

## **The solo mum, feminism and the negotiation of 'choice'**

## **Abstract**

Discursive constructions of single women who have children via sperm donation invoke the significance of feminism as an implicit/ explicit frame in explaining the rise of the 'solo mum'. Drawing on qualitative data from 25 interviews with single (UK) women who have decided to have a child this way, this article explores whether the participants saw this route as emerging out of - or connected to - feminist ideals, paying particular attention to the discursive negotiation of 'choice'. As the women were ambivalent about discourses of 'choice' here, they did not see the decision to become a solo mum as one that emerged out of female empowerment or agency. Nevertheless, the role(s) of feminism here emerged as shifting and complex, and in analysing these contradictions, the study contributes to the on-going conceptual dilemma about how feminist research can approach the difficult question of women's 'choices', especially in a context in which feminism is inextricably enmeshed with neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies.

## **Key words**

Solo mother \* Feminism \* Qualitative \* Heterosexuality \* Choice \* Postfeminism \* Neoliberalism

## **The solo mum, feminism and the negotiation of ‘choice’**

### **Introduction**

In an article entitled ‘Daddies be damned! Who are the British women who think fathers are irrelevant?’ (Davies, 2009), the *Daily Mail* contributed to the cultural meanings of single women using donor sperm to conceive a child. Describing how such women - sometimes referred to as single/ solo mums ‘by choice’<sup>i</sup> - tend to be ‘educated, middle-class, financially independent females who have succeeded in every area of their lives but have failed to find a husband to father their children’, the article quoted a sociological expert who insisted that having a child without a man was a misguided ‘feminist dream come true’ (Davies, 2009).

The construction of the story as a thinly-veiled caution about the ‘dangers’ of women pursuing a career at the expense of building a family is a familiar one in postfeminist culture, and the right wing perspective of the *Daily Mail* is typically alarmist in this regard.

Nevertheless, the article attests to the ways in which ‘single women using donor sperm remain at the heart of concerns about the choice to have a child, the meaning of motherhood, and the future of family life’ (Zadeh and Foster, 2016: 552). Although the *Daily Mail* article is now nearly 10 years old, the issue of whether the solo mum might be somehow connected to the impact of feminism continues as an implicit/ explicit frame in popular discourse (Maher, 2014) – whether feminism emerges as demonised, distanced or disavowed.

In contrast to the *Daily Mail* article, the solo mum has also been positioned in both academic and popular contexts as a new form of family-building enabled by the *gains* of feminism (Hertz, 2006; Mannis, 1999), a context in which Western women are now ‘given increased choices about whether, when and how to mother...’ (Feasey, 2012: 2). As feminism has

invested substantially in the significance of both ‘choice’ and ‘autonomy’, the term ‘solo mum by choice’ appears to immediately orient us toward feminist discourse. That said, it does not do so unproblematically. As both academic and popular commentary has observed, the term ‘single/ solo mum by choice’ creates a hierarchy of single motherhood which is both raced and classed (Bock, 2000), and when situated in relation to the history of feminism, this tension speaks to a longer legacy of debates about whose interests and voices are served and heard. But if the term ‘choice’ may be seen to refer to the history of feminism (albeit in complex ways), it also invokes the prevailing neoliberal landscape in which greater ‘choice’ among flexible options is presented to girls/ women as offering unprecedented autonomy and agency, and an apparent re-writing of a once pre-ordained female life course (Baker, 2010; Harris 2004; Rich, 2005; Scharff, 2012). Feminist scholars have invested considerable energy in thinking about the complex entanglements between feminism, femininity, postfeminism and neoliberalism, worrying that concepts of “choice” and “autonomy”... are vulnerable to co-option’ (Budgeon, 2011: 62), whilst recognising that feminism cannot be understood *outside* of this constellation in its contemporary forms (Gill, 2007a; Budgeon, 2011; Scharff, 2012). In this regard, and in conceptual terms at least, the idea of the ‘solo mum by choice’ may be seen as sitting at the nexus of these debates, whilst offering a terrain for their continued exploration and interrogation.

Drawing on qualitative data from 25 semi-structured interviews with UK women who have made the decision to become a solo mum, and prompted by a discursive context that has linked solo motherhood with discourses of both ‘feminism’ and ‘choice’, this article explores the ways in which the relations between feminism and solo motherhood were negotiated by the participants. In order to do this it asks: to what extent did the women now see their decision as a ‘choice’ or possibility enabled by the social changes feminism has fostered, and what understandings of feminism were adopted or rejected in this regard? What role (if any),

does feminism play in making the decision to become a solo mum, and what other discourses of gender (such as those of heterosexual femininity) might shape and influence how this relationship is articulated? How and in what ways do the women draw on feminism as a means to make sense of/ resist wider cultural discourses on the (still unconventional) choice they have made?

In pursuing these questions, this research can be seen to matter in three key ways. First, the idea of the ‘solo mum by choice’ offers a particularly fertile terrain upon which to explore feminist perspectives on how women are currently ‘oriented toward subjectivities defined by choice, empowerment and individuality’ (Budgeon, 2011: 11, see also Harris, 2004; Rich, 2005; Riley and Scharff, 2012), as well as the structuring limitations and contradictions within which this occurs. Second, the research seeks to offer insight into the ways in which women – in this case a group of mid-life women – use feminism to negotiate the very ‘choices’ the movement has helped to produce (Budgeon, 2001). Third, this article seeks to contribute to empirical work on the solo mum. There is now a small body of work which has examined the motivations and experiences of solo mums, and this has explored the discursive complexities of ‘choice’ in this context (Bock, 2000; Golombok, Zadeh, Imrie, Smith and Freeman, 2016; Graham, 2012; Jadva, Morriesette and Golombok, 2009; Zadeh, Freeman and Golombok, 2013). But what is missing here, and is crucial to the intervention of this article, is that although the solo mum has been seen as discursively connected to feminism in various ways, there has been little attempt to bring these two spheres together: the debates about the influence of ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ perspectives, and the identities, narratives and experiences of *the women themselves*. Given that ideas about ‘the feminist’ and ‘feminism’ have implicitly/ explicitly attended the discursive construction of the solo mum, it seems important to offer the women themselves an opportunity to respond to these framings, and to evaluate their implications for how they conceive of their identities and experiences.

## **Motherhood, feminism, ‘choice’**

Both single women and lesbian couples have been using donor insemination (DI) to reproduce since at least the 1970s, but the trend has grown sharply since the millennium (Graham, 2012), and it continues to accelerate with the trend toward older first time mums (Golombok et al, 2016). But although the press discourse referred to at the start of this article positions single women using DI as essentially subverting constructions of gender, family and reproduction in transgressive ways (see also Hertz, 2006; Michelle, 2010), this idea of an agentic ‘subversion’ has been complicated by both popular and academic discourse on the solo mum. In analyses of popular representations (Zadeh and Foster, 2016) as well as empirical/ qualitative research (Bock, 2000; Golombok et al, 2016; Graham, 2012; Jadva et al, 2009; Zadeh, et al, 2013), there is an emphasis on how such women have reluctantly ‘deviated’ from the “traditional” family and “natural” conception’ in their desire to have a child (Zadeh and Foster, 2016: 562). For example, Zadeh, Foster and Golombok discuss how the solo mums in their study ‘rarely expressed themselves as deliberately non-traditional’ (2013: 113), navigating a complex path between of ‘tradition’, ‘choice’ and agency. Going further, Graham describes how such women are ‘reworking’ their ideas about motherhood, relationships and family in order to ‘salvage at least some of the nuclear ideal they had imagined for themselves’ (2012: 92), whilst Bock suggests that solo mums can be conceived as “unwilling warriors”, who... stress the importance of having the option of single motherhood, yet... cling to hegemonic fantasies of normative family structures’ (2000: 70). Whether due to a ‘failed’ relationship, the difficulty of finding a partner, or the ticking of the ‘biological clock’ (Zadeh and Foster, 2016: 558), the women are seen as making a decision to solo parent in compromised circumstances, thus presenting the significance of negotiated ‘choice’. But although Hertz’s *Single by Chance; Mothers by Choice* (2006) clearly refers to

the context of feminism and touches on whether solo mums situate such a choice in relation to the social changes feminism has wrought (pp16-19), there is little qualitative work which explicitly claims to explore the solo mum from a feminist perspective, nor considers the views of such women about how or whether there is an intersection *between* their decision and feminist politics - however broadly this may be defined. .

As indicated at the start of this article, the notion of ‘choice’ has emerged as a particularly fraught concept for feminism in a landscape structured by ideologies of postfeminism and neoliberalism. The individualization characteristic of the late modern era has been understood as weakening the power of tradition (Baker, 2010: 187; Giddens, 1991), requiring ‘enterprising’ neoliberal subjects who reflexively navigate their own biographies and life narratives. Apparently ‘untethered by gendered constraints’ (Baker, 2010: 187), girls and women have been positioned as the exemplar beneficiaries of such ‘choice narratives’ (Harris, 2004; Rich, 2005), with judgements around success or failure thus holding them accountable for their own fates.

Similarly, given that the key discursive and material characteristics of western neoliberalism are consistent with those of postfeminism (Budgeon, 2015; Gill, 2007a; Harris, 2004), feminist scholars have observed how “‘choice’ has become the bottom-line value of postfeminism’ (Stuart and Donaghue, 2011: 99). Whether conceived of as proclaiming the ‘pastness’ of feminism because gender equality has been achieved (McRobbie, 2009), or as a complex constellation which incorporates the mainstreaming of feminism alongside virulent constructions of misogyny and anti-feminism (Gill, 2007a), discourses of postfeminism have been seen as similarly foregrounding choice, autonomy and individualism, whilst effacing the significance of the wider social structures which might limit such possibilities (Baker, 2010; Budgeon, 2001, 2011, 2015; Gill, 2007a). It is within this neoliberal, postfeminist landscape that feminist work exploring the vexing question of women’s ‘choices’ has emerged

(Budgeon, 2015), with research exploring such terrains as beauty work (Riley and Scharff, 2012; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011), marriage and motherhood (Jacques and Radtke, 2012), and religious practices (Zine, 2006). In this regard, and in contrast to the endlessly flexible promise of a 'neoliberal panacea' (Stuart and Donaghue, 2011: 118), whilst feminist perspectives seek to make space for individual agency and resistance, they also foreground the continued power of normative femininities, and thus how women's choices are always 'historically and structurally conditioned' (Budgeon, 2015: 308). With an emphasis on negotiated choice which is constrained by traditional ideological structures and judgements, these feminist perspectives have something in common with the existing work on the solo mum.

Finally, such dilemmas around agency, choice and the structuring role of gendered subjectivities have emerged as particularly apparent in qualitative research on how feminism is negotiated. In exploring how girls/ women respond to, conceptualise or make use of feminism in their everyday lives, this research has broadly suggested that young women are not keen to call themselves feminist; that they perceive the women's movement to have done its 'job', and that they prioritise narratives of individual choice and biography – as commensurate with prevailing discourses of neoliberalism and postfeminism ((Budgeon, 2001; Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016; Harris, 2004; Rich, 2005, Scharff, 2012; Schuster, 2013). Harris, 2004). Although we appear to have seen signs of change - with the greater visibility of feminist discourse/ activism leading to claims of a 'feminist zeitgeist' (Gill, 2016) - such an apparent mainstreaming of feminism is multivalent and complex: it continues alongside 'revitalised forms of anti-feminism and popular misogyny', and prioritises particular forms of feminism which are compatible with consumer and neoliberal values (Gill, 2016: 612).

As indicated above, age has been seen as a prominent marker of difference in how feminism is negotiated, and this has largely been explored in relation to the identities and experiences of girls and *young* women (up until and including participants in their mid-20s). Although there are exceptions (Quinn and Radtke, 2006), there has been little discussion about how middle aged women they identify with, negotiate or reject feminism(s) within a ‘postfeminist’ or ‘third wave’ landscape. The literature that adopts such periodisation suggests that the ‘third wave’ generation encompasses feminists born after the 1960s and active since the 1990s (Schuster, 2013) – a timeframe that includes the middle-aged women currently becoming solo mums. But the almost exclusive focus on girls and younger women in feminist qualitative research implies that mid-life women have unproblematic and/or uninteresting relationships with feminism, and that there is little at stake in exploring how they may use feminism ‘as a potential resource in navigating the very choices it helped to create’ (Budgeon, 2001: 8). This article seeks to address this omission, specifically in relation to the contested terrain of the ‘choice mum’.

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

Ethical clearance for the project was granted by the author’s institution in May 2017, and participants were interviewed via Skype or telephone in May/June the same year.

Recruitment for the study was undertaken via the UK-based Donor Conception Network (DCN), as well as two Facebook groups which are populated by (mainly) UK solo mums.

Although it is recognised here that the terminology used to define this type of motherhood is contested and complex, the term used in the call for participants, and in this article, is that of the solo mum – the dominant term used by the DCN to describe single women who conceive a child via sperm donation. The DCN has a specific mailing list for solo mums (with 650

such women registered), and the call for participants was circulated by the administrator for this group. One of the Facebook groups includes women who are trying to conceive, are pregnant, or who are already solo mums (311 members), whilst the other is made up of women who are now solo mums to one or more children (117 members). As a solo mum to a donor-conceived child, the author is a member of both the DCN and the Facebook groups, and this facilitated access to these as channels of recruitment (see below).

In addition to being 18 or over, the criteria for inclusion was that participants had made a decision to pursue solo motherhood via the use of donor sperm. The study was thus open to women who were planning/ undergoing fertility treatment, women who were pregnant, and women who were already mothers. The study recruited 25 participants in total, all of whom were single. Within this sample, two were trying to conceive, four were pregnant with their first child, and 19 were solo mothers to one child or more. One participant was the recipient of double donation – having used both donor eggs and sperm. With the exception of one woman (who undertook self-insemination at home using the sperm of a known donor), all had opted for Intra-uterine insemination (IUI) and/or in vitro fertilisation (IVF) at a fertility clinic, selecting a donor based on knowledge of limited characteristics.<sup>ii</sup> The participants were based in the UK, with ages ranging from 33-60, with the majority bunching between the ages of 36-45. In this regard, the study included women in their late 30s to late 40s with babies and young children, as well as women in their 50s/ early 60s whose children were now grown-up, meaning that the women had made their decision and undergone treatment in very different time periods. Yet the focus of the interview was primarily on how the women understood their decision *now* – a framework which allowed for shifts in conception to be explored (and which undoubtedly involved recollection, and stories that were infused by available cultural discourse on the solo mum).

In terms of ethnicity, 17 respondents defined themselves as white British, one as white European, one as white other, two as white Irish, one as European/Asian, one as Anglo-American, one as Black African, and one as Afro-Caribbean. With regard to social class, all but one participant, who identified as working-class, described themselves as middle-class, and with respect to sexual orientation, 23 identified as heterosexual, one as gay, and one as bisexual. In this regard, although it is problematic to simply conceptualise these women as belonging to a unified ‘group’, the sample is weighted toward middle/ upper middle class women who are financially secure and heterosexual – confirming previous data from empirical research on the solo mum (Jadva et al, 2009). Although data on UK solo mums in terms of ethnicity does not appear to exist, the prevalence of white participants in the sample replicates the demographic information held by the DCN (DCN, 2017).<sup>iii</sup>

### *Procedure*

Participants took part in a one-to-one interview that lasted about one hour, and gave verbal or written consent for the interview to be recorded and used for research purposes. The interview schedule then covered key 6 areas including: 1) the backstory about why they decided to become a solo mum 2) the terminology (if any) they used to describe their present/future maternal identity 3) the factors they saw as giving rise to the increasing number of women pursuing solo motherhood 4) what (if anything) the word ‘feminism’ meant to them and whether this term had any relevance to their identities and everyday lives 5) whether their views on gender politics/ feminism had played a role in their decision to become a solo mum, and how they felt about this being framed – in some quarters - as a feminist decision 6) what

impact (if any) the construction of solo motherhood in terms of discourses of ‘choice’ had on how they understood their identity and negotiated this identity in relation to others.

In the call for participants, as well as at the start of the interview, I provided a brief description of the study, and chose to disclose my identity as a solo mum to a six year old girl. Feminist qualitative research has invested in models which seeks to reduce the power gap between ‘expert’ and participant (Oakley, 1981), often including discussions of personal experience and reflexivity in ways which are not silenced by objectivist (masculinist) concerns over ‘bias’ and ‘distortion’ (see Tang, 2002). In this regard, my self-disclosure was offered as a form of reciprocity (Ribbens, 1989), whilst it was also prompted by what felt congruent to me as a researcher and interviewer. At the start of the interview I indicated my willingness to answer any questions about my own experience of solo motherhood – something that was taken up by the women who were trying to conceive, were pregnant, or had very young children. But an exchange of experience in this regard permeated many of the interviews, in so far as the questions prompted conversation about such issues as fertility treatment, family reactions, media representations, or the challenges of being a single parent. In this regard, although it would be problematic to characterise the interviews as simply ‘friendly free-flowing discussion[s]’ (Tracy, 2013: 56), they emerged, at times, as focused conversations in which we shared experiences of life trajectories, fertility treatment and parenting.

But it is fully acknowledged here that the possibility of a ‘non-hierarchical’ (Oakley, 1981) relationship, as based on gender congruence and perceptions of shared experience, is overly simplistic, and feminist work has explored the range of intersectional attributes that can shape the balance of power within the interview encounter (Tang, 2002). As a white middle-class professional woman, as well as a middle-aged solo mum, I shared a broad social location with many of the participants – although I did not introduce myself as a ‘feminist’ for fear

that this may make it difficult for the women to respond honestly to the term. But it is acknowledged here that this shared experience cannot be translated into a simple language or experience of commonality, and that research interviews ‘inescapably involve power imbalances’ which are not easy to eradicate (Ribbens, 1989: 580). Indeed, whilst I have framed this analysis as offering the women a chance to *respond to* how they have been discussed or perceived, it is also acknowledged that feminist research does not simply or unproblematically offer participants ‘voice’ (Saukko, 2008; Tang, 2002). Offering the participants a chance to ‘speak back’ in an academic study clearly has its limits, and there is also always a potential tension between the desire to ‘listen carefully and faithfully’ to the women’s experiences and the impetus to ‘critically assess the discourses ... from which their voices are made...’ (Saukko, 2008: 77) – a stance that often inevitably involves ‘judging’ and *evaluating* the understandings of feminism on offer (Gill, 2007b).

### *Data analysis*

The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and transcribed by two research assistants, and the participant data was anonymised at the point of writing. The data was then analysed by the author using a constructionist approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) which enables consideration of how subject positions are constituted discursively within the interview transcript. This is compatible with a feminist poststructuralist perspective which sees discourses as actively constitutive *of* identities and experiences (Weedon, 1987) in ways which produce subjectivities within relations of power. Importantly, this position acknowledges that whilst identities are socially constructed within discourse, the subject nonetheless exists as a ‘social agent capable of resistance... produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices’ (Weedon, 1987, p.124). In the current study for example, participants moved through multiple positions

during the interviews in which they internalised/ negotiated/ critiqued concepts such as patriarchy, feminism and the nuclear family.

The data was then approached using the six-stage process for thematic (discourse) analysis defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), and this gave rise to five key themes which were (1) negotiations of ‘acceptable’ feminism 2) the resistance to defining solo motherhood as a ‘choice’ and situating it in relation to feminism 3) the uses of feminism and/or a feminist identity in deciding to become a solo mum 4) the role of feminism in navigating social critiques of the solo mum 5) the ‘burden’ of choice in performing the maternal identity of the solo mum. The thematic categories were then analysed in detail and data extracts which represented these themes (as well as the complexities and contradictions within them) were selected for inclusion. The writing stage then involved analysing the complexity and implications of these themes in relation to the research questions, and the literature on feminism, ‘choice’ and the solo mum.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***Negotiating (a space for) feminism***

Out of the 25 participants, 18 described themselves as feminist when asked in the context of the interview. The remaining 7 articulated an investment in equal opportunities and women’s rights, but did not wish to label themselves as feminist – for reasons explored below. When participants were asked what the term feminism meant to them, the idea of ‘equality’ emerged as central, equality was then repeatedly framed in terms of having access to choice:

To me [feminism] ... means complete parity and independence. Complete parity between the genders and independence for women to live their life the way they choose, whether they're in a partnership or not (P11).

Feminism means equality to me ... and that means being able to make my own choices and decisions and reject stereotypes and stereotypical expectations and roles (P18).

For the participants who did not readily identify as feminist, the rhetoric of equality and choice was used to justify the obsolete nature of feminism, something which, as one participant observed, 'did its work decades ago, in the 60s, 70s and 20s' (P14). As has been explored in debates about postfeminism such perspectives are intimately intertwined with repudiations of feminism as 'excessive', 'unreasonable', 'dated' and 'unfeminine' (Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2016; Scharff, 2012).

But such stereotypes also shaped the responses of the participants that *did* identify as feminist, in so far as they were quick to foreground them as problematic 'misconceptions':

...I think a lot of women are worried about what men will think of them if they call themselves feminists because unfortunately the common tar for the term is that if you are feminist, you are a man hater and feminism doesn't mean man hating, it means women having choices and freedom and safety in the world (P25).

, Such participants often refuted claims about the outdated and 'excessive' nature of feminism by questioning that equality had been achieved, and by foregrounding the continued purchase of feminism in relation to specific domains, ranging from beauty practices; objectification; sexism in the workplace; unequal pay, sexual and domestic abuse; and the distribution of

domestic labour (see also Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2016). In addition, some of the participants challenged what they saw as misconceptions of feminism by rejecting the idea that it was ‘just’ for women, foregrounding ‘equal rights for everybody really’ (P15) across axes such as gender, race, sexuality and disability.(P15).

As a whole, these responses echo the discursive frames in Calder-Dawe and Gavey’s (2016) study in which participants carefully negotiated a discursive space for what was presented as ‘fair’ or ‘reasonable’ feminism (see also Gill, 2016; Quinn and Radtke, 2006). Within this construction, ‘fair feminism’ was defined as ‘equality for all’ (particularly equal *choices* for all), as well as a critical practice and political movement which seeks to tackle the gendered inequalities which continue to effect women and girls in disproportionate ways (Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2016).

### ***Resisting solo motherhood as a ‘choice’***

The idea of ‘choice’ was described by the participants as a linchpin of ‘fair’ or ‘reasonable’ feminism (Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2016), and the interviewees *did* position their trajectories as evidence of women’s increased choices about how to become a mother. But as in other studies of the solo mum, the participants also clearly foregrounded the contested nature of their ‘choice’.

Contrary to the idea that solo mums blithely adopt the term ‘solo/ single mum by choice’ in a bid to legitimise their single parent status in class terms (Bock, 2000: 83), there was clear resistance to this phrase in the interviews (and over half preferred the more traditional label of the ‘single mum’) (see also Zadeh et al, 2013). Objections in this respect were various, but particularly hinged on the idea that it misnamed the participants’ narratives of how they came to parent alone. In this regard, the responses confirm those in almost all other studies of the

solo mum which position this route to motherhood as ‘plan B’, and not what would have been chosen if having a child with a partner had been an option (Hertz, 2006; Jadva et al, 2009; Murray & Golombok, 2005, Zadeh et al, 2013). The ways in which this ‘choice’ was then framed by the participants frequently intersected with views on whether the decision to become a solo mum should/ could be read in relation to feminism in any way:

For me this isn’t a feminist act in terms of being defiant, or proving something, or just using men for their sperm. There’s nothing in it where I’m saying to the world ‘fuck you’ I can do this on my own. This is not my first choice. It’s a much more personal thing where I’m saying what do I want my life to be ... and I really want to be a parent... (P4)

Responses in this regard were similar across the participants whether they identified as feminist or not. There is a clear reluctance here to position the decision as a defiant reclamation of reproductive choice and a bid to distance it from particular perceptions of feminism. The suggestion that ‘this isn’t a feminist act *in terms of* being defiant... [my emphasis]’ can be read as suggesting that it wasn’t a feminist act (full-stop), or it can be interpreted as suggesting that feminism need *not* be defined as an aggressive, mercenary ‘use’ of men. But the idea of women setting out to ‘prove’ their independence or agency, whether ‘defiantly’ or otherwise, was not encouraged by the participants – perhaps sitting on a continuum with conceptions of ‘reasonable’ and ‘fair’ (rather than ‘excessive’) feminism discussed in the previous section.

Although there are exceptions (see Lapidus, 2004), the cultural construction of the solo mum is very heterosexualised in cultural and academic discourse - something reflected on substantively by the one participant in the study who identified as gay. This is relevant here given that the idea of feminism and normative femininity as inherently incompatible has a long history, and refutations of feminism are thus simultaneously performances of classed,

heterosexual femininity (Riley and Scharff, 2012). Indeed, in broader discussions about what the term feminism meant to the participants, it was frequently men – rather than other women – who were seen as perceiving feminists in highly negative ways, and such judgements appeared to shape the ways in which the negotiation of ‘choice’ was performed. For example, several participants did not want to be perceived as having ‘removed’ themselves from the heterosexual market (as the term ‘solo mum *by choice*’ might potentially imply), or as one participant suggested, it ‘makes it sound like ... I've rejected the idea of having a male partner and I've actively chosen to do this on my own and that is not true...’ (P12). This is especially so given the extent to which women are often ‘blamed’ for being single, and are subject to a peculiar cultural ‘accountability’ that requires them to justify and explain their single status to others (see Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003).

Feminist research has argued that female ‘choice narratives’ underplay the continued power of traditional constructions of normative femininity, and how these ‘regulate the availability of subject positions... resulting in a system that disciplines and limits “choice”’ (Stuart and Donaghue, 2012: 102). Indeed, the idea that participants had ‘no’ other choice (if they wanted to have a child) only really makes sense if positioned in the context of normative, heterosexual femininity: having a child via donor conception is less a last option than highly *likely* for a gay woman wishing to conceive. Nevertheless, there are also ways in which the responses clearly mark a difference from the *claims* to agency and choice which structure other female choice narratives in a neoliberal, postfeminist context. Rather than perpetuating discourses of female agency, the women are only *too ready* to emphasise their relative lack of choice and agency here.

If terms of how the women narrated and explained their decision, this difference may be shaped by the significance placed on discourses of the ‘natural’ in relation to motherhood. The contested and difficult nature of the ‘choice’ was always understood by the participants

in relation to mothering without a partner, rather than becoming a mother *per se*. As has also been suggested in other studies on the solo mum (Zadeh, Freeman and Golombok, 2013; Zadeh and Foster, 2016), participants frequently positioned their journeys as the outcome of a *strong biological desire* rather than a choice, such as in the statement ‘it hit me like a massive whammy.... I suddenly had a strong urge to have a child’ (P18). This confirms existing research which emphasises how, far from undermining traditional family structures, narratives surrounding the solo mum shore up the apparently ‘inviolable link between womanhood and motherhood’, with the ‘natural’ offsetting the ‘unnatural’ here (Zadeh and Foster, 2016: 559). The participants might be seen as culturally transgressing the ‘right’ context in which to have a child (a stable heterosexual relationship), and some as transgressing ideas of the ‘right’ time (they were approaching their 50s when their children were born). But this is offset by an amplification of the natural centrality of motherhood for women – a desire so strong that it *must* be pursued. Motherhood continues to be perceived as ‘natural’ for women, and the desire for it both inevitable and unquestioned (Gillespie, 2000). As such, when compared to other narratives explored by feminist research, the different articulation of ‘choice’ here may precisely reside in its (apparent) ‘naturalness’ – a context in which there is little perceived need to account for having made a ‘choice’ at all.

***‘I think it has kind of been a mutually reinforcing thing’: feminist identities and solo motherhood***

But it was also the case that the relevance of feminism – and its relationship with ‘choice’ emerged as *highly* contradictory in the interviews. Indeed, the majority of women who identified as feminist in the study felt that their relationship with feminism *had* played a role in fostering the decision they had made, even if they didn’t see the decision *as* ‘feminist’ (and

had previously disputed the agentic nature of their choice in interview). In answering the question, ‘did your identity as a feminist play any role in the decision you made?’, the following participant offers an indicative response:

Yeah, I was thinking about that after ... I came across your research. It’s a tricky one because obviously I wouldn’t consciously have taken the decision on those premises, but I suppose, that being an integral part of my identity, being a feminist and being aware of my own rights ... and opportunities - that will have played into making that decision, and part of that identity would be the feeling that I can rely on myself. I don’t necessarily need a strong shoulder to take me through life and all of that so, I suppose in that sense, yes (P21).

The idea that the research encounter had prompted such reflection emerged relatively frequently across the interviews – suggestive of the ways in which interviews construct and create narratives of identity, rather than gather data on pre-existing, stable ‘realities’ (Ribbens, 1989). In this quote, this participant takes as given that her decision was not driven *primarily* by any feminist agenda, but she does suggest that ‘being a feminist’ made her more attuned to what she could achieve and fostered a greater sense of self-reliance – both of which she sees as contextualising her particular route to motherhood. For other participants, it was suggested that a feminist identity, and the decision to become a solo mum, occupied a kind of reciprocal relationship:

I think it has kind of been a mutually reinforcing thing – [my]... feminist politics have shaped by decision, and I think my decision has also made me reflect much more on the ways that certain normative family ideas are produced in society, and

viewed by feminism. I've become much more ... conscious of ... wanting to like really give space for the kind of variety of family forms ... and recognise those in explaining my decision to people ... (P23)

In this response, feminism is articulated in ways which return to the idea of 'equality for all' (Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2016), and the participant specifically links feminism with the acceptance and visibility of family forms which don't conform to the nuclear ideal. For other participants, feminism was described as offering them the confidence not to settle for a more 'conventional' domestic set-up which may turn out to be unfulfilling and oppressive ('I didn't want to end up in an unhappy relationship with a traditional housewife role' (P20)), whilst for others still, the role of feminism was simply articulated in terms of being a 'strong' woman and encouraging belief in their own ability to succeed. In this regard, in exploring how feminism itself might be used to navigate 'choice' here, there was no unified picture in terms of how conceptions of feminism – and discourses on feminist identities - intersected with the decision to become a solo mum. But what is apparent is that although discourses of neoliberalism and postfeminism shape the interpretative frameworks available to women in terms of how they make sense of and 'use' feminism, they do not dictate them. For example, the responses above are indicative of feminism being conceptualised in both individualistic *and* socially-situated ways: the women talk about and use feminism in relation to their individual subjectivities (shoring up belief in themselves as a 'strong' woman for example), whilst they also articulated conceptions of feminism which were used to critique wider social structures ('how family ideas are produced in society'). In this regard, understandings of feminism were varied, shifting and contradictory, and participants used multiple 'interpretative repertoires' to negotiate what it meant to occupy a 'feminist' subjectivity across the interview context (Quinn and Radtke, 2006: 196).

*‘You left it too late!’: critiquing narratives of blame*

One of the interview questions asked participants about how the decision to become a solo mum was responded to by others, whether this was within their own social environments, or in available media discourse. In contrast to earlier research (Jadva et al, 2009), most women suggested that they had experience of largely positive responses in terms of their everyday lives. But many were highly critical of media constructions of the solo mum, citing press coverage in particular as positioning solo motherhood as the unfortunate outcome of women being ‘over-invested’ in their careers. These critical responses tended to be articulated by the participants who identified as feminist. As one explained:

I have seen .... articles [in the press]... which suggest that you left it too late – concentrated on the career for too long and then by the time you get to 35 you’ve missed the boat ... which I really disagree with, because I tried all my life to find a man ... So there’s a negative connection – ... you left it too late – it’s your fault. You were concentrating on your career for too long – ‘that’s what these feminists are like!’ [laughs] (P7).

Such responses can be seen to sit on a continuum with the wider reluctance by the participants to label the solo mum as ‘feminist’ (and as a ‘choice’), and such media discourses may actively contribute to this reluctance given their negative construction of feminists as career-obsessed (social) ‘failures’. But such responses appeared to be directed less at insisting that the decision wasn’t ‘feminist’, than they were aimed at actively *critiquing* constructions of the solo mum which endorsed a gendered narrative of blame, which demonized the working woman, and which constructed singleness as a life ‘failure’ for women (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). Rather than accepting narratives in which the solo mum was used to epitomise excessive, flawed and ‘unreasonable’ feminism – or what one

participant critiqued as women ‘being “selfish” and damaging the kids and trying to have it all, the jobs, the baby without the man...’ (P5) - several participants constructed alternative explanations in which wider *structural* factors played the key role:

Either you’re viewed as a failure for not having found a man... .. or you must be some kind of militant man-hating feminist that has made this decision because you don’t want any men in your life ... but I think that what both of those narratives miss is the kind of nuance and complexity of the kind of lives that we live today – particularly as women ... My feminist response to this is that it’s like ‘well there are structural reasons that create the kind of conditions within which [being a solo mum emerges]... and we need to kind of pay attention to those without judging whether they are good or bad ... the kind of constraints that women are faced by in terms of the possibilities of having a family’ (P23).

Although again keen to distance the spectre of ‘militant’ feminism, the participant explicitly labels her response *as* feminist, and suggests that feminism can be used as an interpretative framework for critiquing reactionary discourses on the solo mum. Some of the ‘structural reasons’ cited by the participants as creating a context for their decision emerged as the relative immaturity of men; the ways in which cultural constructions of gender permit men to be single for longer than women; men being intimidated by women’s increased financial/career independence; and the ways in which women’s fertility was understood to decline substantially earlier than men’s. Sometimes the latter was understood as a biological ‘fact’, but at other times it was critiqued as an ideological construction, and participants called out some of the same discourses that they had cited as shaping their decision to become a solo mum in the first place. As one reflected:

I became very sensitive to the media and articles everywhere basically ramping the pressure up on women to have kids, to have them before 35, to get on with it, and not putting any of that same kind of pressure on men. It made me really cross (P25).

In this regard, such discussions again sit uneasily with the discourses of both neoliberalism and postfeminism which tend to deny any (gendered) constraints acting upon the self (Stuart and Donaghue, 2011). Here, the women specifically call out discursive strategies which abstract their decision from wider social structures, and the normative gender expectations they endorse.

***‘You’ve defied convention, now get on with it’: solo motherhood and the burden of choice***

In the responses above, the participants critiqued narratives of social censure and judgement which policed their gender identities, and their apparent ‘deviation’ from a normative female life course. But as with other themes in the interviews, this idea of social judgement, and its relationship with how the women understood their maternal identities, emerged in highly contradictory ways across the interviews, particularly with regard to discourses of ‘choice’.

Although it may not have been ‘plan A’, the women suggested that they valued the independence and autonomy of parenting as a solo mum. At the same time, they also acknowledged the challenges of single parenting on an everyday level, and how it often required extended networks of help and support. But when it came to asking family and/or friends for help and support, the vast majority suggested that this was difficult precisely due to the discourse of ‘choice’. As one explained:

I think it makes it more difficult [to ask for help]. Cos' you've got a sense of 'I've brought this upon myself- it's my choice, my decision, now I've got no basis on which to complain'. But then on the other hand .... women in a relationship...most of them are having a child by choice as well and still complain all the time or probably ask for help. But for some reason I feel it does make it harder [to do that as a solo mum], but I feel it shouldn't (P21).

Or:

I think I feel that there is this thing that 'you went against nature and you *chose* to do this on your own' ... no-one's said this to me, but because of the word 'choice', I chose to go down this route even though everyone who has a child now, it's pretty much a choice because there's contraception and abortion ... But it's kind of 'this is your bed you lie in it... you've defied convention, now get on with it' [original emphasis] (P20).

In both responses, there is an emphasis on simply 'getting on with it', and silencing difficulty and ambivalence in the service of self-sacrificing motherhood. Discourses of self-sacrifice and selflessness have of course long since been pertinent to dominant western constructions of motherhood (and have arguably accelerated under postfeminism (Douglas and Michaels, 2004), but there appears to be more going on in these responses here. Both participants suggest that asking for help is difficult in a context in which they are seen as having actively *chosen* single motherhood – even though they reject this as a specificity of the solo mum. Indeed, in suggesting the importance of available cultural discourse on the solo mum shaping the women's' self-conceptions (Zadeh et al, 2013), what emerges here is a fear of social

judgement for ‘deviating’ from a conventional, heterosexual female life course, indicating a perception in which the solo mum should ‘expect’ to struggle in silence in exchange for the unconventional decision they have made. As the quote from P21 directly suggests, few participants had actively experienced such attitudes or judgements *in practice*. Instead, they operated as a discursive framework – or internalised perception - which regulated how they performed and experienced their maternal identities as solo mums, even whilst such discourses were also critiqued and questioned within the context of the interview.

The responses also invoke particular discourses germane to the neoliberal landscape. As has been explored in many feminist critiques of neoliberalism and postfeminism, a key characteristic of neoliberal subjectivities is an emphasis on autonomy, self-responsibility and self-reliance – a framework which holds ‘individuals accountable for their own fates’ (Stuart and Donaghue, 2011: 101). As explored earlier in the article, discourses of biology (the ‘urge’ to mother) might function to mitigate the extent to which this route is perceived / positioned as a ‘choice’. In addition, we have seen how some of the women were only to *ready* to critique the blaming and shaming discourses of the popular press (in which they were accused of having ‘overinvested’ in careers, or ‘left it too late’). Yet when it came to how they described what they saw as the lived realities of solo motherhood, the importance of avoiding the possibility of judgement permeated the responses. Rather than perceiving themselves as the recipients of increased choice and flexibility (in terms of gendered roles, family structures, or practices of mothering), the responses gesture toward the ‘punitive judgement’ associated with not being a ‘post-feminist, neoliberal success’ (Baker, 2010: 200). Indeed, the idea of ‘perfection’, and thus the possibility of ‘failure’, saturates the construction of female subjectivities under postfeminism, with understandings of success/ failure mapped across multiple ‘lifestyle’ domains (Douglas and Michaels, 2004; McRobbie, 2015). In this regard, although the women critiqued such judgements within the interview

context, they were also clearly affected by them, offering a sharp insight into how women's choices are never unencumbered or 'free'.

## **Conclusion**

There are clearly limitations to the sample in this study which should be addressed here. The demographics of the sample broadly correlate with previous perceptions of the solo mum as white, middle-class and heterosexual. But UK studies of the solo mum with a greater proportion of women of colour or lesbian participants may yield different results – particularly given the repeated significance of heterosexuality here. It is also important to acknowledge that although this study has aimed to centre other women's experiences of motherhood, it is inextricably interwoven with my own subjectivity as a 'solo mum'. The study undoubtedly emerges out of my desire to understand the choices that *I* have made (and the role of my feminist politics within these); to negotiate the contested legitimacy of *my* decision (in which I recognise the socially constructed nature of the 'proper' family, yet sometimes really long for a father for my child); and to explore the possibilities at my disposal for defending and embracing my status as a solo mum (an identity that is certainly not yet mainstream or 'normal'). Although a hierarchical relationship between participant and scholar is difficult to fully eradicate, Gill suggests the importance of the feminist researcher recognising and acknowledging their *own* enmeshment 'in these matrices of power', and the disciplining of choice they engender (2007b: 77). This is a dynamic which I have tried to keep in play in approaching, analysing and writing up this data.

But the study offers a number of findings here which are of significance, both in terms of exploring the contemporary uses women may make of feminism, and in relation to the feminist implications of single women becoming mothers through donor sperm.

When compared to the range of studies over the last 15 years on how girls/ young women negotiate feminism, the women in this sample more readily adopted a feminist identity (although for those that did not, repudiations of feminism as ‘out of date’ and ‘extreme’ continued to hold sway). The sample here is clearly small, but these responses could be seen to point to the possibility that older women’s identifications with feminism are less censured and fraught than those of their younger counterparts. Equally, or at the same time, the responses may point to the changing political context in which feminism has a greater visibility or ‘new luminosity’ (Gill, 2016: 614). But just as Gill encourages us to examine *which* discursive constructions of feminism achieve visibility within this ‘zeitgeist’, so the responses in this study clearly suggest investments in constructions of a ‘reasonable’ feminism which sanction ‘fair’ perspectives on gender equality, and which thus operated within a specific, delimited space (Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2016; Quinn and Radtke, 2006).

Yet it also acknowledged here that feminist politics were specifically being explored in relation to what have been tricky terrains for feminism – motherhood, the nuclear family and (predominantly) heterosexual partnerships. Empirical negotiations of feminism are often contradictory, shifting and contingent (Gill, 2016; Quinn and Radtke, 2006), but the particular terrains examined in this article may help to account for the *levels of contradiction* which emerged. To some extent, the women in the sample *did* see the decision they had made as being enabled by family structures becoming more diverse and flexible, and by women being given increased choice about when and how to become a mother (Feasey, 2012). But as the women did not frame the decision to become a solo mum in highly agentic terms, both

‘feminism’ and ‘choice’ emerged as contested discourses here. Feminism in this regard was often seen as actively rejecting the dream of parenting with a partner (and given the demographic of the study, predominantly a man), and as deliberately setting out to ‘go it alone’. Indeed, in confirming the ambivalence of the ‘choice’ discourse found in other studies of the solo mum, this suggests the continued power of ‘traditional family discourse’ (Zadeh et al, 2013: 113) in regulating and shaping female subjectivities. This then in turn then confirms wider research on female ‘choice narratives’, and the suggestion that discursive constructions of agency and autonomy here underplay the continued power of normative femininities (Budgeon, 2015; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011).

But as suggested previously, what is different here is that unlike the apparently wilful promotion of ‘choice’ subjectivities in other ‘female’ domains (from glamour modelling, plastic surgery to leg-shaving), the women were *not* keen to claim agency and ‘choice’.. Whilst this difference may well attest to the continued power of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1980) and discourses on the nuclear ideal, it may also be related to the particular discursive terrain being studied here. As discussed in the analysis, the role played by ‘biology’ in narratives of mothering in the study may be significant, as there is little sociocultural pressure to account for becoming a mother in terms of ‘choice’. In this regard, available constructions of the solo mum – both in terms of media discourse and academic research – shore up the apparently ‘natural’ relationship between womanhood and motherhood (Zadeh and Foster, 2016: 559) in ways which may work to off-set more transgressive possibilities, including the significance or power of *feminism*. In addition, the threat of punitive social discourses in terms of postfeminist ‘perfection’ (McRobbie, 2015) may regulate the extent to which this route is framed as *actively* chosen. The women generally stressed how they had really pursued more normative and traditional routes first (as

one suggested, ‘I tried all my life to find a man’ (P7)), with plan ‘B’ only emerging as way of salvaging the dream to become a mother.

But this is clearly not the whole story. Whilst the women in this study were not keen to frame the solo mum as explicitly connected *to* feminism, or as an expression *of* feminism, the interview data still suggests the highly nuanced ways in which these spheres might interact. – The interview data offers insight into how identifications with feminism were understood as encouraging forms of self-belief and self-reliance which were seen as important for solo motherhood. It also suggests how feminism could function as a resistive force: although the women existed within an environment in which they were keenly aware of the social judgements which might be associated with the decision they had made (and often felt the effects of these discourses), feminism could be used to challenge and question negative social critiques which positioned the solo mum as the deplorable outcome of women’s social and economic independence. This involved resisting individualised and blame-laden narratives on the solo mum, and looking out toward more socially situated understandings of why they had taken the path they were on. Such frameworks were used to call attention to particular inequities in the construction of gendered subjectivities (which stress ‘appropriate’ paths, milestones and timelines for women), and the ways in which these were relevant to discourse on the solo mum. This marks a further deviation from the claims to agency and individualism which might structure other female ‘choice’ narratives under neoliberalism. Rather than claiming that they were freely ‘choosing’ a path ‘untethered by gendered constraints’ (Baker, 2010: 187), some of the women offered reflections on how such ‘decisions’ are still made against a backdrop of inequitable gendered subjectivities and expectations – a perspective which has much in common with wider feminist work in the field (Baker, 2010, Budgeon, 2015; Jacques and Radtke, 2012; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011).

In light of the complexities at work in this data, it may be that the term ‘single/ solo mum by choice’ is not a good match for these participants: it misnames why they pursued this path, as well as the influence of the sociocultural context in which their decisions were made. As a feminist scholar, and one of such women myself, I am torn between wanting to hold on to a sense of female strength, agency and feminism, *and* to recognise the powerful emphasis on ambivalence, ‘non-agency’, and the delimited parameters within which ‘forced’ choice may prevail. In a context in which both ‘single’ and ‘solo’ motherhood have classed and raced connotations (and are contested in different ways (Bock, 2000)), the options seem few. Future studies could use the voices of these women to explore the possibilities of more enabling terms, or the different ways in which such maternal identities and experiences may be configured.

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<sup>i</sup> The terms ‘single/ solo mom by choice’ or ‘choice moms’ emerged in the US context, and are often attributed to Mikki Morrisette [http://www.choicemoms.org/about/about\\_mikki/](http://www.choicemoms.org/about/about_mikki/). The terms are less widely used in the UK but – as the interview data will show – they certainly have a currency.

<sup>ii</sup> In this regard, most of the women in the study had used what is known as a non-anonymous donor – a scenario in which the donor can be contacted by the child once they are 18. But this differed depending on *when* they conceived (following the ‘Disclosure of Donor Information’ regulation (2004), it is only children born after 2004 that may have the right to contact their donor once 18), or *where* they conceived (different national contexts have different forms of regulation). It is also worth stating here that there are growing numbers of women using more informal mechanisms such as websites and social media to find donors themselves. The

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current study primarily recruited women used DI in a clinical context, but it did not set out to prioritise this group.

<sup>iii</sup> Of the 414 single women who have registered details of their ethnic profile with the DCN, 374 class themselves as white (DCN, 2017).