SEXUALITIES

Silencing the single woman: Negotiating the 'failed' feminine subject in contemporary UK society

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Abstract
Despite a growth in single women in UK society over the past two decades, single femininity continues to be highly stigmatised. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of the heterosexual matrix and applying this to qualitative interview data with 25 single women, I argue that single femininity is produced as abject through processes of silencing which render the single female a 'failed' subject and reinscribe heteronormative coupled femininity. Yet while deeply painful, such 'failures' may also be productive, offering moments where the boundaries of heteronormative feminine subjectivity and hierarchies of intimate life are troubled and transformed. This article complicates understandings of stigma and resistance through a nuanced analysis of processes of abjectification and ambivalence.

Introduction

While the number of single women in the UK is growing, their lived experience remains under-researched. The percentage of single women (defined as never-married or in a civil partnership) in England and Wales has risen over the past two decades, from 27% in 2003 to 33% in 2015 (UK ONS, 2015). In Scotland, 27% of adults were single in 2003,

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increasing to 35% in 2015 (Scottish Government, 2015); in Northern Ireland, 36% of adults were single in 2011, up from 33% in 2001 (NISRA, 2011).[1] While narratives of the single woman within contemporary Anglo-American popular culture have proliferated over the same period, they continue to narrowly draw on historical, postfeminist tropes to stigmatise single femininities (Negra, 2009; Taylor, 2012). As a result, cultural representations render more diverse constructions and lived experience of single femininities invisible (Butler, 2011; Halberstam, 2011). At the same time as these social and cultural changes there is a continued privileging of monogamous coupledom in contemporary Western society (Finlay and Clarke, 2003; Ingraham, 1999; Simpson, 2006). Indeed the coupled unit remains firmly placed 'at the centre of the normative practice of sexuality' (Budgeon, 2008). It is increasingly important to consider what consequences such privileging has on female subjects positioned outside the heteronormative, familial, coupled feminine norm and who engage in alternative non-romantic, non-kinship relationship structures. In this study, I draw on 25 interviews with single women to investigate how single female subjectivities are being constructed and negotiated in contemporary UK society.

Much of the literature on singledom has taken a critical discursive psychology or phenomenological approach to understand how women experience their single subjectivities (Addie and Brownlow, 2014; Jacques and Radtke, 2012; Miller, 2020; Reynolds et al., 2007; Reynolds and Taylor, 2005; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). Scholars have also explored how postfeminist themes of agency, choice, independence within women's discourses of singledom are deepened through regulatory intersections with age and sexuality (Budgeon, 2015; Byrne and Carr, 2005; DePaulo and Morris, 2005; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016; Reynolds et al., 2007; Sharp and Ganong, 2007; Williams and Nida, 2005). While older single femininity is frequently linked to asexuality, life course analysis suggests that older single women continue to retain an 'active sense of the sexual selves and identity' (Watson et al., 2016) and demonstrate a diversity of attitudes towards singledom (Baumbusch, 2004). The always-single older women in Baumbusch's study (aged 65–77) overall cited satisfaction with their life, yet few of the women abandoned the desire to couple completely (Baumbusch, 2004). This research argues that age and sexuality are key intersections within single femininity which further abjectify and complicate the ambivalence single women may have towards coupling.

In addition to intersections of age and sexuality, there is a significant body of largely US-based research which explores racial disparities among single women. As Suzanne Leonard discusses, black women are more likely to be single (defined as unmarried) – 42% of US black women will never marry – and this is frequently linked to economic disenfranchisement and high incarceration rates (Leonard, 2019). Rebecca Traister argues this is part of an active strategy by black women of delaying marriage because of economic and educational discrimination, noting that postponement or avoidance of marriage is increasingly adopted across all racial and class groups (Traister, 2016). There is also research which has examined how racial inequalities intersect with age and class. For example, Bronwen Lichtenstein suggests that older middle-class singles in the US avoid recoupling to counter the risk of domestic abuse, while lower class older

women – predominantly black women – despite such risks, are more likely to desire coupledom as it offers financial stability (Lichtenstein, 2012).

Singledom is often investigated as an 'identity' which is either stigmatised *or* resisted (Byrne and Carr, 2005; Sharp and Ganong, 2011; Zajiceck and Koski, 2003). However, I move beyond a binary categorisation of singledom as stigmatisation or resistance, as 'positively' or 'negatively' experienced, to contribute a more nuanced account of how women may simultaneously demonstrate complicity *and* resistance to such stigmatisation (Pickens and Braun, 2018). While existing theorisations of stigmatisation are centred around the internalisation of blame or 'felt' stigma within the individual (Barlösius and Philipps, 2015; Goffman, 1963), I depart from this individualised understanding. Instead, I contribute a psychosocial conceptualisation of stigma which sees subjectivity as produced *between* the psychic and the social, as being stigmatised at, and *by*, the very moment of silencing (see 'Singledom, subjectivity and the heterosexual matrix' below). Drawing on a Foucauldian theorisation of subjectivity and power as operating simultaneously through regulation and resistance, in my analysis I consider how normative femininity is being regulated *and* resisted across multiple identity categories, particularly sexuality and age, through discourses of singledom (Crenshaw, 1989; Foucault, 1988). And while much of the current research into single femininity is US-based (Miller, 2020), this study enhances an understanding of how singledom is being experienced in the UK.

Shelley Budgeon's study of how single people intersubjectively make sense of increasingly diverse personal networks, including non-romantic and non-kinship ties, illuminates the multiple and complex social connections that make up contemporary single subjectivities (Budgeon, 2006). Non-monogamy in particular has been posited as a form of intimate relating which opens up opportunity for other kinds of love and sexualities (Willis, 2018). Mark Finn has told of the 'uncomprehended potential' of a more creative and inventive social which is not confined to normative coupledom (Finn, 2012: 132). I build on this work, but focus on feminine subjectivity, to deepen understandings of how the alternative relationship formations – such as non-monogamous relationships and the decentring of romantic, sexual love – of single women may offer more transformatory or radical constructions of femininity. I consider how such relationships produce a plurality of understandings of intimate life as part of a broader revaluing of alternative forms of familial life and non-kinship networks of care (Barker and Langdridge, 2010; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004).

The single women I spoke to described a pervasive silencing around the topic of their singledom. I argue that single female subjectivity is being abjectified through these moments of silence and silencing, which render the single woman a 'failed' feminine subject, resulting in significant psychic tension. Existing theorisations of silencing and subjectivity formation largely conceptualise it in relationship to stigma. Taking a psychosocial approach, Jimenez and Walkerdine argue that silence is one of a range of emotional responses produced intersubjectively to stigmatising feelings of shame and the result of collective – but unacknowledged – forms of gendered conflict (Jimenez and Walkerdine, 2011). Carpenter and Austin, in their analysis of narratives of mothering, suggest self-silencing operates in two ways: as inhibition, produced by a feeling a subject is not being heard, or are not able to speak due to others' judgement; and as an intentional,

deliberate desire not to speak (Carpenter and Austin, 2007). Carpenter and Austin conceptualise silences not from an individual psychological perspective but as conditioned by the social, cultural and political circumstances from which they emerge (Carpenter and Austin, 2007). I build on this to show that while these strategies of erasure were often deeply painful, the women's accounts revealed that such 'failures' in femininity can *also* be productive, offering moments where the boundaries of normative heterocoupled feminine subjectivity are troubled and hierarchies of intimate life are potentially transformed (Halberstam, 2011).

Singledom, subjectivity and the heterosexual matrix

In this article I draw on Judith Butler's theory of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) and a Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity as discursively constructed (Foucault, 1982) to analyse how femininities are being discursively constructed within women's self-narratives of singledom. I take a psychosocial understanding of single feminine subjectivity as produced through discourses of power at the social *and* psychic level to consider the psychic formation of gendered subjectivity. Butler argues that the subject is constructed through an 'interiorisation' of the regulatory force of the social norm (Butler, 1997: 66), and there is no subject without subjectification. Importantly, this does not conceptualise social regulation as externally *imposed* from the outside, but as actively engaged with by the subject (Butler, 1997: 66). Thus, I use Butler to highlight the potential of agency in the women's accounts and conceptualise subjectivity formation as a desiring process of regulation *and* agentic negotiation.

I argue that the single woman is abjectly positioned through moments of silencing at the boundaries of normative feminine subjectivity. According to Butler, the heterosexual matrix works by producing certain gendered 'beings' as abject: 'This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject' (Butler, 2011: xiii). I thus claim that the 'viable' (heterosexually coupled) normative feminine subject is sustained through the exclusionary abjectification of single femininity. Butler elaborates that 'the production of the *un*symbolizable, the unspeakable, the illegible, is also always a strategy of abjection,' (Butler, 2011: 142). Drawing on this, I suggest that processes of abjectification operate through painful mechanisms of silencing to produce single femininity as 'unspeakable' and 'illegible'. In being produced as unspeakable, the single woman is erased as a subject; in being produced as illegible, she is rendered a deeply incoherent or unstable feminine subject. This silencing predominantly operated intersubjectively to abjectify single women through silences in conversation, or the absence of conversation, and it intensified with age.

Methodology

To address the lack of research on the lived experience of single women (Miller, 2020), I conducted 25 one-hour interviews with women in London who self-define as single and as female[2] using a pre-interview questionnaire. Divorcees, widows or single mothers were

not included[3]; this was to clarify the contested category of 'single' and centre it on subjective identification, which is my focus. It was also due to 'fundamental disparities' in lived experience between these categories of single women (Lahad, 2016; Taylor, 2012: 3). London was chosen as a location as it offers a range of class, race, sexuality and age groups from which to draw the sample. Following my intersectional approach, the sample aimed to include diversity among age (ranging from 21 to 66, with a mean age of 37), race (76% white, 24% Black, Asian or ethnic minority), class (88% middle class, 12% working class) and sexuality (72% straight, 18% lesbian, bi or queer identified) to examine how multiple identities intersect. However, these experiences do not claim to be representative or generalisable, as I was interested in the subjective meanings that were constructed by the interviewees. While existing literature has largely examined intersections of single femininity with race and class (as detailed above), this research, while being attentive to these categories, found that age and sexuality presented as key intersections in the women's self-narratives.

I used purposeful (targeted) snowball sampling[4] complemented by selective recruitment from online groups on Meetup.com and Facebook, and flyers in cafes and shops to reach those who were not online. The interviews were held in a café or the interviewees' home between June and December 2018. My interviews were informed by a feminist ethics of care based on intuition and empathy, as opposed to a masculinist ideal of a separateness between the researcher and researched (Edwards and Mauthner, 2011). I considered my own positioning during the interviews and tried mitigate imbalances of power as far as possible. Following Back and Denier's discussion of the role of researcher and researched, I sought to be particularly sensitive by listening without judgement and offering support, responding according to the context and emotions expressed. Thus, while it is never be possible to *become* the researched subject due to my different positioning, I could try and understand their experience (Duneier and Back, 2006). For example, when one interviewee became upset, I immediately paused the interview, asked if she wished to carry on and adapted according to her needs. To create rapport, I began each interview with basic introductory questions. My semi-structured topic guide then asked how women understood and experienced their single subjectivity and whether their understandings had changed over time. Questions also explored race, age, sexuality, class and embodiment. So as not to impose identity categories, these intersections were addressed indirectly; elaboration was encouraged when they arose spontaneously. I kept more sensitive questions for the last 30 minutes of the interview once trust had been established. Most interviewees were keen to share their stories; however, they were often emotionally intense encounters, with several women breaking down in tears. Yet even when difficult emotions were expressed, the women also demonstrated a sense of humour and lightheartedness, and the tone was complex and varied. I coded the data using NVivo software, and codes (descriptive and latent) were generated inductively and deductively, in relation to the research question and theoretical framework, for example, 'self-regulation'. Patterns and connections between codes were used to construct overarching themes. I then applied a thematic and a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) to explore how single women are discursively *negotiating* or *resisting* discourses of single femininity and how these are intersected with multiple categories of identity (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Crenshaw, 1989).

Rather than an individualised critical discursive psychology approach, FDA examines how subjectivities are relationally and agentically produced through discourses of power and pays attention to how subjectivity positions may be taken up *or* resisted. I used FDA to examine how discourses of singledom were embedded within broader social networks of power and how these discourses constrained and enabled, included or excluded, particular subjectivities (Hook, 2001). I analysed what was left unsaid or rendered unspeakable, which single subject positions were legitimised, and considered how this sustained or challenged gendered hierarchies, remaining attentive to moments of contestation.

Seeking legibility: intersubjective silencing

The women I spoke to told of a pervasive regulatory silencing around the subject of their singledom. Silencing predominantly operated *intersubjectively* to abjectify the single subject – not just between female friends, as a system of mutual governance between female peers (Winch, 2012: 21), but also inter-generationally between family members. Rather than *only* operating visually through the gaze, as Winch (2012) suggests, such regulation was extended through silences in conversation, or in the *absence* of conversation. When the women's single status was discussed by others, it was often in vague, brief statements. The relationship to such silencing was complex, and while participants frequently described how *glad* they were not to have family members or friends bring up the subject of their singledom, at the same time they were sometimes upset that it was avoided. This was especially the case with friends. Joan is a black, 47-year-old, working class, heterosexual woman who has been single all of her life. She particularly notices silences when she meets her friends with children:

> Joan: When I talk about it with people who have children … they don't seem to know how to respond. They have this look on their faces as if they don't know what to say. Erm. Which can cause me to think 'What's going on with them?' Erm. I feel kind of like, oh… I feel like, first of all a bit confused. Second of all I think, 'oh, maybe they don't know what to respond'. Then I think, 'oh but they're very nice people so therefore they must care, but they just don't know what to say'... Or maybe they have something to say but they, but… It's always the same kind of, a kind of looking at you...but not saying anything. They don't even do a lighthearted: 'Do you know what you will find something, or someone,' you know, you know, they don't even say that, there's not, erm... But I, it could be a characteristic of their personality... and then I have to look at myself, there are times when I don't know what to say… Maybe it could just be fair to say: 'I don't know what to say here, I just hope you do meet someone,' full stop… Just maybe that kind of erm, erm, yeah…

In a puzzled tone, Joan struggles to describe both what her friends who have children might mean by such silence, expressions or 'looking,' *and* her affective response to such moments. She insists they are 'nice people, who must care,' which suggests their silence makes her contrarily feel abjectly uncared for. By repeatedly saying she wants friends to affirm that she will meet someone, Joan seeks in others an affirmation that she will move

from her position as single 'non-subject' to a stable (coupled) 'subject.' Joan expresses here what Butler describes as a fantasmatic *desire for* a coherent identification or 'stable' gender identity, foundational to the performative construction of gender (Butler, 1997: 136). Yet this is thwarted by her friends' failure to speak, which produces a psychic dissonance, demonstrated by her frequent pauses, punctuated by 'ohs', 'likes', 'erms' and 'you knows'. By not having her positioning as a subject recognised, her status as a gendered subject fails and is rendered illegible, causing her confusion. Instead, Joan remains within the 'unlivable' abjectifed positioning, yet it is a positioning which she struggles with. Rather than dwell on this, Joan trails off when she begins to consider what her friends might *want* to say. As Butler claims, abjection is 'an identification which must be disavowed, an identification that one fears to make only because one has already made it' (2011: 112). She resolves this tension by dismissing her friends' reactions as part of their personalities, before turning the surveilling gaze inward and emphasising her own complicit silence.

Several older interviewees described how moments of silence were temporally intersected, noting that while they *used* to be asked about their relationship status by friends, they no longer were. This temporal shift again worked to trouble their status as a subject and produced great feelings of distress. Hannah is a white, 39-year-old heterosexual, middle-class woman who has lived in London for 20 years. Her most recent relationship of a few months ended 6 months ago:

> Hannah: People kind of start to stop asking... I used to think that … too when I … knew people, like 39 … I was like 'Oh god I wonder if they you know want to have kids or want to meet somebody?'… We're so programmed to do that!
>
> Interviewer: So, people have stopped asking you?
>
> Hannah: Yeah. Oh god, I don't know, it's quite hard to say. I think sometimes it's unspoken but I do feel it. But then you don't know if you're projecting onto other people but … there's definitely there's definitely this pressure at this age being a woman and being single it's extreme, the pressure that you feel from all angles. 'Oooofff!' [Loud].

While friends have 'start[ed] to stop' asking about her relationship status, Hannah feels it remains an unspoken question. When pressed to explain, Hannah simply describes a troubling, intangible feeling of 'pressure' that she could not articulate. As with Joan (above), as a result, she turns the regulatory gaze inward saying she is simply exerting pressure on *herself* and wonders if she is 'projecting' this pressure onto others. Yet she also feels an externalised pressure stemming from what she calls a collective 'programming'. Thus, she experiences a combination of 'extreme' external *and* internal expectation, which has a significant impact on her. Her sense of deep discomfort, marked by a loud 'Oooofff!' sound, demonstrates the untenable and inarticulable nature of her single subjectivity.

Women often described how their single status had become something which was now presumed or 'fixed' by others, solidifying their abject positioning and producing further distress. One example was Katherine, a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman who has

been single for 10 years. Aged 33, she worriedly says her mother and her sister *used* to mention her being single, but now do not:

> Katherine: There was a time when like my sister and my mother for example would be like 'Oh it's just round the corner you just haven't met the right person yet!' Like that's going to happen! And I've noticed that they've stopped saying that …. there is a part of me that is like, 'Oh maybe they have just given up.' … There is a part of you that still wants people to say, 'Oh no it'll be fine.'

Katherine anxiously seeks reassurance from her family that her single status will be 'resolved' even though she herself thinks 'it won't be' and is concerned that their silence means that they have 'given up'. Instead of wanting to be acknowledged *through* her singledom, she desires confirmation that she still has time to become a (coupled) subject. Once more, this suggests she longs to shift from the *abject* to the 'subject', but she is stalled by her own positioning of herself as forever caught in a place which is 'not fine', with her meeting someone now 'not likely'.

Such silences were significantly intersected with age. Sam, aged 36, directly attributes silencing from others about her singledom to the fact she is approaching middle age. Sam is a white middle-class heterosexual woman who has lived in London for 11 years. She has spent around half of her life single, with two significant relationships. The last one, which lasted 3 years, ended suddenly 9 months ago. Sam says it is a topic which is now avoided by non-single friends and distant family:

> Sam: I do feel like I've got to an age now where it's very difficult to talk about … with friends who are in relationships, or have families, because… they don't know what to say. And I honestly believe that they believe that it is too late now and so they don't want to have that conversation. … A lot of people, like… some, particular aunts and uncles who used to ask me, now don't because it's the 'oh well it's a bit late now isn't it?' kind of thing.

> Interviewer: They used to say things?

> Sam: Yeah. I think I've got to the point where it's not a conversation anymore and it's an assumption. Which is terrifying.

Sam says this silencing temporally positions her as having permanently 'missed' her chance to become a coupled subject. She is painfully caught within what Lahad and Hazan call a triple disenfranchisement of singledom, age and gender (Lahad and Hazan, 2014) and experiences such silence as a painful erasure of her subjectivity. Evoking what Lahad describes as the 'terror of the old maid', Sam fears what she calls the 'terrifying' position of being an 'aging' single woman (Goffman, 1963:18; Lahad and Hazan, 2014). Goffman defines stigma as the result of failing to realise a particular norm (Goffman, 1963: 12, 17). For Sam, the older woman is required to have a partner and children; not possessing such attributes produces a deep sense of abjectification and shame (Lewis and Moon, 1997).

'Unspeakable' subjects: intergenerational silencing

While there was a sense that the interviewees would like friends or distant family members to raise the topic of their singledom and recognise them as single subjects, this desire was mainly absent when it came to close family members – particularly mothers. While women often said they were glad the topic was not brought up by family, their accounts consistently revealed a considerable, persistent sense of abjectification as a result of such omissions, both for those who chose to remain single and those who did not. Joan in particular experiences her mother's silence in deeply painful ways. She palpably describes how her mother's gaze feels like an acute form of intersubjective regulation (Winch, 2012):

> Joan: I think her own frustration comes on me, so it's very difficult to talk to her about it 'cause she's frustrated with where I'm at… She tends to look at what I'm wearing, but looking at the way I'm wearing what shoes, what clothes you know and she would say 'You don't look,' basically she would say,'You don't look attractive, you don't look…' you know. So it's very, she's quite raw, you know, sort of when I might be talking to her about my day and she won't listen, she'll be looking at, seeing what earrings I'm wearing, whether I got you know what's my hair like, the clothes, so … she doesn't erm probably doesn't know …. how to reassure, erm or to handle the situation yeah and to talk to me … she knows that I might get, I'm very, I can be sensitive so she knows that she, she can't say something, [quiet] otherwise I'll get upset.

Her mother's intensive scrutiny of her appearance causes Joan to turn her gaze on herself and feel responsible for her single status due to her 'incorrect' sartorial choices. Joan describes how her mother's intense focus not only produces her as unattractive but prioritises her singleness over *other* aspects of her life – her mother is interested in this to the exclusion of all else, not listening to what she says. Thus, Joan's mother's refusal to recognise other aspects of her subjectivity *because* she is single, destabilises her as a viable, legible single subject. Aligning with postfeminist discourses, her mother locates her femininity within her embodiment and ability to present as a sexually attractive, (potentially) coupled subject (Gill, 2017). While Joan says her mother is careful not to mention her singledom because it will upset her, Joan feels deeply upset anyway and, as her tone attests, her mother's silence is highly abjectifying in its effects.

When the topic *was* raised by interviewees' mothers, it was almost exclusively discussed indirectly through discourses of happiness. Several interviewees said their mothers just wanted them to be happy while still locating that happiness within coupledom. Jennifer however employs the discourse of happiness the other way round. Jennifer describes having a very close relationship with her mother. But in an emotional moment, she suddenly breaks down in tears, claiming that while *she* was not unhappy about being single, she was deeply upset by the belief that it makes her mother (and her grandmother) unhappy:

> Jennifer: Mum, luckily, has pretty much stopped that now [asking]…but I think even my gran would say 'oh is there anyone special'? And you're like oh god I don't want to like upset her either.... Sometimes it makes me sad for my mum because… I might get sad, erm like my brother's just had a baby [trying not to cry], his wife, and it makes me a bit sad that it's not me,

yeah. [Starts to cry] But no, no, no, not that it's not me that's not having a baby, sad for my mum, that's not… because it's not her daughter or something. But that would be the only thing. But it's not, I'm not sad, I'm sad because I think she might be sad. But she's not... [Laughs, while crying]. Because like yeah that's what makes me more upset...

Sara Ahmed has discussed how an apparently freeing statement of happiness can be highly regulatory in its effects: 'If my happiness is dependent on your happiness then you have the power to determine my happiness…You have a duty to be happy for me' (Ahmed, 2010: 91). Jennifer thus feels compelled to make her mother happy. The imperative to be happy becomes doubled, not only must Jennifer be happy, she must also be happy to ensure her mother's happiness, which Jennifer here orientates towards reproductive coupledom. Thus, even while she tries to resist the reproductive coupled norm by insisting she is happy, she sustains it. Jennifer resists and distances herself from her *own* sadness by saying, through her tears and laughter, that it is her mother who is sad, Jennifer is only sad on her behalf. But she hesitantly reflects that while her mother has not said anything directly, this is something that she senses:

Jennifer: So, it's not that she says anything in particular, but you just know that she feels like yeah. … Yeah, well no, and maybe she doesn't, I don't know. But I do feel that maybe she would like a grandchild that was born of one of her children.

Jennifer experiences this silence as deeply abjectifying, conveying a painful sense of not meeting her mother's expectations. Such failure is based not only on her lack of a partner, but also a gendered, intergenerational failure to consequently become a mother and to bear a child *as a daughter*. While there is not space to fully explore the mother-daughter dynamic, psychoanalyst and sociologist Nancy Chodorow argues that feminine identity is formed through the intergenerational reproduction and expectation of mothering. Feminine subjectivity is established through the interpersonal relationship women have with their mothers, from whom role learning is established (Chodorow, 1978: 175). While Chodorow has acknowledged that these gendered features of psychic life do not preclude individual variations and are uniquely situated, this is perhaps what makes Jennifer's failure to repeat such activity so upsetting (Chodorow, 2012: 107). This expectation, combined with cultural stories which celebrate and idealise motherhood – what Diane Negra highlights as the heightened visibility of mothers and daughters in postfeminist culture – perhaps work together to reinscribe her pain so profoundly (Negra, 2009).

While interviewees were more likely to be abjectly silenced by their mothers, fathers were not excluded from this. One example is Theresa, 50, who told of her father's silence around her singledom. Theresa was a white, 50-year-old heterosexual middle-class woman who has been single 'mostly all of the time' and was one of the few I spoke to who said she chose to be single. Theresa told me her father sees her as 'purposeless' because of her lack of a partner:

Theresa: My dad thinks I am like, he doesn't quite see the point of me! … I, I don't really have any purpose in life as such. Cause you know I don't have a family, don't have kids, he doesn't really see what I'm doing with my life….

I: Does he ask you about being single, or does he bring it up?

T: No. He's no, never, never.

While he never mentions her singledom, he abjectly erases her as a valid feminine subject by suggesting the rest of her life is valueless because of 'failure' to couple and produce children. In her father's narrative, Theresa is constructed as having a deficit identity, abjectly defined only by what she is not (Addie and Brownlow, 2014). While she agentically rejects such a positioning, dismissing his statements in a defiant tone, and her father's opinion clearly holds weight. Theresa uses her anger to defend and distance herself from her pain in a way interviewees found more difficult to do with their mothers.

Alternative visions: productive failures?

While the majority of the women presented coupledom as a desirable future goal, some constructed alternative visions of what constituted 'success' in intimate life if coupledom failed' to appear. Several interviewees showed deep ambivalence towards their single positioning, expressing both continued hope of romantic coupling, *and* an openness to different ways of being. This allowed for a continued attachment to the conventional norms of romantic love and reproduction to be held alongside their 'failure' to fulfil that norm (Berlant, 2008: 2). While those aged 40 or over often expressed dissatisfaction with remaining single and experienced more intense forms of silencing, older women had developed a clearer understanding of an alternative, more diverse future. Erin is a 47-year-old, white, middle-class, heterosexual woman who has enjoyed a successful career and describes her relationship history as 'mixed', with no relationship lasting longer than a year.

> Erin: During my 30s I did feel a real like 'Oh my god if … if I don't meet someone now'… but actually… when I was beyond the point of having children in some ways it just took the pressure off…So at the moment I feel quite comfortable with it but equally I don't want to feel too comfortable with it because I think if you… don't make the effort to meet somebody… you're probably not open to meeting somebody.'

Thus, Erin's 'failure' to fulfil the role of mother partially releases her from the pressure of normative femininity. Yet she does not want to shut down the possibility of meeting someone by becoming 'too comfortable' with her single identity. Indeed, while she still desires motherhood, she stops short of desiring *single* motherhood solely because it might prevent future romantic coupling:

> Erin: If I met someone now, I'd quite like to think that they had children … I'm very open to different ways of doing it. Erm I can't see myself doing what a … friend of mine is doing which is adopting on her own … I worry about … would it close the opportunity to have the relationship… maybe it doesn't but I don't know.

Erin thus expresses her disappointment at not being a wife and mother *together* with a pleasurable continued attachment to the promise of future romantic love, marking 'a space of disappointment but not disenchantment' (Berlant, 2008: 2). Erin finds a sense of belonging in her proximity to, rather than location within, the normative status of being coupled (Berlant, 2008: 11). Rather than rejecting the coupled norm, she demonstrates the complexity and difficulty of a liminal lived experience which falls somewhere between the two states, where she is relieved at being released from pressures of fulfilling the feminine norm through her 'failure' to couple and reproduce, yet *still* desires this. This 'failure' allows her to 'escape from the punishing norms that discipline behaviour' and offers 'more creative ways of being in the world', such as being a stepmother (Halberstam, 2011: 3).

These ambivalent failures productively opened up a space for alternative relationship formations, where decentering the monogamous coupled norm was constructed as *also* desirable. For example, Hannah, age 39, explains how her positioning as a mature single woman has provided a chance to consider the *possibility* of a non-monogamous relationship:

> Hannah: Friends I was living with [had] an open relationship … so that was a real eye opener, I think, I'm, I'm growing and changing to see it, I don't… there's lots of different ways of being… maybe I could be different too?
>
> Interviewer: So that's something that you might think about?
>
> Hannah: I don't know. Maybe? Just, just being I think open to the different ways of being is probably a good thing for me, rather than being like if they look at somebody else it means you know they don't love me enough or ugh, like fears?'

Hannah hesitantly suggests that her experience has allowed her to observe and consider alternative relationships. Yet while she describes this as a period of 'growth' towards different 'ways of being', she remains partially attached to the fantasy of the monogamous coupled norm. When pressed as to whether this is something she would consider, Hannah leaves it ambivalently open with a 'maybe' then closes it down, by discussing how it would help her to better negotiate a monogamous relationship.

Another older interviewee, Theresa, 50, told me that while she chooses to be single and childless, to avoid growing old and becoming dependent she has devised an alternative future: 'I'm perfectly happy to do a Virginia Woolf with a really good bottle of red wine … at 65, I was going to have a big party and then walk into the sea.' Theresa's dramatic plan demonstrates the significant pressure she feels to avoid the abjectified figure of the older single woman and she uses it to subvert such painful associations. While she agentically reframes this choice as highly liberatory, and departs from many of the women I spoke to by fully rejecting the coupled norm, she does not escape the punishing expectation to conform to such a norm.

Those who did not identify as heterosexual constructed more radical visions of alternative relationship formations which challenged the hierarchies of intimate life and

celebrated a decentering of romantic love and the monogamous coupled norm (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). Anna, a white, middle-class, 36-year-old, queer woman, has been single for most of her life, with one serious relationship and a few casual sexual relationships. Recalling a conversation with a friend, she told me that for them, non-monogamy is desirable:

> Anna: We don't necessarily see it [non-monogamy] as a bad thing… we don't see it as promiscuous... The idea of perhaps being constrained to one person… feels a little bit claustrophobic to us. So the idea that you could be in a sexual relationship but it doesn't necessarily mean it's a full blown, you know your all-in relationship, is something that we are ok with….

Yet by constructing non-monogamy through a negative framing as not 'a bad thing', she still positions it as liminal and monogamy as normative. Abby Willis has termed this a 'relational panopticon', where regulatory norms within intimate life are still relationally reproduced through the very strategies which seek to resist them (Willis, 2018: 508). It is her failure to conform to the coupled norm which offers Anna space to escape from the shame of deviant female promiscuity and what she sees as the 'claustrophobic' strictures of a monogamous relationship. However, Anna does not place herself *fully* outside the realms of a monogamous 'all-in' relationship, framing non-monogamy as something she is only 'ok with', rather than wholly embracing it.

Laura, who also identifies outside the heterosexual matrix, radically transforms sexual and romantic/platonic, coupled/single hierarchies when imagining her 'ideal' future life. Laura, 24, is a bisexual, non-monogamous, white, middle-class woman who has been single for a year following a six-month relationship. She describes her relationship with her friend Rachel in the following terms:

> Laura: I want [Rachel] to be in my life forever in a way that's more than what I feel for other friends… if I start dating someone I will tell them that I have this really intense relationship with her… it's I think it is a sort of a partnership erm but not necessarily a romantic relationship it's like a maybe like a platonic partnership …

Laura locates their relationship as somewhere *between* friendship and romantic partnership, blurring this regulatory binary, while also taking up and subverting romanticised ideals of lifelong commitment. She also disrupts the hierarchy of platonic/romantic relationships by emphasising the need to tell new partners about the significance of Rachel. When imagining her future intimate life, Laura says:

> Laura: [When] I think about [the future] now I kind of see myself near Rachel … to kind of have like … emotional support and stability erm and we've also talked about that a lot … potentially there's room for a partner but actually if I think about it I think more about it career-wise and myself-wise than I think about whether there's space for another person.

Laura decentres romantic love and challenges normative hierarchical constructions of what constitutes a 'happy' intimate life (Ahmed, 2010) by aligning herself *first* towards Rachel, then her career, herself and lastly any romantic, sexual partner, who is at the bottom of the hierarchy, included if there 'is space'. By doing so, she locates and orientates her happiness towards a relationship which defies normative categorisation and which is elevated as a priority. She transforms the normative structures of intimacy and care, placing Rachel in the role of primary emotional support. Nevertheless, there is a continued privileging of a single, albeit platonic, coupled unit, rather than a more transformative centring of a multitude of non-coupled relationships (Budgeon, 2006), demonstrating persistence of the coupled norm.

Conclusion: irreconcilable tensions, partial transformations

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how female single subjectivities are being constructed and experienced within contemporary UK society. I argue that subjectivity formation is produced and constructed through the operation of power in ways which can be simultaneously regulatory and resistant, ambivalent and agentic. I have demonstrated how single women actively negotiate and resist stigma but also are more ambivalently produced through painful processes of abjectification, particularly as they age, presenting a more radical and diverse understanding of older single femininity. I have also sought to consider how the abjectification of single subjectivity may work in more *productive* ways to trouble the normative hierarchical structures of intimate life and feminine subjectivity.

The analysis reveals a pervasive intersubjective silencing around singledom which abjectly 'erases' woman's single subjectivity and produces significant psychic tension and distress across all age groups. In these moments of silence, their subjectivity as a gendered single subject fails and is rendered illegible. Although the women I spoke with often said that they were glad not to discuss the topic of their singledom, they felt the deeply abjectifying effects of their erasure as a legible subject. Thus, they were caught between an irreconcilable desire for recognition and legibility as a viable subject and a desire not to be defined, and regulated by, the abjectified category of 'single'. It was apparent that the relinquishing of singledom was a duty towards the parent which must be fulfilled and works to reinscribe heteronormative coupledom. While all ages experienced this abjectification, it deepened as the women aged and they moved further from the feminine coupled norm.

In response to this tension, most of the women I spoke to maintained a proximity to heteronormative monogamous, coupled femininity, either through a desire to be acknowledged by others as (potentially) coupled in the future or through a *partial* reshaping of their vision of what constitutes success in intimate life. This response, I argue, is borne from a desire to shift from an abject, liminal single positioning to that of a coupled subject, and works politically to resecure the heterosexual matrix. Through the exclusionary logics of repudiation, these discourses continue to produce the normative female subject as heteronormatively, romantically coupled. While existing literature has often distinguished between those who 'choose' singledom as being more actively resistant, I found that both moments of regulation by and troubling of the feminine norm was consistent across both kinds of accounts. Those such as Theresa, for example, still showed evidence of

significant abjectification expressing a more defiant – yet no less painful – resistance. Thus, the women's narratives blurred such a binary, with their ambivalence towards singledom most evident. Indeed, several interviews stated that they were happy to be single but would welcome a relationship 'if' it arose.

While older women were more likely to experience silencing in more deeply abjectifying ways, their positioning further outside the coupled feminine norm often allowed them to more agentically trouble or resist normative heterocoupled femininity. Where the single subject 'failed' or singledom was experienced more ambivalently, spaces emerged where a proximity to conventional norms of intimate life was maintained *alongside* a more radical revisioning of intimate life. Such 'failures' allowed for the reordering and reconfiguring of successful femininity, particularly when intersected with ageing, non-monogamous and queer or homosexual single subjectivities. While the study is limited by only having a small number of queer interviewees and this would merit further investigation, there was evidence amongst the queer women of blurring the regulatory binary of singledom versus coupledom through discourses of non-monogamy and alternative relationship formations. Those who were located outside the heterosexual matrix often radically reconfigured and subverted normative hierarchies of romantic and platonic relationships, producing more diverse understandings of care and intimacy. Yet the coupled norm still persisted, albeit in new, more creative, forms.

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Notes

1. Gender disaggregated data was unavailable.
2. 'Woman/women/female' are understood as socially constructed categories. I tried to recruit transgender women, however none came forward.
3. Two interviewees had been married for visas. They were included as they did not consider themselves married in a normative sense which would accrue social capital, for example, they did not tell others or understand themselves as 'married'.
4. When recruiting, contacts told me they knew someone suitable but that the person found their single status too uncomfortable to talk about. This suggests that the sample was made up of women who felt *less* stigmatised.

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