



Single parenthood, the non-residential parent and co-parenting in Swedish Daily News

Disa Bergnehr & Helena Wahlström Henriksson

To cite this article: Disa Bergnehr & Helena Wahlström Henriksson (2022): Single parenthood, the non-residential parent and co-parenting in Swedish Daily News, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2022.2033295](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2033295)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2033295>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 03 Feb 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 712



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Single parenthood, the non-residential parent and co-parenting in Swedish Daily News

Disa Bergnehr ^a and Helena Wahlström Henriksson^b

^aDepartment of Pedagogy and Learning, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden; ^bDepartment of Gender Studies, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s, Swedish family policies have encouraged parents to share their parental obligations equally, and in the 1980s joint legal custody became standard after divorce or separation. Mothers as well as fathers are expected to financially provide for the family and to take part in the everyday care and fostering of the child. This study explores how single parenthood, non-residential parents and co-parenting play out and become conventionalized in daily news in this national context. The material consists of articles that mention single parenthood and “the other parent” from the four most widely read newspapers published in the period 2010–2019. The analytical focus has been on the written language and what is spelled out, alluded to or ignored, and dominant and less dominant representations. The results show that there are contrasting depictions of mothers and fathers. While the mother as a single parent, co-parent and non-residential parent overall is represented as good and attentive, the father is more of a split figure. He recurrently comes across as absent and negligent as the non-residential parent, but as committed and involved as the primary parent or co-parent with joint residential custody.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 May 2021
Revised 17 January 2022
Accepted 19 January 2022

KEYWORDS

Joint custody; shared parenting; textual analysis; scandinavia

Introduction

In North America and many European countries divorce and separation in families with minor children have increased since the 1970s, resulting in growing numbers of non-residential parents and shared parenting arrangements (Laura Bernardi, Dimitri Mortelmans and Ornella Larenza 2018). With this increase, the phenomena of co-parenting and non-residential parents have gained more public and political attention, and since the primary, residential parent in most cases and countries is the mother, fathers’ involvement or lack thereof is what has been mostly discussed (Helena Bergman and Barbara Hobson 2002). Policies across Europe and North America have encouraged non-residential fathers to contribute to the financial provision as well as the care of the child, and absentee fathers have been the subject of debate (Edwards Rosalind, Andrea Doucet and Frank F. Furstenberg 2009; Jane Lewis 2002; Bren Neale 2016; Tracey Reynolds 2009). However, it has been stressed that it is hard to estimate parental

CONTACT Disa Bergnehr  disa.bergnehr@lnu.se  Department of Pedagogy and Learning, Linnaeus University, 351 95 Växjö, Sweden.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

involvement only from residential status—a non-residential parent can be very involved in the daily care, and may be of great emotional and financial support both to the children and the other parent (Andrea Doucet 2015; Bren Neale and Laura Davies 2015).

The present study examines news material in a national context where family policies since the 1960s have encouraged parents to share their parental obligations equally. In Sweden, both mother and father should provide for the child through paid labor and should engage in childcare and domestic work (Michael Wells and Disa Bergnehr 2014; Anne Skevik 2006). This shared parenting norm was stressed in the mid-1980s, when joint legal custody after divorce or separation became standard, as a way to encourage men's involvement in childrearing (Bergman et al. 2002). Although conclusions cannot be drawn on parental commitment exclusively by measuring the residential arrangement (Neale 2016), that is, with which parent the child resides, it tells us something about who is responsible for the everyday upbringing of the child. In contemporary Sweden, many fathers are active in their children's lives after divorce or separation, considering that close to one third of the children (0–17 years of age) of divorced or separated parents share their living time equally between the two parental households. However, the official statistics suggest that mothers in general take a larger share of the parental daily duties since close to 60% of the children reside only or most of the time with the mother, while approximately 15% reside only or most of the time with the father (Statistics Sweden 2018).¹

It has previously been argued that since most Swedish single mothers provide for themselves through paid labor, and hence are taxpayers, they have not been politically or morally stigmatized as has been the case in other countries (Disa Bergnehr and Berit Åström 2021; Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards 1997; Jane E Lewis 1997). This said, single mothers continue to be at risk of poverty, and approximately 20% are dependent on social assistance while separated/divorce fathers generally are more well-off (Hugo Stranz and Stefan Wiklund 2011).

Worth noting is that joint *legal* custody is the stipulated norm in Sweden, and consequently parents typically share guardianship and have to agree upon matters pertaining to the child. It has been argued that joint legal custody provides disproportionate rights and powers to non-residential parents (Barnombudsmannen 2005; Jenny Westerstrand and Maja Ahrman 2018). The policy has also been criticized for assuming that parents can agree on the best interests of the child when, on the contrary, divorce and separation are often caused by disagreements, and may lead to recurring conflicts about the upbringing of the offspring (Bergman et al. 2002). Current figures from the Family Law and Parental Support Authority show that many parents seek support by the social services to solve disagreements, and statistics suggest that conflicts about legal custody, residency and the right for the non-residential parent to spend time with the child are rather common (Myndigheten för familjerätt och föräldraskapsstöd 2020).

In this Swedish national context, where joint legal custody is common practice and shared parenting is the policy norm, it is interesting to explore how single parenthood, non-residential parents and co-parenting are represented and reported about (or not) in the media. The present study thus analyses how single mothers/fathers, non-residential mothers/fathers and co-parenting come across in the four most read daily newspapers with national circulation (*Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen* and *Svenska Dagbladet*). In Sweden, newspaper readership is quite substantive with almost 50% of the population reading an evening

paper several times a week and close to 50% subscribing to a morning paper (Johan Martinsson and Ulrika Andersson 2019). The morning papers are more connected to a middle-class readership and the tabloids to the working class but there are also overlaps.

The study of news media representations

News is produced to be newsworthy and to gain the attention of the (potential) readership; an event “must become a ‘story’ before it can become a communicative event”—it must take the form of a message “in its passage from source to receiver” (Stuart Hall and David Morley 2019, 258–259). News media claim to represent reality. However, it has been argued that news often misleads, trivializes and sensationalizes, that it reports crises and bad news rather than what works. Journalists and editors represent the particular phenomenon in ways they believe will sell—they dramatize the story—and are prone to focus more on personal stories than social structures and political decision-making (Bob Franklin 1999).

It has also been argued that the media cultivate political images that reproduce the cultural order and prevents social change. Representations do “ideological work”, and the media tend to reinforce, for instance, gendered stereotypes (Carter Cynthia, Linda Steiner and Lisa McLaughlin 2014). The present study focuses on parenthood, and parenthood is highly gendered, that is, expectations on parents and meanings of being a parent differ between women and men in most societies (e.g., Disa Bergnehr 2008). Consequently, it is important to regard how “media images and representations intertwine with political and social ideologies” (Margaret Gallagher 2014, 27) to convey particular messages about single parents. Symbols, such as “single mother”, signify nothing by themselves but acquire meaning only in relation to other symbols, such as “coupled mother”, “single father” or “the other parent”. However, meanings are never fixed but can vary and change depending on the “rules and conventions which govern their combination” (Hall and Morley 2019, 265). Furthermore, the media “operate to disseminate particular connotative codes, classificatory schemes, and forms of representation that together constitute the dominant maps of meaning of a culture” (Hall et al. 2019, 252). As such, the media performs “their ideological labor in the selective construction of the cultural lexicon”, that is: the media “draw on a limited range of explanatory repertoires and make ‘preferred’ meanings within the framework of the dominant ideologies of the day” (Hall et al. 2019, 252).

Although meanings are never fixed, they are ordered, and certain meanings/interpretations are more “preferred” or common than others—they dominate. Dominant ways to encode a message (as journalists and editors do), tell us about how the readership (is expected to) decode the message, and thus something about cultural narratives and common sense understandings of the phenomenon (Hall et al. 2019). In this study, we scrutinize understandings and encoded messages about what single parenthood is and is not in relation to the other (co-/absent/dead) parent, and how it intersects with other signifying codes such as gender and financial means.

Parents, co-parents and non-residential parents in previous media research

Studies of co-parenting, of “the other” non-residential parent, and the relationship between divorced/separated parents are scarce in news media research in Sweden and elsewhere. There is quite an extensive body of work on how mothers figure in news, but

such work focuses mostly on coupled mothers and analyzes mothers and fathers separately rather than as co-parents. There is also plenty of research on how coupled mothers and fathers are represented in different media, such as parent magazines, self-help books, novels, film and television, but there is less on single parenthood, and on single fathers in particular (for an overview, see Disa Bergnehr and Berit Berit Åström 2021). Below, we provide a brief overview of some extant work.

Research on mothers suggests that they are much vilified and deprecated in popular culture (e.g., Rebecca Feasey 2012; Jacqueline Rose 2018), particularly poor (single) mothers (Berit Åström and Disa Bergnehr 2021), but there are also representations that challenge such depictions, for coupled and single mothers alike, where mothers may deviate from the “good mother” norm but nevertheless are depicted in part favorably (e.g., Kim Allen, Imogen Tyler and Sara De Benedictis 2014; Suzanna Danuta Walters and Laura Harrison 2014; Janet Fink 2011; Louise FitzGerald and Melanie Williams 2013; Natasha Howard 2016; Heather L. Hundley and Sara E. Hayden 2016). In material such as newspapers, magazines and self-help books, coupled mothers and single mothers are generally represented in relation to how their behaviors and practices affect the child’s development and learning (Sharon Hays 1996; Berit Åström 2021), while studies on coupled fathers are prone to investigate to what extent and in what ways the fathers are involved in the child’s upbringing (Ralph LaRossa 1997, Ralph LaRossa 2004; Melissa A. Milkie and Kathleen E. Denny 2014; Lupton Deborah and Lesley Barclay 1997; Melissa Milkie and Kathleen Denny 2014; Glenda Wall and Stephanie Arnold 2007).

Explicit analyses of the co-parent or non-residential parent in single parent studies are scant, but there are examples, such as Marcin Filipowicz 2021 exploration of single mothers in Czech prose, where the ex-partner/father is recurrently represented as absent, uninvolved and failing both child and mother. Film and television studies provide varying images of the single parent as well as the (potential) co-parent. As FitzGerald et al. (2013) observe, the blockbuster film *Mamma Mia* (director Phyllida Lloyd, premiere 2008) depicts the single mother as competent, self-providing, with an extensive social network and a close relationship to her daughter. However, it can be stated that she is also represented as irresponsible since she does not know who the father of her child is. All the same, the long-term absent father (unaware of his child and thus unable to commit) is suddenly present and wants to be involved. The romantic comedy ends with a happily reunited family with a loving partner and three committed fathers.

The absent or dead mother is a prominent figure in popular culture (Berit Åström 2017). In Berit Åström 2015 of the BBC serial *Single Father*, the deceased mother is presented as having been a bad mother; the single father soon finds a new romantic partner to replace her, and thus the mother’s death appears to have benefited the children’s and father’s lives rather than having caused sorrow and loss. The short period of single fatherhood is thus soon replaced by a harmonious nuclear family life. As Åström (2015, 2017) and Joanna Joanna Wilson-Scott 2020 show, the absent or dead mother can have great importance for the plot, and for how the single father is represented. This resembles Jennifer Turchi and Lauren Bernabo 2020 study of single father representations in American television, with the difference that Turchi and Bernabo do not focus on widowers. Their study demonstrates that the single father, through his experience of becoming the primary parent, develops into an involved, attentive father, who strives to protect his children from his conflicts with the mother, and/or her negligence; the mother is vilified while the single father is depicted favorably.

As this brief survey of previous research illustrates, some work has been done on representations of “the other” parent in film, television and prose literature. This work shows that in these genres the other parent is often represented as dead, absent, or unwilling/incapable to commit to his or her parental duties. To our knowledge, there is no research that explicitly explores how single parents and (potential) co-parents, and the sharing (or not sharing) of parental duties are represented in daily news.

Material and Method

The material that is analyzed in the present study was collected from the paper editions of the two largest daily morning papers *Dagens Nyheter* (DN; liberal) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD; conservative), and the two largest evening papers/tabloids: *Aftonbladet* (social-democratic) and *Expressen* (liberal) during 2010–2019. Initial searches via the digital archive Retriever/Mediarkivet were based on variations on *single mother* and *single father* (Sw. *ensamstående/ensam/single/solo mamma/mor/moder/pappa/far/fader/förälder*), in singular and plural forms. Double hits, TV tabloids, and articles about national contexts other than Sweden were excluded. Single parents were mentioned in news notes, editorials, essays, debate pieces and obituaries, and we could not note any differences in this regard between the different dailies.

Searches on single mothers over the ten years generated thousands of hits while searches for single fathers yielded a few hundred. In order to have a balanced sample to analyze qualitatively, with a near equal number of articles focused on single mothers and single fathers, single mother articles from 2015–2017 and single father articles from 2010–2019 were included in the final sample. The years for the single mother articles were selected since these provided a comparatively large number of hits for articles that mentioned the other parent. This was mainly due to the debate that preceded and followed the 2016 law that permitted single women’s use of subsidized public healthcare services in order to become pregnant with the assistance of reproductive technologies (*solo mothers*). The articles on solo mothers comprise close to one quarter (N = 8) of the articles focusing on single mothers.

In total 60 articles remained and were selected for analysis after the single mother and single father articles were coded for mentions of the other parent. None of these contained same-sex parents. Out of 245 articles that in some way referred to a single mother in 2015–2017, 34 (14%) mentioned the other parent. Out of these 34 articles, 8 (23,5%) mentioned the father as a co-parent, 18 (53%) referred to an absent father, and 8 (23,5%) focused on solo mothers (that is, single women who conceive with the assistance of reproductive technologies and sperm donors) where the permanent father absence was discussed. During 2010–2019, 78 articles referred to single fathers, and out of these, 26 (33%) mentioned the other parent. Out of these 26 articles, 17 (65%) involved a mother that was represented as a co-parent, 6 (23%) referred to the mother as deceased, and 3 (12%) mentioned the mother as alive but absent and the father being the primary parent.

The sample was initially coded for gender (mother or father focus), financial means (i.e., well-off or poor), ethnicity (foreign or native origin), sexuality (same-sex or heterosexual parents), and reason for single parenthood (i.e., separated/divorced, widower/widow or single parent by choice). This was followed by the coding of parental commitment, using the categories *co-parent*, that is, the other parent was represented as being involved in

the nurturing and care of the child; and, *absent parent*, which refers to representations of the other parent as having not shared, or not being part of the sharing of parental responsibilities. The absent parent category came to involve the sub-categories *dead mother*, and *never-present father* due to solo motherhood. Not once was the father's death brought up as being the cause of single motherhood, and not once was a single father referred to as a single father by choice (i.e., permanently alone as the only original or biological parent through adoption or surrogacy). The coding resulted in themes concerning how the single parent and the other parent, and their potential collaboration, were represented, which showed that gender intersected with socioeconomic status, but that age and race/ethnicity/national origin were very seldom referenced.

In the analysis, we explore how the "other parent" is made "other": how "difference is marked" (Stuart Hall 2013, 219); how she or he is stereotyped and made different and/or similar to the primary parent or co-parent. Our focus has been on the text, the written language, and what is spelled out or alluded to but also on what is ignored and not referred to. We have studied how the representations "accumulate meanings, or play off their meanings against one another" and how "similar representational practices and figures [are] being repeated" (Hall 2013, 222). In the concluding discussion, we contextualize and discuss the results in relation to Swedish policy ideals about shared parenting.

Results

Shared parenting and the other parent are seldom brought up in the single parenthood news articles overall, but when they are, the gendered contrast is stark. In the articles that include some reference to the other parent, a *co-parent* is mentioned or alluded to in 24% of the single mother articles but in 65% of the single father articles. The other parent as a father is represented as *absent* in 76% of the single mother articles: absent due to divorce or separation in 53%, and absent due to solo motherhood in 24% of the articles. The mother is depicted as absent, most often due to death, in 35% of the single father articles.

The results section is divided into two parts; the first analyses the articles that focus on single mothers, and the second analyses the articles where the single father is in focus.

Single mothers and mostly absent fathers

The poor mother and negligent father

Poverty is commonly alluded to in the articles focusing on single mothers (N = 18/34), and in such news the mother comes across as lonely in her parental duties and endeavors (see also Disa Bergnehr and Helena Wahlström Henriksson 2021). When the other parent, always a father, is mentioned it is in personal stories of grown children who are often celebrities of some kind. The following example illustrates a recurrent narrative, when a successful athlete is interviewed about her childhood and life:

Although her childhood (...) was secure and safe, it was far from easy, with many siblings and only [the mother's] salary from her work in elder care. An absent father put the family in financial hardship. – He chose not to care about us, so only my mother was there to care for us since we were young. I deeply appreciate, and I am proud of, my mum who had the energy [to care] for so many children. (*Aftonbladet*, February 14 2015)

Here, the father “chose not to care”, leaving all the costs and care to the mother. The mother comes across as very much alone in her parental responsibilities, but as hard-working, capable, and accountable.

Another example of a father who opted out and failed his children appears in an article about a popular male singer who talks about a period of mental instability due to his father’s absence. Mental issues due to father absence also occurs in other articles where famous men are interviewed. In this particular piece, the man is quoted saying: “I think there is a hole that needs to be filled with affirmation. It has to do with my dad taking off” (*Aftonbladet*, March 7, 2016).

In these (grown) children’s narratives, pain, sorrow, and disappointment are voiced in relation to the absent father. A successful woman in the music business is quoted as stating: “[My father] did not accept his parental responsibility. I have no contact with him. He is a dickhead” (*Expressen*, December 15, 2017). The mother, on the other hand, is recurrently praised and presented as a role model, such as in this quote from an article on an influential blogger: “Your mother was the sole provider for you and your siblings, have you taken after her in your ambition?—Very much so, definitely. She worked all the time. (...) Where was dad?—Not with us, anyway” (*Expressen*, April 17, 2015).

The well-off mother and absent father

Although many articles that refer to childhood memories of growing up with a single mother mention financial hardship and tough times, there are other ways to represent the single mother. An in-depth piece about a celebrity artist pictures a happy childhood with no mention of straitened circumstances although the father left the mother during pregnancy for another woman: “But mother and child did well without him”. Here, the mother’s support is emphasized, primarily with a focus on emotional aspects rather than putting food on the table: “She supported me in all that I liked, to show-off, to sew clothes. She gave me the feeling that everything about me was good” (*SvD* June 26, 2016). This childhood comes across as being more of a middle-class, well-off childhood, and deviates from the articles where the father’s absence is related to poverty and hard times for the mother and the children.

The emphasis on emotional support rather than financial problems is also found in articles on solo motherhood via assisted reproductive technologies (N = 8/34). The permanent lack of another (biological) parent due to single motherhood by choice via adoption or assisted reproductive technologies is connected to middle-class family life in this material. Rather than financial difficulties, such news raises emotional issues and identity concerns for the mother and child due to the father’s absence. The role and importance of the father is debated and challenged, and most pieces are based on in-depth interviews with solo mothers. One of these women had written a book about her transition to motherhood through assisted reproductive technologies that was reviewed in several newspapers in texts where she was also interviewed. In these pieces, she argues against the nuclear, two-parent family, and raises the argument that reoccurs in other articles on solo motherhood, i.e. that a father is not a crucial figure for the child: “I believe that children have the right to responsible adults. A parent must provide safety, and be present and loving. I believe that is more important than having a father”

(*Aftonbladet*, March 24, 2016). With these wordings, where the importance of “responsible”, “present” and loving’ parents is stressed and contrasted with the nuclear family and the importance of a father, the text challenges other articles where debaters oppose single women’s access to insemination and in vitro fertilization by emphasizing children’s rights to a father.

Another example is a solo mother being quoted as saying: “It is impossible to miss something you never had. This means that children who never had a father face no risk of missing him, unlike children who were born into a two-parent family but where the father disappears and is out of the picture” (*DN*, October 16, 2015). This quote illustrates how the dominant message that “traditional” single motherhood is the result of fathers leaving their families is used to justify solo motherhood—solo motherhood becomes a way to spare the child the agony of longing for a feckless father.

However, there is also a different discourse in the solo mother articles about the absent father (and partner) that idealizes the nuclear family arrangement, and depicts solo motherhood as the second best choice. For example in one article, a solo mother was quoted: “This [entering solo motherhood] is not about not wanting to have a father [to your child], it’s just how life turned out. Like, women do this because they have lost faith in ever meeting someone to have a child with” (*SvD*, January 16, 2016). Such statements, where the two-parent family is presented as the ideal, recur but can appear alongside statements which affirm that a mother and her child will do fine without a partner/father. In this way, the message in the text affirms both the nuclear family arrangement and the solo mother family, based on different rationales.

The well-off mother with a co-parent

The few articles (N = 4/34) where the father comes across as a present, involved co-parent are generally in-depth interviews with well-off career women or celebrities that have joint legal and residential custody with the father. These single mothers appear busy, capable, and resourceful with social networks and (potential) new partners. They juggle a career with involved, committed, “half-time” motherhood. The other parent, the father, is sometimes only implicitly referred to, as in the following example. Here, a famous restaurant owner is asked how she manages to combine running the business with being a single mother, and she answers:

‘Because when I’m with my son, then I’m with my son, and I don’t answer my mobile at these times and I don’t read e-mails.’ Instead, she rises extra early in the morning *the weeks when her son is at her place*, and works at the computer before he wakes up and late at night when he is in bed. (*SvD* July 3 2015; emphasis added)

This is an example of an article where the co-parenting is mentioned implicitly. In the text per se, the father is absent, but he is a background figure with whom the child spends every second week. There appear to be no problems connected to single motherhood and co-parenting except possibly a lack of time, which, however, can be and is solved.

The co-parenting arrangement is in some texts even presented as having resulted in new possibilities and more time for children, work, and leisure, as in another feature article where a well-off career woman, recently divorced, is interviewed. The text goes:

She thinks her life focusing on the children half of the time and on herself the other half is perfect. – I know it may sound provocative, but right now, life is optimal. (...) The parents share equally the time the children stay with them. – It may take some time before my ex-husband and I can socialize, but we have put together a great routine for the children, which is what is most important in our relationship. (*DN*, December 1 2017)

The article from which this quote is taken contains the story of being left by the man and hardships concerned with breaking up in terms of emotional stress, but this turns into the narrative of the divorce resulting in a happy, new beginning, with a co-parenting arrangement that runs smoothly and the woman getting more time for friends and leisure time activities. Thus, this rare depiction of single motherhood deviates substantially from the recurring articles where the single mother is poor, strives to put food on the table, and is lonely in her parental responsibilities since the father has left and is uncommitted and absent. Possibly, the more common way to represent single motherhood is what is implicitly referred to in the quotation above when the middle-class woman notes that she is very positive about her new life as a divorcee, and that this “may sound provocative”.

Single fathers and mostly co-parenting mothers

The well-off father with a shared parenting arrangement

A recurring way to represent the father in the articles that focus on single fathers is a middle-class father who shares the parental duties with the mother. The single father comes across as educated, affluent, committed, and child-centered. Life after divorce/separation is depicted similarly to how it is represented in the rare articles about middle-class, career-oriented single mothers: with shared parenting and joint residential custody. One example is the following quote from an in-depth piece with a well-known lawyer:

My children’s mother and I separated (...) and I’ve obtained an apartment in the same neighborhood so that my son and daughter can continue to have close contact with both parents. When I’m not traveling [for work], I try to have the children every second week. (*Expressen*, October 24 2013)

The common message in many of the single father articles is that the father at least tries to share the care of the children with the mother, and organizes his work and spare time around the needs and activities of his offspring. The parents cooperate smoothly, and adjust to one another, for instance by living in the same neighbourhood and by being flexible regarding which days they are responsible for the children. Thus, in the single father articles the relationship between the parents, and the sharing of parental duties, is represented much in accordance with the political norms that, for decades, have encouraged co-parenting and involved fathers (Bergman et al. 2002; Wells et al. 2014).

The following quote is yet another example of how co-parenting often figures in the articles that focus on single fathers. It is seen as uncomplicated and based on an amicable relationship between the parents where the child’s best interest is a mutual concern. A famous former athlete has divorced and takes care of his eight year-old son by himself every second week, and is quoted as saying:

Me and [my ex-wife] are friends, and we live close to each other. I can be grumpy and stubborn at times, but in this case there is no reason to fall out. We do well as friends, and above all, we do well together when it comes to [the son], that's what's most important. (*Aftonbladet*, August 4 2013)

Not once in the single father articles are conflicts between the parents brought up or alluded to. In one article, a famous actor describes his divorce as “a dark time” but collaboration for the sake of the children with his ex-wife is stressed, such as celebrating Christmases and birthdays together (*Aftonbladet*, August 11, 2016).

The father feeling alone—the downside of co-parenting

Although the relationship with the mother overall is described as unproblematic and characterized by co-operation in the best interests of the child, some single father articles mention downsides of co-parenting, where fathers talk about feelings of loneliness or about feeling bad for not being there during the days/weeks the children stay with the mothers. One father describes an arrangement where the children stay half the week with him, half the week with the mother, and justifies this by explaining “You don't miss them [the children] so much since there is not much time until you see them again” (*DN*, April 26, 2010). Another father, who has his child every second week, is quoted as saying: “Sometimes I feel bad because I'm not around all the time” (*SvD*, November 13, 2011). Also, an essay about shared parenting over Christmas represents fathers as feeling potentially lonely at times, missing their children: “The day before Christmas Eve, single fathers wave bye-bye to their children and see them only two days later. On Christmas Eve, they wake up lonely in a silent house” (*Aftonbladet*, December 15, 2011). Thus, in the single father articles, it is being away from the children that is brought up as being the problem with co-parenting, while any (potential) conflicts with the mother are unmentioned. There is no equivalent narrative in the articles focused on single mothers, and hence no representation of a mother's voice speaking of longing or of guilt.

The father as the primary parent

In the comparatively few articles that depict the single father as the primary parent (N = 9/26), the mother is never represented as failing her children. When interviewed about being a mother who after the divorce did not have her child reside with her one elderly woman was quoted: “I never abandoned my son, I was always there for him” (*DN*, May 28, 2010). Here, compared to how the father is represented in many of the articles focusing on single mothers—negligent and feckless—the non-residential mother comes across as a committed, engaged co-parent. In another article, a man, 33 years old, tells the story of his childhood with his single father. This man's mother was absent for the first years of his life, and at times he wished that she had been there for him, and was also jealous of friends for having siblings. But he is quoted as saying that “I had a great childhood” and “always felt that I was the most important thing for [my father]”, and he refers to having aunties and other relatives that provided great support and gave him much attention (*Expressen*, November 9, 2013). Thus, the mother's absence is not brought up as being problematic, and she is not condemned, which stands in stark contrast to how the absent fathers are represented.

Another gendered difference between representations is that in the articles on single fathers, the fathers commonly come across as having supportive social networks. In many of the articles focusing on single mothers, on the other hand, motherhood appears to be a lonely endeavor. Just one single father article deviates from this narrative in that it focuses on the father's struggle to keep up his paid job while also caring for his disabled child, being on his own. This one article has similarities with the poor single mother articles in that single parenthood is connected to (potential) financial straits, and represented as hard, lonely, and time- and energy-consuming.

Concluding discussion

Despite decades of social policies and welfare reforms that have encouraged and promoted men's and women's sharing of parental duties, also after divorce or separation (Bergman et al. 2002; Wells et al. 2014), the results here show that single mothers and their (potential) co-parents (i.e., the fathers) are depicted in stark contrast to single fathers and their (potential) co-parents (i.e., the mothers): they are represented differently along lines of gender and material means. In the single mother articles, the poor mother is recurrently represented as having been left alone with no support from the father, while the middle-class single mother co-parents with the father, unless she is a single mother by choice who entered parenthood on the premise that the biological father would never be present. In the single father articles, the dominant image is that of a middle-class father who co-parents with the mother in an uncomplicated, conflict-free manner. In articles where he is said to be the only (primary) parent, the mother is often dead.

In this Swedish news material, collected from four newspapers during a decade, the mother is depicted as a good, committed parent, both as a single mother and as the "other parent". Overall, she does not come across as absent as long as she is alive (except in three articles) nor as negligent or failing, which is a recurring depiction in media and popular culture from other national contexts (Rose 2018; Turchi et al. 2020; Åström 2015, 2017). The mother is represented as good and attentive to the children's needs, also when poor and hardworking, and comes across as self-providing through paid employment. Not once in the material is the single mother (or single father) represented as being dependent on the social assistance, although 20% of the single mothers in Sweden are welfare recipients (Stranz et al. 2011). The image of the self-providing, present, attentive mother appears to have become "conventionalized" in articles where she is poor and hardworking—perhaps it has become a "perfect myth" of single motherhood although not the only "myth" (Hall et al. 2019, 261). The poor single mother is typically represented in ways that contradict the Swedish ideals of shared parenting in that she is poor and alone due to a feckless, failing father to her children.

The father, when he figures as "the other parent" in articles that focus on single mothers is thus dominantly represented in negative terms; he is made "other" (Hall 2013), that is, a very different figure from the Swedish ideal of committed fatherhood (Bergman et al. 2002). However, the uninvolved father that opts out from his parental responsibilities is mentioned only in pieces where adults are interviewed about their childhood, but not once in news notes, editorials, essays, debate pieces or any piece where the mother's own voice is cited. Nor is the absentee father referred to as a societal problem, as has been the case in Anglo-Saxon nations (Edwards et al. 2009; Lewis 2002;

Neale 2016). The fact that the failing father is not represented as a problem in the daily news indicates that he is not a figure that is used in political and public arguments about increased responsibility-taking by non-residential parents. Instead, the feckless father is a cultural stereotype that is used to “dramatize” celebrities’ childhoods, in narratives that emphasize happy endings to earlier struggles. In this way, the gendered social order is maintained through the ideological work of the news texts (Gallagher 2014): some single mothers’ poverty and need of support are indeed mentioned, but not problematized in relation to the father’s absence as has been the case in other national contexts. On the contrary, in some texts the father comes across as the one who loses out in the shared parenting arrangement—for instance by not having his children over Christmas—although there is no mentioning of conflicts between parents.

The Swedish joint legal custody norm that influences all divorced/separated parents and their children, presumes co-operation and amicable relationships between the parents (Bergman et al. 2002). This presumption, and ideal, seems to affect the discourse on single parenthood in Swedish newspapers because conflicts between the parents are generally not mentioned, despite the fact that disputes over issues such as residential custody and living arrangements are comparatively common (Myndigheten för familjerätt och föräldraskapsstöd 2020). As such, the news on single parenthood and co-parenting provides “cultural myths” (Hall 2013) that do not represent reality. It risks to hide the fact that some parents, most often mothers, experience their own and their children’s lives being restricted because of the disproportionate rights and powers of non-residential parents (Barnombudsmannen 2005; Westerstrand et al. 2018).

While the mother in our material is represented only in positive terms when it comes to being a mother, also in articles where she is depicted as poor, the father is more explicitly a “split figure” (Hall 2013). In the articles that focus on single fathers, he is depicted as good and committed, dedicated to the child and daily chores, and he collaborates smoothly with the mother, in accordance with the political norm of shared parenting (Bergman et al. 2002; Wells et al. 2014). In *some* articles on solo motherhood it is argued that a father is essential for the child’s development and wellbeing. However, in several articles focusing on single mothers, the father is represented as absent, negligent and unreliable. Thus, in the material overall, he is more of a contested, negotiated, unfixed image compared to the mother.

Previous research supports the image of the father as a “split figure” in that he, in media, popular culture and politics, is represented as failing and feckless or of prime significance for the child’s development and well-being (Edwards et al. 2009; Barbara Hobson 2002; Helena Wahlström 2010; Neale 2016; Åström et al. 2021). Extant research also shows that mothers—single or not—are represented as essential but also vilified as being possibly harmful to their children (Feasy 2012; Rose 2018), particularly if they are single mothers (Åström 2021). In this study, the mother as the other parent is never explicitly referred to as being essential for the child, in the way fathers are in some of the articles on solo motherhood. Possibly, the mother’s omnipresence for the child is implicitly presumed since she generally is represented as an ever-present, benevolent figure. We suggest that future research on single parenthood should focus more than previously on the relationship between the parents, that is, on non-residential parents and co-parenting.

Here, we have chosen to analyze national dailies, but the question remains of whether contradictory, varying representations would have appeared in the local press or other media forms. Our study has its limitations, and risks producing “simplified assumptions” about what representations the media generate. We acknowledge that contemporary media offer great variety with “internal contradictions” (Hall et al. 2019, 248), depending on genre, material, and national context. But dominant conventions about what single motherhood and fatherhood entail also appear across nations and media genres (Åström et al. 2021) as “preferred messages” and “unspoken presumptions” (Hall et al. 2019, 252), some of which we have illustrated here.

Note

1. Governmental stipulations suggest that the non-residential parent must pay child support; or in the case of equally shared residential custody, that child support is paid by one parent if s/he is much better-off than the other.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, under Grant P19-0790:1.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Riksbankens jubileumsfond [P19-0790:1].

Notes on contributors

Disa Bergnehr is Professor of Education at the Department of Pedagogy and Learning, Linnaeus University, and Associate Professor in Child Studies. Her main current research interests are representations of single parenthood, resettlement strategies of immigrant parents and youth, schooling and parenting in disadvantaged areas, school health services, school-home relations, family policies, and children’s and parents’ health and well-being.

Helena Wahlström Henriksson is Professor of Gender Studies, Uppsala University, and Associate Professor in American Literature. Her main current research interests are feminist cultural studies, studies of family and kinship, literary, cinematic and news media representations of parenthood and parent-child relations, single parents, and parenting over the life course. She was the coordinator of the Swedish Network for Family and Kinship Studies 2014–2019.

ORCID

Disa Bergnehr  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6357-6491>

References

- Allen, Kim, Imogen Tyler, and Sara De Benedictis. 2014. "Thinking with 'White Dee': The Gender Politics of 'Austerity Porn'." *Sociological Research Online* 19 (3): 2. doi:10.5153/sro.3439.
- Åström, Berit. 2015. "The Symbolic Annihilation of Mothers in Popular Culture: *The Single Father* and the Death of the Mother." *Feminist Media Studies* 15 (4): 593–607. doi:10.1080/14680777.2014.994100.
- Åström, Berit. 2017. *The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination: Missing, Presumed Dead*. London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Åström, Berit. 2021. "Advise Books for Single Mothers Raising Sons: Biology, Culture and Guilt." In *Single Parents: Representations and Resistance in an International Context*, edited by Berit Åström and Disa Bergnehr, 87–109. London/New York: PalgraveMacmillan.
- Åström, Berit, and Disa Bergnehr. 2021. *Single Parents: Representations and Resistance in an International Context*. London/New York: PalgraveMacmillan.
- Barnombudsmannen. 2005. *Barnets Bästa. Barnombudsmannens Synpunkter På Frågor Om Vårdnad, Boende Och Umgänge. Barnombudsmannen Rapporterar BR2005:06*. Stockholm: Barnombudsmannen.
- Bergman, Helena, and Barbara Hobson. 2002. "Compulsory Fatherhood: The Coding of Fatherhood in the Swedish Welfare State." In *Making Men into Fathers: Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood*, edited by Barbara Hobson, 92–124. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bergnehr, Disa. 2008. *Timing Parenthood: Family, Independence and Ideals of Life*. Linköping: Linköping University.
- Bergnehr, Disa, and Berit Åström. 2021. "Introduction." In *Single Parents: Representations and Resistance in an International Context*, edited by Berit Åström and Disa Bergnehr, 1–28. London/New York: PalgraveMacmillan.
- Bergnehr, Disa, and Helena Wahlström Henriksson. 2021. "Hardworking Women: Representations of Lone Mothers in the Swedish Daily Press." *Feminist Media Studies* 21 (1): 132–146. doi:10.1080/14680777.2019.1704815.
- Bernardi, Laura, Dimitri Mortelmans, and Ornella Larenza. 2018. "Changing Lone Parents – Changing Life Course." In *Lone Parenthood in the Life Course*, edited by Laura Bernardi and Dimitri Mortelmans, 1–26. Springer Open.
- Cynthia, Carter, Linda Steiner, and Lisa McLaughlin. 2014. "Introduction: Re-imagining Media and Gender." In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*, edited by Cynthia Carter, Linda Steiner, and Lisa McLaughlin, 1–19. London and New York: Routledge.
- Deborah, Lupton, and Lesley Barclay. 1997. *Constructing Fatherhood: Discourses and Experiences*. London: Sage.
- Doucet, Andrea. 2015. "Parental Responsibilities: Dilemmas of Measurement and Gender Equality." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77 (1): 224–242. doi:10.1111/jomf.12148.
- Duncan, Simon, and Rosalind Edwards. 1997. *Single Mothers in an International Context: Mothers or Workers*. London: UCL Press.
- Feasey, Rebecca. 2012. *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives: Motherhood and Television*. London: Anthem Press.
- Filipowicz, Marcin. 2021. "Representations of Single Mothers in Petra Soukupová's Contemporary Czech Prose: Guilty Mothers and Uninvolved Fathers." In *Single Parents: Representations and Resistance in an International Context*, edited by Berit Åström and Disa Bergnehr, 31–49. London/New York: PalgraveMacmillan.
- Fink, Janet. 2011. "For Better or for Worse? the Dilemmas of Unmarried Motherhood in Mid-twentieth-century Popular British Film and Fiction." *Women's History Review* 20 (1): 145–160. doi:10.1080/09612025.2011.536396.
- FitzGerald, Louise, and Melanie Williams. 2013. *Exploring a Cultural Phenomenon. Mamma Mia! the Movie*. London/New York: I.B Tauris.
- Franklin, Bob. 1999. "Introduction: Misleading Messages: The Media and Social Policy." In *Social Policy, the Media and Misrepresentation*, edited by Bob Franklin, 1–13. London and New York: Routledge.

- Gallagher, Margaret. 2014. "Media and the Representation of Gender." In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*, edited by Carter Cynthia, Linda Steiner, and Lisa McLaughlin, 23–31. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hall, Stuart. 2013. "The Spectacle of the 'Other.'" In *Representations. Second Edition*, edited by Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon, 215–287. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Hall, Stuart, and David Morley. 2019. *Essential Essays: Foundations of Cultural Studies*. Vol. 1. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
- Hobson, Barbara. 2002. *Making Men into Fathers: Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Howard, Natasha. 2016. "16 and Pregnant and Black: Challenging and Debunking Stereotypes." In *Mediated Moms: Contemporary Challenges to the Motherhood Myth*, edited by Heather L. Hundley and Sara E. Hayden, 103–122. New York: Peter Lang.
- Hundley, Heather L., and Sara E. Hayden. 2016. *Mediated Moms: Contemporary Challenges to the Motherhood Myth*. New York: Peter Lang.
- LaRossa, Ralph. 1997. *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- LaRossa, Ralph. 2004. "The Culture of Fatherhood in the Fifties: A Closer Look." *Journal of Family History* 29 (1): 47–70. doi:10.1177/0363199003261811.
- Lewis, Jane E. 1997. *Lone Mothers in European Welfare Regimes: Shifting Policy Logics*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Lewis, Jane. 2002. "The Problem of Fathers: Policy and Behaviour in Britain." In *Making Men into Fathers: Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood*, edited by Barbara Hobson, 125–149. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Martinsson, Johan, and Ulrika Andersson. 2019. *Svenska Trender 1986–2018*. Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, SOM-institutet.
- Milkie, Melissa A., and Kathleen E. Denny. 2014. "Changes in the Cultural Model of Father Involvement: Descriptions of Benefits to Fathers, Children and Mothers in *Parents Magazine*, 1926–2006." *Journal of Family Issues* 35 (2): 223–253. doi:10.1177/0192513X12462566.
- Myndigheten för familjerätt och föräldraskapsstöd. 2020. "Statistics on Family Law 2019." *Dnr* 4 (2.5): 999/19.
- Neale, Bren. 2016. "Introduction: Young Fatherhood: Lived Experiences and Policy Challenges." *Social Policy and Society* 15 (1): 75–83. doi:10.1017/S1474746415000536.
- Neale, Bren, and Laura Davies. 2015. "Seeing Young Fathers in a Different Way." *Families, Relationships and Societies* 4 (2): 309–313. doi:10.1332/204674315X14352353233301.
- Reynolds, Tracey. 2009. "Exploring the Absent/Present Dilemma: Black Fathers, Family Relationships, and Social Capital in Britain." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 624 (1): 12–29. doi:10.1177/0002716209334440.
- Rosalind, Edwards, Andrea Doucet, and Frank F. Furstenberg. 2009. "Fathering across Diversity and Adversity: International Perspectives and Policy Interventions." *The Annals of the American Academy* 624: 1–11.
- Rose, Jacqueline. 2018. *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Skevik, Anne. 2006. "Lone Motherhood in the Nordic Countries: Sole Providers in Dual-breadwinner Regimes." In *Politicising Parenthood in Scandinavia: Gender Relations and the Welfare States*, edited by Anne Lise Ellingsaeter and Arnlaug Leira, 241–264. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Statistics Sweden. 2018. Accessed 19 November 2018. <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/levnadsforhallanden/levnadsforhallanden/undersokningarna-av-levnadsforhallanden-ulf-silc/pong/statistiknyhet/barns-boende-2016-2017/>.
- Stranz, Hugo, and Stefan Wiklund. 2011. "'I Välfärdssamhällets Marginal – Om Socialbidragstagande Bland Ensamstående Mödrar Av Svensk Och Utländsk Härkomst.'" *Socialvetenskaplig Tidskrift* 1: 42–62.
- Turchi, Jennifer, and Laurena Bernabo. 2020. "'Mr Mom' No More: Single-father Representations on Television in Primetime Drama and Comedies." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 37 (5): 437–450. doi:10.1080/15295036.2020.1812683.

- Wahlström, Helena. 2010. *New Fathers? Contemporary American Stories of Masculinity, Domesticity, and Kinship*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Wall, Glenda, and Stephanie Arnold. 2007. "How Involved Is Involved Fathering? an Exploration of the Contemporary Culture of Fatherhood." *Gender and Society* 21 (4): 508–527. doi:[10.1177/0891243207304973](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243207304973).
- Walters, Suzanna Danuta, and Laura Harrison. 2014. "Not Ready to Make Nice: Aberrant Mothers in Contemporary Culture." *Feminist Media Studies* 14 (1): 38–55. doi:[10.1080/14680777.2012.742919](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.742919).
- Wells, Michael, and Disa Bergnehr. 2014. "Families and Family Policies in Sweden." In *Handbook of Family Policies across the Globe*, edited by Mihalea Robila, 91–107. New York: Springer.
- Westerstrand, Jenny, and Maja Ahrman. 2018. "Kvinnors Rättigheter Angräps Av En Mörkblå Mansrörelse." *Dagens Nyheter*, edited by DN Debatt, 25 November 2018
- Wilson-Scott, Joanna. 2020. "Both Absent and Omnipresent: The Dead Mother in Fleabag." *Feminist Media Studies* 20 (2): 273–283. doi:[10.1080/14680777.2018.1546207](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1546207).