

# 7 Lone Motherhood in Historical Context: Changing Elements in Narrative Identity

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## Abstract

This paper examines lone motherhood through the lens of narrative identity. The data consists of the written life stories of seventeen Finnish lone mothers. The focus is on how lone mothers from two different age cohorts construct their identity around motherhood and lone motherhood. Thus historical context becomes an important element in the analysis.

## Narrative identity

Narrative identity is the view of self in relation to others and the social, as told through stories. Identity is not something one is, but a process, something one continually 'does' through biographical work (Somers, 1994, p.618; Gubrium and Holstein, 1994). People construct their identity and convey it to others in the form of stories which also offer a way of creating continuity and structure to experiences (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998, p.7; Riessman, 1993, p.2; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998). Identities are however not coherent and stable but dynamic constructions and the identities people create for themselves are complex, situational, and often contradictory (Hollway and Jefferson, 2001). Life stories can be seen as a close approximation of the view of self of that person, though one can never assume that the life story and the identity are one and the same (Lucius-Hoene and Depperman, 2000, p.201).

Narrative identities are invariably *social* constructions. Individuals construct their identities with the help of ontological narratives, in which they position themselves in relation to the grand narratives in their society (Somers, 1994). Thus social and historical context are important elements in understanding identity. Below, I show the differences in how women from two age cohorts construct their narrative identities and their lone motherhoods, and examine how these differences can to a large extent be explained through historical context.

## **The Study**

The written life stories analysed in this study were part of a larger life story collection collected in 1995 under the project name *Kvinnoliv i Svenskfinland* (Women's lives in Swedish-speaking Finland) by the Institute of Women's Studies at Åbo Akademi University in Finland. Out of the total 130 life stories, I chose the ones written by women who said that they at some point in their lives had alone been responsible for the upbringing of their children, seventeen in all. The oldest narrator in my material was born in the 1910s and the youngest in the 1960s. The life stories cover experiences of lone motherhood from the 1940s to 1995. There are all types of lone mother in my material: women who have alone had children, widows, and divorced women. The writers' social and educational backgrounds vary from a poor agrarian background with only a basic education to a middle-class background with a university education. All of the narrators have been employed either in agriculture or in the labour market for most of their adult lives.

A significant aspect of the life stories is that the writers did not know at the time of writing that their lone motherhood would become the focus of study. Therefore, the material does not consist of *lone mother* life stories, but rather of life stories where lone motherhood is one of the themes or subject matters (cf. Hollway and Jefferson, 2001). Earlier research on lone mothers has mainly approached research participants as lone mothers, using lone motherhood as a window into their lives. In contrast, the present study takes a holistic approach by examining how the subject of lone motherhood is interwoven into a broader biographical narrative (May, 2001).

## **Lone Motherhood Now and Then**

Two cohorts of narrators emerge from the material: those who experienced lone motherhood in the 1940s through to the 1960s, and those who have experienced lone motherhood from the 1970s onwards (May, 2003). The 1960s denote a watershed in Finnish society - since then, three key developments have affected the lives of Finnish lone mothers. First, increases in gender equality, especially in the labour market, have meant that lone mothers are better able to provide for their families. Second, changes in work and family policies have meant that women are better able to combine work and motherhood - 'working motherhood' has become the norm in Finland (Julkunen, 1994). Third, general values and mores have become more accepting of divorce and lone motherhood. At the same time, legislation has focused on the well-being of children whose parents live apart and has made divorce easier. These three factors combined have meant that lone mothers enjoy a higher standard of material well-being while no longer experiencing

the same heavy stigma as they did in earlier decades (May, 2003). Yet they are still on some level viewed as a threat to ‘the family’ and values pertaining to it (Reuna, 1997). As I explore below, these changes are reflected in how the life story writers view their own lone motherhood and the place they accord it in their narrative identity. Both the older and the younger writers employ two main narratives, though they construct these differently: the narrative of motherhood and the narrative of stigma.

### **Motherhood**

Motherhood is a dominant cultural narrative that the narrators use to portray themselves in a positive light, yet there is a difference in the kind of motherhood they describe. While the older narrators focus on the material aspects of bringing up children, the younger narrators concentrate on the emotional and psychological qualities of motherhood. This difference reflects both the rise in general living standards in Finland as well as the increasing influence of the psy-disciplines on thinking around family relationships, especially motherhood (May, 2003).

The older narrators tell of how they managed to feed, clothe and educate their children at a time when the general standard of living was poor. They display great pride in a job well done. For example Anna marvels at how she managed to provide her children with a good education (the quotes from the life stories are my translations from the original Swedish and I have given the narrators pseudonyms to protect their anonymity):

When I look back at my life I often wonder how I managed everything, all my children graduated from high school and started life without study loans.

The older narrators often narrate a heroic tale of overcoming adversity (May, 2001). This focus on the material aspects indicates that the older narrators do not remember *parenting* alone to have been such a problem, but rather managing to provide for their children financially. It would appear that this reflects a more general attitude to mothering among older Finnish women (Nätkin, 1997).

Motherhood remains central also in the narrative identities of the younger narrators. It is nevertheless a different kind of motherhood from that described above, no longer characterised by concerns over the material welfare of the children, but rather their psychological well-being (May 2003). For example Barbro explains her approach to parenting:

I react quickly if my daughter has problems. We talk and I keep her informed. She gets to know WHY, which I never did [as a child].

The younger narrators seem to take the material welfare of their families for granted and for them, a sign of their success as (lone) mothers is no longer the ability to feed and educate their children, but managing to protect and advance their children's emotional well-being, as exemplified by Ellen's obvious pride when she describes her young son:

His openness has held. He continues to be sociable by nature, and there appears to be nothing wrong with his self-confidence, for the teachers both at school and at the music school say that he is an intelligent and harmonious boy with good self-confidence.

The narrative of 'successful' motherhood, either in terms of supporting their children financially or psychologically, is a powerful cultural narrative the life story writers can employ in building a positive narrative identity. The absence of tales of 'unsuccessful' lone motherhood in the material is perhaps because it is near impossible to tell the story of one's life if it includes such a major 'failure' as not being a 'good' mother. Motherhood is after all one of the central roles women are expected to fulfil in accordance with the cultural narrative over what constitutes 'successful' motherhood. However, it is important to note that the content of this narrative changes over time.

### **Stigma**

Whereas motherhood is presented by the narrators as part of their self identity, *lone* motherhood appears to be an identity assigned from the outside. What points to this interpretation is how the narrators rarely explicitly touch upon the issue of *lone* motherhood other than in connection with their encounters with outside prejudice. The older writers recount instances where they were personally made aware of having overstepped a moral boundary. This is how Karolin remembers the disapproval of other people:

But all one could do was grit one's teeth, hold one's head up and ignore all the old ladies who talked, at times they even had to hiss to each other audibly, there she comes, you know, and then they named my name.

The younger writers seem to have a more diffuse enemy to contend with, as they tend to refer to a prevailing sense of disapproval rather than specific instances. As Barbro suggests:

Being a lone mother has never been a problem and I don't understand people who make a big deal out of it.

One explanation for these vague references to disapproval may be that the nature of stigma experienced by lone mothers has changed. Whereas in previous decades their breach of norms may have warranted direct and personal criticism, such disapproval would today seem old-fashioned. Yet there remains a general sense that nuclear families are better than lone-mother families (Reuna, 1997), and hence also the younger narrators are aware that they do not fit the norm.

The older narrators seem to understand if not accept the stigma they have encountered, as Iris says:

I know that mother was ashamed of me, she said so several times, and I understand why.

In contrast, the younger narrators argue against a stereotypical view that defines them as failures or as potentially harming their children. So Katarina writes:

I became a lioness of a mother, I fought for my right to be accepted as a lone mother.

Another way that the younger narrators signal that they are aware of misgivings that many feel towards lone motherhood is by underlining that they are aware of the risks that a 'fatherless' upbringing poses to their children. For example Ellen says she worried about hurting her son "by removing his father", especially as "I had no one in my little family who could act as 'make-believe father'", making it impossible for Ellen to provide a "male role model" for her son, and she poses the following question: "Would I manage to provide a varied enough childhood for a child, a boy, as a lone mother?" Ellen says she "realised that this would be a problem". However, the narrators counter these fears by portraying their children as balanced individuals - the implication being that this is the result of a stable upbringing.

## **Differences**

Motherhood as central to narrative identity and not fitting into the stigmatized category 'lone mother' are common characteristics in the life stories of the old and young narrators alike. Below, I examine the main two aspects in which the two cohorts diverge.

### *Hard Workers*

For the older writers, the ability and necessity to perform hard work is an important aspect of their narrative identity (May, 1999). Almost all of them

grew up in poor agrarian families and were from a young age made aware of the value of hard work. Their adult lives have also been characterised by gruelling work. For example Anna marvels over her ability to provide for her children through heroically hard graft:

At that time it was possible to work overtime, countless nights I came home at 2 o'clock in the morning, in order to sleep barely 2 hours, soon after 5 am I had to be on my way to my own shift. Today this is forbidden.

Thus the core identity for the older narrators is that of mothers who have sacrificed themselves to provide for their children, which is connected to their focus on the material aspects of bringing up children.

### *Single Independent Women*

The younger narrators combine their identity as mothers with that of the modern independent single woman. For example Ulla devotes more space to telling the reader why she decided to divorce her husband and how the process came about than to describing what life has been like as a lone mother:

I think there were a thousand different reasons for why our marriage crashed: one grows apart from one another, and when one is from the start different there is soon nothing one shares and soon one has nothing to say to each other. We had such different views of the world, of life and how it should be lived, and this is mirrored in everyday situations leading continuously to a number of different conflicts. (Ulla)

She then discusses at length the various pros and cons of her divorce. Ulla thus describes a married *woman* becoming a single woman, not a married *mother* becoming a lone mother. What she says about being a lone mother pales in comparison. She says of her children that “the divorce and the absence of a male role model have affected them”.

Some of the narrators also employ a counter-narrative of lone motherhood. In these life stories, the period of lone motherhood coincides with the period when the writers ‘find themselves’, gain independence and start living the life they want. Consequently, they are able to assign a positive value to being a lone mother. As Susanna says:

Financially times are harder, but I feel richer. I can pick raspberries for breakfast - fetch the newspaper from the mail box, go to the fence and talk to people. I love my house and my life right now.

These differences reflect the rising general standard of living that Finland has experienced in the post-war period, as well as women's increased autonomy.

## **Conclusions**

The two cohorts of narrators construct their identities in both similar and different ways. Both employ the narrative of motherhood to their advantage, the older narrators focusing on their ability to provide for their children financially, while the younger narrators approach motherhood from a psychological perspective, telling of how they have ensured their children's psychological well-being by providing a stable environment for them to grow up in. The dominant narratives on lone motherhood that the older and younger narrators position themselves against are also different. The older narrators portray a stigmatised lone mother, one who had overstepped moral boundaries relating to sexuality and marriage, but one whose motherhood was not questioned. The younger narrators do not specify the prejudice they have encountered, but there is an underlying sense of continuing to fight against stigma. It appears that while contemporary norms afford the younger narrators greater 'freedoms' in relation to their sexuality and marital status, they sense that their ability to be good mothers is questioned.

The place of lone motherhood in narrative identity is thus to a great extent dependent on personal, social and historical context. The older writers can perhaps surprisingly take greater pride in their achievements. Although they experienced lone motherhood in a highly stigmatizing social context, the expectations of lone mothers were different. Beyond the stigma, there seems to have been little questioning of their abilities as mothers, the greatest fear being over their ability to provide for their children materially. The older lone mothers in this study believe they have been highly successful in this and can therefore present their lone motherhood as unequivocally successful (cf. May, 2003 on the effect that the passing of time has on how lone motherhood is recounted). The younger narrators, on the other hand, have experienced lone motherhood in a climate where the greatest fear is that the children of lone mothers are harmed on a psychological and thus more hidden level. The nature of this potential harm is such that it is impossible to predict when it may manifest itself. Thus the younger narrators cannot be sure, however balanced and happy their children seem now, that they have not been harmed. Thus the identity of lone mother is a treacherous one that they guard themselves against fiercely, perhaps more fiercely than the older narrators do.

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