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Published online: 29 Apr 2024.

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"I'm not a saint": divine motherhood at the intersection of single adoption and disability

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ABSTRACT

This article examines some of the social norms, expectations and prejudices that surround the single adoption of disabled children in the UK. Drawing on interviews with a UK-based single adoptive parent, Lynne, it undertakes an intersectional exploration of the quasi-religious 'saintly adopter' position that is frequently ascribed to her. This analysis is realized through a sociocultural linguistic approach (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), which offers tools for examining how individuals position themselves in relation to local and global identities, experiences and expectations. The article shows that the apparent praise of adopters as saintly figures can have an illegitimating force, since it is rooted in presumptions around certain children being 'helpless', 'damaged', and in need of rescue by 'perfect' parents. The pressures surrounding this position are likely to be felt even more strongly by parents and children who are marginalized in multiple ways, such as Lynne, who is both a single and adoptive parent, and her children, who are both adopted and disabled. Together, intersecting forms of prejudice around adoption, single parenthood and disability can make it difficult for single adopters, and adopters of disabled children, to be seen as valued and legitimate parents in a wider social context.

Introduction

Adoptive families are frequently misrepresented and stigmatized in contemporary society. Everyday media, social expectations and government policies continue to reproduce the normative ideal that only a birth family can be a 'true' family (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007; Jennings et al., 2014), yet conversely, that children need to be rescued from 'impoverished' situations, and placed with parents who are more 'well-resourced' (Briggs, 2003; Davies, 2011). Further, adoptive families that include a disabled child (or children) may experience additional stigma around disabled children being 'spoiled' or 'flawed' (Bunt, 2014; Saville, 2020), and limiting representations of disabled people as either 'charity cases' or a source of 'inspiration' (Abes & Wallace, 2018; Grue, 2016). This article considers how one UK-based single adoptive parent navigates such damaging tropes of adoption, disability and rescue in the context of her everyday life. Drawing on data from my research with nine single, LGBT and/or adoptive parents (Mackenzie, 2023a), it takes one participant, Lynne, as a case study. As a single adopter with two disabled children, Lynne experiences intersecting ideals, expectations and prejudices around adoption, disability and single motherhood. Through analysis of her interview talk, the article draws out the intersecting dimensions that lead Lynne's children to be positioned as 'damaged', and Lynne as the 'saintly adopter' who rescues them.

The analysis is situated within the tradition of sociocultural linguistics, a 'broad interdisciplinary field concerned with the intersection of language, culture and society' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586). Following recent directions in sociocultural linguistic research (e.g. Jones, 2018; Pichler, 2021), this analysis deploys an intersectional approach to understand how different aspects of Lynne's identity and experience act as mutually reinforcing vectors that consolidate the limiting trope of the 'saintly adopter'. It examines how Lynne is positioned by socio-cultural constructions of adoption as the rescue of damaged children, and ableist positionings of disabled people as flawed, and reliant upon the goodwill of non-disabled people. It also considers how religious and socio-moral values can intensify the position of the 'damaged' child and the 'saintly' adopter at this intersection of single parenthood, adoption and disability. These strands are particularly relevant to Lynne's experience, since she is a Christian whose faith is extremely important in her everyday life and parenting practice.

Background: single adoption, 'helpless' children and divine motherhood

Prejudices against single parenthood can intersect with prejudices around gender, sexuality, class and age to produce the 'problematic single mother' (Mackenzie, 2023b). This identity position is stereotypically constructed, in the UK at least, as a young, White, heterosexual, working class woman who is 'economically reliant on the state' (Mackenzie, 2023b, p. 3). For single women who bring children into their lives through donor conception ('solo mums'), or through adoption ('single adoptive mums'), different prejudices can intersect to produce complex and specific brands of stigma. For example, solo mums may be accused of selfishly depriving their child of a father, whilst single adoptive mums can be positioned as lesser women, and pretenders to the parental role (Mackenzie, 2023b). My previous work showed how one solo mum used her relatively privileged position as a middle-aged, White, middle-class woman to distance herself from the stigmatized position of the problematic single mother, and its associated dimensions of age, class and (ir)responsibility. In this article, I consider how one single adoptive mum navigates (and ultimately rejects) a position that seems, at first glance, to represent a stark contrast from the vilified position of the young, working-class single mother: the 'saintly adopter'.

It has been well documented that adoptive parents experience a unique set of challenges in raising their children and navigating their role as parents. For example, they often face social stigma around adoptive parents being 'damaged' due to infertility, being less capable and less authentic parents, and adoption as a 'second-best' route to parenthood (Baden, 2016; Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007; Jennings et al., 2014). Weistra and Luke (2017) have shown that adopters often internalize such stigma, resulting in feelings of inadequacy or inauthenticity. Further, the impact of early-childhood trauma can cause (or intensify) social, learning and mental health difficulties that make life very challenging for adopted children and their families, and support from social, health and educational services is often inadequate or incomplete (Adoption UK, 2021; Mackenzie, 2023a; Weistra & Luke, 2017). Stigma and barriers to support may be intensified for both adults and children who do not meet normative ideals around 'good' parents and children. For example, disabled adults are less likely to even make it through the adoption process, despite it being argued that they may make particularly appropriate adoptive parents (Wates, 2002). Children in care face similar forms of discrimination around the 'good' or 'ideal' child, with healthy White infants tending to be the 'most desired adoptees', whilst Black, older and/or disabled children are seen as 'hard-to-place' (Berkowitz, 2011, p. 110).

Nevertheless, adoption can also be positioned as a uniquely legitimate and 'worthy' route to parenthood (Jociles et al., 2010, p. 256). In Jociles et al.'s (2010) research with 'single mothers by choice' in Spain, they argue that the higher status of adoption in the 'socio-moral hierarchy of values' is related to a sense of religious obligation and morality. Their participants suggested that adoption was seen by some (especially those with strong religious, politically conservative beliefs) as the most worthy route to single motherhood because it didn't involve the 'sin' of sexual intercourse as an unmarried woman, and because it involved helping a child in need. The latter is particularly true of intercountry adoption, since children from 'developing' countries are perceived to be especially

'needy' and 'helpless' (Jociles et al., 2010). However, research in the UK and U.S. has shown that being positioned as altruistic 'saints' or 'heroes' often feels reductive, insulting and uncomfortable for adoptive parents themselves, serving to compound feelings of isolation and marginalization from mainstream parenthood (Bock, 2000; Weistra & Luke, 2017).

The historical construction of intercountry adoption as 'rescue' can shed further light on the socio-moral elevation of adoptive parenthood. The link between adoption and rescue is particularly strong in countries that have a history of intercountry adoption, whereby wealthy, usually White, parents adopt children from the 'developing' world, who are either orphans, or whose families are living in extreme poverty (Davies, 2011). As Davies (2011) explains, in these situations intercountry adoption has often been depicted as the ultimate altruistic act; as the 'rescue' of unfortunate children doomed to a life of poverty. Davies (2011, p. 54) argues that the repositioning of 'abandoned' children from 'impoverished nations' as 'adoptable' children who can assimilate to the Western mainstream is enabled by White privilege, whereby White Western cultures are construed as inherently better than non-White, non-Western cultures. Baden (2014, p. 18) shows how the praise and accolades associated with this kind of 'cultural philanthropy' can co-exist alongside stigma around single motherhood and/or infertility, with intercountry adopters being 'seen simultaneously as rescuing children and as inadequate due to infertility'. Further, she notes that intercountry *adoptees* continue to experience microaggressions that denigrate their birth countries and families, and position them as commodities in a cultural transaction (Baden, 2016).

The ideologies of rescue that underpin much intercountry adoption are also rooted in a longstanding romanticization of poverty and need. Briggs (2003, p. 198) has shown how this romanticization has been politically manipulated in the U.S., where emotive images of desolate mothers and children have been strategically deployed to position the country as the noble 'rescuer' of 'unfortunate victims', whilst backgrounding their own responsibility for the causes of poverty and hunger. Bell (2013) has shown how ideals of intercountry adoption persist in the representation of high-profile White, wealthy adoptive mothers such as Madonna and Angelina Jolie. In contemporary representations of these celebrity mother figures as the 'White Saviour', we see sharply intensified versions of a maternal ideal that inscribes racial, gendered, ableist and other forms of discrimination (Bell, 2013, p. 14). Further, in the transactional world of entertainment and fame, intercountry adoption is often positioned as part of a celebrity's philanthropic work, with the adoption of 'poor' or 'disadvantaged' children servicing their brand, social legitimacy, and 'credibility to speak on behalf of distant Others' (Bell, 2013, p. 4).

Whilst the UK does not have the same tradition of intercountry adoption, it does have a history of positioning certain children as more 'needy' than others, and of capitalizing on these representations. British charities such as Mencap and Scope, for example, often relied on images that evoked sympathy and pity for disabled children in their early (20th Century) promotional material (Cousins, 2009). Cousins (2009, p. 58) suggests, further, that their imagery was consistent with broader representations of disabled people as an 'underclass' who, paradoxically, are prevented from managing their own lives, yet are 'required to be eternally grateful for being rescued'. Whilst the situation has improved in the 21st Century, disabled people continue to be depicted as 'fundamentally flawed' (Bunt, 2014, p. 528), and disabled children as 'spoiled' (Saville, 2020, p. 633). Further, reductive representations proliferate globally via social media. As Hadley (2016) shows, images of disabled people as needy circulate through 'charity case' memes, whilst 'inspiration' memes continue to objectify disabled people, and position them as fundamentally deficient (see Abes & Wallace, 2018; Grue, 2016 for more on 'inspiration' discourse).

Within this context of ongoing ableism and stigma, parenting disabled *children* is frequently constructed as less favourable than parenting non-disabled children, and a deviation from the 'normal' life course (Bunt, 2014; Cousins, 2009). Further, parents of disabled children often find they are intensively positioned as 'good' and 'selfless' to the degree that they are ascribed a superhuman or saint-like status. This elevated position resonates with 'inspiration' discourses more generally, working to objectify individuals' lives and experiences. Research with parents of

disabled children has suggested that, although they often acknowledge the sacrifices involved in raising their children, most will reject such discourses of inspiration and selflessness. In Brock's (2017) and Rogers' (2007) work with parents of disabled children, for example, their participants complain that the 'saint' metaphor marks them out as 'different', as well as glossing over the difficulties of parenting a child with an impairment, and undermining the personal cost of their efforts. For *adoptive* parents of disabled children, the reductive and dismissive implications of saintly parenthood, combined with the high moral vs. low legitimacy status of adoption, may create standards of 'perfect' parenthood that are impossible to meet.

The near-divine status of adoptive parenthood, and/or parenting disabled children, is likely to be intensified for *mothers*, and it is often mothers who are the focus for research in this area (see Bock, 2000; Brock, 2017; Rogers, 2007). Women in the UK and U.S. have long been subject to restrictive ideals of the 'good' mother as White, heterosexual, married, middle-class, non-disabled, economically stable and of average age (not too young or old) (Hill Collins, 2006; Lawler, 2000; Mackenzie, 2019, 2023b). Women who fit these demographics tend to be positioned as inherently more 'worthy' and 'deserving' of motherhood (Bock, 2000; Hill Collins, 2006). Further, those deemed to be 'bad' or 'undeserving' mothers are more frequently subject to state sanctions around reproduction and financial support, whilst those deemed 'good' and 'worthy' are more likely to 'encounter state-supported family-planning options' (Hill Collins, 2006, p. 56). The elevation of (certain) mothers to a saintly state is also rooted in traditionalist concepts of motherhood that were dominant in the early 1900s, heavily tied to ideals of religion, divinity and morality (Brock, 2017). For many, these traditions continue. Ringrow's (2020) analysis of religious metaphors in Christian 'mommy blogs', for example, explores metaphors that engender beliefs around 'the divine calling' of motherhood. In the context of faiths that revere women's maternal role, such as Christianity, these metaphors underline the continuing religious significance of motherhood (Ringrow, 2020). Mothers who are single adopters of disabled children, as well as having a Christian faith, may therefore be situated at the centre of a complex web of socio-cultural expectations around 'worthy', 'divine' and even 'saintly' parenthood.

Despite the breadth of research around adoption and parenthood, there is very little scholarship that explores social expectations and experiences at the intersection of single parenthood, adoption and disability. There is even less work that closely scrutinizes the way individuals navigate these expectations through an intersectional sociolinguistic approach. This article contributes to interdisciplinary research in these areas through a sociocultural linguistic analysis that examines how one single adopter of disabled children navigates (and ultimately rejects) the position of the 'saintly adopter'.

Theoretical foundations: identities, intersections and interaction

This article's exploration of the 'saintly adopter' is influenced by recent sociolinguistic work that foregrounds the intersectional nature of identity construction, especially as it is constructed in everyday talk. For example, Levon (2016), Jones (2018) and Pichler (2021) all consider how their participants' unique identities and circumstances, including factors such as nationality, race, social class, sexuality and gender, as well as their specific experiences of social inclusion, exclusion or marginalization, shape both the identity positions that are available to them, and the nuanced ways in which they negotiate these positions. Levon's (2016) analysis of an interview with an Orthodox Israeli Jewish man who experiences same-sex desire takes account of his religious commitment, sexuality and national identity as he navigates his position as a gay man who is committed to his religion. Jones (2018) considers the significance of sexuality, race and class, alongside broader experiences of homophobia and homonormativity, in young (Northern) English people's construction of their identities as 'not proud, just gay'. In Pichler's (2021) examination of fatherhood in South London, she brings intersections of gender, race and social class to the fore as she explores the talk of four young fathers who have ethnically and racially mixed working-class backgrounds. In each of these examples, the complexities of participants' lives, their experiences of the social world, and the specific ways in which they position themselves, for example as Jewish, as fathers, or LGBTQ young people, cannot be understood through attention to a single

dimension of their experience. To do so would be to limit our understanding of these positions and, potentially, to perpetuate stereotypes and misrepresentations of different groups based on single axes of identity. Instead, by unpicking the mutually reinforcing vectors that constitute their lives, these authors explore how a range of local norms and structural inequalities can converge in a way that produces unexpected contradictions, challenges and opportunities for different individuals and groups.

An intersectional perspective is realized in this article through a sociocultural linguistic approach, which represents 'a broad interdisciplinary field concerned with the intersection of language, culture and society' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586). Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) approach to analysing identity in interaction is based on five key principles, the most salient here being the 'positionality principle' and the 'relationality principle'. The positionality principle is designed to account for the range of positions that individual speakers negotiate, take up and reject at the micro-level of talk and interaction, as they position themselves and others (whether consciously or not) as particular 'kinds' of people. These positions may operate at the macro-level of larger structural and demo-graphic categories, at the local level of 'ethnographically specific cultural positions', or at the temporal, interactional level of 'specific stances and participant roles' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 592). The 'relationality principle' draws attention to the inherently relational nature of identity, stating that individual and group identities never operate in isolation, but 'always acquire social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 598). In line with other sociocultural linguistic work (e.g. Jones, 2018), I argue that this approach is ideally suited to an intersectional perspective that seeks a multifaceted, multi-dimensional understanding of identity as it is constructed in specific local contexts.

Research design, data and analysis

This article is based on the *Marginalised Families Online* study (Mackenzie, 2023a). This research involved working with nine single, lesbian, gay, and/or bisexual parents who brought children into their lives in different ways, for example through adoption, donor conception, surrogacy or co-parenting arrangements. Each individual (no partners were directly involved in the research) took part in three interviews over eleven months, and shared selections of their digital interactions from a range of contexts, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp. The research methodol-ogy was underpinned by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), which guided and shaped the direction of this study, especially in its early stages.

Although I collected both interview and digital media data for this study, in this article I focus solely on the interview data, which consists of three interviews per participant (27 interviews in total). Each interview lasted 105 minutes on average, and the sessions were conducted at 4–5 month intervals. In keeping with the grounded theory principles of flexible and data-driven research and theory-building, I adopted an open-ended and participant-focused qualitative approach across the interview and data collection processes, and early analyses informed subsequent interview questions and data collection. I came to each interview with one central question that would guide a relatively open and participant-driven discussion. The first round of interviews focused on participants' family lives, experiences and support channels, centring on the question 'tell me about your family'. In the second interview, I asked participants to 'show me how you use digital media', focusing on how they used digital technologies to connect with others. Finally, in the third interview I used both questioning and diagrammatic visualiza-tions to explore participants' friendship, family and support networks. This research design and interviewing process is described in more detail in Mackenzie (2023a).

This article considers how one locally significant identity position, that of the 'saintly adopter', is constructed, negotiated and rejected through analysis of interview data from one participant who engaged with this position more than any other – Lynne. Lynne has had four children in total, two of whom died in childhood. At the time of interviewing, she had two disabled children: an infant and a teenager. Lynne herself did not disclose any disability, and her sexuality is not known, since she chose not to disclose this information. As both a Christian and a single adopter who exclusively cares for

children with disabilities, Lynne experiences intersecting ideals, expectations and prejudices around adoption, disability, single motherhood and religion. Her negotiation of the 'saintly adopter' position is particularly relevant for understanding the way these dimensions can converge in a parent's everyday life.

Lynne's circumstances very loosely correlate with the average demographics of 'single mothers by choice' in Northern Europe and the U.S., who tend to be White, heterosexual, middle-aged, financially secure and well-educated women with (often part-time) professional occupations (Bock, 2000; Golombok, 2015; Mendonça, 2018). However, it is worth noting that Lynne does not uniformly fit this mould. For example, she was quite young when she became a parent, making her first application to foster children at the age of 21, and welcoming her first child on a long-term fostering placement at the age of 25. Further, whilst Lynne is educated to postgraduate level, owns her home and is relatively secure financially, she does not work outside the home, earning a living as a full-time carer to her children. Nevertheless, the socio-cultural position that she occupies, as a well-educated woman who has chosen to adopt her children as a solo parent and receives caring allowances, is markedly different from that of, say, a single woman who left school at 16, conceived accidentally, and receives a general allowance such as Universal Credit (see Mackenzie, 2023b, for more on different constructions of single motherhood).

To further examine the position of the 'saintly adopter', I employed a two-stage process that began with coding and categorizing the full set of interview data within the paradigm of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Through this iterative process, I constructed a set of core codes and categories that captured and described the relationship between a range of actions and practices across the data (see Mackenzie, 2023a for a detailed outline of this process). At the second stage, I revisited the data associated with core codes and categories from a sociocultural linguistic perspective. For the analytical strand that is explored in this article, I focused on the core category 'extra-ordinary parenting', along with four of its sub-categories: 're-defining the family', 'enduring prejudice, stigma or misunderstanding', 'being seen as a saint' and 'I couldn't do what you do'. Each of these sub-categories was particularly prominent in the interview and digital media data of the three single adoptive parents who took part in the *Marginalised Families Online* study: Lynne, Cheryl and Jenny. For the analysis that follows, I selected two 'significant moments' in which these sub-categories are particularly prominent, both of which occur in Lynne's interview data, and both of which represent 'site[s] of discursive struggle and contested knowledge, power and subjectivity' (Mackenzie, 2023b, p. 93; also see Baxter, 2003; Mackenzie, 2019). Through analysis of these significant moments, I consider how Lynne navigates the 'saintly adopter' position, and examine the dimensions of this position that come to the fore when it is ascribed to her as a single adopter of disabled children.

My analysis of significant moments in Lynne's interview talk centres on the way she positions herself, the way others position her, and the way she is positioned by wider socio-cultural structures, prejudices and expectations. These are not mutually exclusive areas of exploration: for example, in positioning herself as a particular kind of person or parent, Lynne may draw on powerful or institutional socio-cultural structures. Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) relationality principle, which is outlined in the previous section, is particularly relevant to this exploration. In order to operationalize this analysis, I focus on the 'tactics of intersubjectivity' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 599) that Lynne deploys as she describes her identity and experience in relation to expectations and ideals around single parenthood, adoption and disability. These tactics constitute three pairs of overlapping strategies - *adequation and distinction, authentication and denaturalization*, and *authorization and illegitimation*.

The first pair, adequation and distinction, describes the downplaying or foregrounding of similarities and differences between individuals or groups. Through the process of adequation, 'differences irrelevant or damaging to ongoing efforts to adequate two people or groups will be downplayed, and similarities viewed as salient to and supportive of the immediate project of identity work will be foregrounded' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 599). Distinction is the opposite, with similarities being downplayed, and differences foregrounded. The second pair, authentication and denaturalization, concerns claims of (in)authenticity, turning the analyst's attention to 'processes by which speakers make claims to realness and artifice' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 601). Strategies of authentication focus

on 'the ways in which identities are discursively verified' as 'genuine' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 601). Strategies of denaturalization, on the other hand, work to subvert any claim to 'the inevitability or inherent rightness of identities', instead revealing how those identities are 'crafted, fragmented, problematic, or false' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 602). Finally, the processes of authorization and illegitimation go beyond the situation, groups and identities that are of immediate concern in the discourse (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 603). Authorization involves 'the affirmation or imposition of an identity through structures of institutionalized power and ideology', whilst illegitimation concerns 'the ways in which identities are dismissed, censored, or simply ignored by these same structures' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 603). Through attention to these tactics of intersubjectivity, I consider the strategies Lynne deploys to describe her circumstances and experiences, position herself as a particular kind of person, and respond to the way she is positioned by others.

Analysis. Rejecting sainthood: 'damaged' children and (im)perfect parenthood

The three single adoptive parents who took part in the *Marginalised Families Online* study all mention that an elevated socio-moral status is often attributed to them, giving voice to unnamed others who position them as 'lovely', 'wonderful', and/or 'saints'. In my first interview with Cheryl, for example, she noted that people have often described her as 'lovely', on discovering that she is a single adoptive parent. However, she rejects this evaluation, emphatically responding 'no', and noting that she tries to 'shut down' this kind of talk. In our third interview, Cheryl reports being called a 'saint', and being told 'I couldn't do that', suggesting that others sometimes perceive single adoption as a near-impossible undertaking. Jenny reports similar perceptions. For example, in our third interview, she explains that she is also positioned as a 'saint', and that people tell her 'I could never do all of that'. Further, she notes that she and her children are often described as 'lucky' to have one another. Jenny underlines the damage these assumptions can do to adoptees, who she says can be left 'very upset' by the implication that caring for them is so unusual, selfless and difficult that it is seen as 'saintly', whilst the children themselves are positioned as passive, 'lucky' and potentially undeserving recipients of parents' selfless acts. In our first interview, Lynne noted that 'certain older people' in her church see single motherhood as 'shameful'. However, she suggests that their perceptions shift very quickly when they find out her children are adopted and disabled – that when they realize 'you chose that child . . . who's broken', they say she is 'wonderful'. Lynne also rejects these evaluations quite explicitly, saying 'I don't think I am particularly wonderful for what I'm doing'.

In order to further explore some of the intersecting expectations and prejudices at work in the positioning of single adopters (especially single adopters of disabled children) as 'saint-like', and their children as 'damaged' or 'broken', I now focus exclusively on the words of Lynne, a Christian single adopter who has two disabled children. In our first interview, when I asked Lynne to tell me about her family, she explained that she decided to foster and adopt disabled children when she was just twelve, after going to a scripture union camp. After some discussion of the way her life progressed, I asked Lynne to elaborate on her initial comment, explaining what it was about her early life experiences that made her feel sure she wanted to care for disabled children. Her response, which is displayed in Extract 1, foregrounds the significance of her faith as a Christian.

Extract 1. 'this is where my calling lies'

Note: from around line 8 Lynne's son is chattering in the background, and she is entertaining him while we speak. This is likely the reason for her frequent pauses and sometimes fragmented speech. Speech addressed to her child is contained in [[double square brackets]]. See Appendix for full transcription key.

1 J   d'you know what it <u>was</u> that kind've (0.5) <u>ma</u>de you think this is what (.) I want to <u>do</u> and
2   then sort of <u>kept</u> you at it

3 L   h. yeah erm it's: (.) my faith. (0.3) a:s a <u>Christian</u>.

4 J   yeah

5 L   and (.) my relationship with God. (.) is very much [[↑yes↑]] (0.3) [*that's when it started*]

6 J   [so you said it was a camp]

7 L   a scripture union [camp] yes yeah so I came back (1) h. having (0.8) h. sorta <u>met</u> God in a

8 J   [yeah]

9 L   <u>new</u> way (.) <u>as</u> a Christian

10 J   yeah

11 L   er: and made a decision (0.5) that way and (.) yeah so and at the same time (0.2) <u>clear</u> that

12   (.) this is what I would be doing hh. and I've always <u>had</u> (0.3) children (0.5) <u>with</u> (.) disabilities

13   (.) <u>around</u> us erm (0.2) my (.) friend (.) in infants school had epilepsy

       [omitted lines: 60 seconds of further examples around Lynne's experience with disabled
       people in her childhood]

14 L   I used to go hh. and (0.2) help (.) toddlers with Down's in their sort of pre-school sessions h.

15   and also then go in into the main respite (.) place and help some of the (.) more profoundly

16   disabled [children] just hh. <u>sit</u> and (.) spoon (0.2) mushy food into mouths that didn't want to

17 J   [yeah]

18 L   work or erm (.) [just] just sit and cuddle children that hadn't got a lot of cuddling so it was

19 J   [yeah]

20 L   (.) ↑yeah (0.3) I really enjoyed that so it was sort've something I've (.) grown [up]

21 J   [yeah]

22 L   with (.) yeah

23 J   that makes sense

24 L   knowing that x. (0.3) this is what I ↑<u>can</u> do (0.2) [[↑yes↑]]

25 J   was there a particular <u>aspect</u> or (.) uh (.) of Chris Christianity or particular <u>teaching</u> that you

26   kind've picked up and thought (0.3) ↑yes (.) you know that's (.) I want to kind've <u>live</u> that

27 L   hh. I think it's just this is: (0.3) w <u>where</u> my calling ↑lies

28 J   yeah

29 L   this is what I do this is what I <u>love</u> to do God's given me: (0.3) a love (.) and an <u>ability</u> to <u>see</u>

30   in: (0.5) h. <u>some</u> children that (.) other people (0.3) don't (.) <u>welcome</u> or [don't] (0.2) don't

31 J   [yeah]

32 L   see in quite the same way. (0.3) so we I just love the fact that we can celebrate (1.5)

33   [[yeah?]] we talk about celebrating <u>inch</u>stones (0.5) [rather than <u>mile</u>]stones

34 J   [yeah okay @@]

35 L   yeah (0.3) and (0.5) I <u>love</u> that pace of life

36 J   yeah

37 L   I really (.) really enjoy it

In the first part of this extract (lines 1–13), Lynne makes connections between her faith, her relationship with God, and her confidence as a carer of children with disabilities, suggesting that these dimensions of her identity and experience are mutually reinforcing. The language Lynne uses throughout this excerpt underlines her certainty in these interconnected dimensions of her life. For example, she replies emphatically and without mitigation that 'it's my faith as a <u>Christian</u>. and (.) my relationship with God' (lines 3–5) that led her to adopt disabled children, following these statements with the affirmative intensifier 'very much' (line 5). Lynne goes on to make further emphatic and unmitigated statements that emphasize her certainty from a young age, saying that she 'made a decision' (line 11), it was '<u>clear</u> that (.) this is what I would be doing' (line 12) and 'I've always <u>had</u> (0.3) children (0.3) <u>with</u> disabilities <u>around</u> us'. The words 'decision' and 'clear' (the latter of which she emphasizes in volume and pitch) underline her clarity and certainty, and the habitual

adverb 'always' underlines the point that caring for disabled children has been a consistent feature in her life, along with the specific examples she shares about her school friendship with someone who had epilepsy and spending time with toddlers who had Down's syndrome. This is confirmed by her later statement 'it was sort've something I've (.) grown up with' (lines 20–22). Through these statements of certainty in her faith and abilities, and demonstration of her familiarity with disability, Lynne *authorizes* her position as an adopter of disabled children, which is often considered less favourable in a wider social context, through reference to a higher power, alongside extensive personal experience.

In the second part of this extract (lines 20–37), Lynne explicitly describes her desire to adopt and foster disabled children in divine terms, saying in line 27 'this is: (0.3) w where my calling ↑lies', and in lines 29–30 'God's given me: (0.3) a love (.) and an ability to see in: (0.5) h. some children that (.) other people (0.3) don't (.) welcome'. This language echoes the earlier description of her formative experience at a scripture union camp (lines 7–11), where Lynne notes that she made the decision to care for disabled children having 'met God in a new way'. In the later examples, Lynne is very explicit about the link between her relationship with God and her ability to care for disabled children: she explains that God has given her these abilities, and that caring for disabled children is her religious 'calling'. Alongside these claims, when Lynne repeats the statement 'this is what I [↑can] do' (lines 24 and 29), she conflates her actions (what she does) and her personhood (who she is) in a way that suggests caring for disabled children is an integral part of her identity: it makes her who she is. Further, Lynne makes several intensified claims around her feelings about caring for disabled children, for example 'this is what I love' (line 29), 'I really enjoyed that' (line 20), 'I just love the fact that we can celebrate … inchstones' (lines 32–33), 'I love that pace of life' (line 35), and 'I really (.) really enjoy it' (line 37). Her feelings of 'love' and 'enjoy[ment]' are made emphatic by the intensifiers 'really' and 'just', and through emphasis on the word 'love'.

Through these affective statements, Lynne suggests that she gains intense personal gratification and wellbeing from the 'pace of life' that comes with caring for disabled children. As such, she not only authorizes her position as an adopter of disabled children through reference to a divine power, but also through the implication that caring for disabled children is central to who she is. It is notable, given the socio-moral constructions of altruism, selflessness and rescue that are associated with parenting both adopted and disabled children, that Lynne does not imply any self-sacrifice, or 'giving' to her children. Rather, she suggests that her gratification comes from doing something she has significant experience with and is good at, that she feels 'called' to do, and that she enjoys immensely. Lynne's references to her faith, then, are a degree removed from religious ideals around 'worthy' or 'divine' parenthood that can work to intensify expectations of selfless and altruistic parenthood. Instead, Lynne positions herself as an autonomous individual who is driven by her faith, but nevertheless takes control of, and joy in, her own parenting practice.

In extract 2, which is taken from a five-minute sequence towards the beginning of our third interview, Lynne explains in detail how and why she is positioned as a 'wonderful' person for adopting children, and the kinds of expectations and pressures that she feels as a result.

Extract 2. 'don't put me on a pedestal'

```
1 L    when people say: (0.3) oh yeah. (.) yeah. (.) I couldn't do what you do (0.3) e:rm (.) you're
2      just amazing I think this is (.) y'know this is just incredible hh. it puts it all back on (0.2) me:
3      (0.3) e:rm (0.2) and it takes any responsibility: away from: (.) the person saying that.
4 J    mmm
5 L    hh. so: (.) particularly: (0.2) with children with disabilities (.) people'll say *oh: I couldn't do
6      it* you know or h. or oh (0.2) you know I yeah I could never do that in a million years and
7      you think well (0.8) ↑ok but what if: (0.2) your child did have (0.5) a disability are you
8      saying that (.) you wouldn't parent them?
9 J    mmm
```

10 L   h. e:rm (0.2) >oh I couldn't do it I couldn't do it I just couldn't do it I don't know how you do
11   it< well (0.3) <u>are</u> you saying that you <u>would</u>n't parent them
12 J   mmm
13 L   (0.5) or actually are you saying you'd find it really really hard because you're not <u>ac</u>tually
14   acknowledging the fact that (.) I find it really really hard <u>too</u> h.
15 J   mmm
16 L   because by saying I'm <u>won</u>derful and I am a<u>maz</u>ing (0.5) h. what you're saying is I am <u>oth</u>er
17   (0.3) to [↑you]
18 J   [mmm] mmm
19 L   and (0.3) therefo::re (0.2) I must have a (.) a (.) an extraordinarily <u>diff</u>erent
20 L   set of (0.2) [skills] in order to be able to do this
21 J   [yeah]

        [omitted lines: 62 seconds of talk where Lynne explains that it's just as difficult for her]

22 L   as a friend always says you know don't put me on a pedestal it hurts when I fall off
23 J   ah yeah @@@
24 L   and but y'know if you: (.) think I'm amazing and wonderful: and I'm just (.) *oh you must be*
25   so <u>pa</u>tient
26 J   @yeah@
27 L   hh. a (0.3) and then you hear me shout at my child because (.)
28 J   yeah
29 L   they've just done something <u>real</u>ly ↑<u>real</u>ly <u>stup</u>id @[@@]@for the seventy <u>fifth</u> time that
30 J   [@@]
31 L   morning@
32 J   @yeah@
33 L   a th (.) y'know I'm not a saint (0.2) any more than (.) y'know I'm not <u>per</u>fect (.) and <u>you're</u>
34   not perfect (.) but you've <u>made</u> me (.) into this perfect hh.
35 J   mmm
36 L   person not ↑you (.) but
37 J   mmm yeah
38 L   erm a (0.3) yeah (.) and it and then when I've (0.5) hh. (0.5) a y'know I'm not perfect in
39   just the same way that you're not perfect as a parent
40 J   mmm
41 L   your who:le (0.2) image of me shatters hh.

In this extract, Lynne uses the metaphor of being 'put . . . on a pedestal' (line 22) to capture the way she feels constrained by intensified evaluations of her as 'just amazing', 'just incredible', 'extraordinary' or 'wonderful' as a single adopter of disabled children. The reasons for being evaluated in this way are further specified through reference to Lynne's temperament and skill: Lynne notes that she is described as 'so <u>pa</u>tient' (line 25) and as having an 'extraordinarily <u>diff</u>erent set of skills' (lines 19 to 20). Towards the end of the extract (lines 33 to 36), Lynne glosses the way these evaluations position her, as 'a saint' or a 'perfect person'.

Lynne suggests that her children's disabilities are a key factor in her being positioned as a 'saintly adopter', and them as 'damaged children' when she says 'with children with disabilities (.) people'll say *oh: I couldn't do it* . . . I could never do that in a million years' (lines 5–6). As I showed at the beginning of this section, both Cheryl and Jenny report that people made similar statements upon learning that they are single adoptive parents. However, Lynne suggests that her children's disabilities intensify others' perceptions that they are 'broken' or 'damaged' children, not just because their biological families were unable or unwilling to care for them, but also because their disabilities make them less 'whole' or desirable. Their disabilities also intensify others' disbelief and admiration

that she has *chosen* to be a lone parent to these children, who are perceived to be undesirable, and perhaps difficult to love and care for. They also individualize the matter of caring for disabled and/or adopted children, overlooking responsibilities at the level of government and society to reduce social, emotional and financial barriers and difficulties. This intensified praise places the emphasis solely on Lynne, positioning her as heroic, perhaps even superhuman, and implying a rescue narrative whereby 'damaged' children are saved by extra-ordinary individuals like her: a White, Christian, well-educated woman. Her negotiations of the 'saintly adopter' and 'damaged child', for herself and her children, suggest these positions converge and mutually reinforce one another: the more 'damaged' Lynne's children are seen to be, the more Lynne is positioned as heroic, extra-ordinary, or saint-like, and vice versa.

Strategies of *denaturalization* are particularly prominent in extract 2, as Lynne works to emphasize the problematic implications of the 'saintly adopter' position, and its incompatibility with the realities of her day-to-day life. She explains that the idealized image of a mother who has innate, extra-ordinary capabilities does not give her the space to be an ordinary, less-than-perfect parent, with nuanced experiences. As she repeats, quite simply, 'I'm not perfect' (lines 33 and 38). On line 14, Lynne makes it emphatically clear that she often finds parenting difficult, saying that it can be 'really really hard'. Her use of intensified negative evaluations form a direct contrast with the positive evaluations that others attribute to her. She further denaturalizes the position of the saintly adopter by recounting a hypothetical scenario that is designed to illustrate her 'imperfect' parenting, namely 'shout[ing] at my child' (line 27). In line 29, Lynne's use of hyperbole ('seventy fifth time') and intensified negative evaluations ('really ↑really stupid') vividly communicates the frustration she might feel towards her child at a moment like this, and again forms a direct contrast with others' intensified positive evaluations, such as 'extraordinarily different' (line 19), and 'so patient' (line 25). Lynne suggests that when people see what kind of parent she 'really' is, she's 'not a saint (0.2) any more' (line 33), and people's 'who:le (0.2) image of me shatters' (line 41). The implication here is that the elevated position of the saintly adopter is ultimately fragile and unsustainable: Lynne can never be perceived as a 'good' parent when others' expectations of her are so unrealistically high. Her words suggest that the impossible standards of 'perfect' parenting can be just as damaging, or illegitimising, as more obviously negative assumptions around 'problematic' single motherhood or 'inauthentic' adoptive parenthood. Further, the position of the 'saintly adopter' again puts an immense amount of pressure on her as an individual, overlooking the way social systems and structures may work to either support or disadvantage her family.

Lynne also emphatically rejects the position of the saintly adopter by exposing the *distinction* strategies that are deployed in its construction. For example, she suggests that when others position her in a saint-like role, they also distinguish themselves as very different, saying that they 'couldn't do' what she does, 'never . . . in a million years' (lines 1 to 6). Lynne's repetition of the reported speech 'I couldn't do it' (line 10), a low modality statement that implies impossibility, forms a sharp contrast with her own high-modality statement of certainty in our first interview, when she says 'this is what I can do' (extract 1, line 24). In our first interview, Lynne herself uses strategies of distinction when suggesting that she has a different outlook on parenting disabled children from a lot of other people. For example, she says she has an ability to see things in some children "that (.) other people (0.3) don't (.) welcome", or "don't see in quite the same way" (extract 1, lines 30 to 32). Lynne's objection to others' use of distinction strategies is perhaps related to their use of superlative adjectives such as 'amazing' and 'exceptional', which suggest she is a fundamentally and inherently different *sort of person*, rather than a person who has a specific ability that many others don't possess. Lynne counters these strategies of *distinction* with strategies of *adequation*, foregrounding the experiences and emotions that she *does* share with others. For example, when she says 'I find it really really hard too' (line 14), 'I'm not perfect. . . you're not perfect' (lines 33–34 and lines 38–39), her use of comparison and parallelism works to foreground her similarities with others, at the same time as rejecting any implication that she is somehow superhuman. Lynne also explains the effect that distinction strategies can have on her, underlining the point that they position her as the 'other' (line

16), as well as putting her under intense scrutiny and pressure to live up to high standards – it 'puts it all back on me' (line 2). In sum, Lynne makes it clear that being positioned as 'perfect' or a 'saint' has an othering and objectifying effect, implying she is a fundamentally different and exceptional sort of person who cannot be understood through the eyes of a 'normal' parent. This positioning puts Lynne under a great deal of pressure to handle the difficult aspects of being a single adopter to disabled children on her own, with ease, and without complaint.

Discussion and conclusion

This article sheds light on the way certain dimensions of one adopter's circumstances and experiences converge to intensify her positionality as a 'saint', and her children as 'damaged'. As an adoptive parent, Lynne is likely to experience heightened pressures and expectations because biological ties between parents and children are often perceived to be more legitimate and valued than social ties. As discussed in the first part of this article, the social stigma around adoption can often result in adopters internalizing a sense that they will never be adequate or authentic parents, and feeling a sense of failure as they strive towards unattainable perfection. Further, as the parent of disabled children, Lynne is subject to ableist prejudices that position her children as 'flawed' or 'damaged', and adoptive parents of disabled children, by association, as altruistic heroes who are exceptional for having 'chosen' to parent a disabled child. Lynne suggests that adoptive parents of disabled children face heightened pressures to be 'perfect' because of the chasm between these intensively idealized expectations, and the realities of their challenging, complex and *im*perfect experiences of parenting. It also seems that Lynne may experience heightened pressures to be 'perfect' because she is a *single* parent. Although, as Lynne suggests, the stigma associated with single motherhood is often overturned by the reverence associated with adopting disabled children, she is also aware of the continuing perception that single motherhood is 'shameful', especially amongst 'older' members of the church.

Lynne's interview data shows how the positions of the 'saintly adopter' and 'damaged child' converge and mutually reinforce one another. The implication that only a supreme and divine love can save adopted and looked after children positions such children as almost irreparably broken and unlovable. Lynne suggests that people perceive her children to be *doubly* damaged, because not only were their biological parents unable to care for them, but they are also disabled. As a result, others construct her parenthood as even more extra-ordinary and unthinkable. The saintly adopter ideal, then, is equally damaging to adopted and disabled children, who are already more vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy, along with a range of social, physical, learning and mental health difficulties. As an experienced single adopter of disabled children, Lynne is keenly aware of these intersecting prejudices, their effects, and the subtle ways in which they can be reinforced by what may appear, at first glance, to be positive evaluations of her qualities and skills. Her interview talk demonstrates how using language that puts her 'on a pedestal', such as 'wonderful', 'incredible' or 'extra-ordinary' can have very real and damaging consequences, affecting her capacity to feel fulfilled as a parent, to feel that her efforts are acknowledged, and to be assured that her children are seen as valued members of society. The position of the 'saintly adopter' has parallels with 'inspiration' discourses that can render disabled people invisible. In both cases, when individuals are positioned as extra-ordinary and inspirational exemplars, there is little space for the complexity of their individual experiences, and no acknowledgement of the socio-political structures that may work to limit their resources or opportunities. For adoptive parents like Lynne, the 'saintly adopter' ideal works to silence any complaint or objection around such structures.

Although Lynne rejects ideals of saintliness and perfection, she also points to her faith in a higher power as she works to authorize her position as a single adopter of disabled children. Her claim that 'this is where my calling lies' echoes religious and socio-moral values around the 'divine calling' of motherhood, which serve to intensify perceptions of adoptive parents as good and righteous to the point of saintliness. The overlapping tactics of authorization and denaturalization are shown to be particularly useful for Lynne, as she works to authorize her unusual parenting situation in relation to a higher power, whilst also denaturalizing the quasi-religious position of the 'saintly' adopter that is

attributed to her by others. Lynne's faith as a Christian, alongside her advocacy for her children as complete and valuable citizens who are worthy of love and respect, results in a nuanced and multifaceted negotiation of the 'saintly adopter' position. Whilst she embraces the idea that God has given her an ability that not everyone possesses, she rejects the idea that these abilities make her somehow 'perfect', or that her children require a superhuman level of intervention to be part of a loving family. These complex negotiations are made possible, at least in part, through Lynne's relatively privileged position as a White, British, non-disabled and well-educated woman: the authorization of her motherhood as a divine 'calling' may not be so readily available to women who do not fit these narrow ideals of 'good' and 'worthy' motherhood.

Through an exploration of the intersecting ideals, expectations and prejudices that converge to produce an image of 'saintly' adopters, this article has drawn attention to the gulf between idealized images of single adoption, especially the adoption of disabled children, and the reality of being a single adopter of disabled children. Overall, it shows that the apparent praise of adopters as saintly figures can have a strongly illegitimating force for both parents and children, since it is rooted in presumptions around children in care being helpless and 'damaged', and subsequently in need of rescue by 'perfect' parents (namely those who are White, middle-class and financially stable). The pressure that comes with being positioned as a superhuman 'saint' is likely to be felt even more strongly by parents and children who do not meet normative ideals in other ways, such as Lynne, who is a single parent, and her children, who are disabled. Nevertheless, positions of privilege (such as being White, non-disabled and well educated) protect some adoptive parents from other strands of prejudice and discrimination around, for example, 'problematic' single parenthood and 'bad' motherhood. Together, intersecting forms of prejudice around adoption, single parenthood and disability work to intensify difficulties for single adopters, and/or adopters of disabled children, and their capacity to be seen as valued and legitimate parents in a wider social context.

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Appendix: Transcription key

(.)	micro pause (less than 0.3 seconds)
(1.5)	timed pause
[ ]	overlapping speech
underlined	emphasis
asterisked	quiet speech
>bracketed<	fast speech
wo-	false start or self-interruption
h.	audible in-breath (number of units indicates duration)
x.	audible out-breath (number of units indicates duration)
:	extended sound (number of units indicates duration)
?	end of intonation unit (rising intonation)
.	end of intonation unit (falling intonation)
@	laughter (one unit per pulse)
@word@	spoken with laughter or smiling quality
()	transcriber comment
[[]]	words spoken to Lynne's someone else in the room
↑ words ↑	high pitch
↑ words	rising intonation