

British Report on Category 3: Single Parents

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1. Single Parenthood in Britain

The 1960s were the heyday of marriages in Britain.¹ Never before and never after were there so many marriages and so many births (Rimmer 1981:17). However, the percentage of families² with four or more children had been continuously decreasing since the 1920s and by the 1960s the average family size was two children. Between 1961 (when Janette's mother was pregnant for the first time) and 1976 (the year of her marriage) the percentage of lone parent households with dependent children increased from two per cent to four per cent (Rimmer 1981:61). This was at least partly due to the fact, that with the high number of marriages the divorce rate also increased steadily by nine per cent each year, doubling within the decade. The Divorce Reform Act was passed in 1969. It allowed 'no fault' divorces after a two year period of separation. By 1972 the divorce rate had doubled again. Since the 1980s the divorce rate has stabilised on a very high level compared to other European countries, e.g. higher than in France and West Germany (Clark and Haldane 1990). Though many one parent families developed through divorce, the increasing divorce rate does not necessarily remove children from a two parent family environment. About 75 per cent of divorced women and 83 per cent of divorced men remarry within three years.

After a steady increase of lone parent households since the 1960s, the rate accelerated in the mid-1980s. In 1990 it reached twenty per cent of all families with dependent children (Social Trends 1992:39). In 1995 seven per cent of all households were lone parent households, while 25 per cent were 'traditional' family households of a couple with children (Social Trends 1996:51). This means that currently 1.3 million lone parents are caring for over 2.2 million dependent children. Most one-parent households are headed by women, and many are in poverty, an issue that needs more specification. For instance, some 70 per cent of lone mothers live in rented accommodation (compared with only 25 per cent of married couples), while over half of widowed women occupy their own house or flat. With the Thatcherite policy of selling council houses, Caribbean single mothers in high-rise blocks became a particularly residualised group, even compared to other Afro-Caribbean tenants (Gibson 1991, Peach and Byron 19..). Maintenance by the other parent is a problematic issue for the caring parent: Ford (1994:20) reports that although for nine in ten lone parents the other parent is alive and available, only three in ten receive maintenance.

¹ This introduction is written with particular regard to the first in-depth case. The 1960s is the period of Janette's mother's relationship with Fraser, during which she gave birth to four children.

² 'Family' means married couples (with or without children) or lone parents with children. 'Households' are people who live singly or together without referring to their family or legal status.

Support for single parents

The encouragement of employed work for single parents is discussed as an anti-dependency strategy in social policy. It is problematic as most single parents are restricted to low-paid 'women's jobs', and childcare costs are high. "The lower the cost of the child care, the more mothers, whether lone or married, are employed fulltime." (McCallum 1995:24). Pre-school provision is not provided as a universal service in Britain but is expensive and dependent on private initiative. Apart from that there is still political-ideological discussion concerning whether mothers should be encouraged to secure their living or whether employment endangers their children's development.

Thatcherite policy introduced the Child Support Agency (1991) with draconian powers to enforce maintenance payments by absent fathers.³ Except in rare cases child support benefits are withdrawn unless the mother discloses the father's name. The high levels of payments demanded often leave fathers in penury, especially those who have taken on further family responsibilities, and generally the legislation has worsened relations in separated families. (ref...)⁴

The new Labour Government, elected in May 1997, seemed more concerned to reduce 'welfare dependency' than to improve family relationships. Its early policy measures promise to provide job counselling for single mothers and to increase the provision and funding of pre-school facilities by vouchers.

³ Such measures are commonplace in other European welfare systems. The outrage provoked in Britain highlights the strength of laissez-faire liberalism in British family culture, notwithstanding the postwar years of social democracy.

⁴I could not find any information about the frequency of women leaving their families and not supporting them financially.

2. Janette⁵

2.1. Biographical Data

1928	Janette's
grandmother (mother's side) is born in Jamaica.	
	Her family is quite
well off as land-owners.	
1956	Janette's
grandmother and mother, come over from Jamaica to	
	England. The mother is about
11 years old.	
	Janette's grandfather
stays in Jamaica.	
1962 - 1965	Janette's mother has three
children with Fraser.	
	Fraser plays in a
band. He already has a son with	
	another woman.
	After Janette's birth
in 1965 Fraser has another	
	daughter with the other
woman ⁶	
1967	Janette's mother and
Fraser have another child.	
	The family lives in
the grandmother's house in	
	Brixton ⁷ . The grandmother
runs a bed and breakfast.	
	After the birth of
the fourth child Fraser goes off.	

⁵ The interviewer came in touch with Janette through another interviewee who introduced me to her. Janette readily agreed to an interview, which took place at a friend's house where Janette was staying. We were twice interrupted by the friend and once by Janette's older daughter. Janette started easily with the initial narrative which lasted for about 40 minutes. She also answered my follow-up questions in detail.

⁶ This pattern of parallel and changing relationships between one man and several women is also reported for families who stayed in the Caribbean: "Many men who are not physically present may be involved in visiting relationships with several women, all of whom expect financial support from them." (Shorey-Bryan 1986:70). Ellis (1986:7) defines such a relationship as a visiting relationship: "a semi-permanent relationship in which the man does not live in the same household as the woman but visits from time to time. The regularity and duration of such visits varies."

⁷ Brixton (South-East London) is one of the London boroughs where many Caribbean immigrants settled.

old.

time the grandmother's second

up. The grandmother has

arrived in England.

1967 or 1968

to United States.

charge of the house. She loses the

because of the grandmother's divorce or

redevelopment area).

four children move into council accommodation.

moss on the wall.

1972

into another council estate.

in the 1970s

sent to US to live with his grandmother

further education and becomes a

1976

remarries. The couple buys a house.

years the mother gives birth to two

Catholic school.

1981 or 1983

(stage lighting)

1986

mother's family in Jamaica

Janette is 18 months

At about the same

marriage in England breaks

trained as a nurse since she

The grandmother emigrates

The mother is in

house (it is sold either

because it is situated in a

The mother and her

They have

The family moves

Janette's older brother is

The mother resumes

book-keeper.

The mother

In the following

sons.

Janette goes to a

Janette goes to College

Janette visits her

1986	Janette meets
David, a policeman in East London.	
	His family came
from Barbados.	
1989	Janette and David
buy a house in East London	
	Janette works as a
civil servant at the local council housing	
	department; at home she
plays the traditional housewife role	
1990	Janette gives birth
to Charlotte	
	Janette and David
don't marry	
1991	Janette refuses the
offer of a stage lighting job	
1992	Janette participates
in a strike at work.	
	She becomes a shop
steward.	
1994	Janette starts an
access course in social work	
1994 or 1995	birth of Madeleine
1995	arguments between
Janette and David become violent	
March 1996	Janette and David separate
August 1996	Janette claims single
parents' benefit; she negotiates that David spend more time with the children	
February 1997	Janette's and David's house is
not on the market	

2. Results of the Biographical Data Analysis

In Janette's lived life we can distinguish the following phases:

1. very early childhood - violence and loss of father

Janette, born in 1965, is the third child of four. Her parents separated after the birth of the fourth child. Shortly afterwards her grandmother who lived with Janette's mother and the children emigrated to the United States. Janette's mother and the four little children moved into rundown council accommodation when Janette was about two or three years old. By then, little Janette had seen violent relationships between her grandmother and her second husband and most probably between her parents.

2. early childhood: emotional stability in poverty through the stable relationship with her mother

The rapid social decline of the family meant for Janette nevertheless stability as Janette's mother stayed with the children. This 'stability in poverty' was Janette's dominant childhood experience from the age of two to seven. There is considerable sociability with the mother's co-students as the mother goes to college.

3. childhood and early adolescence: housing, education and a nuclear family life as means and signs of economic stability and social upwards mobility; resentment of stepfather.

In 1972 the mother acquires better accommodation⁸ and undertakes further education and professional training. This follows the grandmother's 'educational path' as a nurse, both in England and in the United States. Four years later, when Janette was 11 years old, her mother married a teacher. The lack of data concerning the next years could indicate stable living conditions and relationships during Janette's adolescence. However the close emotional relationship between Janette and her mother could have been threatened both by the mother's increasing outward orientation and the start of a new family life.

3. late adolescence and early adulthood: stability by education, orientation towards her mother's family, stable occupation, and a partner who represents security and order

Janette followed her mother's strategy of gaining stability and social status by education. But although she studies stage lighting (a glimpse of her more creative side) she opts for local council work. She remains connected to her mother's family of origin by holidays in Jamaica.

⁸The Caribbeans who came to Britain during the 1950s and 1960s experienced terrible discrimination, for instance local authorities assigned black people into worst accommodation. In the early 1970s a major reform period led to increased public spending, e.g. for housing and education. In Janette's case the move into better accommodation and the mother's occupational training represent this period.

She also opts for stability and control in her relationship with a policeman, with whom she buys a house, in a locality of London removed from her family and friends, and has a child. In the partnership she plays the role of traditional housewife.

4. repair strategies for inconsistencies: forming links with partner's family, creating more independence and improving negotiation skills

Janette feels both frustrated in her attempt to achieve a 'normal' family life and stifled by her traditional role. The couple do not marry, but she takes her daughter to Barbados, her partner's island. Through industrial action against threatened redundancies at work she becomes a shop steward - which she at first hides from her partner. She also resumes education in order to train in social work. These new activities, both of which strengthen her status and negotiating skills, infuriate her partner, and could be interpreted as the beginning of the end of the partnership. The birth of a second daughter may indicate both that David is trying to tie Janette to her mother role or that Janette is still prioritising 'partnership work'.

5. Violence and separation: continued negotiation of father role.

Shortly after the birth of the second child the failure of Janette's ambitions became obvious. There were violent arguments, in which Janette's life was threatened, and separation⁹. Janette found it difficult to adapt to the new situation: she claimed single parents benefit only half a year after the separation¹⁰ and the common house was not on the market one year after the separation. She successfully negotiates for David to take some share of child care.

Summary

Janette's lived life reveals that she tried to avoid her grandmother's and her mother's experiences of violent and unstable relationships with men. Following her mother's and grandmother's methods of overcoming instability and downward social mobility, she sought stability in her own adulthood through the quest for a 'normal' nuclear family life, through education, and through stable employment. But the balancing of dependency and independence in a stable partnership turned out to be more problematic and difficult than she had expected. Her attempt at the 'traditional' role of housewife leaves her stifled and angry, and she is in any case not married. Her tenacious 'repair' strategies include connecting with her own and her partner's traditional origins and improvement of her negotiation skills. The

⁹ It is difficult to interpret David's behaviour as we do not know his perspective. Without excusing his violence we can imagine that he felt threatened by Janette's change, that he did not understand Janette's attempt to improve the partnership, and that he did not have either the skills (or the will) to communicate his frustration.

¹⁰ This is not unusual: the rate of mothers who ask for social benefits shortly after the separation is relatively low though most of the women face financial problems immediately after separation. Most of them fall back upon their families of origin for support. (Walker 1993)

failure of partnership strategy puts her in crisis, since in order to pursue her own interests and aims she needs to redefine her situation and her intentions.

The quest for 'normality' - a non-violent, stable, standard nuclear family life - is the structuring principle in Janette's lived life. This dominates her experience of social downward mobility, stability in poverty and the following social upward mobility. Social downward mobility appears as a consequence of violence and loss. Life in poverty meant for Janette stable relationships and stable living conditions, although her mother might have seen the emotional and economic fragility of this situation as a single mother of four children. Upward social mobility was for the mother a means to reach more stable living conditions, whereas for Janette it brought a renewed threat to her emotional stability.

3. Results of the Thematic Field Analysis

Janette begins her initial narrative with a three second pause and the statement that she is "(probably) third generation single parent" in her family. She then explains that her grandmother left her grandfather when she came over to England. Janette doesn't blame her grandmother for leaving the grandfather, haltingly adding that the grandfather "didn't, eh-, come with her, he chose to stay back". Janette then briefly reports her mother's story, mentioning that her father left when she was 18 months and that her mother's solution was to marry "somebody else". Her evaluation is that: "I've never ever felt the need for (3) like the norm of a family situation", which she follows with a longer argumentation about the strong women in her family.

Janette continues with a report about her conflicts with her stepfather, interrupted by an argumentation that their conflicts were *not* because she got less attention from her mother because of him: "I didn't have that attention from my mum because there was four children". She states that she and her sisters took over the parenting roles for her two younger brothers whereas her stepfather failed to control them. A short narrative exemplifies the way she told the little boys what to do: "I felt I was in charge".

A global evaluation then introduces the main theme of Janette's initial narrative: "I've never ever felt that I have met a person that is my equal partner". This is the cue to a long and rather distanced account (reports and argumentations) of her relationship with her partner. Referring still to her stepfather, she elaborates her central dilemma: "as in my partner, I never felt that he could (2) ah- I gave **power** to him, h-he didn't actually **have** power over me, I felt that I gave power **to** him, I-erm (3) I don't know what it was, I- uh (exhales), I've discussed it with so many people because I felt that I was so **strong**." She then outlines her attempt to play the housewife, 'you know what society wants it to be', how she came to feel 'dead as a person' and her struggles for greater independence. Much of the account contradicts her own assertion of her power: she didn't actually leave him after she had made the decision to separate, she didn't take the job in a stage lighting, even admitting "I wasn't actually strong enough", her impotence against David's separate social life and his neglect of their first child. Finally she recognised: "Janette, you're a single parent now". This long passage (5 transcribed pages) is interrupted by Janette ("I warned you, I can talk for ages") who might have heard her friend coming into the kitchen. She continues her rather distant report/argumentation about the relationship (she didn't want to sell the house in order to maintain the familiarity of the place for her daughter). Janette then mentions her second pregnancy, followed by a report and condensed accounts of rows when her partner rummaged

through her already packed boxes. She then interrupts her initial narrative again: “I don’t know why I’m telling you this”.

After this interruption (page 13 of 20 of the transcript of the initial narrative) Janette approaches the core of her story about the violent arguments with her partner, notably when she asked him to sign her off the mortgage so that she could get a new mortgage herself. There is no evaluation about the violent arguments but the narrative focusses on the details of the situation when she called the police who didn’t support her since her partner was a policeman (“it was pointless calling the police ... it is an old boys’ network”). Janette continues chronologically and finishes this part of the initial narrative with a report about the support her partner gives since they separated (“the support he gives them now is actually a lot better”). She finishes this part of the initial narrative with “that’s me”, which looks like a final evaluation.

However, Janette continues by referring explicitly to the interview situation itself. She recollects a situation in the social work training when she was asked to talk about herself, and explains that she didn’t claim for single parent benefit until prompted by a friend: “I wasn’t seeking any extra assistance other than from their father”. Her final evaluation is that: “the way it is at the moment is quite comfortable really, they get to see him, I don’t need to, I don’t need to.” So here at the end of the interview Janette refers explicitly to her shifting approach to relationships - her greater personal independence from him enables her to negotiate more effectively with him. We can now understand the ‘probably’ in her opening statement: despite the similarities she is in a fundamentally different position from her mother or her grandmother, since she has successfully negotiated that her partner remains in the lives of her children as their father.

Summarising the structure of Janette’s initial narrative we see that the narrative about the violent arguments with her partner is the experience that determines her perspective on her life. Her grandmother’s and mother’s histories and her own experiences with her stepfather are the explanatory introduction for her reconstruction of her relationship to her partner, in which she is striving to achieve some measure of equality - “... never met a person that is my equal partner”). Gender relationships in her family have always been based on superiority (= independence) or inferiority (= dependence), without equality or balance. Having married a policeman and entered a traditional marriage role she found herself the inferior who didn’t have the power to make her partner do the things she expected him to do. Only by leaving him have things changed. Her partner took on the parenting role since they separated.

The history of ‘powerful women’ in her family is Janette’s construction to explain what happened to her. In previous generations two constructions were available, submission to

men's violence or leaving men aside and being a 'powerful' woman. At the end of the initial narrative another, more 'open' pattern is suggested: Janette speaking up for herself, Janette looking for better educational qualifications, Janette being supported by a friend, Janette negotiating her children's well-being with her ex-partner.

4. Case Structure

Inequality in gender relationships is the central theme around which Janette reconstructs her life story. But Janette's quest is for stability and conformity rather than for equality as such. A question here is whether this view of her endeavour derives more from the violent experience in her partnership or from the experience of instability and inequality in earlier relationships. How are relationships represented in Janette's biography?

1. Relationship to her father

Janette's early memory of a fight between her parents probably represents the moment when her parents made the decision to separate. Janette's recollection of the situation is open-ended, as she was too young to understand and to negotiate the situation with her siblings: "I wasn't talking". She mentions immediately after this story that her next contact with her father was at the age of four or five when he phoned and promised to send her a bag of sweets and a doll, "and I never got it". While the first story is told from the little child's perspective and still contains the incomprehensibility of the situation, the next sequence is narrated from the view of an older child who managed to cope with the disappointment: "and I thought, well, you don't care". Meeting with her father as an adult more fully reveals both her expectations and her disappointment, since she blames him for not having contacted her when he had the possibility at her age of 16¹¹ without Janette's mother preventing them: "at the age of sixteen you could have done anything you wanted to do and you didn't."

To summarise Janette's relationship to her father:

- the argument between her parents left 18-months-old Janette helpless. He may have offered an explanation to the older children, but her expectation that he would clarify the relationship with *her* was disappointed. Janette's reconstruction of these points of contact with her father implies that she was more open for a relationship with her father before the age of four or five and from 16 years on.
- Janette's disappointment in her father is not so much because he left the family but because he didn't develop a relationship with her. Janette's difficulty in relationships with men (stepfather, boyfriends, partner) come from not trusting their interest in *her*. Her determination to maintain contact between her daughters and their father could result from reflections on her disappointment with her father. ¹²

¹¹ At the age of 16 Janette and her sister came by chance in touch with their half-brother. From then on Janette's sister maintained contact with their father whereas Janette didn't.

¹² Janette belongs to a generation of young Black British people among whom there is great concern about active father roles, and a determination to break patterns of paternal absenteeism. This resonates with broader cultural concerns with the 'new father'. It should be noticed that shifts in Janette's orientation to gender roles has undoubtedly been affected both by feminist and social work discourse, as well as by more general cultural discourse on gender patterns in the Afro-Caribbean community.

- The concern for clarity and 'normal' stability in family relationships comes out strongly in later sections of the interview where Janette talks in an impassioned manner about the unsettling effect of not being sure what siblings she might have. The danger that she might have developed a relationship with the young man who turned out to be her brother, uncertainties concerning her partners' other children, and a story about confusion between two separated twins, one of whom had died, are examples of this theme.

2. Relationship to the women in the family

The first chronological event that represents Janette's relationship to her grandmother and mother is another early memory of the day of the move from the grandmother's house into council accommodation. They were about to leave when the grandmother's second husband broke into the house to look for the grandmother, who had already gone to New York. Janette remembers the man coming into the room she was sitting in and "roughing up" her mother. She weaves into this story a later situation when she discussed this event with her mother: "I can actually **see** him, actually **picture** him, and my mum says to me no you **couldn't** have because you were **this** age and I said no mum, I can remember **seeing** him, because the door **fell** on me- ((tape change))."

This story clarifies on the one hand the relief of moving into different accommodation where there would be no further threat of a violent step-grandfather. On the other hand the story reveals that Janette's mother would have preferred that her daughter did not remember these events. The loss of the house, the problems with Janette's father and with the grandmother's second husband, and the grandmother's reasons leaving into United States were probably not openly discussed between Janette and her mother. Janette gives no hint of an open discussion in the interview.

Other stories of her childhood - her enjoyment of the "little flowers" growing out of the moss on the wall in the council flat, and how she run away from home to spend a day in the nursery next door - are told from the child's perspective. They highlight that Janette's report about her early childhood in the initial narrative ("my mum managed with all four of us") is told from today's perspective. As a child Janette might have enjoyed the safer atmosphere in the new home but she might still have had the need for a more structured life-style as represented by the nursery. To leave to gain more independence or to escape from strained situations emerges as a pattern in the family. Perhaps Janette followed her grandmother's pattern to leave when she started her trip into the nursery next door.

The story about "the carpets on the wall" represents the experience of being deceived through Janette's life. The deception was in this case the promise of better and safer living conditions in the new place. Little Janette was looking forward to moving, but later realised that moving into council accommodation signified a process of downward social mobility.

Moving to another council estate house in South London after some four years marks the beginning of upward mobility. Janette's narratives about this time reveal that the seven or eight year old girl started to query her mother's explanations and interpretation of the 'world'. Her mother also started to go to college, which meant that Janette found access to a new world, the politically and socially liberal and experimental climate of the early 1970s. Friends came to their home, studied together and had discussions and parties. The family's narrowness and difficult circumstances were overcome by creating a communicative milieu within an educational context. Probably the discussion focused on more general issues like politics without including a more open approach to family matters.

3. Relationship to her mother and her stepfather

The crucial event in Janette's relationship to her stepfather was the *marriage*. She didn't mind her mother's relationship to this man but with the marriage brought up the unresolved question of her relationship with her father. In Janette's mind at that time her mother was *remarrying*, which was not possible as her mother was Catholic. Now aged eleven, she abided by the rule of no-open-discussion-of-family-matters and she didn't ask the crucial question of whether her mother had ever been married to her father: "it did play on my mind and I never said anything about it." Any option was unsettling. That her mother might be a bigamist clashed with Janette's belief in her mother as the provider of stability and made her stepfather an intruder into an existing marriage. Perhaps Janette's parents had not married and all four children were illegitimate, but her mother had promoted the lifestyle aim of marriage and a standard nuclear family life, and Janette didn't want to be an illegitimate child - maybe she gained emotional stability from the idea of being her father's legitimate child. A third option was for Janette to believe that her parents were secretly divorced and that the stepfather did not know about it.¹³ This view maintained her loyalty to her mother, and gave her the power of sharing a family secret with her mother that excluded her stepfather. In either case *marriage* was an important issue and life-goal that was not critically discussed. Despite the 'liberating' climate which Janette's mother had shared previously with her friends

¹³ Janette hints that her mother converted to Catholicism in order to marry her step-father. This could have been *her* construct to explain how her mother could divorce and remarry even though she was a Catholic.

from college, a marriage itself remained her aim. There was no question why or how to live a marriage. For Janette this could have been another experience where her mother's acting and thinking were contradictory, and possibly deceitful.

Janette might have liked the idea of getting a 'new' father though even though he was intruding into her relationship with her mother. The desire for a stable nuclear family life might have enabled her set aside the 'bigamy question'. However, her stepfather did not take on the father role for her or at least not in the way she expected. The birth of two sons seemed to split the family into old and new members and when her mother was not there he did not take command of the family in the way Janette expected of a parent. She found herself still having to keep order in the house, acting as delegate for her mother - she did not accept as fathering his lackadaisical allowing of the new boys 'to play' and make a mess, and she did not experience him as a father for herself.

In her argumentations in the interview Janette depicts her mother's and stepfather's marriage as that of two single persons who have little in common. As in Janette's own partnership it began with a period in which her mother tried hard to play the traditional housewife role. Then "she did her exams and she went out to work, and there was no stopping her (3) really, I reckon it was from around then that she didn't have a relationship anymore, they started arguing all the time". Her narratives about the earlier period of the marriage omit her mother, perhaps suggesting that the couple was more of an entity than Janette wants to admit and that Janette felt excluded not only by her stepfather but also by her mother. When Janette grew older the arguments at home become more frequent and more intense. Both, mother and stepfather asked Janette to leave home: "but I didn't want to move because *they* told me to move out" (my italics). Janette might have felt pushed again towards downward social mobility. She resisted: "when I was nineteen I moved out, but it wasn't until after I'd secured a place for myself". Obviously Janette had developed a life-goal of being able to make her own living and to live in a place where she felt *safe*.

4. Relationship to David

Janette started her relationship to David determined to do better than her mother. At the same time she maintained her mother's frame of achieving stability through a firm relationship and a nuclear family life. Her choice of a policeman as partner suggests the importance to her of reliability but also of control. She first pursued the traditional role of a proper housewife who was obsessed by ironing, cooking and nice dresses - "like a doily": "I don't know what I was trying to achieve", "I don't know what happened", "I knew I wasn't me". These evaluations

represent her present reflections on what has happened and her feeling of being externally driven: "I felt was supposed to have been the norm, I wanted to fit into that little-, this is how it's supposed to be, you know what society wants it to be kind of **“nuclear family”**".

Janette ignored the signs that David might not provide the kind of stability she expected. Although David divorced after he met Janette, his wife was then pregnant with their third child, a fact which Janette only learnt about later, and which she now evaluates as deceit. However, at the beginning there was no further need to query David's behaviour as she gained the economic stability which was important for her. David does not marry Janette, despite her wishes.

The discovery, at the age of 25, when she is pregnant for the first time, that her mother had never been married to her father, pushes Janette further into securing the relationship with David. This happened in the context of a row in which her mother scolded her for having a child without being married. At this point she is already feeling stifled by domesticity. So now, in order to overcome the precarious character of her relationship with David, she tries to combine being the perfect housewife *and* a 'modern' woman by an increasing outward orientation and by improving her communicative and negotiation skills. Her aim was still either a marriage or, if this was not possible, to have a 'perfect' modern relationship which means independence, stability and 'happiness' at the same time, the picture of a 'modern' woman as often propagated by 'modern women's journals'.

Janette's shift encompassed changing expectations of David. She wanted her partner also to develop towards a 'modern' male gender role, including a 'new father' role. David, however, who might have been happy with the situation as it was before, was not in the least inclined to change and probably became increasingly irritated by Janette's move to greater independence. He may not have understood that Janette's change was not against him and the relationship but an attempt to gain new stability within their relationship. His response was to strengthen his traditional male macho behaviour and to become violent against his wife.

From Janette's narrative it is not clear whether the relationship became violent and she decided to leave her partner as a consequence of this, or whether the relationship turned violent after she had made the decision to leave him. In her reconstruction of her life story she evaluates the violent arguments as "another disappointment with her partner", in the context of more disappointing issues such as when her partner refused to look after the children.

Janet's reconstruction of her situation neglects her ongoing attempts to improve the partnership. Instead she constructs a continuity of the women's history in her family who are described as fighters against male oppression. Now she has lost the stability of a partnership and a nuclear family life she resort to family myths as a basis of stable orientation. But her story reveals that she realises to a certain extent that this myth is not true as women in her family were not working against oppression but to secure economic stability and social status. This explains why Janette started her initial narrative with the sentence "I am *probably* third generation single parent in my family" (my italics). "Probably" highlights the variability of meanings attached to single parenthood. In her mother's case single parenthood probably meant an attempt to exceed her mother's educational aspirations, a rebellion against the mother in late adolescence, or an attempt to connect herself to her Caribbean origins. Later single parenthood signified poverty and discrimination. In Janet's case, by contrast, single parenthood means an attempt to preclude the social exclusion which would arise from a failed marriage. It is part of a wider social project, taken on by men as well as by women, to construct new gender roles. This 'project' may entail a specific cultural history in Afro-Caribbean milieu, but it forms part of a wider undertaking throughout Western society.

Janet's new orientation emerges at the end of the initial narrative and in subsequent accounts of her recent lived life. Now, instead of her earlier practice of excluding him from household tasks, she negotiates that David take the father role. This frees Janette from restricting social relationships to the boundaries of standard family life, which in her case entails being impaled in the alternatives of submission or dominance. At the moment this solution precludes intimacy between her and her partner but it could be a step towards a freer and more negotiated relationship with a partner. (The counter hypothesis would be that a more intimate relationship will push her back into the old strategies). In Janet's story the 'new' orientation is represented by her friends, whereas family members represent the 'old' strategy.

5. Relationship to Friends

Social relationships outside the family play an important role in Janet's biographical self-reconstruction, acting as a corrective against the family's dominating interpretation of social reality. Her friendship with a white girl at school helped Janette to learn that her mother's interpretation of social reality was not always valid; another friend supported her decision to leave her partner; another friend supports her educational aspirations; and a friend urged her to claim the single parents benefit which contributed essentially to Janet's self-definition as a single parent and to her acceptance of the separation from her partner. Social relationships outside the family broaden Janette's horizon of the action options which are available.

5. Summary

5.1. The Problem of the Case

Janette's anguish at the absence and loss of her father is not only located in her childhood, at might appear at first glance. The early relationship was indeed problematic and highly tenuous, but the key issue for Janette was not only that her father left the family but that *he never clarified his relationship to her*. It was this which created Janette's uncertainty concerning her relationships with men. The attempt to develop a relationship with her stepfather also failed, since Janette could not feel included in their relationship in the new family. One also gets the feeling that Janette did not know how to listen to men. Perhaps the 'strong women' culture in her family and society¹⁴ led to negative expectations of men, to expect men to fail and to punish them for doing so, and certainly to a lack of sympathy or understanding of their emotional lives and nervousness of being excluded. The 'strong women culture' is highly contradictory, since for all their economic and managing prowess, heterosexual women are sexually and emotionally dependent on men, all the more when they are unreliable and often absent. The lack of 'sharing' roles means that neither economic or affective relationships are negotiated. In Janette's case, since her mother is such an active organiser, Janette equates parenting with control, which she exercises over her siblings as child 'parent'. She expects her stepfather to control her, yet as a putative 'strong woman' she cannot submit to him. The same problem arises with her partner, and at the same time she expects both these men to provide all the love she missed as a young child.

5.2. Janette's response

Janette responds to the unhappiness of her childhood and adolescence by seeking a traditional nuclear family model. Her determination drives her at first, as it did her mother, to dedicate herself as a housewife without regard to her own needs. She is more able to negotiate the needs of her children, however, with whose needs for a father she strongly identifies. Her anger is more articulately and effectively channelled through her role as a shop steward, in the relatively safe sphere of the public sphere, and she also learns to negotiate family situations through her social work training. Transferring these skills in to the family arena is not easy, however, since her family culture remains one of 'no-open-

¹⁴ The prevalence of women-led households and the higher educational and occupational achievement of women as compared with men in Afro-Caribbean and Black American societies is often explained as a legacy both of the structure and management of slavery in which family life was actively denied and of generations of racial discrimination which was/is particularly undermining of male family roles. The valuing of family life as a political right is one of the reasons for black feminist dissent from white feminists' critique of the (bourgeois) family form. Refs... 'Strong women' is used here to stress the cross-generational nature of women's solidarity, strength and identity, which is particularly pronounced in the Janette case.

discussion'. At no point in the interview does she show any awareness or consideration of the emotional standpoint of her father, her stepfather or her partner. At first her attempts to bring her own needs and interests into the relationship and finally to separate bring violence and even life-threatening situations. But by separating herself sexually from her partner, she becomes able to negotiate a fathering role. Janette leaves and takes the children with her. From then on the father's attitude towards his parenting role changed and he started to look actively after the children.

5.3. Janet's perception of the problem

The failure of her relationship with her partner is the threshold between past and present in Janet's view of her life. She perceives her problem as grounded in relationships to men which she frames in terms of structures of dependency and independence, which span her own, her mother's and her grandmother's histories. Her present self is in the process of formation; she is at a turning point in her life, which has been painfully achieved as she slowly came to recognise the separation from her partner. The discussion of her current situation is clearly separated from the main construct of the interview concerning the past; it conveys a sense that has given up 'role-playing' in her relationship, that she is working things out for herself more open-endedly, supported but not directed by friends, and by changes in the wider social culture. She seems close to recognising and exploring the ways in which a 'strong women' culture can be problematical, not just for women, but also for men, and to considering the emotional position of male partners. But she is not at that point yet.

6. Conclusions

1. While an outsider perspective might associate single parenthood in Janette's case with poverty and low social status, Janette herself places it within the field of relationships: single parenthood represents the failure of the relationship between the parents. 'Janette'¹⁵ represents a type of single parenthood in which the main structuring element is the lack of satisfactory relationships with men.
2. In this type single parenthood is a solution to unsatisfactory, possibly violent or abusive, relationships. This solution is facilitated by shifts towards a 'postmodern' society which allows different life-styles, and permits women to leave their partners without the danger of social exclusion.
3. At first sight Janette's single parenthood looks like a repetition of her mother's and her grandmother's story. But the in-depth analysis revealed that Janette became a single parent for different reasons and objectives. Janette chose single parenthood in order to overcome violence in a relationship, and to integrate different parts of her self into her life, parts which seemed excluded in the 'traditional' housewife role. The ending of the

¹⁵ 'Janette' refers to the abstract type which she represents.

- sexual side of the relationship could be a step in moving towards relationships with a more satisfying character, whether this is with David or not. By maintaining contact with her ex-partner and allowing him to take a parenting role she is separating out different functions of the marriage¹⁶ and also breaking from her mother's history of valuing marriage itself more highly than the quality of the marriage relationship.
4. The development of new objectives for her life was in Janette's case strongly supported by friends from outside the family. This suggests that for the Janette type of single parenthood social policy should strengthen the opportunities for financial, emotional and intellectual support outside the family. A policy which relies on the family as the fallback in crises is blocking the development of the person's own abilities to overcome difficult phases.
 5. The family pattern of 'leaving difficult circumstances' caused Janette during her childhood to lose important emotional relationships and suffer downward social mobility. This 'negative' pattern later became 'positive' as it enabled Janette to leave a violent relationship and to maintain a separate existence while she negotiated a new parenting relationship for her children.
 6. The strong 'Caribbean' dimension of gender relations in this case study has both positive and negative aspects for Janette. The frequency of Caribbean single parenthood means that that option lies comfortably within the horizon of parenthood. On the other hand Janette had herself experienced such strong negative consequences of single parenthood that she was determined to avoid it and regarded it as a failure - though or because she is Caribbean. By orienting towards new gender and parenting roles Janette overcame both this view and her earlier idealisation of traditional and 'official' family norms. Whether consciously or not, she is participating in a wider change of parenting and partnership roles within 'modern' society. A structural point here is that her loss of cross-generational familial support means that she more urgently 'needs' her partner play a childcare role.
 7. The contradictory and rather 'modern' aspects of gender relations in Afro-Caribbean society are illustrated in the fact that Janette places single parenthood in the field of relationships rather than of economic problems. The education and economic independence which 'modern' society brings to women has been achieved by women in Janette's family for three generations. Therefore although some aspects of gender relations in Afro-Caribbean society retain pre-modern aspects (lack of stable family form and male breadwinner roles, violence, lack of paternal clarity), Janette places the quality of the relationship in a marriage higher than status and economic stability. The rapidity of social change which may occur within an individual life history is also captured in her case. Starting from experience of some of the more brutal aspects of a pre-modern gender

¹⁶ In their study undertaken in Berlin points to way single mothers separate out sexual, parenting, breadwinning and companionship roles in male partners. (Maedje and Neusuess 199)

regime she attached herself to the 'traditional' family form in which stability is valued more highly than quality. The modern aspects of her 'strong women' culture exposed the stifling character of that gender regime all too quickly, and she is now in the early process of negotiating a more 'post-modern' gender order in which her independent interests are accommodated and in which 'fathering' includes an emotional as well as an economic role.

7. Comparisons

7.1 Contrasting Types

In order to provide a frame for comparison a useful step is to consider what contrasting types might exist compared to the one that has emerged so far. In the 'Janette' case the story of a partner relationship structures the self-presentation. A contrasting case might be one structured by the story of the experience of (single) parenthood and the relationship to the child rather than to the other parent. Another case structure might centre on the experience of poverty and exclusion (an 'outsider's story').

Contrasting cases might also be found within the field of relationships but centred on different issues, such as the inability to leave a violent or abusive relationship. In Janette's case single parenthood represents a step within a longer development towards more satisfying relationships. A contrasting case would one in which single parenthood leads straightaway to another unsatisfying relationship, another separation, another lone parenthood.

A third type of a case which could contrast strongly to 'Janette' would be one embedded in a culture with strong norms and expulsion for deviant behaviour, a milieu with strictly predefined roles for men and women, where separation or divorce are not legitimated or even legal.

Of the six cases in this report, two are structured by problematic relationships in the family of origin, (Janette and Kate), which two others are mainly framed by experiences of migration and cultural change (Cynthia and Angela). The single parenthood of the last two cases arises from the death of the spouse and is structured by bereavement. In both cases the life is divided into two phases, before and after the death of the partner and co-parent. Common to all is a high degree of family and social dislocation, arising from both political upheaval and labour market mobility on a global level.

Issues we may consider include the nature of shifts in the private sphere which accompany rapid social change and dislocation, and the interrelationship between the private world of

emotions and family relationships, and the public world of welfare, politics and labour market, and where these meet in childhood and adult identities and in parenting and partner relationships. In other words, what do these cases of single parenthood tell us about emergent gender relations in 'risk' society? The Janette case showed us someone whose experiences of father-loss in childhood and family dislocation through migration were nevertheless contained within a frame of considerable social cohesion. Janette and her family are able to take advantage of educational and housing opportunities for upward mobility and personal independence and security. She is able to use her single parenthood as a stage in her quest for more satisfactory gender relationships which will include integration and negotiation rather than exclusion and control. The pluralistic culture of 1990s Britain, the positive attitudes of young black British (professionals?) towards 'new fathering', and the progressive social developments of the 1970s in which her childhood took place, all help in creating a social context in which experimentation with gender roles can take place and a new gender order can develop. The question now is whether the contrasting 'relationship' case of Kate can contribute to this analysis, and what comparable hypotheses arise from case which are structured more by identity and migration, and by bereavement.

7.2. Kate¹⁷

Kate was born in 1950 in East London to a half-Scottish father and an East London mother. Kate left school early in 1966, and then worked at Tate&Lyles, the sugar factory in East London. In 1968 she married, and when her first daughter was born in 1970 she stopped working. A baby boy followed one year later, another son was born in 1975. The couple separated in 1977 and divorced in 1979. Kate lived then with the children on her own, until she remarried in 1981. Another daughter was born in 1982. In 1988 Kate started to work for the social services as a care worker for the elderly, and the second marriage ended in divorce in 1989. A couple of months ago she was dismissed from work, and is at the moment waiting for the tribunal. Her daughter still lives with her.

Kate presents her biography in a thoroughly interpreted, argumentative style. She starts with the global evaluation that she was "not very happy at home, because me mum and dad didn't get on". Speaking from today's perspective her failure at school is attributed to the parental strife - she felt blocked in learning - as is her early marriage: she wanted to "get out of my house", and "I probably made a mistake". She had three children from this marriage, but the

¹⁷I met Kate at an English class in North Woolwich where I did a few interviews mainly for category IV. Kate was very interested to give me an interview when I told about the project ("comparing the situation of people of different ages, in different situations and in different European countries"). When we started the interview I did not know that she was a single parent and she did not know that I was interested especially in single parents. The interview took place in the premises of Pier Project in North Woolwich, it lasted for 1 hour and 15 minutes.

father did not pay for them after their separation. She repeats the evaluation that she made a "couple of mistakes" in her life and continues that she married again, and had another daughter. She had a "hard life, very hard, I feel I had no help". Despite being married she had to do everything herself, and her "mistakes" meant that she stopped or she did not do the things "she wanted to do". She then interrupts herself, asking "what else do you want me to say?", but without waiting for an answer moves on to her working life. She had a job that she liked for the last nine years, but was dismissed recently. "Circumstances brought it", she does not really know why, "I don't feel any bit was my fault". She was upset and it "set her backwards". She feels the need to start a new career. Following another interruption: "I don't know really what to say ((laughter))", she continues that one of her daughters is deaf, "she was very odd to handle". The daughter blames her for the deafness. Kate finally sums up her situation as "a bit of an odd life".

Questioned about her "unhappy childhood". Kate continued to theorise her life through argumentation. She produced more reports, descriptions and short narratives when she spoke later in the interview about her marriages and her work. She described her father, who was obviously very violent, as "a bit spiteful". Kate had watched as a child how he broke her mother's leg, and remembers when the leg was in thick plaster. Kate herself was once dragged downstairs by him. She says that she does not have any childhood memories, or at least no good ones. She thinks there were no happy events. After Kate left school her parents separated, and her father lived with another woman. She tried to get on with her father's second wife but it was "a funny situation". Kate met her father occasionally but they never sorted out the violence of her childhood. He died a few months ago.

Kate is unusual in mentioning spontaneously that she does not know anything about her past. She does not know much about her grandparents, what "their life was", or where they came from. She only knows that her father came from Scotland to East London. He had a brother in Canada, a brother in Australia (he died recently), and a sister in Scotland, but "none of them ever sort of communicated". Only recently she learnt that she has a stepbrother in Canada. Her father did not know about his son in Canada but the son found out about his father and wrote to him a few months before the father died. Kate has the impression that her father did not want to have contact with him, but she wanted to. When asked for the stepbrother's address her father could not find it.

Asked about her parents' separation Kate linked her unhappy marriages with her parents' unhappy marriage. Neither of her husbands was "an understanding person". Her first husband was so jealous that he even did not allow her to have a drink with her brother in the pub. Having the three children was hard for her as she did not get any help; her husband "was

never in" and did not give her enough money. There was no mention of the good time she might once have had with her first husband, perhaps at the beginning of the relationship or when they had the children. Asked about the period of having the children she only repeated her evaluation that the time was "very hard".

With the second husband they were short of money but he was only interested in his hobbies: he had pigeons and went fishing frequently. He never took the children with him. Her mother-in-law did not buy presents for her other children, whereas Kate wanted them to be treated as one family. The relationship with her second husband broke up twice, since they tried coming together again after one year of separation.

Kate's current work problems were another big theme in the interview but rather separated from the other issues. She was proud of her success at work. Although she did not follow the rules precisely she got along with the old people who were often not easy to handle. The dismissal was for accepting presents from the old people and for drinking alcohol during work hours. Kate denied both in the interview.

Although Kate's current perspective on her life seems to be structured by the problems around work and the impending tribunal, her view of her 'private' life - family of origin, marriages and her children - is still more structured by the recent death of her father which reinvoked her childhood troubles. The "mistakes in my life" could be the connecting bridge between these different parts of her life. She made mistakes at work and in her marriages, and all her failures result from her experiences in her family of origin.

7.2.1. Summary

There are strong similarities between the Janette and Kate cases in terms of the biographical data and the thematic order of the biographical self-reconstruction. This may well be because both are structured by a history of family relationships. The bald and repetitive forms of argumentation to which Kate is restricted in talking about the way her life has been thwarted by her problematic relationship with her father and her parents' unhappy marriage illustrates the way she is 'stuck' in these experiences. Janette's free-flowing narration of childhood situations shows how much more worked through her experiences are. Janette's many dramatised stories present her as a vigorous actor, whereas Katie sees herself as a victim of fate. Her one experience of acting freely, led to her dismissal. An external tribunal, which marks the limit of her future horizon, will now decide her fate on the one job she has enjoyed.

The economic deprivations of single parenthood, although quite severe in Kate's case, are even less discussed than in Janette's account. Probably Janette's original situation was more deprived than Kate's, but she, like her family, has integrated education and work into her biography, successfully working towards independence, stability and upwards mobility. Whereas Janette was able to provide economic stability for her children and herself on her own, Kate was dependent firstly on her husbands and then on social benefits. Financial independence does not even appear within Kate's biographical self-reconstruction as a life-goal. The function of work for her was possibly as a means of counter-balancing problems in her private life: it simply removed her from the painful failures of home.

Janette and Kate both expected a caring husband and father as a partner but in both cases the partners refuse to adopt a responsible role. In both self-presentations this theme is more dominant than other problematic aspects of the relationship, such as relationships with other women, drinking etc. This could mean that men's unsatisfactory role in parenting is easier to communicate as a theme than the more emotionally injuring issues of adultery or personal loneliness. Men's role in parenting has also become a common theme in public discourse in 1990s Britain.

7.3. Cynthia¹⁸

Cynthia's family is of mixed South African origin (African - Asian - white European). They migrated to England when Cynthia was ten years old in 1973 and settled eventually in Dagenham, a particularly white and working class area of East London, where her father was a teacher. In 1981 Cynthia started college, first living in student accommodation in East London, and from 1982 sharing a flat with her English partner and another friend in Notting Hill Gate, an area in West London with a large Caribbean population. When Cynthia fell pregnant in 1983 she moved back into a friend's house in East London, and then into her parents' home. When her son was some six months old, she found a flat in a large council estate in East London which she shared with her son and her partner. Cynthia finished college in 1985. In the same year she left her partner and started a relationship with another man. In 1986 their daughter was born. She separated from this partner in the early 1990s and moved to a rented house with a friend in North East London. They had to leave in 1995, and Cynthia then found accommodation through an East London housing association.¹⁹ From 1985 till 1996 she worked in local government, the last year part-time while doing a masters

¹⁸ A colleague set up the interview with Cynthia. We had two appointments, the interview lasted for six hours altogether. It took place in Cynthia's house in East London.

¹⁹ Housing associations are cooperatives which mostly formed with the Thatcherite policy of privatisation of council accommodation. They bought houses and flats which are made available for people in need. The criteria are similar to those used by local governments for council accommodation.

degree in African Studies. At the time of the interview she was doing a full-time one-year teacher training course.

Cynthia started her biographical self-reconstruction by mentioning her South African origins and the migration into England: "so quite a significant part of my early childhood was spent in South Africa". She continued then - still in a report/argumentation mode - with the "twenty four years" she spent in Britain: "so to all intents and purposes I'm quite British as well as I am not". Requesting another prompt from the interviewer she then talked about her school education in Britain ("for me school wasn't particularly important"). She thinks that she started planning her life at the age of sixteen when she attended the 6th form college. At fifteen she got "quite distracted, in the usual sort of ways, out having a good time, men, all the sort of things 15 to 16 year old girls are kind of interested in it could have been quite disastrous". Meanwhile this was balanced by the education she got at home as her father was a teacher. She had no cultural links to other black people as they lived in Dagenham, which she sees as the reason that she did not get lost. Interrupting, she asked the interviewer "does that make sense?", and said she felt she was "rambling". She then continued to describe her life in Dagenham and her change to a culturally different school in Barking and explained that she thinks that both her children are white because her early relationships in England were with white English people. After this Cynthia asked "what else?" and then decided "no, you'll have to prompt me, I lost my thread of thought there, really". The interviewer recalled the last theme, the 6th form college in Barking, Cynthia agreed that this was where she got lost, and the interviewer asked her "what happened then?". Cynthia continued with argumentations and descriptions about her life at school ("can't remember ever having studied") and carried on to her degree, pregnancy, and living circumstances. Her pregnancy was not an accident but "my body had said to me, I think it's time you had a baby".

Cynthia then stopped again and asked: "Isn't this really boring for you?" After reassurance she continued with her various jobs in local government, eventually for eight years in a homeless persons' unit as a care assistant: "what happens is you get used to the money". She lived with another partner inbetween and became pregnant for the second time: "again I think that was just bodily function". She wanted a girl and "if he had been a girl I wouldn't have another child". There were two and a half years between the children. She hid her pregnancy, took maternity leave at eight months, and started working a few months after her daughter's birth because she felt bored at home.

Cynthia asked for reassurance again before talking about the fathers of her children. She "just left" her son's father two years after college, because felt he could not keep up with her development. Her daughter's father she already knew from college, and the relationship

started soon after the first break-up. Cynthia says she wanted to have another baby, but not with her son's father. The daughter's father was more "temperamental" and he took the father's role for both the children. Both children maintain contact with their fathers. Cynthia sees this as "working well, they don't need counselling yet".

After the second separation Cynthia started a part-time masters degree in African Studies in London. During the relationship she was too busy with arguing with her partner. Cynthia sees the main burden of single parenthood as financial. She is pleased that she was never dependent on income support. She stayed with her job for the last five years because of the money, only reducing her working time in the last year, to see whether she could cope with less money. She had never taken the children's fathers to court for money, despite promptings, and they "were actually pretty good", although "they could have done more". Now she gets money whenever she tells her ex-partners of her needs: "they feel guilty, it's worked", and she feels confirmed in her strategy as she did not want to reduce the child-father relationship to money. She thinks that the fathers can't complain because they have always seen their children without paying for them. Last year she started her teacher training, but she values her previous work for the many skills which are useful in teaching.

Cynthia finished her account with a long argument concerning economic, but also cultural issues in single parenthood. For herself education has been the most important experience, to learn, "to move forward" and to discover the things she is interested in. "That's that really".

Summary

Cynthia grew up in a nuclear family, but like Kate, she does not have many childhood memories, which could suggest that there were many situations which were not understandable to a child. As for Kate, there is one early experience of violence which stands out, when she watched her father beating up a nanny who had neglected her caring obligations with a whip.

In contrast to Janette and Kate, Cynthia reconstructs her story *not* in terms of relationships, but rather in terms of identity, and especially cultural identity. She starts with the migration from South Africa to Britain and the question "who am I?" That racial issues objectively structure her family history and the social and political context of her life, in a most disjunctive way, is clear from the biographical data. Yet, despite Cynthia's masters course in African Studies, these are not explicated in any depth. Nor is parenting - the children are hardly mentioned as persons in their own right, nor the reason why she particularly wanted a daughter - nor is the quality of relationships with her parents, or her partners, or her own emotional state of being now. It is striking that a person of considerable education and such

wide social experience needs such frequent reassurance in the interview, and that her remarks are so 'flat' and cynical. Cynthia says she values education for helping to discover what she is interested in, and she presents herself as "the author of her own life". But there is no excited and determined indication of what her newly found interests are or what her life project is, for herself or for her children, and she talks of her present circumstances as dully as she speaks of her early 'rambling' life, using scarcely any direct narration. No texture of her relationships is given, and one is left with the feeling that this is a severely disconnected person, whose biographical dislocations have never been tackled. Perhaps she is so socially disconnected that she cannot even feel comfortable to receive benefits 'from society'. Her relationships seem at best instrumental. Objectively there is a shift, however. From many years of working in 'homelessness' she has moved to African Studies, which is one way of approaching her past, however abstractly, and through teaching she may indirectly come to consider her own self-development. This is a tentative interpretation; this particular interview cries out for more detailed analysis.²⁰

7.3. Angela²¹

Like Cynthia, Angela grew up in South Africa, although she comes from a white British-Irish background. Both her parents, born in the 1930s, were married before, and her father has a son from his first marriage. Her mother is seven years older than her father, who is an engineer. Angela was born in 1970, her sister in 1972, soon after the parents moved to South Africa. She was eighteen when the family moved back to Britain. Some six months earlier she had met a boyfriend and at the time of the migration she was pregnant. Her daughter was born in 1990, and one month later she married her partner. The marriage allowed him to come to Britain. In 1994 the couple separated, but 18 months later they were living together again. At the time of the interview in April 1997 they had been separated again for more than a year. The daughter lives with Angela, and her father supports them financially.

Angela took her A-levels in South Africa. She did a degree in business studies in Britain and worked afterwards for different companies. Now she training in accounting, while also doing two part-time jobs to pay off the debts from her marriage.

²⁰ A well-known study in the psycho-analytical field found that the mothers of small children with disturbed forms of attachment were often unable to give sustained and coherent accounts of their relationships with their mothers. (Main 198) This implies that fragmented and disjunctive forms of narration imply disturbed relations in the family of origin. It could be argued that the structure of Cynthia's account arises from a determination not to be drawn into painful subjects in the interview situation, and that her cynicism is a distancing device, used for the occasion.

²¹ A colleague asked Angela to participate in the study. We met in the evening at her place, her daughter stayed with her mother that evening. After about one hour Angela's ex-husband popped in and waited in another room for her. We finished the interview about 20 minutes later.

Angela reacted with surprise at being asked for her life story (though this had been explained) but she then started easily with a short self-presentation about her coming from South Africa to England at the age of eighteen. Two minutes later a phone call interrupted the interview but Angela resumed the interview easily, with a report about meeting her boyfriend, the hidden pregnancy at the time of migration, her daughter's birth, the marriage in March 1990, and a brief overview of her marriage and the periods of separation.

In a clearly separated second part of her biographical self-presentation Angela spoke about her educational and professional career. After this she referred to her life circumstances in general which included feeling "guilty" at her daughter growing up as a single child, the difficulties of starting another relationships (if she meets a man she takes her daughter to her mother), and feeling "worn out now" from her additional jobs. She then mentioned her child's father and his financial support. Her final evaluation concerned her "feeling guilty because of her child not having her father round".

In the second part of the interview Angela spoke more about the beginning of her marriage and parenthood, the five more months living at home before she and her husband could afford a flat, their happiness at the beginning, the problems which started after she had finished university. They had met when Angela was doing bar work after he had finished school in South Africa. She described him as a "family man". When she left South Africa with her parents she cried "for thirteen hours on the plane". She recalls her father and her husband "fighting", but when they split up, parts of her family were on her husband's side, which was "hurtful". She now thinks she was "too young" for the marriage although it was a necessity, to allow her husband to work in Britain. She then spoke of the idea of going back to South Africa, and in this context introduced her parents' separation which happened about five years ago. Her father lives now with another woman, but she seems to hope that her parents will get together again as she will not go to South Africa as long as her parents are "alone". Actually only her mother, who often looks after Angela's daughter, lives alone. Her father comes almost daily to his office in her mother's home as he is self-employed, but there is a lot of "fighting" between them.

Angela and her husband got together again after their first separation his mother came over from South Africa and they were not able to tell her about their separation. Since they found themselves coping quite well with each other during her two month visit, they stayed together again. Eventually they divorced, which was distressing for Angela, and as a consequence the doctor put her on anti-depressants.

Summary

The migration and early pregnancy are the two structuring principles in Angela's biographical self-presentation, and they are closely interrelated. The migration represents the experience of being externally driven by events, which is a recurrent pattern in Angela's life. The pregnancy represents a defiant clinging on to relationships, in a hidden way, which also seems to be a family pattern, as is evident in her parents' relationship now. On the other hand the 'clinging on' prevents more independent kinds of action.

The relationship to her daughter plays a bigger role in Cynthia's account of her single parenthood than in the other interviews, as does her focus on the future. Her self-presentation could be structured by the question "what will be my life as a half-South African, half-British single mother?" While Cynthia ask "who am I?", for Angela the question is "who will I be?" People who place 'single parenthood' in the field of relationships necessarily make the past a major point of reference, but whereas Kate and Cynthia are stuck in the present, Janette and Cynthia are more future-oriented.

Openness to the future, which is also caused by Angela's more advanced professional career²², also allows her to look back in a more distant way to speak about the time when she was happy with her husband. This could be generalised in a hypothesis that an open horizon in other spheres of life can help to balance out relationship problems in marriage, divorce and single parenthood. Cynthia, by contrast, who has taken major steps to open up her career (MA in African Studies and teacher training) seems more stuck in past traumas. This leads to the question of which kind of unsolved problems from childhood and adolescence are so powerful that they remain the key point of reference of a biographical reconstruction. Asked for more narratives about her childhood and adolescence in South Africa Angela did not narrate but just produced a few argumentations about the general situation in South Africa at that time. This suggests that her past was not unproblematic. Nevertheless we may surmise that the dislocation caused in her life by her father's move as an engineer within the international labour market is less complex than the racial dislocations in Cynthia's experience. But this is without knowledge of the emotional relations in either family (apart from the story of the whipping of the nanny in Cynthia's case), or the relationship of either family to apartheid (though again Cynthia's racially mixed family inherently had a more contradictory relationship to racial politics). It may also be, however, that Angela is in a

²² Angela is the youngest of the group, but most advanced in her career. The ages of the interviewees are as follows: Emmanuel 57, Kate 47, Pauline 36, Cynthia 34, Janette 32, Angela 27. Angela had her child at the youngest age of 18, compared with Kate and Cynthia at 20, Janette and Pauline at 25, and Emmanuel at 42. These were not always the ages at which each individual became a single parent, and several moved in and out of single parenthood.

phase of her biography which allows her to neglect the old open questions, but they remain latent and will surface in a later phase of her life.

7.4. Pauline²³

Pauline was the eldest of four children born in Dublin in the 1960s. Her parents were both Irish, but her father had lived with his family for a few years in the United States. After college Pauline worked as a tax inspector in a small town. She married in 1982, one year after meeting her husband, an information technologist. They lived in the North of England and then moved to London. After their daughters were born in 1985 and 1986, Pauline stayed at home for four years, and during parts of this time her husband was working abroad. Then Pauline started work and soon returned to college to study interior design, with the help of a Spanish au pair. In 1995 the family moved to Switzerland where Pauline's husband worked for an international company. Four months he died in a car accident caused by the other driver. Pauline herself was hospitalised for a few months, before returning with the children to England. She completely refurbished and redecorated their home before they returned. Her husband's urn is placed at a prominent corner of the garden. At the time of the interview (spring 1997) Pauline still needed physiotherapy for her badly damaged leg. Her husband's life insurance meant that she was financially better off than before.

Pauline's story started with a report about her family and upbringing, her "working class background", good education, and job as tax inspector in the south of Ireland. She hated the place but she enjoyed the managing part of her job. She continued chronologically with the meeting with her husband at her cousin's wedding, their marriage, their various moves and job careers. Pauline did not like living in Yorkshire very much, and after working with a big company in London found it difficult to be a housewife, especially with her husband abroad. It was "wonderful" to have a Spanish au pair, but her college studies caused "turmoil", so she went back to work. Pauline finished her initial narrative by introducing their move to Switzerland in 1995. Then she stopped.

The narrative questioning started with her upbringing in Dublin. Pauline spoke of the closeness between the births of herself and her brother with the comment: "it was hard for Mum", continued in a reporting style with her siblings and a description of her mother: "she

²³ I knew Pauline through a friend's narrations about her husband's death. I asked her to introduce me, and Pauline agreed at once to an interview. The interview took place at her home, a semi-detached house in a town near London.

was a hard woman". Pauline then introduced her paternal family's emigration from Ireland to the United States where her grandfather found work at Ford's in the early 1930s. They came back to Dublin and both grandparents died rather early: her grandfather before Pauline's birth when the grandmother was only 50 years old; her grandmother when she was 67. Her family was mother-dominated, and her father didn't intervene if she had conflicts with her mother. It was not a good marriage, though the couple are more content now, both pensioners and living in the Republic of Ireland.

The story of her family of origin was followed by that of her marriage. In the seventh year they underwent a crisis with a lot of arguments, but eventually decided to build things up again. Pauline she didn't enjoy being pregnant, and found it difficult to adjust to life with a little child. Later she said her doctor prescribed her Prozac at that time and it seemed she needed 'chemical' help to find her path again. The treatment was well monitored and successful.

Pauline spoke then about the decision to go to Switzerland and their life there. Eventually she spoke about the accident, her own injuries and the ensuing crisis (using direct narrative) up to the moment when they came back to England. She concluded with her plan to visit Switzerland during the next Summer. She has the feeling that her husband "is still there", and wants to visit the places where they were together to find him again. Pauline has had counselling since she came back to England which was "helpful".

Summary

Pauline is much the 'newest' single parent in our sample, and as such says very little about the experience of single parenthood. At the time of the interview she is still immersed in her own grief, which probably accounts for the absence of the daughters in her account. On the other hand she is clearly in a process of dealing with the bereavement. Her account is initially measured and controlled, ending at her husband's death. Later she manages to talk of events after the accident and of her plans to visit Switzerland again where she feels he still is, using direct narratives which show her engagement with the experiences of both loss and togetherness. Her way of dealing with the break in her life is symbolised in her refurbishing of the house and the placing of her husband's urn outside in a prominent corner of the garden.

Her life before the accident shows the impact of careers in the international labour market on family and gender relations. The husband's work abroad at first leaves the wife isolated, in a 'traditional' situation of full responsibility for the children, although as the children become a little older she combines this with a continuation of her own career. When they move abroad together, her career was lost. On the other hand, marriage to a mobile professional gives her the opportunity to move from the small town existence which she dislikes, and to enter a much higher income bracket, in which the continuation of a career is made possible by private childcare. Her privileged financial position also shows the more protected position of widows as compared with single parents. One might speculate that single parenthood will be a great challenge for Pauline, who initially found the shift from career to motherhood a great stress. Probably she would never have undertaken to have children on her own. On the other hand, the children may well be a great solace for the loss of her husband. Whether she will continue her family tradition of family mobility on her own is an open question; on the other hand she may feel she is now destined to the rather depressive 'return' of her father from the US.

7.5. Emmanuel²⁴

Emmanuel comes from a small Caribbean island. He was the oldest of seven children and his father died early. Emmanuel emigrated to Britain in 1958, at the age of 19, first living in the North as an industrial worker, then in South London as a Fords worker, finally as an ambulance driver for social services. Married in 1969 to a woman from another Caribbean island, he had five children and divorced in 1981. Around that time he met his second wife who was a social worker, sixteen years younger than him. She came from another small island in the eastern part of the West Indies. Their first child was born in 1981 and they married the following year. She was 27 years old by then and Emmanuel was 43. They had two more children. A few hours after the birth of the third child in 1989 his wife died at the age of 33, she suffered from a haemorrhage (???) in the head. Emmanuel's decision to care for the children was supported by his and his wife's families, neighbours and friends from church. After nine months he had to return to work, and he has been working full-time since then, a childminder looking after the children before and after school.

²⁴The interview with Emmanuel was readily arranged via a colleague's friend. When the interviewer phoned he was first irritated as he thought I was his friend's colleague, which suggested his eagerness to start. Emmanuel lives in a semi-detached house in a South London suburb, close to a large shopping centre. His house is next to a lovely little square with an old lime tree and a church.

Prompted to tell me his life story, Emmanuel asked me which part of his life story he should tell. Left with the decision, he started with a very short report about his marriage, his three children and his wife's death. He continued with another short report about his work and his single parenthood in the last eight years: "it has been very difficult". A longer argumentation followed concerning his ineligibility for any extra benefits from social services as he has been working all the time. He wanted to be independent, therefore he did not stop work, but school holidays are particularly problematic as he has to pay for a nanny then. He has only once been on holiday with his children as the entitlement gets used up when the children fall sick. He resents paying so much for childminders while single parents who are not working get help. He also gets annoyed by people saying that he cannot have a financial problem as he drives a car, since he doesn't have "the time to wait at the bus station". At the end of this long argumentation I used an active listening question to ask whether he feels angry about this. Laughing briefly he agreed, but said he is not really angry but he would have appreciated more support. Another longer argumentation followed.

I started the narrative questioning with a prompt to tell me more about his marriage. Emmanuel answered with a mix of argumentations and report that they had a lovely marriage, that his wife was lovely, and that she was a social worker and nurse. Her death has been a shock for her children but aunts and good friends have been helpful for them. "The children got over it now". He himself regards this experience as a "challenge" and is glad that he has been able to cope.

We spoke then in detail about his wife's death. This was the only theme Emmanuel elucidated as a narration. Emmanuel was with her during the birth, he went then home to bring the other children to the hospital. His wife was complaining about a headache, but everybody attributed it to exhaustion. He went home with the children in the late afternoon. A few hours later the hospital phoned and asked him to come quickly. When he arrived his wife was in intensive care, and he had the impression "she was dead". He was told that she had a fifty per cent chance to survive but that she would probably remain brain damaged. The next morning, when Emmanuel returned together with the vicar of his church, the doctors diagnosed his wife as 'brain dead', and Emmanuel agreed to switching off the machine which kept her breathing. He described the situation and commented: "there was nothing, it was only the machine, I knew she was dead". As Emmanuel told the story tears came to his eyes but he answered my narrative questions easily.

The next theme concerned his children and how they coped. This section of the interview ended with Emmanuel telling me that during this pregnancy his wife had asked him to promise that he would care for the children if something happened to her. His reaction at that time was "you are so young", and he thinks that she might have had the feeling that something was wrong with her. Asked for his own feelings he kept telling me about the supportive relations and friends. He also showed me a lot of photos (the living room is decorated with many photos. Emmanuel told me that the children keep rearranging them all the time).

After the narrative questioning I asked Emmanuel about his life before his marriage. He answered easily with a short report about his upbringing, his father's death, and his immigration to Britain. Only then did I learn about his first marriage, his divorce and his children from the first marriage. It seems therefore that Emmanuel reconstructs his biography in the form of two clearly separated lives: before and after his marriage to his second wife. This is in contrast to his actual life as he is in touch with his first wife and with the children of his first marriage.

Summary

Although Emmanuel's story is mainly structured by the death of his wife, it is much more centred on the practical and financial aspects of single parenthood than the other accounts. Age, gender, the length of single parenting (eight years), the soleness of his responsibility (as a widower), his occupational position (male manual work), and maybe his pre-modern social past all affect his orientation.

As a man with full breadwinning expectations, work is more central to his identity - or rather his case reveals how relativised that is in the case of the single mothers. The difficulty of integrating work and parenting is a main theme for him, and it is clear that male manual occupations have accommodated least to the combining of work and family life (about which there has recently been considerable public discussion in Britain). On the other hand, since Emmanuel has taken on the 'extra' task of full parenting he expects social recognition and reward. He therefore resents the fact that employment means he forfeits social benefits, and that public expectations equate single parenthood with poverty and even enforce the association, as by the surprise/envy that he can afford a car. There are further possible reasons why Emmanuel focuses on financial issues and rights more than the other interviewees. Perhaps as a man who has suffered such grief he feels more socially exposed and uncertain of his identity, despite support from his family and friends, and wants a

stronger social message of approval and recognition. The women, by contrast seem grounded in feelings of guilty self-responsibility, perhaps reinforced by low self-esteem. The most they seek is support and responsibility from their partners, and several of them pride themselves on not using social benefits (although they benefit greatly from educational provision, which accommodates single parents well and allows scope for personal development within its constraints). Maybe they have internalised the ‘dependency’ doctrine of neo-liberalism, which is as strong under New Labour as under Thatcherism (Cynthia, Angela and Pauline all came to Britain as immigrants after/in the waning of Beveridgean/Marshallian values). As an (older) man Emmanuel has higher financial expectations, and is more deeply imbued with a sense of democratic and solidaristic social rights and more social confidence to express his views. Furthermore, as a more emotionally-balanced and socially integrated individual he is perhaps not so consumed by the issues which are dominant for the others: relationships (Janette, Kate) and migration (Cynthia, Angela) and grief (Pauline). Emmanuel is also considerably oriented to the children. His family-mindedness and love of his wife enable him to take on the role reversal, and may be that his rootedness in a pre-modern society helps this flexible adaptation, despite his job career in classic ‘modern’ manual sectors.

8. Discussion

In our sample single parenthood is *not* structuring the interviewees’ biographies but other issues and experiences are predominant:

- problematic relationships in the family of origin (violence, instability)
- migration and cultural change as a child or adolescent
- bereavement of a partner after the start of a family

Kohli () connected the “institutionalisation of the life course” with the development of modern Western society. The formation of a ‘standard biography’ - a pattern of successive trajectories from pre-adult life, educational period into a working adult life (including the start of a new family) and a retirement period at older age - encompassed this process. This life course pattern corresponded with the structure and needs of a modern capitalist society but also with the needs of individuals. While ‘stability’ is implied by a standard biography, it is also a requirement for individuals in ‘risk’ society, who need a stable pattern and horizon of everyday orientation. The structuring elements within our sample challenge this pattern, since they produce uncertainty and instability.

In Janette's and in Kate's case it is the family of origin which did not provide the 'standard' frame for growing children. In both cases specific tasks are 'left over' to be solved as adults. In Janette's case the relationship to men is a central issue which structures her life. In Kate's adulthood the pattern of her parents' marriage and their parenting seem still to structure her life. The problems which developed in her family of origin in Janette's case even predominate over the experience of participating in two different cultures. This contrasts with Cynthia and Angela who seem both to be structured by the transition from one social reality into a very different new society. In both cases the task of integrating the different experiences from Apartheid society in South Africa and the politically but not socially equal British society were too big for adolescents. Both reacted by 'forgetting' their past.

The unexpected death of the partner at a time when the children were still dependent on their parents caused a split in the biographical reconstruction of both Emmanuel and Pauline. There is one part of the life story until the death of the partner, and there is a second part of the life story after the partner's death. Both of them produce biographical continuity by separating their lives in two parts. Emmanuel's case suggests that the responsibility for dependent children in combination with a deviation from the 'standard' - a rather old father caring for three little children - makes it more difficult to find the path into a 'standard' biography again.

Within our sample of single parents emerges a strong gender division (which should be validated through comparison with other cases). The women seem grounded in feelings of guilty self-responsibility, perhaps reinforced by low self-esteem. The most they seek is support and responsibility from their partners, and several of them pride themselves on not using social benefits (although they benefit greatly from educational provision, which accommodates single parents well and allows scope for personal development within its constraints). Maybe they have internalised the 'dependency' doctrine of neo-liberalism, which is as strong under New Labour as under Thatcherism (Cynthia and Angela came to Britain as immigrants after/in the waning of Beveridgean/Marshallian values). As an (older) man Emmanuel has higher financial expectations, and is more deeply imbued with a sense of democratic and solidaristic social rights and more social confidence to express his views. Furthermore, as a more emotionally balanced and socially integrated individual he is perhaps not so consumed by the issues which are dominant for the others: relationships (Janette and Kate) and migration (Cynthia, Angela) and grief (Pauline). Emmanuel is also considerably oriented to the children. His family-mindedness and love of his wife enable him to take on

the role reversal, and it may be that his rootedness in a pre-modern society helps this flexible adaptation, despite his job career in classic 'modern' manual sectors.

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Notes to Susanne

1. Remove page breaks to compress document?
2. There is a convention that numbers under twenty five are spelled out (I think)
3. Refs: Peach and Byron; Kohli; Main: Maedje and Neusuess; black feminists;
4. I am sure that state child support is not independent of child support from the father, but reduced accordingly. I imagine Janette started going through the child support agency system, whereas before she just had the standard child benefit
5. I removed footnote 7 p5; I changed the BD headings a bit to emphasise the relationships with men more
6. A book-keeperis much lower status and qualifications (none probably) from accountant
7. The Janette story is also one of step families - it would be interesting to compare with a case analysis from Joanna Bornat's ESRC study - re qualitative methods
8. Kate - her quote 'what do you **assume** me to say' can't be right
- 9 Cynthia and Angela - where are their narrations ie on what topics and at what points?
10. Surely the split in E's story is between the two marriages, not at the death of his wife?
11. I've added summaries for Pauline and Emman.... and added quite a chunk to the 'problem of the case' of Janette.
12. Probably I have too many general points in the summary for Emm? Some of the points belong in the final discussion? Not sure - they are of a different 'order'.