**Negotiating the work-family nexus:**

**Examining identity work in the lives of lone parents**

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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.

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