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**Don't Ask, Don't Tell:
A hidden tool of oppression.
Single mother's beliefs,
media, stereotypes, and stigma.**

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of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

As a social construction at structural level, stigma exerts significant impact on the wellbeing of individuals, yet within the socio-cultural and political landscape stigma is utilised as legitimate form of social control with few mechanisms for limitation – despite links to discrimination and prejudice. Previous literature has found associations between discrimination and long term ill-health of those targeted, with relationships identified between system-justification (belief in the justness of society) and threat cardiovascular reactivity. Dominant mainstream media have been identified performing a significant structural role in the propagation of stigma. Single mothers are stigmatised and targeted by media and society, with a growing body of research reporting health disparities for them in poorer psychological and physical health outcomes. The aim of this study was to explore single mothers' system beliefs, views of media and their lived experience of stigma, whilst collecting contextual demographic and health data. Eleven women participated, watching mainstream media headlines with interviews conducted afterwards. A social constructionist orientation and thematic approach was employed to analyse the women's talk. Thematic analysis revealed a hidden culture single mothers recognised underlying injustices. Where "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" has previously been utilised to ease participation for stigmatised individuals, this was identified in this study as a discourse of dehumanisation. Single mothers illuminate this as strategic practice employed by media, society, and institutions to mutual benefit, perpetuating single mothers' oppression – irrespective of their adherence to neoliberal dogma.

Keywords: single mothers, stigma, media, system-justification, health

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to all single mothers struggling every day, 'presenting' for their children under difficult circumstances. You are courageous, amazing individuals.

It is by the exercise of courage and self-restraint and persistent effort that we shall win in this unequal contest (Militant Suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst, 1908). (Jorgensen-Earp, 1999, p.71)

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