Negotiating the work-family nexus:
Examining identity work in the lives of lone parents

Submitted by Rachel Shona Gibson to the University of Exeter
as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Management Studies
In September 2012

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Abstract

This thesis offers a critical analysis of the everyday experiences and identity work of employed lone parents. Research on lone parents has been dominated by studies which focus on their experiences of unemployment (Haux, 2010; Chambaz, 2001; Speak, 2000). In comparison, the experiences of those lone parents whose histories are more likely to reflect time in work, rather than time out of work, have continued to be marginalised (Coyne, 2002; Ridge and Millar, 2011). Lone parents face the burden of childcare responsibilities without the support of a second parent, yet, they are still expected to engage with employment (Davies, 2012). A greater understanding of how they negotiate their work and family responsibilities is therefore required.

In this study, the concept of ‘identity’ was utilised to explore and analyse the experiences of employed lone parents. Both family and employment discourses provide critical (often contradictory) resources for identity construction (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Haynes, 2008), suggesting that an examination of how lone parents construct a sense of self is crucial in considering their everyday experiences. As concerns regarding inequality were found to be significant in previous studies on lone parents (Wallbank, 1998; May, 2003; 2004b; 2008b), a conceptual framework was required that could help identify experiences of marginalisation, as well as the influences of dominant discourses. ‘Identity’ was considered to be a “practice of improvisation within a scene of restraint” (Butler, 2004: 1), with the notion of identity work used to investigate this practice.

An in-depth qualitative approach, including semi-structured interviews and daily diaries, was utilised to collect data from fifteen participants from the South West of England and the London/Greater London areas. Based on the analysis and findings of this research, the lone parent participants were seen to be positioned awkwardly within discourses concerning work and family. Because of this, the process by which they constructed a coherent sense of identity was complex. Participants were seen to engage with different types of identity work in order to negotiate the paradox they faced as primary carers and providers. Considering the findings of this research, a number of implications were drawn in how this type of family may be supported more effectively within the workplace.
Acknowledgements

I should like to extend my deepest gratitude to the many people who assisted me in the preparation of this thesis. I am indebted to my supervisor, Emma Jeanes, as her guidance has been invaluable throughout the PhD process. In addition, I would like to thank my second supervisor, Scott Taylor, for his support and help. I am also grateful to the academic and supportive environment provided by members of the Business School at Exeter University.

A very big thanks to my parents and my sister who were always there with words of encouragement and cups of tea. Thank you to my friends Caroline and Sarah-Jane for their endless patience and care. A special thank you to Luke for his eternal faith in me to complete this thesis.

Most importantly, I would like to thank those who participated in this study, without whom this project would not have been possible.
Contents

List of Tables ................................................................................................................................. 9

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Opening remarks .................................................................................................................... 10
1.2 Why study lone parents and employment? .......................................................................... 11
1.3 Aim and objectives of the study ............................................................................................ 13
1.4 Methodology .......................................................................................................................... 15
1.5 Thesis structure ....................................................................................................................... 17

Chapter 2: Lone parents and employment: a literature review

2.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 20
2.2 Defining the ‘lone parent’ ....................................................................................................... 21
2.3 Lone parents, employment and social policy in the UK ......................................................... 23
   2.3.1 Developing policy: exploring the Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) studies on lone parents and employment ............................................................... 26
   2.3.2 The ‘social value’ of employment in policy discourses ................................................. 29
2.4 Challenges and issues facing working parents from both lone and dual-parent families ................................................................. 30
   2.4.1 Absence from the workplace ......................................................................................... 31
   2.4.2 Geographical considerations in maintaining employment ........................................ 33
   2.4.3 Organizational cultures ................................................................................................. 34
   2.4.4 The ‘good’ employee: working hours, ‘flexibility’ and gender implications .................. 38
   2.4.5 Organising work and family: ‘work-life balance’ and ‘family friendly’ policies ................ 41
   2.4.6 Technology and work: physical visibility versus virtual visibility ............................... 43
   2.4.7 The quantification of time in regard to work and family ........................................... 46
   2.4.8 ‘Choice’ in negotiations of work and family .............................................................. 48
2.5 Conclusion ................................................................................................................................ 49
Chapter 3: The concept of identity in the lives of working lone parents

3.1 Introduction ................................................................. 52
3.2 The concept of identity ..................................................... 53
3.3 Functionalist approaches to the study of identity ...................... 56
   3.3.1 Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory ....................... 56
   3.3.2 Role theory .............................................................. 61
3.4 Interpretivist approaches to the study of identity ....................... 65
   3.4.1 Narratives of the self ................................................ 65
   3.4.2 Identity work ........................................................... 68
3.5 Critical approaches to the study of identity ................................ 75
   3.5.1 Identity regulation ...................................................... 76
   3.5.2 Power and resistance in identity construction .................... 78
   3.5.3 Performativity, recognition and the ‘intelligible’ subject ........ 81
3.6 Constructing a framework .................................................. 85
   3.6.1 Approach 1: Dominant discourses, norms and expectations ..... 86
   3.6.2 Approach 2: The ‘intelligible’ subject and the ‘other’ ............ 87
   3.6.3 Approach 3: Identity work for primary carers and providers ...... 88
3.7 Conclusion ........................................................................ 90

Chapter 4: Research design and methodology

4.1 Introduction ....................................................................... 93
4.2 Research setting and orientation: presenting the aim and objectives of this study ................................................................. 93
4.3 Research approach and research paradigm .................................. 96
   4.3.1 Applying a feminist methodology to the study of lone parents: addressing the contributions and potential limitations .......... 98
   4.3.2 Critical Management Studies (CMS) .................................. 101
   4.3.3 Qualitative and quantitative research .................................. 104
   4.3.4 Planning and strategy .................................................... 107
Chapter 5: Analysis and findings

5.1 Introduction ...................................................................................... 138
5.2 Understandings and experiences of family and parenthood ................138
    5.2.1 Stereotyping the lone parent: unemployment and ‘poor’ parenting . 139
    5.2.2 The meaning of family .............................................................. 143
    5.2.3 Constructions of the good parent .............................................. 146
    5.2.4 ‘Am I a lone parent or am I parenting alone?’: resistance to the lone parent label .............................................................. 149
    5.2.5 ‘Doing it on your own’: ideals of independence and control ........151
5.3 Understandings and experiences of employment .............................. 155
    5.3.1 Formal support policies versus informal working arrangements ..... 160
    5.3.2 The meaning of work ............................................................... 169
    5.3.3 Employment ambition and progression: the issue of working hours 176
    5.3.4 Lone parenthood as a potential barrier to progression ............... 181
    5.3.5 Negotiating workplace expectations ...................................... 186
    5.3.6 Informal exclusion .................................................................. 191
5.4 Constructing a work-family routine .................................................. 194
    5.4.1 The importance of a good work-family routine .......................... 195
    5.4.2 Maintaining a stable work-family routine ................................... 198
    5.4.3 The restrictions of a ‘regimented’ work-family routine ............... 200
5.4.4 Understanding ‘work-life balance’ and ‘work-family conflict’ ..........202
5.4.5 Separating work and family versus integrating work and family ......205
5.5 Conclusion ..................................................................................210

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction ..................................................................................212
6.2 What it means to be a working lone parent: Negotiating the maelstrom of discourses ..................................................212
6.3 Seeking recognition as both carers and providers .........................220
6.4 Understanding identity work in the everyday experiences of working lone parents ..................................................223
  6.4.1 Moral identity work ..................................................................224
  6.4.2 Habitual identity work ...............................................................228
  6.4.3 Paradoxical identity work .........................................................231
6.5 Organizational and managerial considerations in supporting working lone parents ..................................................238
  6.5.1 Policy considerations for working lone parents .......................238
  6.5.2 Supporting lone parents through a paradoxical approach to management ..................................................245
6.6 Conclusion ..................................................................................252

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction ..................................................................................254
7.2 The rationale revisited ....................................................................254
7.3 Summary and implications of the research findings .......................256
7.4 Limitations of the study ..................................................................261
7.5 Future research ..............................................................................263
7.6 Concluding remarks .......................................................................264
Appendices

Appendix 1: Department for Work & Pensions’ studies on lone parents and employment .......................................................... 266
Appendix 2: Ethical approval form .................................................................................................................. 269
Appendix 3: Work histories of participants .................................................................................................. 271
Appendix 4: The ‘lone parent’ in the media .................................................................................................. 286
Appendix 5: Diary example .......................................................................................................................... 288

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................................. 291

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Tables

Table 1: Research methods used in previous lone parent studies ................................................................. 105
Table 2: Overview of participants ............................................................................................................... 113
Table 3: Detailed overview of participants’ situations .............................................................................. 157-159
Table 4: The rhetoric behind part-time or full-time working hours ......................................................... 177
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Opening remarks

This thesis offers a critical analysis of the everyday experiences and identity work of employed lone parents. Historically, lone parents have been both stereotyped and stigmatised within social and policy discourses (Wallbank, 1998; Chambaz, 2001; Lewis and Hobson, 1997), especially in regard to their relationship with employment. Whilst lone parents face the burden of childcare responsibilities without the support of a second parent, they are still expected to engage with employment as a ‘responsible citizen’ (Davies, 2012: 16). As family and employment discourses are both seen to provide critical (often contradictory) resources for identity construction (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Haynes, 2008; Medved, 2009), the identity work of lone parents is therefore crucial in considering their everyday experiences.

This research will contribute to knowledge in a number of ways. Firstly, this thesis will provide greater insight into the everyday challenges and concerns that may be found in the experiences of working lone parents. Such an exploration will provide an opportunity to consider the current ways in which working lone parents are supported and the possible alternatives that may be apparent. Secondly, this study will contribute towards the theoretical literature on identity work, specifically in regard to identity work as an ongoing, everyday process (Watson, 2008; Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009; Wieland, 2010; Ybema et al., 2009). Finally, this thesis will also contribute to knowledge from a methodological perspective. Qualitative daily diaries will be used to provide an appreciation of both the work and family routines of participants. As this method is still relatively rare in the work-family literature (Bass et al., 2007), such an approach will help to evaluate this research method and demonstrate its possibilities for qualitative researchers. By contributing to knowledge in these ways, this thesis will reveal a new understanding about the lives of working lone parents.

In this first chapter I will introduce why this research is important by providing a broad overview of the literature relating to this field of research. Then I will
present the aim, objectives and an outline of the proposed methodology for this study. Thereafter, I will confirm the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Why study lone parents and employment?

Over the last twenty years, the issue of work-family integration has become a major area of discussion within public, policy and academic discourses (Whitehead et al., 2008). The focus on this area reflects a shift in assumptions concerning the place of paid work in contemporary UK society (Lewis et al., 2003). Traditional expectations of the full-time working father, supported by a home-maker mother, have been mostly replaced by the norm of the ‘adult worker model’, where adults, irrespective of gender or family responsibilities, are expected to partake in paid employment (Janssens, 1997; Lewis, 2001a). Whilst such a shift has led to increased pressure affecting all family types, it is the primary carer and provider who faces particular challenges in meeting such expectations (Gill and Davidson, 2001).

Within contemporary organizational research, the area of work-family integration has also gained greater interest, with studies focusing on the broader context of working lives, especially in relation to issues such as work-life balance and work-family conflict (Gray and Tudball, 2003; Halrynjo, 2009; Clark, 2001; Emslie and Hunt, 2009; Lewis, 1997; Hyman et al., 2003; Buchanan and Bryman, 2009). The subject of these studies tends to be working parents, or, more specifically, working parents from dual-parent families. However, Roos et al. (2006) argue that the ‘family’, as it was previously known, is going through a number of changes; one of the most dramatic being the increase in the number of lone parent families, which is seen to have the potential to challenge the norm of the dual-parent family (Lundqvist, 2011).

Twenty-six per cent of all families with dependent children in the UK are headed by a lone parent (ONS, 2011a). Of these, fifty-seven per cent are in employment (ONS, 2011b), with the Government aiming to encourage many more into the workplace (Knight et al., 2006). These families represent a challenge to current thinking surrounding work and family relations, as the lone parents are simultaneously cast as both the primary carer and provider for their families. However, they may also provide an opportunity to explore the
changing nature of family and work. Coyne believed that lone parents could act as a “lightning rod for the range of issues affecting the care givers’ balancing act with their careers” (2002: 449). As both primary carer and provider, lone parents may experience the same difficulties as any working parent, however, “by definition, the lone parent has no partner with whom to share the responsibilities” (ibid.: 449). Therefore, the issue of employment and work-family integration may be more acute for this type of family.

In the UK, lone parents have increasingly become the focus of Government legislation and initiatives surrounding employment (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011). In particular, studies on welfare-to-work policies have dominated the literature on lone parents and social policy interventions (Harris, 1993; Gregg et al., 2009; Gingrich, 2008; Gray, 2001; Sumaza, 2001; Ermisch and Wright, 1991). Lone parents have traditionally been presented as a ‘social problem’ and even a ‘social threat’ because of their associations with welfare dependency (Edwards and Duncan, 1996: 115). They therefore tend to be understood in “moral terms as well as social terms” (Lewis and Hobson, 1997: 2). Involvement in the labour market is perceived to be the ‘answer’ to the ‘social problem’ of lone parent welfare dependency (Wallbank, 1998), with policy concerns regarding lone parents in the UK continuing to be primarily focused on addressing the issue of unemployment. For those lone parents within employment, concerns of how they can sustain and/or progress their position in the workplace, have only recently become part of UK policy initiatives (Brewer et al., 2009). Results from such programmes have been ambiguous (Sianesi, 2011), which suggests that exploring the experiences of those lone parents already within employment is just as important and significant as considering the voices of those outside, or at the border of employment (Ridge and Millar, 2011; Coyne, 2002; Gill and Davidson, 2001). This thesis will address this issue by focusing on the everyday experiences of working lone parents.

A focus on the concept of ‘identity’ has been central to many studies concerned with lone parenting (Burden, 1986; Campbell and Moen, 1992; Ford, 1996). In the case of lone mothers, exploring their understandings of identity was found to be critical, as they were seen to face particular difficulties in constructing a coherent sense of self in the face of moral discourses on motherhood (Duncan
When reflecting on the findings of such research, as well as the findings of studies on lone parents within the workplace (Coyne, 2002; Gill and Davidson, 2001), their positioning as primary carers and providers within discourses concerning work and family may be a critical issue which requires further investigation. Previous studies on mothers from dual-parent families have examined how contradictory discourses on work and family can lead to difficulties in constructing an identity as a ‘working parent’, which can then lead to difficulties in organising work and family responsibilities (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Haynes, 2008; Medved, 2009). Therefore, investigating how working lone parents construct a sense of self from within work and family discourses is critical to consider in exploring their everyday experiences.

Previous studies that have sought to examine the concept of identity for working parents have tended to rely on the notion of role theory (Burden, 1986; Campbell and Moen, 1992; Ford, 1996; Duncan and Edwards, 1997; Gill and Davidson, 2001). To add to this area of work (as well as address some of the limitations of role theory), this thesis will utilise the concept of ‘identity work’ to help investigate the everyday experiences of working lone parents. Identity work refers to the ‘mutually constitutive process’ by which individuals seek to construct a coherent sense of identity, within the social contexts of their lives (Watson, 2008: 129). Considering the positioning of lone parents in social and policy discourses, such a concept is useful as it can help to examine notions of sameness and difference (Einwohner et al., 2008; Giddens, 1991; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Carroll and Levy, 2008). In addition, this concept can also help to reveal the contradictory or ‘antagonistic’ discourses that are critical within the ongoing process of identity construction (Wieland, 2010; Clarke et al, 2009; Whitehead, 1998).

1.3 Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of the thesis is to explore and critically analyse the everyday experiences and identity work of lone parents in relation to their work and family responsibilities. To help meet this aim, the contexts of working lone parents will be analysed by reflecting on both their work and family experiences, in order to
consider how their understandings and perceptions of employment expectations and family commitments are constructed. An examination of how lone parents organise their work and family responsibilities will also be conducted, with a particular focus on how their identity work can help to continuously shape and re-shape this process of organising. Considering the previous literature in this area, which has highlighted the inequalities faced by lone parents (Wallbank, 1998; May, 2003, 2004a, 2008), a focus on experiences of marginalisation and the impact of dominant social discourse is also imperative for any study that wishes to explore their daily experiences of work and family life.

In order to investigate the concept of identity in the lives of working lone parents, a framework was developed that incorporated particular understandings of the process of identity construction. Identity was taken to be a “practice of improvisation within a scene of restraint” (Butler, 2004: 1) and the concept of identity work was utilised to explore this practice. In brief, identity work describes how individuals are involved in “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165). Alongside this concept, this study also sought to provide an in-depth analysis of the social discourses, norms and expectations that could help to constitute this identity work. By considering these aspects, and how they impacted upon constructions of the socially acceptable individual (or the ‘intelligible subject’ (Butler, 1999 [1990])), this research will critically explore how societal discourses on what is “normal, rational and sound” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 622) may affect the identity work of lone parents and their organisation of work and family responsibilities. Within such an approach, this research will also explore the notion of recognition in terms of how it is afforded to, or withheld from, lone parents as both carers and employees. This could then help to offer a greater insight into the issues and challenges they may face as primary carers and providers.

The research objectives are to:
1. Undertake data collection and analysis to provide an account of the experiences and identity work of participants in relation to their work and family responsibilities;
2. Provide working lone parents with a higher level of recognition by offering them greater visibility in the academic literature;
3. Make recommendations from the findings that could benefit the situations of working lone parents.

This research will benefit a number of stakeholders. In the first instance, the research will benefit employers who wish to gain a greater insight into the identity processes of those with primary caring responsibilities and so avoid problems of ‘identity dynamics’ (Beech et al., 2008). In addition, sensitive management of those with primary caring responsibilities could lead to higher levels of staff retention. Previous research on parents from dual-parent families has found that certain workplace cultures and managerial expectations may be seen as unsupportive of those with outside of work responsibilities (White et al., 2003; Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Aveling, 2002; Sheridan, 2004; Jarvis, 2002; Brown, 2010). This could then lead to problems of employee retention (Glass and Riley, 1998). A sensitive approach to management could potentially increase retention and, therefore, retain the skill sets and accrued knowledge of those employees. Secondly, the findings of this study may be useful for policy makers in considerations of future work and family initiatives. As Davies has pointed out, the pressure of combining paid work and family care has been seen to lack “official recognition as a source of stress for those parenting alone, with policies disconnected from the realities of everyday family life” (2012: 22). By providing an insight into the daily lives and identity work of lone parents, this study may therefore offer findings that are particularly relevant to developing suitably supportive policies. Thirdly, carers in employment stand to benefit through a greater visibility of their individual circumstances which emerge from the findings and in subsequent publications that will arise from this research.

1.4 Methodology

By considering the aim of this thesis, as well as the previous literature within this field, the decision was made to frame the research within a paradigm that
emphasises the social construction of knowledge. This study focuses on the perceptions and interpretations of participants but does not view such discussions as objective or their reflections as static. Rather, they are seen as situated within wider discourses and power relationships, where understandings of the social world are subject to constant change. Specifically, the research was grounded in the field of Critical Management Studies (including aspects of feminism) to ensure that consideration would be given to the dominant discourses or ‘taken-for-granted’ beliefs that helped to shape the work experiences and identity work of the participants.

Participants were recruited from the London/Greater London area and the South West of England and asked to take part in three stages of qualitative research. The first stage was a work history interview to explore the participants’ experiences and identity work within their employment history; the second stage was a daily diary study which was completed for seven days to provide an insight into participants’ daily routines and practices both at home and work; and the final stage was a follow up interview to discuss any issues that arose from the initial interview and diaries. The combination of semi-structured interviews and daily diaries was used to explore the interconnection of work and family in the lives of lone parents. Such an in-depth approach was therefore designed to explore both aspects of their lives, rather than purely focus on either ‘work’ or ‘family’.

By using a qualitative daily diary approach in this research, the aim was also to highlight its potential for other researchers within the field of work-family studies. A qualitative daily diary approach is useful as a research tool, not only because of the contextually specific data that is produced, but also because the text can be used as a prompt in subsequent interviews with participants. Such a tool can help participants to start considering their work-family activities and routines in greater depth, allowing for a more in-depth discussion of these aspects in following interviews. For researchers seeking to explore the intersection of work and family life, rather than the narrower focus of either work or family, such a research method may be particularly effective.
1.5 Thesis structure

The literature review is divided between two chapters. Chapter two will begin by providing an exploration of the context of lone parents and employment to demonstrate why this is a significant and contemporary research area. Policy reforms and discourses concerning lone parents will also be discussed to highlight how this type of family is conceptualised and supported within society. The work-family policy discussed in this section will mainly be orientated around the policy which has been introduced at a national level, although its implementation at the local level (in regard to the importance of organizational policies) will also be discussed. The impact of both national and local work-family policy reforms and practices will be considered throughout this thesis.

An examination of the limited number of studies pertaining to lone parents and employment will then be presented in chapter two, which will be considered in conjunction with the wealth of studies on dual-parents and employment. By exploring the literature on working dual-parents, key issues can be identified, which may be potentially significant for the study of working lone parents. This chapter will then help to highlight any ‘gaps’ in the literature, as well as explore any underlying assumptions that are apparent (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011).

The second literature review chapter (chapter three) will interrogate the concept of identity as a potential method for exploring how lone parents experience and give meaning to their work and family responsibilities. A detailed overview of the different understandings of this notion will be presented by exploring research that has taken a functionalist, interpretivist or critical approach. Literature from the area of work and family research will be discussed, as well as literature from the wider field of organizational studies. By considering the previous literature in this area, as well as possibilities for alternative understandings of identity, this chapter will develop and explain the conceptual framework utilised in this research.

Chapter four will present the methodology and research design for this study. This will include a discussion of the research setting and orientation, an in-depth presentation of the aim, objectives and research questions, and the research approach and research instruments that were used to meet the aim and
objectives. The research approach and research instruments used were assessed to ensure that their strengths and weaknesses were considered, and any setbacks or challenges were identified. This will be followed by a section on how the data was evaluated and the ethical considerations that were pertinent when conducting such a research study. The final section of chapter four will discuss the data management and data analysis techniques that were utilised, as well as how the data will be presented in the analysis and findings chapter.

Chapter five will present the findings and analysis of this research. The first section (5.2) looks at how participants understood notions of family and parenthood and, in particular, how they made sense of their identity as a lone parent within such discourses. The second section (5.3) focuses on how they understand and give meaning to their employment as a lone parent, as well as the challenges they experience in conducting identity work in the face of conflicting discourses and expectations on work and family. The third section (5.4) presents an account of how they organise and manage their work and family responsibilities and the impact that their identity work, as well as wider social discourses, could have on their routines. Concerns regarding both national and local level work-family policy will be highlighted in sections 5.3 and 5.4, with the importance of local organizational policies (both formal and informal) being the main area of focus for participants.

Chapter six offers a discussion of these findings by addressing specific themes found within the data. The multitude of competing discourses experienced by participants will be drawn out in order to discuss the difficulties that were perceived in constructing a coherent understanding of the ‘working lone parent’. This will be followed by a discussion on the different types of identity work that were conducted by participants in their everyday experiences of work and family life. By highlighting these different types of identity work, this section will demonstrate the complexity and contradictions that faced the participants when seeking to construct and maintain a sense of identity. This was seen to have material effects on their experiences, which raises concerns over the type of support that is offered to working lone parents. The final section of this chapter will discuss the policy considerations and implications of this research.
The final chapter (chapter seven) will present a conclusion to the thesis. A summary of the research will first be discussed, including a reiteration of the study's aim and objectives. The findings of this research will then be reflected upon to consider how they met the original aim and objectives, as well as how such research has contributed to knowledge in this area. The limitations of this study will also be addressed, along with an examination of possible areas for future research.

In the next chapter, the first literature review will be presented, which will demonstrate the importance of research on working lone parents and the breadth of issues that need to be considered for those with primary caring and providing responsibilities.
Chapter 2: Lone parents and employment: a literature review

2.1 Introduction

The lone parent family has continued to attract attention from researchers concerned with welfare and unemployment (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011; Harris, 1993; Gregg et al., 2009; Gingrich, 2008; Gray, 2001; Sumaza, 2001; Ermisch and Wright, 1991; Davies, 2012). Such research has contributed greatly to our understandings of lone parents outside (or just inside) the boundary of work, however, there is a continued need for research that explores how working lone parents experience work at an everyday level, what it means to them in terms of identity, and how they organise it alongside their caring responsibilities.

In 2011, a quarter of all families (26%) with dependent children in Great Britain were headed by a lone parent; 92% of whom were lone mothers (ONS, 2011a). Research has also suggested that 40% of all mothers will experience a period of time as a lone parent (Ermisch and Francesconi, 2000). As of 2011, 57.3% of lone parents were also in employment, which represents a 13% increase in employment rates since 1997 (ONS, 2011b). This participation rate rises to 71% for those lone parents with children between the age of eleven and fifteen (Gingerbread, 2012). Their participation within the workforce may have increased, however, they remain a marginal group within organizational literature. As Gill and Davidson note, the lack of consideration given to the topic of lone parents in relation to work continues to be “increasingly at odds with the demographic” (2001: 383). As more lone parents are experiencing the pressure to combine their caring commitments with work, it is imperative to continue to explore how they engage with both aspects.

In this first literature review chapter, I will provide an in-depth discussion of the deficit in understandings regarding lone parents and employment in order to highlight areas that require further consideration. To begin, the meaning of the term ‘lone parent’ will be examined, along with a discussion on why it is important to reflect upon their experiences in light of their increasing numbers within the UK labour market (section 2.2). This will be followed by a section on current social policy pertaining to lone parents and employment to help explore
the context within which they live and work in the UK (section 2.3). Within section 2.4, I will then address the multiple research areas that have focused on working parents in general. Important themes identified from this latter research will help to highlight the ‘gaps’ that are apparent in knowledge regarding working lone parents. However, this section will also go beyond highlighting where research is lacking by identifying any assumptions that may underlie why certain research areas have received more or less attention (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011).

2.2 Defining the ‘lone parent’

Previous studies that have sought to explore the experiences of lone parents in relation to work, have utilised varying definitions to determine who to include within their research parameters, although core descriptors have tended to rely on similar measures (Chambaz, 2001; Ermisch and Francesconi, 2000; Harvey and Mukhopadhyay, 2007). It is generally accepted that lone parents live in a single adult household with one or more dependent children, although the maximum age of the dependent children ranges in studies from fifteen years (Harvey and Mukhopadhyay, 2007: 57) up to twenty-five years (Chambaz, 2001: 659). Government statistics and research reports define ‘dependent children’ as under sixteen years old or sixteen to eighteen years old and in full time education (ONS, 2011a), and it is this ‘dependent child’ age that will be utilised in the present research project.

However, there is a particular concern with definitions regarding the ‘lone parent’ and that is the propensity for policy studies to present them as a static, homogenised group. As Cohen (2002) found, lone parent families are incredibly diverse and are often made up of differing levels of support and extended family structures. To present lone parent situations as all inherently similar is to reduce the complexity of their experiences and risk excluding those who do not fit specific research categories. In addition, certain characteristics and stereotypes have become associated with this type of family, as Sumaza described in her study on UK policy:

The lack of acknowledgement of the heterogeneity within this group has resulted in a stereotypical picture of lone-mother families that has
selectively highlighted some of their features, but not necessarily the most relevant (2001: 107).

Rather than focusing on lone parents as a homogenous group with certain characteristics, the ‘lone parent family’ needs to be presented as a complex and heterogeneous group, which includes individuals from many different cultural and socio-economic contexts and backgrounds. As Chambaz (2001) declared, there is a continued need to highlight the “diversity of lone-parent families, which are too often portrayed as a single whole” (2001: 671). Such differing contexts can produce different outcomes for lone parents including varying degrees of engagement with employment and different experiences of working environments. Chambaz’s study examined lone parent families across Europe and found country to country variations in economic, housing and employment situations, as well as variations within each category, highlighting the dynamic nature of lone parenthood (2001: 658). This also reflects similar findings from other studies, for example, Ermisch and Francesconi (2000) examined the complexity of lone motherhood and step families in Great Britain. Using data from the British Household Panel survey (1991-1995), they identified that the duration of lone parenting is “often short, one half remaining lone mothers for 4.6 years or less” (2000: 235), which can present a difficulty when studying lone parents.

May (2010) made the argument that future studies on lone mothers should not make “totalizing claims” about these participants as individuals, or “reify” the category of the lone parent (2010: 429). However, May herself acknowledged the difficulties that were apparent in developing such an approach as it could risk ‘depoliticising’ this group. In other words, emphasising the varied lives of lone parents could potentially undermine the importance of considering the social and economic inequalities that may face such a family form. A similar concern has also been raised in feminist research when considering the category of ‘woman’ (Alcoff, 1988; Butler, 1999 [1990]). For May, one solution was to utilise the notion of ‘serial collectivity’ (Young, 1995: 188) in order to move the focus from lone mothers as individuals to wider issues concerning “social structures, ideologies and practices that help define women who parent without a male partner as ‘lone mothers’” (2010: 440-441). Additionally, using
Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000) work, she argued that “lone motherhood’ exists as a category of practice and should be studied as such, but without slipping into using ‘lone mother’ as a category of analysis” (ibid.: 441). In order to employ this perspective, May suggested the use of a biographical approach where the focus was on “the place of lone motherhood within a woman’s self understanding” (ibid.: 430). Such an approach was therefore seen to allow for a greater appreciation of the socially constructed nature of the ‘lone mother’.

In considering the definition of the ‘lone parent’, the lone father remains notably absent. Lone parents are statistically more likely to be women than men and this appears to have resulted in the gendering of the lone parent as female. Lone mothers may be the majority, yet focusing on their experiences alone risks excluding lone fathers who may also face challenges in seeking to address both caring and providing responsibilities (Adams, 1996; Fox and Bruce, 2001).

2.3 Lone parents, employment and social policy in the UK

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the family and its changing form constituted a major area of focus for European social policy (Bradshaw and Hatland, 2006), with the increasing number of lone parent families being one such change that has “shaken, if not dethroned” the “hegemony of the nuclear family” (Lundqvist, 2011: 1). In the UK, lone parents have increasingly become the focus of Government legislation and initiatives surrounding employment (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011). In particular, studies on welfare-to-work policies have dominated the literature on lone parents and social policy interventions (Harris, 1993; Gregg et al., 2009; Gingrich, 2008; Gray, 2001; Sumaza, 2001; Ermisch and Wright, 1991). In order to understand this particular focus within the UK, the changing context of social welfare needs to be discussed.

The number of lone parents in the UK has grown steadily from the 1970s (Rowlingson and McKay, 1998). Initial studies conducted on behalf of the Department for Social Services into their financial circumstances in the early 1990s found that lone parents were heavily reliant on benefits such as Family Credit or Income Support, whilst those in employment were described as within the ‘low-income’ bracket (Ford, 1996). The Conservative Government chose to use lone parents as a focus for their 1993 ‘Back to basics’ campaign which
“lauded traditional family values” (Lewis, 1999: 181). The lone mother family, with its higher levels of unemployment and welfare dependency, was portrayed as undermining such traditional values (ibid.). Following this portrayal of lone parents as welfare dependent and morally questionable, this group moved from being considered a ‘social problem’ to a ‘social threat’ (Edwards and Duncan, 1996: 115). Such a conceptualisation of the lone parent family in “moral terms as well as social terms” has continued to persist (Lewis and Hobson, 1997: 2). Subsequent policy changes followed this research to allow such low-income families greater access to Family Credits and childcare help, which in turn was believed to support them in gaining employment. Paid employment consequently became the vehicle by which lone parents could better support their families. In 1997, the (New) Labour Government aimed to increase the percentage of lone parents in employment to 70% by 2010, as part of its child poverty strategy and welfare reforms (Knight et al., 2006). In 1998, a policy research report by Finlayson and Marsh examined the extent to which unemployed lone parents were willing to return to employment. Their findings suggested that, whilst many wished to gain employment, concerns over financial aspects of losing benefits, as well as problems with low self-esteem and low morale (especially amongst younger lone parents with limited qualifications) could inhibit their ability to return to work. Throughout such early report, the unemployed lone parent continued to be constructed as a social ‘problem’ which could be ‘solved’ through involvement in the labour market (Wallbank, 1998).

In the years following the election of the (New) Labour Government, a number of new initiatives were piloted and introduced nationwide (under the umbrella term of the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP)). Such initiatives were designed to help lone parents return to work or maintain their employed status (Knights et al., 2006: 7). For example, lone parents were encouraged to access such schemes as: In-Work Credit (IWC); Work Search Premium (WSP); Extended Schools Childcare and Childcare Tasters (ESC); Quarterly Work Focused Interviews (QWFI); and New Deal Plus for Lone Parents (ND+fLP) (Brewer et al, 2009: 1). Lone parents and employers were then faced with a plethora of initiatives (and their numerous acronyms), that were supposed to make
combining work and caring responsibilities easier. Many of these initiatives were designed to tackle the perceived barriers to work that existed for lone parents, specifically that of affordable childcare provision. However, in 2010, the employment rate for lone parents stood at 56.7% (Finn and Gloster, 2010), well below the 70% target.

The same year also saw the election of a coalition Government into parliament, which, thus far, has continued to focus on the ‘problem’ of lone parents by emphasising the view that marriage defines “the ‘better’ family form” (Haux, 2011: 147) and by making “clear overtones in support of a tax system which favours married couples” (Hughes, 2011: 161). Paid employment has also continued to be a focus for solving the fiscal difficulties of these families with the introduction of stricter policy concerning welfare-to-work. In October 2010, new rules were enforced so that lone parents with children over the age of seven would no longer be able to claim Income Support “on the grounds of being a lone parent” (Department for Work and Pensions, DWP, 2010). If they were still unemployed after their child reached the age of seven, their benefits would be changed from Income Support to Job Seekers Allowance, which requires that all of those in receipt of these benefits provide evidence of actively seeking employment.

Additionally, as of January 2012, the Conservative-Liberal coalition Government proposed the introduction of means testing to the child benefit system. Under this proposal, if a working parent earned less than £42,750 a year they would still be entitled to child benefit, but if they earned more than this figure then they would lose their benefit. However, this means testing would be based on individual incomes, meaning that a lone parent who earned over £42,750 would lose their benefit but two working parents from a dual-parent family could in total earn £84,000 (£42,000 each) without losing their benefit (Her Majesty’s Revenue & Customs, HMRC, 2012; BBC, 2012). This could potentially affect the material well-being of single-earner families as well as lone parent families and so, in effect, privilege and further normalise the dual-earner family over other family forms.
The issue of lone parents and employment has also become prominent in social policy studies in a number of other countries. A greater number of studies have begun to focus on welfare-to-work initiatives or in-work policies and the impacts that such policies are having on lone parent employment rates. For example, studies on policies pertaining to employment and lone parents have been conducted in Australia (Cai et al., 2008); Canada (Ravanera and Rajulton, 2010; Gingrich, 2008); Norway (Kjeldstad and Rønsen, 2004; Syltevik, 2006); and Sweden (Amilon, 2010), with cross-national comparisons being conducted between the UK, the US and other international countries (Coyne, 2002; Millar and Rowlingson, 2001; Knijn, Martin and Miller, 2007; Klett-Davies, 2007).

The apparent connection between demographics and employment rates is one particular assumption that cross-national comparisons of social policy and lone parents have helped to draw attention to. Rowlingson (2001) discussed how, in the UK, the low employment rates are seen to reflect the demographics of British lone parents, for example, in comparison to other countries, they are more likely to be younger, have younger children and be single, never-married lone mothers, as opposed to divorced or separated (2001: 187). This so called link between demographics and employment rates was found to be less apparent in other countries, such as Sweden, where lone parent employment rates were high even though lone parents were also more likely to be single, never-married with younger children. Rowlingson concluded that:

> In most countries, lone parents with a similar demographic and educational profile to those in Britain are nevertheless more likely to have paid employment (ibid.).

This suggests that non-demographic factors are critical to consider in exploring how lone parents engage with and experience employment. For Rowlingson (2001), the two most vital aspects to consider are culture and identity. Unfortunately, such aspects often remain unexplored within studies on lone parents and employment, especially within those studies that are commissioned to develop policy.

### 2.3.1 Developing policy: exploring the Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) studies on lone parents and employment
Policy concerns regarding lone parents in the UK continue to be primarily focused on the issue of unemployment, with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) funding numerous studies in this area over the last decade. Various foci have been used, as can be seen in the table in Appendix 1. The majority of studies have concentrated on the various schemes that encourage benefit exit and employment entry. Pilot projects were first tested in small regional areas to assess their success before being implemented on a national scale. When evaluated, these pilot schemes were found to provide “positive impacts” for lone parents in that they increased levels of employment and reduced the number of those living on unemployment benefits (Brewer et al., 2009: 2). Riccio et al. (2008) also found that some of the lone parents studied began to change their attitudes towards employment over time:

Some eventually became more willing to organise care arrangements to suit the needs of their work lives, rather than seeking work that fitted around their caring responsibilities (ibid.: 13).

Within Riccio et al.’s study, such a change in attitude appears to be portrayed as positive, where the need to provide is prioritised over the need to care. Such a positioning propagates the view that either work or care must be prioritised, perpetuating the idea that employment and caring commitments should be kept separate (Fletcher and Bailyn, 1996b: 258). It also does not fully take into account the tension that may be apparent between work and care responsibilities. These issues are particularly notable in the literature on work and family and will be explored in greater detail within the following review.

Many of the DWP studies relied on data from longitudinal cohort studies to gain information on lone parents and employment (Ford et al., 1998; Payne and Range, 1998; Finlayson et al., 2000; Marsh and Vegeris, 2004). The main dataset utilised was the Lone Parent Cohort (starting in 1991), which involved quantitative, structured interviews to collect information about lone parents over a set period of time. The most recent of such studies analysed the data collected from 1991-2001 and aimed to address how “different pathways through lone parenthood may be associated with different outcomes for the children of lone-parent families” (Marsh and Vegeris, 2004: 1). This study is particularly relevant to consider because it explores a notion that has been
presented by a number of different studies within the fields of psychology, sociology and medicine. Namely, that children of lone parents may be at greater risk of poor health (Judge and Benzeval, 1993), behavioural problems (McMunn et al., 2001), lower educational attainment (Dronkers, 1994), or all of the above (Spencer, 2005) than those children from dual-parent families. By focusing on the outcome of children, policy studies are therefore constructing the needs of the lone parent family via the needs of the child, rather than considering the needs of the parents themselves (Wallbank, 1998). Marsh and Vegeris (2004) found that children whose parents were employed were more likely to do well academically and achieve employment themselves (ibid.:13). The study also claimed that “no negative outcomes were significantly associated with lone parents being in work” (ibid.), therefore constructing employment as a positive force in the lives of both lone parents and their children. Interestingly, whilst the notion of self-esteem was discussed for the children of the lone parents studied (ibid.: 7), such an issue was not mentioned for the lone parents themselves. This suggests that the positive impacts of employment still tend to be understood in financial and material terms, rather than in relation to the possible social and psychological benefits it may have, such as opportunities for building self-confidence, as well as possibilities for identity construction (Duncan and Edwards, 1998; Millar, 2008; Bell et al., 2005).

A further salient point to consider in regard to the various DWP studies is their changing focus. The multiple studies conducted on behalf of the DWP began by evaluating and shaping various welfare-to-work policies by identifying some of the difficulties facing lone parents, for instance childcare (Bell et al., 2005; Finch and Gloyer, 2000). This in turn led to such schemes as the Extended Schools Childcare (ESC) programme which helped to “improve the availability of affordable childcare for working parents” (Brewer et al., 2009: 137). However, whilst the various lone parent pilots (LPPs) were seen to increase employment, their effects on employment retention were ambiguous (Sianesi, 2011). Subsequent reviews of the data from the LPPs found that “there is little evidence that the LPPs are having any impact on job retention” (Brewer et al., 2009: 16). This suggests that exploring the experiences of those lone parents
already within employment is just as important and significant as considering
the voices of those outside the border of employment (Ridge and Millar, 2011).

2.3.2 The ‘social value’ of employment in policy discourses

Whilst paid employment for lone parents within social policy has tended to be
portrayed as an activity to increase financial stability and so reduce experiences
of poverty, it is also important to address how employment has associated
connotations of ‘social value’ (Fraser, 1994: 595). Knijn et al.’s (2007) research
into social policy in the UK, France and the Netherlands identified how
“normative assumptions regarding family structure are now becoming less
important in most European countries” (2007: 638). It is suggested that these
traditional discourses concerned with family and social values are now being
eclipsed by other ‘normative assumptions’ concerning employment. This has
been referred to as the ‘adult worker model’, where adults, irrespective of
gender or family responsibilities, are expected to partake in paid employment
(Janssens, 1997; Lewis, 2001a). Work has therefore become “conceptualised in
political rhetoric as the key duty of responsible citizens” (Davies, 2012: 16). The
effect of this shift on policy concerning lone parents can be seen in the
difficulties faced by the state in “deciding whether to treat lone mothers as
workers or mothers” (Lewis, 1989: 595). There is a continuing assumption that
the “primary duty of mothers is towards their children” (ibid.: 596) and, therefore,
lone parents should be treated as the latter. However, as the pressure to reduce
unemployment rates has grown, along with an increase in “moral outrage” that
women may increasingly be “opting for unmarried motherhood and a ‘welfare
career’” (Lewis and Hobson, 1997: 2), lone parents are more likely to be treated
as the former. Again, the lone father appears to be excluded from such
discussions.

The positioning of lone parents as workers has raised some concerns for social
researchers, for example, Sumaza asked the question: “are work requirements
for lone parents the right response to their needs, given the problematic tension
between work and family they experience?” (2001: 114). Government research
reports tend to present the needs of lone parents as primarily those of financial
value (Knight et al., 2006; Riccio et al., 2008), however, this prioritises
economic need over other important issues. Financial concerns are critical for lone parents in keeping their families out of poverty (as also discussed in Millar and Rowlingson, 2001), yet it is also important to question the sovereignty of such a ‘financial needs’ discourse in order to consider that there may be other needs and wants that the lone parents experience as they shoulder the responsibility of caring and providing alone. For example, in regard to employment, lone parents may “need to work for personal fulfilment” (Wallbank, 1998: 85). More broadly, they may also need to present themselves as a ‘good parent’ in view of often negative societal discourses on lone parenting (May, 2008). Therefore, concerns regarding identity and the self may be especially significant in considering the needs discourse of working lone parents.

Research on lone parents in other countries has also started to explore the notion that ‘social value’ is becoming more associated with full employment. For example, Gingrich’s (2008) study on Canadian lone parents explored how ideas concerning full employment for all may lead to increased social exclusion for lone parents. Similarly, Syltevik’s (2006) study on Norwegian lone mothers focused on their struggle in seeking equality and a place in the market in the face of such ideas concerning employment and social value. Yet, whilst it would appear that full employment has become a greater marker of social value in many countries, there remains a concern over the accessibility of such employment (Smith et al., 2008; Bell et al., 2007). An interesting conclusion drawn by Kjeldstad and Rønsen (2004) in their Norwegian study was that the economic climate of a country was more influential to lone parent employment rates than changes in the structuring of the welfare system. Sweden could be seen to be an example of this where the 1990 recession caused a significant drop in the employment rates of lone parents which traditionally have been very high (Bradshaw et al., 2000). This suggests that, for lone parents, accessing full employment (and so being seen as socially valuable) is directly dependent on the wider economic context. However, such a consideration does not integrate well with UK policy that emphasises personal responsibility and accountability (Powell, 1999:19).

2.4 Challenges and issues facing working parents from both lone and dual-parent families
As presented, many studies have focused on the implications of Government policies for lone parents and employment. As the number of lone parent families has increased, so has concern with policy initiatives that encourage lone parents away from welfare benefits and into employment. These welfare-to-work schemes have been successful to a degree as they have helped to facilitate many lone parents’ re-entry into employment. Yet, policy initiatives designed to address the issue of employment retention and advancement for lone parents have had limited success (Sianesi, 2011), which suggests that there are further issues and challenges that parents from this family form may face within the workplace. A consideration of the wider economic context (Kjeldstad and Rønsen, 2004), as well as the impact of factors such as culture and identity (Rowlingson, 2001), could help to identify such challenges and so aid an exploration into how lone parents experience employment and negotiate their work and family commitments.

In order to explore these issues further, this section will focus on the literature on working parents in general and how they have been seen to negotiate their employment and caring responsibilities. Studies on both lone parents and parents from dual-parent families will be considered to highlight the plethora of challenges that may affect their employment experiences. An inclusion of research on both lone and dual-parents will allow for a consideration of ‘gaps’ in the literature for lone parents, however, more importantly, it will also help to highlight the differences that may be found between their experiences.

### 2.4.1 Absence from the workplace

When exploring the literature on family and work, it became clear that there were a number of different employment issues facing working parents today, which could potentially affect their experiences of work, as well as their ability to engage with their employment. In particular, the potential for absence from the workplace was a major challenge, for example, through needing to provide childcare or through periods of ill-health (both their own and their children). Research that has explored career opportunities for working mothers from dual-parent families has found that childcare responsibilities can be a major barrier to career progression, although not necessarily because of evidence of absence...
from the workplace, but rather because of potential absence from the workplace. For example, Coltrane discussed that when female professional employees become mothers it was expected that “family obligations will inevitably intrude on their ability to commit themselves to their demanding careers” (2004: 215). Therefore, women who had children were perceived as “less serious about their careers” (ibid.: 214). In Coltrane’s work, becoming a mother meant that the women were ascribed particular identity characteristics, which then interfered with their ability to be seen as good, professional employees.

The issue of childcare has also been considered in research on lone parents. However, such research tends to focus on childcare and childcare costs as a barrier to gaining employment (Bell et al., 2005; Finch and Gloyer, 2000; Ford, 1996), rather than considering how childcare, and gendered assumptions regarding care-giving, may continue to constitute a barrier to engaging with, as well as progressing within, employment. Coyne’s (2002) and Gill and Davidson’s (2001) work constitute two of the very limited number of studies that aimed to address such concerns in the experiences of working lone parents. Coyne’s study in particular postulated that childcare responsibilities could be considered the “glass ceiling of the new millennium” (2002: 447), to which lone parents (who by definition have “no partner with whom to share the responsibilities” (ibid.: 449)), would be particularly susceptible.

Ill-health is another situation which could result in absence from work and impact on people’s working experiences. Yet, contrary to many of the work-family studies that focus on the experiences of working parents from dual-parent families, this barrier has more often been explored in relation to lone parents. This focus may reflect research which suggests that lone parents are more prone to periods of ill-health, for example, Baker and North found that, in comparison to mothers from dual-parents families, lone mothers were more likely to suffer from poorer mental health (1999: 128). They also found that those who were unemployed were “more likely to be depressed than those who were employed” (ibid.: 121). Additionally, in a large-scale study for the DWP, Marsh and Vegeris (2004: 5) found that fifty-five per cent of lone parent participants suffered some form of long term illness in the study period 1991-
2001. A further study by Casebourne and Britton found that, for those on benefits, health was not a major restraint in seeking work; however, for those in work, health could restrict their capacity to work and contributed to anxieties about maintaining employment (2004: 2).

One particular issue that requires further consideration in this area is the interconnectivity between childcare and ill-health. Gill and Davidson found that of the lone mothers they sampled, many were concerned with “being seen as uncommitted and unreliable if they took time off work to care for children” (2001: 390). As highlighted, the need to construct oneself as a good employee can therefore be seen to be a significant issue. In many instances, the lone mothers would report in sick themselves in order to conceal the fact that they needed to care for an ill child (ibid.). Taking time off for their own illness appeared to be more acceptable and legitimate than taking time off to care for their children.

2.4.2 Geographical considerations in maintaining employment

A further challenge found for working parents from dual-parent families was the location of their employment. To pursue higher levels of employment, Jarvis (2002) found that many working parents had to engage in lengthy commuting times, which would elongate their working day and result in additional pressure to organise sustained childcare provision. For lone parents, without the support of a second parent, it would be anticipated that such pressure may be experienced to a higher level. However, the issue of work location has only really been considered for lone parents in regard to gaining employment. For example, Speak’s study on lone parents living in poorer neighbourhoods found that such neighbourhoods can create ‘barriers’ to employment that “lie buried within the complex and difficult logistics of living daily lives” (2000: 43). Studies conducted on behalf of the DWP also found this in their work on lone parents in London who, statistically, are more likely to be unemployed than anywhere else in the UK (McKay, 2004; O’Connor and Boreham, 2002). Such a statistic may seem unusual considering the higher levels of employment opportunities available in urban areas compared to rural areas, however, barriers to work within London were tied in with such issues as local deprivation and the inability to move away from such areas due to the cost of housing outside of the benefit
system (O’Connor and Boreham, 2002: 3). Interestingly, the study conducted by O’Connor and Boreham also found that the barriers to work identified were actually “broadly similar” to those encountered by lone parents nationally (2002: 3). This means that there may be other factors affecting the employment rates of lone parents living in London which are yet to be identified.

One of the limited number of studies that has explored geographical concerns for lone parents entering employment, beyond the experiences of those in poorer districts of urban areas, was conducted by Hughes (2004). Hughes argued that the increase of lone parents has not been restricted to urban areas, but has occurred in rural areas as well:

Lone parents exist within, but also beyond, the limits of the city, they exist in the inner-city, in the suburbs, in the small market towns, in coastal resorts, in new towns, in old towns ... They exist, and although many share characteristics with one another, they also face unique experiences and challenges rooted directly in their geographical embeddedness in these specific spatial locations (2004: 141).

Lone parents in rural areas were seen to face particular pressures in retaining and progressing in work when employment opportunities may be more concentrated in urban areas. Building on this, Hughes and Nativel (2005) explored the experiences of employed lone parents living in rural communities. They focused on Somerset and Cumbria as two case study areas and found that the “length of commute to gain promotional opportunities was a particular problem for lone parents in the professional occupations” (2005: 40). Such research is important to consider because it highlights that lone parents exist throughout the occupational hierarchy. It also provides a critique of previous studies on lone parents that are seen to under-appreciate the influence of place and context. It is therefore critical to consider the experiences of lone parents from diverse situations in order to challenge the stereotype pertaining to the place of lone parents in society.

2.4.3 Organizational cultures

Within the work-family literature, many studies on mothers and fathers from dual-parent families have focused on the influence that organizational cultures can have on work experiences (White et al., 2003; Drew and Murtagh, 2005;
Aveling, 2002; Sheridan, 2004; Jarvis, 2002; Brown, 2010). In definitional terms, an organizational culture can be described as:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 2004: 17).

This definition highlights the complexity and pervasive nature of organizational cultures, as well as the power relationships that would be inherent in their manifestations as they are reproduced through group interactions. Therefore, for any employed parent, the orientation of their workplace culture is a pertinent and important influence to consider.

One characteristic that has often been targeted in studies on organizational culture is that of 'presenteeism'. For some scholars working within the area of health, medicine and occupation, presenteeism refers to employees who are “attending work while ill” (Johns, 2010: 519) and are, therefore, “not functioning at peak levels” (D’Abate and Eddy, 2007: 361; see also Dew et al., 2005).

Scholars within the field of organization studies have a slightly different focus as they explore how cultures of presenteeism apply pressure on employees to demonstrate organizational commitment through long work hours (Watts, 2009). To a certain extent, both understandings of this type of culture overlap as they each describe how employees feel a pressure to partake in long work hours irrespective of circumstances such as ill health. Simpson’s study on cultures of presenteeism appears to provide the most detailed explanation of this culture as it is described as:

The tendency to stay at work beyond the time needed for effective performance of the job, as fear of redundancy and uncertainty over promotion opportunities lead to a need to demonstrate visible commitment (1998: 38).

Studies that have explored the influence of cultures of presenteeism or long work hours on the work experiences of parents have tended to look at those in professional occupations (Jarvis, 2002; Sheridan, 2004). In particular, certain types of employment have been focused on that are seen to encourage longer working hours, for example, the Information and Communication Technology
(ICT) industry (Griffiths et al., 2007), the police force (Dick and Jankowicz, 2001; Holdaway and Parker, 1998; Dick and Nadin, 2006), the engineering industry (Watts, 2009), the financial services industry (Granleese, 2004; Haynes, 2008), academia (Acker and Armenti, 2004), the hospitality industry (Cullen and McLaughlin, 2006), and the legal industry (Russo and Waters, 2006). Such studies have helped to highlight how working parents will continue to work within such cultures, even to their detriment (for example, by sleeping less (Acker and Armenti, 2004)), in order to sustain the presentation of a professional identity.

Studies that explore presenteeism or long work hours also tend to focus on those who occupy higher level positions within their organizations, such as managers or executives (Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Friedman and Lobel, 2003; Sheridan, 2004). For example, a study on the work-life balance of managers within the Irish hotel industry by Cullen and McLaughlin found that presenteeism was “found to be embedded in narratives of managerial identity and in the management cultures of the hotel industry” (2006: 510). Such a focus reflects the perception that presenteeism is more apparent at higher levels (Simpson, 1998: 38). From such research, it is difficult to ascertain whether the culture of presenteeism can pervade the occupational hierarchy entirely, or whether it is limited to certain levels within certain organizations. However, what can be appreciated is that the assumptions behind such working cultures may affect how certain employees are perceived. For example, the assumption that long work hours are indicative of greater productivity could affect how part-time workers are valued as they cannot give the same ‘face time’ (Sheridan, 2004: 218). This will be discussed further in the following section. For Simpson, such beliefs regarding time and productivity are so common in working practices as to be considered ‘endemic’ (1998: 40). Previous studies certainly seem to suggest that this is the case (Lewis, 2003), for example Jarvis’s (2002) study drew on biographies from working parents in the US and UK who engaged in long work hours. Examples of resistance against such assumptions regarding time and productivity were rare, with participant experiences highlighting how “resistance to the drivers of long hours in full-time professional ‘careers’ often leads to the loss of this status” (2002: 350). Therefore, the ability to challenge
such expectations was restricted as employee success was dependent upon time spent in work.

Whilst the influence of certain organizational cultures has been explored in relation to parents from dual-parent families, the experiences of working lone parents and the effects of presenteeism are yet to be addressed. This may be partly due to the type of employees who are usually targeted within studies of long work hours, for example, managers and those in professional occupations. In contrast to this, lone parents are typically portrayed as working part-time hours or occupying lower levels within an organizational hierarchy (Bell et al., 2007), with very little emphasis on those who may be employed in managerial or professional positions. Although a focus on these types of employment may reflect the low-wage jobs that many lone parents inhabit (Winchester, 1990; Meadows and Grant, 2005; Breitkreuz et al., 2010), there remains an absence of studies that consider how lone parents from different levels and occupations experience and understand work as a result of certain assumptions concerning time and productivity.

One of the very few studies that has considered the experiences of lone mothers in higher level occupations was conducted by Gill and Davidson (2001) who argued that, whilst the number of lone mothers in these types of occupations may be small, the number of women in these roles is increasing. Statistics have shown that, because of the high divorce and separation rates in the UK, women with children are now more likely to spend some period of time as a lone parent, therefore, questions on how they engage with employment and the challenges they may experience within different types of employment are becoming more pertinent (2001: 383). Gill and Davidson’s pilot study provided an insight into the experiences of lone mothers within professional or managerial positions and highlighted some of the difficulties they faced, for example, the effect that becoming a lone mother could have on career ambitions or aspirations. Yet, although issues such as work overload, organizational climate and role conflict were discussed, there was little consideration given to the effect that cultures of presenteeism could have on such individuals. For example, considering the findings of previous research on working dual-parents in professional occupations (Sheridan, 2004; Jarvis, 2002;
Haynes, 2008; Acker and Armenti, 2004), it would have been interesting to explore whether the professional lone mothers experienced pressure to continually maintain a professional identity by engaging in certain working practices, or whether they perceived a need to meet specific expectations relating to ‘visible commitment’ (Simpson, 1998).

2.4.4 The ‘good’ employee: working hours, ‘flexibility’ and gender implications

As discussed, specific assumptions regarding working hours and productivity form an important part in how employees are measured as successful and seen as eligible for promotion (Jarvis, 2002; Brown, 2010). Those employees who can engage with such ways of working are likely to be portrayed as more favourable over those who cannot. Working parents are seen to face particular difficulties in meeting expectations regarding the 'good' employee because of the conceptualisation of such an ideal worker:

In general, work is organized on the image of a white man who is totally dedicated to the work and who has no responsibilities for children or family demands other than earning a living. Eight hours of continuous work away from the living space, arrival on time, total attention to the work, and long hours if requested are all expectations that incorporate the image of the unencumbered worker (Acker, 2006: 448).

Therefore, working parents who wish to take responsibility for their family, other than just providing a financial backing, may not be able to compete within an organization that still expects the ideal of the ‘unencumbered’ worker.

As it is women who continue to take the greatest responsibility for caring responsibilities (Crompton, 2002), there are major gender implications within traditional ideals of the good ‘unencumbered’ employee. As was highlighted in section 2.4.1, women are often seen as less committed to their work and less serious about their careers after having children as they are cast as the ‘natural’ carer (Coltrane, 2004). Traditionally, men’s position within the family has been seen as that of ‘breadwinner’, which allows them to continue to be considered a good employee after becoming a father (Acker, 2006). Whilst such a positioning may be seen to reflect greater privilege, Sheridan (2004) argued that this understanding of the good employee can be just as problematic for working
fathers as for working mothers. Her study found that men with parental responsibilities were less likely to utilise flexible working opportunities and, therefore, more likely to suffer from ‘chronic presenteeism’ (2004: 210). The pervasiveness of the preferable ‘unencumbered’ employee, as well as the standard ‘male as breadwinner’ discourse, appears to contribute to the continued social expectations concerning the place of men within both the family and employment (Runté and Mills, 2004: 239), meaning that alternative ways of organising work and family may appear untenable. In one of the very few studies that has considered such concerns for working lone parents, such a gender divide was not perceived to be as apparent. For Coyne, both lone mothers and lone fathers with primary childcare responsibilities may struggle to compete with other employees as they cannot offer ‘total commitment’ to their work (2002: 447). Therefore, it was not gender that restricted their ability to meet workplace expectations but their care commitments.

As the good employee still tends to be associated with those who can offer longer working hours, it is critical to consider what this means for those in part-time employment. The effects of such traditional expectations are particularly important to consider for women (especially mothers) as they are more likely to inhabit part-time positions than men (Tilly, 1996). If time is equitable to productivity and commitment then a part-time employee is necessarily less productive and less committed compared to their full-time colleagues. Part-time workers can then face discrimination and stigmatisation as they are perceived to be ‘time deviants’, at odds with the good full-time employee (Epstein et al., 1999: 11). However, interestingly, whilst this organizational understanding of time can create difficulties for some in maintaining and progressing in employment, this is not always just an organizationally imposed barrier. For example, in their study Dick and Hyde (2006) found that:

Research suggests that part-time professionals may not experience their subordinate positions as problematic, often believing that the drawbacks of reduced hours working are a legitimate consequence of their ‘choice’ to work part-time. Such ‘choices’ are frequently attributed to part-timers’ prioritization of non-work activities (2006: 543).

By accepting their subordinate positions, such part-time employees may then inadvertently contribute towards the reproduction of assumptions concerning
the relationship between working hours and organizational value. The concern is that it is mainly women with children who utilise part-time working hours and, therefore, it is they who are most likely to suffer such continued marginalisation. Accepting such a positioning fails to challenge the assumption that time in work is equitable to productivity and commitment. As there is “little to substantiate the claim that longer work hours are correlated with superior performance” (Dick and Hyde, 2006: 546), such a challenge is needed in order for those who cannot engage in such working practices to be valued.

Another critical characteristic of the good employee is their ability to be flexible. Yet, this notion of ‘flexibility’ in discourses of work can have a variety of meanings. Nickson et al. (2004) and Dutton et al. (2005) both discussed how retail/supermarket employment should be a potential favourable market for lone parents due to their flexible working hours and their higher levels of female employment. Yet, Nickson et al.’s study found that supermarkets were more likely to employ students over lone parents as they were more able to work a variety of hours (2004: 255). Dutton et al. believed that the problem with presenting retail employment as a suitable workplace for parents lies within conceptualisations of the term ‘flexibility’ (2005: 98). Customer focused employers need ‘numerical flexibility’ to meet the demands of their clientele and so look to employ those who can fulfil this requirement. However, lone parents may need more short term flexibility for childcare reasons (2005: 99). Considering this, it may be more difficult for lone parents to compete against other types of employees who can offer this ‘numerical flexibility’ and, therefore, they may struggle to progress and be recognised as valuable within such working environments.

For Fletcher and Bailyn, the central expectation regarding the good employee is that they will prioritise the “work sphere ahead of the family sphere” (1996: 258) and so clearly separate work and family. This ideal employee is also described as having no “visible outside responsibilities” (ibid.) which provides a quandary for any parent. Considering such expectations, as well as previous work by Coyne (2002) on care-giving as the new glass ceiling, it is critical to explore how ideals and assumptions regarding the good employee may affect how lone parents experience and understand their paid employment.
Organising work and family: ‘work-life balance’ and ‘family friendly’ policies

Whilst section 2.3 discussed the influence of social policy at the national level, it is also important to consider policy at the local level, particularly in how it helps and supports working parents within the workplace. The metaphor of ‘work-life balance’ has become commonplace in the work-family literature, with ‘family friendly’ policies being seen to offer a way of facilitating such ‘balance’, as well as offering working parents greater support in engaging within the workplace (Greenhaus et al., 2003; Guest, 2002; Estes, 2005; Gray and Tudball, 2003). Yet, such policies have been widely questioned in regard to their ability to help working parents negotiate their work and family responsibilities. In her US study, Albrecht found that ‘family friendly’ policies were inadequate as they did not meet necessary values, namely, encouraging the equality of women and the “wellbeing of the family” (2003: 177). Similarly, Mescher et al. found that work-life balance policies can be highly ambiguous and may continue to “reproduce traditional cultural norms regarding ideal workers and parents” (2010: 21). For example, they can continue to present the view that ‘work’ and ‘family’ are two distinct spheres which are most effectively managed when they are separated from one another, both temporally and spatially. The practice of completely separating work and family commitments is more complex than such expectations allow for, which may help explain why there is a plethora of research relating to issues of work-life, or work-family conflict (Ford et al., 2007; Halrynjo, 2009; Livingston and Judge, 2008; Grzywacz et al., 2002).

Whilst employees may strive to reach a work-life balance, they may face inherent difficulties in reaching such a goal as there are “no recognized standards of ‘work–life balance’ or ‘family friendliness’ to draw upon” (Hyman et al., 2003: 215). Further criticisms of the notion of work-life balance have been multiple, particularly in relation to the positioning of ‘work’. For example, Warren points out that the “work life system is multi- and not just two dimensional” (2004: 99), which brings into question whether positioning ‘work’ outside of the realm of ‘life’ and therefore “wholly separate the two concepts of work and life as polarized alternatives” (Watts, 2009: 38) is practical. Along with questions over the positioning of work in such discourses, there have also been concerns
of the conceptualisation of the term itself. Work, for many, is defined by paid labour (Friedman and Lobel, 2003), however, it is also important to consider ‘the work outside the work’ (Breitkreuz et al., 2010: 43) or the ‘second shift’ of unpaid work that is often experienced by female workers (mothers especially) after their paid working hours are completed (Hochschild and Machung, 1989: 4).

The main criticism for the notion of work-life balance is that it perpetuates the idea that ‘work’ and ‘life’ are oppositional, as well as communicating that ‘life’ is reducible to ‘family’ (Hoffman and Cowan, 2008: 227). In reducing ‘life’ to ‘family’, there is the suggestion that ‘work’ and ‘family’ are the only two legitimate sources of meaning (Brewis, 2011), which then marginalises the ‘unproductive’ leisure and recreational aspects of people’s lives (Ransome, 2007; Land and Taylor, 2010). Many studies have perpetuated the belief that ‘work’ and ‘family’ should be kept separate by offering models for work-family balance that incorporate borders or boundaries between the two spheres (Clark, 2000; Ashforth et al., 2000), suggesting that if such barriers are not maintained, one risks experiencing conflict between the two aspects. For Runté and Mills, such a duality is not intrinsic to people’s working experiences, however, the notion of balance has been ‘reinforced’ by this “growing discourse of work-family conflict” (2004: 237).

For Halpern and Murphy (2005), working parents (especially working mothers) face particular difficulties with the notion that ‘work’ exists in opposition to ‘life’ because they have a responsibility to fulfil both caring and working activities. They argue that the feelings of stress that working parents experience in ‘balancing’ or ‘juggling’ work and family life are a product of the “anxiety provoking” metaphors themselves:

> The balance is delicate and any false move to one side will start the items on the other side in a downward slide. The message in this balance metaphor is clear – spend too much time at work and your family will suffer and vice versa (2005: 3).

To challenge the balance metaphor, Halpern and Murphy offer the alternative term of work-family interaction in order to consider how these spheres may relate, rather than conflict. However, whilst such reconfigurations may challenge
the presentation of ‘work’ and ‘family’ as separate, oppositional spheres, they still rely on these two specific aspects to describe people’s day-to-day interactions, again privileging these sources of meaning over other aspects of ‘life’. To address such criticisms, Moen offered the alternative concept of the ‘life-course fit’ to help explore the variety of different ways that people organise their lives. The life course perspective focused on individual’s social and historical contexts and the notion of ‘fit’ described “employees’ cognitive assessments of various dimensions of resources, resource deficits, and the match or mismatch between resources and resource demands” (Moen et al., 2008: 414). This focus was designed to provide a “broader, dynamic, and contextual perspective on the match or mismatch characterizing the social environments confronting workers, their families, and their communities” (Moen, 2011: 81). By focusing on context, such an approach could consider people’s whole lives in regard to work and family and so challenge the academic rhetoric concerning work-life ‘balance’.

Whilst local policies concerned with work-family balance may be open to criticism, it is important to remember that they also form an important part of helping to challenge gender inequalities within the workplace. In their study on Finnish policies pertaining to men and employment, Hearn and Niemistö (2012) explored the effect of both national and corporate policies on men’s work and family practices. They discussed how Finland’s state support for those with family responsibilities was ‘relatively well-developed’, but that, paradoxically, this has led to the situation where “companies may not always consider that they need to develop their own corporate policies” (2012: 103). In such a context, the assumption appears to be that national policies will provide support for working parents, which then alleviates the responsibility from organizations. Companies will often not encourage employees to take up the national policies (ibid.), and this may then affect who makes use of such policies (for example, women more often than men (Sheridan, 2004)). Combining national and local policies is therefore critical for addressing gender equality within the workplace.

2.4.6 Technology and work: physical visibility versus virtual visibility
One important recent development that can also affect how working parents experience work is the increasing reliance on new technologies. As Arnold (2003) discussed, technologies, such as the mobile phone, have drastically changed our understandings of space and the home and work spheres. New technology has been “assisting in the blurring of worlds” (2003: 242), bringing into question understandings of what is public and private. This has been addressed in many studies which consider the home-working experiences of teleworkers (Baines and Gelder, 2003; Baines, 2002; Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Hill et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2001; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001); however, these studies had different conclusions regarding the positive influence that home-working may have for those with outside-of-work responsibilities. In favour of these working practices, Hill et al. (1998) and Hill et al. (2001) found that those who worked from a ‘virtual office’, which allowed for greater temporal and spatial flexibility, were more likely to have a “favourable work-family balance” (2001: 49) than those who operated from a traditional, set location office. Yet, other scholars questioned the cohesiveness of combining home-working with familial responsibilities (Baines and Gelder, 2003), as traditional gendered ways of organising family and housework meant that mothers who worked from home were likely to suffer “ongoing tensions and contradictions between the ethic of care and their employment responsibilities” (Hilbrecht et al., 2008: 454). Therefore, whilst technology may offer the opportunity for new ways of arranging work and family, traditional gendered perceptions of time and space, as well as expectations to keep work and family separate, may restrict people’s organisational practices.

It would appear that the uncertainty surrounding the issue of new technologies in work may stem from conflicts regarding its potential for creating positive change versus the negative experiences that may be felt in practice. For example, in Perrons’s study, the possible liberating effects of new technologies, such as increasing spatial and temporal flexibility, were seen to offer those with caring responsibilities greater access to a wider variety of employment opportunities. In turn, such increasing access could then lead to a “reduction in gender inequality” (2003: 65). However, whilst she highlighted the potential possibilities for new technologies, her study on those working in new media
found that their experiences were not always so positive. For those with familial responsibilities (who were predominantly women), these technologies meant that their time was more ‘squeezed’ than ever (2003: 89). This again highlights the contradictions that exist between the discourse of ‘infinite availability’ (Watts, 2009: 37), that underlies the ‘blurring’ of work-family spheres through new technologies, and the contemporary expectations for work-family balance.

It is important to distinguish between the type of work that may be conducted in the home sphere, for example, there are some whose primary workplace is in the home, and there are others who have a physical workplace outside of the home, yet will conduct work at home at certain times. Araujo (2008) discussed this latter group in her study on Portuguese university lecturers. Mobile technologies which allowed lecturers to ‘work on’ outside the physical boundaries of their workplace were seen as liberating to an extent, but were also potentially exploitative for the female lecturers. Like in Perrons’s (2003) and Hilbrecht et al’s (2008) studies, it was the women who continued to take responsibility for family and domestic commitments (2008: 494). Araujo believed that the increase in the use of technology to enable home-working was part of the culture of universities which expected longer work hours (2008: 485-6). Therefore, new technologies may allow those with outside of work responsibilities to compete within cultures of long work hours, however, there often remains a question over whether working hours completed outside of the workplace are seen as legitimate.

Whilst new technologies may allow for longer work hours to be fulfilled virtually, this work is often regarded as less productive than the work conducted within the workplace due to the perception that employees have greater “scope for skiving” (Felstead et al., 2003: 244). Like part-time working parents, employees who wish to engage in such working practices may suffer problems within their employment, as their inability to offer greater ‘face time’ within the workplace means that their commitment to work may be questioned (Sheridan, 2004: 218). For those with primary caring and providing responsibilities, the influence of technology in allowing them to engage with work beyond the physical confines, as well as negotiate working hours and working cultures, is therefore important to consider.
2.4.7 The quantification of time in regard to work and family

As section 2.4.5 highlighted, traditional ideals concerning the good employee can still influence how parents organise and manage their work and family responsibilities. The issue of time is critical within such conceptualisations of the good employee as they are perceived as someone who gives more time to their work and, therefore, is more committed and productive. However, as gendered expectations still continue to pervade expectations regarding the family, working mothers still face pressure to dedicate time to domestic and family tasks (Hilbrecht et al., 2008). ‘Time’ in this context is considered as a quantitative, finite resource which working parents (especially working lone parents without the support of a second parent) will find lacking (Campbell and Moen, 1992: 205). This lack of time for working parents in general has been conceived as a ‘time famine’ (Perlow, 1999), a ‘time squeeze’ (Mattingly and Bianchi, 2003); and a ‘work and family squeeze’ (Hochschild, 1997).

Harvey and Mukhopadhyay (2007) used the term ‘time poverty’ to describe this perceived lack of time in experiences of working parents. Their study looked at the different experiences of time for both lone and dual parents, with ‘time’ being broken down into four categories: contracted, committed, necessary and free time (2007: 61). Contracted time was designated as paid employment; committed time was “time undertaken to maintain one’s home and one’s family” (2007: 61); necessary time was time needed for oneself e.g. sleeping; and free time was the leftover time in the day after the first three time categories have been deducted. Harvey and Mukhopadhyay argued that working lone parents, without the support of a second parent, are especially at risk of experiencing a time deficit leading to difficulties in fulfilling “un-marketed household production (meal preparation, child care, house-keeping)” (2007: 58). Therefore, they may need to purchase these products to maintain the same standards of living as parents from dual-parent families. Such a demand can then lead to such consequences as “feeling poor” where lone parents may feel “judged/degraded”, “isolated” and “guilty”, as was found in McIntyre et al.’s (2003: 316) study on low-income lone mothers.
These studies, which have relied on quantitative understandings of time, have been valuable in helping to explore the experiences of working lone parents. Yet, if there is little evidence to suggest that time is equitable to productivity (Dick and Hyde, 2006: 546), as highlighted in the previous section (2.4.4), then productivity needs to be considered by what you do in work, rather than the time spent in work. Lewis (2001) discussed such an approach in her study on the ‘intensification’ of work that is often relied upon by many part-time workers in order to meet the same level of productivity as those in full-time work. She posited that:

If those working reduced hours receive reduced pay but have no fall in productivity this suggests that full-time workers are now being paid more to work less efficiently. Arguably, then, the real challenge to persistent assumptions about the value of time in the workplace may be to pay people according to what they achieve rather than how long it takes them to accomplish it (2001: 27).

However, the notion of the intensification of work also raises some concerns as it has been linked with poorer psychological health, higher stress levels and increases in family tension (Burchell et al., 2002; Green, 2004). Many lone parents utilise part-time working hours (McRae, 2003; Bell et al., 2007; Chambaz, 2001), therefore, exploring the notion of work intensification, and the effect it may have upon how they negotiate work and family commitments, would seem pertinent in analysing their working experiences.

The major issue with conceptualising time as a finite, quantifiable resource is that such an understanding perpetuates the belief that time (like space), which is associated with work and family, should be kept distinct and separate (Runté and Mills, 2004). This is especially apparent in regard to the concept of ‘work-life balance’ which, as a metaphor, is principally reliant upon the “quantification of both work and life in order to make sense” (Roberts, 2008b: 430). Whilst such notions perpetuate the separation of work and family time, practical experiences of negotiating work and family time may not be so clear cut, especially for those who engage in full-time working hours and are expected to assimilate into working cultures that valorise long work hours.
To help conceptualise time within the experiences of working parents, some scholars have called for an understanding of the ‘synchronisation’ of work and family time (Morehead, 2001; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001), where work and family responsibilities and activities may overlap and so be experienced concurrently. For example, Sullivan and Lewis (2001) used the notion of ‘synchronisation’ to explore the experiences of home-working teleworkers. They found that participants gradually increased their combination of work and family tasks, especially in regard to domestic tasks, which was seen to be both a ‘deliberate strategy’ (2001: 137) and an unintentional side effect of being distracted by non-work (ibid.: 138). Women were found to be more likely to synchronise their work and family tasks, which Sullivan and Lewis described as due to the differences between how men and women generally understood time, in other words, their ‘gendered constructions of time’ (ibid.: 139). Drawing on Hall’s (1983) work, they discussed how time in traditional masculine environments (such as paid work) was understood as sequential or ‘monochronic’, whilst in traditional feminine domestic environments, time was understood as ‘polychronic’ where tasks were completed concurrently (ibid.). Such a differing in understandings between women and men was seen to be due to the way that socialisation reproduced notions of gender and gendered ways of thinking.

As mentioned in section 2.4.6, technology has allowed for physical boundaries to be dissolved between work and family, which may allow for the synchronisation of work and family to become more prevalent, irrespective of work location. For lone parents, with both primary caring and providing responsibilities, synchronising work and family time (and using technology to do so) may be particularly significant in their day-to-day lives. However, such ‘gendered constructions of time’ may be a constraint on their ability to organise the synchronisation of tasks.

2.4.8 ‘Choice’ in negotiations of work and family

In discussing how working parents engage with and experience employment, the concept of choice becomes particularly important to consider. Within theories that seek to explain people’s decisions regarding work and family, such as Hakim’s (2000) preference theory, ‘choice’ tends to be positioned as a
rational, objective notion where working parents consider difficult situations purely in terms of a cost-benefit type analysis and make decisions accordingly. However, the choices that one makes need to be seen as situated within specific contexts, as this can then influence the choices that are first perceived to be available (Sheridan, 2004; Dick and Hyde, 2006). For example, Lewis’s (2003) study on chartered accountants investigated the increase of work dominance in the lives of participants. Her study found that the reasons behind work dominating life were more related to the “gendered, societal and organizational constraints on choice, identity and perceived obligations” (ibid.), rather than an objective choice of work over other activities. Jarvis (2002) also considered these constraints in her study on why parents from dual-parent families take part in long work hours in UK and US cities. Her study highlighted how:

Under growing pressures of shared earning, together with widespread labour-market deregulation, couples have to negotiate competing, sometimes shifting, hours, times and modes of paid work, while at the same time coordinating the myriad activities of social reproduction required for them to ‘go on’ (2002: 340).

Such studies suggest that people have the capability to make choices about their situations but that such choices are conditioned by various constraints. It has been argued that women in particular suffer from such constraints as their lives are “characterized by a perception of responsibility that, to a certain extent, is based on illusory freedom of choice and control” (Elvin-Nowak, 1999: 74). Yet, as one can see from Sheridan’s (2004) study, men also experience constraints on what is seen as appropriate behaviour. As highlighted in section 2.4.4, for Coyne (2002), the restraint on choice is more dependent upon one’s care-giving status, therefore, working lone mothers and working lone fathers both have the capacity to suffer a care-giving ‘glass ceiling’ within their employment.

2.5 Conclusion

In an initial consideration of the field of study, ‘lone parenthood’ as a research category was found to be important for two main reasons. The first reason was that 40% of mothers are likely to spend some time as a lone mother (Ermisch
and Francesconi, 2000). The second reason was the relative absence of research on lone fathers (Fox and Bruce, 2001). A need for a particular focus on lone parent experiences within employment was concluded due to their increasing (but still marginal) presence within the workforce (ONS, 2011b). This perception was then complimented by an examination of employment policy and legislation concerning lone parents and an analysis of more general work-family literature. This review of the previous literature in the field highlighted a variety of aspects that could affect how working parents experienced and understood employment. Yet, in comparison to the wealth of studies on mothers and fathers from dual-parent families, many of these aspects have not been identified as relevant in exploring in the experiences of working lone parents. In general, literature on lone parents and employment was found to be more likely to focus on such issues as barriers and challenges to gaining work, rather than exploring the issues that they may face within work.

Considering the extant literature that highlighted some of the challenges facing working lone parents, it became apparent that there were some similarities between the experiences of lone parents and the experiences of those from dual-parent families, specifically in relation to motherhood. However, it has been suggested that the experience of barriers within employment will be generally felt to a greater degree by lone parents (Coyne, 2002), meaning that there is a continued need to focus on their working experiences. In addition, in one of the few studies that considered the long-term working experiences of lone mothers, Ridge and Millar (2011) argued that at a time of economic recession it is critical to consider the ‘challenges’ in maintaining “income security in work” (2011: 85).

Although there were some areas of overlap between studies, there were also a number of research areas on dual-parents that had not been focused on to the same depth in regard to lone parents. For example, Coyne (2002: 451) suggested that further research was required to investigate how lone parents, with both care and work responsibilities, negotiate organizational expectations concerning ‘total commitment’. Greater research in this area could be enlightening as it could explore the expectations and ideologies within organizational cultures, and how lone parents make sense of such expectations.
When considering the previous research in this area, as well as suggestions for future areas of study, there appeared to be an emphasis on exploring the tensions between primary caring and primary providing responsibilities. In order to address such tensions, it is important to consider the meaning that is given to these two areas within the lives of lone parents. The concept of ‘identity’ would offer one way of exploring such meaning, as has been highlighted by previous research on lone mothers (May, 2003, 2006, 2008b).

Throughout this chapter, issues concerning identity have been prevalent, for example, the stereotyping that can be found in constructions of the ‘lone parent’ as discussed in section 2.3, and identity construction as a positive impact of employment as mentioned in section 2.3.1. The concept of identity was also apparent in discussions concerning the need to portray ‘visible commitment’ to one’s employers in order to sustain a professional image (sections 2.4.1, 2.4.3 and 2.4.4). Wider discussions on organizational cultures and workplace ideologies, as well as concerns regarding space, place and time (e.g. the ‘public’ work space and the ‘private’ home space), again utilised the notion of identity to explore such aspects (sections 2.4.3 and 2.4.8). Therefore, focusing on lone parents within employment, I will draw upon the concept of identity to help explore how lone parents experienced and understood their employment, within the context of being a primary carer and provider. The concept of identity has been used to some extent in previous research on lone parents to explore the influence that role identification can have on their decisions regarding employment (Bell et al., 2005; Duncan and Edwards, 1997). The next chapter will provide a discussion and review of previous applications of identity in the work-family and organizational research, as well as how, as a conceptual lens, it may be applied to future research on working lone parents.
Chapter 3: The concept of identity in the lives of working lone parents

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted a number of issues and challenges that working parents may face. Some similarities were found between the working experiences of lone- and dual-parents, for example, concerns regarding the issue of childcare. Yet, lone parents were seen to suffer more acutely from such issues as they have no partner with whom to share the burden of responsibility (Coyne, 2002). Overall, there was a dearth of literature that explored how lone parents engaged with their work, in comparison to the multitude of studies on the working experiences of mothers and fathers from dual-parent families.

One particular concept that was found to be especially critical for working parents was that of ‘identity’. For example, in sections 2.4.3 and 2.4.4 it was discussed how organizational cultures, and the ideologies within such cultures, were found to have a particular influence on parents’ experiences within the workplace (Sheridan, 2004; White et al., 2003; Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Aveling, 2002; Jarvis, 2002; Simpson, 1998). Gendered expectations regarding the identity of the preferred ‘unencumbered’ employee, who could assimilate into dominant working cultures, could affect how working mothers and fathers perceived their work, their behaviour in work and then also influence how they organised other aspects of their lives, such as family (Sheridan, 2004; Brown, 2010).

In view of such work, identity can be seen to affect how individuals understand and give meaning to their employment, as well as how other areas, such as family, may influence such understandings. The concept of identity can therefore be used as a lens to explore working experiences. In addition, notions of identity also become a vital focus for those in positions of power within the organization:

“If those managing organizations either make simplistic assumptions about identity processes, or do not have these processes “on their radar”
then their efforts to change and improve things will be likely to run into, and cause, problems of identity dynamics (Beech et al., 2008: 964).

Considering the potential negative effects that a lack of understanding could have on employee experiences, one could argue that understanding such identity processes is critical for policy makers who wish to support working parents. In order to help develop and improve the situations of working lone parents, it is crucial to explore how they construct a sense of identity.

This chapter will seek to demonstrate the importance of the concept of identity for the study of working lone parents. By looking at how identity has been utilised within current literature concerned with work and family, as well as the wider field of organizational studies, this chapter will help to identify future possibilities for the use of such a conceptual lens in exploring how lone parents experience and give meaning to work within the wider context of their lives.

3.2 The concept of identity

The study of identity has a long and complex history (Lemert, 2011). The term ‘identity’ was originally derived from the Latin ‘idem’ meaning “sameness or continuity” (Scott and Marshall, 2009), and can be related back to the early work of such philosophers as Plato (427-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC), whose concerns with identity were concerns of the soul, in other words, how one could still be identifiable even after the body’s demise (Maritain and Watkin, 2005: 37-55). From the seventeenth century onwards, there was a major paradigmatic shift in the understandings of identity (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). This shift began with the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ where scholars started to challenge the notion of a ‘given’ identity of title or class (Ashe, 1999). However, tensions arose between those who described themselves as rationalists, such as René Descartes, and those who described themselves as empiricists, such as David Hume (Scruton, 2001). The major contention for such theorists was whether identity was shaped by society (structure) or by the free will of an individual (agency). Rationalists believed that people as rational, autonomous individuals could utilise agency to control their thoughts and actions and, therefore, their identity (Ashe, 1999). Whereas for empiricists, knowledge was gained through experience, not reason, which, for Hume, meant that we are all:
[N]othing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement (Hume, 2000 [1739]: 165).

For empiricists, such an understanding casts doubt on the notion of a personal identity that could be controlled by a rational, reasoned individual.

Following this period, the concept of identity continued to be of interest to scholars, however, it was from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards that it began to be interrogated with particular vigour (Gleason, 1983; Cerulo, 1997). Within the area of psychology and social psychology, widely different views of the process of identity construction were being formulated. For example, Sigmund Freud’s (1856-1939) psychoanalytic work on the human psyche posited that identity can be understood as the continuing tension between the unconscious ‘id’ (the desirous self), the unconscious ‘superego’ (the moral self) and the conscious ‘ego’ (the logical, rational self). It is the ‘ego’ which must satisfy the desires of the ‘id’ whilst acting within the confines of the ‘superego’ (Freud, 1986 [1933]: 127-90).

Working at around the same time, the social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), had different understandings of the process of identity construction. Mead believed in the power of language to constitute self. He argued that language is incredibly important in the architecture of human experience as it can “react upon the speaking individual as it reacts upon the other” (Mead, 1967 [1934]: 69). Mead believed that the self develops as individuals interact with one another. Roles, described as a set of behaviour used in response to other sets of behaviour, are always inhabited by individuals in every situation. Mead describes this process as ‘reflexiveness’, the ability to turn back the “experience of the individual upon himself” so that the individual is able to consciously “adjust himself to that process, and to modify the resultant of that process in any given social act” (Mead, 1967 [1934]: 134). Therefore, individuals have the ability to imagine how others view them and act accordingly. This relationship between the external and the internal was to become a major part of the theory of symbolic interactionism (Woodward, 2004). Based on three premises, this theory posited that: individuals temper their behaviour towards ‘things’ based on the meanings of those ‘things’ (where
‘things’ can be objects, people or situations); the meaning given to these ‘things’ is gleaned from one’s interactions with others; and, these meanings are adapted through an "interpretive process used by the person dealing with the things he encounters" (Blumer, 1986: 2). This theory has had a major impact on identity studies and is seen to “underlie most sociological interest in identity” (Serpe and Stryker, 2011: 225).

Within the twentieth century, questions of identity in terms of political representation began to come to the forefront, meaning that this concept, which had previously been understood as the “rarefied preserve of philosophers”, began to be understood as a term with everyday resonance (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 17). However, despite the wealth of studies on this subject, the meaning of ‘identity’ remains elusive, as different approaches have different definitions (Alcoff, 2003; Sarup, 1996). The structure versus agency debate, first highlighted in the discussions between empiricists and rationalists, has continued to cause divisions in opinion, with different theories emphasising the importance of personal identity over collective identity and vice versa (Woodward, 2004). For some, identity has an “inner” origin, meaning that people have control or agency over their own identity, but, for others, one’s identity has an “outer” origin, meaning that ‘who one is’ can be determined by social processes (Côté and Levine, 2002: 55). These differences present a challenge for identity theorists and reinforce the need for greater exploration in this field. As Albert et al. argue:

It is because identity is problematic – and yet so crucial to how and what one values, thinks, feels and does in all social domains, including organizations – that the dynamics of identity need to be better understood (2000: 14).

The study of identity has been prolific in recent years, however, as Albert et al. highlight, it is the tensions that continue to exist within identity studies that make it such an alluring focus for enquiry.

One way to define identity has been to consider the answers to the questions, ‘who am I?’, ‘where do I belong?’, and ‘how do I fit (or fit in)?’ (Oyserman, 2004: 5). Such an understanding again highlights how the concept of identity can be linked to concerns of both individual and collective identity. Within
organizational studies, the focus has tended to be more on collective identity, where questions concerning ‘who are we as an organization?’ have been central (Whetten, 2006). The effect of employment on personal identity has also been a major area of focus as “what one does is often compared with expectations about who one is” (Pratt et al., 2006: 255).

In order to utilise the concept of identity as an analytical tool in this thesis on working lone parents, an examination of the different philosophical approaches is required. In their study of identity within organizational studies, Alvesson et al. (2008) argued that the differing approaches to the study of identity could be better understood in relation to Habermas’ (1972) three cognitive interests that underpin human inquiry: “technical, practical hermeneutic and emancipatory”, or in other words, “functionalist, interpretivist and critical” (2008: 8). The following sections will explore how these three approaches to the study of identity have been used within organizational studies, within the work-family literature, and within studies focusing specifically on lone parents.

3.3 Functionalist approaches to the study of identity

The aim of functionalist or ‘technical’ research is to produce knowledge that can demonstrate “cause-and-effect relations through which control over natural and social conditions can be achieved” (Alvesson et al., 2008: 8). In order to meet this aim, the focus for research in this area tends to rest on investigating decision making and behaviour (Elsbach, 1999). There are two major theories that can be associated with such an approach: Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1986; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Haslam, 2004) and Identity Theory (Serpe and Stryker, 1987; McCall and Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1980). Whilst these two theories may be seen to have many similarities (Stets and Burke, 2000), including the language that they use (Hogg et al, 1995), there are specific differences between the two. In turn, these two theories have influenced the development of other functionalist theories, such as role theory, as will be discussed.

3.3.1 Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory
The basic premise for Social Identity Theory (SIT) is that individuals classify themselves and others based on their membership in certain demographic or social factions, for example; ethnicity, gender, occupation. This self-classification or ‘self-categorization’ (Turner et al., 1987) is seen to demonstrate a ‘reflexivity’ of the self in that it can “take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications” (Stets and Burke, 2000: 224). SIT rests on the assumption that one’s identity is mainly inferred from one’s affiliation with certain social groupings (Hogg and Vaughan, 2002), and this conceptual understanding of identity has been especially useful in organizational studies that explore intergroup behaviour and organizational commitment (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Haslam, 2004; Hogg and Terry, 2000).

As highlighted by Gleason (1983), since the 1950s, identity studies have been majorly influenced by the notion of identity as equating to ‘sameness’. Within SIT, such an emphasis has continued, as the social as a source of unifying identity is perceived as more important than the individual as a distinct entity. The notion of ‘depersonalization’ within this theory demonstrates such a focus as it describes how one tends to see the self as “an embodiment of the in-group prototype” (Stets and Burke, 2000: 231). This is not to say that context is not important, however, as different contexts may challenge the individual to choose between groupings, such as one’s familial, occupational or national ‘selves’ at certain points in time (Turner et al., 1971; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1982). In order to understand how certain identities become ‘activated’ in certain situations, the notion of ‘salience’ was introduced by SIT theorists (Stets and Burke, 2000: 229). For Oakes, a ‘salient’ social identity was one that was “functioning psychologically to increase the influence of one’s membership in that group on perception and behaviour” (1987: 118). A social identity with greater salience, therefore, is perceived to be more important and will influence how one acts to a greater extent than other social identities.

Within organizational studies, the notion of identification in regard to SIT has been utilised by a number of studies, for example, those with a focus on commitment and motivation (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Elsbach, 1999; Haslam,
2004). The aim of this body of work has been to gather knowledge on how organizational identification (as well as organizational commitment) can be encouraged, demonstrating the technical, functionalist foundations of such research. However, Sveningsson and Alvesson believe that such research can be criticised for assuming that an individual's view of the organization, and their feeling of identification towards it, is 'relatively stable' (2003: 1164). Another area for criticism is that, within this field of study, the organization has been “treated as the main object of identification” (Alvesson et al., 2008: 13). To challenge such an idea, it is important to consider that there can be many other objects that exist concurrently as sources of identification (Kuhn and Nelson, 2000), for example, Meyerson and Scully (1995) explored how employees may identify with their organization but also identify with an ideology that goes against the identity of their organization. In considering the case of lone parents, as well as parents in general, the familial self is potentially one of the greatest alternative sources for identification.

SIT has helped to contribute to research in a number of areas, for example, inter-group relations (Brown, 2000); the individual, relational and collective self (Sedikides and Brewer, 2001); primacy of self and threatening feedback (Sedikides and Gaertner, 2001); and stability and change in identity (Burke and Cast, 1997). Yet, as a theory, it cannot adequately explain the co-existence of multiple identities (Alvesson et al., 2008), as well as the incoherence, instability and complexities of social identities and the process of identification, especially in relation to the organization (Gioia et al., 2000). In the context of working lone parents, this theory may not be suitable in exploring their understandings of identity.

A second major theory to consider, which has also relied on social categories to explore the process of identity formation, is Identity Theory. In common with SIT, this psycho-social theory uses the idea of self-categorization to describe how individuals “acting in the context of social structure name one another and themselves in the sense of recognizing one another as occupants of positions (roles)” (Stets and Burke, 2000: 225). Whilst the emphasis for SIT is on how identity is formed through membership in certain groups, Identity Theory posits that it is one’s inclusion in certain ‘roles’ that contributes towards identity.
formation. The focus for research in this area is very much on behaviour, as role identities, “by definition, imply action” (Callero, 1985: 205).

The terms used within SIT and Identity Theory are also similar, for example, both make use of the terms ‘self-categorization’ to describe how identities become activated, and ‘salience’ to describe how identities are ordered. Within Identity Theory, in order for self-categorization to be effective, identity categories (in this case, roles) need to be relatively stable (Styker, 1980). Recognizing how oneself and others occupy certain roles means that these roles must evoke a shared sense of meaning. This meaning translates into specific behavioural expectations for specific roles (McCall and Simmons, 1978), which provides a set standard which can guide behaviour (Burke, 1991; Burke and Reitzes, 1981).

In Identity Theory, the notion of ‘salience’ is used to account for the ordering of multiple role identities (Stryker, 1968). In such situations where multiple roles are available, roles are seen to be ordered into a ‘salience hierarchy’ which can then have “direct implications for outcomes such as role-choice behaviour” (Hunt, 2003: 72). However, the situation itself does not dictate which role will be enacted. Discussing Styker and Serpe’s (1987) work on role salience, Stets and Burke identify how “the identities at the top of the salience hierarchy are more likely to be activated independent of situational cues” (2000: 231). This suggests a level of agency in identity formation, which is a prominent theme in Identity Theory (McCall and Simmons, 1978; Tsushima and Burke, 1999).

Whilst such similarities in the terms of self-categorization and salience can be seen between SIT and Identity Theory, there is a particular difference between the two theories. For Stets and Burke, the major difference between group- and role-based identities is that:

The basis of social identity is in the uniformity of perception and action among group members, while the basis of role identity resides in the differences in perceptions and actions that accompany a role as it relates to counterroles (2000: 226).

Therefore, the emphasis for Identity Theory is more on individual action, rather than group action, with a greater focus on issues of difference for identity formation. In addition, Identity Theory also differs from SIT as it questions the
conceptualisation of society as a “relatively undifferentiated, co-operative whole” (Stryker and Serpe, 1982: 206). This is not to say that Identity Theory conceptualises society as unstructured, rather, society is perceived as “complexly differentiated but nevertheless organized” (ibid.). Within such a view, the self in Identity Theory is a complex but fundamentally ‘organized construct’ (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995: 256). Due to this understanding, Identity Theory faces similar criticisms to SIT in that it does not adequately address instability and incoherence within social identities, as well as within the process of identity formation.

For many studies that have sought to examine parental identity, Identity Theory has been a useful framework with which to explore the roles of ‘mother’ and ‘father’ (Bruce and Fox, 1999; Marsiglio, 1993, 1998; Minton and Pasley, 1996). For example, Fox and Bruce utilised this theory to explore the attitudes and behaviour of fathers. They discussed how the level of commitment that a father had to his child was seen to be an indication of “the salience of the father role to a man's sense of self” (2001: 396). Other impactors were also the “satisfaction that father role enactment provides, and the perceived assessment of his performance in the father role by the father's significant others” (ibid.). The notion of self-esteem was then considered a particular motivator for the continued enactment of the father role. However, this may not be the only motivator for the continuation of roles. Within Identity Theory, self-efficacy is another important motivator as it describes how individuals can judge their own competencies which allows for a greater sense of control to be achieved (Stets and Burke, 2000). Performing a role well is seen to lead to a process of ‘self-verification’ which can then increase experiences of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Burke and Stets, 1999).

Aspects of Identity Theory have also been used by some studies that have explored concerns of multiple identities for parents (Thoits, 1992). However, other studies have sought to move beyond the confines of this theory, for example, by introducing new concepts such as ‘role balance’, which offer alternative understandings of how parents organise multiple identities (Marks and McDermid, 1996). The notion of role identities is still central to such work,
but it tends to be conceptualised under the broad title of ‘role theory’. In the following section I will explore such work further.

3.3.2 Role theory

Role theory is the most widely utilised theory in the technical functionalist work-family literature (Burden, 1986; Campbell and Moen, 1992; Eagle et al., 1997; Williams and Alliger, 1994; Marks and Macdermid, 1996; Fox and Bruce, 2001; Spencer-Dawe, 2005). This theory does not represent one singular theory per se; rather there are a variety of role theories, which will be discussed. Overall, role theory describes how people “occupy and internalise positions to which particular behaviours are allocated” (Bondi, 1994: 192). As in Identity Theory, the ‘performance of roles’ is then maintained through “systems of expectations and sanctions experienced and enforced by individual human agents” (ibid.). The notion of salience is also relied upon in this theory, which describes the level of importance that is ascribed to a role and, therefore, impacts on how roles are organised and prioritised (Super, 1990).

Such a traditional understanding of identity theory has been used by a number of studies on lone parents (Burden, 1986; Campbell and Moen, 1992; Ford, 1996). Ford (1996) used this concept to explore how lone parents made decisions regarding employment. Some of the lone parents studied spoke of a ‘self-fulfilment’ from their work role, whilst others held a greater level of salience to the more ‘traditional role’ of home maker (1996: 35-8). Limited roles appeared to be available to the lone parents in that participants chose either one (employee) or the other (home maker). Their role-choice was also linked to the cost of childcare and whether it was economically viable for them to go to work. The role of employee was seen to become an option only if the financial rewards of work could cover childcare costs.

For Duncan and Edwards (1997), the major criticism of traditional role theory is that it holds certain assumptions about how people make choices and decisions regarding roles. They argued that role theory relies on a ‘rational economic man’ model which assumes that:
Individuals, as separate economic agents whose “preferences” or “tastes” are already given and do not change, make cost-benefit type analyses in order to maximise their utility. Preferences are assumed to be independent of the behaviour of everyone else, and of past behaviour (1997: 32-33).

The ‘rational economic man’ model assumes a greater level of agency in decision making and behaviour for individuals, yet, the suggestion that ‘preferences’ are ‘already given’ indicates a level of essentialism (an underlying essence that always remains the same) and so restrictions on possibilities for behaviour, thought and identity. This model could, therefore, be seen to be conceptually contradictory. Duncan and Edwards analysed this ‘rational economic man’ version of role theory in regard to lone mothers and identity. It was deemed to be inappropriate in exploring their gendered experiences and so, as an alternative to this approach, they argued for a role theory that would take into consideration social relations and perceptions (or ‘gendered moral rationalities’)(1997: 56). They named this approach the ‘gendered orientation model’ (ibid.).

Since its conception, many studies that utilise a ‘sociological analyses’ in considerations of work and family roles “have been based on a gendered orientation model” (Spencer-Dawe, 2005: 253). However, Spencer-Dawe argued that this model is reliant upon the understanding of work and home as separate public and private spheres (2005: 253). This has led to the “stereotyping of women as either ‘work-orientated’ or ‘home-orientated’” (ibid.), which obscures the inter-linking and multi-faceted nature of these two areas. Therefore, whilst such a model has helped to highlight the key issue of gender in identity construction, it still contains flaws as it continues to propagate the notion of the work/family binary, which suggests that these areas cannot co-exist.

There has been some research on lone mothers that has sought to move away from dualistic ideas concerning role orientation. In their study on childcare and employment decisions, Bell et al. (2005) suggested that “orientations towards both work and parental childcare are dynamic rather than static” (2005: 28), meaning that the importance held to ‘worker’ or ‘parent’ could change depending on context and circumstances. Four typologies of role orientation
were identified: lone parents who had strong orientations towards both employment and parental care; lone parents who had a strong orientation towards employment but a weaker orientation towards parental care; lone parents who had a weaker orientation towards employment but a stronger orientation towards parental care; and lone parents who had a weak orientation to both employment and parental childcare (Bell et al., 2005: 2). Such typologies may be useful in providing a broad exploration of how lone parents understand their identity in regard to work and family; however, there are some major concerns with how role theory may lead to the reification of role identities. Such concerns and criticisms of role theory will be discussed further in the following paragraphs.

In its various forms, role theory was seen as an explanation of identity “beyond the essentializing of biological or physical human identity” (Calhoun, 1994: 13). In other words, within role theory, one’s identity was dependent upon their involvement in roles and, therefore, was not dependent upon their biology which was essentially restrictive. Yet, there are some major criticisms of role theory which question whether it really can offer a suitable theoretical foundation for the exploration of identity. For example, role theory is based on the assumption that roles are organised on a linear salience hierarchy. Marks and Mcdermid (1996) discussed this criticism in their study. They found that role theory does not adequately address people’s experiences of role strain (where difficulty may be faced in carrying out one role because of the influence of other roles). They therefore urged researchers to consider how people may instead have the option to “create a non-hierarchical pattern of self-organization” (1996: 417), which may then allow them to reduce their role conflicts.

A further concern is the reification of roles within role theory. Jackson argued that role theory “falsely reifies certain social ideologies into concrete realities or objective templates, and names them roles” (1998: 51). To explore this criticism it is useful to turn to the critique of one particular type of role theory, namely sex role theory, as it has often been relied upon to explore identity in regard to families (Osmond and Thorne, 2008). It is also interesting because it relies on the notion of ‘sex’ (which concerns the biological), rather than ‘gender’, to explore the social concept of roles.
Sex role theory relies on the basic premise that “being a man or a woman means enacting a general role definitive of one’s sex” and, therefore, there are two sex roles in every context, which can be the ‘male’ or ‘female’ role, but have also been referred to as the ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ role (Connell, 1987: 48). Such a gendered positioning was seen to offer:

A shift away from biological assumptions about sex differences, emphasizing that women’s and men’s behaviours are different because they respond to different social expectations (ibid.)

However, sex roles in regard to the family have tended to be portrayed as socially necessary and therefore functionalist (Bondi, 1994: 192). Such a positioning reflects Talcott Parsons view of the functional necessity of the nuclear family (with the breadwinner father and the home-maker mother) for the continued proliferation of contemporary society (Parsons, 1942; Parsons and Bales, 1955). Whilst Parson’s view of the family has been subject to critique, the family itself has still tended to be defined in a more functionalist way (“stressing the objective reality of role structures”) than an interactionist way (“emphasizing the subjective construction of role experience”) (Osmond and Thorne, 2008: 600). Expectations concerning the male and female roles within the family have consequently continued to rely on separate paid work and care categories (Jackson, 1998).

In addition to this functionalist foundation, sex role theory is also often described as being ‘normatively deterministic’ (Simon, 2004: 23), as it implies that people are only shaped by conventional sex roles, constructing exceptions as deviants (Stanley and Wise, 1983). As Osmond and Thorne describe, in situations where people cannot conform to conventional identity norms, role theory “frequently blames the victim and seldom blames the system” (2008: 601). Therefore, the fundamental weakness of sex role theory is that “it cannot account for power, inequality and conflict in gender relations” (ibid.).

In seeking to explore the everyday experiences and understandings of working lone parents, a framework which relies on components of role theory may not be suitable due to its various flaws. Of particular concern is the apparent inability of this theory to take into account issues of power and inequality, which
are critical to consider in the experiences of lone parents as they are faced with negotiating challenging moral discourses in regard to the family (Wallbank, 1998; Lewis and Hobson, 1997; May, 2006, 2008), as well as particular workplace expectations regarding the ideal ‘unencumbered’ employee (Acker, 2006). This would suggest that an alternative understanding of identity is required to more fully address concerns of inequality, gender and power in the experiences of working lone parents. The following section will explore how alternative interpretivist conceptions of identity have been used within the field of organizational studies and the work-family literature, as well as additional interpretivist understandings of identity that may be usefully applied to this area.

3.4 Interpretivist approaches to the study of identity

For Alvesson et al. (2008), an interpretivist (practical-hermeneutic) approach to the study of identity in organizational studies, stands in sharp contrast to the technical, functionalist approach. Whilst a functionalist approach is concerned with producing knowledge that has practical implications for social organisation, an interpretivist approach is more focused on exploring the “subjective meaning of social action” (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 19). Within this approach, identity is a “socially and symbolically constructed notion intended to lend meaning to experience” (Gioia, 1998: 27). Communication is also critical to understandings of identity in terms of how individuals “weave ‘narratives of self’ in concert with others and out of the diverse contextual resources within their reach” (Alvesson et al., 2008: 8). This section will aim to present an overview of the major ideas in this area.

3.4.1 Narratives of the self

Within organizational studies, the notion of identity construction as a narrative process has been particularly influential (LaPointe, 2010; Czarniawska, 2000; Down and Reveley, 2009; Knights and Willmott, 1989; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Ybema et al. argued that:

Taking language seriously enables researchers to begin to unravel the complexities of the processes of identity formation and construction: it can offer insight into how identities are constituted and, over time, reconstituted in everyday organizational talk and texts (2009: 303).
A narrative approach has therefore been utilised by many organizational studies, as it can allow for a consideration of personal identity construction in relation to collective identity construction (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Brown, 2006).

Within the broader field of sociology, narratives have been central to interpretivist understandings of identity. For example, Anthony Giddens wrote:

A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self (1991: 54).

For Giddens, this represents a reflexive process as the self is constantly constructed in line with changing personal and social situations. Identity is perceived as both an ‘endeavour’ (ibid: 5) and an ‘achievement’ (ibid: 215), as identities are formulated through narratives of self.

Giddens has written extensively on notions of narrative and self-identity. He believed that we are all part of a late modern society, which is characterised by a process called ‘reflexive modernisation’ (Giddens, 1987: 187). Such a viewpoint was developed to help explain the social change affecting modern society and described how there had been a:

[D]iminution in the strength and permanence of social ties and obligations which previously bound people into groups, networks and allegiances which were crucial to their social experiences, beliefs and ways of acting in the world, in short, to their social identities (Irwin, 2000: 2.4).

Therefore, social categories such as class, family, and gender roles were believed to be subject to increasing fragility (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996: 24), which meant that social expectations concerning such positions were open to greater challenge and greater opportunities for people to ‘reflexively’ shape their own identities.

Giddens’ ideas concerning narrative, reflexivity and self-identity have influenced a number of studies on work and family (Miller et al, 2008; Bailey, 1999; Brandth and Kvande, 2002). For example, Tietze and Musson (2002) used his
ideas to analyse the experiences of professional management employees who regularly worked from home. Whilst participants were seen to reflexively shape their narratives of self in such situations, experiences of ‘insecurity and anxiety’ were prevalent (2002: 330).

In a study on lone motherhood, Klett-Davies also utilised aspects of Giddens’ work. Drawing from his work, Klett-Davies relied upon the ‘individualization thesis’ which emphasises the opportunities for individuals to exercise agency and so ‘reflexively’ shape their own self-identity (2007: 4). Within such an understanding, the individual is positioned as a relatively free agent who can exert control over their own identity construction. However, for May, who reviewed Klett-Davies’ work from a more critical approach, such a perspective does not address the “continuing inequalities” that lone mothers may face within society (2008a: 51). Adkins (2003) and May (2006) both argued that because of social inequalities, not everyone has the same level of ‘reflexivity’, and that the ‘reflexive self’ may actually be posited as male (Hoggett, 2001). Such a criticism reflects Wajcman and Martin's argument that within the theory of ‘reflexive modernisation’, the notion of gender is “inadequately addressed” (2002: 986).

In her critique of Klett-Davies' study on lone parents, May (2008a) also argued that her main analytical tool appeared to be the ‘Sense of Coherence’ concept which:

[P]laces too much emphasis on individual personality traits and therefore directs attention away from a critical examination of socioeconomic background (2008a: 52).

Within such an approach, an emphasis on context was therefore seen to be lacking. As described, late modernist scholars (such as Giddens) have suggested that social categories are now more fragile and open to change, yet such a view does not adequately address how social categories, such as class and gender, continue to act upon individuals (Skeggs, 1997). To address such inequalities, identity construction needs to be considered within wider social contexts and discourses that can both implicitly and explicitly shape how we see ourselves as well as how we perceive others.
In her own research on Finnish lone mothers and identity, May (2003, 2006, 2008a, 2008b), also discussed narratives to explore identity, however, in comparison, her work on the ‘narrative identity’ of lone mothers sought to address both an interpretivist focus on communication and meaning, as well as a critical exploration of the power relations within identity construction. She described ‘narrative identity’ as “the view of self in relation to others and the social, told through stories” (2003: 170) and her aim was to explore identity as something that was “neither fully structurally determined nor freely chosen but are rather something in-between” (2006: 6).

Narratives in regard to identity formation have been utilised from a number of different perspectives. However, for Alvesson et al. (2008), language and narrative are also important to consider in regard to the notion of ‘identity work’, which has been a significant concept for interpretivist investigations of work and identity. This concept will be explored in greater detail in the following section.

3.4.2 Identity work

Considering the individual as an ‘identity worker’ has become a “popular metaphor” by which to understand identity construction within organizations (Thomas, 2009: 169), with an emphasis on ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’ (Alvesson et al., 2008: 15). Identity within such understandings is considered a ‘relational concept’ where there is “no such thing as a pure identity - no essence or substance that sums up what identity is about” (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001: 62). Identity construction is “thus of necessity always a project rather than an achievement” (Watson, 2008: 124). Sveningsson and Alvesson describe identity work as the process by which people are continually involved in “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (2003: 1165). It has also been described as a:

[M]utually constitutive process whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in which they live their lives (Watson, 2008: 129).
Identity work, in this sense, is something that can be conducted both ‘inwardly’ and ‘outwardly’. The emphasis is again on the relationship between the social and the personal in identity construction, rather than identity being determined by either one or the other (Bergström and Knights, 2006).

Within this area, studies have primarily focused upon the manager as the research subject (Watson, 2009; Down and Reveley, 2009; Carroll and Levy, 2008; Clarke et al., 2009). The focus has also tended to be on the identity work conducted by individuals during periods of heightened stress and pressure where one’s self-identity is challenged (Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Examples of such incidents could be a change in occupational status or when becoming a parent (Ibarra, 1999). The emphasis, therefore, tends to be on conscious identity work, which is grounded in the idea that times of increased stress or changing circumstances can lead to a greater awareness of the “constructed quality of self identity” and so to a greater propensity for “self doubt and self openness” (Alvesson et al., 2008: 15). Yet, identity work can also occur at the level of the everyday. For example, Alvesson and Due Billing argue that “people in their lives, inside as well as outside organizations, routinely engage in identity work” (2009: 98; italics in original). Such continuous identity work is seen as necessary in aiming to achieve a “feeling of a reasonably coherent and positive sense of self” which is important for “coping with the ambiguities of existence, work tasks and social relations” (ibid.). Within such a conceptualisation, identity work is considered to be an ongoing process, rather than purely as a result of challenging situations.

Wieland conceptualises these two processes as ‘active’ and ‘passive’ identity work where identity emerges “through self-aware reflections about whom one is and through everyday practices of doing work and life” (2010: 505). She argues that, whilst focusing on instances of active identity work can help to explore moments of crisis or stress in people’s lives, such a focus tends to “emphasize identity work as a strategic, rational process that results in the development of a coherent self” and ignores the “messiness, irrationality, and inconsistencies” (2010: 508) within identity construction.

Within recent years, many scholars, who have sought to explore the process of identity work, have begun to utilise the notion of dis-identification, rather than
purely focusing on the notion of identification (Jones and Spicer, 2005; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006; Carroll and Levy, 2008; Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). This reflects a wider view that notions of sameness and difference (Einwohner et al., 2008: 5) and understandings of ‘what I am not’ are central within the process of identity construction (Giddens, 1991; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). As Carroll and Levy discuss:

Certainly one of the ways we narrow down the answer of what it is we are, do and stand for is by being cognisant of what it is we aren’t, don’t do and desire not to be thought of. In this sense identity work can be accepted as encompassing being and not-being equally (2008: 80).

Identity work, therefore, can be used to both secure a sense of self as well as separate oneself from other alternative identity positions by “appropriating certain discourses and rejecting others” (Musson and Duberley, 2007: 147). Both Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) and Sveningsson and Larson (2006) discuss the notion of the anti-identity which is a specifically negative identity that individuals seek to separate themselves from. However, Carroll and Levy go on to argue that ‘what I am not’ is not necessarily linked to an oppositional ‘positive’ identity, as dis-identification may occur for many different reasons, for example, disconnection or exclusion from a particular identity discourse. Therefore, the relationship between identification and dis-identification is highly complex (2008: 81), rather than reflecting a positive, preferable identity versus a negative, unwanted identity.

Beech (2011) explored the idea of identification and dis-identification even further in his work on ‘liminality’. Rather than focusing on how individuals may identify with one identity over another, he suggested that there may be times when an individual is between two identity constructions. Such ‘liminal’ practices are seen to occur at the “intersection of structure and agency and so are particularly well fitted to expanding our understanding of self-identity/social-identity mutual construction” (2011: 286). This concept may also be useful in considering those who may be excluded from normative identity constructions, such as lone parents.

Linking to the literature on identity work and dis-identification, a number of organizational identity scholars have begun to focus on the notion of morals and
ethics relating to identity construction. Kornberger and Brown argue that identities are constituted within ‘discursive regimes’ and understandings of ‘ethics’ can be considered ‘discursive resources’ on which “individuals and groups may draw in their attempts to author versions of their self and organizational narratives” (2007: 497). The process of forming a self-narrative that is relatively coherent therefore relies on understandings of morals and values. For Wieland, the notion of the moral self is also tied to notions of the ‘ideal’ self where “expectations for what a good person should be – act as resources for identity construction” (2010: 504).

The difficulty with constructing such a moral identity is that different understandings of morality are apparent in different contexts. For example, Clarke et al. (2009), focusing again on the experiences of managers, found that the participants in their study faced difficulties in constructing moral selves at times when they had to deal with difficult employee management situations, such as implementing redundancies. Organizational discourses have been seen to continue to propagate the idea that professional or managerial identities are characterised by notions of ‘iron control’ (Jackall, 1988: 47) and the “suppression and denial of feeling and emotion” (Parkin, 1993: 179). In Clarke et al.’s study, participants who had to facilitate redundancies were seen to struggle to conduct identity work that would help to define themselves as moral selves because they were faced with ‘antagonistic discourses’ that were “centred on emotionalism, professionalism and the conflicting demands of the business and its people” (2009: 328). Consequently, such situations were seen to confront participants with “possibly un-resolvable identity challenges” (ibid.: 343).

The concept of identity work has been subject to a number of developments. One of these developments has been the application of this concept to explore gender within the organization. Traditional understandings of gender are seen to be so deeply ‘embedded’ in society that “by the time people get to be adults, alternative ways of acting as women and men and arranging work and family life are literally unthinkable” (Lorber, 2005: 242). As Alvesson describes, gender is therefore crucial for “one’s self-definition and others’ inclination to fix a person in a social category” (1998: 990). However, the subject focus of such studies
has continued to be on those in professional or managerial positions. For example, Jorgenson’s (2002) study focused on exploring why female engineers faced disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. By analysing the identity work of these women, Jorgenson could explore their positioning “within prevailing discourses of gender and technical work” (2002: 353). Olsson and Walker (2004) also explored the influence of gender discourses in their work on female executives. They found “recurrent paradoxes” in the identity work of women executives, for example, they denied that gender was an issue in their work but would often discuss the different feminine qualities (such as intuition) that they brought to their positions (2004: 249-50). Such paradoxes were seen to show that “women’s identity work involves shifting, relational and frequently contradictory discursive constructions” (ibid.: 250).

For Whitehead (1998), such contradictory discursive constructions were not just restricted to the working experiences of women, but could also be found in the working experiences of men. Whitehead’s study explored the disruption that could occur in male managers’ sense of gender identity when new managerialist discourses that emphasised control and greater levels of commitment came into the fore. For the first case, such changes were relatively unproblematic as he could easily adapt his identity work to portray the “stereotypical image of masculinity: the man/manager as the rational, controlled and logical agent” (1998: 209). In another case, similar identity work was also found although contradictions became apparent in the narrative of this participant when discussing his young child: “from presenting himself as the ambitious, progressive manager, he goes into an alternative discourse of ‘family man’” (ibid.: 210). Whitehead described the relationship each participant had to the masculine/managerial identity as ‘fragile’ and that this fragility meant that, through their identity work, each had the potential for “subverting and reconstituting” their self-narrative (ibid.: 212). By exploring the identity work of these subjects, Whitehead could then highlight the tensions and contradictory discursive constructions that existed within their narratives.

Another area of development for the concept of identity work has been its use in studies on gender and work outside the physical confines of the workplace. For example, Tietze and Musson’s (2010) study explored the experiences of
managers working from home. The first case described was a senior manager in a production company who defined himself as a manager and a traditional breadwinner father (2010: 152). Working from the traditionally understood ‘private’ space of the home and therefore being unable to go out to the ‘public’ space of work meant that his identities were challenged and resulted in more concentrated identity work to negotiate this difficulty (ibid.: 153). The second case described was a senior human resources manager in a local council who was a lone mother. She felt that working from home allowed her to develop better domestic and professional practices and routines and so be a “more caring and nurturing mother”, as well as a “more productive manager”.

Tietze and Musson discussed how working from home could throw the participants’ identities “into a state of flux”, which could then allow for “different identity constellations to become possible” (ibid.: 154). They described how each case:

[Per]formed identity work by finding practical solutions to the relocation of paid work into the home environment. These included the development of particular routines and practices (ibid.: 153).

In their argument, the new routines and practices that were established by participants helped to provide both a sense of self, as well as a sense of belonging. Within such situations, the emphasis is also on ‘performing’ identity work by identifying acceptable or unacceptable behaviour to help guide the development of routines and practices (Musson and Duberley, 2007).

Whilst a focus on gender and family responsibilities has begun to expand the boundaries of identity work studies, there are still relatively few studies that use this concept to consider the impacts of extra-organizational factors. As described by Alvesson and Due Billing (2009), identity work is something that occurs both inside as well as outside the organization. Watson (2009) discusses this further in his study which considers the importance of life stories and autobiographies for exploring working lives. He critiques research that focuses on exploring notions of ‘work identity’, 'managerial identity' or 'professional identity' by highlighting the dangers that exist in ignoring wider aspects of life within identity construction:
There is a danger of failing to see the human individual as a ‘whole person’ and a danger of forgetting that organizational activities are only one part of a manager’s life. Our identities are shaped across our lives, both temporally and sectorally; any one person’s ‘identity’ will only in part be an outcome of organizational experience (2009: 426).

Watson’s argument is that studies that focus purely on identity within the workplace privilege this identity work and, therefore, overlook or trivialise the influence that other aspects of life may have on identity construction overall. By looking at people’s whole lives first and then focusing on the particularities of work (rather than purely looking at work identity), Watson believes that future research will “not only tell us more about human lives and identities generally, but about organizational, managerial and work processes themselves” (ibid.: 450).

In addition to concerns regarding the application of the concept of identity work, there have also been concerns on the clarity of its conceptualisation (Ainsworth and Grant, 2012; Beech et al., 2008; Beech et al., 2012). For example, in their study on conversational identity work, McInnes and Corlett (2012) argued that identity work needed to be understood in relation to both its ‘ideational/discursive aspects’ (e.g. as a process situated within the structures and discourses of organizations), as well as its ‘interpersonal aspects’ (e.g. the relationships between individuals that are negotiated as part of identity work) (2012: 28). By appreciating both aspects in the study of conversation within an everyday work meeting, McInnes and Corlett identified five identity work forms: performative, confirmatory, controlling, reconciling and negotiating (ibid.: 32). Performative identity work was seen to occur when an individual “felt under an obligation to enact a particular identity because of prevailing personal, social or institutional pressures”, which then offered “little latitude for alternative self-other positions” (ibid.). This was seen to stand in contrast to confirmatory identity work which occurred when social obligations had little influence on an interaction, meaning that individuals could maintain their understandings of self-identity with apparently little “active or conscious identity work” (ibid.). McInnes and Corlett found that the other three forms of identity work (controlling, reconciling and negotiating) were situated between the two forms of performative and confirmatory and all inferred “some social obligation impinging
upon self-other identity but, to different degrees, afforded self and other latitude to negotiate identity positions” (ibid.: 32).

Within such organizational studies that have sought to develop the conceptualisation of identity work, the emphasis has been on the interconnectedness of personal and social identities (Beech et al., 2012; Kreiner et al., 2006). As Beech et al. argue, the responses of others are critical to maintaining a coherent self-identity and so identity work is seen to occur within the “interaction between self and others” (2008: 957). This ‘personal-social dialectic’ is seen to create “conflicts, contradictions and changes” (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012: 17) and, for critical organizational scholars, such ‘conflicts’ have raised particular questions regarding how identities may be regulated and controlled (Thomas, 2009). Issues of power become key considerations within such critical understandings of identity, which will be discussed further in the following section.

3.5 Critical approaches to the study of identity

As Alvesson et al., (2008) described, critical research within organizational studies has particularly focused on the concept of identity in relation to power. For many critical identity theorists, the work of Michel Foucault has been especially influential. Foucault believed that society was made up of normative standards, beliefs and values that were conceived to be the ‘norm’, and his interest lay in those who were excluded from the norm (Paras, 2006). He also believed that these normative standards could limit the subject in ways that they were not aware, which he referred to as the ‘marginalization of the subject’ (Foucault, 1973 [1963]; 2002 [1966]). Society was seen to have become a “carceral archipelago” (Foucault, 1979: 298), where individuals faced multiple sites of control. In his work, he explored the idea that the ‘norms’ established as forms of control could also be internalised and, therefore, individuals would act as supervisors of their own actions and identities. This was described as the process of ‘normalization’ (Foucault, 1980), which could be perpetuated by the “self-perception and signals from others (superiors, colleagues, subordinates)” who are “systematically or sporadically engaging in surveillance and (informal or
formal) examination” (Alvesson, 2001: 880). Discourses were seen to be a major aspect of this process as:

Discourses provide the resource by which identities may be constructed yet at the same time, discourses can constrain because their normalizing effect bears down on the individual attempting to inscribe what can be said and who can “be” (Thomas, 2009: 170).

From such a perspective, identity construction is therefore seen to be a ‘normative activity’, through which social norms and ideals for identity and behaviour are “woven into an individual’s understanding of whom he or she is” (Wieland, 2010: 504).

It is important to emphasise that, for Foucault, ‘discourse’ was more than simply a linguistic concept. As discourse helped to produce knowledge, nothing was seen to have meaning outside of discourse (Foucault, 1972 [1969]). Discourse was seen as a system of representation, which was concerned with both language and practice (Hall, 2001). By focusing on both of these aspects, Foucault sought to challenge the “traditional distinction between what one says (language) and what one does (practice)” (Hall, 1997: 44).

Exploring the concept of identity in relation to the norms and ideals produced within discourses can help to “interrogate the exclusionary practices by which subjects are constituted in organizations” (Thomas, 2009: 168). Therefore, the notion of ‘identity regulation’ is of primary concern for critical organizational scholars (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; du Gay, 1993; Kuhn, 2006; Musson and Duberley, 2007), as will be discussed in the following section. Explorations of ‘identity work’ are still prevalent throughout many of these studies, however, the employee tends to be regarded as the ‘managed identity worker’ (Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009: 99; italics in original), rather than simply the ‘identity worker’.

### 3.5.1 Identity regulation

For many scholars, the increasing interest in identity regulation within organizations reflects the shift in focus from ‘technocratic’ forms of organizational control (e.g. controlling the behaviour of employees) to ‘socio-ideological’ forms of organizational control (e.g. controlling the beliefs and
feelings of employees)(Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004: 152; italics in original).

As Alvesson and Willmott discuss:

> Conceptualizations of organizational control have tended to emphasize its impersonal and behavioural features with scant regard for how meaning, culture or ideology are articulated by and implicated in structural configurations of control (2002: 619).

Exploring notions of identity construction and identity regulation allows for an insight into such socio-ideological forms of control. Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) explored both technocratic and socio-ideological forms of organizational control in their study on an Information Technology/management consultancy firm. They described technocratic control as relating to structural arrangements within the workplace such as “hierarchy, regulated career paths, feedback procedures, and work methodologies” (2004: 171), whereas, in regard to socio-ideological control, their analysis focused on “social relations, emotions, identity formation, and ideology” (ibid.: 152). They found that both forms of control could be interrelated as shared structural arrangements could encourage a shared identity amongst employees. However, it was perceived that the socio-ideological forms of control could often be far more constraining than the technocratic forms of control as the “iron cage of subjectivity” was seen to regulate the identities of employees who sought to construct themselves as professionals within their organization (ibid.: 151, 172). The pressure to present oneself as a ‘professional’ and the control that this pressure can exert over an individual’s process of identity formation has been similarly explored within other studies (Grey, 1998; Hodgson, 2005; Musson and Duberley, 2007).

Some organizations may seek to regulate the identities of employees by encouraging them to engage in certain types of identity work in order to avoid social stigmas connected to the job. For example, Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) study explored the experiences of those involved in various forms of ‘dirty work’ (e.g. work that is socially stigmatised as unseemly or degrading). The assumption was that such workers would find it difficult to construct a moral sense of self in the face of such stigmatisation, yet participants were found to be part of strong organizational cultures that fostered an “ideological reframing, recalibrating and refocusing” of their work which then offered employees the
opportunity to transform the meaning of ‘dirt’ and helped to “moderate the impact of social perceptions of dirtiness” (1999: 413). Such organizational cultures could then be seen to be regulating the identities of employees by offering them alternative discursive resources with which to construct their sense of self.

3.5.2 Power and resistance in identity construction

Whilst the notion of identity regulation has been important within critical organizational studies, so has the concept of resistance (Ezzamel et al., 2001). Identities are seen to be constructed within discourses, yet, as Howarth describes, “while discourses endeavour to impose order and necessity on a field of meaning, the ultimate contingency of meaning precludes this possibility from being actualised” (2000: 103). This means that identities may never be fully regulated or determined by organizations, as discourses can hold many different meanings and so offer opportunities for resistance to dominant identity norms and ideals (Thomas, 2009). Such a perception helps to combine understandings of structure and agency which have traditionally positioned identity formation as either the “tendency for the social world to impose ‘subjectivities’ onto individuals or the tendency for individuals to create their own ‘selves’” (Watson, 2009: 426). As Ybema et al. discuss:

‘Identity formation’ might be conceptualized as a complex, multifaceted process which produces a socially negotiated temporary outcome of the dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-presentation and labelling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance (2009: 301).

Exploring examples of resistance to identity regulation can therefore help to highlight the complexities of identity construction.

As highlighted in the previous section (3.4.1), it is important to consider the wider aspects of life within identity formation, rather than focusing purely on understandings of ‘work identity’ or ‘professional identity’ (Watson, 2009). For many feminist organizational studies, analysing these wider aspects of life in regard to identity construction and resistance has allowed for a more in-depth consideration of gender and inequality (Medved, 2004; 2009; Haynes, 2008; Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson, 2001). The aim for such studies has been to
highlight the constructed and constricting nature of gender identities in order to challenge the associated gendered inequalities (such as assumptions regarding women’s ‘natural’ will to care) within the areas of work and the family (Coltrane, 2004; Aveling, 2002).

One particular concern within such studies is how work and family identities are experienced together. In their study on public sector professionals, Thomas and Davies drew on Foucault’s (1982) understandings of power and the subject to explore identities and subjectivities at the “micro-level of experience” (2005: 684). They discussed the case of Kate, a personnel manager for the police service who was also a mother. Kate did not agree with the masculine competitiveness of her workplace and so resisted by drawing on a number of different subject positions, including ‘mother’ and ‘woman’. However, by drawing on these positions, she was constructed as the ‘other’, which then served to “heighten and emphasize her gendered status and thus contributes to, and reinforces, her marginalized position in the masculinist policing organization” (2005: 693). Thomas and Davies described this situation as the ‘double bind of otherness’:

By drawing on certain feminine discourses emphasizing home/life balance, tolerance and diversity, she presents an epistemologically privileged position. However, in doing so, she also confirms her female status, which, she notes, is constructed as subservient by many (ibid.).

In other words, she may resist dominant cultures by drawing on alternative discursive resources for identity construction (in this example, that of ‘mother’ and ‘woman’), yet, by drawing on such resources, she is being ‘othered’ within the organization, which can then reinforce the dominant norms and ideals of the organization and further marginalise her position within it.

A further concern for scholars within this area is the continuing ideology concerning separate work and family identities. Haynes (2008) discussed this issue within her study on working mothers who had recently returned to work after giving birth. Her work continually highlighted the notion that ‘motherhood’ and ‘mothering’ are socially constructed, not biologically determined, but she argued that, as identity categories, they still encompass powerful expectations regarding appropriate behaviour. One such expectation that her study
discussed was the pressure that may be experienced by employees with children to keep their work and family identities and experiences separate (2008: 636). This pressure could be felt from their organizations, their work colleagues, as well as wider societal discourses. Yet, her study also found that many of the participants demonstrated a resistance to such an expectation in that their identities as ‘mothers’ and ‘professionals’ were felt to be interconnected, rather than compartmentalised. In negotiating such dominant ideologies concerning the ‘mother’ and ‘worker’ identities, the process of identity construction for working mothers was therefore seen to contain “elements of continuity, discontinuity, fragmentation and refocus” (2008: 639).

As Haynes’ (2008) study found, ideologies and dominant discourses concerning paid work and family could exert pressure on the identity processes of working mothers. Such power was not unidirectional or all-encompassing as working mothers could resist and challenge such expectations through their alternative behaviour and their own conceptualisations of their ‘mother’ and ‘worker’ identities. Similar conclusions were also drawn by Medved (2009) in her study on breadwinning mothers, and Johnston and Swanson (2006) in their study on ideologies in constructions of motherhood. However, Medved also found that ‘moral discourses’ of mothering were an intrinsic part of the identity processes of working mothers, which often lead to “sites of personal struggle” (2009: 146).

Wallbank (1998) addressed issues of power, discourse and identity concerning lone parents in her review article on employment law and the media. She discussed the usefulness of applying Foucault’s work on discourse and power to the experiences of lone mothers. As previously highlighted, Foucault believed that individuals are subject to normative beliefs and values which are communicated through discourse, and his interest lay in those who were excluded from such dominant discourses (Paras, 2006). He also believed that such normative standards could limit the subject in ways of which they were not aware (Foucault, 1973 [1963]; 2002 [1966]). Foucault argued that discourses helped to constitute the ‘subject’ (Foucault, 1997) through two distinct processes: ‘subjectification’ (how a person turns themselves into a subject (Foucault, 1982: 208)) and ‘normalization’ (the process in which people are measured and corrected (Foucault, 1979: 178)). It was these aspects that
Wallbank drew upon to discuss the discursive construction of lone motherhood. She argued that discourses, formulated by “the law, the press and the “expert” knowledge of the academy” (1998: 61), ‘create’ the lone mother and marginalise her position in relation to the ‘normal’ dual-parent family. For future studies on lone parents, Wallbank believed that including an analysis of ‘discursive practices’ was then critical in considering “what it means to be a lone mother in contemporary British society” (ibid.: 87). Studying lone parents as they exist within dominant discourses could offer a contextualised view of how meaning is given to work and family, as well as how inequalities may be reproduced.

Whilst Foucault’s work has been central to many of the feminist studies that have taken a critical approach to the study of identity (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Wallbank, 1998; Haynes, 2008), some scholars have questioned the compatibility between Foucault and feminism (Hartsock, 1990; Cain, 1993). Although Foucault discusses issues relating to sexuality and the body (especially in his work on the ‘History of Sexuality’), he provides little reference to women, with many feminists labelling him as “gender-blind and androcentric” (McLaren, 2002: 17). Despite this, there are other feminist scholars who believe that there are parts of Foucault’s work which are crucial in helping to explore notions of gender identity and resistance (McNay, 1992). In particular, Judith Butler’s work on gender identity has been especially influenced by many of Foucault’s ideas. Butler’s concepts are interesting to consider in this review for two main reasons. Firstly, through her work on ‘performativity’, Butler seeks to explain the relationship between structure and agency. Secondly, whilst Butler’s work on gender identity may appear potentially ‘useful’ and ‘sympathetic’ to the concerns of organizational studies, “engagement … has been scant” (Borgerson, 2005: 63).

### 3.5.3 Performativity, recognition and the ‘intelligible’ subject

For feminist scholars who sought to develop a feminist politics that could stand for the rights of all women, the identity category of ‘woman’ was problematic. It was a problem, not only because it suggested that all women were similar in a fundamental way, but also because its meaning was “overcrowded with the overdeterminations of male supremacy” (Alcoff, 1988: 405). In wider social
discourses, the category of ‘man’ was seen as the dominant norm, meaning that the ‘woman’ was necessarily cast as the other, the lesser, in comparison. Identity categories began to be seen as mechanisms of power where normalising discourses could “force the individual back on himself and tie him to his own identity in a constraining way” (Foucault, 1983: 212). In her work, Butler sought to explore and challenge such hierarchical notions of gender through a critical discussion of a variety of philosophers (such as Simone de Beauvoir, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida and, in particular, Michel Foucault). In effect, her aim was to cause ‘trouble’ for gender categories (Butler, 1999 [1990]: xxviii).

Like other identity work theorists (sections 3.4.1 & 3.4.2), Butler believed that identity needed to be understood as a process, rather than a static construct, and argued that “the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms” (Butler, 1999 [1990]: 1). In regard to gender identity, she argued that:

> Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the ‘congealing’ is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means (1999 [1990]: 33).

These ‘social means’ were seen to propagate the notion of gender by emphasising the apparent need for a static and unitary identity. From such understanding, one of her key notions was developed, which was that gendered bodies are ‘performative’, suggesting that identities are fabrications constituted by regulatory norms (1999 [1990], 1988). Identity was seen to be “instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (1988: 519) and she postulated that “I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief” (1988: 520). Within her ideas, there was no such thing as an original (gender) identity, there was not necessarily a “doer behind the deed”, but the ‘doer’ was “variably constructed in and through the deed” (1999 [1990]: 142).

To develop her work on performativity further, Butler relied on Jacques Derrida’s work on ‘iterability’, arguing that performativity cannot be “understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms” (Butler, 1993: 95). This repetition “enables” a subject as well as composing the “temporal condition for the subject” (ibid.). Therefore, Butler
argued that performativity was not constituted through a single event or ‘act’, but was a “ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo” (1993: 95). Within such work, Butler was keen to note the distinction between performance, where a subject is seen to already exist, and performativity, where the subject is seen to be produced and reproduced through discourse. In an interview with Osborne and Segal, she discussed the importance of discourse in producing a subject and how ‘performative speech acts’ can “bring into being that which they name” (1996: 112-113). This production was always seen to take place through recitation and reiteration and, therefore, “performativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established” (Butler, 1996: 113).

In her understandings, the processes of recitation and reiteration were designed to create the ‘intelligible’ subject who adheres to socially accepted ways of being and doing (1999 [1990]: 24). However, as contemporary society was seen to rely on binaries (either/or), for there to be an ‘intelligible’ subject position there must also be those who were excluded from such a position. This process was known as ‘othering’. For example, Butler argued that women are perceived as the negative of men and are therefore positioned as the ‘other sex’ (1999 [1990]: xxx). For one to be considered ‘intelligible’ one must conform to norms and such norms permit only particular types of “practice and action to become recognizable as such” (Butler, 2004: 42). The notion of recognition then becomes critical:

If the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that “undo” the person by conferring recognition, or “undo” the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced (2004: 2).

For a subject to be constructed as ‘intelligible’ or to be ‘othered’, Butler believed that there must be a process of recognition. This was perceived as a fundamental process within identity construction.

An additional aspect that needs to be considered in regard to Butler’s discussions on the ‘intelligible’ subject is that of ‘normative violence’. Normative violence should not be considered as a “type of violence that is somehow ‘normative’”, but rather describes the “violence of norms” (Chambers, 2007: 43).
A number of scholars have addressed the concept of normative violence in regard to Butler’s work (Chambers and Carver, 2008; Chambers, 2007; Lloyd, 2007), although Butler herself tended to discuss it in relation to “the violence of gender norms” that she herself had experienced (1999 [1990]: xix). A focus on the violence of norms was designed to address how acts of social categorisation can be seen as violent as they forcefully define “what (or who) will or will not count as culturally intelligible” (Lloyd, 2007: 136). Drawing on Derrida’s work, Butler discussed the category of sex in regard to the law and legislation, highlighting the “violence of the letter, the violence of the mark which establishes what will and will not signify” (Butler, 1995a: 52). She went on to argue that the ‘categorization’ of the body through ‘discursive ordering’ can be considered in “itself a material violence” (ibid.). Such an understanding can be seen to “emphasise the part that language plays in violence”, as well as demonstrate “how much more varied and complex violence can be” (Chambers and Carver, 2008: 79). In ‘Excitable speech’ (1997), Butler considered the problem of hate speech, which may be considered a more overt example of the effects of normative violence. However, it could be argued that the effects of normative violence can also be seen in less obvious ways, such as the portrayal (or omission) of certain groups within media and policy discourses.

Whilst focusing on the force of social discourses, Butler also sought to address concerns regarding agency in identity construction. The subject was seen to be produced through a process of reiterating normative ways of being and doing (Butler, 1995b). This process of normalization could constrain a subject within a “particular grid of intelligibility by governing and punishing non-normative behaviour” (Jackson, 2004: 679). However, as networks of power relations, discourses are never closed and fixed but are dynamic and fluid (Stern, 2000). Therefore, they necessarily fracture, creating opportunities for alternative identities which are “neither foundational grounds nor fully expressed products” (Jackson, 2004: 675). Sites of resistance can occur within performativity through ‘linguistic disobedience’ which are caused by a fracture between a “discursive command and its appropriated effect” leading to opportunities for resistance through resignification (Butler, 1993: 122). As Digeser pointed out, performative acts are not “mechanical processes or algorithms, but rule-
governed practices” (1994: 659). This means that there are continually opportunities for resistance as “the subject is a reworking of the very discursive processes by which it is worked” (Butler, 1995b: 135). In such an understanding, ‘agency’ can be found in the “possibility of resignification opened up by discourse” (ibid.).

In her work, Butler sought to provide an explanation of identity that addressed both notions of structure and agency. However, critics of her work have often misinterpreted this approach by labelling her understandings of identity construction as too deterministic and her notions of the subject as too abstract (Hekman, 2000; Nelson, 1999). Yet, for Butler, social construction was different from determinism and, therefore, did “not preclude agency” (Stern, 2000: 112). She argued that the subject “must be constituted again and again” which implies that “it is open to formations that are not fully constrained in advance” (1995b: 135). Like Foucault, Butler’s aim was to deconstruct, to question, to investigate and to interrogate the notion of the subject. In Foucaultian terms, this does not mean the ‘death of the subject’ per se, but rather the death of the modernist notion of the rational, autonomous subject (Colwell, 1994: 56). Whilst she saw categories of identity as restrictive, she did not wish to throw them away. Instead, she argued that one should question their underlying assumptions and present them as sites of contention as these identity categories are “never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary” (1995a: 50). Her notion of performativity was therefore seen to reflect neither voluntarism nor determinism, but rather something in between (Osborne and Segal, 1996; Meijer and Prins, 1998; Kotz, 1992).

### 3.6 Constructing a framework

As presented in this chapter, the field of identity studies is highly complex and can be regarded as a site of “continuous unsettled argument” (Wetherell, 2010: 4). In the previous sections, I discussed some of the many approaches that have been developed within the functionalist, interpretivist and critical perspectives. Such an exploration highlighted various themes and concepts which could be utilised in the study of working lone parents. In particular, issues of power were apparent throughout, either because they were central to
understandings of identity construction (for example, in critical studies), or because these issues were notably absent (for example, in functionalist studies). In this section, specific themes and concepts from the previous sections will be presented to help construct a framework for this research.

3.6.1 Approach 1: Dominant discourses, norms and expectations

For both interpretivist and critical identity research, the study of discourses is regarded as integral to understanding the process of identity construction. From a Foucaultian perspective, discourses are central to identity construction as they "constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern" (Weedon, 1987: 108). Discourses are seen to produce the subject, meaning that, to study discourses, is to study the resources that are available to individuals in constructing a sense of self. Previous research on lone mothers has highlighted the importance of discourses for identity construction, for example, May (2006, 2008) explored the effect of moral discourses, whilst Wallbank (1998) discussed the potential impact of media discourses. Yet, by considering the literature in chapter two, there may be many additional discourses that working lone parents experience as primary carers and providers.

The literature review in chapter two highlighted the many issues that may face working parents from both dual- and lone parent families. A number of discourses were seen to be apparent which could potentially impact upon their experiences. In section 2.3.2, the shift in policy discourses was discussed, where normative assumptions concerning social value and paid employment were becoming more apparent (Knijn et al., 2007). In addition, such discourses were seen to propagate the view that “what one does” can be linked to “expectations about who one is” (Pratt et al., 2006: 255), meaning that work becomes a major resource for identity construction. In section 2.4.5, alongside such shifts in policy discourse, there were also growing concerns with work-family balance. This notion of balance was seen to be ‘reinforced’ by the growing discourse of work-family conflict (Runté and Mills, 2004: 237), as working parents struggled to meet such expectations. Within organizational discourses (section 2.4.4 and 2.4.6), contrary beliefs to the notion of ‘balance’
were also still very much apparent, for example, within the ideas concerning the idealised ‘unencumbered’ worker (Acker, 2006), the unemotional professional (Jackall, 1988; Parkin, 1993), as well as expectations for ‘total commitment’ (Coyne, 2002) and ‘infinite availability’ (Watts, 2009). All of these discourses need to be considered in the experiences of working lone parents as they all encompass norms and expectations on what is “normal, rational and sound” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 622). Alongside moral discourses concerning the family (Wallbank, 1998; Lewis and Hobson, 1997; May, 2006, 2008), such contradictory discourses may therefore have a major impact on how lone parents construct a sense of identity.

3.6.2 Approach 2: The ‘intelligible’ subject and the ‘other’

Considering Butler’s understanding of the ‘intelligible subject’, if the dual-parent family is seen as the norm in social and welfare discourses, then the lone parent family as a ‘social problem’ and ‘social threat’ (Kiernan et al., 1998: 2) may be constructed as the ‘other’. In addition, within organizational discourses concerning the idealised employee, the lone parent as primary carer and provider may also be othered. To explore this process of othering, a focus on their experiences of marginalisation and exclusion becomes critical, as it can help to investigate the importance of recognition in identity construction. As highlighted by Butler, the notion of recognition is key to identity construction as it can allow one to be ‘seen’ (and so attributed a level of social value). Alternatively, if recognition is withheld, it can contribute to a process of ‘othering’. The process of recognition is intrinsically tied into understandings of appropriate and legitimate behaviour in particular circumstances. By exploring the work and family experiences of lone parents, and how they may internalise social discourses, one can consider how recognition may be given or withheld from them as primary carers and providers. Such an approach can also identify how lone parents may propagate processes of othering by perceiving experiences of marginalisation and exclusion as justified.

One particular notion which needs to be explored within considerations of recognition and the process of othering for working lone parents is that of ‘normative violence’ (Chambers, 2007; Butler, 1999 [1990], 1995a) (section
3.5.3). Within discourses, norms can be considered violent or forceful as they define who will or will not be seen as ‘culturally intelligible’ (Lloyd, 2007: 136). Again, the issue of recognition is key as it may contribute to the perpetuation of particular negative stigma or, on the other hand, contribute to the silencing of a group if withheld. The notion of normative violence is relevant to lone parents precisely because they may be subject to both negative stereotyping and silencing within social discourses concerning the family. Such aspects may also be experienced to a greater or lesser extent depending upon gender. As a group, lone mothers have historically been smeared, stigmatised and ‘demonized’ over concerns of immorality (McIntosh, 1996: 149). In comparison, the lone father as primary carer is seen to remain unrecognised within wider social discourses (Fox and Bruce, 2001).

Whilst discourses are seen to produce what is intelligible and what is othered, it is also important to address the place of the individual in this process of identity construction. For this study on working lone parents, identity is taken to be a “practice of improvisation within a scene of restraint” (Butler, 2004: 1). In order to explore this practice, and so focus on what the individual does to construct a coherent sense of self, this research will utilise the concept of identity work.

3.6.3 Approach 3: Identity work for primary carers and providers

In sections 3.4.1 and 3.4.2, the notions of identity work and identity regulation were found to be particularly useful in exploring identity construction as a reflexive, but still discursively dependent process (Watson, 2008; 2009; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2002). There was also an emphasis on the importance of the ‘personal-social dialectic’ for the process of identity work (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012: 17), as it is seen to occur within the “interaction between self and others” (Beech et al., 2008: 957). By using the notion of identity work, one can explore how people’s everyday experiences, and the way that they narrate these experiences, are part of how they construct a sense of a coherent self. Such narrations may be considered to be an individual’s personal identity, yet, personal identity is unequivocally tied to those around them due to the need for recognition.
The notion of identity work is pertinent to the study of working lone parents as it can allow for an appreciation of how dominant social discourses and expectations for behaviour can influence individual understandings and ways of acting. By analysing the identity regulation within such a process, this approach can help to highlight the experiences and discourses that served to provide ‘restraint’ within the everyday lives of working lone parents. In particular, the restrictiveness of moral discourses for identity work is critical to consider (Wieland, 2010), as well as taken-for-granted assumptions regarding motherhood, fatherhood, and paid employment, that are perpetuated within such discourses (May, 2006; 2008b; Medved, 2009; Taylor, 1998).

The concept of identity work can also address the issue of reflexivity for individuals. As Halford and Leonard have described, considering the impact of discourses is important, however, they need to be understood within the “shifting contexts of individuals’ everyday lives” (2006: 670). For working lone parents, exploring the fracturing of discourses that may occur within their everyday contexts (for example, when work and family responsibilities coincide), may help to highlight the opportunities that arise for alternative identities to be constructed. It may also allow for a consideration of how subjection can become a space for resistance and change (Thomas, 2009). By focusing on the practice of identity work, one can consider dominant discourses alongside context and so avoid the potential for determinism.

As Watson (2008) and Halford and Leonard (2006) have iterated, in order to effectively consider identity construction within work, one needs to consider identity work both within and beyond the workplace. Considering the wider contexts of individuals, rather than focusing purely on their working experiences, becomes critical. For studies that wish to focus on identity work, it is the “fine-grained personal nuances” of this process that need to be reflected upon (Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009: 98). Appreciating both the caring and work experiences of employed lone parents may also allow for a consideration of the ambiguity that is perceived to be apparent in processes of identity construction (Collinson, 1992). To overcome experiences of ambiguity, individuals are seen to focus on the need for a stable, secure identity (Knights and Willmott, 1989). Yet, for working lone parents, who are situated within both
the (potentially antagonistic) discourses concerning family and work, trying to construct and maintain a coherent sense of self may be especially challenging, leading to a continuation of ambiguity in their experiences of identity work. Understanding how lone parents negotiate the spaces between identities may be a useful way of further exploring this ambiguity. As this study seeks to explore the intersection between the personal understandings of working lone parents and wider social discourses concerning work and care, this in-between space or ‘liminality’ (Beech, 2011) may therefore be pertinent to consider in relation to their identity work.

An additional potential outcome from such an approach could be the identification of any particular types of identity work forms that were seen to arise in the experiences and understandings of working lone parents. As described in section 3.4.1, McInnes and Corlett (2012) identified a number of identity work forms in their study on conversational identity work within an everyday work meeting. Five identity work forms were seen to exist: performative, confirmatory, controlling, reconciling and negotiating (ibid.: 32), and such an analysis helped to contribute to a broader conceptualisation of identity work as a concept. For this thesis, such an outcome could also contribute to theory in a similar way.

In summary, by drawing on such a conceptual framework in the study of working lone parents, the tensions and challenges that occur within identity construction may be highlighted, such as those arising within and between discourses on work and family. Exploring the identity work of working lone parents can help to investigate how they may be othered, as well as their perceptions of recognition. Such an approach will also seek to reveal the tensions and challenges that may be experienced in their practices and routines.

**3.7 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter sought to demonstrate the importance of the concept of identity for the study of working lone parents. In considering the previous literature on working parents from dual-parent families, the concept of identity was seen to shape the meaning they gave to their work, as well as how other
areas, such as family, could impact upon such understandings (section 3.1). Identity could therefore affect how working mothers and fathers perceived their work, their behaviour in work and then also influence how they organised other aspects of their lives, such as family (Sheridan, 2004; Brown, 2010). The concept of identity was therefore seen to be an appropriate lens through which to study the work and family experiences of working lone parents.

As section 3.2 of this second literature review chapter presented, identity is an inherent part of our everyday lives (Sarup, 1996). As a concept within organizational studies, it is also critical for those managers who wish to avoid inadvertently causing problems of ‘identity dynamics’ (Beech et al., 2008). Within the work-family literature it has been traditionally theorised in regard to roles (Marks and Macdermid, 1996; Burden, 1986; Campbell and Moen, 1992; Bagger et al., 2008; Ford, 1996), although, as section 3.3.1 highlighted, such a conceptualisation has not been without its criticisms (Jackson, 1998), particularly in regard to the presentation of work and family roles as separate, oppositional and hierarchical in salience.

For those organizational scholars who conceptualised identity beyond the technical, functionalist understandings of identity, the emphasis moved to focus on the issue of language and discourse and reflected the ‘discursive turn’ happening in wider areas of the social sciences (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 83). Within this area, interpretivist organizational scholars began to utilise the notion of ‘identity work’ to explore meaning, with the focus being on the ‘project’ or process of identity construction (Watson, 2009: 124). Drawing upon such understandings, critical scholars began to explore the notion of identity regulation in order to highlight the power relations inherent within such identity construction (Alvesson et al., 2008). Feminist scholars within the work-family literature also drew upon constructionist and Foucaultian understandings of identity to highlight issues of gender and inequality (Johnston and Swanson, 2006; Medved, 2009; Haynes, 2008; May, 2003, 2006, 2008b; Wallbank, 1998). Taking from this area of critical feminist scholarship, the work of Judith Butler was explored in order to further consider the relationship between structure and agency in identity construction, as well as the criticisms concerning determinism that have been levelled at critical identity scholars (section 3.5.3).
Drawing on certain aspects of Butler’s work, in addition to the notions of identity work and identity regulation, a conceptual framework was derived to help guide this research (section 3.6). By exploring the discourses that give meaning to work and family through the experiences and identity work of working lone parents, one could identify how inequalities and tensions may either be resisted or continue to be reproduced.

In the following chapter I will discuss the methodology and research design for this study.
Chapter 4: Research design and methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the methodology and research design for this research project. To begin, the research setting and orientation for this study will be discussed and justified, which will include a presentation of the aim and objectives of this thesis (section 4.2). Section 4.3 will highlight the research approach that this study adopted and how such an approach impacted on decisions concerning research design and research instruments (as described in section 4.4). The challenges that were faced with both the research design and research instruments (and how such challenges were overcome) will also be addressed in section 4.4. The ethical considerations of this research will be discussed in section 4.5, with the final section of this chapter (4.6) presenting the data management and analysis methods that were practised. Overall, within this chapter I aim to articulate how decisions concerning the aim, objectives and methodology for this thesis enabled the development of an appropriate research design.

4.2 Research setting and orientation: presenting the aim and objectives of this study

In considering the methodology for this research there were a number of influencing factors, the first being the review of existing empirical studies on lone parents and employment. A number of research projects have focused on this subject group from a variety of theoretical perspectives, although the contextual diversity of the lone parent family has often been overlooked (Chambaz, 2001). This need for greater contextualisation was taken into account throughout the formulation of this study’s methodology.

As demonstrated in the literature review, research on lone parents has become increasingly diverse in the last two decades. Studies relying on quantitative, reductive perspectives of the work and home experiences of lone parents (such as Burden, 1986; Campbell and Moen, 1992) have been built upon by in-depth, qualitative research projects (Head, 2005). As previously indicated, it is this contemporary research on lone parents which has most influenced the methodology of this research by highlighting the diversity (Chambaz, 2001;
Sumaza, 2001), contextual reliance (Hughes and Nativel, 2005) and social construction (Phoenix, 1996) of lone parenthood. In particular, studies that utilised Foucaultian (Wallbank, 1998; Taylor, 1998), feminist (Silva, 1996) and narrative (May, 2003, 2004b; 2008) approaches to the study of lone parents (or more specifically lone mothers) were especially influential for the research design of this thesis, as they sought to provide an in-depth analysis of the complexities of lone parent experiences.

The previous literature within this field had a major influence on the formulation of this study’s aim and objectives in a number of ways. In some instances, suggestions for further study were apparent, which offered opportunities to build on the work of others. For example, Coyne’s (2002) study on working lone parents discussed how a possible childcare-related glass ceiling may be apparent for those with primary care responsibilities and advised further research to explore this in greater detail. Similarly, Gill and Davidson’s (2001) pilot study on professional and managerial lone mothers advocated further research into the problems and pressures they may face, particularly in relation to factors such as age of child and length of time as lone mother. The in-work experiences of lone parents were central to these studies, although there was little consideration given to the impact of workplace cultures, which have been seen to be critical in studies on working parents from dual-parent families.

Within the review, the concept of identity was found to be especially critical for working parents, yet, greater exploration of this notion in regard to the work-family literature found that much of the research in this area has tended to rely on understandings of role theory to conceptualise identity. Whilst such studies have contributed towards a greater understanding of identity in regard to working parents, there are many other possibilities for exploring this concept. A conceptual framework for approaching this concept in the lives of lone parents was discussed in section 3.6, which included weaving together the notions of identity work and identity regulation with aspects of Judith Butler’s work such as the ‘intelligible’ subject and the importance of recognition. By using this approach, I sought to gain an insight into the challenges and tensions that working lone parents may face as primary carers and providers, as well as explore concerns of power and inequality which had been highlighted as critical
issues in previous studies on lone parents (Wallbank, 1998; May, 2003; 2004b; 2008b). Such a framework would therefore allow for an exploration of both the everyday identity work of working lone parents, as well as how dominant discourses and issues of power can shape and constrain such identity work.

An examination of the previous literature also helped to identify the assumptions that were inherent in many of these research projects. As Sandberg and Alvesson highlighted, “theory is made interesting and influential when it challenges assumptions that underlie existing literature” (2011: 23). The assumption that appeared to influence research on lone parents was that they exist outside or on the boundary of the workforce, occupying part-time, temporary or unstable jobs. Therefore, research has tended to focus on the experiences of lone parents within these areas, rather than explore the experiences of other lone parents who may exist throughout the occupational hierarchy. Such an assumption may also explain why there are so few studies that consider such issues as the effects of organizational cultures, as these effects (for example, presenteeism) have tended to be explored in relation to full-time workers in professional or managerial occupations (Watts, 2009; Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Friedman and Lobel, 2003; Sheridan, 2004; Simpson, 1998).

Therefore, considering these issues, the overall aim of this study is to explore and critically analyse the everyday experiences and identity work of lone parents in relation to their work and family responsibilities. Whilst the focus is on ‘work’, I will also consider their family experiences in order to address how such aspects co-existed. The emphasis is on the web of interlinking relationships that make up their work and family experiences. The research objectives are to:

1. Undertake data collection and analysis to provide an account of the experiences and identity work of participants in relation to their work and family responsibilities;
2. Provide working lone parents with a higher level of recognition by offering them greater visibility in the academic literature;
3. Make recommendations from the findings that could benefit the situations of working lone parents.
In order to address the main aim of this thesis, three research questions were developed:

1. How do lone parents give meaning to their work and family responsibilities through the process of 'identity work'?

2. How is their identity work influenced by discourses, norms and expectations concerning family and paid employment?

3. Considering their identity work and the influence of discourses, norms and expectations concerning family and paid employment, how do lone parents organise and manage their work and family responsibilities?

By considering these questions, this research will critically explore how societal discourses on what is “normal, rational and sound” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 622) may influence the identity work of lone parents and how they organise their work and family responsibilities. Overall, the research will provide a contextually specific account of participant's experiences of combining work and family in order to highlight the various difficulties that they face. By highlighting such difficulties, greater consideration can be given to how we may offer more help and support to working lone parents, beyond generic work-family policies. The following section will present the research approach and paradigm that were used to position this research.

4.3 Research approach and research paradigm

Guba and Lincoln define a research paradigm as a set of basic beliefs and principles which communicate a certain 'worldview' (1994: 107-108). For each researcher there may be a different worldview, therefore, there will be alternative ontological, epistemological and methodological understandings. Ontology describes the “nature of existence” or the form of reality; epistemology describes the “theory of knowledge”; and methodology describes how ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’ may be researched bearing in mind one’s ontological and epistemological standpoints (Crotty, 1998: 3, 10). There are a number of different paradigmatic typologies that have been developed, for example, Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) matrix on functionalist, interpretive, radical humanist, and
radical structuralist paradigms. However, in management research, three specific paradigms tend to be focused on: positivist, interpretivist and constructivist (Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001), each with their own ontological, epistemological and methodological traditions. For example, positivism’s ontology is that the social world and reality are external and, therefore, should be studied objectively rather than subjectively. A positivist epistemology rests on the assumption that “knowledge is only of significance if it is based on observations of this external reality” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002: 28). To research this version of ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’, positivists would typically use a quantitative methodology. On the other hand, interpretivism and social constructionism both ascertain that access to an objective reality is ‘unknowable’ (Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001: 16). In regard to epistemology, they both highlight the importance of context and would employ a qualitative methodology to explore their subject. However, interpretivism rests on the assumption that knowledge can be gleaned through ‘revealing’ the experiences of participants, whereas social constructionism “sees the process of understanding as contributing to constructing that reality” (Girod-Séville and Perret, 2001: 22).

As identified in the previous section (4.2), whilst research on lone parents and employment has traditionally utilised positivistic paradigms, more recent literature has begun to explore their experiences from an interpretivist and constructivist approach. It is within this latter paradigm that theoretical perspectives such as critical inquiry, feminism, postmodernism and poststructuralism have found their roots (Crotty, 1998: 5; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 23). In order to address the aim and objectives of this study, an approach is required which can critically explore the experiences and identity work of working lone parents in regard to their negotiations of work and care-giving. This study is grounded in aspects of both interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, however, as the focus is critical in nature, the inclination is more towards constructivism (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009).

As lone parents (or, more specifically, lone mothers) are so often portrayed as ‘deviant’ in comparison to the norm of the dual-parent family (Phoenix, 1996: 176), aspects of critical inquiry will also be utilised to help identify instances of
inequality and conflict, as well as identifying “local forms of resistance” (Deetz, 2009: 35). A ‘critical’ approach must:

Necessarily seek to challenge and replace a dominant orthodoxy or, more modestly, to supplement and gradually reorient the diverse currents that comprise the orthodoxy (Alvesson et al., 2009: 2).

It is the ‘more modest’ approach that this research seeks to provide. By conducting research which highlights the prevailing, ‘taken-for-granted’ ideas relating to work and family, one can challenge the dominant ideology inherent in traditional management studies and practices. In-depth, qualitative research will therefore be used to identify how dominant discourses can both construct and constrict participant identities and, in this way, I will seek to question existing ideologies and identities relating to work and family. In the following sections (4.3.2 & 4.3.3) I will reflect on the specific approaches that were felt to be most appropriate in guiding this research.

**4.3.1 Applying a feminist methodology to the study of lone parents: addressing the contributions and potential limitations**

The changing orientation of research within the field of organizational and management studies has led to an increase in the number of studies taking a feminist poststructuralist perspective (Runté and Mills, 2004; Hawkins, 2008; Tyler and Cohen, 2010). Such an approach has allowed for issues of inequality and power to be explored in greater depth within the workplace, with gender being a major consideration within these ‘inequality regimes’ (Acker, 2006: 441). In studying lone mothers, many scholars have adopted a feminist methodology, for example, Silva’s (1996) edited collection, which highlighted the socially constructed nature of ‘lone motherhood’. For this study on working lone parents, such a methodology, which focuses on issues of inequality, gender and power, was seen to be particularly relevant.

Yet, in exploring this type of framework further, it became apparent that the meaning of a specifically feminist approach to research could be contested due to the ambiguity of the term ‘feminist methodology’. As Ramazanoğlu and Holland point out, there is “no research technique that is distinctly feminist”, as well as “no ontological or epistemological position that is distinctly feminist”
Feminist research can be quantitative or qualitative depending on the research field and question being asked (Calás and Smircich, 2009). Considering such assertions, it is important to explore what makes a feminist methodology specifically feminist. For Ramazanoğlu and Holland, a feminist methodology was “distinctive to the extent that it is shaped by feminist theory, politics and ethics and grounded in women’s experience” (2002: 16). Therefore, a feminist methodology should be considered in relation to feminism as a perspective, rather than feminism as a method (Reiharz, 1992).

Harding (1998) believed that there were only three main feminist epistemological aspects: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism. Feminist postmodernism has also encapsulated poststructuralist ideas which have been utilised in many studies such as the work of Runté and Mills (2004) who aimed to deconstruct the dominant discourses relating to work and family life. Within such feminist poststructuralist ideas:

The notion of gender – i.e., its ontological status – is in question as a product of modern philosophies, which rely on stable categorizations to justify knowledge claims (Calás and Smircich, 2009: 250).

From a social constructionist orientation, gender identity is positioned as a construction and, therefore, this approach may help reveal "the naturalized aspects of gender" (ibid.: 261). Considering the aim and objectives of this thesis, a feminist poststructuralist approach was therefore seen as an appropriate, potential framework for this study.

However, in evaluating feminism as a research approach, one issue was raised when considering who to include in the research sample for this study. The review of the previous research on lone parents highlighted that lone parents had been explicitly gendered, as participants were most likely to be women and thus the focus primarily on experiences of ‘motherhood’. The choice of participants may well reflect the greater prevalence of lone mothers over lone fathers (90% of lone parents are women), so this reliance on the ‘lone mother’ participant may not be surprising. Yet, the aim of this thesis is to explore the experiences of ‘lone parents’, which means the inclusion of lone fathers as
research participants. The main reason for this inclusion is that lone fathers continue to be underrepresented within the literature (Ward et al., 1996) and their experiences of identity construction are just as important to consider as lone mothers, as they exist within dominant discourses of the male ‘breadwinner’ (Fox and Bruce, 2001). Therefore, it would be inappropriate to exclude a sub-section of a marginalised group just because of their sex.

The issue that was raised was whether a feminist methodology could be applied to explore the experiences of men, as well as women. As discussed, whilst feminist methodologies are incredibly diverse, their underlying distinctiveness rests on the idea that they are “grounded in women’s experience” (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002: 16). Hesse-Biber and Leckenby believed that feminist research could include male subjects as long as the study was feminist in its approach. They argued that “just as adding women into research does not make it feminist, feminist research may not have women as its subjects” (2004: 214). The impetus lies with the research being “for women, rather than about women” (ibid.: 213). The example they used to demonstrate this is a study by Anderson and Umberson (2004) who utilised a feminist framework to explore men’s accounts of domestic violence. Gender was used to explore and challenge issues of power and discourse related to violence against women and, therefore, the research was constructed as feminist as it was inherently for women. Yet, whilst their study may provide an example of men participating in feminist research, the reason for their inclusion is purely that they represent how women can be oppressed through violence. Here, male participants are suitable as they demonstrate how men utilise power over women and, therefore, their example does not disrupt the status quo of traditional feminist ideologies, i.e. that the masculine oppresses the feminine.

After considering the place of male participants in feminist research, the concern was whether male lone parents could fit into a feminist methodology. If the research was to be ‘for women’ then female accounts of lone parenting could end up being privileged over male accounts. Yet, there are some feminist scholars who argue that traditional understandings of feminism need to be reconceptualised, that positioning men as ‘the enemy’ needs to cease as men can be also be subject to oppression and exploitation (hooks, 2000: 27). For
hooks, feminism can be described as a movement that seeks to end sexist oppression and it is within such an understanding that this thesis will be positioned. By considering such aspects as the impact of gender on identity construction, as well as the influence of gender within the workplace, I can better address the study’s aim and so critically explore societal discourses, identity construction, oppression and resistance in the experiences of working lone parents, both male and female.

Whilst such an appreciation of feminism may offer an appropriate foundation for this research, it is also important to locate such a critical understanding within the broader field of study. In regard to management studies, feminist poststructuralism lies within the field of Critical Management Studies (CMS) and it is this approach that will specifically help to guide this research as the following section will describe.

4.3.2 Critical Management Studies (CMS)

Critical Management Studies was first formally introduced in an edited book by Alvesson and Willmott in 1992 (Grey and Willmott, 2005). Its ‘critical’ aspect seeks to challenge traditional, dominant and under-challenged ideas surrounding management and its study which, for Alvesson (2008), can be achieved by considering the four I’s: ideologies, institutions, interests and identities. Grey and Willmott, in their reader on CMS, highlighted how researchers, who sought to challenge the dominant ideologies within management studies, were often faced with scepticism and hostility. They argued that for them, CMS “offers a ‘badge’ of relative respectability in the face of this hostility” (2005: 4). Like feminist approaches to research, CMS is pluralistic with the impetus being on ‘studies’, rather than ‘study’ which “suggests there is room for considerable diversity and fluidity” (Alvesson et al., 2009: 2). However, its underlying assumption is that:

Dominant theories and practices of management and organization systematically favor some (elite) groups and/or interests at the expense of those who are disadvantaged by them; and that this systematic inequality or interest-partiality is ultimately damaging for the emancipatory prospects of all groups (ibid.: 7).
As a broad field of study, CMS would seem to offer a suitable foundation for this research on working lone parents. It would also seem an appropriate approach in the study of the concept of identity as it offers a bridge between the “micro-political and the wider organizational, socio-cultural and temporal context” (Thomas, 2009: 178). Studies utilising such a foundation can examine the power relationships between the individual and their wider contexts and the influence this can have on identity construction and reconstruction.

There are further aspects of CMS that need to be considered, for example, the three core ideas on which CMS is believed to be based around: ‘de-naturalization’, ‘anti-performativity’ and ‘reflexivity’ (Fournier and Grey, 2000). ‘De-naturalization’ challenges ideas and beliefs about work that have become entrenched and are, therefore, perceived as ‘natural’. In regard to management, this could be related to a number of beliefs, for example, the idea that hierarchy is natural and, therefore, this “existing social order is taken for granted” (Alvesson et al., 2009: 9). Naturalization of the four I’s (ideologies, institutions, interests and identities (Alvesson, 2008)) can restrict people in a number of ways, as beliefs relating to power and domination go unchallenged:

It’s just how things are, the way of the world: of course men dominate women, whites dominate blacks, capital dominates labour. Whether focused on evolution or social function, the answer is the same: There Is No Alternative (Grey and Willmott, 2005: 5).

‘De-naturalization’ can help to identify these ‘taken for granted’ ideas and, by highlighting their context, can challenge their ‘natural’ status. Considering the positioning of lone parents within society, challenging what is seen to be ‘natural’ or taken for granted is critical to this research.

‘Anti-performativity’ or a “non-performative stance” can be described as a specific type of ‘de-naturalization’ as it challenges the belief that action in work is purely performative and can only be understood in regard to the ‘means-ends calculus’ (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17). In other words, an anti-performative stance questions the hegemony of ‘technical’ knowledge which focuses purely on issues of efficiency within the workplace and ideas concerning the greatest output from the smallest input. This ‘technical’ focus raises a number of ethical considerations as employees are reduced to purely ‘human resources’ and
other important processes are ignored, for example, “the distribution of life chances within and by corporations” (Katyal, 2009: 6). However, Spicer et al. (2009) point out that an anti-performative stance does not fit well with the other two core aspects of CMS as it rejects any type of performative action. Instead, they offer the notion of ‘critical performativity’ which involves “an active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices” (2009: 538). Within such an understanding, CMS can be seen as a “profoundly performative project” as it seeks to work with and transform managerial processes, rather than reject them entirely (ibid.: 537).

The third major focus for CMS is ‘reflexivity’. CMS scholars, like poststructural feminists, appreciate the power that is inherent in knowledge production and their place within the research process. Therefore, Alvesson et al. argued that it is mandatory for researchers to “interrogate the assumptions and routines upon which conventional knowledge production is founded” (2009: 11). As a researcher, I play a major part in producing and selecting what knowledge is communicated, therefore, I have a responsibility to critically reflect on my decisions and address the question, “who is watching the watchers?” (Calás and Smircich, 1992: 222). By being aware that researchers themselves are “embedded in particular conditions and traditions of research”, one can offer greater consideration to one’s own decisions and preferences in the research process (Grey and Willmott, 2005: 6).

The relationship of power between the researcher and participant is also an important concern (Calás and Smircich, 2009), as CMS has suffered criticism in this area. Some argued that it was guilty of:

Deploying the same self-authorizing devices of conventional management scholarship to elevate the status of their own knowledge claims and identity projects over and above those whom they research (Wray-Bliss, 2009: 279).

Within social constructionist understandings of research, qualitative research involves the co-creation of knowledge as participants are asked to discuss their experiences in a more in-depth manner and it is from this that the researcher constructs their findings and conclusions. However, this does not mean that issues of power dynamics are negated as the researcher still chooses what to
include and what to exclude, therefore, possibly subordinating “the voices and lives of the researched populations” (Wray-Bliss, 2009: 279). I will endeavour to address such concerns within the section on ethics (4.5).

This section has highlighted the specific research approach that will help to guide this study. A feminist approach was seen to allow for the consideration of gender, power and oppression in the lives of working lone parents, although concerns over the meaning of ‘feminism’ and the place of the male research subject could be potential limitations. Grounding aspects of feminism (which emphasised male inclusion, rather than male exclusion) within the wider field of CMS was perceived to offer the most effective approach in addressing such concerns and facilitating a critical examination of the discourses and ideologies relating to work and family. In the following section I will discuss the methodological approach that was seen to be most appropriate in gathering data for this research.

4.3.3 Qualitative and quantitative research

Quantitative and qualitative research methodologies have both been utilised in previous studies on lone parents, as the following table shows (Table 1):
One of the major distinctions between a quantitative and qualitative paradigm is that a quantitative paradigm is based on the understanding that ‘truth’ is an objective concept that can be discovered and measured, whereas a qualitative paradigm rests on the premise that ‘truth’ is dependent upon the perspective and context of the individual and, therefore, there is not necessarily a universal ‘truth’ (Creswell, 1998: 15). Qualitative research in both organizational and management research has increased dramatically in the last few decades (Buchanan and Bryman, 2009), as many studies sought to produce in-depth, small scale projects on issues such as organizational culture (Watts, 2009; Lewis, 2001b), emotion (Marsh and Musson, 2008) and gender dynamics (Di Domenico, 2008) in the workplace. Research on lone parents has also begun to rely more heavily on qualitative research as the above table shows, for example, May’s (2003, 2004b, 2008b) research on the narratives of Finnish lone mothers. I will seek to build on such work by continuing to explore the
experiences of lone parents and employment using a qualitative research methodology.

It is important to discuss why a qualitative approach was deemed more appropriate than a quantitative approach in addressing the aim and objectives of this study. A quantitative approach would have been unsuitable for this research in two main ways: firstly, because of its links with positivist understandings of ‘knowledge’ and ‘reality’ as objective; and secondly, due to the critical, social constructionist foundation of this research. This study takes a subjective approach, which understands human experience as “itself discursively constituted, that is, it ‘exists’ in, rather than outside, language” (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 184). Therefore, an objective, quantitative approach would not meet the aim and objectives of this thesis. A mixed method approach was also rejected under the same proviso in that quantitative and qualitative research methods have different epistemological foundations relating to ‘truth’ (Phillimore and Goodson, 2004: 4). In addition, exploring a concept as complex and subjective as identity meant that a qualitative paradigm was felt to be most suitable, as Albert (1998) argued, “a person’s (or organization’s) identity may be the last refuge of the qualitative in a world of invading armies wielding rulers and compasses” (1998: 3).

Whilst a qualitative social constructionist approach was perceived to be the most suitable in helping to address the aim and objectives of this study, it is important to consider that this methodology is not without its criticisms. As Easterby-Smith et al. point out, qualitative studies can “often feel very untidy because it is harder to control their pace, progress, and end points” (2002: 42). Yet, it could be argued that this may more accurately reflect the ‘untidy’ shape of the social world studied. The main criticism associated with the use of a qualitative social constructionist approach is related to how data is presented and, therefore, how knowledge is constructed. Whilst the voice of the participant may be stronger in qualitative research, as more in-depth experiential accounts are provided, the researcher still presents their own construction of the data. This has caused some issues in research (for example, feminist studies) that are designed to unveil the ‘reality’ of those studied (Hekman, 2010: 66). If all knowledge is socially constructed, then it is not possible to present a ‘true’
picture or reality. The data collected and the subsequent findings are constructed by both the participant and the researcher, meaning the researcher has an important place in constructing and producing knowledge. In view of this, a reflexive understanding of my place within the research process needs to be considered throughout the collection, analysis and presentation of the data (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002).

4.3.4 Planning and strategy

The initial planning stages of this research consisted firstly of a consideration of the previous research that had been conducted in this research field. In this section I will discuss why this was the first departure point as there are differing beliefs on what are the most effective strategies for conducting research. For example, Grounded Theory, which was first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), stated that theory follows research and does not precede it (Locke, 2001). However, there is a debate related to this approach in that subsequent work by both authors provided grounded theory methods that were “fundamentally different” (Stern, 1994: 221). Glaser asserted that researchers should have no prior “pre-suppositions”, whilst Strauss believed that one should “familiarise oneself with prior research” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002: 46-47). Campbell et al. also argued that:

Nowadays many researchers claim to have used ‘grounded theory’ in their analysis, although in truth not many implement the complex procedures outlined by its designers to the full (2004: 128).

A thorough exploration of the previous literature on work and family was deemed to be critical in the early stages of this research, as only by considering the existing theory could an adequate approach to future research on working lone parents be considered. Buchanan and Bryman (2009) give warning to researchers who fail to consider the historical studies and concepts in their area of research, therefore, this approach was used to gain a better contextual understanding of the research field (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000).

Throughout the planning stages of this research, I continually reflected upon the selected research methods and methodologies. This was to ensure that they
were directly related to the aim of this thesis and, therefore, that the study had the greatest chances of achieving its objectives.

4.4 The research design and research instruments

There were a number of choices to be made in regard to the practicalities of conducting this research on working lone parents, including sampling and research instruments. In this section I will include a discussion of these choices, as well as an overall critique of the research design and research instruments for this study.

4.4.1 Sampling choices

The first sampling decision that was required in this study concerned the definition of the ‘lone parent’. By using strict definitions of what constitutes a ‘lone parent’, one could risk excluding those who fall outside of the definitional boundaries. Considering many of the previous studies on lone parents, this exclusion was seen as unavoidable when determining what demographical characteristics an individual must embody to allow them membership of the research group (Chambaz, 2001; Ermisch and Francesconi, 2000; Harvey and Mukhopadhyay, 2007). The most common definition of a lone parent family is a household constituted of one parent living with her/his children who are under the age of eighteen (ONS, 2011a; Knight et al., 2006; Riccio et al., 2008). However, Chambaz argued that lone parents can be identified as either “isolated families” or “included families” (2001: 662). An “isolated family” describes a one adult household whilst an “included family” describes a parent who may be living with other members of their extended family. Such diversity was sought in this study, although unfortunately not attained, which will be discussed further in section 4.4.5. Overall, the requirements for inclusion in this study were that participants should be lone parents who were in employment and had children under the age of eighteen who were dependent upon them, in other words, were living within the same household.

In considering where to target research participants, the geographical location was critical, not just due to finite resources, but also because of the previous research that had been conducted in this area. For example, the number of
studies into the experiences of working lone parents living in the London and Greater London area have been limited, which is interesting considering that they are more likely to be unemployed here than in other parts of the country (O’Connor and Boreham, 2002; McKay, 2004). This would suggest that the London/Greater London area would be an appealing area to target as lone parents here may face additional difficulties in maintaining employment. However, other studies argue that the assumption that lone parents only inhabit urban areas needs to be challenged (Hughes, 2004; Hughes and Nativel, 2005). Therefore, this study focused on two geographical locations; London/Greater London and the South West of England (specifically South Devon and Cornwall). The aim was to speak to working lone parents from both urban and rural areas and, in doing so, build on the previous research conducted in this field by providing a greater contextual understanding of participant experiences.

Lone parents from a variety of age groups and occupations were sought by advertising the study in a number of different locations. Adverts were posted in specific places such as schools, local shops, community boards and a variety of organizations; as well as online on websites dedicated to parenting generally and lone parenting specifically. Negotiating access to these online communities was not as difficult as anticipated, as the gatekeepers for such sites were very helpful in posting the adverts to the relevant forum pages. Yet, as Wanat (2008: 191) described, gaining ‘formal access’ to research sites through official gatekeepers does not always ensure the co-operation of potential participants. The number of respondents to these adverts was relatively low, so, to address this, a snowball sampling method was then utilised which meant that I could “approach each new person, having been, in a sense, sponsored by the person who had named him or her” (Denscombe, 2007: 18). This technique was considered to be appropriate as it had been used successfully in family research by Bass et al. where the:

Secondary recruitment strategy was a snowball technique in which successfully recruited couples were asked for names and contact information of additional couples who might be interested (2007: 62).
This approach does have some associated problems, for example, it may offer a narrower range of experiences. It may also have some ethical implications because of the pressure that may be exerted on participants to provide other potential participants, as well as the pressure experienced by these potential participants to be involved. To address this issue, as little pressure as possible was applied by only asking participants once about possible other participants. My contact details were forwarded through these existing participants so that potential participants could make contact directly if they were interested, rather than through their friends or acquaintances.

Two recruitment drives were conducted over the data collection period between January and October 2010, with the second drive mainly focusing on recruiting participants from the London/Greater London area. The first recruitment drive had elicited a limited response from this area and so additional adverts were placed in organizations in central London. The total participant count was fifteen (fourteen lone mothers and one lone father), although only six of those were from the London/Greater London area. The reason for this low geographical response and recruitment rate is still unclear, however, this project was not meant to be comparative of lone parents in the two selected areas. Rather the aim was to provide an account of the experiences of working lone parents from both urban and rural contexts. Therefore, the relatively low number of participants recruited in this area was not a specific limitation of this research as in-depth, contextual data was still collected from the individual cases.

A final important issue that needs to be addressed in this section is that of the relatively small overall sample number. Previous in-depth work on lone parents has often utilised small participant numbers because their studies were designed to explore the complexity of their experiences and, therefore, did not seek to be ‘representative’ (Head, 2005; Fox and Bruce, 2001; May, 2003; 2004a; 2004b; 2008b). This previous work highlights a wider concern regarding qualitative research and sample size, namely that qualitative research can still be subject to quantitative measurements (for example, the emphasis on data being valid and ‘representative’) leading to comparisons between the two paradigms and the labelling of qualitative research as ‘unscientific’ (Lincoln and Cannella, 2004: 175). Small (2009) discussed the issue of representation in
regard to such theories as narrative theory. He argued that, within such philosophical standpoints, asking whether the “experiences of one actor reveal something empirical about others would be conceptually senseless, and beside the point” (2009: 19). The emphasis is rather on what can be theoretically drawn from such research, rather than how empirically representative it is purported to be.

To move away from such ideas concerning representation in decisions regarding sample size, many researchers advocated the use of ‘theoretical saturation’ (Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010), a term first used by Glaser and Strauss to describe the point at which:

[N]o additional data are being found whereby the (researcher) can develop properties of the category. As he sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated (1967: 65).

However, whilst meeting the point of ‘saturation’ may be considered key to good qualitative research, “there are no published guidelines or tests of adequacy for estimating the sample size required to reach saturation” (Morse, 1995: 147).

For this research, a definitive minimum sample size was not estimated before the research began. The final sample number (fifteen) reflected instead a combination of factors, including the research approach, the types of data collection methods that were used, as well as the time and budget available (Ritchie et al., 2003). For example, the in-depth qualitative data collection methods reflected the ontological and epistemological positioning of this research. This research took a social constructionist approach to the understanding of identity and so the stories of participants, whilst reflecting some shared conditions of others (for example, the societal stereotyping of lone mothers), were seen as contextually and individually specific. The emphasis was on the richness of the data and how it could contribute to theory, rather than the number of participants. After data was collected from the first round of interviews and the diaries it was coded into broad themes. The final interview schedules were individually designed to address any themes that had yet to be addressed or required further exploration. Therefore, it was felt that by the end of the final interviews the research had, at minimum, achieved ‘thematic
saturation' (Guest et al., 2006: 65), meaning that no further data collection was felt to be required to address the aim of this study. Such a decision was taken after a number of discussions with my PhD supervisor for this project who, as a more experienced researcher, could offer valuable advice on sampling. The input of another researcher has been seen to be critical in making such decisions (Mason, 2010; Guest et al., 2006).

4.4.2 The research field

The research for this study was conducted over a period of ten months. Overall, fifteen lone parents from different socio-economic backgrounds were involved in data collection and the following table (Table 2) provides an overview of age, sex, number of children, occupation, work hours and location for each participant. Pseudonyms have been used in order to provide the participants with anonymity in line with ethical considerations:
Table 2: Overview of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>No. children (age)</th>
<th>Years as lone parent</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Full-time/Part-time</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2 (9, 9)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Senior nursery nurse</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>South Devon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3 (7, 9, 12)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Legal secretary</td>
<td>PT – 25hrs/wk</td>
<td>Greater London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Senior buyer – TV company</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Greater London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3 (6, 15, 18)</td>
<td>2 (2nd time)</td>
<td>Sales assistant – mobile phone shop</td>
<td>PT – 16hrs/wk</td>
<td>South Devon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katy</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mental health care support worker/Assessor</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>South Devon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2 (14, 18)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Academic skills advisor</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>South Cornwall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2 (6, 9)</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>Assistant research fellow</td>
<td>PT – 29hrs/wk</td>
<td>South Devon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2 (7, 12)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Primary school receptionist</td>
<td>PT – 24hrs/wk</td>
<td>South Devon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>IT systems manager – Local government</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Greater London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3 (16, 19, 22)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Academic English teacher</td>
<td>PT – 23hrs/wk</td>
<td>Devon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2 (6, 8)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Caseworker – Prison service</td>
<td>PT – 30hrs/wk</td>
<td>Greater London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2 (8, 2)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Nursery nurse</td>
<td>PT – 30hrs/wk</td>
<td>Greater London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Assistant psychologist</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>South Devon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Programme consultant/ Organizational development - Museum</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Greater London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1 (7)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Secondary school art teacher</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>South Devon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fourteen of the participants were lone mothers, whilst only one was a lone father. This is not unusual in regard to other studies on lone parents, as lone mothers typically constitute the majority of participants, which seems to reflect the statistics that 90% of lone parents are women. There were four potential
participants who withdrew from the study before the first interviews began, however, after the initial interview stage, there was a zero percent attrition rate. Participants were asked to take part in: a work history interview to explore their experiences of work, what work meant to them and their identity work as employees; a seven day qualitative diary focusing on both work and non-work related routines, experiences and identity work; and finally a follow up interview to discuss interesting issues raised in both the previous interview and the diary, as well as issues from the data of other participants. In the following sections on ‘Research instruments' (4.4.3 & 4.4.4) I will describe in more depth why these data methods were considered to be the most appropriate for this study.

4.4.3 Research instrument 1: the qualitative interviews

There are many different types of interview styles available to researchers and it is the tool that is most utilised in qualitative organizational studies (Cassell, 2009). The structure of an interview is its defining characteristic as different structures will yield different types of data. In regard to this study, which focuses on the everyday lives of the participants, qualitative interviews were seen to be one of the most appropriate data collection methods. Two types of interview were used in the data collection for this project. The first interview was a work history interview which was a derivation of a life history interview. The term ‘life history interview’ is relatively explanatory as it encourages a participant to tell their life history (Musson, 2004) or a segment of their life history (Cole and Knowles, 2001). However, it is much more than a simple listing of events, rather “it is an organization of experience” (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992: 8). It is also a research method that presents a:

> Representation of human experience that draws in members or readers to the interpretive process and invites them to make meaning and form judgements based on their own reading of the “text” as it is viewed through the lenses of their own reality (Cole and Knowles, 2001: 10-11).

It is also important to highlight the differences between a life history and a life story as they are sometimes viewed as the same thing. Miller (2000: 19) argued that a life story is where an individual gives an account of their life, whilst a life history is a life story combined with other “texts”, for example, diaries or letters.
In addition to the diaries, the Curriculum Vitaes collected at the beginning of the study also contributed towards the participants’ work history data.

Ethics are a major consideration in the use of life histories. A naïve position would be to assume that this approach would always be therapeutic for participants. However, a life history interview can be quite distressing if participants are discussing unpleasant experiences (Miller, 2000). This was why a more focused work history interview method was utilised in this study. The focus on ‘work’ and its intersection with the home allowed participants to discuss personal issues to a greater or lesser extent, dependent upon how comfortable they felt talking about such aspects. Participants were made aware that it was their choice about whether to discuss personal life events within these work histories to minimise the pressure that may have been placed on them within the interview situation. Musson (1998) utilised a similar semi-structured work history approach in an exploration of General Practitioners (GPs) within certain organizations and: “the open ended structure of the narratives allowed people to introduce subjects of major importance to them” (1998: 16). As mentioned in section 3.6, such research provides an example of the recent ‘narrative turn’ within organizational studies (Rhodes and Pullen, 2009: 583), as more in-depth, qualitative research methods focusing on individual narratives are being adopted.

Within the work history interviews for this study, participants were specifically asked to discuss all their experiences of employment up to the present day, including how they felt about certain events, such as changes in employment through promotion or redundancies, and how such changes influenced their identity work within and outside of the workplace. It also provided an opportunity to begin exploring their experiences of work cultures. To facilitate such exploration, a semi-structured interview schedule was constructed which allowed for additional questions to be asked as and when I deemed them appropriate. As described, the work history interview did allow participants to discuss factors outside of work that were important to them, although only if they felt comfortable discussing such events. Participants were never asked sensitive questions relating to their relationship break up or in regard to their ex-partner, although many participants did briefly refer to this in their discussions.
This was where the importance of building trust between the participants and myself was most apparent. Most importantly, the use of a work history interview allowed for an investigation of the participants construction of, and resistance to, specific identities within the context of work and parenting. It also provided a good starting point for participants to begin considering their experiences of work interacting with other parts of their lives so that when completing their diaries they were already accustomed to discussing such aspects.

These initial interviews were conducted face-to-face which was sometimes difficult to orchestrate, especially with those in the London area due to the added logistics of travel. Interviews with participants in the South West of England could be easily rearranged if needed due to my close vicinity, whilst interviews with participants in the London area had to be planned early in the data collection period to allow for any last minute changes in schedule. Following the collection of the diary data, the final interview was also semi-structured and was informed by the initial thematic analysis of the work history interview and diary data which yielded specific follow-up questions. The majority of these final interviews were conducted face-to-face although two were conducted over the telephone, as finding a time to meet in person was deemed too difficult by these participants. Interesting contextual experiences recounted by individual participants were also included in the subsequent interview schedules to explore these aspects in relation to the experiences of other participants. The media and its portrayal of lone parents was one particular area that was explored further in the final interviews to allow participants to voice their opinions about societal constructions of the ‘lone parent’. The final interviews also offered an opportunity for participants to expand on issues raised in their diaries. Both the initial interviews and final interviews lasted for between sixty and ninety minutes.

Whilst qualitative semi-structured interviews were seen as an appropriate tool in collecting data for this study, it is important to highlight that such an approach is not without its challenges. For example, it is critical for researchers who use such an approach to consider their place within the data collection process, the text that is produced from this method and the resulting analysis of such text (Kong et al., 2002). These aspects will be discussed further in the sections on
critiquing the research design and research instruments (4.4.5), ethics (4.5), and data analysis (4.6).

4.4.4 Research instrument 2: the daily diaries

A seven day diary was also used to compliment the data collected via the two qualitative interviews. There were a number of reasons why a diary research method was used in this research and these reasons shall be explored in this section. Greater explanation is given to why the diary approach was important to this research, compared to the interview method, as it is a less common form of research method within organizational and management studies. Therefore, a greater justification for its value as a method is required.

In the last decade, the diary method has become more prominent as a research tool, especially within the area of health and psychology (Nezlek, 2003; Bass et al., 2007). In 2011, the publisher Sage released a new series of research method textbooks in social and personality psychology, which is set to include a volume on the diary method (Nezlek, 2012). Within the social sciences in general, the diary method refers to the use of ‘solicited diaries’ which can be described as “an account produced specifically at the researcher’s request, by an informant or informants” (Bell, 1998: 72). Diaries can collect both quantitative and qualitative data depending upon their design (Harvey, 2011), and are seen as a way of ‘logging’ everyday events in the lives of participants (Bolger et al., 2003: 579). More specifically, the qualitative daily diary research method can be associated with four factors: first, entries into the diary must be regular; second, they must be completed by an individual diarist; third, they must be contemporaneous therefore making sure that the “record is not distorted by problems of recall”; and finally, fourth, they must represent a record of what the diarist “considers relevant and important” (Alaszewski, 2006: 1).

There are a number of reasons why daily diaries are an appropriate tool for exploring the lives of working lone parents. As Bass et al. described, whilst daily diaries have been used in areas such as health research, they have yet to be fully introduced into studies on work and family. They argued that:
A significant limitation in work-family research is the use of methodologically narrow research designs that mask the fluid nature of individuals’ work and family lives (Bass et al., 2007: 58).

Therefore, a diary approach may offer an alternative to the tools that are normally associated with research in this field, as well as with applied qualitative research in general (Elliott, 1997). Bolger et al. (2003: 579) believed that diaries could provide a way of capturing aspects of people’s everyday experiences that may not be possible through ‘traditional’ methods. Whilst traditional research methods, such as in-depth interviews, can provide relevant and interesting data, the diary technique may also provide an opportunity for those “who are less articulate to reflect on their responses and answer in their own time, without feeling rushed or flustered” (Hawkes et al., 2009: 211). It offers a level of respect to the participant in allowing them to discuss what is important in their lives and lifts the sense of pressure and urgency from them that may be apparent in interview situations.

One of the main reasons behind utilising diaries in this study is their contribution towards qualitative research. As Hawkes et al. (2009) discuss, qualitative diaries can offer a more in-depth picture of a participant’s situation in comparison to interview or survey data alone. They can also “offer the opportunity for the recording of events and emotions in their social context” (2009: 211). As a positive aspect of this method, participants completing a qualitative diary are given a high level of freedom in what they write. On the other hand, such a level of freedom may mean that the experiences a participant chooses to write about may be restricted. Yet, Meth (2003: 202) argued that “what is omitted and overlooked is often as interesting as what is recorded and discussed”. For this reason, I included a follow up interview to probe further on specific events or issues touched upon in the diaries.

The combination of a diary approach with an interview approach (also known as the diary-interview method) has been advocated by a number of scholars as it is perceived to extend the breadth of the data collected (Kenten, 2010; Elliot, 1997; Harvey, 2011). Such a mixed method is seen to offer “a means to ‘observe’ behaviour which is inaccessible to participant observation” (Elliot, 1997: S1), as well as a way of highlighting the processes of power within
everyday experiences (Kenten, 2011). In regard to exploring the concept of identity work, this combination may prove especially useful as it can provide participants with greater opportunities for reflection (Meth, 2003) and can therefore address the context, emotions and power relations inherent in these discourses. Participants were therefore asked to provide not only an account of their experiences within a period of time, but also to reflect on such experiences. Combining this approach with the semi-structured interviews could then provide the participants in this study with greater opportunities to reflect on and discuss their experiences as primary carers and providers.

In considering the practical elements of administering diaries to participants there are a number of options. The first option is the paper and pencil approach which was the earliest and is still “the most commonly used approach in diary research” (Bolger et al., 2003: 593). This method requires participants to complete a physical diary by hand (studies utilising this method include: Almeida et al., 2001; Clarkson and Hodgkinson, 2007; Conway and Briner, 2002; Harris et al., 2003; Meth, 2003; Sonnentag, 2003; Van Hooff et al., 2006; Williams and Alliger, 1994; and Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). An alternative option is the electronic diary approach which has been utilised by only a small number of mainly quantitative studies. These types of study utilise electronic diaries to explore temporal aspects of participant experiences and so small hand held computers or Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) are utilised to document these experiences (Bass et al., 2007; Johnston et al., 2006). For Bolger et al. (2003), electronic diaries are the preferred choice as they:

> [O]ffer major advantages in terms of data entry, management, and accuracy. Since participants enter their responses directly into the electronic diaries, the processes of transcribing and double-checking the data, which are costly and error prone, are bypassed (2003: 596-7).

Other scholars argue that participants should be given the choice of either a paper diary completed by hand or an electronic version typed into a word document (Hawkes et al., 2009; Poppleton et al., 2008). This way the participant gets to choose the method they are most comfortable with and does not exclude those without access to a computer. For this study, I chose to offer
both options to participants, with 73% choosing the electronic version and 27% choosing the paper version.

Within both versions of the diaries, an instruction sheet was provided. Whilst this brief instruction sheet could be seen as constricting the ability of the participant to provide an open discussion about their experiences, it was deemed appropriate for two reasons. Firstly, the study was focusing on the interaction between work and family, therefore, general advice on documenting one’s experience in relation to this broad area of interaction was needed. In her study on Finnish lone mothers, May (2003, 2004b, 2008b) had utilised a more open narrative approach to the collection of her data, however, she found that the use of a life story research method with no guidance to participants can often result in a ‘thin’ narrative (2008b: 475). By adopting the use of guidelines, this study sought to negate this issue by providing a level of focus. The second reason for its inclusion was that many participants themselves asked for general guidelines for the diary as they were unsure of how to begin their entries. The instructions led to participants feeling more reassured about taking part in a less familiar data collection method.

As a research method, qualitative diaries require a certain level of commitment as well as literacy. Greater commitment is required to ensure that the entries are of sufficient depth and this usually means that more time is asked of participants (Bolger et al., 2003). This may explain why so many diary studies to date utilise quantitative diaries rather than qualitative diaries. There is also an assumption in qualitative diary studies that participants possess the skills needed to complete the diary. For Hawkes et al., the “most obvious of these drawbacks is literacy and this may act as a barrier to participation” (2009: 225). Different participants have different skill sets, therefore, keeping and completing a diary may be easier for some than others, again affecting the type of data collected (Sheridan, 1993). To ensure participant commitment in such research, monetary incentives is one option, however, the most effective method seems to be the continued contact and personal interest of the researcher (Bolger et al., 2003; Harris et al., 2003). In her study, Koller (2008) utilised small incentives throughout the research period, for example chocolates. Yet, “results indicate that personal support is rated even higher than incentives offered” (2008: 56).
This approach was also emulated during the data collection period for this thesis, as I would offer participants a box of chocolates or biscuits (depending upon their preference) at the end of the study. These incentives will be discussed further in section 4.4.5.

A further consideration in gaining the commitment of participants is related to the duration of the diary. For Clarkson and Hodgkinson (2007), the longer the duration of the diary, the less in-depth the data collected. Therefore, the length of the diary was a key concern for this research. Some studies have suggested longer time frames, for example, two weeks (Harris et al., 2003; Poppleton et al., 2008). Originally, a fourteen day diary was to be utilised in this research (as can be seen in the Ethical approval form in Appendix 2). However, I reconsidered this diary duration as I felt that I would be asking too much of the participants. The majority of studies suggest that five to seven consecutive days seemed to be a sufficient amount of time for daily diaries, especially in regard to work related studies (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009; Williams and Alliger, 1994; Van Hooff et al., 2006; Sonnentag, 2003; Clarkson and Hodgkinson, 2007). Therefore, within this study, I decided upon a period of seven consecutive days for the diaries, as this would allow participants ample time to talk about both their work and non-work days.

In conclusion, I felt that utilising a daily diary approach within this study could potentially contribute to both knowledge on working lone parents and the role of a daily diary research method in qualitative organizational research. The major limitations of this approach will be addressed in the following section.

### 4.4.5 Critical analysis of the research design and research instruments

Overall, a qualitative approach of a work history interview, a seven day diary, and a follow up interview was utilised to help collect data that would address the aim and objectives of this study. Whilst both the research design and research instruments helped to enable the collection of valuable data, it is important to consider any key criticisms or challenges that were faced in the exercise of such approaches.
One aspect of the research design that needs to be critiqued is that of the sampling process. Whilst participants from a range of socio-economic backgrounds were recruited, I also wished to recruit those lone parents living in ‘included’ families, as well as those in ‘isolated’ families (as mentioned in section 4.2), in order to show the diversity within these family types (Chambaz, 2001: 662). Unfortunately, however, all of the participants recruited were from one-adult ‘isolated’ households. Whilst the adverts used to recruit participants advocated the involvement of lone parents in different situations (for example, those living with their own parents), it may not have been made explicit enough that those from included families were eligible for recruitment. This may be why a mix of household types was not achieved. However, this may not be considered a limitation per se as the aim of the study was not to specifically address these two different household types. The data that could have been gathered from those in ‘included’ families would just have added an additional dimension to the investigation and, as such, may be an interesting area for future study.

By utilising three stages of data collection, data of sufficient depth could be collected in order to address the aim and research questions of this study. Yet, having these three stages was not without its difficulties, for example, when advertising for participants. In order to provide potential recruits with as much information regarding the level of participation expected, the adverts clearly stated that the research would involve a work-history interview, a daily diary study and a follow-up interview. Previous work on lone parents has found that such in-depth approaches could provide an additional challenge in recruiting participants, (Head, 2005; Fox and Bruce, 2001; May, 2003; 2004a; 2004b; 2008b). On reflection, this approach may have deterred some potential participants, although in order to conduct ethical research, it is important to be transparent about the research process from the beginning (Blaxter et al., 2001). This could raise potential questions about the type of participants recruited, for example, that they felt they had enough time to be involved in such in-depth research and had the confidence to discuss their personal lives with a stranger. In defence, this study was not designed to be representative of lone parents as a whole. However, this does not negate the potential issue that
the lone parents studied could be reflective of a certain type of individual and so
the sample could be seen to be lacking diversity.

Because of the in-depth nature of this research, it was important to encourage
participant commitment so as to reduce the chances of sample attrition. At the
first meeting, participants were told that they would receive a small incentive to
thank them for their time at the end of the study (as mentioned in section 4.4.4).
Participants had the option to specify their preferences, although some declined
as they described the research process as rewarding in its own right. Using
incentives in social research has caused some controversy because of the
belief that it may be ‘coercive’ or create a pressure of obligation for participants
(Singer and Couper, 2008; Head, 2009). In this study, the incentives offered
were small personal offerings of gratitude for the time that they gave, therefore,
are not as likely to be construed as a ‘coercive’ tactic in collecting the data.
Reflecting on the data collection period, many participants appeared to have
forgotten about the provision of such gifts at the end of the study, with
assertions such as “you really didn’t need to”. After the final interview, many of
the participants wanted to talk about the research process itself and how it had
made them think about their daily experiences in greater depth. Additional time
was spent with them at the end to talk through their perceptions, as well as to
emphasise how valuable their input had been. Gifts may have encouraged
participants to continue their involvement in the study, however, on reflection, it
may not have been necessary to tell participants at the beginning of the study
that such gifts were to be given. The greatest tool for maintaining participant
commitment appeared to be the continued contact and study information that
was offered to all involved (Koller, 2008), therefore, it may have been better for
unexpected gifts to be offered at the end of the study so as to better present
them as gifts of gratitude, rather than incentives.

One aspect of the research design that needs to be considered further is the
research timetable that was devised. The most difficult period in relation to
timing fell in the data collection stage of the project. Initially, my aim was to
conduct the data collection at similar times to ensure that the general context of
living and working within the UK could be taken into consideration for all
participants. However, two recruitment drives were needed to generate a
suitable number of participants. This meant that the data collection period took longer than anticipated. Delay during data collection was also experienced during the summer months of 2010 as the school summer holidays meant that participants were more pressed for time and, therefore, interviews often had to be delayed to accommodate their needs. As an individual without children, I was less aware of timings regarding school holidays and this was a factor that should have been given greater consideration when it came to designing the research timetable. In keeping with the ethics of this project, as little pressure as possible was put on participants during this time so as to minimise any stress which may have been perceived from involvement in this study. By communicating to participants that their needs were of utmost importance and that I was aware of the pressures they were facing (for example, during summer holidays), the relationship of trust between researcher and participant could be further developed. Within feminist research, such a relationship is seen to be intrinsic to the research process (Griffith, 1998; Bridges, 2001).

The privacy of participants was of continued importance within this period so contact was often made through less invasive techniques, such as emails or text messages which did not demand an immediate response. For many of the participants, email was the most appropriate mode of contact, whereas those without access to the internet, or with sporadic access at best, specifically requested the use of mobile phone text messages in maintaining contact. Phone calls were initially used to communicate with all participants, however, this invariably meant that I interrupted their family, leisure or work time. Participants discussed how contacting them by email or text after the initial interview was favourable as they could respond at a time that was best for them and avoid being seen to take personal calls in work hours. Such an approach did mean that delays were often experienced in communication, but such delays were seen as unavoidable in ensuring that participants’ needs were met.

As previously mentioned, issues regarding timetabling were experienced during the summer holidays due to my lack of awareness of the timings of the school holidays. Such an example emphasises my differences from the participants studied, that I stood outside social discourses concerning parenting, and highlights the importance of considering the “personal preferences and biases”
of the researcher (Buchanan and Bryman, 2009: 13). My preference was to study lone parents, which was, in part, due to the lone parent status of a close friend of mine. After considering the literature in the area, I specifically wished to study their experiences of marginalisation. However, by identifying lone parent families as marginalised in comparison to other family structures, I could be seen to be inherently othering the participants. Additional othering could also occur due to my non-parent status. Interestingly, only one participant asked me if I had children myself, so any othering that occurred could be perceived as a consequence of my own awareness of my childless status, rather than because of the reactions of participants. By seeing oneself as different to that of the research subject, the researcher can then potentially contribute to further processes of othering for both the participants and themselves (Letherby, 2003). In either situation, a distancing could potentially occur between the participant and the researcher. Yet, a researcher may not always share similar experiences with their participants, so, instead, the focus should be on building a relationship of trust in order to gain an in-depth insight into their experiences (Griffith, 1998; Bridges, 2001). This was why utilising certain aspects of a feminist approach, specifically in its emphasis on the relationship of trust between the researcher and research subject, was perceived to be especially important.

Both the use of interviews and diaries within this research raised a number of issues which need to be critiqued. In regard to the interviews, location was an important factor as the interviews were held wherever was most convenient for the participant. This meant that the interviews were held in various locations, which could have potentially affected the dynamic of the interview itself as “locations are not neutral” (Cassell, 2009: 504). For example, some of the interviews were held in private study rooms within the University library. These allowed for uninterrupted interviews, but may have been more intimidating for participants. Other interviews were held within the homes of participants, where participants often appeared more relaxed, but often needed to check on their children, or their children would come seeking them. In interviewing lone parents, such interruptions were perceived as inevitable when interviewing within the home. Rather than being a technical issue, these locations need to be
considered “as part of the overall social context of the study”, which can affect both the “interaction and the knowledge produced” (Cassell, 2009: 504). Additionally, for the final interview, a small number of participants were interviewed over the telephone as they could not find the time to meet in person. Telephone interviews have been found to have different dynamics when compared to face-to-face interviews (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004), as participants will often report a greater feeling of anonymity over the telephone (Greenfield *et al.*, 2000). Using a telephone interview also means the researcher is unable to see the participants’ non-verbal communications, such as hand gestures or facial expressions (Creswell, 1998). The most difficult aspect of the telephone interview that I encountered was the pace. A brisk pace has been described as “part of the character of the telephone interview” (Gillham, 2005: 105), and this was reflected in this research as the telephone interviews tended to be shorter than those conducted face-to-face. In addition, it was more difficult to ascertain when a participant had finished speaking, or had paused to reflect upon the question. This could mean that the quality of data collected within these telephone interviews was lower in comparison to the data collected from face-to-face interviews.

In regard to the daily diary research instrument, one particular issue that was raised was in relation to the type and quantity of data collected from this method. From participant to participant, diaries ranged in detail, for example, some wrote between 5-6000 words, whereas for others it was closer to 2-3000 words. It could be argued that the value of the diaries with lower word counts could be seen to be undermined, however, there are two considerations which can challenge this argument. The first consideration is that even those diaries with lower word counts contributed to the data as they still offered an insight into participants’ daily routines and their feelings around such routines. The second consideration is that the diary data was not only a source of data for analysis but also helped to highlight areas of interest to be included in the subsequent interviews. This perspective was also taken by Harvey (2011) who used a diary-interview method to explore condom use. She discussed how:
Rather than acting as a method for direct data collection, private diaries were used as a space for participants to reflect in writing on particular experiences and as a memory prompt during the interview itself. This space for reflection offered a useful way to explore the ambivalence and contradictions participants felt in their negotiations of condoms (2011: 666).

Therefore, where interesting issues were raised within the diaries, I could then question the participants using extracts to further explore their experiences and allow them to elaborate on issues of importance and areas of contradiction. Such concerns regarding the ‘amount’ of data collected further reflects the difficulties that may often be faced by researchers in measuring their qualitative research (Fitzgerald and Dopson, 2009).

As discussed in both this section and section 4.4.4, understanding the needs of participants, as well as ways of encouraging commitment were both important to the data collection process. The diaries in particular required a certain level of time commitment from participants, however, the assumption that participants had this spare time to give could be criticised as a reflection of my childless status. In order to address such a criticism, I also kept a diary throughout the research process, both as a way of collecting field notes but also as a way of appreciating the challenges in writing about my own work and non-work interactions. Such an approach has also been utilised in other diary studies (Thomson and Holland, 2005), as it is seen to allow the researcher to “think through some of the problems that participants might face in using such a sensitive and time consuming research methodology” (Harvey, 2011: 673). For example, I often found that my diary was completed on an ad hoc basis, such as when travelling on the train. There were also times when entries were added in late. As Bolger et al. have discussed, such ‘honest forgetfulness’ is one potential challenge that participants may face in completing a research diary (2003: 593). Such experiences meant that I was more aware of the difficulties that participants may face in finding dedicated periods of time to complete their diary.

Concerns regarding time and forgetfulness were further discussed with participants after they had completed their diary, as well as the difficulties they experienced in regard to finding the energy or motivation to complete the diary.
in the evenings. The issue of forgetfulness raises a number of issues concerning the diary data produced. If completed within a specific time frame, diaries are seen to offer data that has limited retrospection (Bass et al., 2007; Almeida et al., 2001). Yet, if a participant forgets to complete an entry, then they may fabricate one, which could be seen as undermining some of the value of diaries as data collection tools. Such a concern brings into question the expectations that the researcher holds for such data. Rather than seeing the diary data as a reflection of the ‘reality’ of people’s experiences (Alaszewski, 2006: 44), the diaries were seen to offer participants a way of representing themselves in a particular way, a way that may not always be possible in their daily lives (Holliday, 2000). Interviews have often been understood as reflecting the “narrower, more restricted world of the researcher” (Kong et al., 2002: 245), but, as diaries do not have the same structuring as research methods such as interviews, they can offer participants the opportunity to become involved in co-constructing the knowledge produced. This does not mean that the researcher is any less central to the research process, however, as the data that is produced is “controlled by [the researcher’s] own location in various discourses”, for example, ‘scientific’, ‘humanist’, ‘feminist’, and so on (Gavey, 1997: 57).

Keeping my own diary was also useful in other ways. For example, considering my own diary in relation to that of the participants’ diaries helped to highlight the differences and disparities between our experiences, which then encouraged greater reflection on how participants were presented within the research. It also helped me to appreciate how I had constructed myself as a researcher within interactions with participants. My diaries often reflected concerns regarding my position as a PhD (or apprentice) researcher which contrasted sharply with how I sought to present myself as a researcher to participants. My aim to present myself as a fully competent, professional researcher often led to uncertainties regarding boundaries between researcher and participant. For example, during the data collection period, one of the participants asked if I would like to meet up on a separate occasion to have a cup of tea and discuss the research area more informally. In trying to present myself as a professional (and perhaps also more ‘objective’) researcher I declined her invitation,
although did spend longer talking with her about the research after her final interview. It could be argued that even though my aim was to take a feminist, critical approach to my research, discourses concerning professionalism and objectivity (and within these, expectations regarding emotion) still impacted upon my actions as a junior researcher. Yet, for Kong *et al.*, the research process is “personal, interactional and emotional” (2002: 250) and so to ignore or seek to negate these aspects is to misrepresent what the process of collecting data means for both participants and researchers. An ‘ethical strategy’ is believed to be critical in addressing such concerns and in constructing an “empathetic, emotional orientation” (ibid.: 252). For those who are researching a group as an ‘outsider’, an ‘ethical identity’ is also important in communicating to participants that they are “trusted outsiders who are not out to misrepresent them” (ibid.). Whilst occasionally experiencing times of conflict, my overall aim throughout the data collection process was to construct just such an ethical identity. Further ethical concerns and the need to be reflexive as a researcher will be explored in the following section.

4.5 Research evaluation and ethical considerations

As has been mentioned in an earlier section (4.4.1), the process of measuring and evaluating qualitative research can be problematic. In regard to quantitative empirical research, reliability and validity have traditionally been the key considerations in ensuring a study’s success and acceptance within the academic community (Decrop, 1999). However, since the more extensive incorporation of qualitative methodologies within academia, issues of validity have begun to come under scrutiny. Valid research is perceived to provide “credible conclusions” (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996:1) which can be applied to other settings (Decropp, 1999: 158). This evaluative measure instantly produces contentions for qualitative studies because of their theoretical assumptions. How can one ensure validity when the basic assumption of qualitative enquiry is that of multiple realities which are participant and context dependant? As Jamal and Hollinshead (2001) described, objective research is seen as essential for validity in disciplines that utilise a positivist or postpositivist model. Interpretivist or social constructionist approaches “tend to be banished as ‘merely subjective’” (2001: 69). Unfortunately, as demonstrated in this quote,
Qualitative interpretivist or social constructionist studies are sometimes regarded as second class in that they cannot demonstrate validity in the same way as positivist research.

Reliability is another important aspect of any quantitative, empirical research study and can be defined as “the extent to which a test or procedure produces similar results under constant conditions on all occasions” (Bell, 2005: 117). Again this is difficult, if not impossible, for qualitative studies to produce (Seale, 1999: 471), especially if relying exclusively on one research method. The response from qualitative researchers when facing such criteria is not to accept measures of validity and reliability as the norm. As Feldman (2007) pointed out, if the notion of validity is used to evaluate “how well measurements correspond to what is being measured” then there is one obvious reason why qualitative researchers do not rely upon this notion: “qualitative studies do not measure anything per se. Rather, they seek to describe, interpret and understand” (2007: 22). Therefore, for many qualitative researchers, the traditional concepts of validity and reliability need to be substituted with other evaluative criteria (Munhall and Chenail, 2008: 38). Guba and Lincoln (1989, 1994) believed that qualitative research could be assessed in two ways. Firstly, that it could be seen to have ‘credibility’, which can be determined by such practices as ‘member checking’. This involves returning findings to participants after data analysis to find out their opinions on the researcher’s interpretations (1989: 239). Secondly, that it could be considered ‘trustworthy’ (an alternative for internal validity) and is ‘transferable’ (an alternative for external validity) (1994: 114). However, these latter terms appear to just semantically replace the term validity, rather than challenge the notion that qualitative research can and should be measured in a similar way to quantitative research.

To explore the idea that qualitative research required a different approach to assessment, Mays et al. (2001) compared three qualitative health service studies (Blaxter, 1996; Mays and Pope, 2000; Popay et al., 1998) to examine each of their assessment criteria. General criteria included reflexivity of researcher, presentation of research and adequacy of qualitative methods. Within feminist studies, for a research project to be ‘successful’, the researcher must necessarily be reflective and reflexive to ensure the relationship between
researcher and participant is “close and mutual” (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009:242):

Unless a relationship of trust is developed, we can have no confidence that our research on women’s lives and consciousness accurately represents what is significant to them in their everyday lives (Acker et al., 1991: 149).

This ability to be reflective and reflexive within one’s research offers a more appropriate evaluative criterion for the research in this study. To compliment this approach, Guba and Lincoln’s idea regarding ‘member checking’ was also utilised by sending participants an overview of the findings from this study. This was to ensure that the research was representing what was ‘significant’ for the participants (Acker et al., 1991), and that the interpretations of the researcher were open to challenge.

The feedback received from participants was positive which suggests that they agreed with the findings of this study. However, it is important to acknowledge that such positive feedback may also reflect the relationship between the participants and myself, rather than just whether or not the findings highlighted issues of significance for the participants. As Letherby discussed, building a relationship with participants can lead to certain identity positions being constructed, for example, participants may think that the researcher:

[Accompanied by the material and authoritative resources (e.g. the time and opportunity to study the issue, the academic backing and status) that they hold, is an expert in the area they are studying (2003: 124).

Such a perception could then impact on whether or not negative feedback was received, as participants may not feel that they could, or should, offer criticisms to an ‘expert’. To try to address this potential issue, the co-creation of knowledge was discussed with participants, however, this does not negate the fact that such relationships are characterised by “power differences” (Manning, 1997: 94).

Such issues all raise additional concerns regarding ethics within the research process. As highlighted by Buchanan and Bryman, considering ethical issues is critical for qualitative inquiry due to its in-depth and “open-ended nature” (2009: 10). Reflecting on the ethical implications of the research should be of highest

131
priority, especially in relation to: the research design; identifying and approaching participants; obtaining consent; offering remuneration; ensuring confidentiality and anonymity; and considering the impact of the research on both the participant and researcher (Barbour, 2008: 23). Of greatest importance is the notion that research ethics should revolve around “being clear about the nature of the agreement you have entered into with your research subjects” (Blaxter et al., 2001: 158). For Kong et al., such transparency is part of constructing an ‘ethical identity’ as a researcher (2002: 252).

In order to consider the above points, I utilised the ethical guidelines produced by the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002). Following their guidelines, an ethical approval form was presented to the Ethics Officer within the University of Exeter Business School. An outline of the research proposal and methodology was included which addressed any potential ethical issues that arose from considering the BSA guidelines. An in-depth, qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews and daily diaries was discussed which would allow participants to talk about what was important to them in relation to family and employment. This approach satisfied point seven of the British Sociological Association’s ethical guidelines which asserted that the research techniques proposed should be ‘appropriate’ in addressing the research aim and objectives (BSA, 2002: 2). However, this in-depth approach to data collection also raised some potential ethical issues in regard to the participant’s well-being after the research. With all research projects, it is imperative that the researcher ensures:

That the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research. They should strive to protect the rights of those they study, their interests, sensitivities and privacy, while recognising the difficulty of balancing potentially conflicting interests” (BSA, 2002: 2).

To address any potential ethical problems, I used a number of strategies. All participants were offered a number of assurances: a) participation is voluntary and they may withdraw from this research at anytime; b) all information will be treated as confidential, with the data collected being used for research purposes only (in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998); c) all publications ensuing from this research will utilise pseudonyms for participants and other
named persons/organizations/institutions to ensure anonymity; and, d) participants have the opportunity to seek advice about completing the research from the researcher at any point by telephone, email or in person.

Participants were asked to sign a consent form which highlighted points a)-d), as well as describing the nature of the research project and asking permission to record the interviews. Participants were also given ample time to read the consent form and the detailed study invitation letter before the initial meeting. Hart and Bond recommended that “the respondent should have a signed copy of the form as a record” (1995: 199) and this was provided on all occasions. It was also made explicitly clear that all sensitive data would be stored on a password secured computer and would not be available to third parties.

Another issue to consider was the potential vulnerability of the research group. Whilst lone parents can be described as a marginal group within the labour market, there is little to suggest that they should be considered a vulnerable research group. However, it was still felt that additional information and support contacts should be offered to participants should they require such assistance. None of the participants specifically requested such support, instead information was provided in summary form at the end of the final correspondences to ensure that additional support could be accessed if need be (for example, through Gingerbread, the lone parent charity). By offering this information and by maintaining a relationship of trust with participants, I could seek to protect their interests and their rights and therefore comply with the British Sociological Association’s ethical guidelines for research (2002). Ethical approval for this study was then granted by the Ethics Officer in November 2009 (see Appendix 2).

Whilst the previous section has discussed many of the explicit issues in regard to ethics in research, Bell and Wray-Bliss have argued that it is also important to consider the implicit issues, for example participants “access to published research” (2009: 82). To address this particular issue, all participants in this study were assured that if requested they would be sent a copy of published research when available. Many of the participants indicated that this would be something they would like to receive.
4.6 Data management and analysis

The data for this study was produced from using the combined research approach of a semi-structured work history interview, a seven day diary, and a follow-up semi-structured interview. As there were fifteen participants, this meant that there were a total of forty five texts to analyse. The two types of interviews were transcribed verbatim into word documents and contributed the largest quantity of data to analyse. The four paper and pencil diaries that had been completed were also transcribed although this did not take a long period of time as many of the diary entries were relatively short. The majority of diaries were electronic so this negated the need for transcription. All data was stored on a password secured computer and any paper forms or pieces of information relating to this study were placed within a lockable cupboard. Both computer and lockable cupboard were only accessible to myself in order to ensure data protection and confidentiality for participants.

In addressing the aim and objectives of this research, a data analysis method was required that could consider the data in regard to power, subjectivity, and social constructionism. An approach which could offer an analysis of discourse within the texts was seen to be the most appropriate approach in facilitating such an exploration. There are many different formalised approaches to discourse analysis which are very specific (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002), although the term can be used to describe a more general critical, Foucaultian approach to the analysis of discourse, where the focus is on the intersection between language and power (Grbich, 2007; Jupp, 2006). This type of analysis can highlight “structural relationships of dominance, discrimination and control” and therefore critically study social inequality as it is “expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimised and so on by language use (or discourse)” (Wodak, 2001: 2). In this way, a critical approach to the study of discourse can “play an advocatory role for groups who suffer from social discrimination” (Meyer, 2001: 15). As a historically specific analytical tool, it also focuses on context, which would enable this research to “explain the working of power on behalf of specific interests and analyze the opportunities for resistance to it” (Weedon, 1987: 41).
In qualitative organizational and management studies, the concept of identity has tended to be explored through discourse analysis (Phillips and Domenico, 2009), although it is important to highlight there is no specific method to systematically guide the analysis. As Potter and Wetherell have discussed, there is:

No method to discourse analysis in the way we traditionally think of an experimental method or content analysis method. What we have is a broad theoretical framework concerning the nature of discourse and its role in social life, along with a set of suggestions about how discourse can best be studied (1987: 175).

Discourses are not simple, static structures, they are ‘intertwined’ and ‘entangled’ in one another and can offer “competing, potentially contradictory ways of giving meaning to the world” (Gavey, 1997: 55). This means that an analysis that seeks to address the influence of discourses must first seek to ‘untangle’ them (Jäger, 2001: 35). To enable this ‘untangling’, Gavey argued that an analysis which considers discourse must involve “discerning discursive patterns of meaning, contradictions and inconsistencies” (ibid.: 57). Therefore, such an analysis must seek to explore both similarities and differences within the data collected.

In using such an analytical approach, the data gathered needed to be understood as texts to be read, “not representations of an objective reality existing behind the words” (Medved, 2009: 143). The texts produced from the data collection methods were therefore analysed with such an understanding in mind. The research questions for this study focused on specific areas of interest which helped to guide the analysis. The first phase of the analysis focused on how participants organised their work and family to critically explore the practical challenges they faced. The second phase examined what such activities meant to them in order to explore their identity work and their sense of self. The final phase then investigated how they felt they were recognised (or not) within such areas and focused on how participants perceived themselves in relation to others. In particular, the texts were examined to highlight the presence of dominant discourses concerning work and family. By identifying such discourses, the subject positions offered to the lone parent participants could be explored, as well as instances of resistance to such positioning.
The data analysis approach for this research was partly informed by the critical aspects of discourse analysis, in that experiences of inequality or discrimination were analysed within the participants’ narratives. Feelings of frustration or unfairness were highlighted and then considered in relation to their contexts, in order to help identify the various multiple discourses that may be contributing to such heightened feelings. Whilst critically analysing the data, I also looked for any accounts which described challenging situations, yet communicated ambivalence, confusion, ambiguity or contradictions. This approach was used to explore the discourses that may have become internalised by participants or were seen to be taken-for-granted. Throughout this analysis, instances of identity work were also sought by considering how participants narrated themselves within their accounts. Again, a focus on accounts which entailed periods of challenge and heightened emotions were considered alongside accounts which included feelings of ambiguity and ambivalence. By analysing both of these situations, I could consider the identity work of participants more broadly.

All texts were initially read through twice to provide an overall view of the data and to highlight any emerging themes. The relatively small number of texts produced, as well as the familiarity that such readings gave to me, meant that the resulting data analysis could be conducted without the need for qualitative analysis computer software. After my initial screenings of the data, my PhD supervisor also took the time to look over the data produced to offer advice regarding my discussions of the research. As Gavey (1997) has described, there may be ‘multiple meanings of texts’ which are dependent upon the situation of the reader, meaning that a secondary reader may be able to offer additional understandings and perspectives. The data analysis for this study was not a discrete process in that I did not complete it in a single period of time. Rather, the initial analysis of the data helped to provide the foundations for the findings and discussion chapters of this thesis, which were then built upon over subsequent periods. Writing the findings and discussion chapters involved many additional periods of analysis where I would return to the data, as well as the previous literature in the field.
In regard to the presentation of the data in the following analysis and findings chapter, quotes from the interviews will be followed by the pseudonym of the participant in brackets. Any accounts from the diaries will be followed by: ‘(participant pseudonym, diary)’.

4.7 Conclusion

Within this chapter I have provided an overview of the methodological framework that was used for the empirical research within this study on employed lone parents. The overall aim of this research was to explore and critically analyse the everyday experiences and identity work of lone parents in relation to their work and family responsibilities. By considering the aim of this research, as well as the previous literature within this field, the decision was made to frame the research within a social constructionist paradigm and utilise a variety of qualitative data collection tools. Specifically, the research was grounded in the field of Critical Management Studies (including aspects of feminism) to ensure that consideration would be given to the dominant discourses and ‘taken-for-granted’ beliefs that existed within the work experiences of the participants.

Fifteen participants (fourteen lone mothers and one lone father) made up the sample taken from the London/Greater London area and the South West of England. Participants were asked to complete an initial work history semi-structured interview, followed by a seven day diary. A final semi-structured interview was utilised to discuss the data from the first two collection methods. The data collection period lasted for ten months and the data analysis focused on identifying and exploring the various discourses within participants’ accounts. In consideration of the potential ethical implications associated with this study, participants were assured that their data would remain anonymous and confidential. A reflective and reflexive approach to research was taken to ensure that I was continually aware of my place within the research and the impact that this could have on the data collected. The analysis and findings from this research will be addressed in the following chapter.
Chapter 5: Analysis and findings

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will present the research analysis and findings of this thesis. My analysis of the data revealed a complex tapestry of participant experiences, where their everyday practices, the meaning of such practices and their identity work were tightly interwoven. The following chapter is organised into three sections in order to clearly present the analysis and findings of this thesis. In the first section (5.2), I will highlight participants’ understandings and experiences of family and parenting and the effect that dominant social discourses could have on their perceptions. In particular, the focus will be on how they constructed and understood their identity as a lone parent within wider discourses on family. The influence of the media was also a key issue in this area, as well as concerns with recognition and legitimacy. In the second section (5.3), I will go on to consider the lone parents’ understandings and experiences of work. This section looks at the practicalities of negotiating employment and the difficulties that may be faced in engaging with employment within certain workplace cultures, including concerns regarding the constitution of an identity as the good employee. In the final section (5.4), I will concentrate on the difficulties that were apparent for participants in trying to maintain a daily routine as a primary carer and provider. Throughout this analysis and findings chapter, I will endeavour to place individual experiences within their broader contexts. To help facilitate this contextualisation, participant’s working histories will be referred to and details of each of these can be found in Appendix 3.

5.2 Understandings and experiences of family and parenthood

For the participants in this study, family and parenthood were understood in a number of different ways. Such understandings were seen to have a direct impact upon their experiences of lone parenting which, in most cases, continued to hold negative connotations in regard to stereotyping and stigma. The media was believed to be a key influence in propagating certain images of lone parenting, and, from the table in Appendix 4, one can see there are a number of contemporary media examples that appear to present just such a stereotypical image of the lone parent. However, for the participants in this
study, the analysis found that there was also an awareness that portrayals of the lone parent family as the ‘other’ were implicit in wider societal discourses on parenting and family. This will be explored in the following sections.

5.2.1 Stereotyping the lone parent: unemployment and ‘poor’ parenting

The mass media and its ability to influence people’s perceptions of lone parenting was often discussed by participants. Stereotypical representations of the lone parent were seen as common place, a view which was also reflected in a survey conducted by Gingerbread (the lone parent charity). Their survey found that 80% of lone parents felt that the media contributed towards negative stereotyping of this family form (Gingerbread, 2010). Only one participant in this thesis was able to recall a media piece that challenged such portrayals:

I was reading something a couple of weeks ago in the paper from JK Rowling and she’s the patron of Gingerbread and she was a single parent and she was saying about how the statistics totally don’t back up the stereotype and by far the largest percentage of single parents are in work and are over the age of late twenties and only a really small minority are young mums living in deprived areas (Samantha).

This example highlights the main stereotypes that were identified. From both participants’ perceptions and the media representations in Appendix 4, a stereotypical lone parent was described as: a) unemployed, b) female, c) young (typically teenage) and d) living in a deprived area (usually occupying an innercity council provided home). For a number of the participants who were a lone parent as a product of divorce, the stereotypical perception of the unemployed teenage lone mother was one that they themselves used to hold.

For example, Samantha described how such media pieces challenging the stereotyping of lone parenting would have previously been dismissed when she was part of a dual-parent family: “you can read that stuff and think yeah, yeah whatever”. Similarly Betty described how “before I became a single parent I was like they’re all on bloody benefits, none of them work, blah, blah, blah”. This reaction could also be seen in public responses to media stories on lone parenting (Appendix 4). However, once a lone parent, both of these participants became acutely aware of such stereotyping and so were more aware of how the media often relied on specific characteristics to identify and categorise all lone parents.
As a lone father, Michael had a very different experience of stereotyping compared to the lone mother participants. Michael believed that the stereotypes related to lone parenting were more geared towards lone mothers than lone fathers. This was felt especially in relation to the media:

I think the whole media is focused around lone mothers rather than lone fathers … The most difficult thing about being a lone father is having to explain it all the time. People never consider you being a lone father (Michael).

Michael’s concern was with the tendency for the media to focus purely on the experiences of lone mothers: “I think there are lots of descriptors that describe single mothers, I don’t think there are many that describe single fathers”. He believed that a lack of information regarding lone fathers meant that people did not understand his situation and argued that the absent lone father or the ‘weekend’ lone father was often discussed, but the primary carer lone father was not. For both the male and female lone parent participants, the media had a major part in propagating certain aspects of lone parenting, whilst ignoring others.

The analysis of the data found that the majority of participants were frustrated by the stereotyping and stigma that was attached to lone parenting, especially in regard to how lone parents were presented as a homogenous group characterised by unemployment and lack of motivation. Yet, the issue of unemployment and low motivation to work was not always seen as an unfair reflection of the experiences of some lone parents. Summer argued that for young lone parents there may be limited work available to them or work that is low-skilled and low-waged. Summer herself had become pregnant whilst in school and described how there was a general “assumption that I wasn’t going to achieve anything”. She had always held an ambition to become a teacher and so, after the birth of her daughter, continued to work towards the qualifications she would need, with childcare support from her mother and a paid childminder that was afforded through her student loan. However, she regarded her situation as unusual: “I know that I am probably one of the only people that have done it the way I’ve done it … a lot of girls if they fall pregnant young would give up”. For Summer, being unemployed and lacking motivation
was not a sign of laziness, rather it reflected the assumptions about young lone parents, their futures and the employment opportunities that would be available to those who had left education at an earlier age. In a similar thread, Margaret was reluctant to disassociate lone parenting completely with notions of unemployment. Like others, Margaret held a clear distinction between being unemployed and being ‘work-shy’. ‘Work-shy’ described a particular attitude to work, and was closely tied into the perception that lone parents were lazy, however, there was the argument that being an unemployed lone parent was not indicative of not wanting to work:

There are two issues here, you have: being there for your children, and trying to make enough money to make things work one way or another and those two things have to be met and I think that’s what all parents try to do so if they don’t work because they feel they’ve got enough money through the state and that makes them a better parent then I suppose I respect that (Margaret).

This quote highlights the two responsibilities and expectations that are intrinsic to lone parenting: caring for your children and providing for your children. To be considered a good parent, these dual needs had to be met. As Margaret described, these aspects are important to parents from all types of families, yet lone parents have to meet these responsibilities without the complete support of a second parent (as also highlighted by Coyne, 2002).

The notion that lone parenting tended to be associated with poorer parenting in wider societal discourses was one of the most impactful for the participants. Beth explored this notion in regard to her employment experience as a nursery nurse. She described how at work there were often instances of children behaving badly. They came from all different backgrounds, but she recalled that if there were any from lone parent families then colleagues would comment “oh well, he does come from a single parent family”. In these instances Beth would try and resist these propagations of lone parenting equating to bad parenting by challenging her colleagues:

I would be like what do you mean he’s from a single parent family, it’s got nothing to do with it. Their dad could be there and be useless and then it’s alright that they play up is it? (Beth)
Beth believed that there were certain negative preconceptions surrounding the children of lone parents, where poor behaviour would always be linked to their family situation. Poor behaviour by children from dual-parent families would not receive the same attention. Her quote above also reflects how the lone parent is more likely to be gendered as female.

The notion of the ‘broken home’ was a powerful aspect of the labelling of lone parents, with many participants referring to its use: “you always hear in the news about someone doing something horrible and then it turns out they came from a broken home” (Ruth). Lydia believed that negative adjectives, such as lazy or irresponsible, and negative phrases, such as the ‘broken home’, were a common part of how lone parents were presented:

It’s always said in a derogatory way, you know if you read it in the paper then they always talk about single parents and you know this person did so and so and he was from a broken home, broken back ground so the media certainly portrays the root of the problem as that they’re coming from a broken family (Lydia).

The idea of the ‘broken family’ would seem key to why the lone parent family is so often presented in such a negative way. If the ‘normal family’ is portrayed as a ‘whole’ family consisting of two parents, then a lone parent family is necessarily a break from that. Participants seemed to be especially aware of the term ‘broken’ because it suggested that their family needed to be ‘fixed’, that the lone parent family was not a legitimate family form.

Whilst many participants struggled with the stereotyping associated with lone parenting, a small number of participants appeared less affected by it. For example, Helen had been a lone parent before and did not seem as concerned as other participants regarding the stigma of lone parenthood. Her situation was seen as a reflection on her partner leaving, meaning that she felt it was just a circumstance she would have to live with. Summer had grown up in a lone parent family which she did not find to be a negative experience. Whilst stereotyping regarding young lone parents was perceived to be accurate in her understandings, the more general stigma concerning poor parenting and the ‘broken home’ were considered to be more an example of media sensationalism, than a reflection on actual experiences.
5.2.2 The meaning of family

Many of the participants had previously been part of a dual-parent family, either through their own childhood history or from before their separation from their partners, and so tended to describe this form of family organisation as the norm. To be a lone parent family was to be different from the norm. However, for other participants, the traditional meaning of family needed to be challenged as they believed it had radically changed. Hazel described how “I think probably the term family is still relevant but it covers a whole host of different types, there’s no typical family I would say now”. Another participant, Helen, mirrored this idea:

Define the word normal, what is normal family? Is it like mum and dad and two little kids at home and dad goes off to work all day and mum stays home to look after the kids, that’s what used to be classed as the normal family years ago but not now (Helen).

Whilst many of the participants questioned the idea of a normal family, there seemed to be a general consensus that society still continued to present the dual-parent family as the ideal or most accepted form of family. For example, Nina mentioned how at her daughter’s school “it’s very much like you need to have a partner to have the perfect family”. Similarly, Sue also felt that the school represented a place where these ideals were fostered:

I still get the image in my head if you say normal family, I picture mum, dad and two children and I think that’s you know because we still feed that into our children’s heads from the moment they’re born so all the books she’s reading at school, her learn to read books are based around a family of mum, dad, and three kids…there is no sort of suggestion that mum plus child or children is normal (Sue).

This example demonstrates the pervasiveness of ideas and expectations regarding family and norms, even to the extent that the dual-parent family is still the staple form presented to the younger generations.

Within expectations regarding the dual-parent family, the notion of employment was also critical. The breadwinner/carer dual-parent family model was regarded as obsolete by many participants, yet the ideals associated with this model continued to pervade expectations for mothers and fathers, for example, that a mother should naturally want to prioritise family over work commitments and a
father vice versa. This mirrors Coltrane’s (2004) argument that women’s and men’s positions in society continue to be naturalised as family orientated for the former and work orientated for the latter.

Expectations regarding gendered family roles played a key part in shaping how participants saw themselves within their families. Lydia had previously been part of a dual-parent family before separating from her partner and saw this form of family as the ideal because it was comprised of the positions of ‘mummy’ and ‘daddy’. By continuing the same structure and routine within her lone parent family, she sought to engage in identity work that would allow her to reconstruct her position within the family and so continue to provide both aspects for her children:

I suppose the nearest for me for a normal family is then to work and to do all the things we would when we’re living here but without him here (Lydia).

Lydia believed that she could fulfil the ideal of a normal family by trying to be both mother and father and this propagates the idea that a normal family is constituted by these two dual roles. This idea of being both ‘mum and dad’ was a common theme for many of the participants, although it appeared to be more critical for those participants who had no support from their ex-partner. For example, Nina’s ex-partner was not involved in the lives of her children in any way and, because of this, Nina described how: “I feel like I have to be mum and dad all the time…I kind of play both roles”. Similarly, Michael had no contact with his ex-partner, although the pressure to be both ‘mum and dad’ was seen as a future concern, rather than an immediate need because his daughter was just under the age of two. He also reflected upon his hope that by the time she would need a greater female influence in her life he would have another partner who could fulfil that need. In describing these positions, traditional gendered ideas of mothering and fathering were often evoked, for instance, the mother as the carer and the father as the disciplinarian. This links with Nelson’s (2006) findings that lone parents will ‘do family’ in order to adhere to conventional expectations of family.

Whilst the perception of being both mother and father was discussed, many of the lone mother participants generally affiliated themselves more with the
mothering, ‘caring’ identity: “I generally describe myself as a mummy” (Sue). Yet, there were some participants who did not believe there was a specific difference between the practices and identities of a mother or a father and therefore tended to rely on more gender neutral terminology to describe themselves: “I do actually tend to think of myself more as a parent than a mother” (Laura). Summer also reflected this sentiment as she described how:

I wouldn’t class myself as a mother towards her [daughter]. I would say that I am her parent but I wouldn’t say that I have a mothering role (Summer).

For Laura and Summer, this distancing of oneself from the ‘mother’ label to the more generic ‘parent’ label appeared to be as a consequence of parenting alone. As they were not part of a dual-parent family, they did not feel that they needed to occupy a particular identity defined by particular gendered activities. The things they had to do in order to raise their child as a lone parent were multiple and they did not perceive a distinction between what would traditionally be described as motherly or fatherly patterns of behaviour. Therefore their identity work was more fluid as they did not seek to maintain a coherent stable identity as ‘the mother’.

From the analysis of the data, it appeared that the pressure to fulfil the same expectations as a normal dual parent family left other participants feeling that their place in the family was limitless. They described how, when they were in a dual-parent family, their position as a mother was bounded by specific gendered expectations, whereas, as a lone parent, they had responsibility for all of the pressures of raising a child:

I am everything (Beth).

You’re the main breadwinner, you’re the housekeeper, the cook, the ironing service, the dry cleaning service, you’re everything (Betty).

As a single parent I think there is a tendency to try to be everything/everyone (Lydia, Diary).

Such narratives encompass the prevailing image of the ideal ‘selfless mother’ faced by mothers in general (Raddon, 2002: 386). Samantha also felt that she was expected to be everything to her child, however, she found this concept slightly worrying: “I don’t think I could be everything to him, I think to try would
be setting us both up for something not good”. This particular concern was discussed in relation to role models, specifically male role models. For Samantha, this concern of the lack of a male influence in her son’s life came from reading various psychological articles on the importance of male role modelling. Samantha’s profession and training was in the area of psychology and so she was more often exposed to research on psychological processes and development. Yet, other participants who were not from a psychological background were also aware of discourses concerning ‘good practice’ in relation to a child’s upbringing: “I’m very conscious that I will have to find good role models for him because I don’t want him to miss out” (Hazel). Not having a partner therefore raised additional challenges for the lone parent participants in meeting the perceived developmental needs of their children.

5.2.3 Constructions of the good parent

The pervasiveness of expectations regarding the family can also been seen in relation to how many participants constructed and reconstructed measures of good parenting. Various activities were seen as implicit in being a good parent within the normal family structure. For the lone mother participants, one of the major activities that caused concern in constructions of good parenting was that of housework. Helen (who had both younger and older children) commented on the pressure she felt to make time for all her children as well as adhere to standards of housekeeping that were perceived as inherent in constructions of good mothering. An example of this pressure was found in Helen’s diary where she described trying to make the house presentable, as she was having visitors, whilst her fifteen year old daughter also needed her attention. She wrote: “have too much to do to talk to her” but then expressed feelings of guilt that her need to “look like I can handle everything and keep my house sort of tidy” should interfere with her ability to be a good parent to her daughter. This need to portray an image of self-sufficiency was also discussed by Margaret. In her first interview she indicated that she disliked having people over to her house as it tended to be untidy. She elaborated on why she disliked this in her second interview by commenting: “It’s just people’s perceptions of you isn’t it? You don’t want to be seen as messy… And maybe not in control of your situation”. For many participants, presenting an image of control had become an intrinsic part
of their everyday identity work as they sought to present themselves and their situations as legitimate.

Housework and the need to present a ‘tidy home’ was a major aspect of many of the participants’ dialogues, however, in the wider contexts of their lives, it was perceived to be a low-value activity that was to be endured. In contrast to many of the other participants, Hazel and Michael both outsourced this work to a cleaner once a week. Both were full-time professionals working in the London area and so could afford to buy this service. In their discussions, having a cleaner was seen as a logical way to maximise their time with their children:

I kind of think that you know I don’t see my little boy that much so at weekends I don’t want to spend half of Saturdays cleaning the flat so actually its worth me paying this lady for a couple of hours to come and get it into some sort of order so I am lucky that I can do that and I know that (Hazel).

In keeping with such work as Harvey and Mukhopadhyay’s (2007) study on lone parents, such purchasing of services also reflected their desire to adhere to a dual-parent equivalent standard of living, however, the findings of this thesis would suggest that, financially, most are unable to afford such services as cleaners. What is interesting is that, in initial discussions of negotiating housework, neither Hazel nor Michael mentioned that they did employ someone to help them. It was only during the subsequent interviews that this was identified, with both participants ‘admitting’ to the help. The use of the word ‘admit’ suggests a level of guilt in paying someone to help them in this respect. Where other participants felt guilt in relation to not spending quality time with their children because of housework, Michael and Hazel seemed to experience it in regard to paying someone else for this service.

A concern over other people’s perceptions was commonplace for participants in discussing their family or parenting styles. There was an awareness that their form of family stood at odds with the ideals of wider society and therefore there was a sense that their actions and decisions were under scrutiny:

As a ‘lone parent’ I think people are looking for you to slip up often, not sort of close people and things like that but there is a feeling that society as a whole is looking for a reason to blame lone parenting really...That
by doing it wrong you are just proving to other people that that is what they expected anyway (Lydia).

This perception that one has to work harder in order to prove oneself has also been highlighted in many studies on the experiences of professional women (Foschi, 1996; Heilman and Haynes, 2005; Swim and Sanna, 1996; Valian, 1999). As the ‘other’ (Butler, 1999 [1990]), a devalued group may continue to face greater difficulties in gaining recognition and so feel that they have to work harder to be seen as legitimate (Biernat and Kobrynowicz, 1997).

The influence of expert discourses in regard to parenting has been seen to be instrumental in notions of ‘intensive mothering’, which emphasise child-centred ideologies where the needs of the ‘sacred child’ are priority (Hays, 1996: 46). For participants, expert discourses played a major part in their perceptions of being judged and examined, for example, Samantha was initially very concerned at becoming a lone parent as “generally evidence and research seems to suggest that children of single parents do less well academically and are disadvantaged as a result”. In such discourses, the lone parent family is situated as not only in opposition to the norm but as also a site of potential harm to a child’s development, which again reinforces the notion that lone parenting is linked with poor parenting.

For many participants who encountered discourses that advised on good parenting behaviour, the solution was to try to integrate this ‘knowledge’ into their own situations. For example, in her spare time, Katy was involved in a counselling course and commented on how she felt she was more likely to “review” and amend her own behaviour with her son in line with the information she received from the course. In a similar situation, Lucy’s job involved conducting research on the family and children’s development and this appeared to have had a direct impact on her own understandings and perceptions of parenting:

I do think I change my behaviour, I almost start...the extreme example is when I spent a whole day coding parent and child interactions and literally analysing every comment and then came home and was playing with my daughter and couldn’t get out of that head space of everything I said or did to the extent that I was thinking how often have I smiled in the last five minutes (laughs) which is completely ridiculous but I’d been
doing that all day so then you’re obviously going to question yourself and I did find myself changing the way I was with her because I knew what was supposed to be good and what was not good (Lucy).

It could be argued that, in such a situation, Lucy became the ‘managed identity worker’ (Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009). Such a notion has tended to be understood within the context of work, however, in Lucy’s example one can see how her understandings of her self and her behaviour within the home had become subject to greater regulation. The dominant discourses from her work on what was normal were assimilated into her experiences at home and so formed a part of her identity work in striving to be seen as a good parent. For many participants, expert discourses could be of great influence, not just on their thoughts and perceptions of good parenting, but also on their identity work and behaviour as they strove to meet these standards.

5.2.4 ‘Am I a lone parent or am I parenting alone?’: resistance to the lone parent label

An interesting issue to consider in the experiences of the lone parent participants was the tendency for many to disassociate themselves from the term ‘lone parent’. Previous work on Finnish lone mothers found that they had “more space to give their lone motherhood positive meaning and to defend their right to be a lone mother” (May, 2003: 38). However, for the participants in this study, the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes and stigma relating to lone parenting (specifically lone mothering) meant that the most straightforward way for them to give themselves legitimacy as a good parent was to resist the lone or single parent label:

It sound likes a kind of victim label and the actual ‘lone parent’ sounds like alone and lonely and all those kind of things so yeah it doesn’t sound particularly positive. It’s not a word I would use to describe myself. I might say single parent sometimes…Um, which although it has the same meaning does sound slightly different but they’ve all got horrible pejorative things attached to them (Lucy).

I never ever use that, I’d never say to somebody as an opening statement or a statement about myself that I’m a lone parent. I would just say I’m a working mum and that’s how I’d… I’d always drop the working bit in. I don’t think it’s important that people know whether I’m single, married, separated, widowed whatever, I just think it’s important that
people know I’m in full-time work and I’m a mum … people make judgements don’t they so if I was to say I was a lone parent I think my perception of that would make me sound a little bit needy when I don’t think I’m very needy (Sue).

As a lone parent…That sounds so awful that phrase, hate that! (laughs) ‘The lone parent’. Actually I don’t see myself as a lone parent because their dad is around and he is involved (Lydia).

Lydia provides an interesting example as she seemed to disassociate herself from the ‘lone parent’ label by discussing how her children’s father still had some involvement in their lives and offered her a level of support. However, in her second interview, Lydia discussed how she still felt emotionally tied to this label, even though she did not use it to describe herself:

I’m very sensitive to it in the sense that I think well I don’t…there’s another single parent living down the road and her grass was always long and her garden was always tatty and whatever so I religiously go out and cut the grass because I don’t want to be seen as ‘oh that’s a single parent that lives there’ and somebody that’s just living off the state (Lydia).

Whilst she described how she did not see herself as a lone parent, her behaviour suggests that the associated stigma of the lone parent label still affected her. For Lydia, the main reason this label did not strictly apply to her was that her ex partner still had some input into decisions surrounding the children and had childcare responsibilities every second weekend. This was mirrored by Beth who did not see herself as a lone parent because of her parents’ and sister’s support: “am I a single parent or am I just a mum with two children who has a really good back up of family?”.

Similarly, Katy did not see herself as a lone parent because her ex partner was still involved in her son’s life, however, she provided a unique case as her situation was different from the other participants. The caring responsibility for her son was split equally between herself and her son’s father and, because of this, Katy expressed feelings of guilt in calling herself a ‘single parent’:

I’m probably not doing as much as I should be and as much as what other single parents are doing, um, to kind of qualify for that term or whether the term in itself just expresses that you are single and a parent
so I don’t know whether I’ve got my quantities of what I should be doing right in regards to that (Katy).

Interestingly, Katy experienced emotional conflict from the lone parent label, not because of the connotations attached to it, but because she felt that other lone parents have to do more without support from others. Yet, the experiences of the lone parents in this study show that all had some form of support be it informal (family, friends, ex-partner) or formal (school, paid childcare) (see Table 3 in section 5.3). Informal childcare support has been shown to be critical in the experiences of lone parents (Skinner and Finch, 2006), and, for many of the participants, having childcare support from family and friends served to provide their children with a good upbringing as the parenting was, in effect, shared across this network. One example where this can be clearly seen was Beth’s experience of becoming a lone parent:

It’s not just my role that’s had to change, it’s Nan and Granddad’s role that had to change…the single parent thing for me and my family hasn’t just affected me, its affected everyone, you know, my sister is an auntie but she’s not…she’s kind of like a disciplinarian as well. My uncle would never discipline me but [my sister] has to help me like my mum and dad. My Nan and Granddad would never dream of telling me off or my sister off when we were growing up but my mum and dad have to do it for my girls (Beth).

Whilst support in its various forms was common amongst participants, the label of the lone parent still seemed to hold connotations which suggested that the parent was raising the child completely alone. This in turn again links with the notion of poor parenting in wider societal discourses, as well as social policy, where a child’s development is inherently linked with providing role models (preferably female and male) and opportunities for socialisation, without which the child is more likely to grow up ‘vulnerable’ (Yarber and Sharp, 2010: 221). Separating oneself from the label of the lone parent could then serve to disassociate oneself from the critical perceptions that to parent alone was to be a poor parent.

5.2.5 ‘Doing it on your own’: ideals of independence and control

Considering the support that the participants in this study received, it is perhaps curious that many consistently reiterated the importance of not asking for help and ‘doing it on your own’, therefore constructing a discourse of independence:
“I guess it’s about proving things again, like asking for help is like saying I can’t do it” (Hazel):

I do feel a pressure to show that I’m just as good as everybody else and that I might be on my own but I’m still just as capable as anybody that is married and in a couple so I’m still trying to portray that everything is just as organised as it would be otherwise, that I can do it all (Lydia).

Such narratives can be seen to be influenced by the wider social discourses concerning the ‘super mother’ who can attend equally to both her work and caring responsibilities (Edwards and Wajcman, 2005: 51).

For many of the participants, a change in attitude had occurred towards the notion of support after a period of time as a lone parent, although the need to present oneself as in control continued to be an important aspect of their identity work. In considering their experiences, it became clear that there was a distinction between what was perceived as ideal and what could be practically achieved. Such a distinction has also been found in studies on working mothers from dual-parent families (Aveling, 2002; Brown, 2010). This change in perception that one could ‘do it all’ was experienced by Lydia in trying to negotiate the children’s after school clubs. She described how “you do often push away help because you get into this independent mind frame”, however, with additional commitments and limitations on her time she conceded that “I’ve had to adapt and change my mindset that I will let people help”. For Lydia, this change came from the continued pressure to provide her children with the same upbringing as a dual-parent family. To compete in what she perceived to be discourses of good parenting she had to adapt and recognise that help from informal and formal support networks was needed.

As a relatively new lone parent, Lucy also experienced pressure to construct this discourse of independence: “there is something in me that doesn’t want to ask because I just want to kind of be in control I suppose”. However, on closer reflection admitted that actually the practice of ‘doing it on your own’ as a lone parent was incredibly difficult:

You contain everything within that family and actually now I’ve realised that I can’t do that so I’ve had to rely on people like my parents and my friends and actually that’s fine (laughs), I’ve realised that that’s ok and that there is give and take and there is stuff that I can do for them and I
think that’s made me stronger, realising that it’s ok to ask for help and realised that I can give help to other people (Lucy).

It could be argued that as Lucy had only recently come out of a dual-parent family situation and so had only been a lone parent for a relatively short period of time (eight months), she was more susceptible to discourses concerning control and independence. Certainly, as a lone parent for the second time, Helen in comparison did not appear to find asking for help such a difficult task as she felt it was what her situation required. Yet, for both Margaret and Laura, who had been lone parents for eleven and ten years respectively, such discourses were still very influential in their daily lives. Asking for help and support was often required, but a discourse of independence was still critical to how they saw themselves.

This was where a major contradiction was found in the experiences of the lone parent participants. To meet a certain standard of parenting, that included caring and providing for one’s child, informal and formal childcare support was critical. However, as lone parenting was often described as synonymous with dependency, neediness and vulnerability, participants had to construct a discourse of independence in order to disassociate themselves with these negative characteristics, which meant that support was often turned down. In comparison to studies which suggest that the need to be seen as coping is exhibited to different degrees dependent upon socio-economic status (Emslie and Hunt, 2009), this study found that participants consistently aimed to present themselves as independent, self-sufficient and therefore in control of their situations.

From the analysis of the data, the importance of control and the need to conceal apparent ‘failings’ was found particularly in Laura’s discussions on housework. In regard to employment, Laura spoke confidently about her ability to work well within her current position, however, her dialogues tended to revert back to the area in her life where she felt out of control:

That usually manifests itself in something like the bloody house or garden because I’m just...that just constantly nags, nags, nags away at me ..... every so often I have a mad right now I’m going to get it sorted out and I’m really going to show that I can do this and I don’t know who
I'm trying to show it to but I just...it never gets any better .... that's the bit where it all shows, where it all falls apart .... I can't have anybody coming round and that is actually quite bad, I realised that I was doing that and I was thinking now this is bad actually that you can't let anybody in anymore ... The kids are fine, the job is fine but the house (groans) (Laura).

Laura could construct herself as a good parent in regard to her ability to ensure the well being of her children and her ability to provide financial security through work. However, the aspect of housework undermined these 'successes' for Laura as it symbolised an area that she was ‘failing'. This perceived failure was addressed consistently throughout her discussions, with very little credit given to herself in regard to other aspects of her life. It appeared that this one area tainted the rest of her daily experiences as it demonstrated her inability to meet all the expectations inherent in good parenting and particularly in relation to good mothering. Control was intrinsic to such expectations and to feel out of control in any aspect could be incredibly upsetting: “It's actually quite debilitating, quite upsetting subconsciously because you're constantly reminded of muddle and mess and disorder” (Laura).

Margaret provided an interesting example of a lone parent caught between her need to do it on her own and her need to accept help and support. As described, she had been a lone parent for ten years and discussed how, throughout this time, she couldn't “bear to be beholden to people”. This meant that she often turned down offers for help and support. Yet, Margaret was still intrinsically tied to others around her through the need for recognition (Butler, 2004). For example, she discussed how:

I had a wobble recently and I was just talking to the middle daughter and I said “gosh everything is really getting quite difficult” and she said “well when I was working for somebody else’s mother she said your mother is the strongest woman I've ever met” and I thought ooh and that little thing has been whizzing around my head for the last three days and I'm like it makes me feel empowered and strong, just the notion that somebody said that and I just love a compliment obviously and it’s nice to know somebody thinks you’re doing a good job (Margaret).

Margaret sought to construct an identity infused with notions of control, independence and strength, however, it was only through the recognition given to her by others that such an identity could be maintained. She felt that she had
been recognised in a positive way and this perception then enabled her to more easily negotiate the difficult period she was going through.

Overall, participants felt that they had to continuously work to present their situation as ‘legitimate’, which meant trying to meet the perceived standards of the normal dual-parent family. For some participants, challenging the negative connotations relating to lone parenting was intrinsic to this: “you have to work very hard to dispel the myths about being a single parent” (Sue). Providing for one’s child was a major factor in expectations of the good parent which meant that employment was critical for the lone parent participants. Being employed was not just a way of ensure financial security for one’s family but was also a way of proving that one could provide a good role model to one’s children and divorce oneself from the image of a dependent, unemployed lone parent. This sits at odds with other studies on lone parenting, which found that lone mothers “usually see paid work in opposition to good mothering” (Duncan, 2005: 58). However, being employed and working within certain job sectors and organizational cultures could provide their own challenges, as other expectations and ideals were apparent. The following section will explore how such challenges, coupled with family responsibilities, could affect how participants experienced and gave meaning to their employment.

5.3 Understandings and experiences of employment

The ability to provide for one’s children was of key concern for the lone parent participants and this meant that paid employment was intrinsically tied to notions of good lone parenting. However, whilst employment was important, work experiences could often be challenging, especially in relation to specific organizational cultures and workplace expectations. These situations could then impact on how the participants experienced and gave meaning to work which will be explored in the following sections. The participants in this study were employed in a variety of occupations, with different patterns of working hours. They also each utilised different types of support, both informal and formal and had varying ideas on the meaning of work and its place in their lives. The following table (Table 3) provides an overview of their current working situations, as well as an indication of their current priorities, their levels of
ambition and what they believe their employment futures may hold. As described, a more detailed overview of participant's working histories can be found in Appendix 3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Childcare support arrangements</th>
<th>Paid work situation, ambition level and current priorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td><strong>Formal/paid support:</strong> Primary school, After school club. <strong>Informal support:</strong> Children’s father - Little support. Parent/sister – Regular support.</td>
<td><strong>Current employment situation:</strong> After becoming a lone parent, stepped down from a supervisory position. Renegotiation of pattern of working hours. <strong>Career focus:</strong> No ambition to progress within the near future. Progression would require a greater time commitment in the evenings. <strong>Current priority:</strong> Maintaining amount of time spent with children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 33</td>
<td>2 children Lp: 4 years S. Devon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td><strong>Formal/paid support:</strong> Primary/Secondary school <strong>Informal support:</strong> Children’s father – Support every 2nd weekend. Elderly mother regular support (health dependent).</td>
<td><strong>Current employment situation:</strong> Little change within current work routine. Has recently taken a variety of evening courses (not related to her current job) due to threat of redundancy. ‘Back-up plans’. <strong>Career focus:</strong> Would like to gain employment within a school to better fit her children’s school routines. No ambition to progress hierarchically. Progression would require longer working hours. <strong>Current priority:</strong> Maintaining children’s routines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 43</td>
<td>3 children Lp: 5 years G. London</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td><strong>Formal/paid support:</strong> Paid childminder <strong>Informal support:</strong> Child’s father - No support, Parents - Limited support</td>
<td><strong>Current employment situation:</strong> Returned to work full-time after three months maternity leave. Continuation of full-time hours: financial necessity, alternative hours unavailable. <strong>Career focus:</strong> Careerist attitude, would like to continue to progress hierarchically but feels currently unable to take opportunities for progression. Believes that continuing within her career will provide her son with the best lifestyle possible. But does not want to disrupt routine, does not have the energy levels to pursue a more demanding position. <strong>Current priority:</strong> Maintaining paid work and childcare routine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 32</td>
<td>1 child Lp: 1 year G. London</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td><strong>Formal/paid support:</strong> Primary/Secondary school <strong>Informal support:</strong> Children’s father - Little support. Elder child support.</td>
<td><strong>Current employment situation:</strong> Little change within current work routine. Has requested to opt out of weekend work – request denied. Recent unpaid leave due to child illness. <strong>Career focus:</strong> No current ambition to progress or change employment. Reliant upon work/family routine. Change in routine would lead to greater feelings of anxiety. <strong>Current priority:</strong> Maintaining children’s routines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 33</td>
<td>3 children Lp: 2 years S. Devon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katy</td>
<td><strong>Formal/paid support:</strong> Primary school <strong>Informal support:</strong> Child’s father - equal childcare responsibilities. Parents – Limited support</td>
<td><strong>Current employment situation:</strong> Is moving from full-time care support to full-time assessing. Change in employment linked to child starting school. Assessing offers greater flexibility in working hours (care support - 12 hour shifts). Currently studying counselling. <strong>Career focus:</strong> No ambition to progress hierarchically or to change positions again in the near future. When child is older would like to pursue a career in counselling. Current childcare routine between herself and her ex-partner, and her ability to spend time with her son, may be jeopardised if career in counselling pursued in the immediate future. <strong>Current priority:</strong> Maintaining paid work and childcare routine, amount of time with child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 23</td>
<td>1 child Lp: 1 year S. Devon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Children</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2 children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2 children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2 children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1 child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>3 children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2 children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Formal/paid support:**
- Secondary school
- Primary school, After school club
- Primary/Secondary school, After school club
- Paid childminder
- Academic skills advisor (FT)
- Assistant research fellow (PT – 29 hrs/wk)
- School receptionist (PT – 24 hrs/wk)
- IT systems manager, Local government (FT)
- Academic English teacher (PT – 23 hrs/wk)
- Caseworker, Prison service

**Informal support:**
- Children’s father – Support one evening/week. Family - Support from parents/brother.
- Children’s father – Support every 2nd weekend. Elderly mother regular support (health dependent).
- Child’s mother - No support. Family - Limited support from brother (not local).
- Children's school, Paid childminder
- Children’s school, Paid childminder

**Career focus:**
- Little ambition to progress within her career at present. When children leave home in the future she may wish to take on new role/new challenge. Is content to remain in her position for the near future - suits her current work/family/leisure routine. Children leaving home would allow for greater flexibility in time/work location.
- Little ambition to progress within her career at present. Would like to pursue a PhD but feels constrained by current situation. Is unsure about future aspirations due to primary caring and providing responsibilities. Study would require time commitment, energy commitment and reduction in financial stability.
- No ambition to progress within career at present. Progression would require a greater time/energy commitments.
- No ambition to progress within career at present. Progression would require a greater time commitment in the evenings.
- Little ambition to progress within her career at present. Is unsure about future aspirations due to primary caring and providing responsibilities. Study would require time commitment, energy commitment and reduction in financial stability.
- Little ambition to progress within her career at present. When children leave home in the future she may wish to take on new role/new challenge. Is content to remain in her position for the near future - suits her current work/family/leisure routine. Children leaving home would allow for greater flexibility in time/work location.

**Current employment situation:**
- Recent change from maternity cover to permanent contract.
- Slight renegotiation of pattern of working hours to facilitate childcare (some longer days, some shorter days), number of hours stayed the same.
- Very reliant on her paid work/childcare routine.
- Very reliant on her paid work/childcare routine.
- Very reliant on her paid work/childcare routine.
- Very reliant on her paid work/childcare routine.
- Very reliant on her paid work/childcare routine.
- Very reliant on her paid work/childcare routine.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Lp:</th>
<th>G.</th>
<th>Career focus:</th>
<th>Current priority:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lp: 4 years</td>
<td>G.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>London</td>
<td>father - No support. Family - Limited support from sister.</td>
<td>Wished to progress within her organization before deciding to take a career break. Felt that the expectations for promotion (e.g. long work hours) too great. As a part-time worker was unsuitable for promotion – unable to meet expectations. Still keen to progress within her career after her break, possibly not within her previous workplace. Increasing time spent with children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal/paid support: Primary school, Paid childminder</td>
<td>Children's father - No support. Parents - Moderate support</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Informal support:</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Devon</td>
<td>Assistant psychologist (FT)</td>
<td>Recently changed employment as she no longer wanted to be 'just a manager'. Some renegotiation of the pattern of her working hours to facilitate childcare (some longer days, some shorter days), number of hours stayed the same. Maintaining paid work and childcare routine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme consultant, Museum (FT)</td>
<td>Current employment situation:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>Programme consultant, Museum (FT)</td>
<td>Had been advised that due to funding cuts she could not be promoted within her organization. Applied for and offered more senior role in a company within the private sector. Maintaining paid work and childcare routine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal/paid support: Primary school, Paid childcare</td>
<td>Child's father – Support every 2nd weekend and one evening a week. Retired mother - Regular support.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informal support:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Devon</td>
<td>Secondary school art teacher (FT)</td>
<td>Has recently changed from a full-time maternity cover contract to a full-time permanent contract. Maintaining paid work and childcare routine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal/paid support: Primary school, After school club, Paid childminder (rare)</td>
<td>Child's father – Support every 2nd weekend. Mother - Regular support.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informal support:</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Current employment situation:</td>
<td>Little change within current work routine.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career focus:</td>
<td>No ambition to progress within her career at present. Is happy with the routine that she has and to progress would mean completing longer hours. The nursery where she currently works is connected to her son’s primary school - would not want to move to different employment - would disrupt her current morning/afternoon routines of collecting her son after school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current priority:</td>
<td>Maintaining children’s routines.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career focus:</td>
<td>Careerist attitude, leaving her current work because no opportunity for career progression. Continuing within her career will provide child with the best lifestyle possible. Alternative employment search - offered progression within her career, also local to her home/daughter’s school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career focus:</td>
<td>Careerist attitude, aiming to continue career progression. Continuing within her career will provide child with the best lifestyle possible. Location constraining factor – currently good support networks and close to daughter’s school. Less local opportunities.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current priority:</td>
<td>Maintaining paid work and childcare routine.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In analysing their past and current experiences of work, a number of important factors became apparent that affected how participants negotiated their work and family responsibilities. In particular, certain employment-related ideologies and expectations appeared to impact on both how they evaluated their previous work experiences, as well as how they engaged with their current employment. These factors will be explored in the following sections.

5.3.1 Formal support policies versus informal working arrangements

One of the major concerns for many of the lone parents in this study was the availability of workplace support within their employment. This support could be manifested in two forms, through formal policies or through informal arrangements. This was most likely to be used by participants to negotiate flexible working hours in order to address childcare responsibilities or to access short-notice leave due to child illness. The availability of formal policies and opportunities for flexibility varied from employment to employment, but appeared most limited in workplaces that required employees to work in a set environment for set hours. For example, after years of working in a family business and being self-employed, Helen decided that she wanted to work in a position that involved shorter hours and greater flexibility so that she could have more time to look after her children. She took a part-time sales assistant position in a retail company, however, because of the nature of retail work, there were occasions where she was required to work on the weekends which she found particularly difficult as her children were not at school and she could not afford a childminder. Helen had asked her manager if she could just work weekdays to avoid this difficulty, but she was refused: “she said no there is no chance you could give up weekends, weekends are part of retail work and basically you would have to give up your job in order to do that”. Fundamentally, the conflict that Helen experienced was that she understood flexibility in terms of short-term leave and the ability to re-negotiate her working timetable if need be. Such an understanding has been found to contrast with retail policies concerning ‘numerical flexibility’, where the workforce headcount can be varied during trading hours, (Dutton et al., 2005: 99).
There could also be a ‘clash’ in understandings between the meanings of workplace policies. Like Helen, Nina had previously worked within a family business and when she became a lone parent she reported wanting a ‘9-5’ job that would offer her support in meeting her childcare responsibilities. Her sister worked for the Home Office and advised her to apply for a job within a government department as they offered good flexibility and support policies. Nina took a position within the prison service, initially at full-time working hours, but found that her ability to access support policies or request flexible work arrangements was impeded by her manager. For example, her organization offered both special and parental leave schemes but her manager was either unaware of these schemes or unwilling to share this information with Nina. Only after researching these available schemes for herself was Nina able to challenge her manager:

I wanted to take some special leave and she said well actually you’ve had parental leave before and I said well actually they are two separate issues, special leave is one thing and parental leave is a different thing altogether so there have been times where I have actually had to stand my ground and say well you know this is what the policy is and in one interview I actually had to have the union representative with me which I think encouraged her to research what the policy and procedures are (Nina).

For Nina, her ability to access formal support policies was negated due to her manager’s attitude as well as her manager’s limited understandings of the organization’s policies. Kirby’s (2000) study on workplace communication also found such examples of supervisors sending ‘mixed messages’ to employees with children where knowledge of policies was insufficient, meaning that formal workplace policies were often implemented dependent on their personal preferences. In Nina’s experience, she particularly felt that her manager did not take into account her situation: “She was very adamant that what she was saying was right and I was very strong in saying I’m sorry there is nothing I can do about it”. Nina believed that this friction was not only due to her manager’s expectations regarding working practices but also the broader expectations of the culture in which she worked:

The kind of working culture that I’m in predominantly doesn’t really take into consideration working mums at all for example every application that
I’ve made for flexible working… It’s not really been shoved in my face but it’s been put in very blatantly to me that work needs are priority and we will have to work on your application based on what the work needs are … I’ve put in applications saying I’m prepared to come in early so the work needs are still met but it’s still a case of well actually it would be more comfortable for us if you came in for a certain amount of time even though it might not be a work need (Nina).

Nina felt strongly that there should be a ‘give and take’ working relationship with her employer when it came to issues of work policies and flexibility, but did not believe that her organization’s expectations of her were really compatible with her responsibilities as a lone parent.

Whilst Nina had entered her work as a lone parent, there were others who had been employed within their current workplaces either before they had children or when still part of a dual-parent family, which appeared to offer them greater access to both formal and informal work support. For Betty, this longer service meant that she had accrued greater holiday leave and so could better manage periods of child illness or school holidays. For Hazel, working long hours within her organization before having her son meant that when she returned to work after having her child she found asking for short-notice leave relatively straightforward: “I’d built up quite a lot of good will” (Hazel). Yet, even in cases where additional holiday time had been awarded or short-notice leave was more readily available, the issue of child illness could undermine all of this support due to its unpredictability. Formal childcare support, such as schools, nurseries or paid childminders would not accept children that were unwell. Similarly, elderly family members may be unable to offer childcare support for ill children because of their own ailing health (for example, in the cases of Lydia and Betty). In many situations, participants relied on accessing their annual leave in order to care for their children. Sue provided an example of the difficulties she faced in this situation:

If she has a genuine sickness that she can’t go to school with then I have to start making phone calls at about eight o’clock in the morning and then I would log on to my computer at home, go into my outlook which I can do online and then I’ll just contact everyone I’m supposed to be meeting that day and explain that I can’t come in and I’ll have to take annual leave. In terms of taking the annual leave day I don’t ever have a problem, I’ve got a good relationship with my line manager but… it’s not booking the leave at short notice or anything like that or another person
saying no you can’t do that. The problem I’ve got is how much leave I have and that days like that really eat into my total leave for the year and last year I ended up at Christmas where I had to book leave without pay because I’d run out of annual leave and I think that’s probably the struggle. In my head I’m having this conversation with myself like you know gosh that’s four extra days so far this year that I’ve taken off to cover various illnesses (Sue).

This situation was common for many of the other participants: “in my first year probably 90% of my annual leave time was on children being sick” (Nina), which could then cause difficulties in negotiating children’s school holidays as unpaid leave would often have to be relied upon.

For many of the participants, formal support policies were often seen as limited or inflexible. Basic ‘work-life balance’ policies, which included opportunities for ‘flexible working’, were often alluded to, yet they were seen to be directed towards the needs of working parents more generally, rather than the needs of lone parents:

It’s not until I’ve been a single parent that I’ve realised that there is still a lot that is geared around two parent families (Lucy).

I think the work-life balance thing works really well for working couples far more than it does for a single parent. I think because between the two of you, you can balance out finances much better, you can balance who is picking up on what day and who can work late and all that kind of stuff is much easier (Sue).

Section 5.2.2 described how perceptions of family are still dominated by the image of two parents, yet, it would appear that the norm of the dual-parent family has also been relied upon in work-family policy design (as also described in Knijn et al.’s (2007) study). In circumstances where formal working policies (such as flexible working hours) were seen as unavailable or too limited in meeting the needs of participants, informal work arrangements then became critical in helping them to negotiate their work and family responsibilities.

Such informal managerial support has often been touched upon in wider studies on work-life balance (Anderson et al., 2002; O’Driscoll et al., 2003; Karatepe and Kilic, 2007; Frye and Breaugh, 2004; Roehling et al., 2001), however, when considered in relation to the findings of this study, it would seem even more critical in the experiences of lone parents in accessing and maintaining more
demanding work positions. For Sue, Hazel, Lucy and Michael, being able to work from home on certain occasions when they had unavoidable childcare commitments was one of the most important informal working arrangements they had with their managers. Technology played a large part in this arrangement as their ability to work from home was dependent upon the type of work they were employed in (e.g. that they could complete their work at a computer away from the workplace).

Yet, working from home provided its own challenges as the needs of the child often came into conflict with the need for participants to complete work. For example, Sue’s job involved aspects of training and HR so when she worked from home she was expected to be available to other employees via email or telephone:

There was a situation where I was having to give some advice to another employee who was going through a difficult period and it was quite a sensitive phone call. I left [daughter] in the front room watching TV and she had some cereal and what she’d done is picked up the bowl to drink the milk (laughs), not concentrated and poured milk and all the cornflakes down her front so when I was on the phone she knew that she wasn’t meant to come in but she obviously felt that she had to because of the situation so I didn’t turn round to look at her when she came in, I just kind of waved my hand dismissively and didn’t look at her and I was still trying to maintain the conversation and it was at that point that she went ‘but mummy I’m covered in cornflakes’ (laughs) at which point I looked down and sure enough she was covered in cornflakes, but you know that was for me quite... quite tricky for me to explain to the other person look I’m really sorry I’m going to have to call you back but luckily they were quite understanding and it was ok but you do kind of hold your breath and think actually shall I just run down the road quickly where she can’t find me (laughs), just to avoid the embarrassment (Sue).

This type of circumstance was not uncommon as other participants reported difficulties in working from home and trying to sustain a similar level of work (as well as image of professionalism) in comparison to working within their designated workplace. Michael, Lucy, Sue and Hazel all described how they eventually came to realise that it would be difficult for them to complete sustained periods of work whilst also responsible for childcare and so were more likely to adapt their daily routine in order to split their time between work and childcare. As these sections of time were relatively short, the type of work that was completed tended to be activities that required low concentration...
levels, for instance, replying to emails or short telephone calls. Hazel referred to this type of work as “fire fighting” as it was simply dealing with the immediate concerns of work which would then be dealt with more formally after one returned to the workplace.

For these participants, there was an awareness that working from home was generally perceived as less productive than time spent at work: “you tend to feel that people are wondering whether you’re actually working or not” (Sue). Previous research has found that managers often perceive those employees who work from home as having a greater ‘scope for skiving’ (Felstead et al., 2003: 244). In the experiences of participants, to compensate for such a concern, larger numbers of e-mails were often sent or more regular telephone contact with their place of work was made in order to present their time working from home as valuable. Felstead et al. describe such actions as ‘display behaviour’, designed to “re-establish visibility” (2003: 246). In analysing the diaries of those participants who could make use of such arrangements, their experiences of working from home can be seen as less productive:

My daughter plays out in the garden for a while, which gives me chance to send off a few more e-mails and read some information ready for a meeting tomorrow. Made a few calls to work about tomorrow’s meeting. Had the rest of the afternoon relatively free, which was nice to spend a bit of extra time playing (Michael, Diary).

14.00 Get home later than planned, feel paranoid that I have taken a very long lunch break! Ring into office to check if all is ok. 15.00 Have sneaky hairdressers’ appointment as I am going to my friend’s wedding on Saturday! [Daughter] comes and we get new books from library, read through those in hairdressers. Set phone to pick up e-mails so I can work in hairdressers (Sue, Diary).

In their interviews, the participants themselves acknowledged that the type and amount of work they completed whilst at home was different to that completed in the workplace, as work time would also include family or leisure activities. Yet, their practices of sending greater e-mails indicated that such periods required more ‘concentrated’ levels of identity work (Alvesson et al., 2008) in order to continue presenting themselves as professional, valuable employees. These participants therefore appeared to face additional complexities within their identity work as they experienced both disconnection from the workplace,
as well as a continued need for recognition. Such findings can be compared with Tietze and Musson’s study on home-working parents whose identities in such a situation were seen to be thrown “into a state of flux” (2010: 154).

Informal work arrangements could be helpful for the participants, not just in being able to work from home but also being able to leave work slightly earlier if needed or, in Katy’s case, being the last person in her work group to be asked to complete additional hours. For those who could leave work slightly earlier, there was often a perceived expectation that work would be completed in the evenings at home in order to ‘make up’ this time lost. Technology was again a major part of this as can be seen in Hazel’s situation. Hazel had used the ‘good will’ she had built up before having her son to organise her working hours in a way that would allow her to come into work and leave work at specific times around her childcare. She would use her internet enabled mobile telephone in order to access her emails during her commute into and out of work, as well as in the evenings. Such a device has been seen as useful in the ‘micro-coordination’ of work and family life for busy parents in general (Wajcman et al., 2008: 641). Hazel worked in the television industry which she described as a ‘24/7’ business that encouraged long work hours. Her internet enabled mobile phone was perceived to help her compete with those who could more easily offer such long periods of time at work, as she could continue to be visible within the workplace, albeit virtually. Yet, there were times when she would be expected to be physically present, for example, when meetings had been scheduled for later in the afternoons which would then take priority and so risk undermining her arrangements. Hazel commented on how there could be times when meetings lasted past five o’clock and she would have to excuse herself:

I do feel that it will be very visible that I’m leaving. Like normally before… I suppose it’s hard because before I had [son] I would have just stayed there until the end and it wouldn’t have been a big deal so I’m kind of conscious that it’s not a good thing to be doing, um, drawing attention to myself so I do find that quite stressful (Hazel).

To a certain degree, Hazel was able to utilise technology to complete the additional hours that were expected of her within her employment, yet she still encountered occasions where her organization expected her to remain physically within the confines of the workplace. In those instances, her outside
commitments become very obvious as she was physically leaving whilst others stayed, therefore, positioning herself in odds with what her work considered to be the ‘ideal’ employee (Fletcher and Bailyn, 1996b). She expressed concern that, as she was not always able to work in a similar way to others within the organization, she was then “drawing attention” to herself and so being visible in a negative way.

Whilst helping the participants in their current work, these informal arrangements could also be restricting as there was an uncertainty about whether such support would be available elsewhere. This meant that many participants were reluctant to move jobs, even if they expressed an interest to do so. In his current work as an IT manager, Michael had negotiated with his manager to work from home on certain days so his daughter did not have to spend as much time with a childminder. This arrangement suited him well but he still reported feeling trapped within his current workplace as “there is no guarantee that I could get what I’ve got now elsewhere because what I’ve got is not written down on paper”. At the time of interviewing, Michael reported that the organization he worked for had started implementing redundancies in certain areas due to the economic recession. As Thomas and Linstead (2002) have found, such ‘downsizing’ can lead employees to question their status and value within the workplace. In Michael’s case, the redundancies led to greater feelings of insecurity and, by his second interview, he reported that the number of days that he spent working from home had now drastically reduced: “she’s [daughter] having to spend more time with the childminder so I can show I’m willing to work and I will be there at work”. The pressure for Michael to appear ‘valuable’ to his work was increasing and, therefore, his work time and the physical location of work was taking priority as this was seen as the preferred way of proving one’s commitment, one’s professionalism and increasing one’s productivity. Like all informal arrangements, the opportunity to work outside of the workplace could be taken away, but, in Michael’s case, the pressure experienced from his workplace was seen to impact on his ability to access this working arrangement.
In addition, informal working arrangements could potentially cause further anxieties for participants. Many argued that they did not want to be seen or judged to be any different to other workers and so did not want to receive ‘special favours’ from their employers:

I like to think when I go to work I am a worker … When I go to work I am equal to everyone else … I just see myself at exactly the same level as a working person, I’m there to work and this is who I am (Nina).

I don’t want to be seen as not doing the job as well as anyone else. If I have to take time off I’m very conscious to tell people what I’m doing, you know saying I’m making up the hours on Friday because I don’t want people to think I’m taking the mickey basically or that I think I can have special favours because I have got kids (Lucy).

Because many described themselves as the same as other workers, they were especially frustrated that stigmas and stereotypes presented working parents as less committed, less able to give additional time and, therefore, less suitable for promotion. However, there were a number of contradictions within such discourses, particularly because most of the participants did receive some form of workplace support. Formal workplace support such as flexible working was often utilised. Yet, it was the informal work arrangements with managers that offered the lone parent participants the most useful support as it was personalised to their situations.

Whilst informal arrangements were incredibly useful, by making use of them, participants were then highlighted as different from other employees because they required a different type of management. This was where the major contradictions in participants’ notions of independence and self-sufficiency became most apparent. All participants had experience of requesting short-notice leave for childcare responsibilities, the majority had experienced some form of informal work arrangement with their organization and many reported being unable to work beyond their core hours so would often be unable to work additional hours if requested. Yet the participants wished to be viewed as the same as other employees, reported that they did not want special treatment, and felt aggrieved at stereotypes which portrayed working parents as less able to give additional time to their workplaces and, therefore, were not always seen as suitable for promotion.
5.3.2 The meaning of work

For all of the participants, work held an important meaning in their lives. It could be important as a contributor of finances and of greater stability, but it was also seen as a moral activity, where one could be a role model to one’s children. In particular, work was important because it could contribute to a sense of identity beyond the confines of the home. Head’s (2005) study on lone mothers found that the home is often seen as an oppressive environment. Building on this work, this study found that employment was seen to provide an ‘escape’ from the pressures of home and provided a place where the lone mother participants could be “more than just a mum” (Lydia):

I think I go to work sometimes to have my time to be honest and adult time because obviously I work with other adults and it’s just nice to kind of have a break from the normal house routine … I go into work to get a break because that’s the only time I actually do get a break from just being a mum as much as we have our kids and we love them because that’s part of being a mum but it’s also nice to be yourself as well when you have the chance to do so (Helen).

I would actually say that work gives me a chance to have an identity. When you’re at work you’re not a mother and you’re not anything else but you doing that job. So you have the chance to be you. So I would say for me it’s actually more of a forum to be myself (Katy).

At home you are just a mum and then at work you’re an individual … It’s adult time. You get to interact as an adult, with adults rather than just chat with mums and talk goo goo gaga all the time. You get to interact with adults and you have your own kind of time where you find who you are, when you are at home you are a mum, but when you are at work you are a person (Nina).

For these participants, the expectations they felt within work were less intense than the expectations they experienced as mothers, “in some ways the work is easier because there is less at stake than there is at home” (Laura).

In Katy’s experience, her family life was seen as restrictive because the only interactions she tended to have in this time were with her son. Whereas in work, she was provided with multiple social interactions, which she believed then provided opportunities for identity construction, beyond the confines of ‘mother’:
Work has just created the forum if you like because that’s where you meet other people first and foremost more than anywhere. You come in contact with other people in different walks of life and they question…not necessarily to your face but just their way of being questions yours and you constantly re-evaluate when seeing the way other people are, you constantly re-evaluate yourself (Katy).

Work therefore was given meaning as a place that was different to the family, as it provided a site for identity construction outside the realms of the mother/father position. In this sense, work became a refuge for many of the participants, an experience which was also highlighted in Hochschild’s (1997) study on working parents in a Fortune 500 company. However, Hochschild’s assertions have been criticised as they are seen to be made in regard to employees who are more likely to perceive high benefits and rewards from their work (Maume and Bellas, 2001). The findings from this thesis do suggest that those in more professional occupations seemed to give greater meaning to their work. Yet, being a ‘working person’ was critical for all participants, suggesting that it was the context of lone parenthood that was the major influence on how work was understood, not necessarily the type of occupation.

The perception of work being an escape was articulated throughout the data: “Back to work and forgetting the stress of home life” (Beth, Diary); “Coming into work is a bit like a rest really, bit of a relief from all the excitement that goes on at home” (Laura). Such findings contrast with Costas and Fleming’s study which suggested that work is often a place where one cannot fully be oneself or a place that elucidates limited feelings of ‘authenticity’ (2009: 359). From the findings in this study, this was not apparent for the lone parent participants.

For a number of participants, such as Sue, Ruth, Lydia, Katy and Laura, work was also important because it could contribute to their feelings of self-esteem and self-respect which could then impact on other aspects of their lives. Achieving in work led to greater confidence and this allowed participants to think “ok I can do something really well so the challenges at home now don’t seem so difficult” (Katy). Laura discussed this in regard to positive reinforcement as she believed that if one could do well at work “then you are going to have an easier time at home because you’ve got that endorsement to take home with you”. For her, that feedback represented a “really positive aspect of work”. In these
examples, the confidence gained by many of the participants in their working lives led to greater confidence in their family lives. The interaction between these two aspects of their lives provides an example of how one identity position can rely on another (Carroll and Levy, 2008: 77). Such recognition within work allowed them to consider themselves more positively at home and so could be conceived of as a type of emotional identity work.

Yet, whilst work could provide a respite from the concerns of family, as well as greater feelings of confidence, it could also provide a place where participants were presented with additional expectations for being and doing. The pressure of the expectations that they experienced as ‘mothers’ or ‘fathers’ may be less immediate, as they themselves were removed from the physical boundary of the home, however, new expectations of what constituted a good working mother or good working father could be introduced. Family members and co-workers with children often affected what was seen as legitimate activities and routines for working mothers and fathers, which then affected how participants viewed their own experiences:

The message I got from mum was that I should feel a bit more guilty about putting him in childcare and I should want to spend more time with him and questions I had from colleagues and friends about ‘oh don’t you find it hard’ and a couple of colleagues who quite overtly said they find it really hard dropping their child off at nursery and ‘God you know it was so hard this morning, she was screaming and screaming and I’m so worried and I’ve rung them five times already today’ and I know I’m being dismissive of them and I know that’s not fair but their experience of having a child in nursery was so different to mine I think it just made me think a bit like god maybe I ought to feel a bit differently, maybe it ought to be a bit harder (Samantha).

Samantha’s understandings of the meaning of work had not initially changed when she became a mother and neither had her routine. The example of the other working mothers in her work seemed to communicate that a good mother would go to work to provide financial security, use childcare to negotiate this, however, would then anguish over those choices. A workday would then include regular calls to a child’s nursery, as well as a sharing of this guilt with other working parents, suggesting that a very particular type of identity work was required. Samantha, by feeling that this was not necessary behaviour and by
not engaging in this type of identity work, had placed herself at odds with their understandings of what it was to be a legitimate working mother.

Samantha’s attitude to work was seen to change when her son became older. She described how when he was a baby he was: “something to look after rather than a child to interact with” and so sending him to nursery for longer periods of time was not necessarily an issue as he slept for much of this time. She described how she had “justified it to myself by saying he’d just be doing the same if he was at home” but continued to feel the pressure of social expectations regarding motherly behaviour: “Looking back I wish… do I wish? I don’t know. I feel like I should wish I had more time with him and not that he’d gone to nursery so much” (Samantha). When he became a toddler, Samantha became much more acutely aware of expectations for her behaviour and discussed how “he will have memories of the time we spend together and it’s more important that I’m working less now”. In Samantha’s case, her identity work as a mother became more ‘concentrated’ (Alvesson et al., 2008), which then impacted upon her identity work within employment, as the expectations within these areas contradicted each other. Working mothers have often been stigmatised as generally less committed and give less time to work than those women without children (Coltrane, 2004). Although many of the lone mother participants felt that they needed to challenge such stigmas, from Samantha’s example, it would appear that they may struggle to do this in practice, as social expectations for behaviour advocate that a good working mother should be more disconnected from work in favour of their childcare responsibilities.

Summer recalled being concerned about the taken-for-granted expectation that meaning would be lost from other aspects of life in favour of the ‘mother’ position. She described other mothers that she knew who became: “like this mass blob of just parent and children scenario and they don’t actually have like a personality or life or independence for their own selves”. Like Samantha, after Summer became a parent, work continued to be a very important part of her identity. In part this was seen to be due to her ambition to succeed in her ‘dream job’, but it also appeared to relate to her determination that she would not be seen as a stereotypical teenage lone parent who had become pregnant in school leading to the assumption that “there’s not going to be kind of a future
for her” (Summer). Such expectations appeared to fuel her ambition, as well as offering her a justification for the long hours that she put into her work.

In analysing the experiences of participants, there appeared to be an expected distinction between the meaning of work for mothers and fathers. This impacted on what was considered to be a legitimate working mother and a legitimate working father. Working as an IT manager, Michael felt that there were certain gendered expectations within his organization for how working parents would organise and manage their care responsibilities within their work-family routine. Within his organization, he mentioned how the only other employees who took visible responsibility for the care of their children were female and, when discussing the pressure he experienced to attend late afternoon meetings, he described how:

The pressure for them is not the same as for me. It’s acceptable that they don’t have to turn up whereas for me they expect me to just drop things … What they don’t understand is that I can’t just drop everything at the last minute and go to an urgent meeting. They think I can just do that, they think I have this huge network of people that I can take my daughter to but I’ve got no family whatsoever down here… I don’t think they really understand the concept of you being a single father (Michael).

For Michael, the presence of other working parents did not seem to aid in his experiences of negotiating his work and family responsibilities because of the bias that seemed to exist within the organization for which he worked. This bias has been highlighted in studies on absenteeism where “absence is more expected and acceptable for women compared to men” (Patton and Johns, 2007: 1585). In Michael’s case, the expectation was that he would hold a greater priority to his work responsibilities, would stay in work longer and use his support networks to help care for his daughter. However, the only constant support network he had was his childminder who he would then have to pay at a higher overtime rate.

Michael had been employed within his organization for the last twelve years and reported how he used to regularly work for long hours before he became a lone father. After he took primary caring responsibility for his daughter, the meaning of work changed: “I’ve got no ambition to work my way up the ladder anymore or do late nights”. This change affected his work routine, not in regard to his
core hours, but in how many additional hours he was willing to work within his workplace. When asked about his colleagues’ reactions to this change he replied:

It’s very subtle. People will tend...people who have a problem with it will tend to request meetings that start at five o’clock knowing that I will want to have left just after the meeting has started and then say little subtle things like it’s so difficult to get a meeting with you since you’ve had a daughter but never anything...because I’ve never done anything wrong there is nothing that anyone can actually do. I’m quite within my rights to do that (Michael).

As Michael’s previous work routine included long periods in work, his reduction in hours appeared very visible. He stood at odds with not only his previous working example but the working examples of other working fathers whose work routines had not experienced such noticeable changes. It seemed expected that Michael’s care commitments would be invisible within the workplace, therefore providing a clear separation between his work and family responsibilities. This fits with Acker’s (2006: 448) work on expectations regarding the ideal ‘unencumbered’ employee. A prioritising of work was seen to be in line with the traditional role of the father as breadwinner and this traditional understanding of family roles meant that Michael’s colleagues often found it difficult to understand that in some instances he had to prioritise his caring commitments over his work commitments. Such an example demonstrates how identity claims within organizations can be “ignored, or remain unrecognized” (Beech et al., 2008: 963) if other group members do not perceive the identity claim to be legitimate (Hatch and Schultz, 2002), or the subject to be ‘intelligible’ (Butler, 2004), therefore undermining identity work. Within his experiences, Michael was faced with negotiating competing ideologies concerning work and family, yet such negotiations went unrecognised as the notion of ‘competing’ or ‘contested’ ideologies tended to be understood as the preserve of the working mother (Johnston and Swanson, 2006: 509).

Whilst Michael felt unable to engage with work in the same way as other colleagues, he still attempted to present himself as a professional who was willing to give time to his work, irrespective of circumstance. For example, as described in section 5.3.1, on days where he had unavoidable care
responsibilities, Michael had organised an informal work arrangement with his manager to allow him to work from home, rather than take leave. In his diary Michael also reported often working from home in the evenings after his daughter was in bed, yet the expectation that he would be physically visible in the workplace for longer periods was still experienced when late meetings were organised. Additional pressure was applied to Michael’s work-family routine when news of redundancies became apparent. This meant that working longer hours were needed and he felt a greater pressure to conform to the traditional breadwinner position in line with other working fathers. Such pressures have also been found in Sheridan’s (2004) study on the working hours of fathers in general and Michael’s experience further highlights the difficulties that such traditional male working models can have for those with out-of-work commitments (Lewis, 2001b). To negotiate this difficult situation, Michael sought to present himself as a valuable professional by following expected working practices. In doing so, he appeared to engage in a pretence of authentic identity work, where maintaining a certain image was important, but with little meaning given to the identity itself. Whilst not agreeing with such practices, presenting a specific image to employers was seen as required in maintaining his situation (what Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1184) refer to as the ‘necessary evil’ in experiences of identity work).

Even though the majority of participants felt that having a child had affected the meaning they held to work, many still felt that they had something to prove in that they could be both a good parent and a good employee. This was especially pertinent in their experiences of being lone parents because of the need to disassociate themselves from the stigma of dependence, laziness and irresponsibility (section 5.3):

There was definitely a sense of something to prove. Just because I’m a lone parent doesn’t mean that I can’t still be a really valuable employee and still do a really good job (Samantha).

Therefore, whilst work was seen to provide financial security, it was also felt to offer many other positive rewards. For many, work had provided the structure to their lives as well as a sense of social purposefulness before they had children and, even after having children, the structure and routine within work was still
seen to offer something of importance, as Lucy described “I think if I wasn’t going back to work then I would have needed things in place to have more structure and feel as if there was a bit more of a point to my week”.

5.3.3 Employment ambition and progression: the issue of working hours

In exploring participants’ work experiences throughout their employment histories, it became apparent that the topic of progression was a major issue. Ambition levels varied, with some participants wishing to progress hierarchically within work in order to gain greater financial rewards (following the ‘corpocratic’ career model (Hopkins and O’Neil, 2007)), whereas for others the impetus was to gain employment at a similar pay grade but that offered a more supportive working environment or more interesting work role (following a non-linear employment pathway (Sullivan, 1999)). A concern with additional time commitments was inevitably discussed by those wanting to progress hierarchically, for example, Samantha, Hazel and Nina.

To consider issues of employment progression, it is necessary to address how participants made decisions regarding their working hours. Working hours (whether full- or part-time) were intrinsically connected with understandings of good parenting and reflected the differing beliefs that participants had in relation to the level of direct care or financial provision that a good parent should engage in. In effect, negotiating working hours became a part of their identity project. For example, some discussed how they chose part-time work hours in order to spend more time with their children, whereas others described engaging in full-time work hours in order to provide their children with a certain lifestyle and financial security. The rhetoric used to explain choices regarding working hours was therefore structured around the perceived needs of the child, with employment ambition often being marginalised in such positioning. A number of examples of the rhetoric behind working part- or full-time hours can be seen in the table below (Table 4).
### Table 4: The rhetoric behind part-time or full-time working hours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working part-time hours</th>
<th>Working full-time hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don’t work full-time because obviously I don’t think I could work full-time, not now I’m on my own as a single parent and fit everything around the kids so I guess I’ve sacrificed being able to earn more money, a better wage by having kids but obviously they are my responsibility so I have to regardless (Helen).</td>
<td>I would have liked to have done part-time to have more time with my son but to be quite honest I’ve always worked full-time and even when I was still married I was the worker so I’m kind of used to having that routine (Katy).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve always found it hard working part-time because when I worked full-time, you know, you owned a job and you did it from start to finish. I suppose I was in management post so I was in control...it’s a different culture you have to get used to, a different way of life (Lydia).</td>
<td>The job that I do isn’t...I couldn’t do it part-time so if I wanted to come back here then I would have to come back full-time and also I couldn’t afford to not work full-time. So I think in some ways its easier because if you haven’t got a choice then you have to do it (Hazel).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I worked full-time my kids were young, I really felt that I was neglecting them and I think as a single parent you feel a lot of guilt. Guilt was a big thing so I reduced my hours and even like now I’m trying to still reduce my timetable of work so I can spend more time with my children but I think it’s a constant nigling of guilt and I want to spend time with my children (Nina).</td>
<td>It was kind of expected as a mother generally by society that I didn’t work full-time and there’s all this stuff in the media about how dreadfully bad it is for children to go into day care before they’re two and I was aware of that and unsure of how to manage it but at the same time financially I couldn’t contemplate doing anything other than full-time hours but I knew I didn’t want to work five days a week so that’s how I came to the compromise of doing my full-time hours over the four long days (Samantha).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In both columns of the above table there were examples of participants who felt that they had no choice in their work arrangements and were unhappy with their situations. Whilst constructing a rhetoric around working arrangements could help to justify certain ways of working, in the context of lone parenting, any work arrangement (whether full-time or part-time) could be conceived of as lacking in some way. Such perceptions can be compared with the findings of Medved’s study on working mothers from dual-parent families, where the decisions regarding working hours and constructions of what it was to be a ‘working
mother’ were “sites of personal struggle” (2009: 146). On the other hand, these findings contrast with Johnston and Swanson’s study on working mothers from dual-parent families who felt they had made their own ‘choice’ regarding employment and were “happy with their employment status choice” (2006: 517).

For Helen, working full-time was seen as incompatible with lone parenting, whereas for Hazel working part-time was not financially viable for a lone parent living in London. For others, there was a choice but this was often limited by expectations surrounding work and family. An example of this can be found in Lucy’s work experiences. In her recent search for employment, she described discounting any jobs that indicated full-time working hours as she only wished to work part-time so as to spend more time with her children. When she saw the vacancy for her current job, “it was advertised as full-time but with the option of part-time” so she decided to apply and at the interview indicated that she would like to work three days a week. However, she received a phone call after the interview detailing that:

There wasn’t anyone else who wanted to do a job share and that basically I could work part-time but they wanted to know how many hours I could do, what was the maximum I could do and I found it a really difficult decision because … it wasn’t explicitly said but it kind of felt a bit like well if I don’t say enough then I won’t get the job so I said four days a week which was more than I originally wanted to do but I just felt like I needed to do that to get the job basically (Lucy).

Whilst Lucy did not want to work more than three days a week, her decision was swayed by, not just the prospect of losing out on a job, but losing out on a job that she would find enjoyable. The struggle she had in making this decision revolved around her notions of good parenting in that she believed a good parent should work part-time hours. However, there was also a sense of guilt in taking the longer hours in this employment as she had chosen it and applied for it because it interested her and provided an opportunity for progression within her career. Therefore, in part, this particular job was for her own fulfilment, rather than purely related to her children’s financial stability. By having to take the longer hours, and therefore compromise on her understanding of good parenting, she experienced a sense of guilt that her own needs should take priority over her children’s needs to have more time with their mother. As
Wallbank discussed, social and legal discourses tend to ‘silence’ the needs of the lone mother by instead focusing on the needs of the child (1998: 88). This silencing is seen to be propagated within many of the discussions by the lone mother participants, but, for those who felt that their needs had become priority (for example, by their work aspirations impacting on their children) guilt was the resulting emotion.

As described, it was generally perceived by participants that to gain a promotion within an existing employment, or to move organizations in order to pursue a position with greater responsibility, would require working for longer hours. For those in part-time employment, their ability to progress was often perceived as limited, however, there were differing opinions on why this was so. For some, their inability to progress was a consequence of their own decisions (e.g. not wishing to offer additional time), but, for others, their inability to progress was reflective of the culture of their working environments that marginalised and did not value part-time employees. Workplace attitudes to part-time employees were often perceived to be negative by participants as they were seen to be based on the notion that time in work was indicative of commitment and productivity and part-time individuals were therefore ‘time deviants’ (Epstein et al., 1999: 11). These working hours then tended to attribute certain characteristics to employees that utilised them. For example, Nina had made the decision to reduce her working hours from full-time to four days a week as she was finding it difficult to combine her childcare responsibilities with employment. However, after renegotiating her hours she noted a change in workplace attitude towards herself:

The fact that I do part-time limits me as well because the work force says well you’re not there to kind of...somebody else has got to do your work when you’re not there, it has to be managed in such a way but you always have that kind of stigma. Not that you’re not competent at your job, not that you’re slacking at your job...I don’t know, it’s just that stigma of you can’t commit to your job, you can’t love your job, you can’t be a slave to your job, definitely, there is always that stigma of you can’t be a slave to your job but everybody else can (Nina).

Working part-time therefore appeared to compromise her own ambitions in work as she felt that she could not progress within the organization. She believed that
working part-time made her appear less committed to her job and therefore felt excluded from opportunities for promotion:

I've indirectly been told that because I can't give that commitment I can't work my way up ... I was like well I'm a single parent, I can't put in the hours so that means I'm not going to get up the career ladder and for me that was a big knock back but I thought if I hadn't been a single parent, if I hadn't have been in the position I was right now then I'm sure I would have been in a much more career wise, stable position because I would have been able to offer more in terms of work (Nina).

As working part-time hours was perceived by Nina as a product of her parenting alone, it was then this situation which was seen to cause the barrier to progression. However, she also resented the way that part-time workers were devalued in her workplace, that to be part-time was to communicate a lower level of commitment and therefore an unsuitability for progression. Her ability to engage with her employment in a more meaningful way (e.g. beyond the financial) was then challenged and so she struggled to construct a coherent sense of identity within the workplace. Nina subsequently decided to take a one year career break.

For others, like Lucy, being a parent and wanting to work part-time did not necessarily create a barrier to accessing higher level positions as flexible working practices could be available in their areas of employment. Lucy had previously been employed full-time as a regional manager for a charity. She wished to move closer to her family after having children and so applied for the same position in a different region, although on a part-time basis. However, she described encountering a number of difficulties in practically negotiating the job within her part-time hours. She discussed how the position entailed a large workload and the need for travel, which meant she would invariably work beyond her contracted hours and intensify her work routine in order to meet her employer’s expectations. Yet, even working above and beyond the role requirements could not negate the stigma that was associated with part-time workers:

I did have a boss there who said at one stage to me that she wasn’t sure that being a senior manager and being part-time was compatible...I did feel at that stage that there was a...that my manager felt that you couldn’t be part-time and do your job properly (Lucy).
Lucy felt that her success within her role as a manager was questioned because she could not partake in longer work hours. After her manager’s revelations (which she reported to her HR department), Lucy felt that she could not be considered a ‘success’ as a manager if she continued to work part-time. This reflects the findings of other studies that have found that flexible working within the context of a long work hours culture is generally conceived as “incompatible with holding a senior management post” (Drew and Murtagh, 2005: 262). The option of going full-time was not considered available by Lucy because of her responsibilities as a parent, therefore, she perceived that her only option was to leave that employment. For her, the decision to leave was not purely a product of her manager’s attitude and opinion regarding part-time working, rather, it was also “partly because in some ways I wondered whether she was right”. She described how she felt “like I was a lesser member of the team” and attributed this to her own inability to offer additional time due to her caring commitments. For Lucy, working part-time was found to be at odds with such cultures and, instead of accepting her marginalised position within this employment (which Dick and Hyde (2006) often found to be a common characteristic amongst part-time professionals), she left to pursue a different career pathway. Therefore, whilst working part-time hours itself may not always negate the ability of participants to meaningfully engage with their employment, the connotations that were associated with such working hours could undermine their efforts to sustain such engagement as they feel that they are seen as less valuable than their full-time colleagues.

5.3.4 Lone parenthood as a potential barrier to progression

There were a number of participants who argued that being a lone parent (or for others, mothering in general), presented a barrier to employment progression. The meaning of work was seen to change at the point of entering parenthood which meant that ambition levels and expected career trajectories were forfeited or limited. The notion that one’s career was either ‘on hold’ or had been ‘interrupted’ by the responsibilities of parenting was often discussed. For the majority of participants, progression within one’s employment was an ambition, although it was generally felt that this progression may not be achieved until their care-giving responsibilities had been reduced (for example, when their
When Margaret’s children were younger she was employed as a supply teacher so that she could work her routine around their needs. As her children became older and were more able to care for themselves, Margaret then felt able to apply for work that had more set working hours. Similarly, Katy, in her first interview, described how:

[Until [son] goes to school, now I have such a routine going because I’ve been very lucky with my workplace that I’ve been given the rota to create the scenario that I’ve got, it would be very difficult for me to move workplace right now, um, so that would create a problem for me (Katy).

However, in her subsequent interview, Katy’s son had started at school and so had a different routine. To work around this, Katy had begun to move from care work, which required twelve hour shifts, to assessing work which was much more flexible. Katy’s ambition was to move into a career in counselling, however, such a move was seen as unpredictable. Therefore, whilst her son reaching school age gave her the opportunity to change employments, she still felt restricted in the type of work she could engage with.

For participants, in considering what type of work was acceptable for their situations and what may be suitable for future employment, previous working experiences were critical. In particular, their experiences of working cultures were crucial as certain cultures were seen to make it more difficult for those with outside-of-work responsibilities to engage with the workplace. Throughout their working histories, a number of participants had been employed in professional or managerial positions which they believed encouraged cultures of long work hours and presenteeism. For example, Nina had previously been involved at a management level in a business with her husband which he continued to run alone after the separation. She did not want to return to a management position as she knew how difficult it had been to look after her children in that situation (as was also found in Lucy’s experience):

When I was running the business I had no time for my children. My younger daughter was born…I think I left when she was two so I couldn’t be a mum, didn’t have time to spend with her, talk with her, watch TV, go
the park or anything so then I thought forget the business, I want a nine till five job where I can go to work, leave my stress at the work, come home and just be a mum (Nina).

Her identity work as a mother was undermined by the pressures of running a family business and such a challenging situation was therefore consciously avoided in searching for future employment. Another example is that of Lydia who currently works as a receptionist at a school, however her background was in financial services where she had worked for many years as an assistant bank manager before having children:

I was going to go back after maternity leave, they offered me my own branch but I decided that I wanted to be a full-time mum for a while because I didn't have the time, I didn't want to give the time to being a manager because it would mean long hours and bringing work home so I left there … It was inflexible really and I knew that the view really was 'sigh, so and so's off again because their child is poorly' so I knew it wasn't going to be flexible. As far as carrying on with a career in the bank I just didn't think it would be child friendly because I knew before I had children I was taking work home and I was reading or finishing reports or I was staying in the office until eight/nine o'clock at night so I just couldn't do it … I think if you do a management post then you have to accept that you’re prepared to put in those hours (Lydia).

After becoming a lone parent, Lydia had continued to work part-time in a variety of financial services roles but eventually took a job within a school which allowed her to do the school run each day and also have time off during the school holidays. She described how she did miss the challenge of the management role but felt that she would not be able to properly engage in such a work environment now that she was a lone parent as she was morally obligated to spend more time on her children. Experiences of such ‘moral discourses’ have also been highlighted in the decision making of working mothers from dual-parent families (Medved, 2009: 146).

For Lydia, long work hours were an unavoidable part of more demanding job positions and needed to be accepted if one was to continue working in that area. For the other participants who chose to stay within such roles after having children, this acceptance was a common factor, however, many also described that each workplace was different in their levels of expectations for employees. The aim then was to find a workplace that, whilst expecting commitments of
time, was preferable to the high time demands of previous work environments. Both Sue and Laura highlighted examples of previous working environments that expected extremely high levels of employee time and commitment:

There wasn’t a way of reporting back how many extra hours you were working. The reward you would get is admiration and respect from other people because unless you had four-foot bags under your eyes, you obviously weren’t working hard enough...the general managers would often stay at hotels down the road so that they could be at work until midnight...I really am so glad I decided to move jobs when I did because there is no way that [previous employer] would have allowed me to work the way I have done since coming here to [current employer] and being a mother (Sue).

One of the initiatives was to have an annual away day conference/award ceremony ... I remember being there once and they were talking about oh Rita she would come in on a Sunday and she left her baby when he was only three weeks old and she ignored washing her husband’s cricket whites ... it was just this catalogue of wonderful things that Rita had done for the college and you think you stupid woman, why is this person being put before us as an example of an exemplar, you think well for goodness sake where are your priorities and is that what we’re all supposed to be doing? That’s one of the reasons why I wanted to leave. It was just horrible, the idea that you get praised for neglecting your family basically ... you were seen as wonderful if you went into work at the weekends and you stayed all hours. That’s not what you should be doing ... lip service was paid to the ‘yes of course you must go and look after your children’ etc, etc but the culture was such that there were a group of people leading it who were workaholics basically and they had this sort of vision that this was the most important thing in our lives (Laura).

In both situations, Sue and Laura managed to move to similar positions in other organizations and so reduced the stress and pressure they were subjected to in their previous employments. For example, Laura moved from her position in Further Education to a comparable position within Higher Education. Expectations regarding time commitment were still apparent, just not to the same degree, so these participants felt more able to engage with their employment and maintain their positions as good employees.

For those who continued to work in more demanding job roles, their constructions of good parenting tended to more heavily revolve around the idea of financial security and stability for their children and so they could more easily justify working the extra hours required of their work positions. In their perceptions, if one wanted to succeed or progress in work then being a lone
parent was not necessarily antithetical to this. Sue and Summer provided two particular examples of such participants. Sue believed that progression within her employment would lead to greater financial security for her daughter and so for the past two years had been working towards a promotion in her operations and training position. However, Sue worked for a museum and due to the recession the organization was having a recruitment freeze and therefore could not offer her a promotion. She found this very difficult to process as “I have done all I can to prove myself and worked way beyond my role during this time” (Sue, Diary). As she felt unrecognised within her work, her identity claim felt undermined. She went on to discuss how the lack of career progression in her organization had left her feeling incredibly frustrated because of the impact it inadvertently had on her daughter:

The only reason that I want to progress and earn more money is to provide an easier life for me and my daughter so at the heart of everything is that I want to be able to have more choices in life and make decisions that suit me and that I don’t necessarily have to think so much about money etc, I want to do the best for her so I almost felt like I’d let her down, you know that after all that hard work and effort and picking up from the childminder at the eleventh hour just before she charges me for being late sort of thing, all of that stuff and being a bit grumpy and snappy which is another thing (Sue).

Sue described how both time and energy were sacrificed in her position as carer in order to help establish her identity as a good breadwinning parent. However, as Sue was not rewarded for her efforts in work, she felt that she had failed her daughter as both a carer and provider. Due to the lack of opportunity for progression, Sue subsequently took a job elsewhere.

Summer also linked her career success to a greater ability to provide for her daughter and so was prepared to give all the additional hours needed to achieve her ambition. Summer’s ‘dream job’ was to work as an art teacher at a secondary school and she pursued this goal persistently, even after having to leave sixth form early because of the birth of her daughter. However, Summer’s career success was in many ways due to the childcare support that she had organised for her daughter whilst she studied and was at work. For those participants who worked full-time within more demanding roles, paid childcare (for example, childminders or breakfast clubs/after school clubs) was intrinsic to
their ability to partake in these types of jobs. Yet, this paid childcare was only affordable because of the higher wage that these professional or managerial jobs offered. For those who tried to work full-time in non-professional or non-managerial positions, for example Nina, the costs of such paid childcare could outweigh the financial benefits of working full-time hours. Such an issue has also been discussed in Ford’s (1996) work on lone parents, employment and the perceived barrier of childcare costs.

5.3.5 Negotiating workplace expectations

For a number of the participants, the way to negotiate particular workplace expectations was to challenge them. A particularly effective challenge was to lead by example where an alternative, but equally productive, way of working was championed. For example, within two weeks of starting her new job in research, Lucy became a lone parent and so her attitude to work, as well as her way of working, changed:

I’m in a team where there are seven of us and I’m the only one who has children and when I first got the job I was worried because they seem to work very long hours and also socialise together a lot and I thought this is great but I can’t do it, I can’t just stay on when something needs to be done, I just don’t have that flexibility so I guess I was worried from a work point of view that I would be the kind of strange one but actually I think in some ways I’ve influenced them a bit the other way … I think because some of them are younger there is this sense of you have to work long hours to show that you are really committed whereas I’ve become much more clear about I will work my hours and I will do my job and if I can’t manage to do that in the time then I’ll have to say no I’ll do that tomorrow and I think to be honest I’ve probably shifted them a bit. It was a bit manic before. It was almost a competition to show who is the keenest and who works the most hours and I’ve kind of stepped outside of that and some of them seem to have followed me (laughs) (Lucy).

By clearly demonstrating to other employees that she could still work hard as well as having outside commitments, Lucy challenged the existing culture of her work. Her confidence in herself as an employee allowed her to challenge the traditional conceptions of what it was to be a good worker. Through her example, she offered an alternative way of working to the other employees, as well as an alternative understanding of what constituted a good employee. Some of her colleagues began to emulate this, and so undermined the prevailing expectations for long work hours and presenteeism as the ideal way
of properly engaging with work. A previous study by Jarvis on working parents in the UK and US found that many professional working parents felt unable to challenge such long working hours in their careers because of the fear that it could lead to “the loss of this status” (2002: 350). Whilst Lucy was concerned about unemployment, her practical circumstances as a primary carer meant that such fears were muted, allowing her to challenge her work’s long work hours culture.

Margaret was also seen to offer a challenge to traditional expectations regarding working time, although her ability to do so was seen to have been made easier by the less autocratic nature of her employer. Margaret was employed as a teacher of academic English and described her work as very flexible. She had core teaching hours which she needed to be present for, however, the additional work she needed to complete had no specific working hours attached so when completed she could leave work: “if you’ve done everything you need to do then you can leave”. Therefore, it was her productivity, not her visibility, within the workplace that was the key factor in her employment. This flexibility allowed her to negotiate her work and family in a way that she felt would not have been possible if they had enforced working hours. This approach to work, described by some as ‘flexible availability’ (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009: 33) or by others as ‘intensification of work’ (Lewis, 2001: 26), where productivity (e.g. quality time) was just as favourable as visibility (e.g. long work hours) was rare in the work experiences of participants. Many felt that this alternative understanding of work time should be more widely available as it would mean that “lots of people with children would be able to work more” (Michael). However, success and commitment for many continued to be measured on hours spent within the workplace, and, within the context of a national economic recession, maintaining a job, rather than questioning existing working cultures and expectations, remained an important concern.

In the experiences of participants, it appeared that the ability to challenge existing traditional work cultures and expectations was found most difficult by those in managerial positions. For example, Michael felt strongly that productivity was more important than visibility and so would intensify his own
working practices so that he could resist his organization’s expectations regarding good managerial behaviour. He felt that he could still meaningfully engage with employment even within a shorter period of time. However, because of the threat of redundancy, Michael had to revert back to working longer hours as he felt that his organization understood this as indicative of being a good manager. Similarly, in her previous job as a manager within the prison service, Samantha had held the belief that long work hours equated to productivity and commitment. However, after giving birth to her son and experiencing what it was like to work within such a culture as a parent, she became more aware of the need to offer support to those with out-of-work responsibilities. Yet, whilst she could become an advocate for others within her team, her position as a manager was more difficult to change. She described how being a parent had made her a more empathetic manager, but “not necessarily a better manager”. This view was also shared by Michael. For Michael and Samantha, their understandings of good management continued to be affected by traditional beliefs concerning the professional unemotional manager (Hatcher, 2003). As emotions, such as empathy, still tend to be understood as a feminine trait, ideals of the unemotional, unempathetic manager reflect the belief that a good manager is “predominantly masculine” (Powell et al., 2002: 177).

One of the most difficult work expectations experienced by participants concerned commitment, or rather, expectations for ‘total commitment’ (Coyne, 2002). For those without informal support networks, child illness (as mentioned in section 5.2.1) was the major issue which could undermine their ability to meet such expectations, as the care would need to be provided by themselves. For example, Lucy mentioned that she worried about taking time off work for child sickness because “I don’t want to be seen as the one who is not as committed as everyone else and has to drop everything because of kids”. Similarly, Lydia described how:

It’s always a bit open ended … you always hope that it’s just going to be one or two days but if it’s something longer then that can be quite stressful. So it’s quite stressful for a single parent to sort of…your commitments to your child has always got to come first but at the same time you’ve got the stress of you’re letting people down at work, the
worry about whether you could lose your job or...just the pressures of losing your job if you’re off too much and every time you are off you are very conscious that...this looks bad or whatever and then you get the situation where you’re not feeling very well so you might drag yourself in when you shouldn’t do anyway (Lydia).

For Lydia, stress related to child illness was experienced for a number of reasons, including the pride she had in herself as a worker. By taking time off work to care for a sick child, she appreciated the impact that her time off could have on the workload of other colleagues, their perception of her as a co-worker, and subsequently her ability to be seen as a good employee. Her identity work within the workplace was therefore tied into a moral sense of responsibility to her co-workers and employer.

Despite such awareness and the efforts of participants to minimise the impact of child illness on their work, participants still felt that childcare and work commitments were often seen to be juxtaposed by employers. In their view, taking care of sick children necessarily meant that work was of low priority for them and they would then offer less commitment. Many of the participants had limited informal support networks to rely on in cases of child illness, yet it was felt that organizations tended to see this as a clear ‘choice’ of family over work, rather than as a reflection of necessity. Building on Runté and Mills’ work, these anxieties may represent a conflict between the expectations of dominant discourses surrounding work and family and the ‘lived reality’ of those with outside of work responsibilities (2004: 237).

A further example of the clash that could be felt between expectations surrounding work and family was described by Samantha who felt that there was an “unsaid expectation that you should prioritise work over other things” and that being a parent “wouldn’t affect work so I would be professional at all times and I would do everything that anybody who wasn’t a parent could do”. This was often difficult for her to achieve in practice as invariably she would be asked to attend a late afternoon meeting or work into the evenings which she then had to turn down because of her childcare responsibilities. In those circumstances, she reported that her colleagues were very understanding and often apologetic for asking, however, she still found these times stressful. For Samantha, it was the fear of reprisals rather than the actual experience of
discrimination that was most pertinent: “I think my fear of what the reaction would be was always worse than the actual reaction”, therefore, it was her own expectations regarding work that caused her to feel guilt if she could not meet particular standards. Samantha’s family history may explain why she held such expectations for herself as she described growing up in a family “where hard work was valued”. She remembered seeing her mum “working and raising the family” and her dad working “really long hours” and believed that she “approached work with the same attitude”.

Consequently, when Samantha became a lone parent, she found it difficult to negotiate the values of the ‘hard worker’ alongside the expectations of parenting as she believed that taking time off work for her son would undermine her ability to be a good employee. In one particular situation she noted a co-worker’s reaction to her parental status:

I thought it had been noticeable but interestingly I was talking to a colleague recently who is a senior lecturer in our department and I bumped into her at a birthday party and she didn’t know I had [son’s name] and she said to me Samantha I was so surprised to see you there, I had no idea you had a child, she said just being a parent never seems to impact on your work and she said I was just so surprised and I thought god you know what about that time that I steamed into the meeting looking all flustered, what about that time the school was shut for the snow and I had to come in late (Samantha).

In the following interview Samantha was asked how she felt about the colleague’s reaction. She replied:

I think a bit surprised because I thought it would have been more obvious and I suppose a little bit proud that I hadn’t let being a parent or a lone parent impact on work. A little bit…I don’t know, a little bit cross that she had assumed that it would impact…Why should it? (Samantha).

There were two key conflicting notions to consider in Samantha’s case. When discussing expectations in relation to work, Samantha believed that there was an expectation that being a parent should not interfere with work. However, from her co-worker’s reaction, there also appeared to be the expectation that being a parent would necessarily interfere with work. This expectation was also discussed by Coltrane who found that when female employees become mothers it was expected that “family obligations will inevitably intrude on their ability to commit themselves to their demanding careers” (2004: 215). To
negotiate such stereotypes, working mothers in professional positions have
often been reluctant to make the difficulties they face apparent to their
employers, for example, Acker and Armenti found that “being a mother in
academic life is a predominantly silent experience” (2004: 11). This silencing
was also found in the experiences of participants, however, the pressure they
experienced in taking primary responsibilities for both caring and providing
meant that such silences were all the more constricting.

Many participants struggled to negotiate the expectations within their
workplaces alongside the expectations associated with being a lone parent.
From the analysis of the data, one way to cope with these expectations was
through the use of humour. Humour was a part of their daily lives and could be
used to ridicule the social expectations that they experienced as primary carers
and providers: “you get to the point you just think this is just daft and you just
end up laughing” (Lydia); “if you look at things properly sometimes they actually
are quite funny” (Katy).

For Margaret, who had written two semi-fictional books about a lone mother
character, telling stories of perceived conflict between caring and providing
responsibilities was a way of demonstrating to others how ridiculous such
supposedly serious situations could be:

   It’s like watching comedy, sometimes the most amusing comedy is the
   most…. Average everyday things that have happened to everybody and I
   think it’s the same when you are recounting things that have happened
   (Margaret).

For Samantha, being a lone parent meant that there would be unavoidable
situations where expectations concerning work and family clashed. She felt
powerless in such situations but to cope with such a feeling she described how
“I can’t do anything to change this other than change how I respond to it”. The
use of humour and laughter was their way of resisting the expectations
associated with “serious social categories” (Butler, 1999 [1990]: xxx).

5.3.6 Informal exclusion

Whilst many participants expressed a wish to engage to a greater degree with
their employment, they often felt that they experienced situations of informal
exclusion which could then undermine this engagement as well as their identity work. This experience of social isolation and exclusion was also highlighted in Gill and Davidson's (2001) pilot study on professional lone mothers. Many felt that they often missed out on information because of their working hours and therefore “sometimes you don’t feel as included perhaps compared to others” (Helen). Technology had helped negate this experience for some, for instance Margaret discussed how her work sent out regular emails to all staff to keep them up to date with important information. However, information could also be missed at times when participants were present within the workplace, for example, during lunch breaks. Participants in both part-time and full-time employment reported how lunch breaks would often be used to complete additional work:

I always skip lunch at work because that means I can get much more work done and that I can leave earlier and that’s always my goal (Margaret).

I’m not great at taking a lunch break...Say I have a phone call I need to make that has to be done in work hours like I had to ring up and sort out my tax credits the other day and sometimes I will be aware of the fact that I’ve had ten/fifteen minutes on the phone and I’ll take a shorter lunch break to compensate for that (Samantha).

Utilising one’s breaks as additional pockets of work time allowed participants to feel that they were compensating for any time that was seen to be lost due to family or home related responsibilities. Additionally, by visibly working through their breaks (e.g. by taking lunch at their desks), participants felt that they could demonstrate their productiveness and dedication to their work role. This was also found in Jarvis’s (2002) study on the experiences of those from dual-parent families involved in cultures of presenteeism. The problem that could arise from this type of working practice was social disconnection. By privileging direct work activities over more social activities, such as lunch breaks, participants often reported feeling disconnected from their co-workers or missing out on information because they could not participate in the informal networking that occurred during breaks or after work. Simpson’s (1998) study on female managers also reported this disconnection as many did not appreciate that these social activities were just as valuable as other work-related activities.
A further form of workplace exclusion that many participants reported experiencing was the negative perceptions that were often apparent regarding working parents. This stereotyping of the ‘working parent’ was then seen to attribute certain characteristics to those employees with caring responsibilities. The participants in this study were all aware that to progress within one’s employment, one needed to be perceived as a good employee. This good employee status was seen to be synonymous with prioritising work over other out-of-work commitments or responsibilities (section 5.3.5). For many of the participants, being a working parent was seen to create a potential barrier to the construction of such an image, not just because of the short-notice leave that they may need to take but also because of the stigma they felt was generally attached to working parents (particularly working mothers). Lucy and Sue both provided examples of this in their interviews:

Occasionally people will make comments, like a colleague the other week had been on holiday and came back and turned her computer on and said oh I’ve got to deal with all these emails after having been off for a week but then you’re used to doing that aren’t you Lucy? And I said sorry? I genuinely didn’t know why she meant that and she said oh you know because of having half terms off and stuff and I thought well I have the same amount of holiday as everybody else so where has this perception come from that I often have a week off and I didn’t say anything, I just sort of said yeah I suppose so but I thought then do people have this perception of me that I’m off more than other people (Lucy).

What I really can’t stand is if I pick up on a vibe which people do do in a jokey way, you know, so part of the negotiations of me coming back to work is that I don’t work weekends … it’s bad enough that I only see [daughter] for an hour each night, if I didn’t see her on the weekends then I may as well not have a child, but every now and again there are jokey little ‘oh that’s something at the weekend so we won’t tell Sue, ha ha ha ha’ because with the visitor services part of my role, weekends are very much part of their culture and that annoys me a little bit but you just smile and get on with it but what I can’t stand is people’s assumptions that because you’re a parent that means you’re going to be difficult or actually you’re trying not to work. I work really hard and I’m exhausted pretty much every day because like I said I don’t sit down until nine o’clock at night and then I feel that I’ve blinked and then got up again and for people to put me in that category would really make me furious (Sue).

Many participants agreed that working parents, by virtue of their family responsibilities, were seen to engage less with work and hold less commitment to work than those without outside-of-work responsibilities. The stigma that
these family commitments would then made them ‘difficult’ employees, as they would demand additional support in the form of provisions for short-notice leave time and long periods of leave during their children’s school holidays, was often described by participants through their own experiences. Whilst participants disagreed with many of the presumptions about working parents, they found them difficult to challenge as they were so prevalent. Consequently, this stigma led to the feeling that they were being excluded from the identity of the good employee.

This informal exclusion through stigmatisation could even lead to participant’s decisions to pursue employment elsewhere. Laura had previously been working within a Further Education (FE) college but experienced difficulties because she felt that her manager held particular negative beliefs about working parents:

> When I was in FE [further education college] and it was much higher pressure...I had one particular boss who was a bit...she said she was very sympathetic but in practice she wasn’t ... I would feel terrible if I had to go home because of the kids because that just felt like that was a crime (Laura).

For Laura, taking time off work to spend with her children happened very rarely, however she felt that these rare occurrences made her appear a more unreliable worker in the eyes of her manager: “it added a few black marks to my name”. Interestingly, it appeared that it was often the potential need for time off that created such stigmas, not necessarily a reflection of parents’ actually working practices. In Laura’s case, the stigma she felt then undermined her confidence in herself as a good employee. She felt that she worked very hard, often beyond what was expected of her, yet as a parent she could never seem to be seen to the same standard as other employees as she was ascribed certain characteristics to the detriment of her identity work. As mentioned in section 5.2.3, the perception that individuals may be devalued because of their differentiation from the norm has also been highlighted in a number of studies on women in professional occupations (Foschi, 1996; Heilman and Haynes, 2005; Swim and Sanna, 1996; Valian, 1999).

### 5.4 Constructing a work-family routine
As sections 5.2 and 5.3 have shown, participants held various understandings regarding family and work. For each participant, a unique daily routine was then needed to allow them to effectively engage with both their work and family responsibilities. However, constructing and maintaining such a work-family routine could often be difficult. This section will explore the importance of routine in the lives of participants and how expectations around parenting, family and work could influence or undermine their well-worked rhythms of day-to-day life.

5.4.1 The importance of a good work-family routine

Constructing and maintaining a good work-family routine was incredibly important for participants because of its links with structure and control. As sections 5.2.4 and 5.3.5 highlighted, participants felt that they needed to present to others that they were in control of their situations:

I think it’s something about needing to be…I don’t know…Or wanting to be seen to be in control of things and you know wanting to be seen to be managing working and the household and whatever else goes along side that…there’s a lot of ‘should’ thinking in there about what I should be able to do and maintain in terms of standards…just wanting to do everything and needing to be independent so I think it’s something about not wanting to be reliant on other people and show…Yes I’m parenting mostly on my own but that’s ok, I can manage (Samantha).

As a lone parent, participants were framed as solely responsible for the future outcomes of their children: “If they turn into delinquents then I’m the one who will get the blame from the father and I will be the one who will have to pick up the pieces” (Betty). Because of this, many participants felt that they were under continual surveillance: “You just don’t want to draw attention to yourself, like oh she can’t control her child kind of thing” (Hazel). Managing and organising one’s work-family routine was one of the most important ways in which participants felt they could present and sustain an image of control. The dual-parent family as the ‘norm’ was seen to exist on a well-worked routine between two parents, therefore, to meet the same standards, a comparable routine was critical.

One specific event which was seen to directly affect the structure of participants’ daily routines was the point at which many became lone parents. This was also found in Gill and Davidson’s (2001) pilot study on professional lone mothers.
For those who had previously been part of a dual-parent family, there was a great awareness of the impact that this event could have on children and developing a new routine in as short a period of time as possible became essential in minimising the impact. As a relatively new lone parent, Lucy was especially aware of the need for specific routines in maintaining the well-being of her children:

My oldest girl always had problems with going to bed and going to sleep on her own and then when we split up she was quite obviously upset and disturbed and wouldn’t go to bed at night so I ended up seeing a mental health worker for her and that’s why we set up the routine of the younger one going to bed and then me having this special half hour … so that’s changed but that was a very kind of deliberate putting that in place because she wasn’t going to sleep without me lying there with her until she went to sleep which was just exhausting (Lucy).

In some respects, this new routine was vital for both parent and child as Lucy’s ability to engage and function to a certain level in work would have been compromised by her low energy levels. Betty also commented on this need for routine for both parent and children in her experiences of becoming a lone parent:

No matter whose fault it is you have changed their lives and you’ve got to realise that once you’ve got through the anger and the tearfulness and woe is me act you’ve got to think to yourself what have they been facing? They need a routine, they need structure and unless you get your act together, you know, no wonder you’re tired and worn out because you have no time on your own and I don’t mean to sit there with a bar of chocolate I mean to be able to get on with the things like the ironing or the paperwork or paying bills online or telephone banking. You need that to keep on top of things (Betty).

As lone parents, participants often felt that they had to meet the same standards of parenting as would be apparent in the ‘normal’ dual-parent family and, for Betty, a strict routine then allowed her to address the myriad of activities that were needed in order to sustain her family life.

Yet, in order to partake in these activities that were required as part of everyday life (such as food shopping and housework), participants often had to combine such activities with childcare within their routines. As Katy discussed:
The only time I can do those essentials that everyone has to do is in my time with my son and that stresses me out because it’s like I don’t want to be doing that now, I want to be sat playing or I want to be having quality time but when your working day is done that’s the only chance you have to do it (Katy).

Therefore, a structured routine could help them to cover all the activities that they felt were expected of them, however, such activities were often conducted concurrently with other activities such as childcare.

Preparing meals was one particularly important area of the participants’ routines that was seen to help them meet expectations concerning the family: “we always eat at the table whichever meal it is I insist on that and that’s just what I see as a nice upbringing” (Lydia), “have time to make a proper dinner and my eldest helps me a bit which is nice. Sit down at the table like a proper normal family” (Ruth, Diary). For Michael, mealtimes reflected a structured time which he believed was important for his daughter. He also discussed how “It’s really the one time of the day that I can guarantee to spend with her and also I think food is very important as part of a child’s growing up”.

The process of food preparation was an important part of the identity work of many participants as ensuring that their children ate well was seen as intrinsic to providing them with a good upbringing and, therefore, being a good parent. For example, Lydia discussed how “I want them to eat healthily and just try and get them to be normal people”. For Lydia, the pressure of good parenting in relation to meal times was again related to the idea of responsibility, that the child’s welfare was purely hers to guard and she would be to blame if they do not grow up to be what she, and others, perceived to be a ‘normal’ person. However, Lydia went on to discuss how she struggled to meet those standards in relation to meal times when she was short of time. Both of her children went to after school clubs during the week as Lydia tried to provide them with the “same life as they would have had if they were still with mummy and daddy together”. In trying to juggle these additional commitments, Lydia believed that she was failing to meet the standards required in regard to good parenting and meal times: “I don’t really like Wednesday meals, it really is a rush and its whatever I can get on a plate quick enough”. In those situations, Lydia was forced to substitute the high standards of parenting she held in one area to
enable her to address the high standards of parenting in another area. Irrespective of working hours, the majority of participants discussed the importance of food preparation and organised mealtimes within their routines. Interestingly, such findings stand at odds with previous research on full-time working parents from dual-parent couples which found that they are more likely to depend on ready meal or take-away options in order to cope with their situations (Devine et al., 2009). Considering such work, it appears that the ideals of good parenting in regard to food choice were often self-imposed by the lone parents as they sought to do more in order to make up for the perceived shortcoming of being a lone parent.

5.4.2 Maintaining a stable work-family routine

When participants had established what they perceived to be a good work-family routine, they then faced the challenge of maintaining it. In Lydia’s experiences, her need for strictness in regard to her routine had led to it becoming ‘regimented’, which was also found in the experiences of other participants. Participants’ diaries offered a clear picture to the extent of this often ‘regimented’ routine. An example of one particularly regimented day (Lydia) can be found in Appendix 5. On working days, morning routines were strictly timed to meet either school hours or working hours, whichever began first. For those in part-time employment, routines tended to be constructed around children’s school routines, whereas for those in full-time employment, routines tended to be constructed around work needs. Evening routines were often slightly more flexible, dependent upon work needs, children’s after-school clubs or hobbies. However, maintaining time for an evening meal was a major constant in the structuring of such routines as previously highlighted. For example, from Lydia’s diary in Appendix 5, she commented on the difficulty of negotiating meals on days which involved after school clubs: “Arrange for mum to put a roast dinner on at 3pm. Tonight is a busy evening and I would find it difficult to fit in a proper meal without her help”. In this example, and throughout the routines of other participants, informal and formal childcare support was vital in maintaining day-to-day rhythms, which has also been found to be the case for lone parents involved in atypical working hours (Le Bihan and Martin, 2004).
For later in the evening, the time after children went to bed tended to be characterised as ‘me time’ by participants, yet activities often revolved around housework. Weekend routines and holiday time, without the structure of school or work to guide them were more flexible. However, whilst children’s leisure pursuits were described, this time was also often used to ‘catch up’ on home-related tasks, as well as any additional work that needed to be completed. For example, as a teacher, Summer had the same holiday time as her daughter. She would engage in leisure activities with her daughter in this time but she would also utilise it to negotiate her workload:

I did all my planning during the summer holidays. My little girl and I sat on the beach so whilst she was sat there I took my laptop down and did literally my whole planning for the year which has worked out to my advantage as all it means now is that I have to tweak the odd thing now and again (Summer).

‘Me time’ for the participants was therefore very rare as most of their available time was spent engaged in activities that were seen as necessary in meeting what they saw to be the same level of standards as the dual-parent family.

For those whose ex-partner took some responsibility for the childcare on evenings or weekends, strict routines often unravelled as their routines during leisure time had tended to be constructed around the children:

I get quite lonely sometimes when they are away although it is a relief not to have to cook and sort out all the homework and tantrums. I try to make sure that I eat when I get home and don’t spend too long cooking. I tend to snack on crackers when I get in because I am hungry – then I don’t feel like cooking and don’t get round to making anything until really late. Then I don’t want to go to bed and end up staying up late looking at the internet or playing games. I get so annoyed with myself (Laura, Diary).

As described, the children themselves acted as catalysts for routines. Like many others, Laura felt frustrated with herself if routines were not followed, especially when the children were not around. Her understandings of her own identity within such times became more ambiguous as she was not involved in any particular role. To help fill such time, Laura had become involved in a rowing team which offered a new routine and a new opportunity for identity work: “I now think of myself as a mother and a worker and a rower (laughs)” (Laura). This suggests that routines can offer a sense of comfort for those
involved in them as they allow for continuity in identity work. A sense of unease may then also be provoked when routines are not maintained. This was especially pertinent in regard to work routines, for example, in Katy’s case of becoming a lone parent, her personal life had suffered a number of changes. Yet the consistency and familiarity of her work routine appeared to lessen her anxiety as it had allowed her to sustain a relatively continuous sense of self.

The analysis of the diaries also highlighted the interconnections between participants’ routines and the routines of others. The routines of work, school, and informal/formal childcare support, plus many other unseen aspects, were all integrated into the daily routines of participants, which meant that if one routine was adapted in some way it would directly affect the others:

Arrive at station just after 8am to discover that there are no London bound trains due to over running engineering works. A rail replacement bus journey means that I don’t make it into the office until 9.40am. Very stressful and not a good start to the week. Luckily I don’t have any meeting planned for Monday morning – but means I have to play catch up all day – and no time for lunch (Hazel, Diary).

5.30 to pick [son] up. I’d planned to leave a bit earlier so I could get some food shopping on the way but got delayed with a phone assessment I’d needed to do so didn’t have time as I was worried about getting to after school club on time, I hate him being the last child there ☹️ (Samantha, Diary).

Interestingly, whilst constructing a good work-family routine was seen as a way of presenting that one was ‘in control’ of a situation, this stability was, in effect, dependent upon aspects outside of the control of participants. As the routines of participants could be easily disrupted, notions of control regarding such routines were, in many respects, illusory. In addition, as Collinson has pointed out, “the more we prioritize order, the more we are likely to be threatened by change” (2003: 533). Yet, there was still the perception that it was the personal responsibility of participants to maintain such routines. This highlights the paradoxical situation that participants were faced with.

5.4.3 The restrictions of a ‘regimented’ work-family routine

A structured, ‘regimented’ daily routine could allow participants to feel a greater sense of control over the numerous expectations that they experienced as
primary carers and providers. However, such strict routines were also identified as one of the most difficult things about the lone parent situation:

[T]he worst thing I think about being a single parent, a lone parent whatever, is that inability to get anywhere other than just the day, you know that inability to sort the loft out, just all that crap that just build up because all you feel like you can do is just keep plodding (Laura).

Surviving their day-to-day responsibilities was the aim of the majority of participants, with many feeling that they were unable to plan beyond the immediate future. Participants often described intentions to make significant changes to their work-family routines, however, the need to simply maintain the current work-family system meant that changes were rarely made. For example, Betty had heard that there may be redundancies in her organization and so started to pursue additional qualifications in subject areas that she was especially interested in and would like to pursue a career in. These were seen as her ‘back up plans’. However, the rumours of redundancies proved to be inaccurate and so Betty continued within her established work-family routine. To establish a new routine (e.g. by a change in career) when an existing routine was still relatively stable was perceived to be too risky.

As briefly mentioned in section 5.3.1, these routines were seen to help participants ‘survive’ their day-to-day responsibilities, but were also restrictive in that they often felt ‘trapped’ within certain locations and types of employment:

I went through a period of about a year eighteen months ago feeling really quite resentful. It was when I was really unhappy at my previous job and looking around for other jobs and thinking god you know I’m stuck in this job and if I didn’t have a child then I could move somewhere else in the country. I could take a job that meant longer hours or having more travel and I’d torture myself by looking at the guardian and jobs and thinking oh gosh that looks lovely but that’s in Scotland and you have to have two days away every week and I really wound myself up (Samantha).

As the lone parent participants were often unable to achieve a sense of ‘progress’, their routines then became a source of oppression, where the pressures of parenting alone were consistently reinforced. The activities of direct work and direct childcare also served to often restrict participants’ abilities to renegotiate their work-family routine as these were allocated the greatest
value in regard to time. A routine constructed around these two points of reference was seen as the most legitimate. This links with Ransome’s (2007) work on the conceptualising of work and life. In his article, it is argued that leisure is often neglected in discourses on ‘life’ as it is seen at odds with the productive areas of work and childcare and so is given a lower level of meaning (2007: 383).

Specific routines could also have additional effects on participants as they could lead to experiences of exclusion. As was highlighted in section 5.3.5, those in part-time work often experienced times of informal exclusion within the workplace. However, many of the full-time participants felt that, due to their routines involving longer work hours, they experienced exclusion in other arenas that could be just as frustrating. For example, Sue felt that she regularly missed out on information, but this loss of information was not related to the forum of work, rather it was in relation to the “informal networking that happens at school with teachers and other parents”:

Most mums that I’ve met in the last two years don’t work or they work part-time. I’m very much in the minority as a full-time working mother and they seem to always know stuff that I don’t know…other parents seem to have been given a list of the class that their kid is going to go into next term and I haven’t got it and that’s largely down to the fact that I’m never there to pick her up so although the child minder will normally get information, occasionally I will get missed out…If I was around more then I would know more and so wouldn’t always be on the back foot (Sue).

This was felt by a number of other full-time working participants who described how their routines had left them ‘one step behind’ in regard to school related events and information. In these examples, the playground after school became a site of knowledge transfer which the full-time working participants could not access. Therefore, irrespective of their differing routines, participants felt that as a primary carer and provider there was always a sense of deficiency somewhere in their negotiations of work and family.

5.4.4 Understanding ‘work-life balance’ and ‘work-family conflict’

The issues of work-life balance and work-family conflict were often discussed by participants in constructing and maintaining a work-family routine. Both
'balance' and 'conflict' were subjective constructions but, for many, these issues caused concern as they felt that without balance there would be conflict. 'Life' in understandings of work-life balance tended to be understood as equating to family and, for Katy, it involved evaluating “what’s worse”, for example, in regard to her son being ill, is it worse to not go into work and then not get paid or let someone else in her support network care for him? Hazel believed that many people had an unrealistic approach to this notion:

I think it’s one of those perfect things that everyone is always searching for but I’m not sure that anyone entirely gets there. I think you’re always torn between the two. I don’t know of anyone who had ever said oh I’ve got a perfect work-life balance because even if you...say if find your perfect work-life balance through working part-time then there are pros and cons on working part-time and then you might spend more time with your child but then actually your work just becomes about getting money because you’re not properly engaged in the work culture, you’re not properly part of the team, you’re just there on a couple of days basis and that would be difficult and stressful and I certainly think that...Its one of these things that all companies I’ve worked for have all talked about work-life balance and things that they put in place to help deal with your work life balance (Hazel).

All of the participants had some understanding of work-life balance but felt that there was very little guidance on what this entailed. This reflects Hyman et al.’s assertion that balance as a concept is flawed as there are “no recognized standards of ‘work-life balance’ to draw upon” (2003: 115). As Hazel described, each work-family routine has its pros and cons and to suggest that a ‘perfect’ balance existed created anxiety for those who felt that they were unable to meet the same standards as other ‘normal’ families. For Halpern and Murphy, this stress is a direct consequence of such metaphors of ‘balancing’ or ‘juggling’ as they are necessarily “anxiety provoking” (2005: 3).

Comparing the findings from this thesis with research regarding ‘balance’ for those in dual-parent families, it would appear that such experiences of anxiety may be more acute for those in lone parent families. For example, in his research on working dual-parent couples, Ba’ found that “through gender lines” these couples were more likely to be able to “harmonise work and family, keeping clear boundaries between the two domains” (2010: 5.2). As the notion of work-family balance can be seen to encompass two gendered role positions,
such a concept will, therefore, be more difficult to negotiate for those who parent alone.

By analysing participants’ experiences further, it became apparent that perceived conflict was actually a product of a clash in ideologies and expectations between work and family. To be a good parent, one needed to dedicate large amounts of time to children, as well as provide them with a lifestyle in keeping with that of a dual-parent family. To be a good employee (and so qualify for promotions with greater earning potential), one was required to dedicate long periods of time physically in the workplace and preferably separate and prioritise one’s work over any other commitments. This conflict of ideals was described succinctly by Sue who discussed how “I still had the battle that I could be a good manager and a good mother”. The consequence of this situation was that participants were often left feeling that they were lacking in both areas and would struggle to construct themselves as either a good parent or good employee. If this feeling of anxiety and failure became too great, it could then lead to a complete change in one’s work-family routine, for example, Nina felt that she was so often failing in both areas (through child illness and feeling unable to meaningfully engage with work) that by the time of her final interview she had decided to take a career break to concentrate solely on giving time to her children.

Contradictions between work and family expectations could most often be recognised by their ability to induce feelings of guilt in participants: “there is always a constant juggling of the guilt around do I play with the kids, do I go to work, what do I do?” (Lucy). For example, Samantha discussed in her diary how she did not have a lot of time in the mornings with her son because she had to start work at a certain time. She described how: “Rationally I know most working parents don’t spend quality time with their children in the morning but I still feel guilty”. Even equipped with the knowledge that she was fulfilling other expectations in relation to ‘good’ parenting and that the ideals relating to time and parenting were impractical ideologies, Samantha still experienced a feeling of guilt and failure.
In considering how the lone parent participants in this study organised and sought to ‘balance’ their routines, there did appear to be some similarities between their experiences and the experiences of those parents in dual-parent families. For example, Medved (2009) found her in study on dual-career couples that parents will often be involved in ‘reciprocating’, where childcare is shared and exchanged amongst wider networks of friends and family. Such an organising practice was also utilised by the lone parent participants. However, there were other major differences between how dual-parents organised and ‘balanced’ their routines in Medved’s study, such as through the practices of ‘alternating’ and ‘trading off’ (2009: 134, 137). ‘Alternating’ describes the switching of responsibility between parents and the “sharing of childcare activities in the relational context of marriage” (ibid.: 134). ‘Trading off’ described how couples “took turns staying home from work to manage childcare needs” and were described as “relatively easy ways to coordinate emergency care” (ibid.: 137). Considering such work, the processes of organising daily routines for lone parents can be seen as different, as their ability to ‘trade off’ or ‘alternate’ with their ex-partner was often limited.

5.4.5 Separating work and family versus integrating work and family

One of the major challenges facing participants in organising their work-family routine was the pressure to separate one’s work and family responsibilities. It has been argued that the ‘discourse of work’ “accepts as a given the incompatibility of the work and family spheres” (Runté and Mills, 2004: 241), and, for many of the participants, separating work and family was seen as a natural, healthy path to take:

I try to keep it separate because I don’t think really you should take your personal things to work as well as you should try to not bring your job home (Helen).

I think it’s important to separate them otherwise they start to overlap and I don’t think they should. My daughter doesn’t see me a lot because of my work anyway so I wouldn’t want what time we do have to be affected by work in anyway. In the same way if family started to overlap with work I would find it more difficult to do my job and I need to keep that job (Michael).
Hazel also discussed how she tried to separate the two areas, however, she described it as a “survival type thing” rather than an indication of being a good parent or good employee:

If you came into work and you were just constantly thinking about your child then that would just be horrendous because the day would just go so slowly and you would absolutely miserable and it would be really hard whereas I think its slighter easier if you can switch it off (Hazel).

From Michael’s experiences discussed previously, separating work and family was seen to be expected of working fathers, however, separating work and family was also apparent in more general discourses on being a ‘good’ professional employee. In her diary, Lucy mentioned how she needed to speak to her ex partner regarding childcare and directed him to ring her mobile, rather than her work landline, as “I didn’t want to be discussing home stuff in front of colleagues”. When asked why she did this in the subsequent interview she replied: “I wanted to be seen as professional, not sat at work discussing childcare arrangements”. For Lucy, being ‘seen as professional’ equated to not allowing family related issues to interfere with her work. Her professional identity was dependent on her ability to present to others that her work and family remained separate. However, there did appear to be a difference between presenting them as separate and actually achieving this separation, suggesting that this is an ‘artificial separation’, rather than a natural divide between work and family (Roberts, 2008b: 431).

The need to separate work and family was often part of participants’ discussions, but their actual work-family routine tended to suggest that these two areas were often interlinked and that there was a degree of ‘synchronization’ in work and family time (Morehead, 2001: 3). The work-family routine itself was often a product of influences from both areas, rather than constructed purely around one sphere. The use of technology by participants was one such factor that could contribute to a sense of ‘blurring’ between the two (section 5.3.1). Another way that participants’ work and family lives were intertwined was through the use of personalisation in work. Some actively personalised their workspaces with pictures or drawings from home:
I've got all of their pictures and drawings saying mummy I love you and all this up and on the pin board behind me. I mean it's meant to be for my work stuff but I took all of that off and put kid’s photos up (Betty).

In her subsequent interview, Betty was asked why it was important for her to personalise her work space. She replied: “It's my place, my little section, if I want anything in front of me, its pictures of my kids and nothing else”. She went on to say “they're me, they're part of me so I want them around”. Betty's personalisation then helped her to better engage with her employment as the space became both work and family orientated, suggesting that such personalisation acted as an ‘identity trigger’ (Beech et al., 2008: 961). By personalising her workspace, Betty was visibly identifying herself as a mother in work, therefore also demonstrating that she could be both a good parent and a good employee.

For other participants, such as Hazel, the process of personalising ones workspace was more difficult:

I have some photos there of my little boy but I think it's difficult because it's nice to kind of look up and see him and that's lovely but equally it’s hard because you don't want to get like… it can be quite depressing as well because you look up and it makes you think oh my god, I'm not with him, I'm missing out on all this time (Hazel).

As mentioned previously, Hazel felt that separating work and family was a way of ‘surviving’ as a working mother. Whilst she enjoyed having them in her workspace, pictures of her son could also act as a reminder of the time she was spending away from him and, therefore, contributed to feelings of guilt at not being able to fulfil this perceived ideal of good parenting. Hazel also discussed how she was careful not to put too many photos up as “you don’t want to be seen as someone who the only thing people can talk to you about is your children”. This shows how her identity work as a ‘working parent’ was constrained as she felt unsure as to the extent that the ‘parenting’ part of her self should be visible. It also again demonstrates the belief that to be considered a good employee one must separate work and family to some degree and so highlights the antagonisms that may be experienced between identity work as a primary carer and an employee. For Hazel, pictures of children were a visual representation of another priority and commitment in
one’s life. This was seen as acceptable if presented discreetly but may “make you look like you don’t really want to be there” if it becomes the focal point of the workspace.

Whilst personalising one’s workspace was an example of where notions of family became more apparent in the workspace, there were also examples where notions of work became more apparent in the family space. For example, participants often discussed using employment related dialogues with their children. For those participants with older children, work was presented as “something which enhances your life and is a positive” (Laura). Many participants believed that the fact that they worked, as well as their behaviour towards it, would communicate its importance to their children. With those participants with younger children, the notion of work was actively introduced into their conversations:

I do want him to learn that you don’t get anything for free. From when he was a little child and he said why do I have to go to work and I kind of instilled a little phrase into him that mummy has to go to work so as to get pennies so that he can have toys (Katy).

What I have started doing is making sure they know that my work is linked to those things so if one of them says to me please don’t go to work today I will always say mummy has to go to work to buy you treats so they know that work is important even if it’s just related to chocolate bars at the moment (Ruth).

She gets better each year with understanding that if mummy doesn’t go to work then mummy doesn’t get any money (laughs) and that’s what I tell her really, we need money to do nice things and buy you bikes so sometimes I have to go to work (Sue).

These participants presented work as a source of financial security and this was used as an explanation as to why they could not spend extra time with their children. In this way, work related discourses become integrated into their child’s vocabulary at an early age and, by ensuring their children understood why they worked, they could then more easily engage with their employment without the same level of guilt.

Sue discussed such dialogues in greater detail in her diary when she had to work from home one day to look after her daughter. She had a telephone interview booked with a senior colleague so had to “explain to [daughter] when
my mobile rings she needs to be quiet, she agrees”. Sue’s work related dialogues with her daughter formed a major part of the successful navigation of her work-family routine, as it was only with her daughter’s willingness to comply to instructions that work could then enter into the home sphere:

I set the plan for her so if I know like that phone call I had on that day, I knew that was going happen so I would say to her right mummy is going to do work at this time then as soon as I’ve done that we can do jigsaws or whatever and I can try and plan it a little bit and I’ll keep an eye on the clock so do a half hour thing with her then go to my computer and answer some emails and as long as I tell her when I’ve got to do the work bits she tends to be ok (Sue).

One can see here how Sue set a routine for the day, which included both work and family related activities. She then communicated this to her daughter who became a facilitator within this routine and so helped her mother to better engage with her work and so allow her to more easily negotiate her identity work as both a parent and employee.

A further example of how work and family could interlink was the application of skills and knowledge from one area to the other and vice versa. A number of participants were involved in employment related to children or young adults (for example, Beth, Ruth, Summer, Margaret and Laura) and they often remarked on how the knowledge they had acquired at home influenced their work behaviour: “because of the experiences I have with teenagers at home I sometimes think that might inform the way I am with teenagers here” (Laura).

As a nursery nurse, Beth believed that being a parent herself was crucial to her position:

At work I draw on my own experiences and tell the parents and I think that helps. I think sometimes if you’re told what you should be doing by someone who hasn’t got children then how the hell are they meant to know? You could have all the experience in the world but to be a mum... like a mum talking to a mum I think that sounds better. I think it sounds very patronising when I’m told by someone who hasn’t got children that my child should be doing that (Beth).

In certain working environments, it would appear that being a parent was advantageous as it granted greater authority to the employee. Interestingly in this situation, Beth becomes the voice of the ‘expert’ as she advised parents on
what was best for their child and, therefore, continued the cycle of what was perceived to constitute good parenting.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter sought to present the findings of the analysis for this study. The analysis found that participants’ everyday practices, the meaning of such practices and their identity work were very much interlinked. Experiences of employment were therefore dependent upon a number of factors, including how they understood and gave meaning to family and work through identity work, the work-family routines they had developed, as well as the type of working culture they were employed within. Understandings of family and work, and their connection to these areas of life, had been worked and re-worked in regard to their previous experiences, as well as the influence of wider social discourses, norms and expectations.

At the beginning of this chapter I began by presenting how participants understood notions of family and parenthood (section 5.2). Within their dialogues, the meaning of lone parenthood was often located within the wider discourses on family, particularly in relation to its positioning in regard to the ‘normal’, seemingly more legitimate dual-parent family form. The term ‘lone parent’ was viewed critically by participants, not in regard to their own experiences but in relation to the stereotyping, stigmatisation and negative connotations that tended to be equated with this label. Many sought to resist such perceptions and divorced themselves from the term altogether by discussing the support they received from their extended family. However, because of the connotations of dependency that were felt to be synonymous with the lone parent label, many had also created discourses of independence where measures of self-sufficiency and control were also measures of good parenting. This then created difficulties in asking for help or support.

In the second section (5.3), I went on to present the participants’ experiences and understandings of work. Practical workplace support (whether informal or formal) was a common experience for participants, although it was the informal that was seen to offer greater value as the design of formal support policies
were seen to be based on the generic idea of the family (e.g. the dual-parent family). Work held different meanings for participants, which were influenced by their understandings of their identity and place within the family. These meanings were not static but could shift and adapt over time depending on context. Children’s age was one such factor that could impact on the meaning of work, however, opportunities (or rather lack of opportunities) for employment progression, as well as difficult workplace cultures, could affect the meaning participants held to employment and so the level of engagement they had with their work. Discourses of independence were also found within discussions of work, where many participants reported that they did not want to be treated as different to any other employee and so would try to conduct identity work that presented them as such. Yet, their need for workplace support (for example, the informal special arrangements that many had with their managers) presented a major contradiction in discourses of ‘doing it on your own’.

In the final section (5.4) I explored the daily routines that participants had developed in order to negotiate their work and family responsibilities. Routines were seen as intrinsic to being a good parent and helped to further present an image of control. However, participants faced various challenges in maintaining these routines as their day-to-day activities were also tied to the routines of others, which they could not control. The idea of ‘work-life balance’ placed greater pressure on their need to maintain control over their routines, with the notion of work-family conflict reinforcing the idea that such ‘balance’ was best created by separating work and family activities and identities. This separation was found to be artificial in many respects as their positions as primary carers and providers meant that there were often times where work and family would be experienced conjointly.

The following discussion chapter will reflect on these findings further in regard to four key aspects: the importance of both parenting and employment discourses on understandings of identity; the issue of gaining recognition as both a carer and provider; the practical difficulties that were experienced in organising and managing work and family; and, the varying types of identity work that were engaged in to construct a sense of self as a working lone parent.
Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis was to explore and critically analyse the everyday experiences and identity work of lone parents in relation to their work and family responsibilities. The data presented in chapter five will be further reflected upon within the current chapter. In particular, four key aspects of these findings will be discussed in greater depth, namely:

- The importance of both parenting and employment discourses on understandings of identity;
- The emotional difficulties such a complex web of inter-weaving discourses could create for participants in trying to gain recognition as both parents and workers;
- The practical impacts that such discourses could have in terms of organising and managing work and family responsibilities;
- The varying types of identity work that were engaged in to help construct and maintain a coherent understanding of what it was to be a working lone parent.

In view of the many challenges that were found in the experiences of participants, a critical examination of how the findings of this thesis could be considered in organizational and policy terms will be discussed in the final sections.

6.2 What it means to be a working lone parent: Negotiating the maelstrom of discourses.

In analysing the experiences of the participants, a number of competing discourses were apparent. Specific discourses on lone mothering and fathering, and wider societal discourses on parenting and employment, presented participants with different understandings on what was ‘best’ or ‘right’ for their situations. As demonstrated in section 5.2.1, certain discourses concerning lone motherhood were found to be particularly pervasive in the experiences of
female participants, as this identity was often believed to be characterised by vulnerability, irresponsibility, dependency and laziness (as was also discussed by Phoenix, 1996). The meaning of lone fathering was more often associated with absence, that lone fathers were more likely to be ‘weekend dads’ rather than primary carers. This is reflected in the many studies that focus on the effect of absent fathers on child development (Franséhn and Bäck-Wiklund, 2008; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2004; East et al., 2006). In comparison, there have been very few studies that consider the experiences of the male primary carer and provider (Fox and Bruce, 2001; Adams, 1996). Because of these negative stereotypes and stigma, the ‘lone parent’ was understood to be othered in comparison to those parents from the norm of the dual-parent family. The ideal of the dual-parent family reflected the dominant norm that lone parents had to face, and the phantom of this norm appeared throughout their experiences of both work and family. This norm was seen to be propagated within media discourses concerning lone parenthood (section 5.2.1), within expert discourses that questioned the quality of the lone parent family environment for the wellbeing of children (section 5.2.3), as well as in wider social discourses (for example, within social policy as well as within institutions such as the school), where the dual-parent family was presented as the ideal and preferable form (section 5.2.2 & 5.3.1).

From the findings of this study, the meaning of lone parenthood was divisive and could cause difficulties for participants in trying to construct a positive sense of self within wider discourses on family and parenting. Altering the meaning of lone parenthood was one way to challenge the perceived stigma (‘Am I a lone parent or am I parenting alone?’), however, the most effective way to disassociate oneself from the negative social connotations was to prefix this label with a working status. As a ‘working lone parent’, alternative discourses pertaining to social value became more accessible to them. As Knijn et al. (2007) describe, normative expectations regarding full employment for all, is believed to be becoming more predominant. By engaging in employment, participants felt that they were considered to be more valued members of society, which helped to avoid the stigma of the unemployed, lazy lone parent.
Yet, as ‘working lone parents’, participants still faced antagonistic, gendered discourses. For the lone mother participants in particular, discourses based on the norm of the dual-parent family could bring into question this alternative form of social value, as there were disparities between the meaning and value of work within such discourses. The good parent was believed to occupy a gendered position within the ideal dual-parent family and so would naturally be inclined towards either the feminine caring position or the masculine breadwinning position (Perrons et al., 2006; Mckie et al., 2001). Within such traditional family roles, “mothers usually see paid work in opposition to good mothering” (Duncan, 2005: 58), which questions the virtues of employment in regard to ideals concerning good mothering, especially in regard to those with very young children. Whilst the lone mother participants could construct an alternative, positive social identity by engaging in employment, this could be undermined as they were also situated within wider general discourses on mothering which were based on an all encompassing ‘ethic of care’ (Glenn, 1994). As discourses of fathering still tend to be based on the notion of the provider (Lupton and Barclay, 1997), the lone father participant appeared to be less affected by such concerns. This is not to say that the identity challenges he experienced were any less complex (as will be discussed), rather, the discursive resources available to him varied and so it appears that the male participant and female participants differed in how they sought to construct a positive sense of identity.

Within the workplace itself, participants reported being subject to further discourses concerning the good employee, which again had very distinct gendered effects on their experiences and their identity work. As discussed in section 2.4.4, the good employee has tended to be constructed as someone with no outside of work responsibilities who is able to dedicate long work hours to their organization and has traditionally been seen as male (Acker, 2006; Fletcher and Bailyn, 1996a). For the participants in this study, the expectation that outside of work responsibilities would remain hidden was often felt to be apparent in current, as well as previous workplaces, which meant that they, as primary carers, would struggle to adhere to such an ideal. In considering their experiences, whilst both sexes struggled to keep the two separate, the lone
mother participants seemed to experience a greater expectation within their workplaces that they would find such a task more difficult (for example, Samantha’s case in section 5.3.5). For Michael, discourses concerning the ‘father-as-breadwinner’ meant that his ability to separate work and family was felt to be a pre-given within his workplace, though this created its own problems (section 5.3.2). On the other hand, in many of the lone mothers’ cases, their ability to separate work and family was often felt to be regarded as a preferred, but impossible practice. Their positions as mothers were perceived to necessarily other them within their organizations, that their presence was treated with suspicion as their caring responsibilities were expected to impact upon their work. Underlying such expectations is the view that women are natural carers and so family obligations will “inevitably intrude” (Coltrane, 2004: 215). Such ‘gendered frames of reference’ (Hawkins, 2008) meant that these participants experienced normative expectations both in regard to achieving the standards of the good employee (and so had the potential to be included in the dominant group), as well as being subject to additional assumptions that they, as working mothers, could not meet these expectations.

Challenging such working discourses within certain working cultures was a difficult, if not impossible task for participants. The main difficulty for parents in effectively challenging specific working cultures was that, by resisting certain expectations, they may inadvertently reinforce other assumptions. For example, within their work histories, Sue, Laura and Lucy had left high commitment working cultures (e.g. ones that valorised long work hours and presenteeism), as they felt that their ability and commitment to the job was undermined because they had children (see section 5.3.3 & 5.3.4; also found in previous studies on professional mothers by Adkins (1992) and Casey (1995)). Yet, by leaving, they may have reinforced negative gendered assumptions concerning the commitment of working mothers. Their ability to challenge such notions through their behaviour and example were lost. Such a situation reflects how workplace resistance can have “potentially contradictory outcomes” (Collinson, 2003: 641).

On the other hand, for those who stayed within such organizations, it was felt that their behaviour and example did not always help to challenge the ingrained
negative perceptions concerning working mothers (section 5.3.5). Many felt it was expected that their family commitments would not be visible (5.3.5) and so colleagues would not always be aware they had children (for example, Samantha’s case). Little challenge to stereotypical understandings concerning working mothers could be given as their status as a mother was unknown. Others had identified themselves as a working mother, but were felt to be perceived in a particular way because of this identification. For example, Lucy described how she was seen to take more holiday than other people because she was a mother with school age children, when in fact she had the exact same amount of holiday as other colleagues (section 5.3.6). Such an example shows the ‘bind of otherness’ that can occur for working mothers within the workplace (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 693). As discourses of motherhood within the workplace have historically been understood in a particular (often negative) way (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996), drawing on such discourses can lead to the perpetuation of such patriarchal managerialist understandings and so ‘bind’ working mothers to the identity of the ‘other’. Whilst many participants sought to shape the construction of their identities within the workplace by naming themselves as working mothers, this presentation could effectively contribute towards their marginal positions.

The interplay between discourses and ideologies concerning the good employee and career development was also of concern for participants. Longer working hours were seen to reflect their greater productivity and commitment, therefore, it was believed that this was the type of working style that they would have to engage in in order to seek promotion or to move into a more challenging position. Having primary caring responsibilities (whether male or female) has been seen to undermine one’s ability to progress within employment, as greater time commitments cannot be made (Coyne, 2002).

Yet, in the findings of this thesis, there were examples of participants who continued to work within professional positions that required greater time commitments, as well as others who actively sought promotion either within their work or by applying for work elsewhere. Two such participants worked in London and this location appeared to offer them greater access to new working opportunities. For those in the South-West of England, opportunities for new
jobs were considered more limited, although this in itself did not appear to be a factor in regard to career ambition (for example, in Samantha’s case in section 5.3). Instead, barriers to progression reflected how participants understood their position within the family and the meaning they gave to their identities as parents and workers. This can be seen in many of the participants’ rhetoric concerning working hours (section 5.3.3), for example, Hazel was trying to gain a promotion in work in order to provide her daughter with a better standard of living and so was happy to work the additional hours that she felt were required of her to prove her worth. For many participants, whose rhetoric regarding working hours were more likely to reflect discourses concerning childcare, the ability to alter the meanings of identities in terms of parenting and working could be influenced by factors such as the child’s age. However, preoccupations with sustaining previous understandings of good parenting (and the routines that were linked to these) often made participants hesitant about making any significant changes to their working situations (section 5.4.1), therefore restricting themselves and their possibilities for career progression.

Whilst general discourses concerning work and family were seen to strongly influence the experiences of and understandings held by participants, there was an additional discourse that was seen to be intrinsic to both work and family situations, namely, the social construction of ‘time’. For many participants, the driving force within their day-to-day experiences was to sustain what they believed to be practical. This emphasis on the practical meant that the participants’ experiences were largely influenced by social expectations and assumptions concerning ‘time’. Considering the analysis of the data from this study, it was this issue of time, or more specifically, the quantification of time, that contributed to the continued impact of dominant work and family ideologies and expectations for the participants.

Throughout participants’ discussions on negotiating work and family, the notion of ‘time’ was critical. In particular, quantitative understandings of time or ‘clock time’ (Fried and Slowik, 2004) were intrinsic to the production and maintenance of their day-to-day routines. This understanding of time also led to particular challenges for the participants as they sought to conduct multiple tasks within finite time (section 5.4.1). The quantity of time dedicated to parenting or working
was often used as a measure of success, which for many meant that part-time work was the only option, as it could split the time spent in each aspect. For those who worked full-time, there was a need to defend their decisions regarding working time, which continued to revolve around ideals of parenting within the breadwinner rhetoric. Long working hours were justifiable as they were seen to help sustain employment and therefore the financial security of the family (section 5.3.3). The traditional understanding of the good employee was also based around concerns over quantity of time spent in work. For some scholars, the emphasis on quantity of time in work is tied directly to the notion that time is equitable to money, which can impact on other areas of life (Roberts, 2008a: 430). For example, in Mayall’s work, it was found that caring work may often be ‘devalued’ as it is seen to have no financial reward (1990: 376). In comparison, in this thesis, caring work held particular value for participants because of the link between parental time with a child and the child’s development. This could cause anxieties for those in full-time employment (section 5.3.2). Those participants in part-time employment experienced alternative anxieties concerning productivity and their value within the workplace. As lone parents, the participants felt a duty to meet time demands in both work and family life, yet how to practically negotiate such demands created anxiety in most situations. Their ability to ‘do it all’ was severely compromised by the constraints of time, particularly in relation to housework. Time and its relationship to productivity was consequently a central aspect of the structuring of their daily routines (section 5.4.1).

Michael’s experiences of time demands were somewhat different from the experiences of the female participants. In his case, it was assumed by his organization that he would perceive his time in work as more valuable than his care work as it maintained his breadwinner position within the family. Michael contested such an assumption as his position as a lone father meant that caring was his sole responsibility. Yet, he felt that he had no choice but to outsource this care to paid childminders in order to maintain his daughter’s lifestyle (section 5.3.1). Even if he disagreed with the ‘father as breadwinner’ discourse, the amount of time that he subsequently started to give to his work activities meant such discourses were inevitably reproduced. For Sheridan, this explains
why it is men who are more likely to suffer from ‘chronic presenteeism’ as they face particularly constraining assumptions and expectations concerning the hierarchy of their values and the organisation of their working time (2004: 210).

Considering the findings of this study, understanding time in a purely quantitative sense may lead to the continued reproduction of contradictory ideologies concerning work and family, with time equating to productivity being a major factor in its reproduction. For example, if long working hours are associated with greater productivity and commitment, then employee success will continue to be gauged using this measure. In the experiences of those with caring responsibilities, who may find it more difficult to engage in longer work hours, feelings of success and progression in paid employment are unlikely to occur.

For many participants, understandings of work in regard to time and productivity were difficult to challenge as they were built on traditional ideals and discourses concerning the unencumbered worker (Simpson and Lewis, 2005). Accepting traditional ways of working and regulating one’s behaviour accordingly became an important factor for participants in maintaining their day-to-day routines, as well as gaining recognition. Their strict routines were also a product of needing to be seen as in control and independent, and participants often described how they felt anxious about communicating the difficulties they faced and their inability to ‘do it all’ as it may be indicative of “not being in control”. It was felt that, within quantitative discourses concerning time, being unable to sustain a daily routine was to indicate a loss of control and, as work and family ideologies were dependent upon the notion that these aspects existed as temporally separate spheres, to have an unstable routine was to communicate one’s apparent failings.

The notion of balance between work and life further reflects discourses concerning the quantification of time, as well as the need to separate and control work and family time (section 5.4.2). As Roberts has described, the metaphor of balance is principally reliant upon the “quantification of both work and life in order to make sense” (2008: 430). Within such an understanding, discourses pertaining to ‘work’ and ‘life’ as two separate spheres are continually
reproduced (Runté and Mills, 2004; Coltrane, 2004). For the lone parent participants, there were inevitably situations where time was needed concurrently by both work and the family, and such a conflict negated their ability to create ‘balance’. This conflict was a product of such ideologies that portray work and life as naturally separate, as there is an expectation that a hierarchy of priorities will be created in such circumstances. However, reliance on such a view does not take into account that such separation is artificial, not natural (Roberts, 2008: 431).

As described in section 2.4.5, previous theories that have sought to explore the relation between work and family have done so by relying on traditional conceptions of time and have, therefore, perpetuated the notion that borders and boundaries naturally exist between these two areas (for example, Clark’s (2000) work/family border theory and Ashforth et al.’s (2000) boundary theory). Such boundaries may be subject to some blurring but it is believed to be healthy for individuals to contribute to the maintenance of such boundaries in order to reduce conflict between the two spheres.

In the face of such influential social discourses concerning the organisation of time, the impetus for participants was to sustain their work and family routines in order to survive their daily responsibilities and so maintain an image of control. However, such structuring could also have negative consequences. Once routines had been established they were very difficult to change (section 5.4.1). Participants often felt trapped within their current situations as practically it would be very difficult to amend their routines without impacting their children’s routines. The thought of this potential impact could be particularly anxiety provoking. In addition, discourses concerning balance and work-family separation also contributed towards feelings of anxiety when changes in routine were contemplated. Their well-worked routines thus became an ‘iron cage’ out of which they would struggle to break (section 5.4.3).

### 6.3 Seeking recognition as both carers and providers

The major problem with addressing concerns of recognition for lone parents is that they are positioned within wider normative discourses on family and work, which could result in experiences of normative violence (Chambers and Carver,
2008; Butler, 1995a; 1997). The experiences of the participants in this study all reflected the difficulties that could be faced by lone parents when negotiating a social system that is based on the norm of the dual-parent family. As Nicholson (1997) has described, ideas of tradition within the family can be very constricting in terms of considering alternative family forms. The categories that an individual relies on to organise their world can cause problems when their experiences fail to conform to the supposed norm which can “make too many of us needlessly ashamed of the way we live” (1997: 27). Throughout participants’ dialogues, normative violence could be found where the norm of the dual-parent family contributed to feelings of stress and anxiety as it questioned the legitimacy of their own family form.

Whilst gaining recognition as a good parent was a key challenge for lone parents, they also faced difficulties in gaining recognition as a good employee within the workplace. As highlighted in the previous section (6.2), the good employee within workplace discourses was generally conceived by participants to be someone who could provide visible commitment to their organization (Simpson, 1998: 43) and also limit the visibility of any out-of-work commitments (Fletcher and Bailyn, 1996: 258). In trying to gain recognition within the workplace, participants faced particular difficulties in regard to this notion of ‘visibility’. To meet the expectations of their workplaces, many participants reported working from home on occasions, both in the day and during the evenings. Through the use of technology they could remain virtually visible and so engage in work that may have been inaccessible to them if such flexibility in work location was not available. Yet, it was generally appreciated that this work was perceived as less valuable than that completed physically within the workplace (by both employers and participants themselves), which meant that they felt they were given less recognition for such work (see section 5.3.1).

In analysing participants’ experiences, it became apparent that the concept of visibility held various meanings in regard to the notion of recognition. For example, leaving work due to childcare commitments could make one more visible as a parent and therefore less recognisable as a good employee (see 5.3.3 for Hazel’s experiences). Whereas adhering to workplace expectations could grant recognition as a good, conformant employee and therefore reduce
one’s visibility. For Simpson and Lewis, such invisibility is favoured because it positions the individual within the more powerful position of ‘spectator’, as opposed to someone who is seen to be different and therefore “subject to the controlling ‘gaze’ of the majority” (2005: 1259). The challenge for participants was that their position as ‘spectator’ was always inherently unstable as their care-giving responsibilities could become apparent if their child was unwell. Participants were consequently continually aware of the ‘gaze’ of their organizations and struggled to occupy the position of the favoured invisible worker. Yet, the notion of invisibility as a positive state does raise some issues. For example, some of the participants felt that as they could not engage in longer working hours they were seen as less favourable candidates for promotion. To be invisible could therefore also denote a lack of recognition and a diminishing of value (Butler, 2004).

Gaining recognition as parents and workers was critical for participants, but because they had both primary caring and providing responsibilities, they often struggled to be seen as ‘intelligible’ subjects (Butler, 1999 [1990]) within either spheres. As lone parents, they were othered within discourses of work and family, yet such discourses were seen to offer the only guidelines for the structuring of their lives and identities. The spectre of the dual-parent family norm within dominant discourses, as well as social policy, was seen to have a forceful effect on their experiences, for example, in their understandings of the notion of work-family balance. Their struggle for legitimacy was, in part, a product of their positioning as the other in comparison to this idealised family, and so participants invariably experienced times of normative violence where they felt marginalised. In addition, by seeking to meet the expectations they associated with the ideal dual-parent family, the concern within their daily lives was survival, rather than progress; that their day-to-day routines would be maintained (section 5.4.3).

Considering the multiple, often competing discourses that participants faced, as well as how recognition was both given to and withheld from them as carers and providers, understandings of what it meant to be a ‘working lone parent’ were often ambiguous. To explore their understandings of identity further, I will
discuss how identity work was utilised to negotiate their everyday lives in the following section.

### 6.4 Understanding identity work in the everyday experiences of working lone parents

As described, the lone parent participants were all subject to the regulatory effects of a variety of different, often competing discourses in regard to work and family. Within discourses concerning the family, the ‘lone parent’ was inevitably othered in comparison to the norm of the dual-parent family. Similarly, in discourses concerning the employee, the lone parents could be othered in comparison to the good ‘unencumbered’ employee, however, such othering was experienced differently depending on gender and the meaning that work was given in their lives. Due to their awkward positioning in both family and work discourses, the process of identity construction for participants was laborious, often frustrating, and in need of continuous modifications. To be seen as successful in any given position was often felt to be unattainable because of their inability to conform to family and workplace norms. Yet this did not mean that issues of legitimacy or recognition were of little importance to them. Rather, participants continued to strive for recognition as good parents and, in the majority of cases, good employees as well (section 5.3). To be seen as legitimate in a particular position was to gain recognition, and to gain recognition was to gain a measure of social value (Butler, 2004). Therefore, participants' feelings of uncertainty, of instability, of being othered and therefore subject to the prevailing ‘gaze’ of the majority, meant that legitimacy and recognition were marked as central concerns in their ability to engage with both work and family. In seeking to gain recognition and a sense of legitimacy, the identity work of participants was therefore critical.

However, through analysing the experiences of participants, it became apparent that the process of identity construction may be better understood by focusing on certain types of identity work. As discussed in section 3.4.1, identity work is understood to be the process by which people are continually involved in “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson and
Alvesson, 2003: 1165). This understanding has tended to be used to explore examples of ‘active’ or conscious identity work, which is conducted during periods of heightened stress and pressure where one’s self-identity is challenged (Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Ibarra, 1999). In this thesis, the data suggests that identity work is not something that occurs only at times of crisis and so cannot be purely understood as only a process that is ‘active’. Identity work for the participants was also to be found during their everyday routines, as well as at times of heightened stress. As their routines were intrinsic to their understandings of themselves as good parents, the maintenance of such routines could also be regarded as a continual stressor for participants. Wieland has suggested that identity work is also about the “self-aware reflections about whom one is” which can be found throughout “everyday practices of doing work and life” (2010: 505). To discuss the experiences of the lone parent participants further, three types of identity work will be presented: moral identity work, habitual identity work and paradoxical identity work. These three types of identity work were not mutually exclusive and could be experienced concurrently.

6.4.1 Moral identity work

In seeking to gain recognition as both parents and workers, the participants had to negotiate the complex notions of morals and values. Previous work on lone mothers has emphasised the importance of considering such notions when it comes to identity construction (May, 2008; Duncan and Edwards, 1997), as morals and ethics are considered to be important ‘discursive resources’ which individuals draw upon to “author versions of their self” (Kornberger and Brown, 2007: 497). Within such understandings, notions of the ‘ideal’ also become critical as this encompasses “expectations for what a good person should be” (Wieland, 2010: 504). In order to try to meet moral expectations regarding parenting, as well as employment, participants would engage in moral identity work, a type of identity work that could be compared with McInnes and Corlett’s notion of ‘performative identity work’, where one feels “under an obligation to enact a particular identity because of prevailing personal, social or institutional pressures” (2012: 32). Social discourses concerning correct conduct were central to many of the participants’ moral identity work. However, as such social
discourses were understood within the contexts of their lives, their perceptions of moral identity work were highly personal. Constructing understandings of moral identities and engaging in moral identity work was therefore both a social and a personal process.

Examples of such moral identity work were found throughout their experiences of work and family life. Notions of personal responsibility were especially prevalent in understandings of the moral parent, and, in many of the lone parents’ cases, domestic responsibilities such as housework and meal production were considered to be key acts within this identity work. The lone mother participants in particular often engaged in such moral identity work (sections 5.2.3 and 5.4.1), as they frequently felt that certain standards were expected of them, standards that represented the traditional homemaking mother within the ‘normal’ dual-parent family. Interestingly, many of the participants often focused on the few instances of where specific standards of domestic work were not met, rather than on their accomplishments in other parts of their lives (for instance, Laura’s example in section 5.3.6). Their tendency to focus on their apparent failings communicates the instability of moral identity work, as participants continually strove to construct a moral sense of self in light of traditional norms concerning the family. This challenges previous work on lone mothers and their moral identity construction. Duncan and Edwards (1997) relied on the notion of ‘gendered moral rationalities’ to develop a model of lone parent typologies, e.g. family orientated, employment orientated etc (also in Duncan, 2005). Such a typology appears inappropriate in light of the findings of this thesis, as it suggests a level of stability in moral positioning. Lone parents exist within multiple discourses which can offer competing understandings of moral behaviour. They also understood discourses concerning morals within their individual, highly contextualised situations. For participants, constructing a moral self was not a simple rational process of choosing what was right or wrong for a given circumstance. Rather, it was about weaving a narrative from often competing discourses that allowed for a moral presentation of self. Such an example of this can be seen in the rhetoric used by the lone mother participants who chose to work full-time (section 5.3.3).
Notions of morals, values, ideals and conscience have all been used to examine how individuals within organizations reflexively regulate their behaviour and identity (Hodgson, 2005; Wieland, 2010; Clarke et al., 2009; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Kuhn, 2006). However, in the case of participants in this study, focusing purely on morals, values and ideals within the workplace fails to take into account the understandings of such notions in their wider lives. For example, whilst many participants were seen to exhibit a ‘professional conscience’ (Hodgson, 2005) within the workplace (e.g. reflecting on business needs), this was complicated by a wider sense of conscience regarding family responsibilities as a primary carer. The notion of conscience is seen to be essential to the ‘production and regulation’ of the individual “for conscience turns the individual around, makes him/her available to the subjectivating reprimand” (Butler, 1998: 115). Yet, the lone parent participants existed within a multitude of demanding discourses, each associated with a different focus for experiences of conscience. The notion of a singular conscience in a given situation, for example, that of a professional conscience within the workplace, does not take into account that multiple consciences may exist at any one time and are, in turn, influenced by one another.

An example of this can be seen in regard to many of the participants’ understandings of the ideal employee. Many felt that to be ‘professional’ and so to ‘fit in’ a certain presentation of self was required. Such a presentation included trying to separate work and family, however, the conscience they experienced as primary carers meant that such boundaries were difficult to maintain. In section 5.4.3, Lucy described how she would purposefully make sure that any children related telephone calls were taken on her mobile phone outside of the office space. Her conscience as a mother meant that she felt she had to take such calls, even if they were not urgent, but what could be described as her ‘professional conscience’ meant that such calls should not be conducted within the public workspace.

To address such difficulties, the impetus for some of the participants was to focus instead on presenting themselves as a moral employee, rather than an ideal employee. The difference between the two is that an ideal employee is
someone who strives only to meet the expectations of their workplace and so can assimilate seamlessly into a working culture (Acker, 2006). On the other hand, a moral employee can be understood as someone who tries to meet the expectations of their organization when within the workplace, but not at the expense of their other responsibilities and relationships. In the working situations of participants, this could lead to the challenging of high commitment working cultures that negatively affected their own experiences, as well as the experiences of other colleagues (for example, Lucy’s case in section 5.3.5).

This type of moral identity work was particularly apparent in the cases of those participants who were currently, or had previously been, employed in managerial positions whilst a lone parent. As described in section 5.3.5, participants such as Michael and Samantha became more aware of the example that they were setting to other colleagues and the need to offer support to those with challenging outside-of-work responsibilities. They believed that their actions did not make them a ‘better manager’ (as such actions did not meet their requirements of the ideal managerial employee) but felt that they had become more empathetic as managers. In effect, being a moral employee was about meeting the requirements of their work, whilst also considering the needs of others.

The need to present oneself as a moral employee also, in part, appeared to be a product of contemporary organizational expectations of work-family balance, which emphasise the need for harmony between caring and providing responsibilities. The major problem with this concept, as discussed by Moen (2011) and Halpern and Murphy (2005), is that it communicates to individuals that balance is equitable to success; that to balance work and family is to be a better person. Presenting oneself as a moral employee was one way that participants could seek to gain recognition as a working parent, yet the practicalities of sustaining this balance (and so sustaining the image of the moral employee) was difficult to accomplish as a primary carer and provider. For many participants, the concept of balance would be more easily achieved as part of a dual-parent family and was more applicable to the organisation of this ‘normal’ family structure (section 5.3.1). In this respect, the process of conducting moral identity work was often frustrating for participants, as they felt
excluded from such understandings of the moral employee who could effectively balance work and family obligations within the ‘normal’ family structure. This could be seen as a further example of the effect of normative violence.

The process of moral identity work was critical for lone parents as they sought to gain recognition as parents and employees. Yet, the continued propensity for care work to be juxtaposed with paid work (Runte and Mills, 2004) meant that presenting a coherent moral self in regard to both work and family life could be difficult. The focus for the participants was therefore on what was practical within such moral discourses of work and family. Moral identity work was still important, however, participants would also additionally engage in identity work which could help to sustain their everyday routines of caring and providing.

6.4.2 Habitual identity work

As discussed in section 5.4.1, maintaining a work-family routine was important for participants in meeting their responsibilities as primary carers and providers. These routines were influenced by what was considered to be moral behaviour (for example, the decision to work full-time, part-time or not at all), however, participants were very aware that what was seen to be moral or ideal in a particular situation may not be practical in their circumstances. In the experiences of participants, moral identity work was something that was actively engaged with, as it pushed them to question their own moral positioning. Alternatively, identity work that was conducted in order to manage practical, everyday concerns was a process that appeared to be more taken for granted, more habitual. For example, participants were continually faced with the task of maintaining their daily routines (section 5.4). To do this, they had to negotiate multiple micro-situations where commitments and social expectations for both work and family arose. Previous research into home-workers has found a similar link between identity work and practical routines. Tietze and Musson described how cases “performed identity work by finding practical solutions to the relocation of paid work into the home environment” which included developing “particular routines and practices” (2010: 153). From the findings of this thesis, such identity work could be conceptualised as habitual identity work,
in other words, the identity work that was routinely engaged in by participants to negotiate their everyday existence. In this respect, the process of habitual identity work could be compared with McInnes and Corlett’s understandings of ‘confirmatory identity work’, which focuses on the mundane and less conscious process of identity work (2012: 35).

Working through lunch times was one example of habitual identity work, as participants engaged in this practice for a number of important reasons. Working through lunchtimes would allow them to be more visible as employees and so be identity affirming in that respect, however it would also allow them to leave work earlier and so maintain their family routine, thus also affirming their identity as carers. The reason that this could be seen to constitute habitual identity work is that this was a practice that was used regularly and allowed them to address their identities in respect of both work and family. Most importantly, it was also taken for granted. For many participants, it was ‘just something that you do’, a practice that had become ingrained in their routines and so was given little thought, yet contributed greatly towards the sustaining of their routine and the image of themselves as a good working lone parent.

Habitual identity work could also be recognised in regard to participants’ understandings of time. In order to manage the multiple work and family-related tasks within their daily routines, many had adopted specific ways of combining the two, for example, by ‘intensifying’ their actions in regard to a particular task and so increasing their productivity, or by ‘synchronising’ a number of tasks within the same time frame (Morehead, 2001; Lewis, 2001; see section 2.4.7). For the lone parent participants, whether part- or full-time, this intensification of activities in work was often referred to, for example, limiting workplace socialising in favour of work (section 5.3.6). Yet, it was also discussed in relation to home life where domestic tasks would be combined with childcare (section 5.4.1). Organising work and family responsibilities in this way meant that more could be done in less time. Through engagement with multiple tasks that were both personally and socially meaningful, they could maintain a coherent sense of self. Such habitual identity work was a central part of their daily experiences, yet was often taken for granted.
Previous studies on the intensification of work have tended to describe its potential negative effects such as poorer psychological health, higher stress levels and increases in family tension (Burchell et al., 2002; Green, 2004). For the lone parent participants, such worrying effects were apparent in their bid to intensify and synchronise work and family activities, for example, their references to experiences of guilt and exhaustion. However, such effects were seen to be accepted as part of their daily lives, that to continue within their current lifestyles and routines as a lone parent was to accept that such impacts were unavoidable. Conceptually, such habitual identity work can be appreciated as an ongoing process, which was engaged in by participants throughout their daily experiences. Such an understanding contributes to the theorisation of identity work as a product of repetition, rehearsal and routine (Taylor, 2006; Taylor and Littleton, 2006; Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009), rather than simply a process initiated by periods of heightened stress and anxiety (Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Ibarra, 1999). This is not to say that habitual identity work, in comparison to moral identity work, is not initiated by periods of heightened stress and anxiety. Rather, it would seem that this type of identity work is a product of daily micro-stressors which occur so often as to be regarded with a level of ambivalence.

The maintenance of a work-family routine was intrinsic to the participants’ understandings of themselves as a moral parent and employee. Yet, the importance of this routine meant that alternative ways of organising work and family were not always appreciated by participants. This suggests that such habitual identity work could be seen to reflect the ‘forced re-iteration of norms’ that individuals may experience, where they feel compelled to take part in taken-for-granted ways of being and doing in order to gain recognition (Butler, 1993: 94). Engaging in habitual identity work would lead to the continued practical reproduction of such routines, which could be seen to create a ‘psychic prison’ (Morgan, 1997: 280) for participants. Whilst their routines could help the lone parents meet some of the expectations within discourses of caring and providing, there were always expectations and ideals that they were unable to meet as parents and employees. As mentioned in section 6.4.1, norms and ideals are different for different social categories (for example: the ideal
employee, the lone mother, the working father etc), with identities often being constructed in opposition to other 'inappropriate' subject positions (McKinley, 2010). This presented the participants with a dichotomy as they felt the need to engage in identity work in order to establish a coherent, legitimate identity in the face of conflicting, competing, and inflexible discourses on work and family. The solution to this apparent contradiction appeared to be the process of paradoxical identity work.

6.4.3 Paradoxical identity work

To construct and sustain a coherent positive sense of self, participants had to engage in both moral and habitual identity work. However, both of these types of identity work were only possible through an understanding and acceptance of the dichotomy of being a working lone parent. As was highlighted in section 6.2, the participants were subject to a number of competing discourses that impacted what it meant to be a working lone parent. The lone parents were othered within discourses concerning the family as they stood at odds with the norm of the dual-parent family. Within discourses concerning lone parenthood, the ‘lone parent’ was gendered as female, meaning that the lone father as primary carer tended to go unrecognised. More generally, the lone parent participants were also positioned within dominant discourses concerning work and family which tended to rely on either/or notions, that one was either orientated towards work or family (Bell et al., 2005; Duncan and Edwards, 1997). Caring responsibilities were seen to undermine one’s connection with work (Coyne, 2002; Duncan, 2005; Hays, 1996), meaning that those with primary caring responsibilities became the embodiment of the encumbered, and therefore othered, employee. Considering this, participants were often seen to occupy a space of ‘liminality’ which refers to when an individual is “between two identity constructions: when they are neither one thing nor the other” (Beech, 2011: 286). Such ‘liminality’ in the experiences of participants was continuously apparent, with few exceptions. To seek a coherent sense of self in the face of such competing discourses, the lone parent participants had to find a way to combine the apparently incompatible identities of parent and employee. This process was seen to represent a form of paradoxical identity work.
Broadly, a ‘paradox’ can be described as “the dynamic tensions of juxtaposed opposites” (Rosen, 1994, xvii). It denotes “contradictory yet inter-related elements” which seem “logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously” (Lewis, 2000: 760). Previous research on subordinate groups has helped to highlight the ‘paradoxes’ that may exist within identity construction, for example, studies that focus on sexual identity (Yeung and Stombler, 2000; Gamson, 1995; Weeks, 1995), national identity (Kadioğlu, 1996; Collins, 2001), and gender identity (Mahoney and Yngvesson, 1992; Bannerji, 2000). Using the concept of the ‘paradox’ to consider the identity work of participants can help to highlight that the difficulties they experienced were not just ‘conflicts’ between identities, but rather that the identity positions themselves were constructed as incompatible within social discourses. If their identities were to be understood as ‘conflicting’, this suggests a difference that could be overcome. From the literature on work-family balance, the notion of ‘conflict’ also holds connotations of personal responsibility, in that it is the individual who has to address this conflict (Lewis et al., 2007). Drawing attention to the paradox within their identity work can instead highlight how identities may be socially constructed as oppositional, and therefore the tensions that the lone parents experienced between identities could not be overcome. Exploring the paradoxes within identity construction can also help to highlight concerns of recognition, as identities are seen to encompass many paradoxes about “what we have in common and what separates us; about our sense of self and our recognition of others” (Weeks, 2000: 162). For Weeks, identity (in particular, sexual identity) can be seen to be paradoxical as it “assumes fixity and uniformity” whilst also confirming the reality of “unfixity, diversity and difference” (ibid.: 163). In other words, identity categories tend to be understood in binary, stable terms, however, by identifying the existence of others, identity categories are also revealed to be unstable and open to challenge. Paradoxes can consequently become apparent in the intersection between multiple identities which hold differing views on what is legitimate, what is recognised and what is devalued.

Understanding the identity work of participants as paradoxical can help to demonstrate the complexity of their identity constructions. The process of
identity construction is not neat or rational, but rather involves “messiness, irrationality, and inconsistencies” (Wieland, 2010: 508). It was the inconsistencies within the participants’ narratives regarding their work and family responsibilities that especially highlighted their paradoxical identity work. For example, as can be seen in section 5.2.5 and 5.4.1, certain expectations concerning work and family were often reflected in the narratives of participants in regard to being able to ‘do it all’ and be independent. Yet, they often discussed times when additional help was needed and informal working arrangements were relied upon. A paradox therefore emerged between the ideology of being seen to be an independent lone parent (in comparison to the negative stereotype of the dependent lone parent), and the practicalities of life as a working lone parent.

The use of paradoxical identity work can also be seen within participants’ descriptions of identity in relation to work. Employment was an important part of the participants’ identities, with work strongly contributing towards their sense of self (section 5.3.2). However, they were also very aware of the wider discourses that juxtaposed caring and paid work identities (as can be seen from section 5.4.3). Caring and paid work continue to be presented as binaries, which are interrelated but hold contradictory expectations (Runté and Mills, 2004). Organising these two identities alongside one another would therefore seem paradoxical. Yet, for participants, this co-existence of identities relating to caring and employment was intrinsic to their experiences as primary carers and providers. Paradoxical identity work therefore became a way for them to negotiate and play with the dominant ideologies they faced within their everyday lives as working lone parents. It allowed them to contain multiple contradictory selves within their overall understandings of self, which could be likened to what Costas and Fleming (2009) have described as the notion of various ‘others-in-me’. This understanding of how multiple identities are negotiated can be seen to stand at odds with the theories of other identity scholars. For example, there are those who believe that a sense of self is delineated by separating oneself from other alternative identity positions through a process of “appropriating certain discourses and rejecting others” (Musson and Duberley, 2007: 147). This involves identifying various anti-identities which are seen to stand in contrast to
other preferable identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). However, for participants, appropriating discourses concerning employment did not mean the rejection of discourses concerning care work. Rather, the two were understood to be entwined with one another, not just fiscally, but emotionally, as greater confidence in the workplace could have a measured effect on confidence levels within the home sphere (section 5.3.2). By appreciating their situations as paradoxical, participants were more aware of the relationships and apparent boundaries between identity categories. This greater awareness meant that participants could more easily negotiate their situations as working lone parents.

Whilst paradoxical identity work allowed for multiple, seemingly incompatible, identities to be negotiated, there were times when the paradox between identities became more acute. For example, participants did not personally dis-identify themselves from notions of the good employee, but an experience of stereotyping (for example, as described in section 5.3.6), coupled with an appreciation of wider discourses on working parents, made them aware of the paradoxes of seeking such an identity position as working lone parents. As Carroll and Levy (2008) have noted, individuals who are not seen to reflect the ‘norm’ risk exclusion from dominant identity discourses. In the case of the lone parent participants, such exclusion meant that they often struggled to find discursive resources with which to construct and maintain a positive perception of self, which often resulted in a sense of insufficiency (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996).

Yet, whilst a sense of insufficiency and exclusion could become apparent in certain situations, participants could also use paradoxical identity work to help mock such experiences through humour and laughter (section 5.3.5). The use of humour has been seen to be intrinsic to combating the paradoxes of everyday organizational life (Martin, 2004), which supports Butler’s belief that “laughter in the face of serious social categories is indispensable for feminism” (1999 [1990]: xxx). Many of the participants discussed how humour was a part of their daily lives and was a coping mechanism by which they could ridicule the social expectations that they experienced (section 5.2.5). Talking about their everyday experiences was a way of highlighting the pressures they faced, as well as a way of helping them to negotiate their situations as primary carers and
providers. By bringing attention to such issues, the socially constructed and paradoxical nature of the tension between work and family life became apparent.

Participants often described feeling powerless in situations where caring and providing responsibilities clashed. Humour could be used in such situations to grant them a greater feeling of control over their emotional reactions and behaviour. It could also help them to navigate the contradictions apparent within their situations. It has been argued that laughter can remove feelings of ‘fear and piety’ in relation to particular discourses which opens them up to critique (Hariman, 2008: 255). Humour and laughter were therefore powerful tools as they allowed the participants to engage in paradoxical identity work and, in doing so, disrupted the governing forces of normative expectations regarding work and family, even if only briefly.

All participants, irrespective of occupation, used humour to negotiate their everyday lives. Yet, for those in professional occupations, laughter and humour were seen to be of even greater importance, and were more often under threat, as they faced additional conflicting discourses concerning professionalism and emotionalism in the workplace (section 5.3.5). In comparison, participants such as Beth and Ruth, who both worked in nurseries, did not face this type of distinction, as emotionalism was part of their work. The interaction of such discourses concerning emotions and professionalism have been regarded as unavoidably ‘antagonistic’ which can lead to “possibly un-resolvable identity challenges” (Clarke et al., 2009: 343). The reason for such antagonisms appears to be because of the understanding of professional or managerial identities as being characterised by notions of ‘iron control’ (Jackall, 1988: 47), which includes the “suppression and denial of feeling and emotion” (Parkin, 1993: 179) (also highlighted in section 5.3.5). For participants, parenting was intrinsically tied into emotions meaning that, for those in professional occupations, the paradox between parenting and professional identities was even more apparent. Appreciating the paradox within such situations could allow those participants to engage with a greater level of emotion within their identity work (for example, by being the ‘empathetic manager’). Yet, it was often felt that the ‘solution’ to this paradox was to prioritise traditional understandings
of the professional worker over other alternatives (section 5.3.5). The logic within such an expectation would seem to be that separating identities can help to remove the experience of paradox. From the findings of this study, such separation would seem wholly artificial and unappreciative of the daily lives of those with both primary caring and providing responsibilities.

For the participants, paradoxical identity work was one way for them to try to negotiate the multitude of conflicting discourses that they experienced as working lone parents. However, this type of identity work could be difficult. As Benjamin (1987: 50) has described, the experience of a paradox within identity construction can be “painful, or even intolerable” as individuals face pressure to present a unified, coherent identity. Such pressure can result in the need to keep identities separate as “opposites can no longer be integrated; one side is devalued, the other idealized” (ibid.). Because of such pressures, a number of the lone mother participants felt that when they went to work they should only be seen to be a ‘working person’, rather than a ‘working mother’ (5.3.1). Yet, because of the informal support that was often offered to them by managers, as well as the labelling they could inadvertently receive as mothers within the workplace, such a singular identity was not always possible. In this respects, many of the working lone mother participants appeared to be unable to escape the paradox they faced in negotiating their primary caring and providing identities. In comparison, it would seem that Michael’s position as a lone father meant that it was more difficult for him to conduct paradoxical identity work. As described in section 5.3.2, his primary caring responsibilities were not recognised by other male colleagues within his workplace, leading to a lack of understanding of his situation. As masculine workplace ideologies inferred that paid work should be the primary factor for men’s sense of self (Collinson and Hearn, 1994), and that consequently a father’s position within the family should be that of provider and breadwinner, it was expected that Michael should necessarily prioritise work and engage in work practices that mirrored that of the unencumbered worker. However, as he was a lone parent and so had primary caring responsibilities as well as responsibilities for providing, he felt that he was being given recognition for a position that did not match his situation.
Michael could resist such recognition by not engaging with certain expected working practices, for example, by leaving work at five o’clock or working from home on days of unavoidable childcare responsibilities, although this could have negative consequences. Many of his male colleagues appeared to have difficulties understanding such behaviour in someone they recognised as an archetypal male employee. He felt that such behaviour was punished as those colleagues began to organise late afternoon meetings, which he was expected to attend. His situation was made more complex by the threat of redundancies as he had to conduct ‘professional’ identity work in order to be considered valuable. It would appear that whilst the female participants still struggled with discourses concerning the commitment of the ‘working mother’, their presence as parents with unavoidable childcare responsibilities was at least acknowledged within the workplace. For Michael, the discursive resources associated with being a primary carer were unavailable to him at work because of his gender, which served to constrain his identity work. His experience suggests that, in comparison to the lone mother participants, the process of identity construction for Michael could instead be characterised as a form of enforced identity work or a pretence of authentic identity work (in a similar vein to Beech et al.’s (2008: 963) notion of a ‘pretence of conformity’), an identity work he did not agree with and did not feel reflected his current situation, but which he felt compelled to engage with in order to sustain his employment (section 5.3.2). Such identity work can be seen to be a “necessary evil” (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1184) in pragmatically maintaining a certain way of life.

Within organizational studies, the notion of a paradox in regard to identity has been discussed in studies on collective identity conflicts. For example, it has been explored in regard to organizational identity (Fiol, 2002; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Gotsi et al., 2010), as well as individual identity conflicts, such as for women in professional occupations (Wood and Conrad, 1983; Dillabough, 1999; Martin, 2004; Olsson and Walker, 2004). In relation to these latter studies, a paradox has also been seen to be apparent in the many inconsistencies and contradictions that can be found within policy discourses concerning work and family (Runté and Mills, 2004; Allard et al., 2007; Lundqvist, 2011; Borchorst,
2009). If traditional policy discourses within the workplace can be seen to encompass paradoxes for working parents (Kaufman and Gerson, 2012), then there needs to be an examination of the ways that management can readdress these contradictions, rather than continue to reproduce them.

6.5 Organizational and managerial considerations in supporting working lone parents

In exploring the experiences and understandings of the working lone parent participants, it became apparent that there were a number of organizational and managerial considerations that needed to be discussed. Organizational policies were one such area to address, as well as concerns regarding how managerial approaches may offer support to such employees. The following sections will discuss these two aspects in greater detail.

6.5.1 Policy considerations for working lone parents

Previous research in regard to supporting lone parents has tended to focus on the evaluation of existing family and welfare policies (Speak, 2000; Ridge and Millar, 2011; Albelda et al., 2004). Suggestions for policy reforms tend to be financial in nature, for example, Ridge and Millar argued that future policy for working lone parents should seek to ‘stabilise financial security’ by considering how tax credits are awarded, as well as increasing subsidies for childcare costs (2011: 95-6). Whilst reforming financial policies may be significant in helping to address the difficulties faced by working lone parents, the analysis from this study highlights the importance of considering policy within, as well as beyond, the organization.

Addressing micro level policies within the workplace is one particular area that requires further attention. For participants in this study, micro level policies were important for them in sustaining their current work-family routines. Many relied on informal working arrangements with their managers to help them negotiate their care responsibilities and this was especially prevalent in the experiences of those who worked full-time in organizations with cultures of long work hours. Such arrangements were dependent upon the good-will and empathy of individual managers and could be withdrawn at any time, making the working
situations of these lone parents inherently unstable. For those who worked in organizations where formal flexible working policies were available, accessing such policies was not necessarily a straight-forward process. Managers did not always realise such policies were available or were seen to withhold such information if they had prejudices against those with outside-of-work responsibilities (section 5.3.1). In other words, the local understandings of formal organizational policies could become fragmented. Considering experiences of informal work arrangements, it would appear that lone parents would benefit from a formalisation of their informal working arrangements as such a change could provide a greater sense of stability in their work and family routines. However, in light of the experiences of such formalised work arrangements, the integration of such policies would also need to be considered in regard to the culture of a particular workplace. To address such cultural issues, adequate training for staff in positions of authority would be required to advise on why these policies are important in managing a diverse workforce.

There are many potential problems with such micro-level policy interventions for working lone parents, not just in regard to the practicalities or expense of implementation. The major concern is whether targeting them as a specific group may lead to greater stigmatisation, as was seen to be apparent for working mothers with regard to the implementation of specific ‘family-friendly’ policies (Hegtvedt et al., 2002; Scheibl and Dex, 1998; Young, 1999). Participants felt that general work-family policies were designed around the norm of the dual-parent family and were therefore less suitable in addressing their situations (section 5.3.1). Specific policies which targeted their situations and helped them to more easily engage with work were therefore seen as necessary. Yet, they also discussed how they did not want to be seen as different, as the ‘lone parent’ (or more specifically the ‘lone mother’) was socially synonymous with dependency, weakness and vulnerability from which they struggled to disassociate themselves (section 5.2.5).

Addressing this need to ‘fit in’ when considering targeted support presents a real challenge, especially in regard to working cultures that valorise long work hours. Previous studies on policy implementation within cultures of presenteeism found that those who accessed formal workplace policies (which
offered greater flexibility and support) were stigmatised as less committed (Sheridan, 2004). This brings into question whether lone parents would feel able to access such formal workplace policies if made available as they could contribute to additional stereotyping and stigmatisation. They may feel that such policies mark them out as different and so not make use of them, leading to a form of self-exclusion. Policy makers are therefore faced with a conundrum in negotiating what Hughes terms the “politics of representation” (2011: 164). Should they develop policy that directly targets working lone parents to help support them or, by doing so, would they further entrench negative perceptions of dependency in social discourses of lone parenting? The difficulty in answering such a question is that, as discussed, lone parents exist within a society based around the dual-parent norm, so to negotiate both work and family they will require support, either formally or informally. As described in section 6.3, this means that they both require and reject recognition as lone parents, and so are positioned awkwardly within discourses of dependency and self-sufficiency.

In the face of such a predicament, it becomes imperative for policy developers to identify the wider social and political issues within current work-family policy, rather than offering specific policy solutions for the ‘lone parent’. As Moen (2011) discussed, policies that focus on the individual tend to ignore the influence of cultures and social structures on work and family organisation. The emphasis, therefore, should not be to purely focus on policy that facilitates individual action, but rather to highlight the cultural and social norms that exist behind such policies and so consider the “construction of meaning in the process of policy-making” (Helman, 2011: 52). An emphasis on social action, rather than individual responsibility, has been a central aspect of policies in the Scandinavian countries (Ellingsæter and Leira, 2006). In such countries, the family has been reframed as a ‘public’ issue and so full-time working parents are provided with high-quality childcare provided by the ‘caring state’ (Leira, 2006: 27). Such a shift towards a social democratic perspective was seen to lead to ‘defamilising’, as the family was no longer a private, inclusive organisation (Esping-Andersen, 1999). This shift could be particularly useful for
UK policy on working parents as it helps to challenge traditional ideas concerning the family.

By analysing the experiences of participants in this study, a number of different policy concerns were found which require greater consideration within future UK policy discourses. In particular, the norm of the dual-parent family (which has been discussed), the notion of personal responsibility, the needs discourse, and, linking to all of these areas, assumptions regarding identity and processes of identity construction for working lone parents, were all seen to be pertinent in terms of policy development.

The notion of personal responsibility continues to form the underlying foundation for current UK work-family policies (Hughes, 2011). For lone parents, without the support of a second co-habiting parent, such a personal responsibility ascribes a significant burden which is not sustainable without informal or formal support. Yet, they still feel a need to present an image of independence, which makes exploring their needs all the more difficult. Establishing the needs of a group is critical in developing policy that can support them, yet for the participants in this study, their needs were unclear and often ambiguous. For Wallbank, the needs of lone mothers are “silenced in contemporary social and legal debates” as they are eclipsed by the needs of the child (1998: 88). From the analysis of this research, the needs discourse of the participants (in particular the lone mothers) were also found to be silenced in this respect, however, in addition, they remained hidden because of the negative connotations associated with asking for help as a lone parent. This silencing effect was therefore both socially- and self-imposed, a cyclical process which is difficult to address. Using the example of the Scandinavian approach, reconstructing the family (and so understandings of what is legitimate within this form) could offer lone parents greater autonomy in this respect.

Identity and representation are major issues to consider in relation to policy formation, as well as the assumptions that exist regarding the process of identity construction for working lone parents. How lone parents are politically represented as a group (or, in other words, their ‘politics of representation’ (Hughes, 2011: 164)) is a critical issue to consider both within organizations and
within wider society. Lone parents continue to face stigma and stereotyping, leading to assumptions regarding their situations and apparent needs. However, developing a ‘politics of representation’ is complex as the identity categories required for such representation can normalise discourses and constrain individuals within such categories (Foucault, 1983). This has been found to be a particular problem for feminist studies in discussing the category of ‘woman’ (Alcoff, 1988) (section 3.5). This effect can also be seen in the experiences of the participants in this study as it was felt that their lone parent family form was othered and seen as less legitimate in comparison to the norm of the dual-parent family. As described in section 5.2.4, to try to escape such negative perceptions, many participants would try to position themselves within wider discourses on parenting by denying that they really were a lone parent. Deconstructing and challenging the category of the ‘lone parent’ may therefore be one way to emancipate lone parents from the stereotypes and stigmas that are intrinsic within this identity category. However, a similar ‘denial of the category’ approach can be a problem as a ‘subject’ is needed in order to be politically represented (Alcoff, 1988: 418).

Identity categories can be sites of oppression, but there are also political reasons for their continuation (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 28). In order to continue exploring the difficulties they may face as primary carers and providers, a continuation of the ‘lone parent’ identity category is required. The issue becomes about undermining the stigmas and stereotypes that are so often associated with this family form and emphasising the heterogeneity of this group. May (2010: 429) concluded in her study on lone mothers that the emphasis should be on the doing of lone parenthood, rather than on the being which is seen to reify this category. However, it could be argued that the term ‘lone parent’ itself needs to be substituted with a different term in order to semantically challenge the stereotypes and stigmas that are associated with it. As Silva discussed in her study on lone mothers, the term ‘lone mother holds connotations of “abandonment and loneliness” (1996: 3), which was also discussed by participants in this study (section 5.2.1). Yet, in developing countries, the concept of the ‘female-headed household’ is instead used to identify this family form, which “carries a connotation of responsibility and
power” (ibid.). However, in either situation, the lone parent still tends to be constructed as female and so is exclusionary to male lone parents. This exclusion can be seen in the experiences of the lone father participant, who remained unrecognised in workplace understandings of primary caring and providing. Therefore, the importance of considering the label of the ‘lone parent’, and the binaries that are included within such a term, also holds resonance within the organization. If lone fathers are to feel confident in accessing help and support within the workplace, then gender neutral terminology regarding the lone parent is required within policy, as well as within everyday work discourses.

Challenging the embedded social understandings of the ‘lone parent’ may begin by questioning the very term itself. One such alternative may be to utilise the term ‘primary parent’ to substitute ‘lone’ or ‘single’ parent as it suggests that there are other forms of care and support available to the child or children. These additional forms of care and support were found within the experiences of all of the participants in this study, be it through informal or formal childcare, as well as governmental financial support (child tax credits) or child maintenance from the other parent. This alternative term positions this type of family within a network of support and therefore the well-being of that child becomes a concern for a wider set of individuals, organizations and institutions, rather than continuing to place the burden of responsibility purely on the parent. The impact of this ‘burden’ would of course still need to be taken into consideration, however, such an alternative term, which moves away from traditional discourses concerning ‘lone parenting’ or ‘parenting alone’, may help to provide a space for the re-consideration of the organisation of childcare responsibilities.

Another issue to consider in regard to assumptions concerning identity for working lone parents relates to how they engage with the process of identity construction. Policies concerning work-family balance appear to rest on the assumption that one’s sense of self in regard to ‘work’ and ‘family’ is distinct from one another so can be separated (Runté and Mills, 2004). Studies which rest on notions of boundaries or borders between work and family propagate such understandings (Clark, 2000; Desrochers and Sargent, 2004). In
comparison, the findings from this study show that identity construction is far from a simple process of picking and choosing between identities dependent upon location. Within their everyday lives, participants were involved in a variety of different (but interlinking) processes of identity work, for example, moral, habitual and paradoxical identity work. Such findings are important because they challenge traditional assumptions regarding the process of identity construction for working parents. As Beech et al. have discussed, the need to provide such a challenge is critical as there is a danger that managers will make ‘simplistic assumptions’ about the process of identity construction, which can lead to “problems of identity dynamics” (2008: 964). In the experiences of participants, such difficulties concerning ‘identity dynamics’ within the workplace were often apparent. For example, they often felt subject to the expectation that they could and should separate their work and family identities and responsibilities in order to be an effective worker (5.4.5). They also felt that assumptions were made concerning their gender and their commitment to work (5.3.5). Such assumptions concerning their identities were seen to be major contributors to the difficulties they experienced within the workplace.

It is therefore imperative that future policies should seek to address the inequalities and assumptions that exist within current work-family legislation, including concerns regarding identity construction for working lone parents, rather than simply for policy makers and governments to develop policy around their perceptions of the needs of a large and complex group. The needs of working lone parents are variable, multiple and often ambiguous and it could be argued that they do not primarily need specific policies to help them negotiate their work and family responsibilities. Rather, they first require recognition as legitimate parents and employees. Consideration needs to be given to the traditional understandings of work and family, especially in regard to assumptions concerning priorities and hierarchy. In traditional conceptions, greater importance and meaning is ascribed to either work or family, which inevitably leads to a natural positioning of one identity over the other (Perrons et al., 2006; Mckie et al., 2001). This provides assumptions about the position of the other identity, that little meaning or importance is given to it in comparison. In the case of participants, such a rating scale is unhelpful because they must
offer both care and provision for their child, therefore, employment is intrinsically tied in with the importance of family. The gendered assumption that lone parents will naturally prioritise their parenting identity over their work identity, and ascribe greater meaning to one over the other, fails to take into consideration the interconnectivity of these two aspects in their lives.

Considering the different types of identity work utilised by the participants in this study, one specific way to offer them greater support within the workplace may be to also apply the notion of the paradox to managerial practices. This option will be discussed further in the following section.

6.5.2 Supporting lone parents through a paradoxical approach to management

Within this study, the lone mother and father participants were seen to be othered in discourses of work and family, although to varying degrees (section 6.2). The aim for many of the participants was to challenge such othering by emphasising their independence, their ability to ‘do it all’ and so disassociating themselves from the negative stereotypes concerning the lone parent. Such a positioning could have a silencing effect as it became difficult for participants to ask for help from others. For policy makers, such a silence presents a problem as the difficulties that working lone parents face may consequently go unnoticed. As highlighted in section 2.3, policy makers have only relatively recently begun to target issues facing lone parents within employment through recruitment, retention and advancement pilot schemes (Brewer et al., 2009). Initial evaluations of such schemes suggest a level of ambiguity in their ability to address the needs of lone parents (Sianesi, 2011), which, considering the findings of this thesis, may be due to the veil that lone parents often seek to draw over the difficulties they face as primary carers and providers. If working lone parents continue to conceal such difficulties in a bid to disassociate themselves from discourses of dependence, they also continue to conceal the difficulties that they face as a lone parent in a society structured around the dual-parent family. Participants were therefore faced with a dilemma as recognition and support was both needed and rejected.
Whilst help was often rejected, it was crucial for the participants in maintaining their current situations, with many relying upon formal workplace policies as well as informal working arrangements with their managers in order to negotiate their caring responsibilities. Yet, by engaging in such informal or formal working practices, participants were being singled out as different and in need of help and additional management in order to allow them to work to the same capacity as others. Such a situation shows how avoiding being ‘othered’ was an almost impossible task for participants. This need for support could further highlight their inability to meet the perceived standards of the good unencumbered employee who would not require such assistance and so served to heighten the paradox of being a ‘working lone parent’. One is therefore faced with the question of whether traditional modes of management are suitable in offering appropriate support for those with primary caring and providing responsibilities. Considering the findings of this thesis, there may be an alternative approach that would better address their needs as carers and providers, namely, a paradoxical approach to management.

Like in the field of identity studies, the concept of the ‘paradox’ has also been widely utilised in organizational studies. In particular, it can be found within a variety of managerial studies (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Koot et al., 1996; Lado et al., 2006; Langfred, 2000; Lewis, 2000), for example, in regard to managing the paradoxes found during organizational change (Stoltzfus et al., 2011; Luscher et al., 2006). It has also been used as a concept to explore an alternative style of managing particular groups of workers (Gotsi et al., 2010; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). Beech et al. explored such an approach in their study which highlighted that organizational life in general contains ‘paradoxical situations’ which “demand both individuality and coordination” (2004: 1313). Drawing on Poole and Van de Ven’s (1989) work on understandings of paradox within managerial and organizational theory, they found that studies that sought to address paradoxes (“where A and B are two opposing propositions”), in both practice and theory, were more likely to focus on apparent ‘solutions’ to such paradoxes, for example, by temporally/spatially separating ‘A’ and ‘B’ or by finding a perspective that removes the opposition between them. They highlighted that there has been little focus on the possibility of “accepting the
paradox ... and appreciating the contrasts between A and B” (2004: 1314). In other words, there is a requirement for paradoxes to be accepted as ‘persistent’ and ‘unresolvable puzzles’, which need to be appreciated as an aspect of everyday organizational life (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 385).

For a paradoxical approach to management to be effective, a manager must be able to move beyond ‘either/or’ logic, which is unable to deal with the complexities of paradox (Ford and Ford, 1994), and instead look to ‘both/and’ reasoning (Chen, 2002: 180). Within Western organizational studies, either/or logic has polarised constructs such as ‘quality/cost’, ‘differentiation/integration’, ‘stability/change’ and ‘cohesion/division’ (Lewis, 2000: 762). In comparison, by using ‘both/and’ logic, a paradoxical approach to management is more akin to Eastern philosophies, for example, the Chinese ‘middle-way’ philosophy which focuses on ‘holism’, rather than ‘exclusive opposites’ (Chen, 2002: 182). Lewis uses the Taoist symbol of Yin and Yang to illustrate such a perspective as it signifies a “wholeness composed of contradictions” (2000: 762).

Paradoxes are seen to be caused by “the hangover of one set of assumptions or beliefs into a new age or environment” and emerge when “beliefs or assumptions fail to keep up with external changes” (Cannon, 1996: 110). From the findings of this thesis, paradoxes were seen to exist for participants due to the continuation of dominant discourses concerning parenting and family norms, as well as ideals and expectations within the workplace. Such beliefs can be seen as a ‘hangover’ from the ‘breadwinner’ model of family organisation, where the male full-time worker is supported by a female homemaker (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; O’Neil et al., 2008).

The strategy involved in this type of management is to offer employees support in coping with paradoxical situations, rather than offering apparent solutions or ignoring such situations (Beech et al., 2004). The most important aim for participants in this study was to maintain their current situations, so a managerial approach that emphasises coping would seem to be a viable option, particularly in the face of policies based on the dual-parent family which emphasise anxiety-provoking notions of work-family balance. However, the notion of ‘coping’ is not only applicable to employees, but is also pertinent to the
understanding of management itself. Handy (1994) describes how a paradox framework shifts understandings of management from ‘managing’ (with its roots in control and planning), to ‘coping’. The argument here is that all organizations contain paradoxes and the only way of ‘managing’ paradoxes is to cope with them (1994: 12).

In a study on healthcare professionals, Beech et al. explored the benefits that taking such an approach to management could have and described how “professionals were supported through processes that were not presented as neatly resolvable” (2004: 1327). Such a redefinition helped to “create a climate which allowed the clinicians to engage with possible alternative ways of working” (ibid.: 1325). Gotsi et al. (2010) also found similar positive results in their study on managing creative workers. The process of identity work for creative workers was seen to be particularly difficult because of contradictions between artistic and business identities, however, a paradoxical approach to management and identity regulation was seen to offer a number of potential positive outcomes. Firstly, a ‘paradox lens’ could help to “reframe identity tensions, thereby reducing the likelihood of anxiety and counterproductive responses” (2010: 799). Secondly, such an approach could facilitate the blending of seemingly contradictory, “but complementary strategies”, and thirdly, it could help to shift “notions of managing from control to coping, potentially avoiding triggers of cynicism and resistance” (ibid.).

One of the most important aspects from Gotsi et al’s work that holds resonance for the study of working lone parents (as well as working parents in general) is the idea that apparently conflicting identities can be considered as “distinct, yet mutually enabling” as they are viewed as “two sides of the same coin, rather than as polarized contradictions” (ibid.). For the participants in this study, whose working identities were intricately tied into their parenting identities through the need to provide, such a perspective could be especially liberating as it could allow for an appreciation of the beneficial aspects of being a working lone parent. For example, such an approach would allow for an appreciation of the additional human capital that participants had developed through their ability to negotiate both employment and family demands. In her study, Hughes found that many working lone mothers have lower recognised levels of human capital,
which she describes as “competencies, knowledge and personality attributes embodied in the individual parent which influences their ability to undertake waged labour” (2011: 170). By taking an alternative perspective, the findings from this thesis suggest that, for working lone parents, the process of organising and negotiating both work and family responsibilities can, in itself, allow for a greater development of marketable skills, rather than undermining their ability to engage in work.

The emphasis within such an approach is about valuing difference (Murnighan and Conlon, 1991). Difference denotes a variety of perspectives and this variety allows for issues to be considered in new and creative ways (Lewis, 2000). As primary carers and providers, working lone parents may bring a different perspective to continuing concerns regarding the integration of work and family.

For example, their experiences can help to challenge the traditional assumption that work and family responsibilities can be neatly ordered into a hierarchy of priorities, which directly impacts upon the meaning and time given to activities related to these two spheres. As described, work was important for participants as a source of identity away from that of the ‘parent’, yet was also closely tied to their identities as parents because of their responsibility to provide for their children. For most participants, the meaning that they gave to work had changed since becoming a lone parent, but this change did not necessarily negate its importance in their lives or undermine the relationship they had with work. This reconceptualisation or ‘resignification’ of work (Butler, 1995b) allowed for participants to construct a rhetoric for their interlinking work and family identities and routine. Yet, because of the dualisms and hierarchy apparent in systems of meaning (Knights, 1997), such a reconceptualisation was not always recognised as legitimate. A paradoxical approach to management could potentially challenge such systems of meaning through an acknowledgement and appreciation of the dual influence of work and family in the lives of working lone parents.

Such an acknowledgement could potentially offer recognition to the importance of both parenting and working identities. It could therefore also address what could be described as the ‘paradoxes of belonging’ (Smith and Berg, 1987) that lone parents were seen to experience. As discussed in section 3.6, the notion of
recognition is key as it allows for individuals to be ascribed social value (Butler, 2004). It would appear that one way to offer working lone parents greater recognition within the workplace would be to provide a greater level of transparency regarding the tensions between discourses on work, parenting and family norms, so “holding the paradox open” and “working with or through it” (Beech et al., 2004: 1314). As described in section 6.4.3, those participants in professional occupations often felt that they needed to separate their ‘parent’ and ‘professional’ identities in order to ‘solve’ the paradox they faced as working parents. This led to the perpetuation of particular ways of doing work. This could potentially be challenged if such paradoxes were instead held open, as it would allow for an examination of alternative ways of negotiating the work-family nexus.

Within such understandings of paradoxical approaches to management, the emphasis is also on dual responsibility between the employee and the employer where ‘managing identity tensions’ becomes a “personal and collective process, rather than the struggle of individuals or the responsibility of an elite group” (Gotsi et al., 2010: 800). As discussed in section 6.5, notions of personal responsibility continue to pervade discourses concerning lone parents. Within the workplace, such notions are propagated through expectations for work-family balance. By acknowledging the complex interchange between work and family, a paradoxical approach to the management of working lone parents could potentially allow for a shift in perception regarding the family, which has traditionally been understood as a ‘private’ area. This shift could be to consider family as more of a community endeavour, which includes a greater consideration of those who have primary caring responsibilities within the workplace. In-work funded crèches could be one such practical solution where childcare responsibilities are not left to the parent alone, although the cost of such an endeavour may be unrealistic for many companies (Kelly, 2003). The Nordic social democratic approach of state funded childcare may be another option (Leira, 2006), although, as described in section 2.4.5, this may result in the alleviation of responsibility from organizations (Hearn and Niemistö, 2012).

In critique of both options, they cannot offer support for parents with ill children, which was a major concern for participants (5.3.1). Such a criticism emphasises
the conundrum for both managers and policy makers in developing credible, practical solutions which can also help to challenge traditional ways of organising work and family. From the findings, when it came to child sickness, participants would either take annual leave or unpaid leave. In both situations, participants felt that taking time off work to care for sick children was frowned upon by their organizations (section 5.3.5). Offering parents with ill children partially paid leave may be the best way to address such a difficulty, as this type of leave could be given the same legitimacy as other types of paid leave.

As Lewis describes, in a diverse organization, “traditional either/or thinking oversimplifies management practices and demands” (2000: 769). Therefore, on a management level, addressing paradoxical situations within the workplace must involve creative, often contradictory responses from managers. For example, Denison et al. (1995) discussed how the behaviour of effective managers was often contradictory as it was used to mirror fluctuating workplace demands. These managing executives were seen to have a “rich behavioural repertoire” as notions of control and stability were also utilised alongside emotional responses such as compassion (1995: 537). For the lone parents in this study, a compassionate, empathetic manager could be a strong positive force in their experiences of negotiating work and family responsibilities (section 5.3.1). Emotions therefore need to become an integral part of an effective managers’ behavioural repertoire.

Another way of applying a paradoxical approach to the management of those with primary caring and providing responsibilities may be to increase the availability (and appreciation of) part-time positions in professional occupations. Cultural expectations within professional occupations often revolve around notions of time equating to productivity and commitment. Part-time workers therefore tend to be constructed as ‘time deviants’ who are less legitimate compared to full-time employees (Epstein et al., 1999: section 2.4.4). Yet, research has shown that longer working hours do not necessarily equate to greater productivity (Dick and Hyde, 2006). The findings of this study also suggest that those in part-time working hours do not consider commitment to be a product of long working hours. Many participants discussed moving into lower-level positions after having children in order to access part-time working
hours. For some participants, their previous higher-level occupations did not offer part-time alternatives for their positions, but for others, even when such working-hours were available, they felt undervalued and underappreciated as part-time employees (section 5.3.3). Because of this, they felt that opportunities for progression were not possible as they could not engage with idealised ways of working. A paradoxical approach to management could help to: identify the tensions that were apparent within discourses concerning time, productivity and commitment; make these tensions more transparent to workers; and so potentially grant part-time workers greater legitimacy. One way to make these tensions more transparent would be to challenge the norm of full-time static working hours. By making part-time working hours in professional occupations more available to both men and women, this could potentially reduce the stigma associated with alternative ways of working.

Managers also need to be able to identify paradoxes within organizations. This may involve reading into the responses of employees, for example, in their use of humour. As described in section 6.4.3, humour was used by participants to help ridicule their paradoxical situations. However, in social situations, humour can also be used as a form of confrontation (Martin, 2004). In their study on middle-managers, Hatch and Erhlich (1993) described how managers used humour to compare their organization to that of a prison, where they were cast as both guards in monitoring employees, but also as prisoners in relation to their superiors. By using humour in this way, such paradoxes could be confronted and made visible to others in a “less-threatening, more playful fashion” (Hatch, 1997: 287). Therefore, managers need to be aware that humour in the workplace may contain important insights into the paradoxes experienced by employees. The humour used by the participants in this study could offer managers an insight into the paradoxical situations that they experienced as primary carers and providers.

6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the main findings of this study. I discussed the multitude of discourses that could affect how the participants understood their work and family identities, as well as the practical and emotional issues that
such inter-woven discourses could create for them. The different types of
identity work that the lone parent participants engaged with were also
discussed, namely, moral, habitual and paradoxical.

The latter sections of this chapter considered the findings of this research in
policy terms. In particular, some important managerial and organizational
considerations were highlighted in regard to supporting working lone parents in
the future. An alternative way of managing working lone parents was
suggested, which also holds wider resonance for the management of working
parents in general. In the concluding chapter I will address how such findings
met the aim and objectives of this study, what I consider to be the main findings
of this study, the limitations of this research, as well as areas for future research
in this area.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study has been to explore and critically analyse the everyday experiences and identity work of lone parents in relation to their work and family responsibilities. In the conclusion to the thesis, I will briefly revisit the rationale for this study and justify how the analysis of previous research in this area helped to inform the aim, objectives and conceptual framework. In the following sections, I will reflect on the findings of this thesis in order to demonstrate how the aim and objectives were met. I will also highlight the recommendations that could be made from the outcomes of the research. Finally, I will discuss the limitations that arose from this study and will suggest areas for future research.

7.2 The rationale revisited

This research was undertaken to contribute to understandings of working lone parents. Twenty-six per cent of all families with dependent children in the UK are headed by a lone parent (ONS, 2011a). Of these, fifty-seven per cent are in employment (ONS, 2011b). This employment rate has increased by twelve per cent since 1997 and, during this time, the issue of employment in the lives of lone parents (especially lone mothers) has been of continuing concern for Governments and policy makers (Coleman and Lanceley, 2011). The majority of research into lone parents and employment has tended to focus on concerns regarding policy (specifically welfare-to-work schemes) and the lone parent subject at the boundary of work (Harris, 1993; Gregg et al., 2009; Gingrich, 2008; Gray, 2001; Ermisch and Wright, 1991). Yet, the experiences of those lone parents whose histories are more likely to reflect time in work, rather than time out of work, have continued to be marginalised (Gill and Davidson, 2001; Coyne, 2002; Davies, 2012; Ridge and Millar, 2011). This lack of focus became particularly apparent when considering the studies conducted on lone parents and employment alongside the research on parents from dual-parent families (section 2.4).
In exploring the research that had previously been conducted in relation to lone parents and employment, the concept of ‘identity’ was highlighted as a useful lens through which to consider their understandings and experiences (section 2.5). As a concept, identity is significant because it central to “what one values, thinks, feels and does in all social domains, including organizations” (Albert, et al., 2000: 14). It can affect how individuals understand and give meaning to their employment, as well as how other areas, such as family, may influence such understandings. The concept of identity was also seen to be critical for contemporary organizational studies, as managers are now expected to be more aware of identity processes in order to avoid problems of ‘identity dynamics’ (Beech et al., 2008: 964). For example, within the workplace, assumptions could be made about the identity processes of working parents, and the subsequent meaning and commitment that they give to their work. Consequently, this could result in problems of ‘identity dynamics’, where the working parent is ascribed particular identity characteristics that may not be congruous with the meaning that they actually give to their work identities.

One intended objective for this research was to provide a greater understanding of the difficulties facing lone parents in negotiating both caring and providing responsibilities. A focus on identity could help facilitate such an exploration as it could highlight the norms, ideals and expectations associated with caring and work identities. By drawing attention to such discourses, the tensions and contradictions experienced by lone parents in constructing a sense of identity and negotiating their daily lives could be examined in greater detail.

As concerns regarding inequality were found to be significant in previous studies on lone parents (Wallbank, 1998; May, 2003; 2004b; 2008b), this thesis required a conceptual framework that could help identify experiences of marginalisation, as well as the influences of dominant social discourses. Grounded in critical understandings of identity, this framework drew upon a number of concepts. Identity was considered to be a “practice of improvisation” within a wider ‘scene’ of restrictive social discourses (Butler, 2004: 1). The notion of identity work was used to investigate this practice and so help explore the processes by which individuals constructed a coherent sense of identity. Alongside this concept, an in-depth analysis of the social discourses, norms and
expectations that could be seen to contribute to the development and construction of this identity work also formed an additional aspect of the framework. By considering these aspects, and how they influenced constructions of the 'intelligible subject' (Butler, 1999 [1990]), the importance of recognition for lone parents could be investigated further, that is, how they felt they were ascribed social value. As lone parents have historically been considered to be a 'social problem' (Carabine, 2001), concerns of social value in constructions of identity were seen to be critical.

The aim of this study was to explore and critically analyse the identity work and everyday experiences of lone parents in relation to their work and family responsibilities. Taking into consideration the previous literature in this area, the aim of this study was addressed in chapter four. Grounded in Critical Management Studies (including aspects of feminism), this study sought to achieve this aim by utilising a qualitative approach to collect the data. Fifteen participants from the London/Greater London area and the South West of England took part in: a work history interview to explore their experiences and identity work within their employment histories; a seven day diary study to provide an insight into their daily routines and practices both at home and work; and a follow up interview to discuss any issues that arose from the initial interview and diaries.

There were three objectives for this study. The first objective was to provide an account of the identity work and experiences of the lone parent participants. This was met in the form of interview data and diaries that were presented and interpreted in chapter five. The second objective was to provide working lone parents with a higher level of recognition. This objective was met by offering this group greater visibility through the findings contained in this thesis. The final objective was to offer recommendations that would benefit lone parents. To meet this objective, a number of recommendations from the findings were offered in chapter six that could potentially benefit the situations of working lone parents, as well as their employers. These will be discussed further in the following section.

7.3 Summary and implications of the research findings
The findings chapter comprised of three sections. The first section considered how participants understood their lone parenthood (section 5.2); the second section looked at how they gave meaning to their employment (section 5.3); and the third section addressed how they had developed their daily routines in order to meet both their work and care commitments (section 5.4). A number of competing discourses concerning employment, caring and lone parenting were apparent in the dialogues of participants, which meant that it was more difficult for them to be recognised as legitimate, valuable parents and employees when compared to the traditional ideals of both the good parent and the good employee (section 6.2).

As a consequence, participants faced experiences of ‘normative violence’ (Chambers and Carver, 2008; Butler, 1995a; 1997), where recognition was perceived to be withheld from them as both parents and employees (section 6.3). As lone parents, they were othered within the dominant discourses concerning work and family, yet seeking recognition within these areas was still critical for participants because of the discursive resources that such areas offered. These resources were central to their constructions of identity as they included particular notions of what identity characteristics held social value. The participants therefore sought to structure their lives and identities around such notions of social value in order to gain recognition. Such a finding resonates with Butler’s (2004) argument that recognition is key to identity construction.

In addressing the research questions for this study, it was found that the participants’ understandings of their identities (and their associated identity work) greatly influenced the structuring of their daily routines. This meant that the processes by which they sought to construct and maintain a sense of identity had material effects on their experiences. For example, constructing an identity as a working lone parent included making decisions concerning full-time or part-time working hours. This decision could then impact on their financial situations. The processes by which participants sought to construct a sense of self were highly complex due to their awkward positioning within dominant social discourses concerning work and family. Three identity work forms were perceived to be apparent in their experiences: moral, habitual and paradoxical (section 6.4). Their moral and habitual identity work was found to be especially
constraining when organising and managing their work and family responsibilities. Within such processes, the emphasis was on personal responsibility as a moral parent and the need to maintain their current routines and positions, even if such routines and positions were not preferable. On the other hand, their paradoxical identity work provided them with opportunities to question and resist contradictory discourses concerning work and family (for example, through the use of humour) (section 5.3.5). However, the process of paradoxical identity work was rare in comparison to that of moral and habitual identity work, meaning that participants often struggled to construct a positive sense of self in the face of dominant discourses, norms, and expectations concerning family and paid work.

There are a number of implications to be drawn from this research. Building on such work by Coyne (2002) and Gill and Davidson (2001), this research contributes to knowledge by highlighting the everyday challenges and concerns that may be found in the experiences of working lone parents. In addition, this study has contributed towards the theoretical literature on identity work, specifically in regard to identity work as an ongoing, everyday process (Watson, 2008; Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009; Wieland, 2010; Ybema et al., 2009). Previous research in this area has tended to focus on the identity work that occurs at times of heightened stress and pressure, specifically within the workplace (Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). There has been little consideration of the concept of identity work in regard to people’s whole lives (for example, both within and beyond the workplace), and how these processes of identity construction may impact on one another (Watson, 2009; Tietze and Musson, 2010). In this study, appreciating the ambiguities within such processes of identity construction across both work and family allowed for a greater insight into the everyday experiences of the lone parent participants. Identity work has also tended to be used as a broad term, which does not always account for the different forms of identity work that may be apparent (McInnes and Corlett, 2012). Within this study, moral, habitual and paradoxical identity work forms were extrapolated from the experiences of participants. This was not designed to be a definitive list of the different types of identity work that may be engaged in by participants, rather, the aim was to highlight the central
forms of identity work that were seen to be critical in their daily lives as primary carers and providers.

This research also has implications for management studies in regard to supporting working lone parents within the workplace. As discussed in section 6.2, the lone mother and father participants were often othered in discourses of work and family (although to varying degrees). Many participants sought to challenge such othering by emphasising their independence in order to disassociate themselves from the negative stereotypes concerning the ‘lone parent’. Yet, such a positioning could have a silencing effect, as it became difficult for participants to ask for help from others, including within the workplace. Informal workplace support was often utilised, but such support was unstable as it could be withdrawn at any time. The major problem with such informal support is that it does not address the apparently dichotomous, paradoxical relationship between care and paid work. Similarly, the contradictions between ideologies concerning the good parent and the good employee cannot be challenged by developing and implementing micro level policies alone.

One possible way for managers to begin to address this issue is to consider the experiences of primary carers and providers as a paradox. As described, discourses concerning employment, lone parenting and parenting in general are contradictory in the way that they construct norms and ideals. Yet working lone parents have to negotiate such situations, which presents them with a dichotomy. Despite the fact that a number of studies have presented ways of considering the co-existence of competing work and family demands (Rothbard, 2001; Medved, 2009; Ilies et al., 2009), the possibilities of applying the notion of the paradox to such situations have yet to be fully explored (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 397). As discussed in section 6.5.2, one possible way to address such a situation, where competing ideologies and discourses are apparent, is through a paradoxical approach to management (Luscher and Lewis, 2008; Beech et al., 2004). In the first instance, this type of approach to management may be useful in helping to challenge the negative workplace attitudes that can surround those employees with outside-of-work responsibilities. This approach values difference within the workplace (Murnighan and Conlon, 1991), which could
allow for the appreciation of alternative perceptions concerning work and family. Consequently, this could mean that alternative ways of organising work and family responsibilities, beyond the traditional ‘breadwinner’ model of full-time working, may be granted greater legitimacy, for example, the use of part-time working hours.

As discussed in section 6.5.2, previous work in this area has found that a paradoxical approach to management can help support workers within a business environment by reframing identity tensions and by reconceptualising management as a way of enabling ‘coping’, rather than control (Gotsi et al., 2010: 799). The expectation within such an approach is that managers and employees will work together to address competing discourses and so take collective responsibility for working situations. This notion of collective responsibility is especially pertinent to the experiences of working lone parents, as participants often mentioned feeling a burden of personal responsibility as primary carers and providers. Within the workplace, such ideas concerning personal responsibility for working parents are also reproduced within policy discourses on ‘work-family balance’ (Lewis et al., 2007). Applying a paradoxical approach to the management of those with outside-of-work responsibilities could offer them a different type of support, where the integrating of work and family responsibilities becomes a concern for employer and employee alike.

However, developing a practical solution to address such a concern is complicated. For example, increasing the availability of funded childcare may help to readdress the balance of responsibility, but would not help when children were unwell. To deal with this situation, partially paid leave could be offered to parents when children were sick. Such options could help to challenge notions of personal responsibility in terms of organising work and family, as the financial burden is also shared by the company. Unfortunately, the financial cost of such initiatives may also mean that such practices are unlikely to be seriously considered (Kelly, 2003).

Another practical application discussed in chapter six, which could be used within a paradoxical approach to management, is the increased availability of part-time positions in professional occupations. By allowing for this type of
working practice to become more common, the ideals associated with full-time work, which include assumptions concerning productivity and commitment, can become more transparent and so open to challenge (section 6.5.2). Such a paradoxical approach to management may therefore offer employers a more flexible and less constrained way of managing those with caring responsibilities. In turn, this could lead to greater commitment and motivation amongst employees. It could also lead to higher levels of staff retention, for example, lone parent workers may not feel that they have to leave their employment to gain part-time working hours or to be seen as legitimate employees. This could consequently lead to a more effective use of skill sets and accrued knowledge.

Finally, this thesis has also contributed to knowledge from a methodological perspective. The research focused on experiences of both work and family in order to provide an overview of participants’ experiences as working lone parents. This approach included data collected from qualitative daily diaries, a method that is still relatively rare in the work-family literature (Bass et al., 2007). Such an approach helped to provide an appreciation of both the work and family routines of participants, and produced contextually specific data that would have been less accessible from interviews alone. For studies seeking to explore the intersection of work and family life, rather than the narrower focus of either work or family, such a research method may be particularly effective. This research method allows participants to write about both their work and family experiences and provides them with a space to discuss the interactions and tensions that may arise between the two. The emphasis is on their lives as a whole, rather than on one aspect alone, which allows for a more holistic appreciation of the interaction between work and family responsibilities.

7.4 Limitations of the study

As discussed in chapter four, a number of potential limitations were apparent within the methodology of this study. In section 4.4.1, one potential limitation was seen to be the relatively small sample size. The limitations of a study are often described in relation to how a study may be ‘representative’ of a group or generalised to other contexts (Lincoln and Cannella, 2004; Small, 2009). The issue of sample size is important to consider, although it needs to be
understood in the context of the study. This project was not meant to be comparative of lone parents across the UK, rather it sought to provide a contextually rich account of the experiences and understandings of working lone parents (section 4.2). Therefore, the findings that arise from the study can be best understood as situated ‘truths’ (Riessman, 2008) and so, in common with other critical feminist studies, this research does not make claims regarding whether the data can be generalized to other contexts and groups (Chase, 2005). However, a larger sample number would have provided a greater wealth of experiences, which would have contributed to the study and its findings.

Due to the contextual emphasis of this study, one particular limitation of the research may be the data that was not discussed. Even from a relatively small sample, a considerable volume of data were produced, as the interviews provided five hundred and ten pages of transcript material for analysis. Although the local contexts of individuals and the major themes and patterns found in the data were discussed, some data was not included. Like any researcher, I faced decisions about what and what not to include and the resultant findings may reflect my own personal biases and views on what is important or significant. Sharing the findings of the research with participants was one way to reduce the inclusion of bias or misinterpretations (section 4.5), however, such an approach cannot negate the power differentials that were apparent between myself as a researcher and the participants (Letherby, 2003).

As discussed in section 4.4.5, my personal situation as a woman without children may also be considered a potential limitation within this study. As a non-parent, my interpretations may lack insights that a researcher with children may be able to provide. However, as also highlighted in section 4.4.5, such a situation can be at least partly addressed if the researcher recognises their place within the research process, and the effects that their personal views may have on the construction of knowledge (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Acker et al., 1991). Taking such a perspective does not negate the differences that may exist between the participants and the researcher, but this perspective did encourage me to be more reflective during the different stages of this research project.
A potential limitation of the framework for this study also needs to be addressed, as well as the influence that such a framework had on the analysis of the data collected. The framework for this study was grounded in a critical perspective. In order to critically explore and analyse the everyday experiences and identity work of participants, I had to focus on the tensions, difficulties and challenges that they faced. The potential problem with having such a specific framework is that the researcher may be selective in their analysis of the texts and focus on the data which will “simply mirror his or her prior expectations” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 42). By analysing the data in such a way, I could potentially have selected data that supported the assumptions I held about lone parents, for example, that they are marginalised within work and family discourses. To limit this potential problem, any text that was seen to reflect tensions, difficulties and challenges in the experiences or identity work of a participant was considered as part of their wider dialogues. This was to ensure that comments were not taken out of context. As an additional insurance, the data were also looked over by my director of studies who offered advice on analysis and subsequent discussion (section 4.6).

7.5 Future research

There are a number of potential routes for further research, which can be taken from this thesis. For example, the experience of the working lone father in this study was particularly interesting to consider as he had to face specific (gendered) challenges within his workplace. The findings from this study showed that Michael faced challenges peculiar to his ‘lone father’ situation, which suggests that a more in-depth exploration of lone fathers’ experiences of care, employment and identity work would be worthwhile in contributing to the limited research about this group (Fox and Bruce, 2001; Adams, 1996).

Another area of future research would be to continue to analyse the situations of working lone parents during a time of economic uncertainty. At the time of writing, a recession was still impacting the UK economy, the effects of which could be seen in Michael’s account (section 5.3.1). Due to a fear of redundancy, Michael had adapted his working behaviour to meet workplace expectations concerning the ideal employee. His ability to afford paid childcare for longer
periods of time meant that such a change could be managed. For those unable to afford such childcare, or without adequate support from family or friends, the recession could have major implications as they may be unable to adapt their working behaviour. In addition, the clash between ideals concerning work and family could also impact upon participants’ organisation of working hours (5.4.2). Being unable to meet the ideals concerning the good employee may therefore place them at greater risk during times of redundancy. One possible approach would be to conduct a longitudinal analysis of the experiences of those with primary caring and providing responsibilities within the UK, to help analyse the impact that such an economic climate may have on their situations and their perceptions of risk. Such a longitudinal analysis could also help to explore: the changes in their careers as lone parents; how they cope with the challenges of primary caring and providing; and how changes in their personal lives (such as the age of their children) impact upon their experiences and understandings of employment.

A final area for future study would be to analyse the practical application of a paradoxical management approach to those with outside-of-work responsibilities. Considering the findings of this study, such an approach could be important in helping to challenge the assumptions that underpin general workplace policies, which are seen to be based on the notion that “one-size-fits-all” (Friedman and Lobel, 2003: 88-89). This type of managerial approach should not be restricted to working lone parents, as dichotomies regarding caring and working face parents from different family forms, as well as those with elderly or disabled family members (Fredriksen-Goldsen and Scharlach, 2001).

7.6 Concluding remarks

As described, the purpose of this study has been to explore and critically analyse the everyday experiences and identity work of lone parents in relation to their work and family responsibilities. In this final chapter I have sought to highlight how this research met such an aim, as well as the proposed objectives. I have also discussed the implications that such research may have
in terms of contributing to knowledge. In concluding this study, the potential limitations of this project and areas for future research were also addressed.

As primary carers and providers, working lone parents face a multitude of challenges. They face expectations concerning work and family ideals, whilst simultaneously being cast as the other in both regards. For critical theorists, the goal should be to challenge such positioning by offering working lone parents greater recognition as both parents and employees. To contribute to such a goal, this thesis has presented a systematic study of the everyday experiences and identity work of the participants. The findings of this study have helped to develop a new understanding of the identity work of lone parents, as well as present an alternative approach for their management within the workplace. Such a contribution to knowledge could benefit a number of stakeholders, including researchers, business professionals, policy makers and, most importantly, working lone parents.
**Appendices**

**Appendix 1: Department for Work & Pensions’ studies on lone parents and employment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author (year)</th>
<th>Report type (no.)</th>
<th>Report subject</th>
<th>Method of data collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>McKay and Marsh (1994)</td>
<td>Research (25)</td>
<td>Lone parents and work – Benefits and maintenance</td>
<td>Quantitative - various</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marsh <em>et al.</em> (1997)</td>
<td>Research (61)</td>
<td>Lone parents, income and labour participation</td>
<td>Quantitative – survey, questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finlayson and Marsh (1998)</td>
<td>Research (80)</td>
<td>Lone parents and decisions to work: Processes of preparing to work</td>
<td>Quantitative – survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snape and Kelly (1999)</td>
<td>In-House (50)</td>
<td>Lone parent attitudes towards state support – various foci</td>
<td>Qualitative – focus groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodfield and Finch (1999)</td>
<td>Research (89)</td>
<td>Voluntary sector schemes – benefit exit and employment – NDLP - evaluation</td>
<td>Qualitative – interviews, focus groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas <em>et al.</em> (1999)</td>
<td>Research (90)</td>
<td>Evaluation of welfare provision for lone parents</td>
<td>Qualitative - interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finch <em>et al.</em> (1999)</td>
<td>Research (92)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment - NDLP - Lone parent participation</td>
<td>Qualitative and qualitative interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green (2000)</td>
<td>In-House (63)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – NDLP - Evaluation of local study areas</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finch and Gloyer (2000)</td>
<td>In-House (68)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment: Lone parents and childcare - NDLP</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (2000)</td>
<td>In-House (72)</td>
<td>Lone parent employment rate – Denmark and UK</td>
<td>Quantitative – administrative data</td>
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<td>Hales <em>et al.</em> (2000a)</td>
<td>Research (108)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment - Evaluation of NDLP phase one</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hales <em>et al.</em> (2000b)</td>
<td>Research (109)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment - Evaluation of NDLP phase one</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
</tr>
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<td>Title</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
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<td>------------------------</td>
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<td>Lewis et al. (2000)</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment - NDLP - Lone parent evaluation</td>
<td>Qualitative - interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connolly and Green (2002)</td>
<td>In-House</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – ONE pilots – compulsory review meetings</td>
<td>Quantitative - interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>O’Connor and Boreham (2002)</td>
<td>In-House</td>
<td>Lone parents, paid work and London: Review of research methods</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
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<td>Pettigrew (2003)</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Lone parents from minority ethnic communities – various foci</td>
<td>Qualitative - interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Casebourn e and Britton (2004)</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Lone parents, health and work – Decisions about work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evans et al. (2004)</td>
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<td>Lone parents, work and benefits</td>
<td>Quantitative – existing datasets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Griffiths and Jones (2005)</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – lone parents and Employment Zones (EZ)</td>
<td>Qualitative - interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bell et al. (2005)</td>
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<td>Lone parents, work and childcare</td>
<td>Qualitative – interviews, focus groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Lone parents and work – Methodological study</td>
<td>Quantitative - survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knight and</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment –</td>
<td>Quantitative –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Scope of Outcomes</td>
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<td>Knight et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Research (368)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – Work retention</td>
<td>Literature review &amp; Quantitative – administrative data</td>
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<td>Yeo (2007)</td>
<td>Working (37)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – Work retention</td>
<td>Quantitative - administrative data</td>
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<td>Brown and Joyce (2007)</td>
<td>Research (408)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – NDLP - Non-participation</td>
<td>Qualitative - interviews, focus groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ray et al. (2007)</td>
<td>Research (423)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment - Lone parent evaluation</td>
<td>Qualitative - interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hosain and Breen (2007)</td>
<td>Research (426)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – NDLP plus - Lone parent evaluation</td>
<td>Qualitative - observation of pilot</td>
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<td>Thomas (2007)</td>
<td>Research (443)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – Lone parents and WFI</td>
<td>Literature review &amp; Quantitative – administrative data</td>
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<td>Cebulla et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Research (484)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – NDLP - Review of impacts</td>
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<td>Riccio et al. (2008)</td>
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<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – Second year impacts of ERA</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jenkins (2008)</td>
<td>Research (499)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – NDLP plus - Evaluation Scotland and Wales</td>
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<td>Goodwin (2008)</td>
<td>Research (511)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – Lone parent view of benefit sanctions</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jenkins and Lloyd (2008)</td>
<td>Research (524)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – Options and Choices Events</td>
<td>Literature review &amp; Qualitative – administrative data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brewer et al. (2009)</td>
<td>Research (606)</td>
<td>Pilot projects - benefit exit and employment – NDLP plus - Net impacts</td>
<td>Literature review &amp; Qualitative – administrative data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Ethical approval form

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER BUSINESS SCHOOL

Ethical Approval Form

NAME: Rachel Gibson
Degree: PhD Management studies
Supervisor: Dr Emma Jeanes

Title of Research Project:
Lone parents at work: Personal identity and organisational culture.

Outline Proposal:
This research project aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of lone parents throughout their work history, concentrating on understandings of work-life balance, organisational culture and identity. As current social policy targets lone parents and employment, it is important to document the challenges of being a sole carer and worker so as to provide a better understanding of their experiences. The literature review for this project has highlighted the complex and multi-faceted nature of lone parent subjects, as well as a dearth in qualitative research on employed lone parents. This research project would seek to add to the existing knowledge on lone parents whilst also producing original knowledge on the experiences of employed lone parents.

Methodology: (Please indicate any ethical issues arising and how you propose to address these issues. See Ethical Guidance Notes)

This research project will be utilising a qualitative, phenomenological approach to data collection. Participants will be asked to complete:

1. An initial diary to be completed daily for a seven day period.
2. A second diary to be completed daily for a fourteen day period.
3. A work history interview.

This in-depth approach to research will allow participants to tell their story and discuss the issues that they find important in relation to employment. This satisfies point seven of the British Sociological Association’s ethical guidelines which point out that research should be “worthwhile and that the techniques proposed are appropriate” (BSA, 2002: 2). However, this in-depth approach to data collection may also pose some ethical problems. With all research projects it is imperative that the researcher ensures,
"That the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research. They should strive to protect the rights of those they study, their interests, sensitivities and privacy, while recognising the difficulty of balancing potentially conflicting interests" (BSA, 2002: 2).

To address any potential ethical problems with this project, participants will be assured that:

- Participation is voluntary and they may withdraw from this research at anytime.
- All information will be treated as confidential, with the data collected being used for research purposes only (in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998).
- All publications ensuing from this research will utilise pseudonyms for participants and other named persons/organisations/institutions to ensure anonymity.
- Participants have the opportunity to seek advice about completing the research from the researcher at any point.

Participants will also be asked to sign a consent form which will highlight these points, as well as describing the nature of the research project and asking permission to record the work history interviews. All sensitive data will be stored on a secure computer and will not be available to third parties.

There is little to suggest that lone parents should be considered a vulnerable research group, however, given the utilisation of in-depth interviews there is potential for sensitivity. This will be taken into consideration when recruiting participants and the researcher will also provide links to lone parent support agencies (Gingerbread.org.uk, lone-parents.org.uk, oneparentfamilies.org.uk), which provide information and support on a variety of subjects.

This research project aims to ensure professional integrity by reporting the data collected accurately as well as maintaining a good relationship with participants by protecting their interests and their rights. This complies with the British Sociological Association’s ethical guidelines for research (2002).


Signed: (Student) Date: 20/01/09
Signed: (Supervisor) Date: 01/01/09
Signed: (School Ethics Officer) Date: 15/01/09

Need to be referred to University Ethics Committee? Y/N
If Yes: Further Action required:
Appendix 3: Work histories of participants

| Beth  | Lone mother • 33 years old • 2 daughters (9 years old) • South Devon |

In regard to her aspirations at school, Beth described wanting to be a teacher, but did not feel that she was academic enough to pursue that occupation. She decided to take a Nursery Nursing qualification at College with the intention of furthering her qualifications in order to move into teaching in the future. To earn some extra money during these studies, she started working part-time for a cleaning company. On completion of her qualification at the age of seventeen, Beth was employed as a full-time nursery nurse at a nursery forty minutes from her home. She worked at this location for seven years, in which time she was married and had twin daughters. She described how these events led to her decision to stay in the field of nursery nursing, rather than go on to study for a teaching qualification as previously planned. Whilst at that nursery, Beth progressed to team leader position, however, she felt that she had to step down from this role for a number of reasons. Her then husband worked nights so was unable to help with the care of the twin girls at that time, which often led to Beth feeling exhausted during the day. This, combined with a forty minute commuting time each way to work, meant that she felt she could no longer take on the extra responsibility within her workplace. She decided to send her CV to a local nursery in the hope that she could work closer to home. She was successful and took on a role of nursery nurse at a nursery only ten minutes away from her home. Again, Beth described working her way up to a supervisory level, however, at this point her marriage ended and so she requested to step down as supervisor as she felt she was unable to deal with that level of work responsibility and look after her two daughters by herself. She also tried varying her work hours (from seven until four, and then from nine until six) to see what the best pattern was for her to both fulfil her full-time working hours and still spend some time with her children in the morning and evenings before they went to bed. Throughout this time, Beth discussed how valuable her parents and sister were and described them as a continuing source of support and help. Currently, Beth is still working full-time hours at her local nursery.
Betty • Lone mother • 43 years old • 3 children (7, 9 & 11 years old) • Greater London

Betty left school at seventeen and took a full-time position as an office junior in a solicitors firm. She progressed to a junior secretary within eighteen months because of her typing skills and since then has worked for six solicitors firms. She described each move as a stepping stone to earn higher wages, as she often felt that this was the only way to increase her income. Betty mentioned that there have been two redundancies in her working history, but in both instances she was able to find another full-time secretarial position relatively quickly. The second instance of redundancy was voluntary as she had just had her first son and so applied to work at a local firm of solicitors instead. Betty has been working for her current organization as a legal secretary for nine years. In that time she had two more children, but five years ago she described going through a difficult divorce, after which she reduced her hours to part-time in order to complete the school runs for her three children. In the last two years, Betty returned to college in her spare time to take courses in child care, aromatherapy and holistic massage. She described two reasons for this: one, to gain extra confidence; and, two, to have an alternative employment pathway if needed. The current solicitors firm she works for had been discussing the possibility of redundancies and so Betty believed it was important to have a ‘back up’ in case she could not find work in this field elsewhere. Betty also continues to care for her eighty year old mother who has diabetes. Whilst her mother can help her with child care, she is unable to look after the children if they are ill because of her own poor health so Betty will only rely on her in emergencies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hazel</th>
<th>Lone mother</th>
<th>32 years old</th>
<th>1 son (1 year old)</th>
<th>Greater London</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

After leaving school, Hazel went to University where she studied for a BA in Philosophy and Sociology, graduating with a 2.1. She described being quite keen to get on a recognised graduate training program and so applied for a place on a major airline’s graduate training scheme. She was accepted and worked there for two years, learning about different parts of the business and gaining additional qualifications. After her graduate training had finished, Hazel applied for a permanent full-time position in their marketing procurement department. She worked in this position for a year, but wanted to move to a smaller company as she felt that like “a small fish in a very big pond”. Hazel also wanted to move to London as it was ‘glamorous’ and so took a marketing position there in an online banking company. After two years in that position she decided to take a few months out to go travelling and, on returning, secured a marketing position within a major TV company. Unfortunately, Hazel described how she did not like the culture of the company which was quite ‘aggressive’ and after a few months she was contacted by a recruitment agency who made her aware of a job being offered in another major TV company. She moved to the marketing procurement department of this other company and has been working for this organization for the last five years. Fourteen months ago she had her son, with the knowledge that her son’s father would not be involved in his upbringing. After three months on maternity leave she returned to work full-time for two reasons: one, her job was not available on a part-time basis; and, two, she felt that she could not afford to work part-time whilst living in the London area. She has some support from her parents, although relies more on paid childcare to look after her son when she is at work.
Helen • Lone mother • 33 years old • 3 children (6, 15 & 18 years old) • South Devon

Helen had her first child at the age of fifteen. She was sent to a school for pregnant girls where she sat her exams and left just before her daughter was born. The father had no involvement. After the birth, with the help of her mum, she returned to College and did a hair and beauty course, but had to relocate with her family before she could complete the qualification. After the relocation, Helen started working part-time in a fish and chip shop and had her second child (again without the support of the father) before moving down to live in the South Devon area where she got a job in another chip shop. She met her then partner and started working in his family’s bakery, before giving birth to her third child. After her son was born, Helen and her then partner bought the bakery from his parents and ran the business together. They also bought a second shop to trade from, which Helen ran by herself. After they sold the business, Helen discussed how she wanted to work as a carer for the elderly so took a job with a charity for six months. However, she felt that they gave her too many clients for her to do her job effectively and so decided to leave before getting married to her then partner. After the marriage, she had a few months off from work where she took full-time caring responsibility for her children. Helen and her husband then bought a pub which they ran together for two years before separating. To support her children, Helen took a part-time sales position in a mobile phone shop where she currently works.
Katy • Lone mother • 23 years old • 1 son (5 years old) • South Devon

After leaving school at the age of seventeen, Katy took a full-time job as a mental health care support worker. She described taking it because it was “well paid for someone my age who hadn’t got a lot of experience”. At eighteen she was married and at nineteen gave birth to her son. Her husband had a mental disablement so Katy was the primary earner in her family. She continued to work full-time hours in the same organization after her son was born as her husband could care for him whilst she was at work. At the age of twenty-two she separated from her partner and took joint custody of their son. At this point, she re-arranged her full-time, twelve hour shift work over half the week so she could care for her child during the second half of the week. Katy also began courses in assessor training and counselling as she wished to move into one of these areas in the future. When her son started school she was able to make a transition from being a care support worker to training care support workers, which offered better hours to fit in around her son’s school hours, as well as better pay. At the point of the final interview, Katy was working part-time as a care support worker and part-time as an assessor, with an aim to move to full-time assessor hours in the near future.
After leaving school, Laura attended university and graduated with a degree in English. She described being unsure about what employment path she wished to take, an uncertainty which she believes has followed her throughout her working life. Laura’s first job was as a temporary admin worker in a law firm which became a permanent contract with the company. Her husband was offered some work abroad so she moved with him and, on returning to Britain, had her first child. She does not recall having any permanent working positions initially after her first child was born and took on part-time freelance work during the period up until her second child was born. After having her second child she took a computing course and continued with part-time freelance work up until her first child reached school age, at which point she took on a part-time admin role to fit in with school hours. At the age of forty-one Laura’s marriage ended and she described feeling a greater pressure to progress career wise in order to provide greater financial security for her children. She took a part-time position as a computer skills trainer which also funded her to complete a PGCE. After gaining her teaching qualification she took a full-time position in a Further Education College, however, she recalled the work environment as very unsupportive so applied for a job as an academic skills adviser at a University. She currently works full-time in this position.
On leaving school, Lucy attended university where she studied for a degree in English as she initially wanted to go into teaching. However, during her degree, she realised that teaching was not the career she would like to pursue and decided to go into youth work. She did two placements during her degree and then on graduating spent the two subsequent years volunteering for youth support services in London and Botswana to be eligible for a further training course in youth and community work. After completing this qualification, Lucy was employed in a women’s refuge and described not enjoying this experience due to the management staff. She left this employment to take on a job in London running a young women’s project with a charity, which she really enjoyed. She gradually worked her way up to become the regional manager for youth work. She described how her then husband was also employed within this area to a senior level. On having her first child, Lucy decided that she would return to work part-time, whilst her partner continued full-time, and saw that a part-time regional manager position had become available in Devon working within the same charity. The move to Devon was mainly to be closer to family members and to be able to afford a house. She stayed in that employment for three years and had her second child, but found it difficult to continue part-time at a management level and so decided to leave. She was offered some freelance work for a youth service which allowed her to work part-time, with greater control over her working hours and less need for travel than her previous job. She continued taking freelance work for the next few years as her children got older and she described ending up doing more evaluative work within youth services. Lucy wished to become more secure within her research positions and so studied for an MSc in educational research for a year. Whilst she intended to keep working part-time during this period she found her workload too much and so chose to concentrate solely on her studies. On graduating, she found that she really enjoyed being involved in academic research so took a part-time job as an associate research fellow in family research. However, weeks after starting in this position, her marriage ended. She continued within the same job but described work as now having a “different context” and is “not sure what comes next”.

Lucy • Lone mother • 41 years old • 2 children (6 & 9 years old) • South Devon
After leaving school at sixteen, Lydia took on a junior position at a bank. She worked up through the different grades and eventually got to a supervisory level where she stayed for nine years. She described getting to a ‘cross roads’ in her life where she was not sure what she wanted to do next so her then husband offered to support her whilst she went back to college to study any area that interested her. However, at that point, a manager from her husband’s jewellery business left so Lydia was asked to temporarily take his place. She ended up staying in this position for two years, managing a number of his jewellery shops. She eventually decided to go back into financial services as she felt that “that was what I knew”. Lydia also described her relationship with her partner as a bit ‘wobbly’ at that time so felt that it was best to move out of the family business. She took a job as an assistant manager at a building society and worked in that position for another nine years. She continued working when she became pregnant with her first child and was going to return to employment after her maternity leave, as she had been offered her own branch to manage, but felt that she did not have the time as it would require her to work long hours and bring work home in the evenings. Instead, she decided to become a full-time mum for six months. Lydia was then asked to run an agency within a bank part-time and, whilst working there, had her second child. Just before the birth of her second child, her marriage ended and her partner left the family home two weeks before her son was born. Lydia described this as an ‘amicable’ separation. She continued working for the bank until her son was four months old but found that the working hours were inflexible. Lydia described resigning from that job and having a ‘no man’s land’ for six hours where she was thinking “I’ve got to get a job, doesn’t matter what it is”. She had a contact working in a financial advice team who was able to offer her a flexible part-time position which she stayed in for three years, after which she took a flexible term time job within children’s services. She described taking this job as she “wanted a change” from financial services and after eighteen months there applied for a position as a receptionist within a primary school. Lydia currently works part-time hours in this position.
Margaret • Lone mother • 56 years old • 3 children (16, 19 & 22 years old) • South Devon

After leaving school, Margaret studied Applied Linguistics at University. After marrying her partner who studied in the same area, she spent some time abroad and then returned to Devon where her and her partner set up a business teaching English language to foreign business people. During this time, she had three children and took primary responsibility for their care, whilst also helping with the business. When her marriage ended, her partner kept the business whilst she kept the family home. To help support her children, Margaret got a job as a supply teacher which gave her greater flexibility to look after her children if needed. Financially, she found that quite difficult as work was not always available and she would not be paid in school holidays. She also disliked the role of a supply teacher as she described how the class would always ‘act up’ when their teacher was away. However, she found it difficult to contemplate changing jobs as “it really worked from the point of view of being a single parent”. When her youngest child got to the age of fifteen, Margaret felt that she was now able to look for alternative work elsewhere that she would enjoy. She is currently working in a part-time (term time only) job teaching academic English to foreign students. Over the last few years, Margaret has also had two (semi-fictional) books published which were based on her own experiences as a lone parent. These provided her with a creative outlet during her time working as a supply teacher and now provide her with additional financial support for the holiday periods.
Michael attended sixth form where he completed his A levels. He felt that it was expected that he would go to University and so went on to study IT at University. After gaining a position as an IT specialist, he decided that he would like to change careers as he had come to dislike his role as he found it very monotonous. As a change, he took a job in a training centre teaching IT skills to young people with disabilities. He enjoyed this work and so, from there, Michael retrained completely and went into social work. However, he described how, at the time, social work was not very well paid and so, due to the financial pressures of living and working in the London area, he returned to working in IT twelve years ago. He has been working full-time in his current position in local Government as an IT manager ever since. Michael provided little detail as to the point when he became a lone father, although he did mention that he was aware that he was going to be looking after his daughter by himself prior to the birth. He has no contact or support from his daughter’s mother and no family living locally. A paid child minder allows him to work full-time hours. Whilst not always enjoying his work, he does not wish to change jobs as the current set-up he has with his manager allows him to more easily look after his daughter.
After school, Nina went to University where she studied for a degree in IT and communications. Whilst at University she met her partner, got married and decided to leave University before completing her degree in order to start a retail and wholesale business with her then husband. She was involved in the business for eight years in which time she had two children. Their care became her responsibility, alongside helping with the business. After the marriage ended, Nina had to look for work elsewhere which she described as being very difficult as she did not want to refer to her ex-partner for a reference. She did a short training course in childcare and for a while thought that she might like to open her own nursery. However, she remembered how difficult it was to help run the previous business and ‘be a mum’ and so decided that she would like a job that would be ‘9 until 5’, with no further demands on her time. Her sister worked for the Home Office and recommended that she applied for a job in the civil service as they offered support and flexibility for working parents. She got offered a full-time job as a caseworker within a department of the Ministry of Justice but found those work hours too difficult to manage and so decided to work four days a week instead. Even with four days a week, Nina felt that there was too little flexibility offered and had many formal talks with her (often unhelpful) manager about the support that should be available to her as a working parent. During the second interview, Nina advised me that she has since decided to take a career break of one year to think about what she would like to do with her future and whether she would like to return to that employment.
| **Ruth** • Lone mother • 37 years old • 2 children (8 & 2 years old) • Greater London |

Ruth described leaving school with no GCSE’s. She worked in a variety of junior positions within shops and hairdressers but found it difficult to decide where she should train for future employment. After being on Job Seeker’s Allowance for a number of months, Ruth described being put on a childcare NVQ2 course which she really enjoyed. After qualifying, she went on to take the NVQ3 in childcare whilst employed full-time as a nursery nurse supply worker in a private nursery for two years. She was then offered a thirty hour a week position as a teaching assistant in a private school which she was employed in for eighteen months and then returned to working as a nursery nurse in a state school. Whilst in this employment she had her first child and returned to her thirty hour a week position after maternity leave. She had no support from her father’s child and knew that she would be a lone parent before her child was born. She then had her second child (again with no support from the father) and has continued to work thirty hours a week in the same employment. A paid child minder allows her to work these hours but her mother is able to look after the children in the evenings/at the weekend if it is needed but Ruth does not like to rely on her too much.
Samantha • Lone mother • 31 years old • 1 child (5 years old) • South Devon

Samantha reported attending a grammar school up to GCSE level and then went to a local College to take her A levels as the subjects that she wanted to study (specifically psychology) were not available at her school. She had planned to do a psychology degree at a University in Manchester but deferred for a year as she was in a relationship and did not feel that it was the right time to move away. During this year she worked in a bar and at the end of the year still did not wish to move away so applied to a local University instead for the following year. During this second year, Samantha took an admin job working for the prison service which she enjoyed. When she began her degree, her employer offered her a part-time position in the newly established drug treatment service and she stayed in this post throughout her three years at University. Initially, Samantha had been interested in pursuing a career in clinical psychology, however, during her time working in the prison, she realised that she was interested in the area of drug treatment and support for a future career and so the team offered her additional training in drug intervention for users whilst she was studying. After graduating, she took a job working with a local drug support team to help and support those who had been released from prison. After a team restructure, a team leader position arose which she was encouraged to apply for. She was reluctant to take the position as she felt that she was quite young and relatively inexperienced but it offered her a better salary. Two years after taking the position as team leader, Samantha found out that she was pregnant. After six months maternity leave she returned to her position working thirty five hours over four days. However, her maternity leave had given her time to consider what she wanted to focus on career wise in the future and so, on returning to work, applied for a team manager job at the prison service she had originally worked for during University. Not long after starting in this new role, Samantha’s relationship with her son’s father ended and her son started to go into nursery four days a week. The following year, her mother retired so was then able to care for her son two days a week. Samantha found this period especially challenging as she was also acting up to a more senior role in work, with little support from upper management. She had never wanted to be ‘just a manager’ and described contemplating whether to go back to study psychology at a higher level so as to change her career pathway. After a period of reflection, she saw a position come up in a psychology centre which she decided to apply for and is now currently employed as an assistant psychologist working flexible hours over five days.
At the age of sixteen, Sue got accepted to an academy drama school in London. On leaving this school she described having a few part-time dance teacher and acting jobs and then managed to get a full-time acting position at a major entertainment venue in London. She became a team leader for the other actors within this company and then left to take a job as a tour guide for an open top bus company. She described this employment as ‘horrendous’ and after a year was contacted by her previous employer to ask if she would like to be involved in their management training scheme. During the scheme she was employed as front of house manager and gained industry recognised qualifications in management skills. After three years, Sue had worked her way up to operations manager for her venue. She then decided to move to a position as a full-time front of house manager for a major London museum which she stayed in for four years. During this time, Sue gave birth to her daughter and continued to work full-time after returning from maternity leave. Two years later, her relationship with her daughter’s father ended and she became a lone parent. She continued in her full-time role with the help of a paid child minder as she described having no family living locally to rely upon. Whilst employed as a front of house manager, Sue also became involved in the training and development aspects of the museum and was eventually offered a full-time position as development manager. Whilst she enjoyed this role she also wanted to progress further up within the management structure and so for eighteen months had been putting a business case together with her head manager to justify why she should be promoted. She had also been putting in longer work hours to demonstrate her value. Unfortunately, at the time of the first interview, the recession had begun to majorly affect funding within her area and so she was advised that her case had been unsuccessful. Sue described this as a really difficult period as she had put so much time and effort into her promotion bid and felt that she had let her daughter down. Without the prospect of future promotion, she then decided to look elsewhere for work and, at the time of the second interview, advised me that she had been offered a full-time position as a people development manager within a major food company. The position was also much closer to her home and did not require her to negotiate central London transport.
Summer • Lone mother • 24 years old • 1 child (7 years old) • South Devon

Summer described how she had a passion for art from a very young age and so from the age of about fifteen knew that she wanted to become an art teacher. She went to a grammar school to complete her A levels but during her first year in sixth form found out that she was pregnant. She described leaving “before I was thrown out” and continued her A levels at a local College. She gave birth to her daughter over the Christmas period and mentioned how “just to quote, good reference for me, only missed four days of my A levels whilst having her”. After completing her A levels, Summer was accepted onto a fine arts foundation course which was designed to help students onto full art degrees at University. She was offered financial support from the government to help with her studies and then was offered a place at a local University to complete her final year of her BA undergraduate degree. She described being very happy that she could go to University locally as she had a great support network which she did not wish to move away from. After graduating, Summer went straight onto a PGCE course to train in secondary school art teaching. She described this time as very challenging financially as she only had a very small amount to live on and support her daughter. Throughout her studies, she also had a paid childminder to look after her daughter which also stretched her finances. As part of her time on the PGCE Summer had to partake in two placements at secondary schools but she also volunteered at other schools during her reading weeks in order to strengthen her CV. After qualifying as a teacher, she was offered a full-time maternity cover post at a local school. This post allowed her to complete her NQT year. At the time of the interviews, Summer was applying for positions for after the maternity cover ended. After the close of this study she informed me that she had since been offered a full-time art teacher post at a secondary school twenty minutes from her home which she was ecstatic about.
### Appendix 4: The ‘lone parent’ in the media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media source</th>
<th>Media mode</th>
<th>Subject matter</th>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Perception of lone parent(s)</th>
<th>Public responses to discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BBC website (2010)</td>
<td>Online article</td>
<td>I/O</td>
<td>Single parent families: Growing up without a mum or dad</td>
<td>Argues there is no ‘normal’ family, discusses evidence which suggests no negative effects of living in a single parent family</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC Radio Five Live (2010)</td>
<td>Radio program</td>
<td>PO EI P/T</td>
<td>Have we got it wrong about lone parents?</td>
<td>Presenter provides a balanced discussion on lone parents. Uses information from Gingerbread to challenge negative stereotypes held by members of public who phone in</td>
<td>Positive - Lone parents who are working Negative - Teenage lone parents perceived as burgeoning social problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC Radio Five Live website (2010)</td>
<td>Online blog</td>
<td>PO</td>
<td>Have we got it wrong about lone parents? Continued</td>
<td>Online blog – asks for opinions on stereotypes surrounding lone parents.</td>
<td>Positive – Many lone parent stereotypes incorrect Negative – Teenage lone parents perceived as burgeoning social problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC Radio Four (2008)</td>
<td>Radio program</td>
<td>EO P/T EI</td>
<td>Any questions? News and current affairs</td>
<td>Various issues discussed including lone parents. Opinions differ – some panellists discuss issues on how the tax system is bias towards lone parents, others argue that lone parents need the money</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC Radio 1extra website (2009)</td>
<td>Online blog</td>
<td>PO</td>
<td>Are you a single parent?</td>
<td>Online blog – asks for experiences/opinions of lone parents regarding stereotyping etc</td>
<td>Positive – twenty-two lone parents discussed their experiences and challenged negative stereotypes Negative – Benefit system called into question by other members of the public, seen as biased towards lone parents. Those not working labelled as “scroungers”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC Radio Four</td>
<td>Radio program</td>
<td>EO EI</td>
<td>Woman’s hour: New work</td>
<td>Experts from Gingerbread and the Department of Work and Pensions</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Subject matter</td>
<td>Key</td>
<td>Article summary</td>
<td>Public opinion</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2004)</td>
<td>BBC news website (2004)</td>
<td>I/O</td>
<td>Lone parents face ‘workplace woe’</td>
<td>Article discusses the difficulties faced by lone parents in maintaining employment</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2010)</td>
<td>BBC news website (2010)</td>
<td>I/O</td>
<td>More help for families facing relationship breakdown</td>
<td>Article discusses how the family has become a key 2010 election issue – future policy plans to help lone parent families</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2010)</td>
<td>Daily Mail website (2010)</td>
<td>CS</td>
<td>'I couldn’t afford to stay married and lose £200 a week benefits’, says mother of seven children by four fathers</td>
<td>Article uses a case study of one lone parent currently living on benefits. Discusses how in ‘Benefit Britain’ it is easier to be a lone mother</td>
<td>Negative – Members of the public made numerous negative comments about this case study Positive – One member of the public warned that this case study is not the norm for lone parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2010)</td>
<td>Daily Mail website (2010)</td>
<td>CS</td>
<td>The town that marriage forgot: My journey to single mother central</td>
<td>Article uses a case study of a town in Merseyside where there is a larger than average number of lone parent families</td>
<td>Of the 447 comments, the majority were negative, with many claiming similar ‘problems with lone parent families in their own areas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 5: Diary example

Lydia’s diary - Monday

First day back after Easter holidays. Non pupil day at my school so the children won’t be in. Luckily for me both of my childrens’ schools are open so I won’t have to ask my mother to help me with childcare. My mother is 77 years old and will sit with the children as she doesn’t drive it would have meant me driving to pick her up and bring her over early and then take her home later. She however would just stay at home with them. I have always used my mother and my father prior to his death 9 years ago. I prefer for my children to be with family. Obviously this is cheaper for me also. Prior to starting primary school [son] went to Preschool 5 days a week partly because I felt he was ready for it and also because it fitted in with my work.

6.35am Alarm clock goes off to start my day. Early morning routine is quite regimented. I get up and go straight into the shower so that my daughter can go in for her shower at 6.50am. My son gets up at 7.00am

7-7.35am Breakfast time and preparation of packed lunches

7.40-8.05am Children and I finish off getting dressed to go to work/school. During this time I finish off any basic housework hang out washing etc.

I do not allow television in the morning or any computer/gadget games before school.

8.05am Pick up my daughter’s friend on the way to school arriving at 8.15-8.20am I then drive on to my son’s school at 8.25am. As we have time to kill most mornings we will often do extra reading in the car or test his spellings. This is generally in addition to in the evenings, however if we have had clubs/training the night before sometimes this is the only time we have to fit this in.

8.45am [Son] goes into school, school meal order has to be dropped off each week by Wednesday so [son] ran into Reception today to drop his order off for next week. (This I got him to complete while in the car so that he chooses what he will eat the following week- the days he doesn't have school dinners I give him packed lunch).

8.50am 9.00am Drive to work few road works on the way and meet traffic from other schools. On arrival at the school where I work I am able to park in the school car park. (On some occasions I do have to park on the road if the car park is full. This can leave me close to my start time, though I nearly always get there before time or on time. On the rare occasion I am held up I usually ring ahead and my employers understand. (I always think the working relationship is a two way thing and flexibility should work both ways as long as neither take
advantage.) I have a good working environment.

9.00am First morning back and we have a meeting in the hall for all staff. I manage to arrive just as the meeting is starting 9.05am.

9.20am Office staff return to the Reception area to prepare for the return of Students tomorrow (Tuesday) First things first we make coffee and discuss/review the diary (this covers within our office and other relevant events around the school).

10.15am-12.30 Return to office tasks today they include checking the last days registers have been collected and input correctly photocopying sufficient supplies of forms and distributing them to the class room teachers. During this time I also answer the telephone and any queries from people who visit the reception desk. (Staff, Parents, Work men and on a normal school day pupils). Rolls are delivered for lunch so I take the delivery man down to the Staffroom. I regularly also take people to various areas of the school where necessary. Keeps me fit!

12.30 As we have all had rolls provided for lunch I stop for a roll and a bite to eat. Normally I am guilty of standing in the kitchen area having a quick bite to eat while working. This is through choice as I am allowed a short break if I wish.

12.40-2pm Return to the above duties.

2pm Official end time.

Today I leave on time as no pupils are in. As a rule I try to be flexible with this and find I can work until about 2.45pm without having to involve childcare.

2.15pm Pick up my mother on the way home, drop her off at my house and have a quick cup of tea. Arrange for mum to put a roast dinner on at 3pm. Tonight is a busy evening and I would find it difficult to fit in a proper meal without her help.

2.50pm Leave home to pick [son] up from school.

3.15pm [Son] comes out of school drop him off home with mum and drive onto [name of school] to pickup my daughter at 3.40pm. (Road works so time is tight).

3.45-4.05pm Drive home immediately, [daughter] goes up to start homework while I put on rest of tea to cook.

4.45pm All sit down at the table to eat tea.

4.50pm [Daughter] discovers brace has broken; telephone orthodontist to arrange appointment. This is finally arranged on Friday at 3.20pm in [name of
This was the earliest date I could get where it would not take [daughter] out of school for too long or effect my working day. I’ve found as many other parents I have spoken to that Braces shift/break need altering etc. Schools don’t like pupils to miss school too much but likewise appointments need to be limited in my work time. With my own appointments to consider and two children it can feel quite pressurised sometimes albeit my own! I also need to work around school times for [son] and when my mother can help me pick him up.

5.00pm Resume my less inviting cold tea!
5.10pm Get [son] ready for football. I try to ensure my children can do the same as children who are not in a single parent household. This does mean there is lots of running around by me. I also have to budget carefully to afford for them to do their hobbies. (I probably do spend more than I can really afford often if I am honest). Their Dad does not do any of the running around or provide any further assistance, only his normal monthly maintenance.
5.30pm Leave home to drive to [name of football fields] ready to start at 6pm. Road works again so arrive just in time. Watch [son] play for 20minutes. Swap car seats and depend on a friend to bring [son] home. (I try to swap between the two children so that I watch one child do a sport one week and the other the next).

6.20pm Drive back home to do [daughter’s] hair ready for Taekwondo.
6.30pm Leave home to drive to the leisure centre
7.00pm Watch [daughter] do TKD and chat to other children and parents.
8pm TKD finishes. Go down and speak to the coach to arrange to help score at local competition on Sunday.
8.25pm Leave leisure centre. Discuss competition on way out with parents and arrange to pick people up on Sunday.
8.30pm Arrive home. [son] stayed awake to show me his Player of the day trophy he won at football and I missed! Feel pretty sad that I wasn’t there. (Can’t be in two places at once!) Gave him lots of praise and cuddles to try and make it up to him.

8.45pm Take mum home. Leave [daughter] in house with [son] now she is 12 for short period. (I have fantastic neighbours who are very aware when I am not there and the children know they are there). Previously my mother had to sleepover several nights when [daughter] was younger.

9.00pm Come in and sit on the bed and chat with [daughter]. As she is tired I come down at 9.20pm (normal bedtime is 9.30pm).

9.30pm Finally sit down!
9.55pm Finish off dishes tidy up, and go to bed by 10.30pm
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318


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326


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