making more money will allow them additional time to juggle the work - family divide. Given the lack of support networks for these women, they find it more difficult to ask for help. They rely on their energy and desire to fulfill their family needs, often paying a high price which results in a lack of leisure time for themselves. “By having neither in-depth social resources nor high incomes these women worry and are more stressed about how they will continue to provide materially for their children without depriving them of mother time. They have fewer options and typically focus on making money since they see this as a solution to ease the burden of organizing a satisfying family life through other strategies. In sum, they have fewer resources to organize into multiple strategies even though they try” (p.23).

The second typology “looking to the market” is the single mother who has adequate and secure financial resources. They are fortunate to have well paying, stable jobs as professional women and entrepreneurs. In these families, mothers are fortunate to have the financial stability to buy “helping hands.” They often pay for nannies,

housecleaners, as well as other in kind services. As far as social networks go, most of these women have family they can depend on, yet choose to keep familial networks and close friends at bay, instead utilizing their paid services to get the work done, both caretaking and domestic labor. Family and friends are seen as enjoyment and leisure rather than a source of assistance for work that needs to be done.

Put differently, they do not want to 'wear out' their social capital but prefer to save it for special occasions. Because they have the financial resources to buy help they can choose when and how to include friends and family in their extended family circle and their preference is to manage hired help rather than call on family and friends. These mothers are opting out of the economy of gratitude because they can afford to. They express their preferences to helpers in a more direct way because there are no bonds of obligation beyond the market relationship, leaving them free of feeling dependent. They avoid the entanglements of those women in this study who become deeply enmeshed in all phases of family life and therefore cannot separate the strands of obligation and reciprocity (Hertz & Ferguson, 1998, p.25).

The third group of women, "tapping the networks," fall into the financial category bordering working and middle-class. Most of these women work in female-dominated occupations, lacking the financial opportunities that the women in the second group have been afforded. Despite the lack of financial resources, these women seem to be frugal and make up for their inability to buy services through the use of family and friends. Most of the women studied fell into this category. It is interesting to note that the largest category "tapping the networks" in the Hertz & Ferguson study (1998) corroborates the findings of Baks study (1998) where the largest group was self-reliant.

The two largest groups - “tapping the networks” and “self-reliant” – rely heavily upon the “extended family arena” as one of the most important coping and managing mechanisms. They tend to be highly social and create resources through alternative methods, for instance, shared housing, sharing daycare, etc. Single mothers of all classes rely on “resourceful child raising.” These mothers are constantly struggling to find ways to be resourceful, fun, and engaging in activities that are free (i.e. picnics in the living room, library trips) (Schein, 1995). The lines between work and family are blurred. This seems to be less stressful for these women, partly because of the way they have constructed what it means to be a “good mother” and partly because they juggle creatively their commitment and quantity of work with developing quality relationships with family and friends.

Lastly, there was a cadre of women who fell into the category of having both stable, well-paying financial resources as well as strong social networks. They are referred to as “good jobs/good friends.” This group incorporated the strategies of both “looking to the market” and “tapping the networks.” These women have upper middle-class incomes that afford them the luxury to buy services when necessary, yet are incredibly social, relying on family and friends for support, assistance, and guidance. The reliance on others is less out of necessity and more out of the desire to have close relationships and networks, for themselves and for their children. Most of these mothers cut back on their work schedules post-motherhood, many utilizing flex time.

In her classic work on single parent families, Mendes (1979) developed a typology of five distinct lifestyles that single parent families develop. The “sole executive” is the first of the five typologies. It corresponds nicely with Hertz &

Ferguson's (1998) "going it alone" group of single mothers described as those who manage alone with very little or no outside assistance. The second typology is the "auxiliary parent" who shares parenting responsibilities with other auxiliary parents who do not reside with the family. This auxiliary parent type is similar to Hertz & Ferguson's "tapping the network" group. The "unrelated substitute" is when a parent shares one of more parenting functions with someone who is unrelated to the family. Type four is the "related substitute" single parent family type who is synonymous with the "unrelated substitute" except for the fact that the shared work and responsibilities is with a related family member. Both of Mendes' type three and four could be considered a subsection of Hertz & Ferguson's "tapping the networks" making the category more nuanced. Lastly, type five is what Mendes refers to as the "titular parent." She goes on to say, "In the Type 5 life-style, the single parent lives with the children but has, in effect, abdicated the parental role. Examples are single parents who are alcoholics, drug addicts, severely infantile, or actively psychotic and, as a consequence, are parents in name only" (1976, p.108).

### SECTION III: THE HISTORY OF BLACK FAMILIES AND WORKING-CLASS FAMILY LIFE

#### **The Black family**

Given this study's respondents were overwhelming women of color, it became important to review what has been written about the black family. Several issues relating to black families were addressed in the previous section of this literature review. Details were provided about how black families manage and cope and some of the strategies used by women. This section offers a more structural approach to understanding the black family. Forces that contribute to their rise are addressed below, along with a summary of two opposing viewpoints about the origin of single motherhood within the black community.

The black family - particularly the black single mother family - has been suspect, interrogated, and marginalized. Given the power of race in American culture, it becomes necessary, but not sufficient, to analyze single motherhood through a racial lens, and to examine the black family as a product of historical experience. It is crucial to avoid essentializing and assuming that all black families are alike. We must locate the intersectionality between race and class and investigate how the two factors combined have shaped, and will continue to shape, the black family of the past, present and the future.

“Until the 1960s, a remarkable 75 percent of black families included both husband and wife...since the 1960s, rapid urbanization, and especially ghettoization, has had a devastating impact on many black families” (Franklin, 1988, p. 25). “The changing structure of the black family noted by Moynihan in 1965 continued at an unprecedented pace into the eighties, and by 1984, most black families with children were headed by a single mother” (Nichols-Casebolt, 1988, p. 311). How and why this phenomenon occurred is subject to debate. Conservatives adopt an ethnocentric approach that utilizes a deficit model which views single mother families as problematic. Others have adopted a cultural relativist approach that looks beyond the personal and takes into account larger forces and structures. Both views are examined below.

### **Demonization of the black single mother: Ethnocentric approach**

“The pathological and dysfunctional view of black families has been primarily related to the cultural ethnocentric approach and associated with the work of E. Franklin Frazier (1939) and D. P. Moynihan (1965)” (Dodson, 1988, p. 77). Frazier attributed marriage and family patterns and structures within the black community as by-products of slavery and American culture. Like Frazier, Moynihan concluded that the black community was in disarray. They both felt that the black family was problematic, yet, each had a different idea about how to remedy the social ill. Perhaps there is no better example of how single mothers are viewed as deviant and used to explain social ills than Moynihan’s “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (1965). In his seminal work, Moynihan adopted a behavioral thesis to explain poverty and “illegitimacy” in the

African-American community, ultimately placing blame on the matriarchal structure of the black family. With the matriarchy came the rise and proliferation of the black single mother-headed household, which was a devastation to the black community. Moynihan says, “The prevalent view that seems to be emerging is that black family structure is the cause of poverty among these families; and the increase numbers of black single mother families can be attributed to a growth in welfare benefits and erosion of traditional family values” (in Nichols-Casebolt, 1988, p. 306). The Moynihan report received an overwhelmingly negative response from the African-American community. Despite the outrage, many scholars continue to adopt a similar position, albeit with new rhetoric (Mead, 1992; Murray 1995). Wilson (1987) goes so far as to call Moynihan’s report “prophetic.” Building on the work of Moynihan is Wilson (2002) who claims that the deterioration of the family is the cause for many of the social ills we experience in contemporary society. Fatherlessness, teenage pregnancy, single motherhood are all predictors for failure. Due to the “marriage problem” (failure of people to marry at earlier ages) and the high rates of divorce, society is experiencing negative and profound ripple effects. Family structure, according to Wilson, is one of the strongest indicators of functionality, thereby, making single mothers the most dysfunction family form. The different family forms and structures today distinguish “one part of America from another.” He goes on to say,

we are in fact two nations...in one nation a child raised by two-parents, acquires an education, a job, a spouse, and a home kept separate from crime and disorder by distance, fences or guards. In the other nation, a child is raised by an unwed girl, lives in a neighborhood filled with many sexual men but few committed fathers, and finds gang life to be necessary for self-protection and valuable for self-advancement. In the first nation,

children look forward to the future and make plans. In the second, children disbelieve that they will have a future and live for the immediate moment. Harm occurs in both nations, but in the second nation, they proliferate – child abuse and drug abuse, gang violence and personal criminality, economic dependency and continued illegitimacy (Wilson, 2002).

Welfare is another contributor to family dysfunction. It is thought to be a catalyst and primary cause of unmarried women having children (Nichols-Casebolt, 1988).

Murray (1984) posits that AFDC induced black women to form single mother families because it offered women a way out of marriage and work. Overall, the ethnocentric view vilifies black single mothers and blames them and their misjudgments and immoral behaviors as the cause of single motherhood. Moreover, the racist assumptions are explicit and provide the foundation for which cultural bias and discrimination rest.

### **In defense of the black single mother: Cultural relativity approach**

Contrary to the ethnocentric approach, the cultural relativity school argues that black families are a feature of cultural and value differences and black families possess a degree of cultural integrity and strength (Nichols-Casebolt). Furthermore, “Black women generally have internalized the black community’s perception of them as strong, independent, and resourceful persons” (Harrison, 1988, p. 221). Cultural relativists “tend to focus on the ‘strengths’ of black families rather than their weaknesses...black Americans’ cultural orientation encourages family patterns that are instrumental in combating the oppressive racial conditions of American society” (Dodson, p. 77, 81).

Forces beyond the control of individuals have contributed to the changing structure of the black family. Racism, classism, and sexism are all systemic forces that place black women in triple jeopardy (Sands and Nuccio, 1989). “Because racism permeates and transcends all social relationships, economic and political arrangements such as slavery, segregation, and desegregation have not operated in the public arena alone, but have seeped into the private arenas of sexuality, marriage and family, and the personal lives of Blacks and whites, men and women” (Omolade, 1987, p.239). The power racism has had on the development of family formation within the black community can be traced back to slavery. It is not enough to pay lip service to slavery and its’ impacts. A thorough examination of the family requires a more nuanced level of analysis, unlike the one offered by Moynihan. Slavery has had a long and deleterious effect on the black family, particularly the structure of family life and how it is they responded (Franklin, 1997; Gutman, 1978; Omolade, 1986/1987; Patterson, 1982; Rainwater, 1967). In Frazier’s landmark 1939 study he examined families in the 1920s and 1930s concluding that African-American family life was produced by the slave experience, developing what he calls the “two stream theory.” The first is the dominant stream - the rise of the matriarchy. The second development is considered the subordinate stream - the emergence of class as the identifying variable that determines family form. For instance, the two-parent family model is a middle and upper-class phenomenon, while female-headed household models are typically lower class. Due to slave conditions, Frazier concludes that single motherhood was a by-product of structural forces. Both of these concepts he developed offered further explanation of how family life was dictated by the cruelty of the slave system. Family stability and security were

inconceivable given the harsh restrictions placed on both black women and black men. Omolade (1986) applies a feminist analysis to single motherhood within slave families. She acknowledges the victimization of single mothers but moves beyond to viewing black single mothers as heroines who actively create their own families to their specifications. Rather than depicting female-headed families as solely victims of oppressive conditions, Omolade applies/utilizes a dialectic of oppression framework and “found that the debased condition and position of the oppressed always led to their conscious resistance and desire for freedom. Black resistance to social death took the form of creating viable families, whether patriarchal or female-headed, and of developing extended kinship networks along with political and protest strategies” (1986, p. 240).

Another explanation for the rise of black single mother families is the role and status of the father. Black men have been subject to economic and racial discrimination that has had an effect on black family life as well. “The availability of black men is a key and crucial factor in explaining female-headed families among blacks” (Darity and Meyers, 1984). Economic status and joblessness are culprits that explain the rise and persistence of single mother families in the black community (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986). “Evidence also indicates that the number of black men who economically were able to support a family decreased at almost the same rate that black single-parent families increased” (Nichols-Casebolt, p. 311).

Along with family structure, the history of slavery also impacted gender relationships, and therefore marriage, within the black family. Men did not “assume the subordinate role in the family constellation...the female was not economically dependent on him” (Staples, 1988, p. 187). The “compulsion to marry” did not play the same role

or have the same prominence in black families as it did white families. “Upon closer inspection, it seems that the desire to marry and remain married has not diminished, only the conditions for doing so have altered” (Staples, p. 188). The desire for marriage differs for black and white women (Ladner, 1972). In her study that examined attitudinal differences among black and white women in respect to marriage and family, Ladner concluded that “motivations that led the lower-class black women in her sample to marry differ from those of whites. She states the former enter marriage after a more realistic cold assessment of the chances of its succeeding...love, emotional security, etc. are actually ‘luxury’ reasons for getting married. Thus, Black females...are using more sophisticated and rational reasons for entering the marriage contract” (Heiss, 1988, p. 205-206). She concludes that attitudinal differences between the two groups are not different, instead the family structure variance can be explained as a “function of situational and resource differences” (Heiss, p. 212).

Black families look different because of their unique history and as a result, they have developed ways of being and coping that display their strength. Extended family and “systems of exchange” are strategies that have helped to ensure the maintenance of physical, emotional and economic needs (Stack, 1974). Reciprocal networks of sharing (Stack) and reciprocal extended family-help patterns (McAdoo, 1978) have allowed black families, of all economic groups, to offset the discrimination they face and compensate for the lack of resources available to them. The use of kinship and non-kinship support has been a crux for the survival and maintenance of black family life (Omolade, 1986). In a study of twenty black adult women, “more than half (64%) of the significant others were nonrelatives, suggesting that, in addition to the parent and the relative, the non-

relative is greatly involved in the achievement of black family members. Furthermore, these non relatives were found in almost every segment of the respondents' lives" (Manns, 1988, p. 278).

Omolade (1986) avidly defends the black single mother by highlighting the differential treatment of black single mothers from their white counterparts. The black single mother has simply been used as a scapegoat for the "white population's backlash against these changes...Historically problems in the white family have been attributed to individual failure while problems in the black family are seen as evidence of collective black pathology" (p.2). Given this racist ideology, how do black single mothers seize agency and power? For some black single mothers their location as single mothers is a "means of transcending and surviving injustice" (Omolade, p.3).

## **THE HISTORY OF WORKING-CLASS FAMILIES**

What does the literature say about working-class families that has implications for this dissertation? Much of the literature focuses on *working-class families* from a social and cultural perspective. It details what everyday life is like for families that are working-class (Ferree, 1985; Komarovsky, 1962; Rubin, 1972). This literature addresses issues such as parenting, marriage, housework, familial histories and dynamics and how working-class families are similar to or different from families in other class groups.

### **The absence of single mothers in working-class literature**

The literature on working-class women reveals the lack or absence of investigation into the lives of working-class single mothers. In addition, the literature on working-class families is overwhelmingly the story of a heterosexual, two-parent family, most typically white. Fewer studies have been conducted with working-class families of color. Rubin (1992) argues that little is known about working-class families in general. She states, “we knew plenty about the poor families, the dependent families, the delinquent families - those that make the headlines, who crowd the welfare rolls, who tap the public resources. But we knew almost nothing of the forty million American workers - just under half the total workforce - who are employed in blue-collar jobs...” (p. 4). Furthermore, working-class studies is not as prevalent today as in the past. Fewer articles and books are written about contemporary working-class women. Perhaps this is because class is an analytic category that we rely on less today, especially in women’s studies and

in feminist writings. It appears that other identities, such as race, sexuality, and geographic region, have supplanted class. Unlike studies on working-class men, that tend to focus on his labor/employment identity, the literature on working-class women explores her subject position beyond that of her employment. There seems to be a much more holistic analysis of her life that takes into account her status as a worker as well as her role as mother and wife. This acknowledgment of women's work both in the workplace and in the home is a double-edged sword. It is critical that scholarship address the complexities that the second shift creates, yet in doing so, it reproduces the home as the sacred space that belongs exclusively to women by continuing to talk about unpaid labor from a woman's standpoint. For better or for worse, these studies highlight and potentially reinforce fixed gender roles and gender stereotyping by focusing on the fact that women engage in two qualitatively different kinds of work: paid "productive" labor and unpaid "reproductive" labor.

Most working-class women have engaged in some form of waged labor. The fact that women contribute to the family economy is an understatement for single mothers, given that single mothers assume both the role of breadwinner and homemaker (Blackwelder, 1997). This dissertation examines the issue of work for single mothers who are economically just getting by. The current working conditions and strategies developed by single mothers to make their lives and the lives of their families manageable are explored. By examining working single mothers today, this dissertation reveals the consistencies or inconsistencies of working-class family patterns of the past and how they are similar to or different from the life conditions and situations of working single mothers today.

## **Social and cultural aspects of working-class family life**

What do working-class families look like? Do working-class families and women hold distinct views on marriage, family, childrearing and housework? Are there cultural patterns or trends in this population, and if so, what are they? What implications do they have on single mother families?

### **Working-class family life: A closer look**

Until Komarovsky's (1962) work, working-class studies looked predominantly at troubled or delinquent families and working-class families were studied in relation to their middle-class counterparts. Furthermore, previous studies in marriage and family had exclusively looked at the middle-class. As early as the 1960s, it was assumed that the separation between the working-class family from the middle-class family was essentially no longer a viable distinction because of the shifting patterns of consumption. As Veblen (1994) argued consumption is conspicuous for all classes; differences that were once obvious are now minimized. Nevertheless, while this may be true, Komarovsky found that different perceptions, expectations and material patterns emerged for working-class families.

Many ideologies and philosophies of working-class families originate from the experiences of growing up in working-class families. Working-class families often experience family dysfunction. In Rubin's (1972) classic study of working-class family life, she found that the majority of people reported growing in a household with

alcoholism, divorce, desertion, foster care or mental health concerns. As a result, Rubin borrowed a phrase from Howell (1973) that describes working-class families as either “settled-living” or “hard-living.” The “settled livers” are the families that find stability and rootedness amidst some chaos and the “hard livers” grapple with instability, violence, and rootlessness. Furthermore, working-class families were less likely to envision a future. This privilege of futuristic thinking, “distinguishes the consciousness of the working-class from that of the more privileged class” (Rubin, 1992, p. 38).

### *Views on housework*

Many studies compare working-class families with middle-class families to determine if there exists a difference in material lives. Overall, findings reveal that views on housework differ for middle-class and working-class women. While Friedan (1963) was arguing for middle-class housewives to remove themselves from the perils of their homes and move into the workplace, which she referred to as the world of liberation, other studies made the claim that only some housewives (middle-class) were feeling trapped in the suburb of disenchantment, other women (working-class) did not share in the same experience (Ferree, 1985; Komarovsky, 1962; Rubin, 1972). In fact, Komarovsky states, “we find little evidence of status frustrations among working-class wives. They accept housewifery. There is hardly a trace in the interviews of the low prestige that educated housewives sometimes attach to their roles, as reflected in the familiar phrase, ‘I am just a housewife’” (1962, p.49). Notwithstanding, this does not mean that the working-class women were satisfied homemakers, but they do not attach a

negative connotation to housewifery. In fact, housework was not a sensitive issue for either working-class women or working-class men. Another distinctly unique trait of the working-class families from Komarovsky's study was their refusal to reify occupational success. The worth of a person, as they understood it, is not measured by their competence in a vocation. This is perhaps one of the biggest differences between the working-classes and the middle-classes. Conceptions of work and its meaning and who does it are class-based. These findings are consistent with Rubin's (1992), where two-thirds of the working-class, stay-at-home mothers were happy to do so and considered their work important.

### *Notions of time*

The concept of time manifests differently according to one's class background. Leisure and leisure time are partly constructed by class. Komarovsky found that time was not considered the same scarce commodity for working-class women as it was for middle-class educated women. Leisure time for working-class families was inherently different given expectations of the quantity and quality of what constitutes leisure. Middle-class families tended to have more leisure time available and filled the time with activities, whereas, working-class families had less leisure time but spent the time more frequently at home in "quiet hours." There was more of a clear separation, both materially and emotionally, between work and home for working-class families (Rubin, 1972). Rubin found in her 1992 study of working-class families that all classes experience much less leisure time today than in her 1972 study.

### *Notions of marriage*

What have we learned from the literature about what marriage means to working-class families? The concept of marriage has also shifted over time and working-class families are subject to these changes. Marriage is a complex set of arrangements that is influenced by various factors, economic, social, cultural, sexual and so on. Modern society has added an additional dimension and purpose of marriage: companionship. Studies of marriage, prior to Komarovsky, focused primarily on middle-class marriages (Burgess & Locke, 1953; Shorter, 1975) and previous studies of the working-class (particularly in England) showed a considerable psychological distance between husband and wife. Komarovsky makes the distinction between what she refers to as the “ideal” concept of marriage and explores how working-class couples transfer that “ideal” onto their own lives and how it differs from the “actual” reality of married life. She speculated that working-class folks would hold companionship as an ideal just as often as the middle-class couples. She found that educational level, more than gendered understandings of marriage, were the primary indicators that affected how women and men perceive of marriage. The more educated one is, the higher the level of expectation of what marriage *should* be. Church membership was also associated with the more middle-class response of intimacy and companionship in marriage. The expectations of marriage for working-class families are different than the reality. One expectation of modern marriage is that it serves as a place to “share one’s hurts, worries, and dreams with another person” but the reality is such that disclosure and communication do not determine if the blue collar marriages were happy and fulfilling.

Similarly, Rubin found a significant difference between working-class marriages and middle-class marriages. Intentions and expectations vary for working-class and middle-class couples. The social psychological milieu was that marriage was the “next developmental step” for working-class couples. Getting married acted as an escape from parental control and authority. Independence and adult privilege were found outside of marriage for the middle-class and inside of marriage for the working-class. “There is a quality of urgency among the young people of the working-class that is not so evident in a comparable group of middle-class, college-educated men and women - an urgency that is rooted in their class history and family background” (Rubin, 1992, p. 54).

#### *Friendships & networks outside of marriage*

As a cultural ideal, marriage is thought to be more important and central for women than it is for men. To the contrary, women are more likely to develop and maintain close contacts/connections to individuals outside of the marriage that are central to their lives (Komarovsky, 1962). In fact, 6 out of 10 women enjoy close relations with others outside of the family, whereas, 2 out of 10 men have connections outside the marital relationship (Komarovsky). In addition, working-class families are more bound by ties of kinship. “Daily existence centers about relatives all the more because there are so few competing social ties or interests” (Komarovsky, 1962, p. 236). Working-class families are more likely to use kinship relations as barter of exchange (babysitting, laundry, shopping, cooking, cleaning, etc.). Grandparents of professional families do not baby sit like they do in working-class families (Rubin, 1972). While the ideal conception

of kinship relations centers around the primacy of the nuclear family, the actual reality is that the working-class families rely heavily upon the extended family in many ways.

Working-class families did, however, rely on peer relationships, neighbors and mutual aid connections to those beyond the nuclear family, but the extended family was the heart of working-class social life.

*Working-class women then, working-class women now*

Rubin (1992) revised her original study conducted in 1972 and expresses the stark differences between the working-class women in 1972 and working-class women in 1992. Key differences arise as a result of major changes that have taken place culturally, socially, economically and politically. Gains made by the feminist movement are one example of this change. Even though working-class women in 1992 were still less likely to self-identify as feminist, the influence of the Second Wave, coupled with changing economic situations, impacted the lives of all women and had a lasting affect on the ways women viewed their family life and the role they played in it. Women's (and men's) view of work have changed. It is much more commonplace and excepted by all parties that women work outside of the home. One last change that Rubin highlights is the fact that men are much more likely to share in domestic labor then in previous decades. But even this shift is far from reaching its full potential (Hochschild, 1989/97).

Overall, life is harder today for working-class families. In 1972 parents believed their frugality would mean a better life for their families. They were able to save money and buy a house. In 1992 the rate of inflation has increased, homes cost more, and real

incomes for working-class families have not kept up with the rate of inflation, making it virtually impossible for working-class families to have today what they once had in the past.

### **Economic contributions by working-class women**

Most working-class women and daughters did not have the privilege or choice as to whether or not they would work. For the most part, poor and working-class women were forced out of economic necessity to engage in full-time paid work. For working-class women of color this was, and still is, particularly true (Skolnick, 2000). Working-class women are under-appreciated for their pivotal place in the formal economy. It is due to their labor power that production continued during war times, that the “pink-collar” sector is employed, and that families stay afloat during economic recessions. Working-class women were, in the past as well as the present, relegated to low-paid, menial and segregated work. In contrast, for most middle and upper-class women the decision to work was just that - a decision (Stacey, 1996). As Kessler-Harris (1982) documents, working-class women, particularly women of color, were working throughout history. Overall, women’s engagement in the labor force was very much contingent upon external forces: poverty, war, consumption patterns, the feminist movement, changing roles and expectations of women, and sexual freedom. Working-class mothers were also more consistently in the workforce, whereas, middle-class mothers entered and left the workforce depending on the needs of the family. Working-class women were, therefore, pioneers in the struggle of balancing work and family life.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, this literature review begins by tracing the changing nature of single motherhood from 1880 to date. This review reveals a shift from the deserted mother, to the widow, to the unmarried single mother. It exposes the transition from the “deserving” single mother to the “undeserving” single mother. Most importantly, we have learned from history that single motherhood has a long and complex trajectory and will not banish out of will. The pattern we have learned as a result of exploring this history is that single mothers are characterized very differently throughout different periods of history. The characterization depends on multiple factors: demographic realities, social contexts and conditions, political motives, social movements, to name a few. One common feature that cuts across all periods is the real and potential threat that family dissolution (or change) is problematic. Single mother headed households are in part to blame.

The second section of this literature review examines the contemporary reality of single mothers. It presents findings from empirical studies that have explored the lives of single mothers. Previous research has been instrumental in helping us more fully understand the lives of single mothers. The material presented helps to contextualize the findings of this study and highlights where the women in this sample are different from and similar to other single mothers. Several of the areas where findings from previous research correspond to this study are presented below.

### *Decision-making*

We learned that the decision to have a child without a partner is a complicated choice at the very least. The literature specifies in great detail the variables that influence a woman's decision that range from micro level issues to macro level structures. Typically, women do not rely solely on one variable when making her decision, rather a complex and interacting set of variables influence her decision.

### *How single mothers feel about their lives*

We learned that women are left to make sense of and describe their life experiences as single mothers. This is not always an easy task given the pressures that she faces about the inadequacy of her family. A tremendous amount of the literature compares single mother headed households with married parents. This research has contributed to our understanding of single mothers but more often than not at the expense of further marginalizing single mothers. When asked to compare their situations with married mothers, single mothers repeatedly state they feel as though their situations are inadequate. Moreover, the well-being of single mothers is compared to other subgroups of mothers, which provides useful information but is also inadequate. It is important to know that different types of mothers (separated, divorced, widowed, single) report different concerns and stressors, but it is just as important to examine the stressors of single mothers independent of comparison. What is left out of the comparative analyses presented is the depth and richness of the life of single mothers.

When it comes to ideas of marriage, single mothers express conflicting feelings. On the one hand, they often feel more free to not marry and are skeptical of the institution (Siegel, 1995b). On the other hand, many studies reveal that single mothers yearn to marry and are quite positive about the benefits of marriage, often longing to be married themselves (Fragile families studies, 2002; Gibson, Edin, and McLanahan, 2003).

*Typology summary: Managing and coping*

A variety of typologies have been developed to help us understand that single motherhood is anything but a monolithic group of women. In essence, two different kinds of typologies exist. The first typology describes how single mothers are depicted. We learned about the deviant, victim, heroine and single mother by choice categories. The second set of typologies offers an enriched way of understanding how different types of single mothers manage and thrive. Women in each type respond to her situation uniquely, develop strategies for survival accordingly, and represent a lifestyle. Furthermore, each typology is determined by the economic and social supports marshaled by the mother. Several authors have developed typologies and below is a summary of how they correspond to each other.

Type one: “Going it alone” (Hertz and Ferguson); “Traditional strategy” (Bak); “Sole executive” (Mendes)

Single mothers who are on their own; they manage with little or no outside assistance; they do not have support from family and friends; they struggle financially and as a result have an immense lack of time to themselves.

Type two: “Looking to the market” (Hertz and Ferguson)

Single mothers who have adequate financial resources and can afford to pay for services; they have family but are more willing to buy the necessary services than rely on others; family and friends are intended for leisure time activities.

Type three: “Tapping the networks” (Hertz and Ferguson); “self-reliant” (Bak); “auxiliary parent” (Mendes)

Single mothers who are typically pink collar workers and unable to outsource their material needs; they rely on family and friends to help out.

Type four: “Good jobs/good friends” (Hertz and Ferguson)

Single mothers who have more than adequate resources and can purchase services to meet their needs but they also utilize their family and friends to a great degree.

Type five: “Titular parent” (Mendes)

Single mothers who have abdicated their mothering role and are not actively involved in their child’s life.

The women in this study most resemble an amalgamation of type one and type three. In fact, the typical story of these women falls somewhere in between these two types. Much like type one who are alone and have little or no assistance, the mothers in this study experience a feeling of loneliness and independence. They share that few friends and family help out, at least to a degree they would like. In addition, the women in this study also partly resemble type three because they too hold pink collar jobs and have limited financial sources that restrict their capacity to buy out services. A new category/typology can be added that I refer to as, “going it almost alone” that most accurately describes the lives of the respondents. They are raising their children alone most of the time, although they are not completely alone. They receive some support from friends and family.

### *Support networks*

More often than not, it is common to hear about the pivotal role that support networks offer single mother families, particularly in families of color. In fact, it has become conventional wisdom and expected that single mother families utilize networks to a greater degree than two-parent families. As you will read in later chapters, the women in this study have different experiences that add to this area of the literature. In sum, irrespective of their differences, all single mothers develop creative ways to cope and manage. The degree to which they are different is meaningful but they all share common elements given their status as marginal families. There are qualitative differences among subgroups of single mothers, that usually have more to do with what is

available to her, but ultimately, I argue, single mothers are more alike than different. They are all left to make sense of and reconcile their status in a pro-marriage society, and develop ways to manage the needs of their children as well as the own needs. Even though single mothers may do this differently, they all occupy a location in society that makes them suspect and places her in a unique position. Subsequent chapters present some of the unique findings this study has to offer, while simultaneously recognizing and highlighting the commonalities among and between single mother families.

### *Black family and working-class family life*

The literature on the black family offers insight into the origins of single motherhood within the black community. The review also reinforces the stigmatization placed on black single mothers. The literature on working-class families provides a useful backdrop for a deeper understanding of working-class family life. We learned that working-class families have struggled in a unique way. They have been confronted with different concerns and issues than middle-class and upper-class families, as well as poor families. For instance, work has a different meaning for working-class women who have a different relationship to, and views about, housework, time and leisure availability, ideals about marriage and network supports outside beyond the family. Like much of the literature on single mother families, the reliance on extended family and non-kin has been historically critical in the development and functionality of working-class family life. Moreover, like the single mothers of this study, working-class women in general have

been in the paid labor force and financially contributing to their family's well-being while also maintaining the household in many other respects.

## CHAPTER III

### Research design and methodology

#### **Core questions of research**

The main research question the dissertation examined was: What are the life experiences of never married working-class single mothers? Embedded in this overarching research question are five key areas of focus. The following areas of focus made up the substantial part of the interview guide.

1. Decision-making process: How did they become single mothers? Do the working-class single mothers of this study feel as though they have made choices about their single mother lifestyle, like some of their middle-class and upper-class counterparts? How does choice affect these women, if at all?
2. Strengths and challenges of single motherhood: Do the women feel there are advantages to single mothering and if so what are they? What are the hardships they face?
3. Feelings about being single, marriage, and family: What do single mothers think and how do they feel about their current unpartnered marital status? How do the women feel about being single given the cultural climate that is pro-marriage? Do they think there are advantages, disadvantages, etc.?
4. Managing and coping: What strategies do working-class single mothers develop to help them manage and cope? Do the working-class single mothers of this study

operate differently than what the literature informs us about single mothers from other class groups or from working-class families in general?

5. Practice and policy recommendations: What social work services/social benefits do they use, if any, and how do they regard these services?

### **Description and justification of the study**

This study was an attempt to uncover how one segment of family constellations - never married working-class single mothers - understand and interpret their own lives as well as how they manage and cope given the challenges they face both materially and socially, particularly in regard to decision-making, perceptions of self in relation to motherhood, singleness, marriage, and family; and how they cope and manage.

This study adopted a qualitative grounded theory approach to investigate the epiphenomenon of single motherhood by employing a semi-structured interview guide with a purposeful sample of mothers recruited in New York City. The study lends itself to qualitative research because of the exploratory nature of the issue under investigation and uncovers the perceptions of never married working-class single mothers in reference to the various identified aspects of their lived experience.

Another important reason for the use of qualitative methods is to tease out the intricate details and multifaceted nature of women's lives that would be difficult to find through quantitative methods. As Padgett (2004) describes the benefits of qualitative research, she shares, "its central tenets of flexibility, naturalism, and immersion situate the researcher in a very different place from his or her quantitative colleagues. In short,

qualitative methods can direct our attention away from the blind pursuit of answers toward thinking about questions” (p.3).

In addition to traditional qualitative methods the study also relied on feminist qualitative methods (Reinharz, 1992). Feminist methodology is central to this study because it places at the center of analysis women and women’s issues. Feminist research is likely to confront and identify important and unique qualities that might otherwise be overlooked by relying entirely on “traditional” qualitative methods (Lorber, 1988; Collins, 1990,1994).

Over the course of several months, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 women. All of the interviews were transcribed and the material below is a product of the insight they shared.

### **Conceptual issues of qualitative methods**

#### *Grounded theory*

The particular tradition of qualitative methods adopted is a grounded theory approach. The grounded theory approach is inductively derived from the systematic study of a phenomenon it represents whose central purpose is discovery. One of the key features of the grounded theory approach is the interplay or constant interaction with the data collected from the study, the analysis, and the *theory-building*, and how they stand in a reciprocal relationship to each other. The ultimate goal of a grounded theory approach is to contribute to theory-building that is faithful to and will illuminate the phenomenon

under investigation and will contribute to the field and to the pre-existing body of literature (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990,1994). It is movement beyond description with the intent to develop and contribute to a theory that is grounded in the material derived from the respondents through a careful and thorough analysis.

### *Theoretical traditions of qualitative research*

There are theoretical traditions and orientations that make qualitative research uniquely different from other methodological frameworks. Each of the theoretical traditions has its own paradigm and therefore method for examining a phenomenon. Each orientation has its own logical assumptions, it lays the ground work for what and how the project will look, what questions will be asked, the overall emphases of the project, and consequently each tradition produces a different research project that reveals qualitatively different findings (Patton, 1990). In some instances, qualitative research relies upon more than one theoretical orientation and combines a variety of approaches. Various traditions within qualitative research were born out of disciplinary difference (Patton). Ultimately, the tradition one utilizes shapes the questions and interprets the results from that particular vantage point(s).

This dissertation relies on three theoretical traditions of qualitative research: phenomenology, hermeneutics and orientational inquiry. Each of these traditions offers a unique depiction of an event and a unique way (method) of examining the social phenomenon under investigation. These three traditions vary to the degree in which the study holds “true” to the specific tradition. This study borrows from each tradition in a

loose manner and has elements of each tradition within the epistemological foundation. For instance, exploring the essence of the experience of motherhood through the lens of never married and working-class women is rooted in a phenomenological approach whereas, asking questions and pondering the conditions under which her decision was made and how she understands and makes sense of and interprets her motherhood as well as her singleness is imbued with the hermeneutical approach. Lastly, this study also utilizes an orientational approach because of its commitment to a feminist perspective as well as a class perspective. Both of these orientations are a crucial component of this dissertation and help to situate and shape the context of questions asked and assumptions made.

### Phenomenological

The phenomenological approach attempts to capture the “true essence” of a phenomenon. It answers the question, “What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people” (Patton, p. 69). Husserl (1913, 1962), one of the founding fathers of this tradition, saw phenomenology as the study of understanding how people describe things and experiences; how people make meaning and understand their lives? Another unique quality of the phenomenological viewpoint is the belief or assumption that there is an essence to experience. That essence is not understood as an objective reality, but rather a subjective set of meanings. People develop their worldview from their experience in the world. Experience blends with objective reality and personal reality (Patton). This study is working with the assumption that there is a shared essence of single motherhood, a shared meaning that may be mutually understood. This

dissertation uses both the phenomenological perspective (understanding the use of methods that illuminate the experience of individuals) and it is a phenomenological study (the actual study of what people experience). Phenomenology fits nicely with the theory of social construction, which is one of the theoretical frameworks for this study which was explained in the introduction.

### Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the “study of interpretive understanding” (Patton). In most cases, hermeneutics is used in relation to textual analysis. However, Kneller (1984) broadened the scope of hermeneutic inquiry from the interpretation of a text to the understanding of a human act. In order to understand the conditions under which the women became single mothers and how they interpret both their singleness and motherhood, hermeneutic inquiry is well suited. One of the purposes of this study is to make sense of how a particular subset of single mothers makes sense of and interprets their situation. There is an underlying hypothesis that perhaps these single mothers (like others before them) exercise agency. Like the phenomenological approach, the hermeneutical approach also blends with the constructivist framework and these approaches rely on qualitative methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). “Hermeneutic researchers use qualitative methods to establish context and meaning for what people do...[it] argues that one can only interpret the meaning of something from some perspective, a certain standpoint, a praxis, or a situational context” (Patton, p. 85).

## Orientalional

The last tradition that applies to this dissertation is orientational inquiry.

Orientalional inquiry begins with an “explicit theoretical or ideological perspective that determines what variables and concepts are most important” (Patton, p. 86). It is when the orientation of the researcher determines the focus of the study. The extent to which the orientation drives the project is a matter of degree. In this dissertation there are several orientations, discussed earlier in the introduction, that help frame the project: the theory of social construction, feminism and Marxism.

## *Characteristics of Qualitative Research*

### Themes of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is built on themes (Patton, 1990) that are interconnected and tease apart phenomena in an attempt to more fully understand it. In order to develop a qualitative study, many issues must be addressed. Above you read about the theoretical traditions within qualitative research that helped to shape the project. Below you will read about several themes of qualitative inquiry that are referred to as “strategies” as opposed to paradigms. Themes have more to do with pragmatic issues than philosophical or epistemological ones (Patton); they help determine the appropriate method. Not all qualitative projects utilize all of the themes/approaches of qualitative research methods. The themes most relevant to this project which further substantiate utilizing qualitative methods are presented: Inductive Analysis, Qualitative Data, Holistic Perspective, Context Sensitivity, and Empathic Neutrality (Patton, 1990).

Inductive analysis, as opposed to deductive analysis, moves from the specific to the general. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) articulated, **inductive research** is grounded in specific contexts and speaks about real world patterns. In other words, inductive research allows the subject to share her experience without placing limits on what she can and cannot share. Initially, each case stands independently and is later compared to other cases where patterns and themes may emerge. The use of an open-ended interview guide lends itself nicely to inductive research, it is based on and rooted in the gathering of truly **qualitative data** that will capture “thick descriptions” of life as a single mother, relying on their direct quotations and interpretations.

One fundamental principle of social work theory and practice is the commitment to a holistic approach to social issues/problems. This idea of a **holistic perspective** transfers over to methods as well (Janesick, 1994). As Patton (1990) states, “The evaluator searches for the totality – the unifying nature of particular settings” (p. 49). In addition, this view understands and values the individual’s social environment and political contexts in which their lives exist. This holistic approach is crucial for this project. The single mother must be understood as a complex individual who is both a whole unto herself and a part of a complex system. Adopting this approach will ideally help to more fully understand how single mothers shape their own lives and simultaneously understand forces that influence those decisions. **Context sensitivity** as a part of qualitative research is very close to the holistic perspective. Context sensitivity “places findings in a social, historical, and temporal context; dubious of the possibility or meaningfulness of generalizations across time and space” (Patton, p. 40). The driving theory of this dissertation is the social constructivist framework. It understands single

motherhood as one family form in a constellation of many other forms and is attempting to locate and adhere to context sensitivity.

**Empathic neutrality** is a response to the positivist orientation that embraces “objective” science. Patton (1990) advocates for researchers to abandon those constructs because they are both problematic and reproduce falsities within research methods. He suggests that researchers of all traditions adopt neutrality. “This simply means that the investigator does not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths...Rather, the investigator’s commitment is to understand the world as it is, to be true to complexities and multiple perspectives as they emerge, and to be balanced in reporting both confirming and disconfirming evidence” (p. 55). Sound and rigorous data collection methods are the most typical way to ensure neutrality and therefore credibility. This modernist approach of neutrality departs from the earlier positivist notion of researcher detachment. Instead, it includes and embraces the idea of empathy as a force behind inquiry itself as well as the data collection process. Feminist qualitative research holds empathy as a fundamental component of research and central to its methods (Reinharz, 1992).

## **Design and collection issues**

### *Guide construction and evolution*

Guide construction is a difficult task and must be handled with skill and knowledge. Typically when conducting qualitative research, interview guides are developed which tend to be less structured, more fluid and open to change (Patton, 1990). This does not mean, however, there lacks logic or rationale behind the creation of a guide. When preparing the guide for this study several steps were followed (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). Initially, and over the course of several months, preliminary questions and thoughts were recorded as the researcher had ideas. An ongoing log was generated with an abundance of questions, many of which were later thrown out, but nevertheless useful for the final development of the guide. After the thought exercises of generating potential questions, sorting and organizing was crucial. As made evident in the guide itself (See appendix D), global categories emerged: *past* decision-making; *present* self-identity along with others perceptions, managing and coping strategies, attitudes about marriage, and well being; and *future* ideas about policies and programs for single mothers. To more clearly articulate and synthesize the relationship between previous research and the stated study the researcher engaged in a four step process. (1) Once the categories - or key zones - were established the researcher reviewed the literature to determine what previous scholarship had found in relationship to the newly established categories. (2) Articulating what impact, implications, and speculations prior research has on the proposed research was the second step. This was a crucial step in identifying

propositions. (3) Next came the generation of actual questions. At this stage, the questions tended to be highly abstract and densely conceptual. They were not yet the kinds of questions one would ask a respondent during an interview. All the same, these questions were critical to the thought process. (4) The last step was to take the abstract questions and translate them into digestible questions that were appropriate for the interview.

Furthermore, within each of these general topic areas (past, present, and future), specific questions had to be sorted with some logic and order. The sequencing of questions is a critical matter. It is less controversial to begin the interview process with the least intimidating questions, according to Patton, therefore, the guide begins with present behaviors, activities, and attitudes. Questions about the present also tend to be easier for a respondent to answer given the immediacy of the present. Demographic questions were asked at the end of the interview to gather social characteristics. To begin with demographic questions can be cumbersome for the respondent and act as a distraction.

Some of the questions warranted a probe to remind the interviewer what additional key points should be extracted that may not come out spontaneously. The development and use of probes was to tease out and/or clarify a statement made by the interviewee. Several of the questions did not need prepared probes, but as Lofland & Lofland (1984) suggest, the use of on-the-spot probes was helpful when more information or clarification was necessary.

Many additional concerns were considered while working through the interview guide: wording of questions, avoiding dichotomies, clarity of questions, and ensuring

singular questions. In addition, several other contingencies were taken into consideration as well: the duration of the interview, number of interviews needed, the setting, and identities of both the researcher and the respondent. These were all factors taken into consideration during guide development and research protocol.

As part of the interview guide construction, a pilot interview was conducted to determine if and how a respondent interpreted the questions. This process was useful, it helped to tease out some glitches and as a result many of the questions were re-worded.

As qualitative research suggests, the interviewer should be flexible with the interview guide allowing the interviewee to share their experience in an authentic way while balancing the desire to get at questions that were preset. The interview in this study began with a question about the woman's present situation. It asked her to share what her typical day looks like. This question put women at ease and allowed them to freely open up. It was an easy question for them to answer and was usually a quite lengthy answer as well. They felt free to share all the nuances and details of their day. Given the breadth of this question and what it evoked, many of the other questions in the guide were answered during her response to this particular question. The researcher was flexible throughout the interview allowing the women to tell her story in an order and fashion that was spontaneous. As the women shared their lives, the researcher would pay attention to whether women were answering other questions in the guide. The interview was not rigidly structured by asking question by question, rather it was more fluid and the pace was set by the interviewees. The overwhelming majority of women very freely shared details of their lives and needed virtually no probing. As they spoke it became

clear that they were the masters of their lives and felt competent and willing to share their personal histories.

### *Validity and reliability*

When evaluating research, validity and reliability are concepts that take into account “subjectivity, interpretation, and context” (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). Quantitative research methods have strict guidelines as to how to maximize validity (does the study measure what it claims to measure) and reliability (do you get the same response more than once). Qualitative research, on the other hand, grapples with these issues in a different way. Ultimately, both methods of research are attempting to maximize the legitimacy of a study by ensuring that methods and findings are interpreted in a way that is true and authentic to the participants. Just because validity and reliability are much more difficult and nebulous to test in qualitative research does not mean it is a less trustworthy method.

Qualitative research as a field has recognized the importance and value of subjectivity yet are aware of its potential misuse. To accomplish the goal of maximizing “justifiable” subjectivity, qualitative method demands a new way of thinking about validity and reliability. Auerbach and Silverstein developed “criteria for distinguishing between justifiable and unjustifiable ways of using subjectivity to interpret [qualitative] data” (p. 83). With the help of Rubin and Rubin (1995) Auerbach and Silverstein use three new criteria that insure justifiability of data and interpretation. They are: transparency, communicability, and coherence.

Transparency means that how you arrived at your interpretation should be evident to other people. Individuals do not have to agree with your interpretation but they must be able to trace how you went about arriving at your findings. Communicability is the ability to effectively communicate your findings to your audience in a way that makes sense and is clearly understood. Finally, coherence is making sure that you tell a lucid story and that themes and constructs appropriately weave the story in a logical way.

During the research process, each of these three issues played a role in reminding the researcher of the salience and importance of validity and reliability in this study. Each of these issues were formative when the researcher was developing and designing the study.

#### *Human Subjects Review/Institutional Review Board*

Prior to beginning the data collection process and in accordance to guidelines set forth by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services all research conducted with human beings must comply with federal standards that were established to protect the rights of subjects. In order to meet this requirement, the City University of New York Graduate Center developed an Institutional Review Board (hereafter, IRB) to review research designs for compliance with human subject regulations. Every study conducted at the University must be approved by IRB prior to beginning research. To be granted permission to engage in research each element of the design - that has to do with human subject participation - was thoroughly evaluated. That includes the interview guide along with all materials that were made available to the subjects (See appendix D – J: consent

form, flyers, recruitment script, resource listing, etc). Approval for this study was granted on July 31, 2003.

### *Sampling procedures*

The method of sampling employed in this study was “mixed purposeful sampling” (Patton, 1990). Purposeful sampling relies on a deliberate selection of individuals who have something to offer the phenomenon under investigation, in this case, single mothers who are never married and working-class. There were three additional sampling strategies used to elicit information rich cases: Homogenous sampling, criterion, and snowball sampling.

The first element of the sampling strategy was homogeneous sampling (as opposed to maximum variation sampling), which describes in-depth a subgroup of a population. There are many different subgroups of single mothers, however, this project examines a never married working-class subgroup for reasons aforementioned. A secondary sampling strategy is criterion based, meaning that each case interviewed met the pre-established criterion. As Patton (1990) states, “A more formal basic research version of criterion sampling is theory-based sampling. The researcher samples incidents, slices of life, time periods, or people on the basis of their potential manifestation or representation of important theoretical constructs” (p. 177). Each participant was selected based on the following criteria: (a) never married, (b) currently not residing with the father of the child(ren) or with a romantic partner, (c) working-class (for a complete definition of working class see below), (d) over the age of 21 at the time

of the birth of her first child, (e) has custody and/or is the primary caregiver of the child, and (f) must reside in New York City. The last sampling strategy utilized was snowball sampling. This technique relies on referrals from subjects that have been interviewed to provide names of individuals whom they know, or know of, that meet the selected criteria. Overall, 5 of the 28 interviews were elicited through the snowball technique.

Making strategic decisions and tradeoffs are part and parcel of sampling. This dissertation, like all research, has limitations as to whom and what is being studied. These limitations are discussed below.

#### *Rationale and limitation of sampling criteria*

Criteria were selected with a clear purpose in mind. This section will explain each criterion, along with the rationale and limitations of each.

##### *1. Never married*

This subgroup of the single mother population was selected for two reasons. The first is that the fastest growing segment of the single mother population is women who are never married (United States Census Bureau, June 2001). Second, the single mother who has experienced divorce, separation and widowhood is likely to have a different experience than women who never marry.

##### *2. Currently not residing with the father of the child(ren) or with a romantic partner*

This criterion was established to rule out single mothers who may be cohabiting with a partner and therefore more likely to receive additional support and assistance. One

limitation of this criterion is it excludes an increasing number of never married working-class single mothers who cohabitate. However, given the purposes of this particular study - to understand women's experiences as a single mother, parenting without a partner - a strategic decision was made to rule out cohabiting single mothers.

### 3. *Working-class*

In order to actually identify and study class as an analytic category an operational definition of working-class was developed<sup>26</sup>. There are numerous ways to define working-class and this researcher has developed a definition that is used for this study. The claim is not being made that this definition is the definition of working-class. This definition is one conceptualization of working-class used strictly for this study to draw out explanations of single mother's lives who fall in between other cohorts of single mothers who have been studied with the intention to understand if their income status affects their lived experience.

Drawing on 2000 Census data and other studies, this project defines working-class single mothers as those who earn an income above the federally established poverty guidelines (see Appendix K) but who do not exceed the third income quintile (see Appendix L). However, because the levels of poverty thresholds are very low and insufficient for measuring consumption needs, I have calculated a 50 percent increase in the poverty line as a more realistic measure to determine working-class status (see Appendix M).

Utilizing these standards, working-class women fall within the theoretical income range of \$17,910 to \$42,000. The number of children affects the level of income that

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<sup>26</sup> The researcher developed this definition of working-class with the assistance and expertise of Dr. William Kornblum, City University of New York Graduate Center and Jared Bernstein, Economic Policy Institute.

defines a single mother as working-class (for instance, if a single mother has one child or if she has several children it will affect her income level, see Appendix M for this breakdown). Furthermore, the median income for female householders (no husband present) is \$25,787, which falls within working-class status as defined in this study (see Appendix N).

Originally the criteria of class also incorporated education level. In order to help further distinguish class, it was thought that women who had education less than a bachelor's degree would be better suited for the definition of working-class. Once recruitment and interviews began, it was discovered that of the 28 interviews conducted 4 of the women had received their bachelor's degree. Upon hearing their stories, they were no different than their non-college degree counterparts. They worked in setting just like the other women and financially struggled all the same. Therefore, the women with the college degrees were interviews that were incorporated into the analysis.

4. *Over the age of 21 at the time of birth of her first child*

This study is not describing the lives of teenage single mothers, therefore, all women who gave birth to a child before they were 21 years of age will be excluded. Even though adulthood is legally defined as 18 years of age, the age of 21 years was selected because of the potential maturity that goes along with entering one's adult years. Because one of the major zones of inquiry is decision-making, the age of 21 seems to be a period in one's life where the freedom to make choices is greater than at age 18. Furthermore, the age of 21 in our culture is a demarcation of adulthood.

5. *Must have custody of child(ren) and/or be the primary caregiver*

In order to grasp the responsibilities of full-time motherhood, it is important and that all the women in the study have custody of their children - or are the primary caregiver - rather than a situation where the child is in foster care, wards of the state, or are being cared for by someone else.

6. *Must reside in New York City*

Due to financial constraints, this dissertation will examine only single mothers who reside in the New York City. A comparative study would be interesting and could perhaps shed light upon differences single mothers face given geographic differences. Yet that is not possible nor a stated purpose of this study. Census statistics reveal interesting geographic demographics in relation to single motherhood and its prevalence in New York State (See Appendix O).

In summary, each sampling criteria was selected with a particular rationale yet limitations exist as well. Since only never married working-class single mothers were interviewed, this study addresses only their lived experiences. It precludes all other segments of single mothers, making this a homogenous sample with no generalizability.

*Sample size*

When conducting qualitative research the issue of sample size is a vague and ambiguous matter. There is no formula for sample size with qualitative inquiry, but instead, “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (Patton,

1990, p. 185). There are two critical issues regarding sample size: (1) the trade-off between breadth versus depth and (2) redundancy. Patton explains the crucial decision that needs to be made between breadth and depth as a goal of the inquiry. With fixed resources and limited time, one must be selected at the expense of the other. Breadth is the study of specific experiences with a larger number of people while depth exposes a “more open range of experiences” for a smaller number of people. Given the purpose of this study, depth was the issue of predominant concern; information about the lived experiences of never married working-class single mothers and their sharing of intricate details required an in-depth exploration. Regarding the second methodological issue redundancy, Lincoln & Guba (1990) recommend that sampling size is determined when the information gathered begins to reveal redundancy. Overall, in qualitative inquiry the question of sample size is left open to the discretion of the researcher.

### *Sample recruitment*

The first stage of recruitment entailed contacting agencies in New York City that are known to serve single parents. In addition to agencies that were known to the researcher, telephone calls, emails and personal visits were made to daycare centers, unions, workplaces, schools, and organizations throughout the following boroughs of New York City: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx. Staten Island was excluded because it is a more difficult borough to navigate without a car.

The second stage of recruitment consisted of following up with each contact. Each organization/agency was mailed - or delivered in person - an information and

recruitment letter (See appendix E: Letter for Organizational Recruitment) which describes in detail the research process and procedures. Recruitment flyers (See appendix F) were also sent - or dropped off at the site - that advertised the study and provided potential respondents with the contact information of the researcher. All potential subjects were instructed to contact the principal investigator to insure voluntary participation. Once a potential respondent contacted the researcher, each woman was screened over the telephone to determine if she was eligible for participation (for additional details about this process, see data collection procedures below).

In total, 43 agencies were contacted. Thirty-three agencies responded positively agreeing to distribute or hang material for employees and/or clients.

Level of involvement and commitment within the different organizations varied greatly. Most of the organizations expressed interest in the study and agreed to publicize the study by hanging flyers at the minimum and would sometimes verbally announce the study at meetings. The level of involvement of agency personnel was seemingly confounded by work overloads, rather than disinterest or skepticism. One particular organization – a labor union – was the most helpful and recruited the largest number of participants (10 out of 18). When the researcher met with union officials, they were very interested in the study given their large number of members who are single mothers. The union leaders stated they could benefit from the project's findings and explore areas where they could improve upon meeting their employee's needs. In addition, the union leaders posted an advertisement in their local newspaper that was distributed to all union members. The ad gave a brief summary of the project and provided the contact

information of the principal investigator. The ad generated a lot of interest and many calls from potential participants.

### *Data collection procedures*

When a woman called, the researcher would explain the project and would screen as much as possible to insure she met the established criteria (See appendix H: Telephone Recruitment Screening Script). During the telephone screening process, the researcher informed potential respondents that the interview would be audio-taped, would last anywhere from 1 to 3 hours, and was confidential. All the participants agreed to the audiotape with no hesitation. The women were also informed that they would be compensated \$20.00 for the interview.

In total, 28 interviews were conducted, 18 of which were used for analysis. The remaining 10 interviews were conducted and transcribed. This allowed the researcher to review the interviews to determine if they were going to be used for analysis. Though the subjects appeared to meet the criteria during the telephone screening, throughout the course of the interview it became apparent the 10 subjects did not meet the eligibility criteria in a minimum of one category and often they did not meet several of the criteria. Two of the women had their children as teenagers; 2 were currently unemployed and receiving public assistance; 2 women were in committed relationships and residing with their partners; 3 women had children who resided with relatives in another state or country; and 1 woman refused to sign the consent form yet wanted to talk and share her life. As one can see, the situations of the 10 women deviated from the focus of this study

as expressed in the criteria. Though the women had interesting stories to tell, their deviation from criteria meant their stories could not be used. After the 10 interviews were completed, each woman received the \$20.00 compensation, but the 10 interviews were not used for analysis.

Of the 18 interviews, 7 were conducted in a private office at the City University of New York Graduate Center, 5 were at their place of work, 3 were at the researcher's private office at Long Island University, and finally, 3 were held at a coffee house requested and chosen by the participant. At the beginning of each interview the consent form was thoroughly reviewed with each participant (See appendix I). They were asked to read it and encouraged to ask any questions. A signed copy of the consent form was provided to each participant. The length of time to conduct the interview took anywhere from 1.5 to 3.5 hours. Each interview was conducted during one meeting; no interview required a second meeting. On 3 occasions, however, the researcher called participants post the interview for clarification as the notes and/or transcription was being processed. Upon completion of the interview, each participant was provided with an envelope that contained a thank you letter and a \$20.00 bill. They were also given a list of resources and agencies that provide services to single mothers (See appendix J: Resource List) and several copies of the recruitment flyer to share with individuals who may fit the criteria.

Lastly, immediately following the interview post interview reaction notes were recorded. This acted as a place for the interviewer to make notes of the interview process itself. The notes have offered a "flashback" of the conversation and many of the ideas have been incorporated into the chapters. The reaction notes typically included items such as, but not limited to: "time of day of interview, its emotional tone, any particular

difficulties, (methodological or personal) that were encountered, your own feelings during and about the experience, [and] insights and reflections” (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, p. 58).

*Sample description (n=18)*

All 18 of the participants were never married. The majority of women were Black (12), the remaining were of the following racial/ethnic groups: Latina (3), bi-racial (2), and white (1)<sup>27</sup>. The average age at the time of birth of their first child was 29 years with 25 years being the mode. The age range at time of birth of first child was from 20 to 43 years. The women in the sample had from 1 to 3 children with an average of 1.5 and a mode of 1. Twelve of the women had 1 child, two women had 2 children, and four women had 3 children. The children ranged in age from 18 months to 21 years.

More than three-quarters of the subjects has at least some college education. The lowest grade of completion for the women was high school and the highest level completed was a bachelor’s degree. More specifically, 1 participant received her GED, 3 were high school graduates, 7 had gone to college anywhere from 1.5 to 3 years, 3 had associates degrees, and 4 had bachelor’s degrees. All of the women were employed full-time. The participants came from a variety of workplaces. Sixteen of the eighteen work in the not-for-profit sector, primarily in human services, and the majority work for the

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<sup>27</sup> The ethnic categories used by the researcher are Black, Latina, bi-racial and white. The women, however, self-identified as nominally different than the categories used by the researcher. The women referred to themselves as follows: 11 self-identified as Black, 1 Haitian, 2 Puerto-Rican, 1 Hispanic, 2 bi-racial and 1 white. The researcher collapsed Black with Haitian, and additionally collapsed Puerto-Rican and Hispanic.

city of New York. Of the two remaining respondents one worked in real estate and the other is a medical clerk. The average annual income is \$30,000<sup>28</sup>. Twelve of the women had a history of public assistance, while 6 of them had never received welfare. The average time spent on welfare was two to three years. As far as living arrangements, 14 of the women reside with their children and no other adult, 2 reside with their child and the mother's biological parents, 1 lives with her children and her maternal grandmother, and 1 lives with her children and one young grandchild.

Most of the subjects came from families in which their parents had been married for some time. Of the 18 respondents, 7 had parents who are divorced, 6 had parents who are married but one or both have died, 4 had parents who are currently still married, and 1 set of parents is never married. Generally, respondents came from larger families with an average number of children being 3.5 and a range of 1 to 11 siblings.

#### Sample description and race

This study did not intend to look at any one particular racial/ethnic group. It was assumed by the researcher that just as women in New York City come from diverse ethnic groups, the sample would as well. Originally, the researcher had hoped the women would represent various ethnic groups, with no one group being disproportionately represented. In fact, the majority of self-selected women were Black (12 of 18). One potential explanation for this sample is that the major recruiter for

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<sup>28</sup> Recall that the theoretical income range for working-class women was set as \$17,910 - \$42,000. In reality, the empirical income range was \$15,000 - \$46,000. Although this range appears large, the majority of women had an income closer to the median of \$30,000. More specifically, the largest number of women made anywhere between \$24,000 and \$31,000. There was one woman who made \$15,000 and one who made \$46,000; everyone else made between \$18,000 and \$41,000.

respondents was a public labor union that advertised to women in the human service sector and a large portion of its membership are women of color.

Because of the small sample size and the racial sample demographics, generalizations cannot be made regarding race. The study's objective was not to study the dynamics of race explicitly, it was believed that class would be a variable that was highlighted. When the project was conceived and the guide developed, race was not a variable that was used as criteria or an issue that was going to be explored within this population. Due to the sample demographics, the researcher should have adapted the guide accordingly by dealing with race as an explicit issue with the respondents, meaning, the researcher should have explored how the women view their race and ethnicity and how that affects and impacts their lives as single mothers. In hindsight, the researcher would have been more acutely aware of the racial demographics and been flexible with the interview guide to add a new dimension to explore with the women.

Furthermore, the researcher is sensitive to the issue that race could have been further complicated by the fact that (a) the questions in the interview guide do not adequately deal with the impact of race, and (b) the race/ethnicity of the researcher (white) could have generated answers that did not address the issue. There are, however, some places where the relevance of race is illuminated. Those instances are described in subsequent chapters.

## Biographies of the subjects

### *Respondents who met the criteria.*

#### **Judy**

Judy has three children (7, 5 & 3). She was 20 years old when she had her first child. She is currently 27 years old. She lives with her mom, dad and three children in the Bronx. She is Puerto Rican and her highest level of education is high school. She works full-time, 35 hours per week, at a grassroots community organization and makes \$26,000.00 per year. She was on public assistance for approximately one year about 3 years ago. She has 7 siblings. She is the second to last.

#### **Martina**

Martina has one son (20 months). She was 31 years old when she had him; she is currently 33 years old. She lives with her son in Brooklyn. She is bi-racial and her highest level of education is a college degree. She works part-time, anywhere between 20-30 hours per week, as a Real Estate Broker. She makes \$40,000.00 per year. Her father also helps her out financially. Her parents are legally married but have been apart/separated for 15 years. She has one younger sister and has never been on public assistance.

#### **Betty**

Betty has three children (15, 13, 6). She was 25 when she had her first child; she is currently 40 years old. She lives with her children in the Bronx. She is Black and the highest level of education completed is 2 years at a Community College. She works at for the city of New York as the Executive Assistant. She works 35 hours per week and makes \$41,000.00 per year. Her parents were never married. Her mother was a single mother and raised them as such. She has three brothers, 2 older, 1 younger. She was one public assistance for a 3-month period about 14 years ago.

#### **Marcella**

Marcella has two daughters (8 & 7). She was 29 when she had her first daughter; she is currently 37 years old. She lives with her maternal grandmother (their great grandmother) and her two daughters in Manhattan. Her sister, along with her 12-year-old niece, are temporarily residing with them as well. She is Hispanic and she has completed two years of college credits. She works for the City of New York. She works 35 hours per week and makes \$22,964.00 per year. Her parents are divorced and she has 6 sisters and 2 brothers. She is the second oldest. She was on public assistance from May 1994 until November 1998.

#### **Kay**

Kay has one son (4). She was 26 when she had him; she is currently 30 years old. She lives alone with her son in Queens. She is Black and has completed 3 years of college. She works for the City of New York. She works 35 hours per week and makes \$28,000.00 per year. Her parents were married until her father died in 1994. She has 2 older sisters both of whom are married with children. She was on public assistance for several months while living in another state.

**Selma**

Selma has three children (13, 12, 9). She was 22 when she had her child; she is currently 35 years old. She lives with her three children in Queens. She is African-American and she is a junior at a local four year university. She works at the university as a lab technician and she works for the Board of Education as a substitute Teachers Aid. She works 20 hours per week in the University lab and works anywhere from 15-30 hours a week as a substitute aid. She makes \$18,000.00 per year. Her parents were married until her father died in 1991. She has 4 siblings, 2 sisters and 2 brothers; she is the second oldest. She received public assistance for one year in 1991.

**Carmen**

Carmen has one child (16). She was 22 when she had her daughter; she is currently 38 years old. She lives with her daughter. She is African-American. She works at for the city of New York and has been with them for 15 years. She works 35 hours per week and makes \$46,000.00 per year. Carmen is currently a junior at a local four-year university. Her parents have been married for 35 years. She has 2 half siblings. She has never received public assistance.

**Teri**

Teri has one child (7). She was 27 when she had her daughter; she is currently 34 years old. She lives with her parents and her daughter in Brooklyn. She is Black. She works at for the city of New York City. She has been employed by the city for 16 years and at her current location for 3 years. She works 35 hours per week and makes \$40,000.00 per year. Teri completed a bachelor's degree several years ago in communications. Her parents have been married for 47 years. She has 1 older brother and 1 older sister. She has never received public assistance.

**Ada**

Ada has one child (11). She was 32 when she had her son; she is currently 43 years old. She lives with her son in Manhattan. She is Puerto-Rican. She works for the city of New York. She has been employed by the city for 18.5 years and at her current location for that same duration. She works 35 hours per week and makes \$32,000.00 per year. Ada completed one and a half years of college. Her parents have been married for 47 years. She has 2 sisters and 2 brothers; she is the second youngest. She was on public assistance for a 3-month period of time 18 years ago.

**Beverly**

Beverly has two children (18 & 16). She was 25 when she had her first child; she is currently 43 years old. She lives with her children in Manhattan. She is African-American. She works for the city of New York. She works 40 hours per week and makes \$16,000.00 per year. Beverly received her Associates Degree several years ago. Her parents were married for 30 years but have since divorced. She has 1 younger sister and 1 younger brother. She was on public assistance 15 years ago.

**Randy**

Randy has one daughter (14). She was 25 when she had her; she is currently 39 years old. She lives with her daughter in Queens. She is African-American. She works for the city of New York and part-time in the service sector. She works 40 hours per week at her city job and works about 20 hours per week at in her second job. She makes \$27,000.00 per year combined. Randy completed 3 years of college at a local university but never completed her degree. Her parents divorced when she was 3 years old and her mother died in 1995. She has 2 older brothers and 1 younger half brother. She was on public assistance from 1992-1993.

**Wanda**

Wanda has one daughter (21). She was 40 when she had her; she is currently 61 years old. She lives alone in Brooklyn. Her daughter is away at school at a four year university studying pre-med. She is Haitian. She works for the city of New York. She works 35 hours per week working with children with disabilities. She has been with the city agency for 15 years. She makes \$24,000.00 per year. Wanda completed her bachelor's degree 2 years ago after starting school about 20 years ago. Her parents were married until her father died when she was 12 years old. She has 1 older brother and 1 younger sister, both of whom are in Haiti. She was on public assistance; she received WIC, when her daughter was an infant, about 20 years ago.

**Stacey**

Stacey has one son (10). She was 31 when she had him; she is currently 41 years old. She lives with her son in the Bronx. She is African-American. She works for the city of New York and has been there for 14 years. She works 35 hours per week and makes \$30,000.00 per year. The highest grade that Selena completed was the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Her parents divorced after 10 years of marriage. She has 1 older sister. She was on public assistance 16 years ago.

**Darlene**

Darlene has one daughter (15). She was 34 when she had her; she is currently 49 years old. She lives with her daughter in the Bronx. She is Black. She works for the city of New York. She has been with the city for over 5 years. She works 37 hours per week. She makes \$26,000.00 per year. Darlene completed high school and has attended a few trade schools over the years. Darlene is Baptist. Her parents were married until her father's death in 1989 and her mother's death in 1987. She has 5 sisters and 6 brothers, 8 of whom are still living. She received public assistance twice from 1990 – 1992 and then again from 1995 – 1998.

**Arlene**

Arlene has three daughters (23, 17 & 9). She was 21 when she had her first daughter; she is currently 44 years old. She lives with her three daughters and her 6-year-old grandson, the son of her 23-year-old daughter. They live in the Bronx. She is Black. She works for the city of New York as a clerical associate. She has been with the city since 1987. She works 35 hours per week. She makes \$28,000.00 per year. Arlene received her GED and has completed 30 credits from a local college. Her mother was a single mother

and she has 5 sisters and 2 brothers. Arlene is currently receiving food stamps along with a rent subsidy. She was received public assistance right after the birth of her first daughter and then again for 3 years after the birth of her second daughter.

### **Tricia**

Tricia has one daughter (13). She was 25 when she had her; she is currently 38 years old. She lives with her daughter in the Bronx. She is African-American. She works for a Medical Center in New York City as a clerical worker. She has been employed there for over 3 years. She works 40 hours per week and makes \$25,000.00 per year. Tricia received her Associates degree from a local community college. Her parents were divorced and her mother raised her. She has 2 older sisters and 1 older brother. Tricia was on public assistance for 9 years after the birth of her daughter. She currently receives a housing subsidy.

### **Kristine**

Kristine has one son (18). She was 41 when she had him; she is currently 59 years old. She lives with her son in Brooklyn. She is White. She works for the city of New York. She has been employed there since 1966. She works 40 hours per week and roughly makes \$41,000.00 per year. Kristine received a Bachelors degree from a local college prior to her son's birth. Her parents were divorced and her mother raised her; she has 1 sister. Kristine has never been on public assistance.

### **Lorraine**

Lorraine has one son (7). She was 43 when she had him; she is currently 50 years old. She lives with her son in Brooklyn. She is bi-racial. She is currently in school full-time, studying to be a midwife. She completed her RN several years ago. She makes \$25,000.00 per year. Her parents were married for about 50 years prior to her mother's death in 1995. She has 1 younger brother. Lorraine currently receives food stamps, Medicaid and a housing subsidy but has never been on TANF.

*Respondents who did not meet the criteria, as explained above.*

### **Sarah**

Sarah has one daughter (1). She was 17 years old when she had her; she is currently 18 years old. She lives with her mom (a single mother as well) and her daughter in Manhattan. She is Dominican and she is currently taking GED classes. She works full-time, 40 hours per week, at a Collections Company in their legal department. She makes \$15,000.00 per year. Her parents were divorced when she was seven years old. She has 3 brothers and 2 sisters all of whom are older. She has never been on public assistance.

### **Olivia**

Olivia has one daughter (2.5 years old). She was 30 years old when she had her; she is currently 32 years old. She lives with her daughter and her 13-year-old brother in Manhattan. She is Puerto Rican and the highest level of education completed is 9<sup>th</sup> grade. She is currently on disability, but was previously working in the fast food industry. She currently helps to care for her elderly maternal grandfather who lives close by. Her

mother died in November 2002 and her father died in 1997, both of drug overdoses. Since then she has taken custody of her 13-year-old brother. She has 5 brothers, all younger.

**Dolores**

Dolores has two boys (4 and 18 months). She was 30 when she had her first son; she is currently 34 years old. She lives with her two sons and their father in Brooklyn. She is African-American and she attended college for two years post high school. She works for the Department of Education. She works 35 hours per week and makes \$28,000.00 per year. Her parents have been married for 37 years and she has 1 older sister and 1 older brother, who are twins. She has never been on public assistance. She learned about the research through her son's daycare.

**Gloria**

Gloria has one daughter (21). She was 21 when she had her daughter; she is currently 42 years old. She lives with her daughter and her 3-year-old grandson in Manhattan. She is Hispanic and the highest level of education she completed was high school. She works as a secretary. She works 10 hours per week and makes approximately \$10,000.00 per year. Her parents are legally married but they have been separated for 25 years. She has 4 older siblings, 3 sisters and 1 brother. She was one public assistance for a short duration in the 1970s when her daughter was an infant.

**Tanya**

Tanya has one son (3). She was 17 when she had her son; she is currently 20 years old. She lives with her son and her mother in Manhattan. She is Hispanic and she is currently enrolled at a local community college; she is in her second year. She works at a management company and does clerical work. She works 37.5 hours per week and makes \$13,000.00 per year. Her parents were not legally married but were in a relationship until the time her father died, when Tanya was a toddler. She is an only child of her parents but has three stepsiblings from her father's previous relationship. She has never been on public assistance.

**Brenda**

Brenda has two children (17 & 11). She was 30 when she had her first daughter; she is currently 47 years old. She lives with her two daughters. She is African-American and she is currently enrolled in a local community college. She works at for the Department of Education. She works 30 hours per week and makes \$20,000.00 per year. Her parents were married until her father died in 1998. She has 3 brothers, 2 younger and 1 older. She received public assistance for a short duration approximately 6 years ago.

**Iris**

Iris has one daughter (16). She was in her twenties when she had her; she is currently in her mid-forties. She lives with her daughter. She is Native American. She works for the city of New York where she does clerical work. She has been there for over 20 years. She works 35 hours per week and makes under \$30,000.00 per year. The highest grade

that Iris completed was the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and has taken some courses at a local community college. She had 5 siblings.

**Marissa**

Marissa has one son (4). She was 34 when she had him; she is currently 38 years old. She lives with her mother and father in Brooklyn. Her son lived with her and her parents for the first 2 years of his life. Then Marissa made the decision to send her son to her native county to live with her sister so she could complete her college education. She is Black. She works for the city of New York. She works 35 hours per week as a clerical assistant. She has been with the city for 4 years. She makes \$24,000.00 per year. Her parents have been married for 50 years. She has 11 siblings, several of whom are in her native country and the rest are scattered throughout the United States. She has never been on public assistance.

**Yolanda**

Yolanda has one son (16). She was 32 when she had him; she is currently 48 years old. She lives alone in Brooklyn. Her son lived with her until August 2001 at which time she sent him to live with her niece in the south. Yolanda felt that raising a son in New York City was not good for him and she could not move because of her job. Her niece has three children and could use his assistance, so Yolanda sent him down south. She is Black. She works for the city of New York and has been there for 20 years. She works 35 hours per week. She makes \$28,000.00 per year. Her parents were married until her father's death in 1994 and her mother later died in 1998. She has 1 older and 1 younger sister. She received public assistance for 5 months 15 years ago.

**Annette**

Annette has one son (5). She was 32 when she had him; she is currently 37 years old. She lives alone in Queens. After Annette had her son he lived with her in New York for 1 year. After that year, she sent her son to her native country to live with his maternal grandparents so that she could attend school and work. She immigrated from her native country in 1996. She is Black. She works as a live-in nanny and housekeeper for a family in New Jersey. She commutes out to New Jersey and stays from Thursday through Sunday. When she is not in New Jersey, she resides in Queens and attends school full-time at a local community college. She is working on her Associates degree. She has worked for this family for 4 years, which is when she sent her son to live with his grandparents. She makes roughly \$17,000.00 per year. Her parents have been married for over 30 years. She has 4 sisters, and Annette is the second to last. She received public assistance for 6 months after her son was born.

## **Data analysis**

Unlike quantitative methods, there are no steadfast rules about data analysis when using qualitative methods (Miles & Huberman, 1984). However, that does not negate the need for guidelines to ultimately insure that the researcher does their “very best with [their] full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study” (Patton, 1990, p. 372). The process of data analysis is to organize data in a way that tells the story and elucidates and organizes what the interviewees shared. It is the process that enables one to present to others what they have discovered (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). As many qualitative researchers have argued, the timing of data analysis is not rigid; data collection and data analysis typically happen simultaneously. As the researcher is gathering the data, ideally, they begin thinking about what they are hearing, what they are noticing. During the data collection stage, this researcher carefully recorded analytic insights into her post interview notes.

As the data collection began, and throughout the entire process, the first task was to find ways to describe what was being said. Description is distinct from interpretation in that description is merely the act of sketching what has already been said while leaving out any further work. Whereas, interpretation moves to answer or interpret the why questions (Patton, 1990). Geertz (1973) and Denzin (1989) refer to the first step as developing “thick description.” Post data description, content analysis began, more typically known as “coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Content analysis is the act of “identifying, coding, and categorizing patterns in the data” (Patton, p. 381). Coding is finding topics in the data, labeling data with the purpose of locating patterns and themes.

Coding is by its very nature inductive research because it comes directly from the data itself, identifying “indigenous concepts” and “sensitizing concepts.” (Patton, 1990).

This dissertation relied heavily upon the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) during the analysis phase of the research. According to Strauss & Corbin, coding has several elements and stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Each of these phases builds upon the previous with the ultimate goal being the production of grounded theory. Analyzing data, however, does not typically happen in a linear fashion, rather, the researcher moves more fluidly from one phase of coding to another and back again.

All of the material for this study was hand coded and analyzed. During the initial phase of data collection, the researcher imported the transcripts into the qualitative software program NVIVO. After dabbling with the program, it became apparent that given the relatively small sample size it was more useful, suitable and efficient to analyze the data by hand. This method also allowed the researcher to be closer to her material and fostered a “getting to know” feeling with the transcript in its entirety.

### *Open coding procedures*

Open coding is the beginning phase of data analysis; it is the first brush over of the data. It entailed reading and rereading the transcripts line by line. Open coding the data is when the researcher conceptualizes the data that emanates from the raw text. The process of open coding in this study was conducted by a sentence and/or paragraph analysis style. When appropriate, a line by line analysis was incorporated. Once the

interviews were transcribed the researcher milled through each transcription many times in order to get a feel for the material and then began to break down the concepts by thinking about and writing labels for the phenomena and ideas that the women were sharing. Code notes were written in the margins of the transcriptions themselves. Once all the transcriptions were read and labeled, the process of grouping like labels with like labels was the next step. This process was referred to as “categorizing.” Categories were named to give that cluster of labels some meaning. This procedure of open coding was very labor intensive and arduous. What initially appeared to be a theme or category shifted and changed over time.

In addition to code notes, the researcher kept a word document entitled, “dissertation journal” where all thoughts, reactions, and possibilities were recorded after she completed the labeling process for each transcription. Any time an idea was generated it was recorded in the journal. The researcher would refer back to the journal continuously.

### *Axial coding procedures*

Open coding essentially means taking the data apart, whereas, axial coding entails putting the data back together “in new ways by making connections between a category and its sub-categories...it is putting them back together in a relational form” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 97). During axial coding, the researcher tended to write on separate paper all of the labels she had generated that might be related. The lists tended to be relatively long and in no particular order. As she looked through the list of labels, she began to

notice and cluster certain labels that were related in some way, giving the cluster of labels a categorical name while also developing sub-categories. This phase encompassed a trial and error method. There were many occasions whereby labels seemed, upon first site, to be connected or related and then later it was discovered it related more directly to another category.

### *Selective coding procedures*

Selective coding is a procedure, not unlike axial coding, that integrates the concepts on a more highly abstract level. It required the researcher to develop and “explicate a story line” with a core category that specified the core idea of the research. Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) refer to this third phase of coding analysis as “developing theory.” They specify that this is the stage where we organize themes into abstract concepts called, “theoretical constructs” and it is from these theoretical constructs that we develop our “theoretical narrative,” or what Strauss & Corbin refer to as the “story line.”

### Recording and storing data

Participation in this study was completely confidential. The audiotape, all handwritten materials, and the transcriptions were assigned a pseudonym, along with an ID number. Only codes, and/or pseudonyms, have been used during the analysis phase of the research. This further protects the participants’ confidentiality because the findings are not directly connected to any one respondent. The code key and pseudonym are kept in a separate locked file cabinet (in the home of the PI) from the data itself; only the PI has access. No other individuals, except the Principal Investigator’s advisor had access

to the information, ensuring confidentiality. Each participant was fully informed of the way her confidentiality will be secured. The researcher herself conducted every interview and completed a verbatim transcription all of the tapes, with the exception of two interviews. Two individuals were paid to transcribe one interview each. To ensure confidentiality, no name was used on the audiotape, only a number, therefore the transcriber did not know the identity of the respondent. The transcriptions for the 18 subjects totaled 187 single spaced pages. Given that transcriptions were being completed immediately following an interview, data collection and the beginning phases of data analysis were happening simultaneously.

## CHAPTER IV

### “Pathways to single motherhood”<sup>29</sup>: Influences on choice

This chapter teases apart the complicated process the women shared as they navigated their way through the decision-making process of becoming single mothers. It takes the reader into the lives of single mothers by describing how the women got pregnant, the various forces that surround their decisions, which include a variety of influences, along with the reactions of their family and friends. Lastly, the women share their thoughts about what type of family they envisioned while they were growing up, which aids us in further understanding how deeply rooted values and ideas are in helping shape family constellations.

#### **Influences on choice: Biological aspect**

Biology, how one becomes pregnant, is only one aspect of becoming a single mother. Women’s life circumstances meant that they came to their pregnancies in a variety of ways. When women shared how they became pregnant, two groups emerged: (1) those who got pregnant by accident and (2) those who planned their pregnancy. On appearance, one would think that the group that planned their pregnancy would have an “easier” decision. But we learned that was not necessarily the case.

Of the two groups, accidental pregnancy and planned pregnancy, fewer women fell into the former group. Approximately one-third of the women were surprised by

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<sup>29</sup> This phrase “pathways to single motherhood” was coined by Judith Siegel (1995) in an article she wrote that compared the perceptions of premotherhood preparation of women who achieved pregnancy through different means (through sexual intercourse, adoption, or donor insemination).

their pregnancy. Among this group, some women talked about the relationship as being casual and the pregnancy an unanticipated accident.

Arlene: It wasn't planned. I knew at the time it wasn't an ongoing relationship with her father... When you don't use birth control that's what happens.

Selma: No, the pregnancy wasn't planned. With [my daughter's] father we had only been going out for six months. I got pregnant and I was scared at first...He [my third child] was also a surprise. I guess I was invincible. I started messing around with [Gary] and the next thing I know I'm pregnant.

Other women were in a different situation. They were in a committed relationship with the father and then got pregnant. Their pregnancy seemed more like an "accident on purpose"<sup>30</sup> that occurred in the context of a relationship.

Kristine: I met [my son's] father by chance. I had a relationship with him. I hadn't planned on being pregnant, it just kind of happened.

Stacey: I had him out-of-wedlock; I wasn't married. that was not our intention. Our intentions were to get married, but it didn't work out that way and that hurt me a lot.

Judy, along with Ada, were in relationships, and had actively tried to pursue getting pregnant but were initially unsuccessful. For a decade Judy was unable to conceive so she was under the impression that she was not going to have a child and gave up trying. When Judy did get pregnant, she was surprised.

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<sup>30</sup> Davies and Rains (1995) used this term for single women in their study that did not set out to get pregnant intentionally but "relied halfheartedly on the rhythm method."

Judy: I was surprised and the reason I was surprised was because [my son's] dad and I were trying to have kids for 10 years. We couldn't have them for some reason. We thought we couldn't have any kids...I was shocked, ecstatic, scared, nervous, exhilarating.

Darlene had a similar story,

Darlene: I was living with her father...I didn't think I could have children. I had been living with that assumption for 14 years. When I was 20 I had an abortion, I am pro-choice, but I wouldn't recommend that to anyone. After the abortion I ran a fever and almost died. Years later doctors told me that all of one tube and half of the other were blocked. I was living with the assumption until I got pregnant. I went to the doctor to pay to have a pregnancy test and I had no choice but to believe it. I was 2.5 or 3 months pregnant.

Among the group who planned their pregnancy, two subgroups emerged: those who went ahead with their pregnancy thinking the relationship with the father would work, and those who got pregnant with no hope or expectation of the relationship working out. Some women were in relationships and were trying to make it work with their partners. They planned on getting pregnant with the assumption or expectation they could be with the father.

Selma: He [my second child] was actually planned. [Steve] and I were really trying to work on our relationship, we thought about staying with each other and getting married but it didn't turn out that way.

Ada: In each of these situations [her pregnancies] I was misled to believe that it's okay, go ahead have the baby, we'll work things out, things will come around [meaning with the father].

The second subgroup were women who had no hopes for coupledness. To be single and a mother was an explicit decision made beforehand. The two subgroups were almost

equally dispersed - with a few additional women falling into the “explicit decision beforehand” category.

Martina: Well, I think that at that time in my life, I was a little bit more open to him coming in, because I wanted to have a child and ultimately that’s what he was there for, was to provide my son...I always knew I was going to end up a single parent. I didn’t know how this was going to happen or what the circumstances of that were ultimately going to be.

Darlene: At one point, I could have married her father if I wanted to be married. But I didn’t want to be married just to be married, I wanted the commitment...I could say I did choose [to be a single mother].

### **Cascade of influences**

How did the women decide to proceed with their pregnancies? The women, with the exception of one, got pregnant through intercourse and were left with a decision about how to proceed. How did they make the decision, in what contexts, and what were the variables that contributed to and influenced the process? In order to fully understand the complexity of the decision-making process it is useful to think of stages of decisions. We just explored the first stage where the biological route to pregnancy influenced how the women felt about having a child. It is equally important to explore other variables that helped her make her decision to become a single mother as well as variables and factors that help shape how she feels about her status. Below, you will read about the five major factors that evolved from the interviews. Moving from a micro to a macro level, the five categories are as follows: personal, demographic, relational, practical, and ideological. Each of these categories presents a different issue that influenced the women and their decision.

*Personal influence: Desire to be a mother/desire to nurture*

Some women spoke about their desire to nurture which had been with them since they were young girls. In addition, Beverly's experience as a nanny enhanced what she describes as her mothering instinct. These experiences had a strong impact of some women's decision to have the child.

Beverly: I love dolls; I love playing mommy when I was little. I love children. I used to always baby-sit. I was a nanny for many many years before my children. I was the black girl pushing the little white baby up the block. I even kept a lot of photos of little blonde kids. So when they gave me my baby, I just knew what to do.

Judy: I guess I had always been responsible. A lot of my friends always said I was the mother type. Even in high school I tended to mother even my friends...I have always known what it takes to be a parent.

For others, it was more like a "calling" where they felt compelled to have a child, almost like a foreshadowing.

Carmen: It was just something I wanted to do. I wanted a child. I don't know why I felt I was ready for a child. I don't know what told me I should do it at that age, but for some reason, I just wanted a child...I was very determined.

Cultural pressure to be a mother and have a child was a motivating factor for some women. Being a mother was something that was internalized and expected of you and went unchallenged.

Wanda: For my culture [Haitian], it's always good to have a child. Well, he [the father of the child] was very upset about that; he wanted me to have an abortion...I stayed and said, "I would have the child whether you want it or not. I will have it." And from then on I never heard from him and I never tried to look for him...He didn't want the baby so from there I never tried to find him...I wanted children, but when I see 39 years old and when I had a child and no husband in the picture, I said to myself I have to respect myself. It will be me and my daughter and that's it...again, for my people, it is a blessing to have a child.

*Demographic influence: Age/getting older*

Age was a big influence for most of the women. This topic comes up in several different places throughout this study. The mean age at the time of birth of their first child was 29 years old. Many of the women spoke about "getting older" and this being their "last chance" for childbirth. The women below share their personal perceptions of their age. They watched their biological clocks tick and felt it was now or never.

Lorraine: When I hit forty, I said to myself, if I hit 40 and I hadn't had a baby by then I was going to seriously pursue having a baby. It hadn't happened, a relationship and a baby by 40, so I hit 40 and saw myself single and kind of in a relationship with someone in another state and said to him this is what I want, I want to have a baby now and he wished me good luck.

Wanda: I was 39 years old...I said to myself, this is the last chance I have to have a child...I wanted children.

Teri: I was 27 and to me I felt like I was getting older. I didn't want to wait until I was 30 to have my first, so I was like I am going to keep this one. I knew right away.

Judy: I thought here I am now, I was in my thirties, and I thought I would never have children. I was 32 when I had him.

Martina: At about age 28 or 29 I knew I wanted to have a child. I have a peace with single motherhood...

It became apparent that age is a relative concept. Compound age with the fact that other women and friends in their cohort had already had children made some women feel older. Several of them were the last of their cohort to have children and this was another influence that exacerbated feeling like the clock was ticking.

Teri: All my friends already had children, they were teenage parents and here I am 27 years old, that is kind of late. That was late for me compared to my friends.

Betty: I was twenty-five when I had [my daughter] my friends had already had their kids...I was twenty-five and it's like I thought you would not have kids...I was always so busy working and everything...and the fact that I was twenty-five [years old] people thought I had decided that you didn't want to have kids.

*Relational influence: Hopes for coupledom*

The wish to be partnered had a strong influence on the women when it came time to decision-making. These women expressed hope that the relationship with their child's father would progress and solidify and her hope for coupledom prompted her to move forward with her pregnancy. In some of these cases, the women say that they were under the impression that the couple relationship would come to fruition. She was making the decision to have the child with the expectation they would be a couple. In the end, however, each of the relationships did not work and she was left to solo parent.

Beverly: I wanted the dads. I was in love with the dads, not love crazy, but I thought they were big, strong, healthy men, nice. I wanted it [a relationship with the father that would mean they were a family].

Ada: ...I had the dream that I would get married and live happily ever after and that I would only have one love of my life. In each of these situations, I was misled to believe that it's okay, go ahead have the baby, we'll work things out, things will come around [meaning with the fathers].

Kay: I didn't choose [to be a single mother]. I was trying to be with his father.

Tricia: No. I never thought that I would [be a single mother]. He was there during the birth. He stayed through the pregnancy.

The desire for a traditional, two-parent family was evident for some women; they expressed their yearning for a nuclear family. In some cases, the hope for coupledness was more than just her desire for the relationship, but it was also a desire that her own parent expressed and expected. For Stacey, the pressure to achieve a nuclear family was compounded by the fact that her own father was pressuring her to get married.

Stacey: I had him out-of-wedlock; I wasn't married... What happened when it came time to commit to marriage, I broke it up, because I thought why would he not want to marry me. My father thought I should just take it but I couldn't. He [my father] has asked if I regret not following his advice and I say no.

#### Fled unhealthy relationships

Some women were initially in relationships with partners but because of their partners unacceptable behaviors they chose to leave the relationship. They felt obligated and responsible to protect both themselves and their children.

Marcella: I think if I had been a weaker woman, I would have stayed in a drug-infested place just to be with him, not to be with myself... So I think

it was a big step to choose to leave him, but like I said, my kids come first. As much as I loved him, I love them more.

Betty: I chose to raise them by myself rather than be with somebody fighting and arguing everyday...because you can't concentrate on other things, I don't think in that environment. I need them [her children] to grab the tools they need to go out and function to contribute to society on their own.

Staying in an unhealthy relationship was not an option for Selma. Below she shares that being in an abusive relationship was no longer a viable option for her. It was enough to give her the courage to leave the relationship.

Selma: I refuse to stay in relationships that were abusive, I don't mean physically, but I mean I wasn't going to settle for him doing whatever he wanted to do and me settling for it. I wasn't going to put up with the other women, the disrespect daily, no, because why should I? I looked at it like, his life is not more important than mine, if he's happy, why shouldn't I be. That's why I refused to stay in relationships because if he didn't care about me and he was in the relationship to just go through changes or the motions, why be there. To me there was no real commitment or love, we never had that. There was total disrespect. I was better off by myself.

#### External support and advice

Words of encouragement and advice from partners, family, and/or friends were crucial in helping women make a decision about her pregnancy. In some cases, physicians were influential individuals and played a role in helping her decide how to proceed.

Kay: He [the MD] just put it out there. He said you're going to make your own decision. It helped. Other people too on the job [helped me decide]. One girl said I'll help you. We actually got pregnant at the same time, we didn't plan that, and we worked together on the job. She said her mom could help me if I don't have any help.

Tricia: I had reservations about it. A doctor told me, I was hesitant, and she told me, "Girl go ahead and have your baby." The fact that she said "Your baby" something about that clicked in my head and it made me want to have her as opposed to something else [abortion or adoption]. It was that that helped me make the decision.

For other women, family members had strong opinions about what direction the woman should take and how to proceed when making decisions about her family situation.

Beverly: ...When I told my mother that the relationship wasn't working out right, my family was supportive. I told my mom I could get an abortion, it's not working out right and my mother said, "NO, DON'T YOU DARE." That was the support.

For others, the support they received from the father of the child had a strong influence on the decision to have a child.

Stacey: ... We both sat down and spoke about it and asked each other if this was something we both wanted and agreed upon it, he was very supportive. But I also had questions. I didn't want to just be a statistic.

For Carmen the external support she received came from having strong female role models in her life, which allowed her to think about actively pursuing single motherhood.

Carmen: I had very strong women in my life and I always had this idealistic idea that you don't need a man to raise a child.

*Practical influence: Self-sufficiency*

Having the practical and material resources in order justified and legitimated the decision to become a single mother for many women. Being self-sufficient, having finances in order, and an apartment was a strong indicator that she was ready to become a mother. Many women felt it was the right time in her life and felt she deserved and “earned the right” to have a child alone.

Beverly: I was ready [to be a single mother]. It was really fascinating...I had my own apartment, so I didn't have to bring my kids into my mom's house, like a lot of moms have to bring their kids into their mom's house. I had my own place for five years in Chelsea it was an antique apartment. When I came home it was like WOW! It was okay. If I had to do it all over again, I would. And I had full control. I felt positive about it.

Carmen: I was working for the city...at the time, so I was earning my money. It wasn't like I was financially strapped or making an extra burden or anything along those lines.

Selma: I was 27 years old and just got my second apartment by myself. I had gotten everything together the way that I thought it should be.

This concept of self-sufficiency played a powerful role in the lives of these women. It was a driving factor for some when it came time to decide about having a baby and the quest for self-sufficiency continues to play a strong role in their lives. It became readily apparent when the women talked about social supports. Being self-sufficient and not relying on others offers her a sense of competence and success as a single mother.

*Ideological influences: Feelings about abortion*

How a woman feels about abortion helped her make the decision about whether or not she is going to have the child. For a woman who holds a pro-life view, it is apparent that abortion was not an option. Furthermore, just because a woman believes in the right to choose does not mean that she feels comfortable exercising that option in her own life. Of the women who are pro-choice, some stated they themselves would not have an abortion, while for others they had negative experiences with a previous abortion and would not, therefore, exercise that option again.

Beverly: I didn't want to blow a chance. I just said God, this might just be the only chance since I had D & Cs, two previous in earlier years and I always had a best friend who had a D & C and to this day she can never have kids. Sometimes it messes you up and I didn't want to get messed up.

Darlene: Oh I knew [I was going to keep my daughter]. Like I said, after I had that first abortion I knew I wasn't ever going to have another one. I am pro-choice, but for me, I wouldn't have it. It never crossed my mind to have an abortion....I wouldn't recommend that to anyone. After the abortion I ran a fever and I almost died.

Other women expressed they were pro-choice, believed in a woman's right to choose, but would not exercise that option in her own life.

Judy: I'm not against abortion but for me it wasn't an option.

Lastly, several women had pro-life feelings and shared they do not believe in abortion, felt compelled, or obligated to have the child.

Marcella: I don't believe in abortion. I wouldn't have went that route. I wasn't going to go there.

Selma: I don't personally believe in abortion so I didn't consider that. I am afraid to do that [abortion], infections, I am just afraid. So I said if I can't prevent a problem, then I'll just deal with it

Betty: I don't know what this is in me but I can't destroy it. I don't know what it could be, you know. I thought about it, but I said no I can't do that....I don't want to abort this child because I do not know what this child's contribution is supposed to be but the fact that I am pregnant is supposed to mean something.

#### Desire to be an independent mother

Several women expressed, but not as clearly as Carmen, they felt strongly they could raise a child independently and succeed. As Carmen shared earlier, she consciously challenged the prevailing notion you need a man to raise a child or that the best family form is a two-parent family.

Carmen: I am not the typical single parent person. Most people say it was an accident or whatever. I wanted my daughter. I planned to have my daughter. I sat down and told my mother that I wanted to be a single mom....That was truly me and I felt that I could do this on my own. I didn't need any help. And I have to admit, I have really lived up to what I said I was going to do...It was a conscious choice to have her.

#### **The reaction of family and friends**

The reaction of family and friends influenced women in both their decision to have their child and had impacts on how the women felt about their decisions. Many of the women

indicated their disappointment or frustration when loved ones were not supportive about their pregnancy, just as women indicated they felt comforted when others were encouraging. Overall, family and friends of the women were supportive of the fact that they were pregnant. Family and friends had different reactions. It was more typical for friends to be supportive and for family to express caution or hesitation.

### *Supportive reaction*

Some women were fortunate to have unconditional support of friends and family. It made them feel more comfortable with their decision. It also offered reassurance that they could do it.

Marcella: Everybody was very, very happy, because I think they lived vicariously through my pregnancy....Both pregnancies were very good in that aspect, where everybody was very happy for me.

Carmen: My mother was very supportive. My father was too. My father's biggest problem was my choice of man. My father did not like my daughter's father...My father just did not like him at all. That's what he was mostly against. But me having a child didn't bother him at all....My friends were very happy. My best friend, my daughter's godmother, was ecstatic....All my friends were very supportive. I didn't have anyone that was negative towards me or anything.

Beverly: Well, when I told my mother and I was like well me and the father are on shaky ground I was told from her and my great grandmother, "Look, we're here for you. The kids not going to starve. Just go for it." They were very supportive. My sister was very supportive...So my mother was ecstatic.

For Kristine the fact that her mother and sister supported her pregnancy was a great relief. Kristine was 41 years of age at the time of birth of her son and the father was a romantic fling that did not last long nor was ever serious. Kristine is a white woman and her

partner is a black man. This issue of race complicated the pregnancy for Kristine's family, so their support was very meaningful to her, given her situation.

Kristine: My mother was very courageous....My mother supported me and my decision. My sister also supported me at that time.

### *The normative single mother family*

Slightly different than the supportive response, some reactions were barely reactions because single motherhood is a normative experience and did not warrant any unusual response. The reaction of family and friends was affected by the person's own history of what she had experienced within her own family. Many of the respondents came from single mother headed households, therefore, making it a normative experience.

Selma: With us they don't really care about babies or people having babies. My mom was a teenage mom, she had her first child when she was 17, I was actually 22 when I had my first child. I was already in another category, outside of my mother.

Darlene: Having a baby is nothing to them [my family], everybody was doing it. I wasn't at home so they weren't really supportive. In my family, you couldn't say that, we're not supportive people.

Tricia: They treated me the same. I didn't notice any difference. My mom was a single mom; she was married, but separated. But she basically raised us alone, so she knew. I guess she didn't think it would take this long for me to find my family unit. It's taken me a little longer than expected, but that's okay.

Judy: I don't think my friends and family had negative opinions about me because a lot of my friends and family are single parents.

### *Mixed reaction*

For some women the reaction from their loved ones was mixed. Some family members or friends expressed happiness while others expressed disappointment. It was easier for the women to hear and accept positive support; it was difficult and challenging when people were less than supportive.

Kay: My friends were happy. My family was not. They said you're not married. They said it's not easy being a parent even married. They weren't happy but they helped, they supported me but they weren't too keen.

Ada: My parents didn't believe in being a mother without marriage and I was the only one in my household who didn't go that route....My brothers and sisters were really happy for me. It was the older folks, my aunt who partly raised me, she was a little disappointed to me. That hurt me, she's like a mom to me. As time went by, everyone accepted it and things got better.

### **Visions of the idealized family**

All of the women shared their preconceived ideas about family life and their own personal desires of what type of family they longed for. These visions of family were rooted in childhood fantasies. Some of the women had ideals that were radically different than their actual lives. There women dreamt of the traditional family model of husband, wife and kids. They shared the strong influence this image had on the development of their own desires for family. I refer to this group as the *fantasy ideal*.

These women were left to reconcile their fantasies with their real life situation. Compare this to the second group who early on rejected normative depictions of family and were more critical of monolithic definitions of family. I refer to this group as *critique of an ideal*.

### *Fantasy ideal*

The fantasy ideal is when the women spoke about having a desire for the nuclear family modeled upon a “social ideal” influenced and shaped by a variety of forces. Within this category, three subcategories emerged: a belief in the nuclear family, a desire to replicate family of orientation, and aspirations to have both a family and a career.

### Belief in the nuclear family

Several women revealed that their desire for a nuclear family and their expectations of what family life is supposed to be was rooted in a fantasy projected through culture. A common theme is the supportive and loving partner.

Selma: We had different shows that we watched and liked. My fantasy was based on what you saw on TV, like the white dress and big church wedding. Your husband was nice and sweet and charming and your family was loving and supportive. I got a lot of that from the Brady Bunch.

Beverly: Yeah, I just wanted a man who would like respect me and care about me and love me a whole lot and treasure me and I wanted lots and

lots of kids and animals. At the time I like wanted 10 [kids]. My dream didn't complete.

Arlene: I always wanted to have 4 kids. I always wanted 4 kids and a husband and a dog.

Tricia shares that she was naïve in her vision about family life. Her family protected her from the harsh realities of growing up.

Tricia: Because of my childhood, I grew up very sheltered and protected so I had a fantasy way of thinking back then so I always thought I was going to have a house, a car, all this great stuff. I didn't realize I needed money, a good job, an education all these things to get that. I didn't know that.

Wants to replicate family of orientation

For other women, their own families of origin were models to replicate. They wanted for their and their children's life to have structure and stability much like that which they had growing up.

Kay: I always wanted to be what I saw growing up. I was raised with morals and values, going to church, a Baptist church. I always wanted to meet someone like my dad. He was always a provider. I did envision something like what my mom and dad had. I envisioned that type of stability, like a man that would take care of the family... .Someone who would come home and just help out like with kids, go to church. Just be there. Vacations together. Like holidays. That's how it was in my family. We were always together during holidays it was a big thing.

Teri: My mother had five kids, I wanted five kids...I wanted the same thing, a working husband, kids, I wanted the same things. But it didn't turn out that way.

Wanda: My grandfather had many children. I felt I was supposed to have many children for myself.

Aspirations to have both family and career

Some women wanted both a career and a traditional family. They felt like they could "have it all." In their mind, there was no need for them to have to sacrifice or choose between the two.

Stacey: [When I was growing up] I wanted to be an airline stewardess...I wanted to travel around the world and meet people...I also wanted a white picket fence, the big house with lots of kids, plenty of them.

Ada: I dreamt about the white dress of making my parents proud and never making them sad or ashamed of me. I always wished my dad would walk me down the aisle and that I would have two children....I dreamed of being able to live in a big house with a backyard with a swimming pool....My dad was the breadwinner and my mom was the homemaker. She took care of the children. That's not what I wanted. I wanted a career and a family.

### *Critique of an ideal*

The critique of an ideal emerged when the women spoke negatively about a dream of wanting *a* type of family. They were critical of the assumption that a traditional family is best. They had developed their own desires for a family that didn't fit this model. They also shared some of the reasons why the traditional model was not optimal for them.

Interestingly, the women that fell into this category were more likely to state they had chosen to become single mothers, whereas, the women who were captured by the “ideal” family were more likely to report that they did not actively choose single motherhood. Women tended to fall into one of the other category. It was not likely, nor common, that women expressed both sentiments.

#### No interest in dream or the idealized family

A good number of women refused to accept the notion of an idealized version of the family. They shared they never wanted a traditional family and felt that to set up the traditional family as an ideal was oppressive and detrimental to young girls. They wanted to seek a more gratifying self-empowered life that was more realistic for their dreams and desires and one that fit their specifications.

Martina: I never did fantasize about [a wedding] as a child, that I was going to get married here, and wear this dress, and have this honeymoon. That was never something that I was interested in....My mother told me never to rely on marriage. I was always interested in gymnastics and sports. That wasn't my focus. That whole fairy tale thing is very detrimental to little girls, and if I had a little girl I probably wouldn't even read her that stuff. Make your own kingdom and then maybe you'll find someone who's capable of sharing it with you.

Carmen: I really didn't know what kind of family I wanted. I didn't have the white picket fence. I didn't have the Leave It To Beaver family image.

Darlene: I never had the dream of being married and having kids.

#### Had career plans

The aspiration to be a professional was the dream for some of the women. They didn't dream of a family or the white picket fence. Their professional aspirations were primary over their desire to become a mother. Earlier some of the women shared their dreams about "having it all," a family and a career. These women were different. They had career aspirations and did not want children.

Judy: I didn't really visualize being a parent. I always dreamt of being a lawyer.

Marcella: I never wanted to have children. I said, "I will never have," because I was tired of raising kids. I wanted to become a doctor. I wanted to be an obstetrician.

#### Abusive past

For Kristine, her experience in an abusive family meant that she did not know what she wanted regarding family, although she did know that she did not want to replicate abusive patterns. Her family did not act as role models and therefore, she was left with her own devices to develop her ideas of family.

Kristine: My father was very abusive towards my mother, very abusive. It was in the 1950s living in Rhode Island. A woman of today it would have never worked out like that. She subjected herself to years of physical abuse. Because of that, I didn't have a healthy idea of what it would be like to grow up and have a husband and a healthy relationship.

To conclude, each of the issues presented in this chapter offer a more nuanced look at the various factors that contribute to the stages and pathways that women rely on when it comes time to make their decision to have a child. As repeatedly stated, the choice to

have a child is grossly misunderstood if one applies a simple 'to choose or not to choose' model. Rather, the women shared the range of influences that impact their decisions.

Once they make the decision to have a child without a partner, how do they manage and what type of strategies do they develop that aid them? The next chapter addresses this issue of coping and describes a typical day in the life of the never married, working-class single mother of this study.

## CHAPTER V

### A typical day in the life of a single mother: Coping strategies

This chapter describes the lived experiences and addresses the coping and managing strategies of women in the sample. It begins with a detailed description of their daily lives. The first section describes their everyday life in order to fully understand the complexities of their daily living. The second section examines strategies developed and sources of support that help make their lives more manageable.

#### **Routinization of schedules**

The most common theme described by the women when they were asked to talk about a typical day was the concept of routinization. This was explained as a necessity and a means to get all the many tasks accomplished in order to sustain their daily lives, especially those of their children. One woman summed it up succinctly, “It’s hectic; it’s real hectic.” Much like the harried nature of life in the city, these women replicate the hustle and bustle of the streets in the privacy of their own homes. Every minute of time is accounted for. The women and their children are extremely rushed, time is crunched, multi-tasking is the norm, negotiation is critical, stress is usual, but in the end, they seem to manage, to find ways to juggle doing it alone. Despite their intense lives, the majority of women did not seem to be negatively affected by the intense amounts of work and sheer exhaustion they experience; it seems to be a fact of life for them and something

they embrace. Conversely, there were several women who did share the emotionally overwhelming feeling as a result of their frenzied lives.

*Up at the crack of dawn, the morning hustle, & the hectic day*

Like many people, getting up early is a way to insure that all the necessary tasks in any given day get done, although it is not without a cost. When the single mothers in this study talked about their day, each story started with the time in which they got up. As you will read, there was not one woman who was able to sleep beyond 6:15 in the morning, most of them rising much earlier to start their day. Many of them talk about how exhausted they are by the late morning. In addition, the extent to which the women shift roles is impressive: they are cooking, getting children ready, transporting children to school, and working full-time. No wonder they are exhausted by the time they arrive at their workplaces. Later in the chapter you will read about multiple shifts, a concept very related to the multiple roles discussed here.

Judy: I get up at 5:30 am, take a shower, get dressed about 6:15 I wake up the kids, get them ready for school at 6:45 I prepare them breakfast. At 7:15 – 7:20 we're out the door. They go to school in Manhattan, so we have to leave a little earlier. Two of them go to school in Manhattan and the babysitter lives across the street from the school, so I drop my daughter off at the babysitters about 8 am and then at 8:20 I get back on the train to go to work. I get to work about 9:00 and then from there it's work work work until 5 pm...[At 5 pm] I do the reverse. I get on the train, pick up the kids at the babysitters, sometimes I get a ride from my dad from the babysitter's home, because my dad works in Manhattan. I get home from work, make dinner, get the kids to bed and then the next day I start all over again.

The amount of rushing from place to place is a part of the fabric of the lives of these families. With the exception of one woman who resides with her parents in a large home, every other woman talked about her living arrangements as being sub par and lacking the necessary space for her and her children. This requires the need to negotiate space to maximize efficient utilization. Betty talks about the pecking order in her household regarding who gets to use the coveted bathroom first, second, and so forth.

Betty: I wake up and I go into the bathroom and then I have to get the fifteen years old up while I take care of the six year old. And then after we clear the bathroom, then the thirteen year old goes in.

Interviewer: It sounds like there is an order?

Betty: Yes...Then when we clear the bathroom, we wake up the thirteen year old. I drop the baby off. He goes to school on 123rd Street, and my job is on 125th Street. So I drop him at his Charter school. And then, I walk over here. And then I am this executive assistant until 4: 30 pm and I rush back across town. I pick up the baby, and we go home. I have to check everybody's homework is done. I have to do the homework with the six year old.

Marcella reports a similar pattern.

Marcella: I get up at 5:30. I pick their clothes out, iron, whatever I have to do. I wake my oldest child up at 5:45 or 6:00. She takes a bath. I start making breakfast. I wake up the next one. She takes forever...I usually try to be out the door by 8:00 in the morning. One has to be to school at 8:00 and the other one has to be to school at 8:20. I run the younger one up the street, that's where her school is. Then I take the bus across town, across 110<sup>th</sup> Street...Usually, it's a cab because I'm running late. This has been a real strain, but I don't want her to get there late. Today was the first day that she got on the school bus, so that was awesome. I didn't have to kill myself...So I drop them off. I ran to work. I'm usually late, because I have to be there by 9:30. If I drop one of them off at 8:30, there is no way I can get to 110<sup>th</sup> Street and Second Avenue by 9:30. I'm trying to change my hours to 10:00 to see if that helps. I get there by 10:00. I interview until 12:00, when I have lunch. I usually interview six people.

It's a busy day by 12:00...they [the kids] get home at 7:00, I get home at like 6:30 to start dinner, put pajamas out. They can take a bath. And hopefully it's a great day and they did their homework at the after-school. I make dinner, they eat, I clean up. I go through their backpack and make sure homework is correct. I want to have them in bed by 8:00, but it's usually 9:30, after I've said "go to bed" like a hundred times. Then I proceed to clean up the house, take out my clothes. I try to take out their clothes, but I'm tired. I usually get to bed at like 12:00 or 1:00 in the morning...It's like I'm running on empty.

The statement by Selma below exemplifies just how important it is for her to have routine to schedule her day. In fact, she used the words "lock down" which is a graphic phrase that captures how entrenched the routine of Sunday is for her and her family. Setting aside this day allows them to function more smoothly throughout the week.

Selma: Sunday is lock down, every Sunday. It starts with breakfast and laundry. Then after laundry, all three of them have braids, so I have to braid everybody's hair. After their hair is done we go over if anyone needs to catch up with any homework they didn't understand. We spend half an hour going over homework and after homework, we try to get everybody washed up okay, clothes prepared for the next day. Then they get to play the video games, game boy. But me, after they're washed and their clothes are set up, then starts dinner for the next few days. I try to stretch it till Wednesday if I can...By this time it's like 8 PM, I have those washing machines that are hooked up in the kitchen and it literally takes almost forty minutes for the first load to be done, so after all of that about 8 PM we're finished and then we have to clean the kitchen. I try to get them to bed, but they're usually already in bed by 9:30 PM. That's Sunday.

Waking up earlier than their children is one way in which the women have a minimal amount of time to themselves to do the things that are important for them. At the very least, waking up early, or staying up late, allows them a moment of uninterrupted time for television or even prayer.

Stacey: I wake up first at 5 AM by myself and go before the lord because I am a Christian and then I wake up my son at 6:30.

Teri: By that time it's almost 8:30 pm, get her ready for bed, give her a bath, she likes to read so we'll read a little bit. Then off to bed. And then the same thing the next day. For me, I'll do a little talking on the phone, take a shower, watch a little television, Steinfeld or the news and then I fall asleep. I usually go to bed between 12 and 12:30, that's late.

### *The stress of the day*

Even with the abbreviated moments of uninterrupted time, the stress of the day, adopting multiple roles, and having to do it all alone - with little or no break - can be overwhelming. For Stacey, her day is so stressful, just talking about it brought her to tears.

Stacey: I usually arrive [to work] anywhere between 7:45 or 8 pm. I open up the office. I sit down and I always open my mail here at work. This is the only place I get time to myself...At 3:55, the best time of the day, is the time to clock out. Then I go back across the Bronx to Harlem to Morningside Park Recreation center where he goes to an after school program. I pick him up at 4:30 and I never leave cause the kids take to me and I spend time in the after school program. I help out in the after school program so I don't leave until 6 pm. So they want to give me a job part-time but I told them no way I can't do that, but I'll help out volunteering. We head home, it's about 45 minutes. When we get home, my son takes Rocky [the dog] for a walk. [She cries and says she is burdened. She shares that her tears are about balance between personal life, work, and being a single mom and how difficult this is to achieve.]

For Arlene, the stress of her living condition makes her depressed.

Arlene: I'm trying to take the old stuff out that's junk and bring in new stuff. The apartment is so depressing and that's what makes me so depressed. I have dealt with this depression in therapy.

*The triple burden of work: beyond the “second shift”*

In her study on middle-class, two-parent working families, Hochschild (1989) developed the idea of the “second shift” where women describe that returning home from work is not about the work day ending, but rather, the time when the “second shift” begins. The women in Hochschild’s study disproportionately engaged in reproductive labor compared to the contribution made by their husband. The women in this study differ somewhat because they are doing it without another adult physically present in the household<sup>31</sup>. Their shifts seem to have expanded from those described by Hochschild. As witnessed below, these women have more than two shifts: the morning shift, their paid work shift, and then upon returning home, they have yet another entirely new set of tasks and obligations to take care of. In addition to the multiple shifts these women undertake, several of them are full-time college students, adding an additional shift. Ada shares that after her first shift in the morning she needs to take a nap in order to feel refreshed to get up and get to her paid job. Like Stacey, Ada’s life is so hectic and rushed it brings her to tears as well.

Ada: I am up by 6 AM, of course we have pets. My son would like a mini zoo in the apartment if he could. I feed all the pets. By the time I do all that it is probably 6:30 or 7 AM. Then I have him up and get him breakfast, get his uniforms out of the closet, make sure everything is ready for school, send him off. Then I start getting myself ready for work. By the time he leaves, I am already so exhausted; I sit down to take a breather for about a half an hour....By the time I get here [to work] I am already so exhausted from doing things at home....Then of course at night by the

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<sup>31</sup> Each of the families that Hochschild’s interviewed were married couples. She found that gender shifts have occurred and men are more likely to help out than in previous decades, albeit, men didn’t help out enough (according to the woman’s perspective) and the work was still pretty strictly divided by gender type labor (he mowed the lawn and cleaned the garage, while she vacuumed the house and cleaned the kitchen).

time I get home, I have to rush from here to pick him up at the after school program about 5:45 pm....Sometimes I don't make it [on time to pick up my son] and you see me on the train, like last week, and I start crying on the train.

As Selma below describes her day, in essence, what she explains is the multiple shifts of work that she encounters each day. Moreover, Selma and Carmen are two of the women that are raising children alone, working full-time, *and* attending college. Being full-time students adds an additional burden and more work for them. Furthermore, time they have to spend with children is minimized because of their other responsibilities. No wonder why Sunday has to be “lock down” for Selma - it is the only day of the week she has with her children concentrated in one location and takes full advantage of getting prepared for the upcoming week. Needless to say, their schedules were incredibly complicated. In fact, while the researcher was interviewing Selma, in order to understand her daily routine, she had to draw a graph to get the story straight. That was a visual indication of the complexity and intensity of her life.

Selma: I get here [to my work]. I drop him off, I go directly to my car, I drive here. I come here and drive right into the lot, come upstairs and at first I do all of her running around, whatever she needs, copies, follow-ups from reports, invoices that are missing, [supplies] have to be delivered to [my] department...That's what I do here. I do that from 9:30 to 2:00. At 2:00, I get back in the car, pick up [my son]. I stay home for two hours. Five o'clock I am back on the road, heading to my classes and this is every Monday, Tuesday and Thursday. Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays are my days on call at [my job], so if I'm called for them, then I have to call my babysitter who's name is [Candi], she lives in the building adjacent to us and she will come to my house physically and stay with [my son] until he's dressed, ate his breakfast and walk him to school.

Carmen: I am usually up at 5:15 am, I'm in the bathroom until 5:30, I get my daughter up at 6. I have one daughter she is sweet sixteen. I get her up by 6, I'm out of the door by 6:30. I am usually at work between 7:30

and 8:00, I work until 5 mostly because I do a couple hours of overtime and Monday, Wednesday and Thursday I go to school from 6:30 to about 10 PM...I am here [at the University] until about 10, I am usually home about 10:30, quarter to 11 and we get to bed.

### *Reproductive labor*

It is typical that the women take on almost sole responsibility of the reproductive tasks necessary for daily life. There is no instance where the women outsource labor or pay for help, no one else cleans, cooks, does laundry service or the like. It is left solely up to her. In some instances, when the children are old enough, the children marginally help, but for the most part, the women are doing the overwhelming majority of domestic labor on their own. Moreover, doing reproductive labor on the run is typical: squeeze it between this task and that task. As we heard earlier, the routinization of the day's events help the women get a jumpstart on their day. This routinization carries over into their reproductive labor as well. As Stacey and others describe there is a routine for each task and this helps them to manage what might otherwise feel too unmanageable. Tasks are compartmentalized and the details can be quite intricate of when each task is completed. This order provides or optimizes a sense of control in their lives.

Stacey: I do that [laundry] in the middle of the week between Wednesday and Thursday. The laundry is complete by Thursday, we put the laundry away on Friday evening.

Arlene: I do the cooking. I have to buy a washing machine, cause I don't like to go outside for laundry. So I wash my clothes by hand. People think I am crazy but this is what I have to do. Cleaning is like a project. They [the children] share cleaning the different rooms... Everybody has their responsibilities.

Selma: I do that [cook, clean, laundry] at night and in between my times of running back and forth. The kids help out a lot.

Marcella: Usually me[I do all the housework]...So I usually clean on the weekends and cook during the week.

Sometimes the children help out with small tasks that make completing the chores a bit easier.

Carmen: Mostly all of that stuff is done on the weekends, by both of us. My daughter has the bathroom and her room and I have the rest of the house. It's age. Seniority, she gets the bathroom. She can bend in the tub better than I can.

Beverly: I have a washing machine. I cook, I clean, they [the kids] clean also. They clean their area, but mostly I oversee all of that.

Darlene: [My daughter] has her chores, she does the bathroom and living room and I do the rest. I try to clean as I go, so I don't have much to do. We do laundry together.

Kay: I tell [my son] to go clean up your room. I have attempted to teach him to make the bed. He doesn't know yet. He knows how to put the toys in the box...He likes to be a little helper...Usually I try everyday to pick up but to say washing the tub, washing the bathroom, vacuuming and dusting. I try to do that on Saturday or Sunday after church. Sometimes we're just so busy you just do it when you can.

Ada: Almost always it [housework] gets done on the weekends, unless there is something that we have to do. For instance, tonight when we get home, I'll have to clean the bathroom myself because I would have him do it but the fumes are too much for him still. He'll do a little bit here and there. He does have chores...I try to get in a little cleaning during the weekends, but I am exhausted. Like last night he vacuumed and I cleaned up the kitchen really well and mop the floors. That's all we did last night. So tonight we'll go home and I'll clean the bathroom

Judy, along with Teri, are the only two women that reside with their parents. For both of these women, their mothers assume a lot of the reproductive labor, which frees them from having the responsibility rest solely on their shoulders.

Judy: Well, my mother is around the house, she is not working, my mom does a lot of the housework and the cooking. If I need to do it, I do it. Weekends is mostly when I do laundry, cleaning the room, cleaning up after the kids, it's usually done on the weekend.

Teri: Well my mother does all of the cooking. I don't cook at all, except for breakfast. I will wake up on Saturday and Sunday morning and fix breakfast for myself and my daughter. I do my own laundry. We have a washing machine and dryer in our house, so I do my own laundry. I try to do laundry every Saturday if I can. My mother does the grocery shopping...I clean, vacuum, dust, I still do the vacuuming around the house, stairs, basement. My daughter makes a mess of the house, so I do most of the cleaning. I contribute a lot, I'm fair.

### **Father involvement**

Having the father of the child around sometimes offers women respite and makes managing and coping a bit easier. The fathers have various levels of involvement and participation, although most of the fathers are not involved. Even when fathers are involved, some of the women characterized their relations with the fathers as negative. It was more common to hear stories that detailed disappointment, betrayal, and abandonment. Most of the women shared the struggles and conflicts they face balancing their own dislikes for the father and not wanting that to interfere with their child's relationship with him.

*Negative or non-existent relationship*

Each of these descriptions about the father reinforces how alone most of these women are exemplifies the degree to which they have mastered self-sufficiency.

Betty: We do not get along. We do not get along...But I do not have any interference with his relationship with the children. Whatever they want to do, they do.

Selma: Those guys. We're civil, but we don't like each other. I don't like them and they don't like me. I think on my part more so, I've been disappointed, I feel betrayed, even though like I said they pay their child support, they let the children down. A lot of times they will tell the kids, "I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that," they get the kids all psyched up and they don't come through with it or when they promise may be months later or a year later or if he promises something now it will show up in the summer time or it won't show up at all.

Teri: We were good friends at one point but we never really talked about child support until recently, this past summer, I asked him he needs to step up to the plate and take responsibility now. It's seven years and you never offered anything, you should contribute too in her upbringing. He said, "okay, alright" and nothing.

Stacey: We [me and my son's father] don't have a relationship. We both were not forgiving when we split up. We did not see eye to eye. We left on bad terms. I grew to forgive but he didn't. So even if I come nice and humble and pleasant, he is like, um, I get a real negative vibe from him all the time. I just do the same thing. I purchased my son a cell phone so he could call his son on his own direct phone instead of calling the house.

Ada: I don't have one really [a relationship with my child's father]. He does not contribute financially the way he is supposed to.

Beverly: ...He [the father] disappeared. He disappeared and tried to change his home number and I just let him go on his own merry way. That's how cold some men can really be. I wasn't going to chase after him. I think in many ways it was a blessing; I wasn't going to be abused or harassed. I sweated out the nine months and watched things change. He never came around, he stayed away.

Interviewer: What's your relationship with her father?

Darlene: None. As a matter of fact, I just found out Friday where he was. [He provided financially] Until she was 4 he did all of that. But was a fair weather dad.

### *Ambivalent Relationship*

These ambivalent relationships are on again-off again types. Sometimes the relationship is smooth, other times it is rocky. The women who report the ambivalent relationships with the father seem to be a little better off than the women who report negative relationships. Furthermore, the women who report ambivalent relationships with the father seem to be worse off than the women who report having positive relationships with the father.

Marcella: Some days I love him [her daughter's father], some days I hate him. Right now, I'm in my hating mode....I don't want to totally get rid of him, because if the girls think that whenever he's around it's like god has come down from heaven...But they love him and I can't see right now bringing another man into the picture...So I avoid all that...I'd rather be by myself until the girls are old enough to have their own lives.

Tricia: It [my relationship with my daughter's father] could be better. There's not a strain or anything. We're friends, but not really, we don't really keep in contact. Every once in a while, we'll talk on the phone. He lives in Queens with his mom. He sees [my daughter] every now and then, very infrequently.

### *Get Along*

The fewest number of women expressed a positive relationship with the father. But those that did reap the benefit of having him available to participate in the child's life are also

more fortunate to receive some financial assistance, albeit modest amounts and typically given on an inconsistent basis.

Judy: ...I have a very positive relationship with [my son's] father. He takes as much responsibility as he can. He picks him up on the weekends. If I really need him to do things, he does it. He helps as much as he can financially. I don't have a problem with him being a father; he's a good father.

Carmen: Right now it's cordial [my relationship with the father]. At one point in time it was non-existent. Over the past 8 years, 9 years, it's gotten much better. He's more active, he participates a little bit more. Those things have improved over the years.

### **Strategies for coping and managing**

This section explores various strategies, and/or people that help out to make life more manageable. Some women rely on family as a source of support, while others rely on friends or the church community; often these are not mutually exclusive. Meanwhile, a few women view themselves as totally alone. Given their typically inadequate incomes, how women manage financially is also explored below. As a result of their commitment to their family, the women are coping and managing well.

#### *Sources of support*

Receives help from family and/or friends

Many of the women shared stories where family members provided support. Though most of the women initially stated that they were sole providers, it became evident there are family and friends who are available in some way, shape, or form, albeit not in the way or to the degree women would have liked. The women who receive assistance and support from family and friends appeared less stressed than the women who are managing totally alone.

It's all in the family

Judy: When my mother doesn't have to go school, she will stay with the kids. If my mother has to go to school, then she'll leave them with my aunt – my mom's sister.

Interviewer: You mentioned your mom, your mom's sister, are there any other people that you go to for support?

Judy: No, usually not. If my mom can't do it or my aunt, then I take off. My kids come before my job. I do a lot of it alone.

Betty: My mother had recently retired after I became pregnant, so I only stayed home the regular six weeks. And then my mom baby-sat [my son] while I came back to work. As soon as he was a year and half, he was in nursery school. He's been in school ever since. He was just one and a half. Sorry, two and a half. All the kids had been in school since two and half. I have been working since they were all in school.

Interviewer: So who helps out when you need any kind of assistance? Whatever that is?

Betty: My mom... That would be my mom or my niece. My mom is raising my niece. [My niece] is twenty years old; she is like a big sister to my children. They are almost like siblings because my mom raised her. [My niece] took [my daughter] to the doctor for me when she twisted her ankle.

Marcella: Well, it's basically my grandmother and their father. Well, I have a sister who's staying with me that helps out a lot too.

Teri: I have a girlfriend who helps baby-sit for me if I want to go out on a Saturday night or something...The van brings my daughter back to the house [after school] and my mother is there. She is a homemaker. So my mother is there with her. My mother helps her with her homework.

Aging parents was a concern for some women. At one point, parents were able to provide support and care for the children but as they get older and health issues are a concern, they are less available to provide help, not to mention the added burden it places on the women of having to care for both her child and her aging parents.

Ada: Well, if my parents cannot pick him [my son] up, I have to go, I have to run. My parents have been my support system since he was born. But again, they are older now, if they can't make it for whatever reason, I would have to go and leave my job...Right now my niece [also helps out]. I have a niece that moved three blocks from me. She doesn't pick him up, she just watches him until I get there and then she goes her route.

Martina: My dad and his girlfriend took care of [my son]. When my dad was physically unable to watch him, my mom babysat for a few hours once when I was visiting.

Beverly: ...Well, my mother, their grandma,[and] my sister [sometimes provide support]. I don't bother other family members; they are far away...They all have their own responsibilities. My mom worked for the Board of Ed, she just recently retired after 40 years. But the thing is my sister works. Everyone works, everyone has their responsibilities. Otherwise, I hold my own, with gods help.

Randi: Her grandmother, her dad's mom [helps out when I need assistance]. She'll be able to help out. I also can call a friend Betty who lives in the building...Her uncles of course were there [after the father died]. My mom was there. She has helped me out a lot...My family has been really helpful, they pulled in for me there. I can look back and I don't see any gaps anywhere. (This is a case where the father died very shortly after the daughter was born).

Stacey: When it gets really crazy I'll reach out to my mom. His father was very active in his life as far as every other weekend.

Tricia: My mom. She lives in the Bronx. She is there for me all the time ever since my daughter was born.

Lorraine: When [my son] was born I had just gotten a job, three weeks after he was born I went to work. I would pump, my dad would come to Brooklyn from Long Island, I could give him the milk and bottles. It was really good. That enabled me to work. My dad was there absolutely. My brother too...He has always been around...[My son] spends the night there and he goes there regularly.

“I get by with a little help from friends”

Some women talked about the reliance on friends, rather than biological family, as a source of support.

Carmen: I have very good friends. Today my support system is very close friends. I have one friend I have had since I was twelve, that's my daughter's godmother. I have another girlfriend that I have had for 16 years, I met her on the job. Those are my support systems.

Kay: If I'm working late or somewhere to go after work, the only person I could really trust is grandpa [not biological grandpa, but a friend who they refer to as “grandpa”]. The school knows him...There is no problem. They don't call me, they know it's okay...There was another lady, she has three foster kids, I try not to call her, even though she does try to help out. If I ask her to do me favor and pick him up, it might be a problem. She'll say I'll see. I know she has her own problem with her three foster children.

Arlene: There is a man in my life, not a sexual partner, but a friend, who helps out with the kids. He treats them like they're his own. He bought us all cell phones so we can call each other during the day.

Selma: ...It's just us and [my babysitter] and her family. They are like the closest. My sister, one is in New Jersey, the other in Kentucky, my brother lives way up in the Bronx and the other two live down south, one in Durham and other in North Carolina. So it's like, we have no close family with us right here. My mom lives in Jamaica [Queens], she's a

nurse so she is always working or doing something...[My babysitter] has four sisters. Sometimes I use them.

Wanda tells her story about her neighbor who she could rely on. She also mentions developing creative ways to bring in extra cash to supplement her meager wages.

Wanda: I am still living in the same building and somebody saw me pregnant, a neighbor, and she was pregnant herself at the same time. She was from Panama and she sent for her mother to take care of her baby. As a matter of fact, her baby was born in January and my baby was born in March. She told me, "My mother will look after your baby when you're ready to go back to work." That was the beginning. I don't have to go outside to find a babysitter. I dropped [my daughter] off upstairs in her apartment and it was cheaper this way...Sometimes I found a friend and did a little job on the side that helps. Sometimes I bake, that helps me a little [side job to make extra money].

In this case with Lorraine, the lines of demarcation between family and friends seem to be less rigid. She highlights below how pivotal her friends have been in her life and how they are more like family, fictive kin. As you read earlier, Lorraine also spoke about her biological family and how essential they have been in her and her son's life. Lorraine was unique, however, to the extent in which she had access to resources far beyond those of any other woman in the study. Her own personal financial situation was no different from the other women, but she came from a family that was financially more stable than the others and were able to help her out.

Lorraine: I have friends and family in my support network. My father grew up in the very progressive left wing environment...his circle of friends are like part of my family. So they have become aunts and uncles. There are people my father's age who are part of our extended family who will take [my son] when I need to study, [my son] can spend the night. They have children. Their children are my age and their children have

children. There's that kind of a family. Then I have friends, a lot of friends...I have lots of friends in that neighborhood [where my son goes to school] that can pick [him] up after school if I need it. I take their kids too. I have established relationships in the neighborhood and that is also part of my support system. There is no way I could have done it at all without a support system, not at all, no way. I have been able to manage through different circumstances, whether it was housing or friends or family.

#### The church community

Along with their helpful neighbors, Stacey and Wanda also find support in their church community. Several of the women spoke about their church and their faith as being crucial in their lives and playing a large role in their coping and managing. Interestingly, however, more women did not speak about their religious and/or spiritual beliefs as essential components in their lives; religion/spirituality did not play as heavy a role in their lives as would be expected.

Stacey: I have learned and grown about how to cope with things from the church. They are very supportive. You get a chance to meet once a month in a support group with other women. It helped. I learned to deal with my anger at my son's father. It helped....That's been a saving piece for me.

Wanda: In my community, Haitian community, I most of the time go with the Haitian community to the masses. The mass is said in my language it comforts me.

#### *Doing It Alone*

There were women who upon detailed discussion revealed that they really are doing it alone without the assistance or support of anyone. Neither of the women below have family they are close to and they both have fewer friends.

Darlene: No one [helps out when I need assistance]. I do it alone. I have sisters and brothers here but they are no help. They have their own problems and stuff.

Kristine: Really no one [helps out when I need assistance]. I have a sister, but she really wasn't involved in terms of helping out with my son. That's why I was always so overly concerned.

### *Financial situation*

Money is a source of stress for all of the women. Some women have the fortunate reality of child support, while few others had families they could rely on. Unlike the various forms of support we just read about, the overwhelming majority of the women manage financially with little help. And when they do receive financial assistance it seems to be a last ditch resort.

### Financially independent/sole providers

Most women meet their financial needs alone. Each and every one of them is financially just squeaking by.

Selma: I am always stressed. Bills I never pay in full. I basically pay the minimum on the bill to keep it on. Then as the money comes in during the month, as I get the check, most months the checks come by the 12<sup>th</sup> or the

13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup>, I put a little bit more money into the con Edison, telephone, cable, whatever, so by the time the end of the month comes, I have \$20.00 to \$30.00 left on the entire bill. That way if I have to carry it over to the next month, they won't come give me a notice of shut off or anything like that. That's how I do it...I try hard not to [go to anyone for financial assistance], but if I really really need it, I go to my grandparents or my mom because my father is deceased. I really don't like to do that.

Stacey: I just thank god, he [god] has been keeping me above water. Just recently, at the beginning of this storm, it was looking like it was going to be a financial struggle. I combined my bills into a low interest rate. I went to him in prayer and he helped me out. I pay my rent on time, I have car insurance. I have three active credit cards. Each and every bill gets taken care of. I don't know how. It's only god. I tie 10 percent of my salary to my church and god says he'll meet all my needs. There is food in the cupboards at home. There are towels, toilet paper, toothpaste, tissues a closet full.

Interviewer: Who do you go to for financial help when you need it?

Darlene: No one. A loan shark.

Judy: I am budget conscious. Other than the fact that I have a big weakness for shopping, I always make sure that I have enough so that ends meet.

Carmen: It's just me...I do have a support order out. You will not believe the amount. I took him to child court in 1997 and I believe he was making minimum wage at that time and the judge ordered him to pay \$25.00 a month. I swear to god, \$25.00 a month. There has been a modification that was made two years ago, they call it an increase in life or something like that, and they raised it to \$30.06. Ask me the most important question, how often has he paid? Not very, really. Not very. He barely kept a full-time job. He just recently acquired over the past two years, just recently acquired jobs that mandated taking it out of his paycheck, so I would say that out of 10 years so far, maybe I have received a year and a half of support, if that. I am being very generous.

Being part of the "sandwich generation" has financial implications for Ada in addition to the other stressors it provides.

Ada: No [there is no one I go to for financial help], it's just me. I help my folks. I am financially trying to help them as well.

Beverly sums up a sentiment many women expressed.

Beverly: I do it totally alone financially. You figure if you don't take nothing, you don't have to go through the aggravation, the stress, the torture that a lot of women go through.

Financial support from family and/or friends

Very few women have family or friends they can rely on for financial assistance. Much like the reticence we heard earlier about not wanting to rely on others too heavily, the women below share their concern about being weary of asking for financial help.

Kay: My mom [helps out financially] every now and then. I try not to ask my mom for money, but every now and then. I have another friend. He helps indirectly. He gives me money and says this is for [my son]. He's just a friend. He's a nice guy, not like a father figure.

Tricia: My mom [helps me out financially]. But basically I do things on my own right now. I'm working and I try very hard not to go to my mom.

Even though below Teri shares that she does not ask her parents for money, they financially assist her by allowing her to live in their house rent free.

Teri: No, I basically don't ask them [my parents, with whom I live] for anything. They pay the taxes on the house and the mortgage but other than that, no, I don't ask them for financial help.

A similar situation holds true for Lorraine. Her father was able to help her out in very material ways, housing was one of those ways.

Lorraine: When [my son] was born I was living in a house, a building that my father had bought years ago, I could afford to not work the first five months after he was born because I was the super and the manager and I paid low rent. My living situation helped a lot. I was able to spend time with [my son]. There wasn't anyone else to support us, but because of the building I was able to manage.

Receives support from the child's/children's father

It was not common for fathers to financially provide, but when they did, it was a relief for her.

Betty: I don't get child support, not formal child support. But when he [the children's father] gets paid, he always comes and he buys them things and gives them money. Like today, he is going to take the six-year-old shopping for a coat and things like that.

Marcella: He [my daughters father] gives me \$100 a week. During the week, he'll give me \$10 here, \$5 there. He pays for one of the girls' after-school, which is \$300 a month. Whenever I get into a serious jam and I'm backed up, usually he'll help me. I want him to give me more, because he does make more money than that.

### *Self-care*

There were several methods for coping, one being the recognition and personal insight that women needed to take time to nurture and care for themselves. Many shared very intimate, vulnerable, and challenging aspects of solo parenting but heroically they

acknowledged the need for support and sought that out. Support took various forms from therapy to physical exercise.

Marcella: If I didn't have therapy, I don't know—I would either be in jail or six feet under. Some days I want to hit my supervisor with a hole-puncher, and I stop myself with a breathing exercise or doing something that my therapist recommended. It's good because I go on a weekly basis and just dump on somebody that has no kind of opinions, no yes or no criticisms. I've been lucky enough to have gotten therapists who are pretty decent. I just started one last week, and he is the best one I ever had so far.

Ada: I was not the parent I wanted to be to my son, I was yelling at him all the time, I was always angry, always crying, every little thing would get to me. I knew I was hurting him, not physically, but emotionally. That's when I decided, I need help so I could help him. It [therapy] did work. It gave me the support I needed.

Lorraine has developed multiple strategies for coping and has a keen sense of her own needs.

Lorraine: I have always worked from the inside...I have done therapy but I'm not doing it right now. I have been thinking about doing therapy again...I started yoga class. I thought maybe this will help me. It is quieting the inside; it is taking care of a part of me that I have neglected. I go to the theatre five times a year. I used to ride my bike all the time. I would bike everywhere. That was a way for me to release my energy and stress. Hopefully as the weather gets warmer I will get on my bike again. There are things I am working on and hoping to do...I might put things off for a little bit, but I will ask for help when there's something I need help with. Hopefully [my son] is learning for all of that. Hopefully he sees that mom is doing that, she reaches out when she needs help and he learns that it's really healthy to do that.

*Making life more manageable with creative solutions*

Lastly, some women shared some small, and not so small, strategies that help them get through the day. Some rituals include cooking in abundance so there are leftovers; having cell phones so all family members can communicate and are easily accessible; networking with other single mothers; and being vigilant and organized have all proven to be strategies that work to their advantage.

Kay: I usually cook every other night – there are only two people at my house. Usually I over cook, I cook enough for five or six people, I don't do that on purpose....Friday is a lazy night. We don't cook on Friday. After work we always go to some fast food place and bring it to our house or order a pizza. That's always a treat to ourselves. Every Friday we do that. It's been customary since my son could talk. After Friday I don't cook.

Stacey: On Sundays I always prepare two meats and during the week after work, I cook fresh vegetables and rice so I don't spend too much time in the kitchen.

Selma has adopted several strategies that work for her and her family.

Selma: On Sunday, I cook three meals and put them in the freezer. That will get me through Wednesday. Then on occasion we may eat out or bring in some carry in or take-out or something like that... We all have cell phones, each one of the children has their own cell phone, those prepaid ones, so that way if ever I'm running late and I'm supposed to meet them somewhere, I can let them know directly what is going on, especially with [my youngest son], because he's in elementary.

Selma: If I have a problem and I need to know from another woman how to do this or that, I have that network with other mothers. Most of the kids where we live have single mothers. There are few men that have their own kids. They are my networks for resources and information. One woman when they first came up with the child health care plus, I was

trying to qualify for healthcare. She had just gotten a job as one of their reps. She happened to be one of my daughters friends mothers and she gave out these flyers to her friends with contact information.

Kristine found that being organized was helpful for her and aided her in getting through the tough moments and fulfilling her commitment to be a single mother who is fully available to her son. She came to terms with sacrificing herself for the well-being of her son. The recognition that she is the sole provider in all ways made it easier to cope and manage. This internal motivation was expressed eloquently by Kristine but it was a sentiment many of the women expressed.

Kristine: I was very organized. I was very determined to do a good job and do the best that I could. I devoted myself to raising him with no life of my own, absolutely no life of my own, none. I don't know if that's balanced, but that's the way that I did it. It's all enveloping...I had a young child who had all kinds of needs and I love him very much and I had to devote myself to raising him and I couldn't think about anything else. There was no room for that financially, emotionally or anything else. I saw a lot of women with boyfriends and men in and out of their apartment, I never liked that idea. I always wanted better morals for my son. If it meant that I didn't have any private life of my own, so be it. I made the decision to have this child and that had to come first. And that is just the way it worked out.

In sum, women shared the intensity of their lives and in the process revealed an inner strength they possess in order to handle their situations. Even during and after sharing their stories of daily routine, they all unanimously agreed that they would do it all over again despite the hardships they face. The love and devotion they have for their children came through loud and clear. Their lives, however, are not without some complications and challenges. In the next chapter we hear intimate feelings about motherhood, what it is like to be a single woman, and thoughts about marriage.

## CHAPTER VI

### Feelings about motherhood, singleness, and marriage

We have heard from the women about how they became single mothers and the multitude of influences on that impact on her decision. In addition, we learned how they manage the intricacies of daily life. This chapter shares some interpersonal feelings about how they experience motherhood, singleness, and marriage.

#### **Strengths of single motherhood**

These women feel proud when their children are healthy, happy, and doing well. Academic achievement ranked high on the list of concerns; many of the women place heavy emphasis on their children's success in school. They also receive strength from their own accomplishments and their ability to rise to the occasion. Being a single mother seems to intensify the feelings when they excel, because when they do it well, they realize that it was a result of their own work. But this same pattern is felt when they face challenges, this is when they report feeling all alone.

Several sub-themes emerged when women were asked to share some of what they perceived are the strengths or advantages of single motherhood. The sub-themes include: the pride they feel in their child's achievements; the pride they feel about their own accomplishments in successfully raising their children independently; the unconditional love they receive from their child/children; the positive examples they set for their child;

and lastly, the freedom the experience offers because they do not need to compromise with a partner about childrearing issues. Each of these sub-themes is presented below.

*Pride in child's achievements*

These single mothers felt a sense of pride and accomplishment when their children fared well. Their sense of pride was intensified by the fact that they get to take credit for raising their child on their own, it seems to heighten their sense of accomplishment.

Randi: It gives me strength seeing her [my daughter] get through school positively. She has positive friends; that's a strength I get to see.

Beverly: My daughter was the valedictorian in her junior high school...When you see positive things, when you see them want good things, even if they make mistakes and fall and go off the trail, to see them come back...That makes you feel good because you know you instilled something that they are not going to forget...That makes you feel real good when you see progress. They didn't end up in jail, nobody is on drugs, no one is in gangs. And to be African-American, that's means a lot.

Judy: You have a good sense of pride when you see your children accomplishing things. No one else can get credited with that.

Ada: I see that my son is excelling and I see that he is really a good boy.

Darlene: When my daughter could be recognized as a very good student and everybody likes her that's good.

Carmen: Just seeing your child grow and prosper, doing all the normal things, walking and talking. Those things are challenging and interesting and exciting to see.

*Pride in her achievements as a single mother*

Like her child's achievements, it was equally important for her to talk about her accomplishments as a single mother. Many of the women highlighted their love of motherhood and their love for their children along with how powerful it feels to know that they have successfully achieved raising children without a partner. It gives them a sense of power, responsibility, and duty; they often feel empowered as a single mother.

Beverly: It feels good too. It feels good too cause I look and see that I have done it. I made it; I didn't lose them, like a lot of mothers lose their kids because of being irresponsible and neglectful.... It feels good because you look back and if you see positive things and the kids are doing well you say, "Wow, I made it, I did it and look at that." It feels good. I am not ashamed. I hold my head up.

For Tricia, she speaks about both the love and joy she receives from her daughter and her own pride in taking on the responsibility.

Tricia: I love being responsible for another life, another human being. She brings so much joy too. Her personality is so vibrant. She's so smart. She's just a lovable kid.

*Love from children*

Just about every mother spoke about how important and motivating it is to know the extent of love they receive from their children. In many cases, it keeps them going. They shared that coming home after a long days work can be grueling but the minute they see their children, they feel at ease and comforted.

Marcella: I would prefer to have the kids, because the affection and love they give me will stay with me a lot longer than any money that I ever have will. The way they love me is worth much more than any megamillions.

Teri: I mean, children they love you unconditionally. My daughter, she is a very very happy child. She'll wake up smiling, since she was a baby. People call her smiley, that's her nickname.

*Positive examples they set for their children*

Raising children with feminist principles was important for some women. Some felt that being a single mother can allow for the possibility that children experience women as strong role models and can foster a child's sense of independence. Others mentioned that being a single mother also meant their children are not subjected to unhealthy relationship dynamics.

Betty: I'm hoping that I'm presenting a positive female role model for them [my boys], and they respect women when they get older....Same for my daughter, I'm hoping that she will grow up and she will be independent, have an independent desire in her, so that she does not have to be dependent on a man.

Carmen: Sometimes being a single mom is a good thing. I have all of our attention to focus on that one child. That's one thing my daughter can never say is that she has never been loved. She has all of that. She has never seen people arguing and fussing and fighting because it's me and her. There are certain things she has been spared by being raised by a single mom. She doesn't have to worry about divorce, divorce will scar some children.

*Freedoms that come from raising children alone*

Having the father out of the picture allows the women to raise their children with more freedom. Not having to negotiate or compromise with a partner is viewed as a positive aspect of single motherhood. Because they are doing it alone means that they do not have to juggle their time or energy between the competing needs of a partner and their child. This sense of empowerment translates into high self-esteem for some of the women.

Lorraine: One of the strengths or positives is I am it. I am it. I am capable, I have good ideas, I'm creative, I'm loving, I'm positive. I can give him all these things without conflicts. Let's say someone having a completely different way of dealing with behavior issues that come up, or what kind of responsibilities kids should have and at what age, bedtime. I can set the agenda, I can decide what I want and I can do it. Hopefully I'm making the right choice and decisions. I can live with the responsibility. I don't have to answer to anyone in a way. I can question myself, I do all the time. There's an awareness that I am it. I need to think in a holistic way what I am doing. I need to think about things in many different ways, from many different angles. This is positive.

Martina: I raise my son the way I want to raise my son, and my vision for him is my vision. I don't have to compromise that with a partner, and I don't have to ask someone something. It's ultimately my responsibility how my son is going to be as a man in the long run. And I like having that responsibility...I don't want anyone else trying to influence how I'm going to have to raise him. I also don't have to deal with coming home and dealing with someone else, and their problems, and their stress, and their, "You're paying too much attention to the baby and not paying enough attention to me." My focus is on my son, because I want to get to know him.

Beverly: Being a single mother if the father is not good or his lifestyle or situation, then you get to guide the kids and you try to keep them on the right track. That's the good part of it; you don't have to fall for that negative side, that's the situation. You can stay positive, that's your choice.

Kristine: His father was never a stable influence and never supported his child in anyway...He is very ignorant as far as I'm concerned. In essence, in some sense, it's better that I was doing it by myself. His involvement made things much more complicated.

For Darlene, being a single mother meant that she could insure her child's safety. This was particularly powerful for Darlene, given her abusive family of origin. Being a single mother meant that she could make certain her child would not have the same experience that she witnessed. Single motherhood provided her a sense of safety, control, and power.

Darlene: I wouldn't have anything else for myself in this day and age being that I grew up in an abusive family. My daughter is 15 I wouldn't trust no man around my kids. That's just me. And I don't have time or inclination to cater to most guys and most guys want someone to cater to them and I'm not the one. As far as myself, I'm fine.

Most of the women acknowledge that raising children solo is a challenge. But these women are evidently living up to the challenge and thriving.

### **Challenges of single motherhood**

Just as the women expressed positive aspects and strengths of single motherhood, they also shared some of the challenges and stressors. The word "hard" was probably the most commonly used adjective to describe the challenges they face. The pressure that accompanies doing it alone ranked high on their list of stressors. Moreover, being a lone material provider creates a lot of stress for these women. Carmen uses the metaphor of

juggling to describe her situation. She says it's *Challenging. It's my word for it. It's exciting at some points, but it's challenging. It's hard juggling.*

Several sub-themes emerged they include: the heavy burden of assuming sole responsibility on a material level as well as on an emotional level; the heavy burden of being the only person to instill values in their child; the self-sacrifices women make to care for their child; and lastly, the financial burden they carry.

*Sole responsibility on a material and emotional level*

Most of the women talked about how stressful it is to know they are the only ones who their children can turn to to insure their needs get met on all levels. Day and night, they are the sole providers and the demand is grueling. The toll it takes on her is utter exhaustion.

Judy: It's hard. It's really hard. You really can't turn to anyone to back you up in difficult situations when the kids are sick it comes down to you. They need things, it comes down to you, you have to make sure they have everything they need, clothes, food...it falls on me. You have to take care of all the necessities. I can't stay and get into bed, I have to leave and leave them with someone to get time alone...it's not easy.

Marcella: It's the hardest job I ever will have, I'm pretty sure, because you're responsible not only for raising these kids, you're responsible for what kind of adults they're going to be in life. You know what I'm saying? You have the choice of raising somebody who's going to make the world a better place, or somebody who's going to be a monster and make a whole bunch of people suffer. So that's the hardest job...So by far that has to be the hardest job that any human has in this life, and more so mothers, because your father—anybody could be your father.

The flipside of the freedoms that accompany single motherhood are the limitations and pressure. While not having to negotiate with a partner when making decisions, having to make them alone can be just as stressful. The need to rely only on oneself is not a reassuring concept for some of the women.

Beverly: You are the disciplinarian, you're the cook, you're everything. Sometimes it can get stressful like if everyone is talking at one time or if you have to make decisions or choices you don't have that other half to talk to get their input, you have to think of everything for yourself. You just have to be on point, take your time to think, think over everything and put it out there.

Tricia: It's tough. One person doing everything. It's challenging. It's draining. I can't even explain it. It's very draining I'll say that. It takes a lot out of you emotionally.

Stacey: Sometimes feeling like I have to do it all by myself is stressful.

Fear was not a typical response yet Ada shares her overwhelming fear about her son's loneliness and her concern about his only child status and not having a second parent around to back her up in the event that anything ever happened.

Ada: I don't like it at all. It scared me, it still scares me. It scares me being single, for my son, everything goes back to my son. He's my major focus in life right now. It scares me because if anything ever happened to me where is my son going to end up? Who is going to provide for him? At some point, my son will be alone and that scares me.

The endless amounts of time that single mothers put in is as Lorraine says, "it's exhausting."

Lorraine: The difficulties of being the only person, there's no break. I have people that I can turn to and say help, but usually I only do that when I need to study or when I have something that I'm doing but I rarely have said to someone, "I need a break, can you take him." I feel like there has to be a reason other than me taking care of myself. I miss that there is no opportunity for me to say I have to get out of here, I need to be alone, I need to take care of myself right now....Right now it's really hard. It's harder now that he's 7 than when he was 6 months. It has gotten so hard. His needs were simpler. I could provide more. They were much simpler. His needs are more complicated. What he needs of me is more complicated. I don't need to feed him anymore, I need to cook for him, but I need to be there for him in deeper ways and that is really challenging, being patient and making the right decisions dealing with his behavior, school issues...It really is a challenge being a single parent. I used to think of myself as a super woman. I don't think like that now. I'm a down to earth human being. I do have limits.

Betty: I think it's hard but I think it just requires more of me because it's something I have to do. I have to push myself...There are a lot of times I can't be tired. I can't show stress because they're not going to understand that. You know I'm always doing something. I'm always doing something. I'm going here, I'm going there. It's like no stopping and people say, "Oh, You have so much energy." These are things I have to do...People look at me and think that I'm so with it and everything. They call me the hub in the office. Like everything centers around this desk. I don't want to be the hub. I always tell them that this is my second job. My first job is to raise my kids. I can't be killed on the second job. And then I'm not able to do my first job...I can't let the second job stress me so much that I can't do the first.

For Kay the challenge is so difficult that she has had thoughts of giving up her son. Her son suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and her confidence level as a mother suffers. Her guilt and shame around this made it very difficult for her to share.

Kay: It's very very hard. I kid you not there has been a lot of times – this might sound cruel – I just wanted to give up my son because I felt like I can't do this. I'm not really a good parent. I love my son to death and I really thought, I never thought it was going to be easy, but sometimes I think I just cannot do this.

Caring for elderly parents makes single parenting more complicated. We heard in the previous chapter that Ada taking care of her parents presented a financial burden for her. In addition to the money, helping take care of her parents impacted on the time she spends with her child - an issue all the women struggled with. The burden of solo parenting feels more severe when other responsibilities demand their time and energy.

Ada: Because I have to take care of my parents, I don't have the time for my son that I would like....He [my son] doesn't get 100 percent of my focus, I try to give him at least 75 percent of it...My only other distraction at this point is my parents, making sure they are set, they are safe, and they have everything that they need.

Marcella: I would like to be able to put some money to take care of my grandmother. That's another worry of mine—I can't really go too far, or leave too far, because I don't have another care provider, even though my aunt says she is.

### *Heavy burden of instilling values alone*

Some women spoke about the importance of instilling values and the difficulties that accompany assuming the role of “moral guardian” (Boryczka, 2004). With no one else to bounce ideas off of, this is particularly difficult and challenging.

Betty: It is very hard. I would say it is very hard. You try to instill values in them, and hope they will keep them, and carry them out, but there are a lot of influential things once they walk out your door.

Ada: It's so hard, it's been challenging, it's been frustrating. It's really difficult, it really is. I have tried to instill in my son a lot of the values and morals my parents instilled in me as a child.

*Self-sacrifice*

The theme of self-sacrifice came up frequently. Some women told the story of lacking sleep, having no time alone, maintaining few friendships, putting off college, financial sacrifice, not having a boyfriend/partner and being sexually deprived. Each of these sacrifices feels intensified given they don't have anyone to co-parent or give them time away from their role as mother. In many cases, the sacrifice meant deferred dreams and a moratorium on their own needs so they could meet the needs of their child.

Ada: It's hard being a single parent; it's frustrating at times because I'm so exhausted most of the time. I don't have a social life. I don't get to go out anymore. And not that I miss the going out as far as dancing or hanging out goes, no that is not what I mean. What I mean is to just go out and relax. I cannot go after work cause I have to run home and pick up my son. I don't get to relax. I don't have anytime for me...I was actually in college, I went back a few years ago to try to get my degree in education that was when my son started having problems in school as far as his academics, and so I had to stop that. That was a choice I made because it was either him or me, I chose him he really needed it. I had already gone to school; I did what I was supposed to do.

Wanda: When my daughter started school, public school, I could get an education. Then I started going to school, it was ESL first and then I started going to the afternoon, when my daughter finished school at 3 pm, she used to be at latchkey after school program...She reached 6<sup>th</sup> grade I say to myself, 6<sup>th</sup> grade is a critical year for children, I have to be there. I stopped going to school at that time I had 35 or 40 college credits. I stopped going to school, I was there in the afternoon for her to control the telephone, whatever she is doing, just there for her.

Tricia: I focus so much on my daughter that I really don't focus on dating and going out or having fun. My focus is on my daughter and it cuts into my private life. Now that I am getting older, you have to do something different. You need to focus on yourself. She's going to get older and she is going to leave you. She is going to have her own life and you're going to look back and I don't want to have any regrets.

*Social life*

Not having a social life is frustrating for many. And not having time or energy to acknowledge and foster their sexual needs is just as maddening.

Arlene: I don't go anywhere. I don't go out. I don't have a social life. I don't have friends like that...I really don't have friends; sometimes I talk on the phone. I don't have people coming into my house. Sometimes I want to have some adult conversations without the kids outside the home but it's really tough and it doesn't happen...I was talking with some people at the day care about sexual desire and said that I don't even get it. I used to. I am just going to concentrate on making it better for me and my children. It [sex] would be nice sometimes, but you have to deal with a lot of different personalities.

Lack of time for self and lack of time with their child is a frequent complaint expressed.

Judy: Not being able to get away from them. I need mommy time. Mommy time away from them. I don't get mommy time.

Betty: No time for myself.

Tricia: Time. I don't seem to have enough of it. I would like to spend more time with [my daughter] and mold her and keep her focused.

Selma: I don't have a life. I don't have a boyfriend. I have two girlfriends, we mostly talk on the phone, we rarely go out, they are single parents too.

Beverly: My mom always told me when you have kids and if you're a dedicated mother you give up your life and tend to your kids. I think I have done that. The partying scene and years went by and I was there with the kids. We were home at dinnertime, reading, just having family time. Just us three.

Carmen shares that single motherhood is rewarding but not without sacrifice.

Carmen: I guess I have mixed feelings about it. Like I said, it's rewarding on one end, you see your child prosper and do well. But I think I did give up a lot, especially socially, I did give up a lot. I pretty much shut down dating. I do very little of it because of her. I think on that end, not being able to have that male companion or that male friendship involved in your life that is something that is missing....It's like a mixed bag.

### *Financial burden*

The financial burden of single parenting is a grave concern for every woman interviewed. There was not one interview that did not touch on this hardship in some way. In fact, the women reported finances as their greatest stressor. Residing in New York City only makes financial woes more difficult. The high cost of living poses additional challenges. High rents, day care, summer programs, clothing all add up to more than what most of the women make in waged labor. Nevertheless, as we learned in chapter two, each of the women in the study found ways to handle their financial difficulties.

Tricia: Being a single parent is hard and it's getting worse. Everything is going up except your pay. I would be able to handle it fine if I could bring home that paycheck before taxes I would be fine. I would really be fine. I have to call and see if they can lower my rent any more. I have section 8 and my rent is \$900.00. I wish it could be lower than that. It's very hard I don't see how some single parents do it. Me, it's like I am always in the hole and I'm never going to get out. I have to believe that someday I can get what I need. I have no one to depend on. I don't ask anyone for anything. My sister gives the kids Christmas clothes and gifts.

Carmen: The hard part of course is financially were struggling sometimes. I had to put off going to school until she got older. I got pregnant when I was in school so I had to drop out of college. That was kind of hard...Trying to find a babysitter, a reliable one, a daycare center, an after school program, day camps, it was extremely a lot especially quality ones.

You need affordable ones with good intentions. It's hard and it's even harder today finding those types of things... Then we have to look into the day care centers and that was hard, 600, 700, 800 dollars a week sometimes, the day care centers that's ridiculous, that's rent. Then there is summer camp, what are you going to do with them in the summer, you have to have something for them in the summer. That's got to be very expensive.

Judy: They grow like weeds, you have to buy clothing and just the stress of the financial and planning around things. Not being able to always give them what they want.

In addition to the very practical financial worries, there is a psychological element as well. When she cannot provide her child all that they need and want, it makes it more frustrating for her.

Marcella: The financial—not being able to give them everything I would like to give them, for them not to have their own house. They really want to have a house. They really want to have their own room. They understand that I'm in a situation, but every time they go to my sister-in-law's house—she has a house upstate, and they love to go to that house, because it's like upstairs-downstairs. They have a backyard. I really want to give that to them. I guess eventually I will be able to.

Kay: Not having enough money to pay bills. I worry everyday, how am I going to pay for this and that. We get by.

Ada: The fact that I can never make ends meet. It's very difficult to make ends meet. I get backed up on my rent, which I currently am and my other bills to make sure I can provide for him. I have to take from one to give to the other. Those are my main stresses right now: finances, making ends meet and taking care of my parents.

Carmen: Finances. I will over stress about my finances. I do, I do. Nine times out of ten I don't need to but I still do. That's a big deal.

The high cost of health insurance was raised as an issue that adds to the financial hardships of single motherhood.

Judy: Health insurance. I pay out of pocket and pay more than I used to, maintaining their health.

These financial burdens and the mental energy that goes into insuring their livelihood is a daily struggle these women face. Given their lack of financial resources, they cannot outsource any of their needs. They are left to their own devices of creativity, ingenuity, and sheer strength.

### **Feelings and attitudes about singleness**

This section highlights the personal perspectives of the women as they share their feelings about their singleness and their attitudes about marriage. It begins with a look into the lives of the single mothers and explores their feelings about their singleness. The study of single people has been a growing field in social science. Given the increasing number of single people, the majority of whom are women, it becomes important to examine this segment of the population in order to fully understand the contexts and perspectives of this group. The most recent U.S. Census statistics inform us there are 95.7 million unmarried single Americans over the age of 15 (43% of all US residents) more than half of whom are women (<http://www.factfinder.census.gov>). Furthermore, New York state has the highest percentage of unmarried adults (50%) (<http://www.census.gov>).

When the single mothers of this study shared their experiences as single women, as anticipated, a variety of responses were offered. The answers, presented in this

section, fall along a continuum ranging from women being satisfied and fulfilled as a single woman to feeling very sad, lonely and depressed.

#### Benefits and freedoms of singleness

Many women shared feelings of satisfaction, happiness, and even pride when asked about their feelings in relation to their singleness. In fact, one woman talked about her singleness as a “badge of honor.”

Marcella: ...I think that back in the day when the stigma was like, “Oh my God, you never got married,” but now it’s like a badge of honor or the cool thing to be by yourself, so you don’t have to be dealing with nobody’s crap. That’s the way I see it. I see a lot of my friends who are married that can’t go out because he doesn’t want to...he’s not your father, he’s your mate...So I don’t understand that aspect.

Stacey: Being a single woman can be real fun, bubble baths, eating what you want to eat. When you don’t feel like cooking, you don’t have to cook. Don’t have to tell another person you’re going out. You tell your kids you’re going out.

Like Marcella many women verbalized their increased standards and expectations as far as what they want and need from a partner. Even though some expressed a desire to be in a relationship, they also expressed an appreciation and respect for the self that meant they are not going to settle in a relationship for the sake of having a partner. Both Kay and Selma are critical of how men treat women and as a result the women feel they are better off without men.

Kay: Some men just call point blank for sex. They don’t want to have any commitment, they won’t acknowledge my son, they just want to be intimate. It’s not just about intimacy. Why do you have to only call me to be intimate. I have learned really who is really there for me and who was

really not there for me. And most of the guys that I know that's what they are really all about. I'm not really about that. If I could meet just one person who was not like that or could look beyond what you see on the outside. Okay, you look like this or that, it's not just about how someone looks on the outside, it's not about that. It's not about hanging out, getting drunk or taking advantage of people – it's more. So I would just prefer to stay single. If this is what is out there to offer me than I don't want that.

Selma had enough of the anti-feminist practices of men and is fed up with the objectification of women by men. Male insensitivity is enough for her to be happy about her single life style.

Selma: It's either the first time they [men] meet you, you look fine, just the way you look and a couple of weeks later, "How come I never see you in a dress or you're always in flats, do you ever wear heels and your hair is always wild and frizzy now." It seems like women, who do they think women are, some kind of a commodity. Women are flesh and blood and they [men] don't care.

Darlene: I love it [being a single woman] sometimes. My only problem is trying to make ends meet. As far as that I could use a little help; all the other stuff I could do without. Men now are different from what they used to be. It's about a billion women to one man and they know it, so they are arrogant and selfish. Me myself, I can do without it.

### *Satisfaction with singleness*

Not all women felt so reassured about being single but they did express their satisfaction. Their expression of their satisfaction manifested differently than the women above. Teri felt settled as a single woman but is clear that she eventually wants more. And Selma brings up a topic that no one else raised, AIDS, and how it impacts sexuality and relationships. Being single for Selma is a safety strategy - a way for her to protect herself.

Teri: It's okay [being single]. Now that I am getting older, I want to get married some day. I want to go home to someone. And I don't want to still be looking for someone or dating at 40, I really don't. I would rather be settled down and have a home for me and my daughter. But if it doesn't happen, I'll survive, I'll live. I won't be stressed over it.

Selma: I'm good with that [keeping men at bay] because racially speaking AIDS is very prevalent among women in my age group and it's like when I look at relatives and friends who are married or have a live-in, there's so much going on from him having three girlfriends on the side to children coming out of nowhere, people getting all kinds of STDs. I know one lady, my girlfriend, whose husband died of AIDS, she has it now too because he was out there doing his thing in clubs and things, while she was at home and he brings it home to her. That's enough for me.

### *Complexities of being single*

A common response was complex ambivalence. In other words, when some women were asked about what it's like being single, they were able to articulate both a positive aspect of their status as well as challenges that accompany being single. In fact, one woman speaks about the simultaneous liberating and frustrating aspect of being a single woman.

Ada: [Being a single woman is] sometimes liberating, sometimes frustrating. There's a lot of loneliness because I don't have anyone to go home to have an adult conversation with. I think I've been alone for so many years, I can appreciate my space. Because I've been alone for so many years, I am actually afraid to consider going back into a relationship. Those are all my emotions. It's liberating in a way, but it's also frustrating and lonely in a way being a single woman. Sometimes you just want that person there to say everything will be okay and give you a hug.

Kay: Sometimes I like it and sometimes I don't. I have had lots of relationships with people. I tried a lot of relationships with all types of people too. Sometimes I feel I'm trying too hard. Sometimes I hate

being single and sometimes I like being single because sometimes I have learned men's true colors.

*The perils of singleness*

Juxtapose the feelings of satisfaction with sadness, loneliness, grief, and disappointment that many other women felt about being single. All of the women that shared disappointment about being single feel they are missing a partner and want to be in a relationship at this stage of their lives.

Marcella: Part of me misses the part that I never got married. I mean every girl wants to get married. I don't care how much they say, "I don't want to get married," everybody wants that party, that wedding dress. But I'm like I've gotten to the point already where that's not going to happen to me, so I'll live vicariously through one of my daughters if they get married. If they do, that's fine.

Carmen: Now [that my daughter is getting older] I see the need for a relationship. I kind of miss having that adult conversation that is not always with another girlfriend. Sometimes you have to have that. I miss that. It's hard when you're so independent that you want to share your life. I have just recently come to that conclusion... I don't like it [being single]. I finally came to that realization that I don't like it. I think that's one thing that I think I need to achieve is I do want that relationship. I do want to have a strong male partner that's on the same level as me.

Carmen consciously chose to be a single mother. She made the decision relatively early in her life that she was going to be single and raise a child. She was very firm in her stance about women doing it alone and having the inner strength to take on such an important job independently. During the course of time together Carmen acknowledged her strength and at the same time was able to admit her feeling that something was lacking. Carmen was not the only woman who felt that way.

Tricia: I am getting a little tired of being a single woman. I'm not really ready to be married per se. I don't want to be single anymore. I would like to have someone to share my life with at this point.

Some women underscore the difficulties of being single. The fact that you are no longer just a single woman but a single woman with a child makes it more challenging to find a partner. Below Martina highlights that not all people identify with the word "single" because they may have partners or be widows or in her case be a parent.

Judy: I think that's harder because it's hard to find someone who is interested in being with a single woman who has children. It's hard to find someone to commit to that relationship.

Martina: I said that I am not a single woman who doesn't have my son - I am a package deal these days, and for the rest of my life.

### **Feelings about marriage**

Connected to the feelings about being both single and mothers are the feelings about marriage. In spite of (or may be because of) the increasing numbers of singles, the cultural and social pressure to marry is strong. It was interesting to hear the women talk about their feelings of being single and it became apparent that feelings about marriage were not always parallel to feelings of singleness. More specifically, just because someone was proud of being single did not necessarily mean they were anti-marriage and vice versa. Despite the pro-marriage forces at play in our society, this finding may not be too surprising. Not all of the women felt as though they wanted to be married or in a relationship. As with most findings in this chapter, feelings about marriage ranged on a

continuum from vehemently believing and wanting marriage to being proud of being single with a host of other feelings in between.

*Unabashed desire to marry*

As several women shared their feelings about wanting to be married, they also shared the pressure to conform because they are the only ones within their families not married and they feel the pressure to fall in line with family patterns.

Ada: I am pro-marriage. I would have loved to have gotten married. But it didn't work out...My parents have been together for 47 years...My brothers are married. My sisters were married. I was the only one who was not married. I was the only one that never made it to the altar.

Marcella: Yeah, yeah I do believe in marriage, but I haven't found anyone I have wanted to marry. My parents were married, my grandparents were married, my brother's married, my sister was married and my other one has never been...I don't have a problem with marriage.

Tricia: I wish I was married. I don't want to be a single mom. It's challenging.

Remember Carmen who gained insight about her self and her desires and was able to share freely and openly that she felt something was lacking, she came to the realization that she did want to be married and that was the factor in her life that would make her feel more complete.

Carmen: In fact, it was after my mother passed away, I really had to go through a lot of soul searching and come to that conclusion that I think I want to be married. But I also don't want any more children. I strongly don't want any more children...I would like to be married. I finally had to admit that. It took a long time.

It was difficult for her given that she had earlier in her life made a conscious choice to be a single mother. Reconciling her feelings of the past and her present feelings was not an easy task. Similarly, Lorraine sought out single motherhood through artificial insemination and strongly yearns for a relationship. For her marriage is not simply about her own happiness and fulfillment but would be equally beneficial for her son.

Lorraine: I wish that I was in a relationship. I really really really wish that [my son] could see me in a healthy romantic relationship with a man that would be really good role modeling not only to see me in a different way, romantic with someone, but as a model for him. The ideal is for a couple to have children and raise kids. That's the ideal. I'm glad that I was able to do it and I wouldn't not have done it. I would do it again.

*Desires marriage with skepticism*

For some of the women, being a good mother is their primary concern and marriage is secondary. They share a desire to marry, but the act of marriage falls behind their commitment to raise their children independently. They expressed putting their child's needs before their own. They desire marriage but they will not accept it with conditions that are not of their choosing. Given that they have been single, their expectations and standards have increased. Their ability to do-it-alone has given them the strength to identify their needs and their willingness to not settle.

Betty: My thought is that if I ever get married it would be at like middle age, when I would be alone and would have time to contribute to somebody else. I can't even imagine before that time.

Some women were critical and made the distinction between their needs and desires as far as marriage is concerned. They feel they do not need to get or be married to fulfill any gap but they would like to be married if, and only if, it enhanced them.

Martina: You know, I kind of always knew that I would be a single parent. I would be a single parent, but eventually, I would probably get married...Ultimately, down the road, I would like to get married and have a large family—not necessarily a large family myself, but marry into a large family, so we can have holidays. I would like for him [my son] to be able to have holidays and stuff like that with family. But right now, he has so much energy that I can't even stop and deal with some other bullshit right now...My standards were different before I had [my son]. Now that I have him as far as having anyone in my life they would have to meet a whole different set of standards that are extremely high, because they would be around my son. Someone has to be worthy of my son, and that's going to take a lot, because as far as I am concerned, my son deserves that. Someone who's present, someone who's successful, someone who's intelligent, honest, outgoing, who ultimately has the traits that I want for my son. I would rather be alone than be with someone who doesn't possess that, because I don't want any negative influence on him.

Stacey: I wouldn't say it [marriage] makes a woman whole if she's married. I disagree with that. If I get married, great. If I don't, I don't. Just give me the strength to hold my own.

Tricia: I would like to do it in the future. I would definitely enjoy the institution of marriage. I have never been; I'm sure my day will come. I'll be patient. There are some women that think they HAVE to have a relationship, it's a myth, you don't need it. It helps things, but it's not a necessity. A lot of women put up with so much in their marriage because they don't not want to be married and for the kids and other issues and they might be miserable to stay together because of the kids.

Arlene: I am not going to be with somebody just because...Sometimes I would love to be married and other days I wouldn't. I think my kids need to feel a father sense. I am just going to be an old maid with three kids and a grandkid and no mate because these men out here these days are really fickle and crazy and you would think that an older man would be different. But the older they are, the stupider they are.

Feelings can be conflictual too. Teri wants to be married but questions the idea if the relationship is more of a headache and heartache than pleasure.

Teri: It's not too bad [being a single mother]. It's not as bad as people think it is. I guess it would be better if we had a mate but some people who are married it's like women who are married are like single mothers. They still have to do everything. It's pathetic, what do you need a husband for. I don't know if it's better to be married, or be single, I really don't know. I mean you have some men, rare, that really helps out, that is rare.

Beverly, Darlene, and Judy speak share their fears about marriage. Their fears stem from various places, yet they all share this common theme. For some marriage was linked to an abusive past. They experienced abuse in past relationships and were adamant about not raising their child[ren] in an abusive environment, whereas for Judy her fear of marriage was not identified as stemming from familial abuse, but from high incidences of failed marriages in our society. She was also critical that someone else (state, government) has the power to formally sanction the definition of the "family."

Beverly: It [marriage] can be good but I was always fearful of getting stuck in a bad marriage and you can't get out unless you gave your life for it. I always wanted that prince charming. Someone to open that door for me, and never be so mean and hard, even African-American men can be. I don't want to be cursed at; I don't want to be put down. I want just to be part of a team. None of that friction, I was afraid of all of that. I never wanted my kids to see no man beat me up or torture us or anything. So I kept that away, far, far away.

Darlene: Yes I do [believe in marriage]. If a guy comes down and says he has a note from god, I'm there; otherwise I'm not risking it. I can't trust no man around my daughter that's just how I was raised.

Judy: I've always wanted to do [marry] but it scares me. That failure rate, it's almost like I already have a family, I don't really need that piece of paper that legally makes us [me and my children] a family.

## Well-being and satisfaction

Overall, the women report high levels of satisfaction in their lives. There were many components in their lives that brought happiness. When the women were asked about what makes them happiest in life, the most common response was their children.

Judy: Those three little kids. Just to see them, if they get home before me, they smile and hey you're home mom. The little things they do. When they say I love you mommy. It's the little things that they do. [My daughter] gets up in the morning and says I love you mom and it the little bonuses that say I'm not doing too bad of a job.

Martina: My son makes me happiest. He probably always will though.

Marcella: My kids, definitely. They are the ones that get me out of my blue funk sometimes...Sometimes that makes me melt the evilness away.

Selma: The kids. I mean they are my entertainment. They are my everything. They are my whole social life basically. Through them I meet other single mothers, even though we don't become the best of friends.

Feeling close to their child and having a close knit relationship was fulfilling for the women.

Carmen: I like our closeness. Me and my daughter have a close-knit relationship. We talk all the time. Me and my mom had the same relationship, we were extremely close. I think I have done a good job at that.

Randi: [My daughter] appreciates me and I appreciate her. She is at this age now, and she can understand what I am talking about. We can both have good conversation. That makes me happy in my life right now.

Darlene: Our closeness. I know her like a book and she knows me just as well.

In addition, work was important to most of the women. They found it gratifying and rewarding. It was a chance to get some of the social needs met. Most of the women, with the exception of two, work in the field of human services. They highlighted the joy that work brings them. Although they were not overly optimistic or uncritical of their work environments, they seem to find meaning and satisfaction in their jobs.

Kay: I really enjoy going to work. I hear some people complain a lot about going to work but I like work. It's relaxing. They are like part of my family. My department is good, they know [my son]. My director is really good she always understands and has an ear if you want to talk... She is like a little mom. She always gives me advice. She has two daughters and she doesn't dress it up. She tells you the real deal, she doesn't tell you what you want to hear and that's probably why I like going to work. I get my work done. But I really enjoy going to work.

Teri: That I have a job considering they had layoffs at my agency in May, 25 people, 3 people in my department. So I am grateful to have a job considering the way things are now.

Randi: Knowing that I do have a good job.

Tricia: I love working. It keeps me busy and a positive frame of mind and provides a role model for my daughter and the world of work is what you want to seek and not other means of financial gain.

Spiritual faith and belief in God brought several women happiness. Their religious conviction brought peace and happiness, making their lives as single mothers more grounded.

Kay: I like church, church is important. It makes me feel really good. Sometimes I go to church and I can be angry at [my son] and people there are so warm. It gives me perspective.

Beverly: That I believe in God...I was introduced to god at 9 years old by my mother. If I was ever afraid or scared or worried or nervous I always

learned to pray and if I prayed I would feel good. And if I feel good it would come out good. I would say, "I'm not going to worry too much, I'm going to leave it in gods hands." And it always worked out that like. Having that spiritual connection really saved my life a lot of times.

Stacey: Having the lord in my life and then my son [cried a lot here].

Being healthy is what some women reported as making them happiest about their lives.

Teri: That I am healthy.

Ada: That I wake up every morning. That I have my son, that I have my parents, and that I have a job.

Many women were very happy about their personal accomplishments. Their accomplishments ranged from recognizing their own inner strength to having pride in their independence and their ability to meet their financial responsibilities. Each of them is addressing happiness with their self-confidence they have achieved and the self-assuredness they feel.

Wanda: The way I vision whatever I am doing. I am somebody who is always thankful. I am thankful because I see what I did for myself.

Randi: ...I believe now that I know what I want. I don't have time to mess around with that. I know when to stop, don't go there. It's hard to recover from that. That makes me happy, knowing that I see that now.

Darlene: All my bills get paid.

### **Impact of single mother headed households on children**

There is little doubt or dispute that being a single mother has impacts on children. How and to what degree is the question. Experts from various social science disciplines purport to know the impact that single motherhood has on the well being and achievement levels of children (McLanahan, 1994, 2001, Poponoe & Whitehead, 2003). Interestingly, however, no previous findings have used single mothers themselves as the “experts” to share their perception of how their family form affects their children. This section does just that – it allows the women to speak from their own perspective about the impact of single motherhood on their own children.

Judy begins this section by sharing that her three children are indifferent to her being a single mother and all of her children have her as a constant in their lives that produces and reproduces a sense of security for them. The fact that these woman can offer their children themselves as a “constant” is viewed by them as having positive impacts on their child along with the amount of attention they have to offer. They spoke about how empowering the experience of being raised by a single parent can be for their children.

Judy: I don't think that me being a single mom has a negative aspect, nothing negative on them. They have always had mom, I'm the one constant in their life.

Wanda feels strongly about the example that she has set for her daughter and tells us that her daughter is proud of her.

Wanda: She [my daughter] is very proud of it [my status as a single mother]. I am always there for her.

Tricia highlights the undivided attention that her daughter receives given the fact that she is being raised by a single mother and she is an only child. Time does not need to be divided for anyone else.

Tricia: She is an only child and she gets all the attention and all that she asks for. She enjoys being the center of attention.

Another impact of being raised by a single mother is that it models independence for children.

Randi: The independent thing, she's pretty much independent.

Carmen: I think [my daughter] sees that she can be independent. I think she sees that women can take care of themselves.

The lack of a father in the child's life is a frequently cited concern that the women raised as having an impact on their child's life. Most of the time the child expresses to their mother a yearning for a father figure. Some children feel lonely and sad that other children have a father in their lives and they do not. They feel a sense of lacking.

Carmen: [My daughter] wants her father in her life, especially when she was about 8 or 9 years old is when the questions started happening, "Mommy why didn't you marry Daddy. I don't understand why you and Daddy aren't together. I don't understand why Daddy doesn't come and see me more often. Why doesn't Daddy buy me things." That's when I started seeing how it affected her more than it affected me.

Darlene: [My daughter] wants her step daddy....Her wanting her dad first started when she was around 8 years old in on Father's Day in school everybody was making, like I said ignorance is a trip, I am going on the assumption that everything was cool because she never said anything about him. I didn't know she felt that void until she was about 9 years old. When they were making the presents for Father's Day and she didn't have a father to make one for that's when I realized it meant something to her.

Martina: I think before I had mentioned the only thing that down the line may be a problem with being a single parent is questions about a father not being in the picture, because his other friends will have fathers—or at this school, mothers and mothers, or dads and dads, but that male energy may become a question for him...I will obviously have to tell [my son about his father] when he is older and has questions. But I want to wait for an age where he understands that the person who was his biological father has nothing to do with who he is as an individual. I don't want him to feel that this person was a bad person, and therefore I'm a bad person. Overall, he is just a sperm donor...I don't want him to think that because his biological father was a bad person that that makes him a bad person.

Stacey: Not having a father he feels that we're not a whole or complete family. It makes him very sad.

Because their father and mother are not together, Selma feels her children lack role models about couple relationships. Instead they have been subject to a tumultuous relationship between their mother and father who do not get along.

Selma: I guess [in a single mother headed household] has its own dysfunction in a way because they don't know what it's like to live in a two family parent home. Everything is one-sided as far as they know. Everything is mom oriented. They have contact with their fathers, but he's not there so they don't see normal interaction, woman and man, husband and wife or how it's supposed to be. They see our dislike for each other. They see that, they hear it [between mom and dad]. There are times when they tell me, "Why are you angry with him?" [cried]

Ada: The negative part of being a single mom and how it impacts on my son, is that he is alone all the time. Because I am always so busy doing so many other things and it all has to do with the family, I don't have the time he would like me to have with him one on one....He's getting old enough to feel like we need a male figure in the house and I think the reason he needs that is because he wants me to be able to spend more time with him.

The lessons learned in this chapter are simple: single mothers can identify both strengths and challenges of their situations in terms of motherhood, being single, marriage, and how their lifestyle impacts their children's well-being.

The next chapter examines how the single mothers of this study grapple with society's view of them and ends with their sharing programmatic ideas about services that single mothers need.

## CHAPTER VII

### Reactions to public opinion: Practice and policy solutions

This chapter addresses the issue of perception from the viewpoint of the women, perception about (a) how the public and society characterize single mother headed households and (b) what single mothers suggest about policies and programs that would aid them in their lives. Single mothers are often the target and subject of debate from a policy and practice standpoint. Policy makers, researchers, scholars, and elected officials create policy for single mothers, yet these policies and practices are not typically informed by single mothers themselves.

The chapter begins with her perception about the negative stigma much of the culture holds for single mothers in an attempt to understand if the current culture wars influence how they perceive themselves.

#### **Single mothers view of cultural perceptions and misperceptions about single motherhood**

The women in the study had strong opinions about how the public views single mothers in general. Most of their perceptions about the way the public views them and other single mothers were negative. They feel that society wrongfully blames them - leaves the father out of the equation - and does not see the whole picture, societal pressure is aimed at her and her alone.

I'm sure they [people in general] think, careless teenagers, starting life thinking they know all these things. They don't think about the fact that they didn't become single moms on their own. It takes two. It doesn't

happen over night. A lot of the blame from society falls on the mother and they forget that there was a father that helped produce the children (Judy).

It was revealing to hear the women, in a consensus, share their thoughts about the societal presumptions made of single mothers. Consensus was that society has negative opinions of single mothers and that opinion is judgmental. In addition, women shared that negative stereotypes are hurtful especially when they are directed at them. The statements below reiterate the frustration of the respondents and their experience with the pejorative comments and thoughts others have regarding their lives.

### *Reigning Stereotypes*

Stereotypes are powerful forces that affect how people understand a phenomenon. They are usually oversimplified generalizations that are imbued with racist, classist and sexist undertones. Several of the women highlighted classist misperceptions that all single mothers are welfare recipients.

Martina: The other thing that bothers me, people think of me when they meet me—you hear a lot of things about single mothers on welfare...I think there are stereotypes that go along with being a single mother.

Darlene: Single moms [are the targets of public attention]...the ones who try not to do something for themselves, like the ones on welfare.

Along with classism, stereotypes can be driven by racist assumptions as well. Race was an issue that women felt wrongfully informs people's perceptions and shapes the way they view single mothers. This racialized perception directly affects the lives of these

women. They feel hurt by the conjecture others make about their lives based on their skin color.

Beverly: Yeah, I know they have [people in general have opinions about single mothers], especially African-American [single mothers]. They think oh they're irresponsible or they just want to make lots of babies, or they can't keep a stable relationship. But it takes two people.

Selma: Yeah, they do [society has opinions about single mothers]. I am 35 now [and was 22 years of age at the time of birth of her first child], but when my two older children were in strollers, I am thin, I have always been thin right, and I had double strollers with these guys and I would go places with them on the train or the bus and the first thing people would think is teenager. They would comment. I would physically pick the stroller up and walk it down the stairs and maybe I would hear, "That's a shame. She can't be more than 17 and look at all those children she has." I don't pay them no mind.

People also make gendered assumptions about what mothers have to offer and what fathers have to offer without knowing the particulars of the family's situation.

Randi: I have one child, when a mother has four or five kids, two boys and three girls and whatever and they can't handle the boys, people will say, "She's not being a good mother, she can't handle her boys. A man should come in there and help her."

In addition to classist, racist, and sexist assumptions about single mothers, many of the women felt that people inappropriately presuppose single mothers are questionable people who lack proper morals and are bad women.

Stacey: I think [people] think sometimes they are home wreckers. I think they think we did something wrong along the way to drive the other person off. I don't think they think too many positive things.

Ada: I think [people have opinions about single mothers]. If you were to ask my dad that, he would say, "She is not respectable because here she is a single mother and she has never been married." People definitely have

opinions about single mothers...I have been able to thankfully provide for my son as a single mother and not had to depend on public assistance or anything else or gone out there and sold drugs because you see a lot of single moms so overwhelmed that they sell drugs or prostitute themselves.

Tricia: I think people have a lot of negative [thoughts of single mothers]. I think that they think single mothers are lazy and put off doing, they are not responsible. They are irresponsible for putting themselves in that position. They don't look at all the factors involved.

Carmen: I think they [people in general] are very judgmental of them. I think the ones who made the conscious decision are never brought to the forefront. It's always the ones who do this by accident. So, they are the ones that tend to be picked on the most. Because usually when it's an accident it's a teenage mom or someone that is not as well financially stable. I think they get picked on a lot. I think people are very judgmental.

Another form of discrimination that Carmen shed light upon was how some single mothers are discussed at the expense of other types of single mother groups. She underscores how some single mothers are fore grounded while others are back grounded, which helps to shape how we understand this phenomenon. In other words, she states that society has an incomplete picture of single mothers by focusing on certain segments of the population while ignoring others, which helps reinforce a hierarchy of motherhood.

The misconceptions of others can help reinforce institutional forms of discrimination that can adversely affect single mothers.

Betty: ...I worked in human resources for a long time and they see single moms and they think, oh gosh, she's going to call in sick because the kids are sick. She can't stay late because she has to be there for her kids. I know that from the work environment.

This type of stereotyping is not unique to single mothers. Women in general experience higher rates of labor market inequality and workplace discrimination (Albelda, Drago, & Shulman, 2001). Because many of them are also mothers or potential mothers is potentially another layer of discrimination they face (Crittenden, 2001).

Historical shifts in the way we define families have changed over time and as a result the way people feel and think about single mothers can be subject to these changing representations. What some people may have thought about single mothers during one period in time may not be the same today. Views today are more tolerant of single mother headed households than they were in the past according to some of the women in the study.

Teri: Yeah, the ones who were born in the 1930s and 40s, like my parents because when I told them I was pregnant my mom was like, "You're going to be a single parent?" I said, "I guess so, no one has asked me to marry them." My father was like it's okay, it's okay, he said he was happy and glad because I don't want you get old alone and be alone like your aunt. His aunt died alone, she didn't have any kids. But things are different now. It's like, some people still are like, you're not married and I say, "No I'm not." I could get married and then get a divorce. There are plenty of women now having babies without husbands. I think you can raise kids just as good as a two-parent household. What's the difference, now they have same sex parents, what are you going to do, times are changing. You can't judge people.

Kristine: Their viewpoints are more relaxed today than they were 19 years ago. When I had my son, I felt a little stigma attached to it. Now, there are plenty of women having children who are not married.

Interestingly, Marcella raises geographic difference and shares that being a single mother in New York City is a much more commonplace occurrence and therefore less

stigmatized. Moreover, she feels that living in this urban environment, people have more serious concerns than to worry about the status of marriage in family households.

Marcella: Yeah [I think the public has opinions about single mothers]. I think not so much if you were born and raised in New York, because that's such a norm, but if you come from like the Midwest or something, where everybody's married—you know what I'm saying? Here, it's more of a melting pot, so you get to deal with a whole bunch of different living situations that you never would be dealing with in Iowa or South Dakota, where everybody is pretty much the same. But I don't think people make such a big deal anymore. They're more worried about whether the train station is going to get blown up than whether or not somebody is married to whoever they have kids with. I think it would be the least in a chain of worries right now.

Overall, the women shared that people often produce and reproduce stereotypes about single mothers that are based on false perceptions that can be driven by classist, racist, gendered, moralist assumptions as well as being influenced by generational and geographic differences. In spite of all the reactive statements that were shared, the women were also fully capable of proactive thinking and offered many recommendations for practice and policy that would be useful in their lives.

### **Policy discussions and programmatic ideas for single mothers**

There was a variety of programs and policies offered that could advantageously affect the lives of single mothers. The women in this study shared their views about what would be most beneficial. In the past, policies and programs have been notoriously set by individuals who are disconnected from the experience itself or from people that are

immediately affected. This section aims to right that wrong and offers their perspective of what is needed in their lives. A plethora of ideas were generated.

Many of the women talked from their personal experience and shared that they had either benefited from a similar program or that they could have greatly benefited from one had it been available and/or accessible. In contrast, many of the women developed their ideas for programs based on stereotypes of single mothers rather than as a result of their own experience, both are presented below.

The ideas generated below closely reflect the challenges that the women in the study shared in chapter three. The ideas range from parenting classes to multi-service programs (job training, money management, computer training) to affordable daycare to flextime policies along with many more.

### *Pragmatic solutions*

Parenting classes, along with multi-service programs, were the most common suggestions for what would be most beneficial for single mothers.

Teri: Parenting courses on how to deal with certain situations. It would be really stressful on some single parents, dealing with day-to-day stuff of life.

Carmen: I think a lot of times people assume that because you had a child, that you know how to take care of a child and I see so many errors that young parents make when they don't have that older mom to say that's the wrong way to do that, that's the wrong way to do that, how to wash the clothes...I would definitely set that up along with a support system.

Judy: First is parenting classes. A lot of single moms came from probably the same situation where their moms were single moms. They don't have the background or ability to deal with it.

Multi-service programs that address the plethora of needs of single mothers was another suggestion made. Literacy, money management classes, counseling, after-school programs for children are a few of the ideas put forth.

Beverly: Life experiences and literacy, then cooking and fun for yourself. Pampering time. Stress relievers.

Darlene: Money management skills, how to manage your money. Mechanics skills and housekeeping skills. That's what I think are the most important ones...I think the most important thing is every child who wants to go to college should be able to so they can better themselves so they don't have to struggle like their parents.

Kristine: Counseling services, educational referral services, after-school services, tutorial programs.

Betty: I think there ought to be more programs for children after-school. They do not have things like that as much anymore. There ought to be free programs that children can go have after school that are a little academic with sports or recreation because you have to monitor everything they do because there really is nothing for them to do.

Judy: I would have some sort of counseling so they could discuss their issues with someone who isn't going to be judgmental. That's important.

Marcella: I think they need programs in quality daycare, empowerment classes for women to help them get their GED, go to get their degree...And of course there are a lot of other things, like placement, helping you to find quality housing.

Much like the multi-service programs, some women recommended setting up resource centers where single mothers could go, be with women who are experiencing similar situations, and get support as well as resources and referrals. These resource centers would also be child friendly and develop simultaneous programs for children that could allow for mother and child to have time apart in the safe zone of a guarded space.

Kay: I like the set up of resource centers where people could come. It could be like a refuge. If people want to come and just get away from the hustle, just come and relax. Nobody is going to ask you questions, no one is going to judge you. You can come alone or come with your kids. We could all get together, we could have groups, not just for moms, but for dads too. Everybody could come together. We could talk about different topics; we could have different activities. We could take the children off the parent's hands. We could have mentors. Sometimes moms want to be by themselves even if for four hours or three hours. Someone could say I'll going to take them off your hands for a while. I'm going to take them to the movies or roller-skating or whatever. People could come in and give testimony to give them encouragement. Some people just might want to give up. There would be resources for them, housing lots of single parents struggle with housing, that's a big deal for single parents...Childcare is a big concern for single mothers...A lot of people are forced to leave their children at home, they really don't have anybody. I think that's a big thing. I think they should have more programs for single moms. And more programs for children of single parents. More subsidies to help the parents get what they need. Some parents don't even have the money to pay for these basic types of things. That is very important. Emphasize that, get more programs for single families.

Another important role of the resource centers would be to provide mutual support.

Carmen: It's very good to have other single moms to talk to, hash out problems with. You would be amazed at how many of them have the same problems

As you have already read, many of the women we have heard from mentioned the need for childcare. Childcare seems to have become a universal problem, particularly, childcare that is quality and affordable. Daycare would not only allow the women to go to work with the reassurance that their children are safe and properly cared for but a secondary gain could be that the woman could advance her own career opportunities.

Marcella: Quality daycare and programs to help women better themselves, empower them.

Stacey: ...Another thing allow women to further their career but they don't have the proper service for someone to take care of their kids.

Arlene: Babysitting, day care services.

Lorraine: Women need on-site day care. Having maternity leave is important. The biggest issue for me has been childcare. Quality care is too expensive.

Selma: Incredible childcare program with transportation because a lot of problems with parents, although it's not me in particular, they can't find a babysitter. Sometimes the sitters hours conflict with travel time to and from work and then I said childcare with transportation because how are they going to do two things at once.

Birth control education as a way to empower women to make decisions about their reproductive health was presented as another idea for needed programs.

Carmen: I think they [single mothers] should be educated in birth control about whether or not they want to have more children. Even though I had made a conscious decision to have my daughter, I knew I didn't want to have anymore so that's how come she is the only one I got. Whereas some people choose to have more than one child. I think it's very difficult to have more than one child by yourself. It's hard with just one. I feel for people who have two, three, or four children on their own.

Stacey: Sex classes, how to protect yourself, contraceptives. You should use that regardless of how old you are. I think that's a start.

Employment training, particularly training to acquire job skills, was raised.

Teri: Learning job skills, counseling as far as furthering their education and learning basically skills. Companies and jobs are looking for certain kinds of skills to get the job.

Judy: Definitely a lot of single moms are young definitely an education program where they could get training to get better jobs.

Flexitime policies were offered as a way for parents to spend more time with their child.

Flexitime programs offer mothers the opportunity to create a work schedule to their specifications. The several women in the study that were fortunate to have flex-time were adamant about the benefits of such a program. It allowed them the freedom to stress less about work/family divide and the women were generally more satisfied with their places of employment.

Kay: I leave work anytime between 3:45 and 5 PM. I get there at 8:15. I have flextime. I can get there anytime between 8 and 10 AM. I don't take an hour lunch; I take a half an hour lunch so I can leave a half an hour early....it's beneficial.

Arlene: Flexible programs that work with mothers. A program that mothers could come in anytime and someone is there to watch the kids. Programs that accommodate the parent, because jobs don't accommodate you, even if it's a program that comes to your house...If you're just starting your job you have to take whatever shift they give you and that's hard for single mothers. When the kids are a little older it's a little better then they can stay home by themselves. They shouldn't have to stay at home by themselves, that's alienating. You need to interact with your child.

Related to job training and work place family friendly policies, more financial support for single mothers is needed. Financial support can take on numerous forms: from breaks for first time homeowners to more affordable housing in general to allowing women to keep their jobs without the threat of layoffs. Here are some examples.

Selma: We also need access to first time home ownership, I have never owned a home...I would like to talk about increasing the salaries and wages for people so that they can make it. They don't have to be overly

comfortable but just enough so they don't have to struggle too much. And let's get some affordable housing.

Ada: I think I would try to devise a program where you could get better housing for parents. Me for instance, as much as I work, I pay over \$700.00 for a one-bedroom apartment. I am having a hard time...My ideal thing is having a big building where I could put the less-fortunate working mothers where they wouldn't have to worry that they don't have enough rent to pay or enough food or the support system they need...If there is some place I could go. I fall between the cracks. I either don't make too much money or I make too much of it, whether it's a dollar more or two dollars more. That puts me at a disadvantage...I would find a way to help women like me who fall between the cracks all the time.

Beverly: Don't lay them off their jobs. That makes them feel sad. If they're working hard and they show that incentive, let them have it, let them keep it. Keep them working. If they are working, don't mess with them.

Several women mentioned that tax breaks would be advantageous for their families.

Teri: Take out less taxes for single mothers. Single mothers should have a tax break. Only because when I put her down as a dependent, after I came back to work after my maternity leave, there was an extra 56.00 dollars in my check. How's that going to help me, I just had a new born baby, 56.00 dollars, what's that going to do for me?

Kristine: There should be incentive for them financially so they could get services for their kids. Tax breaks and anything additional would be helpful.

Stacey: They need more financial aid. They need a tax write off or something. They did this thing about getting money back, they should do this more often. Grants for your kids to go to college. Supporting their education and their kid's education.

In addition to tax breaks, tougher child support enforcement laws would help single mothers out financially.

Stacey: ...[G]ive the fathers who try and run away from their responsibility of supplying financial aid to their children, provide them

Judy: Definitely a lot of single moms are young definitely an education program where they could get training to get better jobs.

Flextime policies were offered as a way for parents to spend more time with their child.

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*Fundamental suggestions*

In addition to the pragmatic suggestions they offered, women also spoke about ideological shifts that would be needed in order to change the public's perception of who single mothers are and what they may need to enrich their lives. These ideological shifts would mean that the public needs to rethink their negative positions/attitudes about single mother headed households. Furthermore, the media needs to pay closer attention to how they depict single mothers. Below the women offer suggestions as to how we can achieve these goals.

Women talked about the need for society to support single mothers and relinquish the prevailing notion that they are a detriment to society. In fact, several women talked about that fact that single mother families are "good" families and can be strong families as well.

Tricia: Don't look down on single moms, they are trying so hard. There is no booklet to tell you how to do this thing right...To be compassionate. That's all. Don't be so judgmental because they are single moms. Just open your hearts to them.

Martina: ...It's just another form of family. There is nothing wrong with single motherhood. Children can actually benefit from this type of family. People think that children lack, but they don't. They get love, the most important thing for a child's development.

Ada: A lot of single mothers are courageous. They are strong-willed, but they need the help you are not providing...Support, additional support for single mothers to be able to live better with their children...Definitely we are courageous women and strong women.

To stop the demonization of single mothers is another way that we could promote a healthy image of single mother headed households that could ideally help to overcome the stereotypes and discrimination that women face.

Carmen: Not to be so critical. That sometimes people do make this choice consciously and that it's not such a bad horrendous thing to happen. I think our family structures have changed tremendously over the last twenty years. So to always bring up the forefront the ones that are doing the least good, try to bring to the forefront the ones that are doing the most good.

Martina: They've used these welfare moms to show who we are, but that's not who we are at all. And I think you have to be a very strong woman to be a single parent, very strong and very dedicated.

Judy: To be a single mom isn't a choice, it's a responsibility. The children are here – whether their fathers are or are not – they need to be taken care of. I think the biggest thing that people need to know is that it's not just the mother's choice, it's also the father's choice to walk out on his family.

Setting priorities that are family friendly which requires or demands a redistribution of power and resources in our society was another creative solution for how to begin to tackle breaking down barriers that keep single mothers - and all families for that matter – living in conditions not of their choosing.

Marcella: Stop wasting money bombing Iraq and give the money to us to take care of our kids...if he [the President] gave us some money that he spent on one bomb, do you know how much better the childcare and the lives of all the women in this country could be? He's so busy killing all those people over there...So I would tell him that: "You're so busy bombing, bombing. You're a good old boy from Texas that thinks that the whole thing is to be the last cowboy standing. And that's not what the whole thing is about because you'll be the last cowboy standing with a whole bunch of illiterate people that are bums, crack heads, crack dealers."

Now that we have heard from the voices of the women in this study, the subsequent chapter offers a summary and discussion of the findings. It is an attempt to synthesize the material and offer points of comparison to previous findings in the literature.

Commonalities with other findings as well as unique contributions made by these women are highlighted.

## CHAPTER VIII

### Summary and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of a subgroup of single mothers, specifically how they made the decision about becoming a single mother, under what contexts that occurred, the influences on that decision, how they cope, how they feel about single motherhood and marriage, and finally what programs would be beneficial to them. The findings of this study revealed that various factors in their lives help them in their pursuit towards motherhood and the process of decision-making is more complex than previously suggested in the literature. As you have read, the women shared their unique stories and the researcher teased out the common threads. Key findings are highlighted below.

While the women shared their stories about being never married working women and mothers, they uncovered richness in their lives and happiness as single mothers. Just as other mothers, these women also revealed some of the challenges they face, but overall, they have transcended barriers and are living lives that are more than satisfactory. The women do not perceive themselves as “victims” but rather see themselves as strong and empowered women who thrive, rather than merely survive.

The findings are organized in the following manner. First, is a summary and discussion of decision-making processes, coping strategies, and shared expectations. Second, is a summary of program recommendations, implications for future research, and policy implications. Lastly, methodological limitations are presented.

The goal of this study was to understand the lived experiences of never married working single mothers who are independently raising their children. Several findings are worth mentioning upfront that were surprising; each of these are explored in greater depth throughout the chapter. The average age of the women at the time of birth of their first born was older than expected. The mean age was 29 years old. Seven of the women were over the age of 30 year when they became first time mothers. This statistic was surprising in that it is higher than the national average and particularly interesting given that the overwhelming majority of women were women of color. Another surprising finding was the extent to which the women take care of their family without the help of family and friends. It was assumed going into the study the women would systemically rely on others to fill in for their family's needs. Most of the women have support networks but the support they receive does not appear to be instrumental. In addition to managing rather independently, all but two women lived alone and took pride in their self-sufficiency. It was discovered that many of the single mothers openly expressed ambivalence about being single women and single mothers. For the women in this study, being a single mother is both a powerful symbol of strength and courage while at the same time it is instrumentally challenging. Choice can be understood in a similar light: choosing single motherhood, it was revealed, is also a complicated concept that requires a more nuanced examination than what has been previously offered in the literature. Overall, the never married working single mothers of this study offer new insight into the lives of single mothers, yet they are not so different from other single mothers in many ways.

The research project additionally set out to explore how class as a dynamic influenced the lives of these women. Surprisingly, class did not play a role to the degree that was expected. This is both a result of the research design and the researcher's failure to adequately address the issue. In addition, race was an issue that was not sufficiently addressed, which could have provided useful and interesting information.

### **Decision-Making**

#### *Becoming a single mother: degrees of choice and women's agency*

In this study women's choice to be a single mother was explored. A leading question driving this project was: does choice apply to these women, and if so, how? What did their choices look like? Did they choose to become mothers and how was their decision-making process different from more wealthy women?

It was revealed that choice is not a simple, cut and dry construct. Choice appears to be complicated for these women. Not all women intentionally sought out their pregnancies but that did not mean they did not consciously choose to be single mothers. In fact, the majority of women (10) report choosing single motherhood, but only 4 women pre-planned their pregnancies. For less than half of the women (8) becoming a single mother was not an explicit choice, a first choice - or even a second choice - nevertheless, all of the women made the decision to move forward with their pregnancies. All exercised agency, but in different ways. Once they made the decision, more than

three-quarters of them report being happy and satisfied with their lives and deeply love their children.

One element in the degree of choices is whether or not she planned her pregnancy beforehand. Of the 18 women, 7 planned to get pregnant and actively tried to get pregnant; 11 women were surprised by their pregnancy. Ten women said they chose to be single mothers while 8 said they did not choose to be single mothers and they wanted to be with a partner.

According to the women, planning one's pregnancy is not an indicator of whether or not she feels she decided to choose to be a single mother. We learned that six of the women who had unplanned pregnancies feel they still made the decision to be a single mother. They consciously chose to raise their children alone rather than be in an unhealthy relationship. They desperately wanted to keep their child, they felt capable and strong to do it alone, or never had the intention of staying with the father.

Four women pre-planned their pregnancy and actively sought out single motherhood. In addition, it became apparent there is a difference between choosing motherhood and choosing single motherhood. All of the women chose to be mothers and a little over half of them consciously and simultaneously made the decision to be single mothers. The decision to be a mother took priority over the cost of raising them alone.

It is my contention that choice can be understood more clearly if we think of the many facets of choice. Just because a woman did not consciously seek out pregnancy without a partner in her life does not mean that she is a victim of her circumstance. She too made a choice on some level about how to move forward in her life and determined

what would be best for her and her child. Below is a closer look at what facets of choice looked like for these women.

#### Facets of Choice

<u>Deliberate (intended) SMC = 4</u>	<u>Non-deliberate (mistimed) SMC = 6</u>
Planned pregnancy	Unplanned pregnancy
Stated SMC	Stated SMC
<u>Marriage and mother seekers = 3</u>	<u>SM by default = 5</u>
Planned pregnancy	Unplanned pregnancy
Did not choose single motherhood	Did not choose single motherhood

Most of the literature makes assumptions about how women become mothers based primarily on class and race attributes (Ludtke, 1997; Mattes, 1994; Siegel, 2000). More specifically studies about poor and working-class single mothers fail to explore how they made decisions about their pregnancy, assuming it was an accident and that choice was not a factor. Furthermore, they assume that poor and working-class women do not exercise agency in the same way as did professional women. When the term “choice” is used, it is typically reserved for middle and upper-class women only, many of whom are referred to as “single mothers by choice.” Because of their socioeconomic status their decisions are more accepted and tolerated. They have resources to legitimate their decision and they are more likely to be revered. In the past, questions about decision-making have not been posed to working-class and poor single mothers. Without this information, assumptions are made that poorer women cannot or do not make decisions in ways that mirror or are comparable to middle and upper-class women; rather they are having children as a result of poor decisions and irresponsible behaviors.

The women in this study understand and operate within a different framework of choice. They don't use the word or concept of "choice" in the same way as single mothers in other studies (Bock, 2000; Hertz and Ferguson, 1998). In these studies The label "single mothers by choice" is reserved for women who are characterized as mostly older professional women who seek out information about single parenthood before they become pregnant. Many of them rely on donor insemination. Their pregnancy materializes in a way that is different from the women in this study. A value is placed on the label "single mother by choice" that carries much more positive connotations than a single woman who gets pregnant by accident or a woman who has sexual intercourse to conceive. Furthermore, donor insemination requires a tremendous amount of resources and money. The way society views how a single mother gets pregnant and the value they place on her pregnancy is a result of class bias. In this study only one of the respondents sought out donor insemination and the rest got pregnant as a result of sexual intercourse.

This research revealed that never married, working women make the decision to be single mothers too, even in some cases when her pregnancy was not planned. Despite their unequal statuses and access to resources, most of the women celebrate their agency and exercise their power. The way the concept of choice has been previously applied has been too narrow. These findings offer a more complex understanding of choice for single mothers.

*Becoming a single mother: the cascade of influences*

The decision-making process does not rest solely on how she became a single mother. Regardless of how she became pregnant (surprise/accident or intentionally), she engages in a thoughtful act of deciding how to proceed. A multitude of influences affect her decision about whether or not to proceed with the pregnancy. No one offered a single variable as the deciding factor; rather a cascade of influences shaped her decision<sup>32</sup>. There were many factors that influenced the women's choice to become a single mother. All of the women talked about multiple influences in their own lives that helped them make the decision.

Cascade of influences

Desire to nurture  
 Advancing age  
 Desire to be partnered  
 Leaving unhealthy relationships  
 Strong support systems  
 Feeling self-sufficient  
 Feelings about abortion  
 Prepared for independent motherhood

Age

One common variable which strongly influenced more than half of the women in the study was advancing age<sup>33</sup>. The mean age of the women studied was 29 years old. The range was 20 – 43 years. Somewhat by researcher design, the women tended to be

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<sup>32</sup> As defined by the American Heritage Dictionary (1996) cascade is defined as “a succession of stages, processes, operations, or units.”

<sup>33</sup> As stated in the methodology chapter, one of the criteria for participation was that the women had to be at least 21 years of age at the time of birth of their first child. This specification impacted the findings in this area.

more like the traditional “single mothers by choice” cohort in this respect. To be eligible to participate in this study women had to have been over the age of 21 years at the time of the birth of her first child. As a result the women in this study tend to be older at the time of birth of their first child. than the norm. Out-of-wedlock childbearing typically happens more frequently among younger women. “In 2002, 89 percent of births to teenagers were out of wedlock, compared with 50 percent of births to women in their early twenties. The proportion declined to 12 percent for women 30 years old and over” (Downs, 2003, p. 6). The women in this study fall outside of the established norm of single motherhood; they are older than other women in national statistics. Moreover, their older age defies stereotypes about single mothers, especially for women of color. Some women talked about the judgments their families made in regard to their childlessness and their age. For many not having a child by the age of 25 meant they were an “old maid.” Cultural expectations played a role in this regard as did racial patterns and histories. All of the women who talked about advancing age, being childless, and feeling external pressures were Black women.

Another variable that influenced women’s decision to move forward with their pregnancies and become single mothers was the overwhelming desire to nurture. This desire to nurture frequently took the form of women expressing their longing to be mothers, their love for their child, their desire to provide care and the recognition of the benefits of motherhood. Interestingly, women did not, however, essentialize motherhood. They did not assume that all women should or must reproduce. Not one of the women made a statement that she decided to have her child because she felt her womanhood was questioned or that her role as a woman was not fulfilled. In contrast,

most of the women shared that they had given thought to having a child and their desires were examined rather than just assumed. There were other life goals they also wanted to achieve, motherhood was only one of them. This desire to nurture was also made evident in Mannis' (1999) study where the professional women repeatedly expressed wanting to be a mother, and "falling in love with the child and the satisfaction that comes with unconditional exchange of love" (p.124). The desire to nurture was an overarching theme of Mannis' study because it was an issue that all the women expressed. Both the findings of this study and the literature report that this desire to nurture is a strong influence on women's decision-making around motherhood.

One's feelings about abortion contributed to women's decisions as well. For the women who do not believe in abortion, their decision to have the child was firmly ensconced in their ideological and sometimes religious convictions. Yet for women who do believe in the right to choose most of them stated because they had experienced an abortion in the past they were not going to exercise their right again. They felt another abortion was either too dangerous or they had a negative experience with previous abortions, and that timing was more conducive to having a child this time around. Feeling responsible and prepared for motherhood, the need to flee unhealthy relationships, and having strong support systems were additional influences that factored into these women's decisions.

## **Coping**

### *Social supports*

For many decades now, social scientists have been exploring the role of social supports in the lives of families, particularly extended families (Mintz and Kellogg, 1988) and Black families (Frazier, 1948; McAdoo, 1988; Omolade, 1982,1986; Stack, 1974). Social supports are generally viewed as instrumental in helping families, especially single mother families. One of the most noted studies on social supports within the Black community was the work of Stack (1974) who found that poor urban Black families develop elaborate systems and “networks of exchange” that mitigate the harsh and brutal effects of poverty.

The women in this study offer their unique picture of social supports. They fall somewhere in between previous findings. They do not have the social support networks of wealthier white single mothers but they are not without any support. They share some aspects, albeit minimally, to Black urban poor (Stack), to poor rural women (Wijnberg and Reding, 1999) as well as to middle-class single mothers (Hertz and Ferguson, 1997). Ultimately, the greatest difference between previous findings and these women is the quantity and quality of supports, both of which are less. The degree to which the women rely on family is quantitatively less than what is described in other studies and the quality of the contact is also different. By quality I refer to the kind of supports offered and discussed in other studies of single mothers and poor families. For instance, sharing of childcare, exchanging food, clothing, furniture, developing play groups, arranging back

up care in case of emergency are but a few. Some of the women of color look to their families for help, whereas others have no contact.

It was anticipated, given the findings of previous research conducted with single mothers, these working women, mostly women of color, would tap into their families as support systems. But few women report that they relied on family supports. Although some of the women had a mother or other family member who could baby sit as needed, it was much more likely to be on an as-needed basis, not as an institutionalized form of assistance. In other words, some grandmothers, mothers, siblings, or friends were available to watch the children but they did not provide day care or were not as intimately involved in the women's lives as expected. There was only one exception. grand mother was the full-time day care provider for her daughter.

Social support can take the form of shared housing or "doubling up." High costs of living, especially in New York City, rising rents, fewer employment opportunities that pay a living wage, along with other economic and social shifts, means that more adults are residing with their parents than in previous decades (Lewin, 2003). As we learned, however, this was not the case with these women. Only two women live with parents, another lives with her grandmother for whom she provides care, and the rest live independently with their children.

In addition to providing the overwhelming majority of care for their families, these women are sole financial providers. Unlike some other material forms of support they received, financially they were on their own. Few of the women report receiving financial assistance from other people and when they did it was inconsistently provided and the amount was meager. The two women who lived with their parents received some

financial assistance, which generally came in the form of housing. Several of the women received a modest amount of financial help from the biological father or a friend, but that money was not on a regular basis, nor was it a contribution that matched their own. For the women to sustain themselves financially meant they had to be creative with their money. For instance, some did not pay all the bills at the end of the month. All were extremely budget consciousness.

As the literature review detailed, previous studies have explored social support networks of single mother families (Edin and Lein, 1997; Hertz and Ferguson, 1998; Omolade, 1986). Some studies compared single mother families with married mothers to determine if support varied between these groups (Jayakody, et. al, 1993; McAdoo, 1980; Siegel, 1995). Jayakody et al. (1993) compared single mothers with married mothers, all of whom were African-American. Her findings revealed that single mother families rely more on kin and non-kin support and have more extensive networks of support than married mothers. In addition, “the majority of mothers lived in close proximity to their families, had daily contact with kin, and reported feelings of closeness to and satisfaction with their families” (p. 273). Furthermore, Jayakody found that within the single mother group, “the claim that the social economic difficulties faced by black single mothers are largely mitigated by virtue of extended family involvement overstates the prevalence of aid provided (to these women)” (p. 273). This reliance on support was not to the extent that previous studies had suggested (Ladner 1972 in Jayakody et al.; Stack, 1974). In contrast to the women in Jayakody’s study, many of the women in this study do not live close to their families of origin, nor do they have contact or necessarily report satisfaction with their families of origin.

Other studies exclusively examined poor Black families (Stack, 1974), working-class Black families (Blum and Dreussen, 1996) or middle-class Blacks (McAdoo, 1978) and have documented the existence and importance of kin support across classes. When comparing Black and White single mother families, Hofferth (1984) found that Black families were less likely to receive kinship support and financial assistance from their families than white single mothers. In contrast, Hogan et al. (1990) found that Black mothers were more likely to live with a relative, receive unpaid child care from relatives, and also more likely to receive significant financial assistance from someone other than the biological father. Extensive kinship networks were not as apparent with these single mothers and certainly social economic difficulties were not completely mitigated by assistance from extended family.

Degrees of social supports are influenced by class. Poor single mothers tend to have thin resources (Edin and Lein, 1997) whereas middle-class professional single mothers are “rich in resources” (Bock, 2000; Hertz and Ferguson, 1998). Middle and upper-class single mothers typically have a variety of social supports at their disposal from supportive friends and family to their ability to purchase cooking and cleaning services. The intricacies and breadth of middle-class women’s networks far exceeds those of the women in this study. The degree to which networks are truly helpful varies as well. As Wijnberg and Reding (1999) revealed in their work with poor rural single mothers, some women’s kinship networks tended to be helpful while other women had negative experiences with familial networks. Friends were less available to provide support than were family members. But like the women in this study, friends were more accessible to provide emotional support both to them as well as to their children and it

cannot be assumed that family was eager or willing to provide help. In some cases the women have found that no contact with their family of origin is sometimes the healthiest way to raise their children, especially cases where there are histories of abuse. This echoes findings by Gladow and Ray (1986) who studied low income rural single mothers. In addition to the aforementioned factors that help explain differences in social supports, there are numerous other factors at play that also influence how much help the women in this study receive. For example, does her family live close by? Does she speak to her family? Does she trust her family members to help care for her children? Are her parents living? Do her friends have the time or willingness to help out?

The single mothers of this study place a high priority on self-sufficiency and receive less help from others than what may be desired or needed. They parallel the dual-income earners of Hertz's study. The middle-class families of her study, place emphasis on self-sufficiency as well. But Hertz found that this focus on self-sufficiency has a negative aspect too. It keeps them "isolated from dependence upon extended community. Middle class dual-earner couples sacrifice community membership on the altar of self-sufficiency" (p. 34).

The reality that women do have some assistance challenges this concept of self-sufficiency. When asked to share who helps out and how they manage as single mothers, the women in this study revealed a discrepancy and contradiction. Most of them initially reported that they completely and totally do it alone. They said they receive very little help, if any, from outside sources. Yet as the conversation continued and they shared more about how they manage and cope, it became clear they do receive assistance from other people but apparently not as much as they would like. The interview itself was a

discovery process, particularly around the issue of social support. The women report and perceive they are alone but as their stories unfold they reveal that they do in fact receive help from others, albeit, not as much as they might prefer.

In sum, regarding social supports, the women in this study are both similar to and different from other cohorts of single mothers. We learned that one cannot assume all single mother families rely extensively on familial networks or friends to help them in times of need. Families have access to various kinds and levels of support and make decisions about how much they want and need outside assistance. Race and class appear to be influential in this respect but they do not determine what type or level of help a single mother utilizes. Even though the women originally stated that they receive no assistance, upon explication, they revealed they have minimal family members and some friends who they turn to in time of need. Yet the help they received did not feel to them as a crucial part of their family's experience, nor did it feel to the mother that the help she received played an integral part of her family. Instead, the women expressed a feeling of pride in relationship to her independence.

Another important finding is that the women in this study are not noticeably different from what many married mothers report about lack of time and exhaustion (Hochschild, 1989, 1997), yet the extent of exhaustion seems more pronounced for these single mothers given that they rarely, if at all, get the opportunity to take a break. Overall, the never married working single mothers of this study are not so different from single mothers of other studies. Similarities are far more pervasive than differences among single mother groups. Furthermore, some aspects of single motherhood are also similar to motherhood more generally speaking.

*The value of routine*

As the women shared their stories about how their days unfold, routinization was the most common theme that emerged and it plays a critical role in how they managed their lives. Routinization is defined as activities that are mechanically and habitually performed on a regular basis. For instance, for some women laundry always gets done on Saturday and putting it away is reserved for Sunday; others use Sunday as “catch up” day when extra meals are prepared for the week, cleaning happens, or the children’s hair gets braided. In the way the women used the term, the idea of routine has a positive connotation: it keeps women going and it provides them with a sense of competence and accomplishment. Since time is so sparse and precious, routine is a solution that keeps them organized; it fosters a sense of control and mastery over their lives.

*The value and importance of work*

All of the women worked in the service sector. The overwhelming majority work in not-for-profits or for public agencies. The women reported that their paid jobs provided them with a sense of accomplishment and they shared high levels of satisfaction. It was common to hear them talk about a deep interest in their work and the pleasure they receive from helping others. Many of them talked about “running a tight ship” at work and being hyper-organized, not unlike how they managed their home life. Time at work was more than just a pay check, it provided the added benefit of respite from caretaking at home. One mother spoke about the social aspect of work and how

rewarding it was to go to work each day where she received emotional support from her supervisor and colleagues.

Like the feelings of competence related to self-reliance/self-sufficiency discussed earlier, work offered the women an opportunity to excel beyond the confines of their own homes. The same way they do it well and do it alone at home, they place emphasis on doing well and achieving at work.

In addition, the issue of work is not a complicated situation or option for working women of color. Limited employment opportunities and precarious economic conditions make full-time work a necessity. Battle-Walters (2004) found that Black people have strong work ethics and all the working-class women in her study found satisfaction with their work. Given that the overwhelming majority of women in this study were women of color, the findings of Battle-Walters resonate for these women as well. Work for these women was meaningful and furthermore, several of the women talked about how grateful they felt that they had a job given the troubling labor market and the layoffs they had witnessed at their places of employment.

*Being an independent single mother: Feelings about motherhood*

Mannis (1999) conducted qualitative interviews with ten women who chose single motherhood. All of the women were educated and financially autonomous. As they described the individual and contextual factors that made their choice possible, one's "attitude or mind set" was a prominent finding. Mannis found that the women adopted either a "can do" attitude that highlighted a sense of empowerment or an "it's tough"

attitude where she worried about the child's development and time pressures. She goes on to say, "It was unusual to find complex and even contradictory attitudes" (p. 124). The findings of this study were different. The majority of the women in this study expressed something similar to both the "can do" *and* "it's tough" attitude about single mothering. At the same time they identified strengths in their situations (can do), they were also forthcoming about the challenges (it's tough). Like many other aspects in their lives, these women construct their lives from a both/and perspective. They are realists who recognize and report both sides of their complicated situation.

The women identified numerous strengths that accompanied being a single mother. They tell us that being a single mother offers different advantages than a two-parent family. It teaches children that women can be independent and it promotes children seeing their mothers as strong and capable. One very common response from the women was the added benefit that children of single mothers receive undivided attention. Because they do not have to divide their time between a partner and their child, they feel this allows them to be more available as mothers. This is particularly salient given the lack of time they have available as they juggle motherhood, work, and reproductive labor. They view this aspect of single motherhood as a win-win situation both for the child and themselves.

Women feel there are substantial personal benefits to being a single mother as well. Women were hopeful and optimistic about their personal lives and their family's well being. They report personal happiness that stems from the unconditional love and time they spend with their child(ren). Although their hectic work schedules interfere in this regard, nevertheless, they report being happy and "in love" with their children. This

finding echoes Demo and Acock (1996) who compared different types of mothers (married, remarried, divorced, and continuously single mothers) and examined their levels of personal happiness. They found that with continuously single mothers the “frequency of enjoyable interactions with their child” was most influential in determining personal happiness. Personal happiness for other types of mothers was dependent on other variables (child’s well being, marital stability and marital conflict, employment and number of hours worked).

Moreover, the women in this study feel that not having a partner allows them greater opportunity to be the mothers they want to be and allows them undivided attention and time with their child. Many of them do, however, express a desire to be partnered but believe it would be more suitable at a later stage in their lives, which usually meant after the children are older.

All of the positive elements of single motherhood do not come without a cost. The women have a tendency to feel overwhelmed by having to assume sole responsibility - on an emotional and material level - for their family and their children. The financial burden is felt more predominantly in New York City where the cost of living is so high. The majority of women receive no child support. They are financially creative and sacrifice their own needs on many levels. They experience stress, which can be overwhelming. They do not have many outlets for their stress. They repeatedly delay, and sometimes forgo altogether, their needs so they can meet the needs of their child. Many dreams are deferred, yet they do not present themselves as martyrs; they view this as part and parcel of motherhood.

By and large, despite the challenges they face and the sacrifices they make, the women report feeling happy and satisfied with their lives. Just like the poor rural single mothers in Wijnberg and Reding's study (1999), "It was in the area of child raising and child caring that the mothers looked for their greatest satisfactions and experienced their greatest stressors" (p. 509). Being an independent woman who is also an independent mother is empowering for these single women. Overall, the strengths seem to outweigh the challenges.

### **Shared expectations**

#### *Vision of ideal family*

Each woman shared her expectations about what type of a family she wanted. Each had a vision of her ideal family and how it would be structured. Their ideals and visions developed in early childhood and characteristically stayed with them throughout their lives. Their ideal families tended to be reminiscent of either the traditional family or critical of the traditional family. The women who yearned for the traditional family felt something about her family was missing and incomplete. She wanted a husband both to fulfill her own needs and those of their children. This finding is not unlike a study conducted by Battle-Walters (2004) who found that Black working-class women (some of whom were married, some were single, and some were single mothers) in a southern Black community revered traditional families. "The women believed that the presence of

Black men was needed to provide positive Black role models for African American boys, as well as to take some of the employment and financial burden off of Black women” (p. 63). This idea of raising black sons to become good fathers and partners was subtly repeated throughout the interviews for this study. Yet at the same time the women spoke about “needing a man in the house” for the sake of the son and to offer a role model, they more frequently recognized that raising children in a single mother headed household encouraged and promoted viewing women as strong, capable and independent women. Just as importantly, the women feel that their children, both boys and girls, have a sense of respect for women that is a product of being raised by a single mother.

Like the mothers in Battle-Walters study, the women in this study wanted men around too, but the reasons were slightly different. They longed for men primarily for their own needs for intimacy and love. A secondary gain is the help men can provide with material and childrearing needs for their children. The single mothers did not feel like they were lacking in their abilities or unable to manage independently. A relationship with a man was not a necessity but more like “icing on the cake.” This finding is very similar to that of Blum and Dreussen (1996) whose working-class Black women stressed the importance of two-parent families, but they did not express a personal desire to marry, nor to rely on a male as the breadwinner.

When the women were asked to share their visions of an ideal family, two groups emerged. The women in the first group fell into a category referred to by this researcher as the “fantasy ideal.” They felt the nuclear family is ideologically and materially the best. Some wanted to replicate their own families of orientation and some women shared their aspirations of wanting to “have it all” - a career, children, and a nuclear family.

They were able to identify numerous sources of their fantasies. Most revealed their family ambitions were rooted in societal norms and values that came from television, familial pressure, and fictitious representations of family.

I refer to this “fantasy group” as those who have to *reconcile ideologies*, meaning resolving the wish for a traditional family with the reality of being a single mother family. About half of the women in the study shared their desire and vision to have a traditional family. Like many people, these women wanted a partner/husband first and then children. They always wanted to be mothers but within a certain context of having a husband along with children. Their yearning for motherhood within a traditional family structure was not, however, fulfilled. How did they reconcile their nostalgia for something they did not have? How did they resolve this dilemma? To cope with these competing ideologies women overtime developed new ways of perceiving their lives. They felt they excelled as mothers and found personal gratification with their lives. They felt proud of themselves and their children for all they have achieved. They readjusted their lives and became intricately involved in their children’s lives as well. They shifted their views and began to see single mother families as normative, even though they desired otherwise. Lastly, they felt and hoped that something different was coming down the pipeline. They were holding out for the partner they did not have and set aside their own needs in order to meet those of their children.

In contrast to the “fantasy group” the other women fell into a category referred to as “critique of the ideal.” Approximately half of the women rejected the traditional family model. They felt any hint of a family ideal was oppressive and disillusioning. They did not feel pressure to conform to such a family and felt empowered to develop

their own family to their specifications. Several of the women had dreams about careers, not about having children. In contrast to their counterparts, these women were critical of societal norms and mores, they rejected what they saw on television and the internalized pressure to “wear a dress, have a honeymoon.” The white picket fence phenomenon was not part of their vision.

I refer to the “critique of the ideal” group as *reinforcing ideologies*. The half that shared they did not have a fantasy about a “traditional” family did not have to reconcile competing wishes with their reality. They did not experience the same conflict as the other women. For these women becoming single mothers did not challenge preconceived ideas. They were more open to having children without partners. Many of them said that they had known since they were younger they would be single mothers or they would not have the kind of family that our culture deems “normal.”

The women who had to reconcile ideologies of wanting a traditional family with their reality of being a single mother were not always the same women who said they did not choose single motherhood. Dreaming of a nuclear family did not inhibit many from making a conscious decision to be a single mother. Sometimes they were faced with abusive or unhealthy relationships; other times it was the ticking of the biological clock or not wanting to have an abortion. Regardless, some of the women who wanted a family other than what they had were not inhibited from saying they made a decision to have and raise their child solo. The women whose ideology was reinforced by their current family structure and not challenged were more likely to be the women who stated they sought out single motherhood, although that was not the case for every woman. Nevertheless, just because some women dreamt of something other than what she had did not mean that

she was resentful of her situation. Quite the contrary, regardless of whether she chose her lifestyle all the women in the study revealed a wide range of strengths about single motherhood while simultaneously conveying hardships.

The two groups of women, those who *reconcile ideologies* and those who *reinforce ideologies*, in many ways mirror findings by Bak (1996). In her research with single mothers in Denmark, Bak found that women develop ways of making sense of and understanding their lives. She referred to this as a “family strategy.” Two types materialized, the “self-reliant strategy” where women perceived their single mother families as “valuable, acceptable, and self sufficient” (p.5). The second type was the “traditional strategy” where women felt their families were “lacking one of the basic family-components, the man in the family” (p.5). The “self reliant” group is akin to the half of the women in this study who fell into the *reinforce ideologies* group, whereas, the *reconcile ideologies* group is analogous to Bak’s “traditional” group.

One difference of findings between these groups is that 16 women in Bak’s study articulated the “self reliant strategy” and 9 in the “traditional strategy.” In my study, the women were equally divided among the *reinforce ideology* and *reconcile ideology* groups. Perhaps one explanation for this difference is the extent to which single mother families are more commonplace in Denmark and the Scandinavian countries and less stigmatized than in the United States. In addition, they have developed much more institutionalized social support systems for single mother families; the Danish welfare state is much more receptive to meeting the needs of single mothers than in the U.S.

*Motherhood and family victorization*

Battle-Walters (2004) developed a theoretical concept known as “racial and gender victorization.” This theory states that “one’s ability to value one’s race and gender, while not allowing social stigmas, sanctions against, or stereotypes associated with one’s makeup to inhibit, diminish, or control one’s self-perception, outlook, or the quality of one’s everyday lived experience” (p.106). I rely on Battle-Walters concept and apply it to this study; the concept is referred to as *motherhood & family victorization*. Like racial and gender victorization, motherhood and family victorization develops in reaction to the belief that single mother families deviate from the “normal” family. Motherhood and family victorization acknowledges that single mother families have positive strengths and contribute to our understanding of pluralist families. In contrast to a deficit model to single motherhood, *motherhood and family victorization* focuses on the empowerment of these never married working women who have risen above.

Just as racial and gender victorization offer us a more equalitarian vision, *motherhood and family victorization* can also,

...redirect our focus away from a pitiful model to powerful people. Hopefully it causes us to build on hope instead of hopelessness. One of the contributions of feminist theory is that it has sought to validate and empower the voices of the respondents that it represents... We must begin to see [single motherhood] differently, no longer from the victim mentality. How do we begin to do this? We must listen instead of assuming. We must employ the opinions of those affected by policies rather than merely implementing policies on them. We must stop blaming and begin to educate. We must stop complaining and continue to mobilize. We must take responsibility for our own lives, while seeking to improve the lives of others. We must see the can in the cannot and choose the better instead of bitter. The key is aborting society’s pathological

model that makes everybody and everything a passive victim, and moving toward an empowerment model that actively seeks solutions for the disempowered and accountability for those with power. If these working-class African American women have taught us anything, I hope it is the ability to see strength in the midst of stereotypes and resilience in the midst of reproach (Battle-Walters, p.113).

Even though about half of the women in this study discussed their desire to be married, it was not at the expense of simultaneously recognizing that their family was sufficient as is. Even as they expressed hope for change, they also relished in their power and ability to have made it thus far. The women who talked about wanting to be married and have a traditional family focused more on how a partner could fulfill their own needs for intimacy and how a father figure could be a positive influence on the life of the child, and less focus was on how he would make them complete. When the women shared these ideas, it was as though a silent feminism had emerged. They seemed to embrace feminist ideas when they recognized they could do it alone, even if they still wanted a partner to share in the experience. “Doing it alone” seemed to validate her claim to motherhood and offered a sense of empowerment.

#### *Adopting a both-and paradigm*

From the interviews we learned that single mothers live a multifaceted life that is fraught with contradictions. Many of their statements reveal these contradictions. On the one hand, they want traditional families but they also cherish some aspects of single motherhood; they made decisions but it may not have been in the context they would have preferred; they receive assistance from friends and family but not as much as would

be expected; and they want to be married but at the same time value their independence and freedom. Upon first glance it might appear the stories they tell fit into an either/or paradigm, but upon further exploration their contradictions can be understood as breaking from this dualism. Applying a both/and paradigm describes the richness and complexity of their convictions as well as their ambivalences.

This concept of two simultaneous pulls was apparent when the women shared the meaning of single motherhood for them. Two different and competing themes were revealed: the symbolic versus instrumental meaning of single motherhood. The symbolic meaning of motherhood for many of the women represents independence, strength, fortitude, and power they hold both as women and mothers. The symbolism of their lives is a powerful force that keeps them grounded and keeps them going. It gives them reassurance to think that they act as role models for their children and are living proof that women can successfully create and maintain a household. Compare this to the instrumental meaning of single motherhood where women share the limitations and hardships of this reality. Where many of them embrace the freedom that accompanies single mothers they also share the difficulties they face on many levels, financial, emotional, and psychological. Each day they face difficult situations that are exacerbated by the fact that they are doing it all alone. Both the symbolic fantasies and the instrumental realities are true and present in the lives of these single mothers.

*Lessons learned about class and race*

Below you will read a variety of findings that emanate from the voices of the women. Some of what they had to share is connected to and a product of their class position. Their material quality of life was one of the most obvious manifestations of class. They spoke about their inadequate living arrangements and their struggle to pay for all the necessary and practical expenses, like quality child care, health insurance, bills, and summer camp for the children, to name a few. Given that they were all workers and sole financial providers, some of whom make a living wage and all of whom live in a costly urban city, each of them struggled financially to get by. Even the women who had a slightly better income still spoke about their financial hardships. None of the women could pay for services like middle and upper-class single mothers, but as importantly, none of the women were caught in the depths and despair of poverty either. They fell in between. They worked hard to bring in just enough money to insure their families well being but lacked enough to tap into resources that could ease their levels of stress. One woman spoke with pride about how she had enough money to make sure that her hall closet was stocked with toothpaste, toilet paper and other essentials. But her modest income did not allow her to provide for her son in other ways that she desired. Moreover, their incomes allowed them to live independently from extended family or friends, with the exception of two women who lived with their parents. For the women who lived alone with their children and no other family members, they shared that was important to them and provided them with a sense of independence.

The type of work the women engaged in was another indication of their class position and had material implications in their lives. All of the women participated in pink-collar<sup>34</sup>, service work, none of them were supervisors or managers. Given their low status of work, they were often subjected to demands of the employer. Flex-time and other concrete strategies to mitigate family needs were not provided by the employer (with the exception of two women who did have flex-time) and the women were left to their own ingenuity. Part-time work was not an option for any of the women. They were forced to work full-time due of their financial needs. Yet they did not take for granted their work and they felt very fortunate to have jobs, particularly given that many of them had witnessed lay-offs and cutbacks in their workplaces.

This was different than many of the middle and upper-class single mothers in Hertz's study (1997) who had the luxury of opting for part-time or consulting work. Moreover, their work days were relatively long and routinized much like their home lives. Despite the negative aspects of their work, the women spoke highly of their jobs and work they do. They found pride in the tasks at work and as you will read below found work to be a respite from home life.

How much did class determine and/or influence the lives of these single mothers? Suffice it to say that their working-class positions strongly influenced how many and what kinds of resources and services were made available. And there were many other instances where class seemed to be a variable worth noting, but in the final analysis, it appears to be more useful to use an intersectional approach to thinking about and

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<sup>34</sup> Pink-collar as defined by Bremner (1992) "describes a broad category of clerical or office worker occupations: stenographers, typists, secretaries, shipping and receiving clerks, office machine operators, bookkeepers, accountants, cashiers, telephone operators, salespersons, sales demonstrator and real estate sales, beauticians, waitresses, and homemakers"

understanding the women's lives. This requires that we see her in her entirety as a woman, a mother, of a particular racial and ethnic group, and as a worker. If we exclude her multiple identities her story is incomplete.

What lessons did we learn about race?

There were some interesting findings that relate to race and they are presented below. We could know more about race and the role it plays in the lives of these particular single mothers if questions about race/ethnicity had played a more explicit role during the interview. One serious limitation of this study was the neglect given to race and issues pertaining to race and ethnicity. From the inception of the study, the issue of class was a driving variable. As respondents were being interviewed, it should have been the responsibility of the researcher to re-examine the interview guide based on the racial and ethnic background of the respondents.

Women of color shared their desires about family that were not different from single mothers of other studies nor were they radically different from working-class black women of Battle-Walters study. Race and class, along with employment patterns, unemployment, welfare programs, and other forms of social supports available, all have "powerful and predictable consequences for personal relationships" (Stack, 1974, p. 108). The woman's desire for marriage is only one of many variables that influence and affect the outcome of whether or not she actually marries. For the women in this study, their race and their class positions make marriage less of a viable option. The pool of marriageable black men is relatively small for black women. Furthermore, the women

shared that marriage in and of itself was not a guarantee to a good or healthy relationship. Many of them expressed the desire to be married, but have consciously made the decision to postpone marriage until their children are older and more self-sufficient.

In addition to their views on marriage, the women of this study also share values and views of the mainstream society, that is predominantly white culture and white values, and wish to acquire a “good life.” That good life takes the form of wanting an adequate home, fine furnishings, good schools for their children, occupational opportunities for themselves and success for their children. The women are not different from many other Americans who are seeking to obtain a quality life that is influenced by and rooted in the American dream.

Contrary to popular opinion, the women did not all come from single mother families themselves; they are not victims of the “cycle of dependency.” Interestingly, 10 of the 18 women were born into families with married parents. Seven sets of parents were divorced and one woman had parents who were never married. These 8 women described themselves as coming from single mother families.

The women in this study defy other stereotypes about black women and black families. They do not rely on extended kinship, which is thought to be more prominent in African-American families and their religiosity did not play a major role in their lives. Furthermore, the age of the mother at the time of birth challenges assumptions about black single mothers reproducing at a young age. The mean age was 29 years old at the time of birth of their first child, which is by all standards a high average. In fact, many of the women stated that friends and family members had assumed they had decided not to

have children because of their older age. Many were thought of by their families as “old maids.”

### *The relevance of Social Constructionism*

How did social constructionism inform this study? As stated in the introduction, the theory of social construction was informative and help shaped this project, particularly about issues related to family structure, its origin, development, and how the women themselves perceive their life situations. Social constructionism argues for a new sociology of knowledge that recognizes and supports the complex dialectical process of how people come to know their own realities, or in other words, their own lives. At the expense of oversimplifying the theory of Berger and Luckmann, social constructionism influenced this project insofar as it situates understanding how people’s realities are a complex web of subjective experiences that are further shaped by a dialectical process.

For the single mothers of this study, their life experiences of becoming and being single mothers and the social contexts in which that occurred has an impact on her material life as well as her perception of her life. Berger and Luckmann were interested in not only trying to understand what ‘reality’ means and how it differs between societies or groups of people, they were equally interested in the “processes by which *any* body of ‘knowledge’ comes to be socially established *as* reality” (p.3). This study, in an elementary way, sought to get at the heart of the women’s “realities” and asked questions that enhanced our understanding about how it is that they developed their “realities” – in what contexts and under what conditions. As you read, the women shared their realities,

each being unique from the others, yet common elements emerged and reemerged. One of the most common subjective experiences of everyday life, or “realities,” centered around their material realities or material constraints, for instance, her lack of time and habits of routine that made life more manageable, along with her independent lifestyle that embraced the concept of autonomy and self-sufficiency.

### **Program suggestions/recommendations made by the single mothers**

When the women were asked about what types of programs would be beneficial for their lives and the lives of other single mothers, each offered a wide variety of programs and services. No one thought that one program was the panacea. They all recognized the need for a multi-pronged approach to services. Programs suggestions ranged from parenting classes to job training and money management courses. From after school programs to resource centers that both they and their children could utilize to employment policies like flex-time.

The suggested programs fell into two categories: those that are pragmatic and those that are ideological. The pragmatic programs are more practical and service-oriented, whereas, the ideological ideas are not programs per se but are proposed strategies for change that are more ideologically based. The women recognized that even with a plethora of programs made available to single mothers and their families, if public perception does not change its attitude and views about single mother families then the programs are limited in their ability to make transformative change. Thus, one way to help educate the public is through the media. According to the women, the media needs

to be involved in helping reshape the image about family formation and be watchful of the monolithic depictions it presents about single mothers.

An interesting dynamic emerged when the women began speaking about programs for single mothers. There was a social distancing that occurred where they exposed a tendency to hold negative views about other single mothers. Interestingly, there was consensus among the women that people wrongfully stereotype and stigmatize single mothers. Further, the women felt that Black women are more likely to be stereotyped and discriminated against as single mothers. As you read the women made statements that exposed negative representations of single mothers that are imbued with racist and classist undertones. Even the women themselves are subject to falling into the trap of stereotyping some single mothers at the expense of others. This was particularly evident when two mothers suggested the need for birth control education. They spoke about single mothers “having too many children” and not being informed about proper use of birth control. In addition to the need for birth control education, a common response for program development was job training programs because it was assumed that single mothers have a lack of training and skill. When asked if they personally did, or could, benefit from such programs, their answer was frequently, “no, I don’t need that.”

The women’s negative attitudes or thoughts they hold of “other” single mothers can perhaps be partly explained as an internalization of mainstream societal views. Given that society demonizes single mothers and makes assumptions about how they came to be and their needs - especially Black mothers - the women fall prey to similar thinking that comes from various sources. It could also be explained as “downward

comparison,” which is the act of comparing oneself to someone else you deem as being worse off with the intent of making oneself feel better about their own situation (Festinger, 1950; Siegel, 1995). It was clear the women were not aware of their participation in reproducing a hierarchy of single mothers. They feel society wrongfully marks them as women who are immoral, but it appears they unknowingly do the same. The concept of the “looking glass self” can be applied to this situation and help explain the dynamics at work (Cooley, 1956). As Cooley and others (Mead, 1971/1934) argued, the self is a social construct and how one conceives and perceives of oneself is largely determined by what we come to know as the reflection of ourselves through the behavior of others. Our identities are heavily influenced by who and what others think we are.

It is my contention that these single mothers are influenced by social and cultural forces, interactions with others, and as a result, develop a sense of self and their needs based on how the reflection of their self is influenced by how others perceive them. If the women in this study believe, or unconsciously internalize, the stigmatization that is directed at them it could help explain why they participate in the stigmatization of others. If they see themselves as inadequate through the eyes of others, it logically follows that they could see others, like themselves, as inadequate too. Both Festinger’s “downward comparison” and Cooley’s “looking glass self” offer insight into how and why women participate in the reproduction of stigmatization.

## **Limitations of the study**

Recognizing limitations of any study is a fundamental part of the research process. Good research practice needs to be open to examine the process of the project, what could have been done differently, and what lessons were learned from the experience. Hindsight provides insight that can prove to be useful and informative. One of the most important aspects and benefits of qualitative research is the flexibility with which a researcher can conduct the information gathering process. In order for qualitative methods to capture the vastness of people's lives, it is important that they leave themselves open to discovery as the interview unfolds. This was an issue in this study that was not adequately exercised. Instead, the researcher stuck too closely to the interview guide and as a result missed opportunities that may have authentically emerged given greater flexibility. In addition, the size of the sample limits the findings of the study. Given that one of the key motivating factors for this study was to explore the issue of working-class status, a more explicit conversation about class status and working environments could have elicited more fruitful information. At the very least, a discussion about how the women themselves view their class positions and how that may or may not have an impact on their families could have generated rich data. The issue of race presented another limitation in this study, in a similar fashion to class. Race was not explicitly explored, nor discussed. A more overt examination of race as a factor that influences family life could have also elicited interesting data. This issue is made more problematic due to the vagaries of sample research, which resulted in a homogenous

sample. Due to limited resources, the researcher could not continue sample recruitment beyond what was accomplished.

### **Methodological limitations**

When conducting qualitative research one must recognize both the strengths and limitations of what the findings can offer. Qualitative research is used to illuminate a depth that cannot be achieved using other research methodologies. Aiming for depth does not come without a cost. As this study sought to understand the lived experiences of a segment of single mothers trade-offs were made. Two methodological limitations should be noted: the inability to generalize and the tension between keeping the women's stories whole yet also needing to "break them up" to locate themes and patterns.

As stated in the methods chapter, purposeful sampling is used to offer a rich depiction of a phenomenon. Because of the limits in sample size and composition, it is impossible to generalize the findings to the larger population. Instead of making any claim to speak for the population of single mothers, this study offers an in-depth look at the lives of the 18 women who took the risk of sharing intimate details so we can further understand their particular lives.

Another complication of this research relates to the issue of coherency. A tension arose for the researcher about wanting to keep the women's stories whole yet needing to locate patterns and themes across women, which resulted in feeling as though the women's lives were being "broken up." It is my hope that the intimacies, wholeness, and richness of their lives was not lost.

### **Implications for future research**

As stated, more extensive research is needed to fully understand how class influences the lives of single mothers. Just as importantly, research needs to be conducted that examines the intersection between race and class for single mothers and how they together shape her decisions and her life situation.

There were interesting findings in this study that related to the women's work. Their level of commitment and satisfaction with their jobs could be further investigated. What is it about their work environments that aid in their satisfaction? What primary and secondary gains do they receive from work? To this end, does union employment contribute to women feeling differently about their work?

An area of research that was not addressed in this study is sexuality and sexual orientation. Sexual orientation was not known about the women who participated in this study. Future research should explore this issue and grapple with how sexual orientation plays a factor in women's decisions about family life. Research needs to move beyond the heterosexist assumption about families.

Regarding educational levels of single motherhood, the women in this study have relatively high levels of education compared to national statistics. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 63 percent of out-of-wedlock births were to women who have not graduated from high school (Downs, 2003, p. 5). It would be interesting to compare single mothers who have less than a high school degree with those who have some college or educational training in order to assess if and how these differently educated women become and how they function as single mothers.

Unmarried women who are cohabiting with their partners make up a substantial proportion of unmarried single mothers, which helps explain the increase in non-marital childbearing rates. Given this statistic it would be interesting to compare single mothers who are doing it independently with single mothers who are cohabiting to determine if differences exist between and among these two groups of mothers.

### **Policy Implications**

In addition to the program recommendations made by the women themselves, there are important policy implications that arose out of the data. Child support is one of resources that could be advantageous to the lives of single mothers. Given that so few of them received child support and when they did, the amount was inadequate. This begs the question what role should child support play in the lives of single mothers? Are the father's financially able to contribute? Is child support the way to go when lower income fathers will not likely improve the lives of single mothers? At the same time that child support enforcement policies need to address the economic needs of single mothers and their children, male joblessness needs attention, particularly black male joblessness. But "employment alone is unlikely to solve the problems of poverty for many single mothers" (Casebolt and Krysik, 1997, p. 37).

There must be in place additional social policies that utilize a multi-pronged approach to addressing the needs of single mothers. They include, but are not limited to, day care, increased wages and flex-time. Mothers need to be supported as workers, just as they should be supported as mothers. Quality and affordable child care is essential for

these women, and for all single mothers. For most of the women in this study, good day care was not available. Instead, women spent a lot of time worrying about their children, rushing around to find providers, and piecemealing together child care. As a result, she felt her work suffered. Beyond the concerns of the workplace, quality and affordable day care needs to be an essential and institutionalized priority of the state. It is in everyone's best interest to formulate and develop humane and just ways to care for children.

Additional policy recommendations that would advantageously benefit single mothers would be to increase the minimum wage and offer flex-time, these changes could have profound affects in their quality of life. There was also a high demand for quality and affordable after-school and summer programs for the children of single mothers. While the women are working full-time, there are not sufficient opportunities and resources for school aged children to be in safe and quality supervised care in both after-school programs and during the summertime.

Social work practice must be sensitive to pluralist families as well. They must avoid making assumptions about family structure. They should be aware of the larger forces at play that influence family formation. Social workers need to consciously avoid playing into the societal assumptions made about single mothers and how they came to be. Social work educators must bring the family into the classroom that moves beyond a psychotherapeutic framework. We need to teach students about the family using a broader scope that adopts a macro analysis of family life and family structure.

## Appendices

### Appendix A

Family Groups by Female Reference Person, Marital Status, and Race (U.S. Census Bureau, March 1999)

<i>Race</i>	<i>Widowed</i>	<i>Divorced</i>	<i>Separated</i>	<i>Never Marr</i>	<i>Sp.Absent</i>
All Races	17.3%	36.1%	12.2%	31.2%	3.2%
White	19.4%	42.2%	12.0%	23.4%	3.0%
Black	13.0%	23.0%	13.2%	48.5%	2.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	16.0%	28.3%	10.7%	34.3%	10.7%
<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>12.0%</b>	<b>27.2%</b>	<b>19.1%</b>	<b>37.3%</b>	<b>4.4%</b>

### Appendix B

One-Parent Family Groups, Maintained by Mother of all Races, with Own Children Under 18 years, by Marital Status, U.S. Census Bureau, June 29, 2001

Never Married	42.4%
Divorced	35.3%
Separated	18.3%
Widowed	4.0%

### Appendix C

Percentage of Unmarried American Adults (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999)

	1998	1990	1980	1970
White Men	40%	37%	35%	32%
Black Men	59%	55%	51%	43%
All Men	42%	39%	37%	33%
White Women	43%	41%	39%	37%
Black Women	64%	60%	55%	46%
All Women	45%	43%	41%	38%

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Guide**

[Prior to this opening statement, the consent form has already been reviewed]

#### **OPENING STATEMENT:**

Thank you so much for coming and meeting me. In order to keep me focused during the interview I have some questions that I will be referring to that will help structure the interview. If there is something that you want to share that I did not cover, feel free to either tell me or write it down when it comes to you and we can review your comments/thoughts at the end. I have pen and paper for you to take notes too. I will be taking some notes as well.

[TRANSITION:] Remind me: how many children do you have and how old are they? Who do you live with?

#### ***PRESENT: MANAGING & COPING***

1. Where do you work?  
PROMPT: Number of hours per day/week
2. What does a typical day look like for you?  
PROMPT: What time do you get up, what time do you go to bed and what happens in between, child care arrangements: paid/unpaid, family/non-family, informal/formal, pick up kids at school, household chores/activities, who does what
3. Who helps out when you need assistance?  
PROMPT: Who do you go to when you need help, support systems, handle stressful situations
4. What is it like parenting alone?  
PROMPT: Strengths, challenges, positive and negative aspects of being a single mother
5. What is your relationship with the father of your child(ren)?  
PROMPT: Provide assistance, money, children's relationship, weekends, weekdays
6. What is your financial situation?  
PROMPT: Who do you go to for financial help. How do you manage financially.

- Would you identify yourself as a worker, mother, both or something else? What role does work play in your life?
7. If you could currently change anything about your family, what would you change?  
PROMPT: Have you ever wished things about your family were different, and if so, how would it be different? father involvement, familial involvement, friend involvement, work schedule, day care arrangements
  8. What would you keep the same?

***PRESENT: WELL-BEING***

9. What makes you happiest about your life?
10. What are the biggest stressors in your life?
11. If you could rank your satisfaction (of your overall life) on a scale from 1 to 10 where would you be? 1 being least satisfied, 10 being most satisfied? And why?

The next set of questions are more about you and some feelings and thoughts that you may have about your past and present situation. Take your time when answering these questions and if you don't understand the questions, feel free to stop me and ask me to restate it in another way.

***PRESENT: SELF & OTHERS PERCEPTIONS***

12. How do you feel about being a single *mother*?
  13. How do you see yourself?  
PROMPT: How would you describe yourself to others? Who are you?
  14. How do you feel about being a single *woman*?  
PROMPT: How do you feel about marriage? Have you ever thought of getting married or never getting married? Explain.
- 
15. Do you think that people have opinions about single mothers in general?
  16. Do you think that people have an opinion about you as a single mother? (How do your family and friends view you?)
  17. How does being a single mother impact your child(ren)?  
PROMPT: Strengths, challenges, positive and negative aspects of being a single mother

Now I would like to ask you a set of questions that have more to do with the past. Take a moment and think back to your own family when you were growing up.

***PAST: DECISION-MAKING***

18. What was it like growing up in your family?  
PROMPT: What kind of family did you grow up in, who raised you, who did what, who was around, parents married or not, siblings.
19. When you were growing up did you have an idea/thought/dream about what type of family you would have?
20. Share with me what it was like when you got pregnant? If I had been a confidante when you got pregnant what would I have heard or seen?  
PROMPT: Planned, surprised, Support systems, Joys/worries
21. Would you say you chose to be a single mother?  
PROMPT: Would you use that word?
22. Who or what helped you make the decision to become a single mother?  
PROMPT: Thinking back what were the most important things that helped or influenced you to make the decision to be a single mother?
23. What were people's reactions when you decided to become a single mother?  
PROMPT: Reactions from family and friends, supportive, question you?

This last set of questions asks you to think about the future, both for your family and for all single mother families.

***FUTURE: SERVICES/PROGRAMS/BENEFITS/POLICIES FOR SINGLE MOTHERS***

24. How do you envision your family in the next ten years?
25. If you got a job as the director of a new organization for single mothers, what types of programs would you develop?
26. If you could tell the President anything about single motherhood, what would it be?

Do you have any thoughts/comments/questions for me? Is there anything you would like to add that we did not cover or something you would like to tell me about your experience as a single mother that you feel is important?

**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION:**

**Name:**

**Address:**

**Telephone Number:**

**Age:**

**How old were you when you had your first child:**

**Number of Children:**

**Age of Children:**

**Living Arrangements:**

**Race/Ethnicity:**

**Current employment:**

**Income:**

**Work History:**

**Number of hours work per week:**

**Highest level of education:**

**Religion:**

**Family of origin (parents married, divorced, etc.):**

**Number and order of siblings from family of origin:**

**History of Public Assistance:**

**Appendix E**  
Letter for Organizational Recruitment

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Susanna Jones and I am a doctoral candidate in Social Welfare and Women's Studies at the City University of New York Graduate Center, Hunter College School of Social Work. I am writing to request permission to use your organization as a site for recruitment of potential respondents. Recruitment from your agency would entail hanging flyers in your agency and allowing me to talk with agency staff to inform them of the study. It would also be very helpful if staff could provide information to potential participants to contact me if interested. I have received authorization from the CUNY Graduate Center Institutional Review Board to begin research. Please see the attached record of approval.

There are several issues that I will address in this letter regarding my research methods, but first I would like to briefly describe my dissertation. I am researching never married working-class single mothers in New York City. I am interested in interviewing single mothers, who are never married, who are residing without a partner, who were at least 21 years of age at the time of birth of her first child, whose annual income is between \$17,900 and \$42,000 and who has full custody of her child(ren). It is my impression that there are women within your organization that could be ideal respondents for this project and could provide a great deal of rich information for this project.

The main point of my research is to explore the life experiences of the never married working-class single mother and examine how she became a single mother, how she feels about being unpartnered, how she copes and manages in everyday life and finally, what social work practices and social welfare policies would be conducive for her and her family. Previous research with single mothers has tended to focus on the teenage single mother, the single mother receiving welfare and the most recent surge of research, the upper-class, professional single mother "by-choice." Little research has been conducted with the single mother who most typically falls between these categories.

This dissertation relies on qualitative research methods, which means that I will be asking in-depth questions about their lives. Participation is voluntary and she will have the right to withdraw at anytime without penalty. All interviews will be conducted by myself and will last approximately two hours. In some cases, a second interview may be necessary. I have three different locations (two in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn) where I have access to private office space. Each interview will be tape-recorded and transcribed with the permission of the respondent (I have attached a copy of the questionnaire/interview guide so that you may see what kinds of questions will be asked). I am sensitive to, and aware of, the potential emotional issues that could be raised by asking the questions and have built in two procedures to minimize risk. First, each participant will be ensured complete confidentiality and second, every participant will be provided with a list of referrals to assist them in the event they would like additional support. Although no

services or benefits come from the interview, they nevertheless will receive referrals that they can independently pursue in the event they are interested. Each individual will also be provided with my contact information so they may reach me if necessary.

In the event that you would like to know more about my research methods or the research project, please do not hesitate to ask.

I will be contacting you within the next week to discuss the possibility of tapping into your organization/agency to determine whether or not there are individuals that meet the criteria for inclusion in this study. If you have any questions for me, please call me at (917) 691-7659.

Thank you in advance for your time and energy!  
Gratefully and Respectfully,

Susanna Jones

**Appendix F**  
Flyer for Recruitment

# *LOOKING FOR WORKING & NEVER MARRIED SINGLE MOTHERS*

## WHY? TO INTERVIEW YOU ABOUT LIFE AS A SINGLE MOTHER

**If you are: (1) never married, (2) currently not residing with the father of the child(ren) or with a romantic partner, (3) have an annual income between \$17,910 and \$42,000, (4) over the age of 21 at the time of the birth of your first child, (5) have custody of your child(ren), and (6) live in New York City, please call the number below.**

**The interview will last approximately two hours and will be held at your convenience.**

**Please Contact Susanna Jones, doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center, at (917) 691-7659, and leave a message with your contact information if you would like more information or if you would like to participate in the study. The material gathered will be used for dissertation research on working single mothers and will help identify the issues and concerns single mothers care most about.**

## Appendix H

### Telephone Recruitment Script to Enlist Participation

Thank you for calling. My name is Susanna Jones and I am a doctoral student at the City University of New York Graduate Center in the Social Welfare Program. For my dissertation I have chosen to talk with single mothers in NYC and ask what your experiences have been. This includes how you became a single mother, what went into your decision, how you feel about it, how being a single mother affects you, how you manage, and what types of services would best suit you and your children. I also want to know how you perceive yourself and how you feel others perceive you. In a nutshell, I want to know what your experiences as a single mother has been in the past and what it is like now and what you would like for your future. I hope this experience for you to tell your story and to think about ways that policy can work for single mothers is empowering.

The single mothers in this study have been selected on a voluntary basis from various organizations, groups, and locations where I advertised or sometimes women who have already participated connected me to another mother they knew. The interviews will take about two hours and will be held in one of three locations where I have access to private office space: CUNY Graduate Center in mid-town, Single Parent Resource Center in mid-town on the eastside, and Long Island University in Brooklyn. Ultimately, you can decide where the interview takes place. In some cases, a second interview may be necessary so that we have more time to finish with the questions. If that is the case, we'll find a time that works for you. Even though during the interview I will ask a series of questions, you have the right to not answer any specific questions and you also have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty.

Each interview will be taperecorded. Because we will cover so much material during the interview, I want to be sure that I can revisit our time together and be confident to avoid any errors. If you are uncomfortable with the tape recorder, the interview will not happen. I really want to avoid getting information wrong.

Your responses and reactions are completely confidential, and your identity will be disguised. In other words, I will assign a phony name, or pseudonym, both on the tape and on all written material. This means nothing you say can be traced back to you personally. The code key, along with all research materials, will be locked in my home. Do you have any questions so far?

Lastly, in order to participate in the study I will need to ask you a few questions to make sure that you are eligible for the study. Some of these questions are personal but remember I am asking them to determine if you meet the criteria that has been established.

- Have you ever been married?
- Are you currently working? Are you currently on public assistance?

- How much is your income per year?
- Are you living with the father of your child(ren) or a partner?
- Were you over the age of 21 when you had your first child?
- Do your children reside with you full-time?
- Do you reside in NYC?

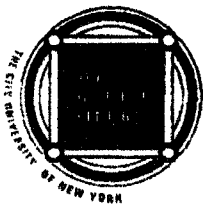
I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you for calling me and responding to the flyer. I am very grateful to you.

You are definitely eligible to participate in this study. I hope we can set a date to meet. Are you interested in participating? What day, time and location is best for you?

[OR]

Unfortunately, you are ineligible for the study because \_\_\_\_\_. I would like to thank you for reaching out and calling me.

At the end of the interview you will be given a list of referrals. However, there are no services or benefits that come with the interview.



Doctor of Social Welfare Program  
The Graduate School and University Center

The Graduate School and University Center

Hunter College School of Social Work  
The City University of New York  
129 East 79 Street  
New York, NY 10021  
TEL: 212.452.7048 FAX: 212.452.7440  
E-MAIL: web.gc.cuny/socialwelfare

### CONSENT FORM

My name is Susanna Jones, I am a doctoral candidate in the Social Welfare Program at the City University of New York, Graduate Center. I am currently working on my dissertation entitled, "The Life Experiences of Never Married Working-Class Single Mothers in New York City." This is a research study about never married working-class single mothers in NYC. I am interested in hearing your story about how you became a single mother, how you feel about being a single mother, and what life is like for you. I am also interested in how you manage everyday life, and what ideas you have about your future. I would like permission to interview you about your experiences.

The interview will take about two hours and if we need more time we may schedule a second interview. With your permission, I would like to tape the interview so I can record the details accurately. I plan to transcribe all of the interviews. However, in the event that someone is hired to complete the transcriptions, confidentiality will be honored; the transcriber will not know your name. All information you give me will be completely confidential. Your name will not be on any form with answers. I will, however, give you a phony name that I will use when I write the findings. At the top of the each page with your responses there is a space for a code. It is a number you will be assigned. The code key (with your name, pseudonym and ID number) will be kept separate from all other research materials and locked in a file cabinet in my home for at least three years (when the data is no longer needed, I will properly shred all documents and erase the audiotapes). You may request a copy of the transcription and omit any parts or the whole interview if you choose. You may choose to not answer any question or discontinue your participation at any time throughout the process without penalty. **Taking part in this study is completely voluntary.**

The interview will offer you the opportunity to reflect on and share your life experience with me. It will also contribute to a body of literature that has left out the stories and voices of many women like you. You may experience some discomfort in answering personal questions about your life. You may request a break at any time during the interview. At the end of the interview, you will be provided with a list of counseling referrals of organizations that provide services and support. There is no direct benefit for you and no services will come from the interview. If you are interested in seeking out support, you are fully responsible to do so independently. You will however be compensated \$20.00 for the interview and the time you took to share your experience with me. Given that I am a social worker, I am also a mandated reporter. This means that if you report harm to self, others, or child abuse, I am legally required to report the incident to the authorities. In the event that this is required, you would be fully informed of my obligation.

If you have any questions about the study, contact me at (917) 691-7659, or email me at jonessusanna@hotmail.com. You may also contact my advisor Prof. Andrea Savage at (212) 452-7026, asavage@hunter.cuny.edu. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a participant in this study, please contact Hilry Fisher, Sponsored Research, City University of New York Graduate Center at (212) 817-7523, hfisher@gc.cuny.edu. Thank you kindly for your participation in this study. I will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

If you would like a copy of the study upon its completion, please fill out the information below. A copy will be mailed to you.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you agree to have the interview taped? [circle one]      YES                      NO

I am fully informed about this study and agree to participate on a purely voluntary basis. If you agree to be interviewed, please sign below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



**Appendix J**

List of Referrals provided to respondents upon completion of the interview

**Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy** 1841 Broadway, New York, NY 10023

(212) 333-3444 <http://www.icpnyc.org>

Call the number for an intake appointment. Sliding scale offered.

**Single Parent Resource Center** 31 E. 28<sup>th</sup> Street – 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10016

(212) 951-7030 Executive Director: Suzanne Jones

SPRC has numerous support groups for single parents along with a parent-line with information about other programs in within NYC.

**YWCA of Brooklyn** (718) 875-1190 ext. 675 or 681 Ellen Chuse, Childbirth and Parenting Educator runs weekly support group meetings for mothers. Call for additional information.

<http://www.singlemothers.org> Website that offers resources and supports for single mothers.

<http://www.singlemoms.org> An international Not-for-profit organizations for both single mothers and single fathers which is dedicated to providing resources, support, and information to all single parents.

**Appendix K**

2002 HHS Poverty Guidelines (Federal Register, Vol. 67, No. 31, February 14, 2002, pp. 6931-6933)

Size of Family	Income
1	\$8,860
2	\$11,940
3	\$15,020
4	\$18,100
5	\$21,180
6	\$24,260
7	\$27,340
8	\$30,420

**Appendix L**

Mean (average) Household Incomes by Quintiles (source: Money Income in the United States: 2000, Current Population Reports, Table C, pg. 8.)

Lowest 20% (lowest quintile)	=	\$10,188
20% (second quintile)	=	\$25,331
20% (third quintile)	=	\$42,359
20% (fourth quintile)	=	\$65,727
Top 20% (highest quintile)	=	\$141,621

**Appendix M**

Adjusted Poverty Guidelines to Determine Working-Class Income (developed with the help of Jared Bernstein from the Economic Policy Institute per telephone conversation April 28, 2003)

Size of Family	50% increase in poverty level	100% increase
2	17,910	23,880
3	22,530	30,040
4	27,150	36,200
5	31,770	42,360
6	36,390	48,520
7	41,010	54,680
8	45,630	60,840

**Appendix N**

Median Income for Female Householder, No Husband Present (U.S. Census Bureau, Table 4: Median Income of Families by Selected Characteristics, Race and Hispanic Other Householder: 2000)

<u>Race</u>	<u>Income</u>
All races	\$25,787
White	\$28,371
Black	\$20,395
Hispanic	\$21,006
Non-Hispanic White	\$30,231

**Appendix O**

## NEW YORK STATE

Married couple household	46.6%
Marr. Couple Households with kids under 18	21.6%
<b>Female householder (no husb.)</b>	<b>14.7%</b>
Male householder (no wife)	4.4%
Non-family Households	34.3%
Unmarried partner households	5.4%
Multigenerational households	4.4%

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