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On Being a ‘Good’ Mother: The Moral Presentation of Self in Written Life Stories

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how women present a moral self in relation to public norms that constitute ‘good’ motherhood. The focus of this article is on two types of written life story: first, those written by mothers who express a past or current wish to divorce and, second, those written by lone mothers. The life stories offer insights into how individuals account for their actions in situations where they face the moral dilemma of clashing ethical norms – care for self and care for children – and how individuals with a ‘spoiled identity’ manage a moral presentation of self. The article concludes by critically examining the consequences of using written life stories rather than face-to-face interviews as data in a study of the moral tales that individuals tell.

KEY WORDS

accounts / divorce / life stories / lone motherhood / moral presentation of self

Introduction

This article examines the moral presentation of self in relation to public norms that constitute ‘good’ motherhood. Moral presentations of self are of interest here not in order to determine the extent to which social actors ‘really’ are moral, but rather as signposts to what the governing norms of a society are, how these are negotiated in particular social situations that present a moral dilemma, and the accounts or ‘vocabularies of motive’ that individuals employ when justifying their solution to this dilemma (e.g. Finch and Mason, 1993;

Goffman, 1971; Mills, 1940; Ochs and Capps, 2001: 105, 109; Scott and Lyman, 1968). Sociologists have mainly focused on vocabularies of motive in the study of a wide range of social problems such as violent, 'dangerous' or illegal behaviour (Presser, 2004; Scully and Marolla, 1984; Shover et al., 2004). But the idea of using justificatory accounts for one's actions also has a wider application and has been used to study, for example, the presentation of self as a 'good' parent by mothers whose daughters take part in beauty pageants (Heltsley and Calhoun, 2003) and the parents of 'troubled' teens (Godwin, 2004).

In Western countries, motherhood is part of a powerful nuclear family ideology that permeates all of society and is defined and delineated by strong social norms. Motherhood is accorded great significance in Western countries: being a 'good' mother is particularly important for a successful moral presentation of self and it is indeed questionable whether a 'bad' mother (or a mother who could not show herself to be 'good') could claim a moral self (Liamputtong, 2006; Nätkin, 1997; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003). In this article I examine the issue of 'good' motherhood in relation to divorce and lone motherhood in the life stories of Finnish women, the oldest of whom was born in the 1910s and the youngest in the 1960s. During this period, the social context in which these women lived underwent considerable changes. As late as 1940 over 60 per cent of the population worked in farming and forestry (Julkunen, 1994: 84) and it was only after the Second World War that Finland underwent rapid industrialization and urbanization. By the 1990s, Finland had become a high-technology post-industrial society (often called 'the Japan of the North') with a comprehensive Nordic welfare state. These structural changes have been accompanied by changes in social norms. Improved gender equality means women are better able to lead autonomous lives. Divorce has become more acceptable and lone motherhood less stigmatized.

The data for this study derive from a larger life story collection 'Women's lives in Swedish-speaking Finland'. Before examining what the acceptable vocabularies of motive around divorce are and the ways in which lone mothers succeed in presenting a moral self, I discuss the moral presentation of self and the gendered social norms that define motherhood.

Presenting a Moral Self

Social life is intrinsically moral and being able to present oneself as a 'moral' actor is an important part of being a member of a society or a social group (Goffman, 1959, 1971; Green et al., 2006; Linde, 1993). Each society has its own codes for acceptable and 'moral' behaviour, that is, social norms:

A social norm is that kind of guide for action which is supported by social sanctions, negative ones providing penalties for infraction, positive ones providing rewards for exemplary compliance. The significance of these rewards and penalties is not meant to lie in their intrinsic, substantive worth but in what they proclaim about the moral status of the actor. (Goffman, 1971: 124)

Behaving in a morally acceptable way thus ensures being accepted as a member of a social group. Various studies have shown how important it is for individuals to feel as though they 'belong', that they are accepted and respected by their peers. Individuals take others in their peer group (based, for example, on class or ethnicity) as their reference point and follow shared social norms that convey 'respectability' and a moral self (Sayer, 2005a; Skeggs, 1997). Social norms, however, rarely appear as categorical imperatives but rather as '*qualified* guides for action' (Sykes and Matza, 1957: 666, emphasis in original), which allows room for flexibility in how these norms should be interpreted.

Moral life 'takes place in storytelling' (Frank, 2002: 17) such that individuals work out moral dilemmas and present themselves as moral actors by providing narrative accounts of their actions. If an individual's adherence to social norms is less than perfect they may attempt to repair their potentially 'spoiled' identity by employing narratives that align their behaviour with cultural expectations, thus allowing them to present a morally acceptable self (Goffman, 1963; Mills, 1940). C. Wright Mills called such narratives 'vocabularies of motive' (1940: 907), a concept which has since been employed in the study of the motives that individuals provide for their actions, particularly for problematic or 'deviant' behaviours. One key study, by Sykes and Matza (1957), focused on the narratives told by delinquents to neutralize their unlawful behaviour, while Scott and Lyman analysed accounts that they defined as socially approved vocabularies 'made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior' (1968: 46). Rather than viewing language as representing a deeper underlying 'truth', these studies examined its social function. The focus of this article also is on 'doing' morality through accounting for decisions as moral ones (cf. Smart and Neale, 1999), rather than on whether the accounts the narrators present are 'real', that is, whether they are 'really' moral actors.

Whether an account is accepted or not depends on the extent to which the persons giving and receiving the account share the same background expectancies or taken-for-granted ideas of what is acceptable – that is, whether they belong to the same speech community (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 53, 61). Talk tends to be dialogical, which enables the speaker to check whether the listener finds a particular line of reasoning acceptable. This establishing of common ground through dialogue means that accounts provided in talk tend to be phased, that is, a speaker gives an account, which generates a question from the listener, which gives rise to a further (perhaps more detailed) account, and so on (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 60; see also Presser, 2004). In the data for the present article, which consist of written life stories, no such dialogue, phasing or gradual development of accounts in line with shared background expectancies is possible. The life story writer cannot be sure of which speech community the audience belongs to nor of whether the audience will accept or reject their account as valid. This has certain consequences for the nature of the accounts offered by the life story writers, an issue that I return to in the discussion.

Gendered Moralities for Mothers

As discussed above, the 'morality' of behaviour is usually measured against socially acceptable norms; for example, norms around 'proper' family life, which have an effect on how individuals conduct their family life (Boulton, 1983; Chodorow, 1978; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000). Social norms around the social institution of motherhood may appear to be natural (cf. Sayer, 2005b) but they are in fact socially constructed (Smart, 1996). As a result, mothers from different ethnic and class backgrounds may hold differing ideals as to what constitutes 'good' motherhood – for example, the extent to which a mother is expected to care for her children herself and in what way – yet what unites mothers is their tendency to discuss their own motherhood in relation to social norms (e.g. Bhopal, 1998; Boulton, 1983; Duncan, 2005; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Landsman, 2000; Liamputtong, 2006; McMahan, 1995; Thomson and Holland, 2002). Thus it would appear that there exist strong expectations to be a 'good' mother (however this is defined in a particular society or culture) and that consequently mothers tend to try to present themselves as fulfilling the necessary requirements (e.g. Landsman, 2000; Liamputtong, 2006; Nätkin, 1997; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000; Skinner et al., 1999).

In most Western countries, it would appear that there is one crucial social norm that parents are expected to follow; that is, the ethic of care for children (e.g. Landsman, 1998; Nätkin, 1997; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000). This norm is inscribed in law in many countries, Finland included (Kurki-Suonio, 1999). In their study of step-families, Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues (2003) found that the parents they interviewed voiced a strong moral imperative of putting their children's needs first and that making moral choices was itself seen as indicative of caring about children (cf. Smart and Neale, 1999). There appear to be differences, however, in how 'good' motherhood and fatherhood are constructed: fathers are able to follow a more individualistic moral imperative of self-care, whereas the ethic of care for children is overriding for mothers (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003). Furthermore, 'good' motherhood seems to include the responsibility over the quality of fatherhood, that is, a 'good' mother ensures that her children receive 'good' fathering (May, 2003).

But motherhood is also related to other norms around, for example, sexuality, whereby a 'good' mother is heterosexual and married to (or at least living with) the father of her children (Smart, 1996). In Finnish society, mothers tend to be depicted as central figures in families: the mother is seen to be the 'heart' of the family, its emotional anchor and the glue that keeps the family together, as well as providing emotional and physical care for other family members (Vuori, 2001: 55–7). These social norms also regulate behaviour (e.g. alcohol consumption), health and hygiene, and the upbringing of children (Nätkin, 1997; Vuori, 2001).

This article is purely concerned with how individuals negotiate public norms when morally evaluating their own lives and I wish to emphasize that the analysis should not be interpreted as 'cynical'. When writing of women *presenting themselves* as 'good' mothers I do not question the veracity of this presentation

because I do not assume the existence of a more 'authentic' layer of motives behind the 'vocabularies of motive' (Mills, 1940; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003).

Methods

The data derive from a collection of written life stories 'Women's lives in Swedish-speaking Finland' (Kvinnoliv i Svenskfinland) collected in 1995 and archived at Åbo Akademi University. The project was publicized widely in the Swedish-speaking press in Finland as well as through other forms. 'Ordinary' women were encouraged to write and send in their life stories and potential contributors were asked to write about their lives in their own words. The project succeeded in collecting 130 life stories written by women from a wide range of backgrounds (see Sand, 1998, for more information on the collection). Because the life story archive was envisioned as constituting a resource for current and future researchers from a variety of disciplines, the project aimed to collect 'generic' life stories that could be used for a variety of research aims. My involvement with the life story collection began as work on a PhD thesis on lone motherhood (May, 2001) and my interest has since broadened to the question of presenting a moral self in relation to social norms around motherhood (May, 2005).

Written life stories are a popular form of data among Finnish sociologists, who have initiated a number of life story collections and competitions for research purposes. One of the key Finnish sociological works detailing the changing lives of Finnish people during the 20th century was based on such data (Roos, 1987). Furthermore, writing is a fairly popular hobby in Finland and literacy levels are high, which probably partly explains why these initiatives meet with such a positive response from all sections of society. It is not unusual for a life story collection to contain hundreds of written life stories and the working classes are usually relatively well represented – for example, in the present sample, 10 out of 31 narrators can be defined as working-class.

The researcher's limited ability to influence the content of what is said in written life stories presents both a richness and a challenge for analysis. It can be extremely fruitful to be met with 'unexpected' data, as can happen if life story narrators touch upon subject matters that the researcher may not have thought of asking about. A further richness is seeing how individuals connect issues in their lives when allowed to do so freely, without the 'interference' of the researcher's framework (May, 2001). However, written life stories present a serious challenge as well, mainly because such data can offer exasperatingly 'thin' narratives. In an interview situation, the researcher can ask the research participant to elaborate on specific issues, but such a possibility does not exist with written life stories (it is indeed not customary among Finnish life story researchers to contact the life story narrators to gain further information and this was not done in the present study either). This challenge can prove to be a fruitful one, however, if the researcher proceeds to approach the data from a different angle which generates fresh questions (May, 2001). The researcher may become more reflexive over their agenda

and may have to concede that it is not appropriate to the data. I return to evaluating the nature of written life stories and the consequences of using them as data in the final section of this article.

This article focuses on two groups of life story. The first group consists of 18 life stories written by women who say they at some stage during their marriage (and when their children were still living at home) considered divorcing their husbands. The second group comprises 17 life stories written by women who were or had been lone mothers. There is some overlap between these two samples, because four of the narrators in the first group did divorce and thus became lone mothers. The narrators range in age from women in their thirties to women in their eighties. Ten narrators come from a working-class or agrarian background, whereas 17 narrators have a middle-class background. Four of the narrators do not give enough information on their background to be able to make this distinction.

The data were analysed with the help of narrative analysis, with a particular focus on meaning (Riessman, 1993). How an individual narrates her life tells not only about that individual's experiences and thoughts, but says also something about the social context in which she has lived (Mills, 1959). Personal narratives are in other words not merely idiosyncratic – the act of telling a personal narrative is a social one. Narrative accounts draw on communal language and shared interpretive frameworks through which the narrator makes sense of her experiences and renders these comprehensible to others (Freeman, 1993; Linde, 1993: 164–5; Stivers, 1993). These shared interpretive frameworks communicate the limits of what is considered 'acceptable' and reflect the dominant social norms and morals according to which we are expected to live (Richardson, 1990: 127). Thus culture speaks itself through an individual's personal narrative (Riessman, 1993: 5).

Personal narratives are an important forum for establishing moral character (MacIntyre, 1981; Ochs and Capps, 2001). The events recounted in personal narratives often concern times when the narrator has 'violated social expectations' (Ochs and Capps, 2001: 46) and the narrator offers justificatory accounts for her actions, explaining untoward behaviour (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 46). Life story narrators tend to discuss such non-normative behaviour in a moral light, that is, evaluate and judge their own actions in relation to commonly held moral standards (Hoey, 2005; Ochs and Capps, 2001). The telling of a personal narrative can be understood as the act of 'building a moral philosophy of how one ought to live' (Ochs and Capps, 2001: 46). In the following sections, I provide an analysis of how the life story narrators in the present study present their moral dilemmas in relation to divorce and lone motherhood, and the ways in which they negotiated a pathway through a field of moral rules. All quotes from the life stories are anonymized.

Putting the Children First

In this section, I examine the 18 life stories written by women who say they at some point during their marriages contemplated divorce, a potentially 'deviant'

act (Riessman, 1990). Because I am interested in how individuals account for and morally evaluate their *own* decisions, I include only life stories where the divorce was something the narrators themselves potentially wanted. I would argue that in addition to the more conventional approach of studying individuals who have divorced, it is also important to study accounts of women who have considered divorce. Examining the points at which individuals are contemplating a non-normative course of action is just as important as studying lives that more obviously or openly contravene norms. In their dialogues with social norms, individuals consider what the expected reaction of others might be, and this is the point at which vocabularies of motive may guide conduct: 'acts often will be abandoned if no reason can be found that others will accept' (Mills, 1940: 907).

It is interesting to note that the majority of the narrators in the present study who wrote about their wishes for divorce were born in the 1940s or later and that their accounts of marital unhappiness are mainly situated in the 1970s and onwards. This I would argue reflects the taboo that divorce presented for older generations of women; divorce has only become a real possibility for women born since the Second World War. Thus any older women who had endured unhappy marriages probably did not consider divorce a realistic option.

It is generally believed that divorce is harmful to children. All parenting is 'morally charged' but parents who place their children at potential risk 'are in a morally questionable situation, and may have their moral identities especially at stake' (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003: 129). How then can even the thought of divorce be morally defensible? The answer lies in examining more closely the way in which the narrators account for their wish to divorce: they refer to their children's well-being as key:

The problems came with my husband's career advancement, he worked longer hours, the business dinners became more usual, his consumption of alcohol increased. The children and I felt we were neglected, the moments together and shared family activities became less frequent, besides which they were characterized by stress, nervousness and fights. (KLiv 14, born 1920s)

The children began also to suffer from the discord even though it was less frequent because my husband rarely showed himself at home. (KLiv 119, born 1950s)

It is important that the narrators embed their own unhappiness in accounts of how the worsening relationship between the spouses affected the children. Children are thus crucial elements in the narrator's justifications for why the marital discord warranted thoughts of divorce. These accounts read like appeals to loyalties where 'the actor asserts that his [sic] action was permissible or even right since it served the interests of another to whom he owes an unbreakable allegiance or affection' (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 51).

More importantly, however, children are also central in the narrators' accounts of their final decision. Fourteen narrators decided to stay with their husband because they believed that this was best for the well-being of their children. They invariably describe their husbands as 'good' fathers:

But he was a good father. He had patience and he played a lot with the children. (KLiv 112, born 1940s)

These women define a 'good' father as one who gives his children time and care, and is never violent towards them (although some of the fathers did physically abuse the narrators). The narrators indicate that a 'good' mother cannot rob her children of a 'good' father (May, 2003) and present their own actions in terms of an ethic of care, balancing their own needs with those of others (Tronto, 1993). They distinguish between being a wife and a mother and, in a situation where the obligations of these two roles clash, motherhood takes precedence:

I think we got married too soon. We were too young and we had not had the chance to mature and develop as persons. Even so our marriage has lasted. We celebrated our golden anniversary a couple of years ago. Admittedly, I have been ready to pack my suitcase several times, but I did not want the children to suffer. I was myself a child of divorce and I did not want my boys to have to go through that experience. To the outside we must have seemed the 'ideal, industrious couple', but it has not always been so good. We saw and continue to see life differently. (KLiv 33, born 1920s)

Four narrators, however, did end up divorcing their husbands. Despite taking a course of action that according to one social norm is harmful to their children, these narrators are able to present their decision as that of a 'good' mother by saying that their main motivation was to protect their children from harm (cf. Riessman, 1990: 62–3). What emerges from the life stories is that a 'good' mother can deprive her children of a two-parent family if the father's presence is harmful to them, either because of mental harm caused by the parents' arguments or because of (the risk of) physical violence:

The child [sic] was seven weeks old when [my husband] for the first time went into a rage. My heart leapt because it was no longer a question of just me. The worst was that the baby at that moment was lying on my lap being 'burped'. Not even this stopped him! This was the first time I seriously realized the danger that lay ahead! If he could not stop himself in front of his own newborn child, what would ever stop him? (KLiv 95, born 1940s)

I thought for a long time that I should keep our marriage together for the sake of the children, but after thinking about it for many weeks I came to the conclusion that this would be wrong of me. Children do not thank you afterwards for having done so and neither can they have a secure upbringing if the parents' relationships is not working. (KLiv 48, born 1940s)

Thus the narrators are using justifications for their decision to divorce: that is, accounts that first, 'assert [the action's] positive value in the face of a claim to the contrary', and second, 'recognize a general sense in which the act in question is impermissible, but claim that the particular occasion permits or requires the very act' (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 51). Yet there are some indications of feelings of guilt – the above narrator also comments that her children have been affected by not living with their father – highlighting that justifications may not always be 'powerful enough to fully shield the individual from the force of his

[sic] own internalized values and the reactions of conforming others' (Sykes and Matza, 1957: 669). The life stories show clearly how individuals have to navigate between, at times contradictory, normative requirements or expectations. In the case of children and divorce, the narrators present their choice as a dilemma that must unfortunately be resolved at a cost (cf. Sykes and Matza, 1957: 669) – here that cost is breaking against the social norm that defines two-parent families as ideal.

These findings are similar to the ones reported by Walzer and Oles (2003) from their study of divorce narratives. They found that women tended not to present their own well-being as a primary justification for divorce. There are also clear parallels between the findings of the present study and those of Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues (2000). The narrators present themselves as moral actors by providing an account of a moral dilemma they have faced and of how they have pursued 'the moral option', which invariably involves placing one's children's needs before one's own (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000: 790, 794). Thus, similarly to Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues (2000: 799–800), I would argue that the ethic of care for dependent children presents a non-negotiable moral norm.

These accounts of the divorce dilemma seem almost identical, all adhering strictly to the social norm 'put the children first'. This would appear to be the socially acceptable account in relation to divorce; that is, divorce can only be narrated in a socially acceptable manner if it can be defined as beneficial to the well-being of one's children. These accounts read like 'press releases' (Wiersma, 1988), that is, they present formulaic and seemingly airtight stories that are 'rigidly adhered to, almost like a code, and – when heard as a group – sounded almost uniform' (Wiersma, 1988: 210). I discuss in the concluding section the possible reasons for why the life story writers present such rigidly formulaic narratives around divorce.

In accounting for how they weighed up their various options the narrators are describing a process of weighing up justifications for the non-normative act of divorce. Perhaps only those who found a 'moral' enough justification that meant they did not risk serious damage to their self-image as moral persons went through with the divorce (Sykes and Matza, 1957: 667). The present data, however, cannot answer the question of whether only those who can provide 'acceptable' accounts and ensure others' favourable evaluation of their character will divorce. This would have to be investigated with individuals who are in the process of deciding over divorce. Most of the narrators in this section did not end up with the openly 'spoiled identity' of a divorced lone mother (Goffman, 1963). In the next section I examine how mothers who do hold this stigmatized identity manage the task of presenting a moral self.

Being a 'Good' Lone Mother

Next, I examine 17 life stories written by lone mothers – this sample partly overlaps with the previous one, as four of the narrators went ahead with the

divorce. A lone mother family by definition breaches the ideal nuclear family of two parents and their biological children. Lone mothers face prejudice, stigma and doubts over their ability to bring their children up 'properly' (e.g. May, 2001; Nätkin, 1997; Phoenix, 1996; Roseneil and Mann, 1996).

As mentioned above, general beliefs about what constitutes 'good' motherhood change over time, which is clearly visible in the life stories (see May, 2003, for a more thorough analysis of this issue). Interestingly, there is a wider age range among the narrators in this sample than in the previous section. In the previous section I suggested that the scarcity of older narrators describing possible plans to divorce perhaps reflects the strong taboo against divorce that these women had experienced. The fact that the older lone mothers in this study were all either widows or were divorced by their husbands lends weight to this argument. These older narrators, who brought up their children from the 1940s through to the 1960s focus on the material aspects of parenting: on how they managed to feed, clothe and educate their children against all odds, thus fulfilling the requirements of 'good' motherhood:

My main goal in life then was to survive – to provide for my children. As time went on I was forced to just go on, to not look back. And I had no one to talk to. My son was too small – I could not burden him. (KLiv 64, born 1910s)

When I look back at my life I often wonder how I managed it all, all my children graduated and they set off in their lives without any student loans. (KLiv 61, born 1920s)

In contrast, 'good' motherhood entails something quite different for the younger narrators whose children were born in the 1980s and 1990s. Instead of focusing on the material aspects of parenting alone, they discuss lone motherhood in terms of their children's emotional and psychological well-being:

Life has surely not always felt easy for them; the divorce and the lack of a male role model has affected them. (KLiv 48, born 1940s)

Was I harming my child when I in this way deprived him of a father? [...] Now I would, through choice, rob him of daily contact with his father, with a man. (KLiv 95, born 1940s)

These differences are understandable if considered in light of the changes that have occurred in the social context and in social norms. The older narrators' focus on the material can at least partly be explained by their social and individual context at the time. Finland was a poor agrarian country that was also suffering from the after-effects of the Second World War, which had further lowered living standards. In addition, the older narrators were mainly from poor working-class or agrarian backgrounds (as were the majority of the population at that time) for whom it was not easy to provide their children with basic necessities or with the education that they needed to get on in life. It is therefore not surprising that, for these narrators, securing their children's material and educational needs remains the most memorable and commendable aspect of their lone motherhood, and the hard work they put into this plays a central part in their moral presentation of self (cf. Nätkin, 2003: 28).

In contrast, the social and individual context in which the younger narrators were bringing up their children was in many ways different. Finland had become an affluent post-industrial society with a comprehensive welfare state that ensures a minimum standard of living. Providing a home, food and education to children still comprises 'good' parenting but perhaps does not require the same effort as it did in previous decades. The younger narrators also tend to be relatively well-educated middle-class women with careers, a factor which no doubt contributes to the lack of accounts of material hardship in their life stories.

In addition, the social norms against which these women measure their own lives have shifted. Psychological and psychotherapeutic theories have become part of public consciousness and influence how people assess their lives (Vuori, 2001, 2003; cf. Smart, 1996). These theories become familiar to parents, for example, during visits to baby-well centres (which practically all Finnish parents and infants attend) and in contact with schools. The effect of these theories is visible in general constructions of a 'healthy' family being one where there are two parents, both of whom are physically and mentally healthy and therefore capable of providing their children with 'proper' gendered role models (Forsberg, 1994; Nätkin, 1997). There are consequently fears that children who grow up in a one-parent family are potentially harmed because of family form. These form the basis of much problem-centred research on lone motherhood (e.g. Amato and Booth, 1997; Sauvola, 2001) and are repeated in general debates that tend to depict lone-mother families as 'insufficient' or 'broken' families. It is therefore not surprising that the question that most exercises the younger life story narrators is: 'Are my children being harmed by growing up with only one parent?'

Crucially these narrators do not negate the assumption that children fare better in two-parent families. Like the norm that parents should put their children's needs first (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000), this one is perhaps also non-negotiable. Nevertheless, the narrators do not put their hands up in despair and claim themselves to be 'bad' mothers. Instead, they show how they have done their utmost to provide a loving and secure upbringing in order to undo or lessen the harm they assume has been caused their children. They are thus employing justifications, that is, accounts where the social actor 'accepts responsibility for the act, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it' (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 47):

The most important thing in my mind was that I provide my children with safety, that I be physically and emotionally present. I always answered their questions and dressed them nicely. I let them dirty their clothes if they were having fun, and did not want to cut their playing time short. In the evenings I tried to study parenting, I attended courses and sought information also from the baby-well centre. I so wanted to be a good mother, so that my children would feel that they were loved. In fact I think I succeeded in this quite well. (KLiv 87, born 1940s)

The narrators are keen to point out that their children show greater maturity and social skills than their peers, and present compliments from professionals as the ultimate proof of their success. Indeed, in these times of professionalization of parenting, a professional's stamp of approval is perhaps the highest and most authoritative form of praise:

His openness has held. He remains social by nature, there's clearly nothing wrong with his self-confidence because the teachers both at his school and his music school say that he is an intelligent and harmonious boy with good self-confidence. From the little boy who used to accompany me to choir performances he has developed into a good piano player and even sings in a choir. He has friends and enjoys both reading and playing ice hockey with the kids from the neighbourhood. (KLiv 95, born 1940s)

Because prescriptions for 'good' motherhood are context bound and change over time, there are clear differences in how the older and the younger life story writers narrate their motherhood. However, what unites these women is the dialogue they hold with social norms relating to 'proper' family life. Just as the mothers in Landsman's (1998) study who both accepted and resisted the 'blame' they felt society placed upon them over their children's disability, the narrators in the present study do not refute social norms around the two-parent family but attempt to show how, despite at face value appearing to be 'unsuccessful', their families have in fact been 'successful' ones.

Discussion

This article has examined how life story writers negotiate public norms around motherhood in their construction of a 'good' mother and thus a moral self. The focus has been on two groups of life story writers: first, women who have faced the moral dilemma of contemplating a divorce, and the second, women with the 'spoiled identity' of lone motherhood.

It would appear that over and above functioning as a forum for presenting oneself as a moral actor, personal narratives can be used as a way of 'cleansing' oneself, of offering a justification (Scott and Lyman, 1968) for why one has breached a social norm. Personal narratives allow the narrator to 'preserve a positive social identity' in the face of a moral digression (Riessman, 1990: 119). The narrators in the present study manage to uphold themselves as 'good' mothers and to make a claim for a valid social identity (May, 2004). Thus personal narratives can be a way of seeking exoneration and of (re)building a moral character. These are clearly stories of success. This may be partly because of the nature of the data: the conventions of life story writing make it difficult to write the narrative of an 'unsuccessful' life, in addition to which individuals who would tell an immoral tale perhaps do not wish to participate in research (Heltsley and Calhoun, 2003: 97; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000: 799; Vilkkö, 1997).

The question does remain, however, why individuals whose lives are in some way non-normative simply do not discard unhelpful social norms and tell their stories by completely circumventing these. After all, by engaging with social norms that their lives have not satisfied, they risk exposing themselves as 'immoral'. I argue that individuals cannot simply choose which social norms to engage with; for example, there are some ubiquitous social norms that all mothers must position themselves in relation to in order to claim a moral self (May, 2004; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003).

The findings in this article need also to be discussed in light of the nature of written life stories as opposed to face-to-face interviews. There seem to be differences in how mothers construct their narratives of mothering for researchers, depending on the method of data collection. It would appear that in face-to-face interviews mothers present a more ambivalent picture of mothering than in written life stories, more freely contrasting ideology with practice (e.g. Boulton, 1983; Nätkin, 1997). Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues (2000: 799) argue that the in-depth interview is such that it produces a 'subject demonstrating morality through reflecting on dilemmas'. It would seem that in written life stories there is less room for such reflection. Narrating a moral dilemma is always a risky enterprise because the narrator's moral reputation can be undermined if the audience does not share the narrator's morality (Frank, 2002), face-to-face interviews are phased interactions (Scott and Lyman, 1968), where the speaker can check and double-check that the listener has got the right impression. For example, a mother may express reservations about the myths surrounding motherhood, yet ensure the listener that she is in practice a 'good' mother. In such dialogues, the speaker can shape their storytelling to a particular audience, whereas there is no such opportunity to ensure a positive audience reaction when producing a written life story that will be read by an unknown reader. In other words, the life story writers have no way of knowing whether their accounts will be deemed acceptable by the audience.

This would perhaps explain why the life story writers seem to be so 'cautious' about going against social norms surrounding motherhood and present a narrative that sticks closely to the normative prescriptions on 'good' motherhood. As a result, the life story writers who discuss their thoughts around divorce end up presenting formulaic 'press releases' on the importance of putting the children first (Wiersma, 1988). Perhaps because the narrators did not know which speech community they were addressing (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 61), they assumed the broadest possible community and stuck with accounts that were in line with widely accepted social norms. Whereas an interview participant can 'test the water' and gauge the listener's reaction before including more negative or ambivalent aspects of motherhood in her narrative, life story writers are perhaps aware that they do not have the same opportunity to negotiate their identity with the reader (cf. Scott and Lyman, 1968: 58) and that they consequently risk presenting themselves in an 'immoral' or 'amoral' light unless they closely follow normative expectations.

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