

PEELING THE LABEL OFF: NARRATIVES OF SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES  
OVERCOMING STEREOTYPES

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTERS OF ARTS

Major Subject: Communication

West Texas A&M University

Canyon, TX

April 2019

## **Abstract**

This performance thesis focused on the personal narratives of single parent families. Through the power of storytelling this project sought to correct some common stereotypes about single parent families, connecting with listeners in a way that raises awareness of generational practices and stereotypes that have contributed to the negative narrative associated with the term *single parent*. The performance took place on April 9, 2019 and includes narratives selected from a variety of sources, as well as the personal experiences of the author.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to acknowledge my beloved husband. He has been my biggest supporter through this journey, and he has pushed me to be the greatest. Brook, I love you with my whole heart and without you and Owen I would not have survived this journey. Second, I want to say thank you to all my professors that have walked with me since the beginning. Thank you for never giving up on this small town girl who thought she would never be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I am forever grateful for your time, constructive criticism, your unending support, and encouragement.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The definition of a “normal” family has changed greatly over the years and what was once considered a unique family situation is becoming more prevalent. Over the past two decades, the rise in single parent families, by the increase of divorce or non-marital childbearing, is a growing factor in family dynamics (Zartler, 2014). Single parent families are not only formed by death, unplanned pregnancy or divorce, but single parenthood is becoming a conscious decision in society (Jeter, 1994). A two-parent family has often been presented as the best option for children, and the non-traditional single parent family is seen as a disadvantage (Zartler, 2014). The structure of family dynamics is being transformed into a more non-traditional view that makes what was considered a disadvantaged family the new normal. In the United States approximately 23% of children live with one parent (US Census, 2017). One-quarter of children in America are being raised in a single parent home, and understanding these family structures is crucial in building up the next generation (Banks, 2012). Banks (2012) says: “the broad-brush portrait that paints our families as failures will change when single [families] are embraced and [their] children expected to thrive” (p. 2). My performance thesis focused on the unique challenges encountered by single parent families.



The view of single parent lifestyle being a disadvantage can be seen as inequality and a struggle for parents and their children (Zartler, 2014). Single parent families are increasing significantly and examining the struggles they face is important in comprehending this family structure and validating the impact of single parent families on society (Hornberger, Zabriskie, & Freeman, 2010). One struggle is how children's education is negatively affected by their single parent family life. The single parent family composition affects the children's education and performance (Lange, Dronker, & Wolbers, 2014). There is also the struggle of how having one parent in the home affects the well-being and economic status of the family structure. Financial struggles present issues within the dynamics of the single parent family. Also, understanding how these struggles developed from past generations can help guide society in a direction of eliminating these labels. Understanding the struggles single parents go through can help society grasp what it truly means to be a single parent family and even though they have their unique struggles the narrative about single parent families are still inspirational. The significant rise in single parent families over different generations has developed negative and positive stereotypes for these families

Baby Boomer, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z generations have played a vital role in how society negatively or positively stereotypes single parent families. These generations were brought up with different beliefs during their time period that influenced the definition of a traditional family. Generations hold different opinions on what a traditional family is, and their opinions and stereotypes create a foundation for the next generation (Howe, 2000). Generations have their own unique definition of families, but their views can carry throughout decades and steer society in a

negative direction that shapes our views on non-traditional single parent families (Howe, 2000).

My study used a storytelling approach to bring awareness of the many challenges faced by single parent families. The influence a single parent has through telling his/her stories has the power to reach across generations, nationalities, and all genders. Storytelling has been a successful tool for centuries in captivating and changing people's ideals. It has the ability to build imaginations, create new worlds, and reshape beliefs. Storytellers "must discover why an experience, situation, or person has touched them and allow that understanding to shape the tale" (Black, 1993, pp. 1) Through that story, the storyteller has the ability to open others hearts and expand their understanding (Peterson, 2017). I compiled a performance, using the power of storytelling, by telling multiple narratives about single parents and my own experience of growing up in a single parent home. My goal was to relay to the audience what it means to be a single parent and challenge any misguided stereotypes about this unique family structure. Through storytelling, I was empowered to wrestle with people's ideals and what they think they know about single parent families, and expand their views and how they treat all unique family structures (Peterson, 2017).

### **Rationale**

Between 1960 and 2016 the rise of single parent families living with their mother tripled from 8 percent, and children living with their fathers went from 1 to 4 percent (Census Bureau, 2017). Single mother families are the second largest family arrangement in the United States (Census Bureau, 2017). Single parent families are increasing and therefore examining how society stereotypes their lifestyles is significant

in validating the importance of future research of this family structure (Hornberger, Zabriskie, & Freeman, 2010). Also, incorporating the stories of different types of single parent families, from different generations, and the struggles they go through, helps bring awareness to the stereotypes we hold about single parents, which leads to the following research question:

RQ: ‘Why is learning about single parent families important and what is it like living in a single parent home?’

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 1 has provided an overview of the proposed study, a brief discussion of the literature, the performance plan of using personal narratives and the research question on which my performance is based. Chapter 2 reviews the literature in greater depth, while Chapter 3 indicates the methodological grounding used, as well as my plans for the performance. Chapter 4 includes the script I compiled for my performance and Chapter 5 includes my self-assessment of the performance, along with the evaluations written by my thesis committee members, and a discussion that answers my research question.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Chapter Preview**

Chapter 2 provides an overview of never married single mothers, never married single fathers and how they challenge society's stereotypes about single parent families. Additionally, this chapter provides a preview into past and present generations and how they play a role in developing these stereotypes.

#### **Never Married Single-Mothers**

Society communicates many negative views and beliefs about single parent families, especially single-mothers. Single parents are judged differently based on their gender. Society has developed different perceptions for single-mothers and fathers. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2009 single-mother households doubled from 12% to 26% and 9.88 million households were headed by single-mothers with children under the age of 18 (Dejean, McGeorge & Carlson, 2012). Therefore, researchers say there are six times as many single-mother households in America compared to single-father households, and more than six times as many children living with single mothers. The majority of society criticizes and ridicules single-mothers while single-fathers are considered honorable (Dejean et al., 2012). Single mothers are viewed as mostly irresponsible and are accused of not taking responsibility for their actions, while single

fathers receive compassion and support. The rise of single parent families has positively changed the way society communicates about how a “normal” family is constructed, but the negative attitudes towards single-mothers still exist (Dejean et al., 2012). The views and beliefs communicated towards single-mothers alter the way those families see themselves and how they portray their families to society.

Dejean et al. (2012) discovered that single mothers are perceived as unhappy, poor, deviant, and irresponsible adults that will raise illegitimate children. These “attitudes included beliefs that single-mothers have non-traditional values, do not value marriage, and are promiscuous” (Dejean et al., 2012, p. 124). Single mothers are viewed as not wanting a two-parent family and have a harder time remarrying, or getting married, because of the expectations of their future spouse, and how that individual will interact with their children (Gotea & Busuioc, 2016). Also, research has discovered that the majority of single parent mothers are the children of single parents (Gotea & Busuico, 2016), coming from all different types of backgrounds and lifestyles. The negative traits society identifies with single mothers has the ability to shape these mothers’ personal identities and their futures.

American society has developed many negative stereotypical traits for single mothers and their children. Dejean et al. (2012) found that single-mothers are viewed as less secure and unable to provide the same adequate economic stability that men can for their families. They are portrayed as lazy, depressed, and not willing to exert time and energy into the stability of their children. Single-mothers are viewed as having a harder time making life choices and solving difficult problems because of the stressors of single parenthood, supposedly resulting in children with behavioral and educational problems

(Gotea & Busiuico, 2016). Thus, their children struggle economically and in many other aspects of their lives because of their parent's life choices (Dejean et al., 2012). Society sees single parent children as more likely to be involved in criminal activity and having poor behavioral traits; however, most single parent children can grow up to be successful and live happy lives (Dejean et al., 2012).

Overall, the views society has about single-mothers are negative, viewing them as careless parents and valuing them less than single-fathers (Dejean et al., 2012). Single parent mothers are seen as having a negative view on life and are inadequate parents in society. Society views single-mothers as better care-takers for their children, but are believed to lead more incompetent and irresponsible lifestyles in comparison to single-fathers.

### **Never Married Single-Fathers**

Single parent fathers are an increasing phenomenon in today's America, but continue to be invisible to society (Kalman, 2003). Research suggest that single-fathers are portrayed as honorable parents compared to single mothers, but they are viewed as a societal disappointment. American society has labeled single parent fathers the most negatively viewed fatherly role. In 2009, research discovered single-father households had risen by 5% and 1.74 million households were headed by single-fathers. Single-fathers are deemed by society as honored parents, but are still considered insufficient in maternal areas. American society considers single fathers as being less nurturing than mothers, having fewer parenting skills, and establishing poor relationships with their families (Dejean et al., 2012). Society also portrays them as having poor relationships with their children by being impatient, self-centered, immoral, and unhappy (Dejean et

al., 2012). A common belief is that single parent fathers are not involved in the lives of their children because they choose personal interests over their families (Marczak, Becher, Hardman, Galos, & Ruhland, 2015).

There has been a lack of resources for single-fathers leaving them to figure out their roles on their own (Nieto, 1982). Single-fathers are believed to achieve single parent status because something must have gone wrong for the father to gain custody of his children, and not understanding why the mother was not awarded custody (Dejean et al., 2012). Single-fathers are seen as lacking the skills to perform what society labels a traditional motherly role (Nieto, 1982). They are perceived as not being able to fulfill the emotional and nurturing needs that a mother provides for her children. Society views fathers as the bread winner (MacKay, Wilding & George, 1972) and not suited to take on the responsibility of being a single parent (Dejean et al., 2012). Fathers can provide for their children's physical and financial needs, but cannot fulfill their emotional needs (Nieto, 1982). They are portrayed as not being caretakers, resulting in them lacking the ability to care for their children making them inadequate parents (Dejean et al., 2012).

Single parent fathers are faced with society's expectations of being the provider financially and establishing stability for their families. Fathers must provide the income, upkeep of home maintenance, and their identities within society (Nieto, 1982). Fathers are viewed as individuals who should go out of the house and work and support their family financially, even if it is part-time. Society believes that fathers should put their jobs above their family. This view is complicated for single fathers because it brings the expectation of choosing between their family and their jobs (MacKay, Wilding, & George, 1972). Single fathers are presented with the expectation of choosing between

professional success and family, with the views of society influencing them towards economic stability being the wiser choice. Single fathers face stressors every day that challenge their identities at home, work, and within themselves.

### **Single Parent Families Struggle with Education**

To truly understand the negative effects of single parent life on their children's education it is important to understand why these children usually perform worse in school. Children from single parent families usually are in a lower economic class limiting their financial resources, resulting in living in a lower income neighborhood with lower quality schools (Lange et al., 2014). In addition to finances single parent parents have less time to be involved in their children's' educational lives because they are the sole supporter of their family making it difficult to do homework, help with reading or go to extracurricular activities (Lange et al., 2014). Also, only having one parent makes it difficult for that parent to monitor their children's social groups and attitudes at school (Lange et al., 2014). The occurrence of divorce, death, and non-marital problems can have an effect on the children's emotional state and indirectly affect the child's school performance (Lange et al., 2014).

The rise in single parent families results in an increase of single parent children in school systems. The increase of single parent children in schools affects the school, their families, and other students. According to Lange et al. (2014, p. 332), there are two explanations for the effects of single parent families on children's education performance: "that is, the decline of the community network of the school and the lower amount of teaching and learning time at school and at home." The type of students a school serves shapes the identity of the school and helps the school determine its



practices. Schools that have a large population of single parent children are usually characterized by a lower socioeconomic status and less social capital (Lange et al., 2014). Therefore, most children will have a lower performance level as compared to schools with fewer single parent families (Lange et al., 2014). According to research, effectiveness is determined by how much time and effort is put into teaching and learning both at school and home (Lange et al., 2014). The effectiveness of teaching and learning can be skewed by problems children may experience from outside sources as well as their home that interrupt this process (Lange et al., 2014). Garriga (2010) found that single parent children arrive late to school (Lange et al., 2014). Single parent children arriving late affects the learning time not only for that child but the teachers and other students. Single parent children coming from a divorce, death of a parent, or lack of a parent can bring problems to the classroom that change the focus to non-academic goals (Lange et al., 2014). Consequently, that insufficient educational time interferes with the educational process for the single parent child, teachers and the entire class (Lange et al., 2014). Single parent families are not a private affair but they effect society and the functioning of education. The effects of this struggle do not go unrecognized, and some single parent families put a significant emphasis on education hoping to help overcome these setbacks (Gotea & Busuioc, 2016).

### **Well-Being & Economic Status**

Societal views of single parent families lean towards a negative stereotype, and the majority of research documents single parent households as poor, unhappy, and welfare dependent. The majority of these families constantly have to adapt to these stereotypes and learn how to overcome these social portrayals (Greeff & Fillis, 2009).

The idea of being a single parent comes with the stigma of dissatisfaction and unhappiness, and these ideals are a daily battle for single parents and their children. Also, research has suggested that having children outside a partner relationship is paired with instability and a decrease in mental health (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015). There are many happy and thriving single parents who have successful careers, family life, relationships, good mental health, as well as their children growing up to be successful adults. Single parents, regardless of choice, are faced with society's social norms, resulting in social disapproval and rejection within their family structures (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015). They are perceived as having something wrong with them and living a life that does not coincide with a traditional family, when in reality, they can be a happy and thriving nontraditional family.

Although single parents are becoming more numerous and accepted by some generations, they still face negative stereotypes. Single parents are portrayed as having lower levels of happiness compared to two-parent relationships (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015). They are associated with financial struggles, missed career opportunities, low self-esteem, and unhappy individuals. Society has even said "the commonly reported negative effect of parenthood on well-being is actually restricted to single parents" (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015, p. 135). These stereotypes have alienated single parent families and made them construct ways of coping in society. Single parent families rely heavily on developing strong family cohesion to be able to withstand what society says about their families (Greeff & Fillis, 2009). They rely on outside family members, support and encouragement, to help function and adapt within society (Greeff & Fillis, 2009). The stereotypes that society communicates about single

parent families forces these families to strategize together and try to change these negative views about their family structures.

In the U.S. individuals who do not work, single parents, and individuals without children are portrayed as the deserving poor (Moffitt, 2015). The majority of single parents struggle with day to day tasks, but labeling them as poor can be demeaning. Research has suggested that single parent families are the main recipients of welfare (Moffitt, 2015). Single parent families are labeled as needy families, and the U.S. welfare system plays a part in the encouragement of this mindset (Moffitt, 2015). Moffitt (2015) found that ones who are perceived to truly deserve government benefits are individuals who work, are married, and have children, but anyone who takes government assistance outside those parameters are undeserving (Moffitt, 2015). Furthermore, single parent families are portrayed as individuals who do not employ enough effort into having governmental assistance and are seeking a free hand out for a situation they created. This mindset has begun a decline in the assistance provided to single parent families. Society has portrayed these families as undeserving and have cut their governmental benefits in the assumption that they are not taking responsibility for their actions and situations (Moffitt, 2015). Single parent families are labeled as needy, and are developing a mindset of dependency on governmental assistance only to be rejected by the same people who labeled them in the beginning. Single parent families struggle with finances and their well-being, but labeling them as poor families and creating negative mindsets can be detrimental. These stereotypes of single parent families have developed over the years through the opinions and ideals of past generations. The beliefs Baby Boomers,

Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z have towards non-traditional families play a vital role in the negative and positive stereotypes of single parents.

### **Discourse Dependent Families**

Non-traditional families are increasingly becoming the norm in America, and developing coping mechanisms and relying on interfamilial language is crucial in maintaining their identity. The United States of America is a prime example of a diverse population and the growing of contemporary families (Galvin, 2006). As contemporary families increase, “their definitional process expand exponentially, rendering their identity highly discourse dependent (Galvin, 2006, p. 3). Although all families in some way are discourse dependent, non-traditional families depend on discourse more to attain the feeling of family and the desire of authenticity (Galvin, 2006). Research claims families are built on communication and their identities are built through discourse (Galvin, 2006). Discourse dependency is not a new concept but discourse dependent families are becoming the norm in America’s society (Galvin, 2006).

Non-traditional families look different to outsiders causing questions and stereotypes to surface (Galvin, 2006). Single parent families are discourse dependent because they are faced with these stereotypes which challenge their family identity and cause fractures within their structure (Galvin, 2006). These concerns rise when people outside of their family unit challenge their infrastructure, making these families constantly reevaluate their internal and external boundaries to maintain their family identity (Galvin, 2006).

External boundary management happens when single parent families feel the need to manage the conflict between revealing and concealing their personal information

(Galvin, 2006). When this problems arises, they rely heavily on discourse to manage the conflict. According to Galvin (2206), there are four communication strategies for boundary management; labeling, explaining, legitimizing, and defending. *Labeling* refers to the families' actions of identifying family positions when interacting with outside people (Galvin, 2006). Labeling gives the notation of expectations for each family member, and families today are confronted with more inconceivable labeling circumstances that past generations. *Explaining* is the definition to the labeled family relationship, it gives the label meaning and understanding (Galvin, 2006). Single parent families periodically face the desire to explain their family structure to outsiders, and portray their identity. *Legitimizing* is authenticating the family structure and recognizing family standards (Galvin, 2006). This strategy arises when relational ties are threatened, or when there is a need for people to see the family is genuine (Galvin, 2006). Last, *defending* is the act of shielding the family from outside attacks that threaten the families' infrastructure (Galvin, 2006). Single parent families use this strategy when outside people attack their validity with negative stereotypes.

Single parent families are faced with many external conflicts in which they develop strategies to cope, but in return they have to practice internal boundary practices as well. There are four practices; naming, discussing, narrating, and ritualizing. *Naming* is a crucial component in non-traditional families because it establishes family status (Galvin, 2006). In a single parent family naming of a child can become difficult depending on the parent situation, or deciding on the child's last name. Naming is constantly revisited in non-traditional families (Galvin, 2006). The differences within a family plays a role in the amount of discussion that goes on about the different family

situations (Galvin, 2006). *Discussion* within a family is key to a supportive and positive climate, and allows the family to decide how to handle challenges (Galvin, 2006).

Every family tells stories and the more diverse a family the more complex their narration process (Galvin, 2006). Stories bring together all the different parts of a family and give the family a purpose and cohesion (Galvin, 2006). According to Galvin (2006), single parent family stories can give clarity to the questions of “how did we get here?” Last, *ritualizing* gives meaning to the emotional side of families (Galvin, 2006). All families have rituals whether it is a holiday, vacations, or mundane routines, but non-traditional families can struggle with this because of their diversity. Single parent families may struggle with developing their own rituals or what rituals to keep from previous families (Galvin, 2006).

Single parent families rely on discourse within their families and outsiders to maintain and build their internal and external identities. Galvin’s ideas on discourse-dependent families explain the mechanisms single parent families use to deconstruct negative stereotypes.

### **Family Units and Generational Differences**

Unique family structures are developing daily, and they are revamping the definition of family. Family structure is viewed through the lens of being married or being divorced. Society divides people into these categories whether it be a simple question on an application or deciding how to complete yearly taxes. Although marriage rates are at their lowest, divorce rates are at their lowest too in 30 years (Davis, 2018). Divorce is at an all-time low since the 70s because of the decline of marriages in America

(Davis, 2018). This change is affecting how society views family structures and influencing current generations to see unique as normal (Davis, 2018).

Generational views have shaped American society by how organizations function, our children's expectations, and societal views on the characteristics of a family. The way a generation views a traditional family shapes how families see themselves and how future generations will react to those stereotypes. Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z are four of the most involved generations that have shaped our current society's views on families. Baby Boomers includes anyone born between 1943-1960, Generation Xers were born between 1961-1981, and Millennials were born between 1982-2000, and Generation Z were born between 1995-2012 (Reeves & Oh, 2008) (Singh, 2014). These generations play a vital role in how families are viewed.

**Baby Boomers (1943-1960).** Baby Boomers make up the largest portion of our society today. In the 40s and 50s, the ideal family had two parents, who were married, and the mother stayed home while the father worked outside the house. Boomers have an optimistic outlook on life and strive to make themselves better (Reeves & Oh, 2008). Howe and Strauss (2000) explain that the problems Boomers have with today's families in the workplace, gender roles, authority, schedules, and their way of life is because things are extremely different from the ways they were raised. Single parent families in the Baby Boomer time-frame developed through the death of a parent and was not seen as a societal norm (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The idea of having only one parent was non-existent, because family was seen as two-parents, with siblings, and a strong belief in togetherness. The traditional family has shifted from a two-parent family to many different forms since the 50s. Baby Boomers value the belief of balancing work and

family, and it is this ideal that can lead to a non-understanding of single parent-families of today (Andert, 2011). Also, Baby Boomers' beliefs in commitment, optimism, and personal gratification (Andert, 2011) may lead to the understanding of why this generation is raising, or have raised, their grandkids that come from single parent homes.

**Generation X (1961-1981).** Generation X exhibits some of the same values as Baby Boomers but present major differences. Children from the Gen X era experienced countless movements that changed their culture including feminism, civil rights, gay rights, suggesting parents consider themselves before their children, and *Roe v. Wade* (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Their values about family life were distant, and having children was an option not a desire (Reeves & Oh, 2008). Children from this era were labeled as the latchkey kids (Andert, 2011), and were alienated most of the time from their parents according to Reeves and Oh (2008). This generation encouraged the ideals of mutual independence and detachment between parent and child, and stressed how these ideals affected the parent-child relationship (Howe & Strauss, 2000). According to research, the 60s and 70s were labeled as the fastest growing time period for single parent households, increasing from 5% to 13% in 1980 (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Many single parent children of this generation felt abandoned and increased feelings of resentment towards their parents, and found themselves in a chaotic and broken world of child care (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Generation X found themselves in the midst of a damaged society that started the era of single parent families. The values and beliefs of Generation X play a pivotal role in the development of stereotypes of single parent families today.



**Millennials (1982-2000).** Millennials are the second largest generation of today. This generation is “optimistic, civic duty minded, confident, achievement focused, social, moral with street smarts and a solid awareness of diversity” (Adert, 2011, p. 73).

Millennials have been influenced by technology, diversity, sexual alignment, and non-traditional families (Adert, 2011). This generation stresses the importance of attachment to children and a more involved family life than Generation X (Reeves & Oh, 2008). In this generation, researchers discovered a major increase in single-mother and single-father households. Millennials are growing up with more single parents than other generations, and are accompanied with the stereotype of kids being arrested, having educational problems, and suicide (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Regardless, Millennials are determined to have a mindset that children are important, and desire a change from Generation X. Overall, single parent families face a large amount of stress, scrutiny, and judgment from different generations, but Millennials are trying to overcome society’s views and help single parent families become less castigated (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The traditional family has changed over the years, and non-traditional families are becoming the majority. Regardless, society has developed many negative stereotypes for single parent families, but hopefully, over time Millennials can change society’s views and help develop a more optimistic view of single parenthood.

**Generation Z (1995-2012).** Generation Z is growing and is being raised in a world filled with conflict. Singh (2014) refers to this generation as the “Digital Natives” and they are implemented in a society filled with terrorism and worldly concerns. In America’s society, Generation Z makes up 25.9% and, by 2019 their numbers will grow drastically and will exceed over 30 million (Tulgan, 2013) (Beall, 2017). They portrayed as tech

savvy, concerned about global problems, and are more tolerant and receptive of diverse cultures and their unique family styles (Singh, 2014). Their emerging characters consist of, being prematurely mature, pampered, empowered, risk takers, and protected (Singh, 2014)

Generation Z is being brought up in a completely different world than Baby Boomers, Millennials, and Generation X'ers, and play a role in how society views unique families. They are being brought up in a world where they are in constant communication with people, and they will go to great length to sustain this connectivity (Tulgan, 2013). They have lower attention spans due to ever changing apps, there are viewed as excellent multi-taskers, they pay less attention to prices, going into the workforce at an early age is more appealing, a greater chance at becoming entrepreneurs, they have high expectations for life, focused on their individuality, and are universally global (Beall, 2017). They are the new emerging generation, and their ideals will significantly impact the future. Generation Z differs from other generations because they have lower expectations, cautious when it comes to confidence, and their demands are moderately meek (Talgan, 2013). Generation Z reflects a whole new way of looking at diversity, and are “ever changing their own personal montage of selfhood options” (Singh, 2014, pp. 61). Generation Z is open to newer ideas, diverse human connections, and unique family structures (Tulgan, 2013).

There are many articles about single parent families struggling with education, finances, and parental fulfillment, stressors of everyday life, but little is known on what it actually means to live in a single parent household. Understanding why Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, Millennials, and Generation Z have developed stereotypes about single

parent families, and how each family has challenged these prevailing negative stereotypes can help society appreciate and know what it is like living in a single parent home.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 has provided an overview of single parent mothers and fathers, and how they are faced with the challenge of conquering societies stereotypes. Furthermore, Chapter 2 gives an insight into how future and present generations play a role in the development of single parent family stereotypes. Chapter 3 offers information about the methodological grounding provided by the Narrative Paradigm.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGICAL GROUNDING

#### **Chapter Preview**

Chapter 3 provides insight about the narrative paradigm and explains how people are natural born storytellers. I also explain how to successfully tell stories using the five storytelling languages and how to organize a successful storytelling performance.

#### **The Narrative Paradigm**

Stories are a way for people to remember the past and look towards the future, and they inspire people to connect to themselves or others. According to Fisher (1989), humans can be called *Homo narrans*. The term *Homo narrans* means people are natural born storytellers, symbol-using animals, and share their life experiences with those around them (Fisher, 1989). People use symbols in a way to communicate their stories hoping to establish a connection with one another, find common ground, and confirm the story is part of their lives (Fisher, 1989). Narration is more than telling stories but a figure itself, or a type of “human interaction, an activity, an art, a genre, or a mode of expression” (Fisher, 1989, pp.62). Narration is a form of communication and can help people recount or account for their choices or actions (Fisher, 1989). Recounting can take the form of biographies, autobiographies, or history, while accounting is a form of explanation and argument. Both, recounting and accounting, can be seen through the lens

of poetry, drama, discourse, and any form of communication (Fisher, 1989). Fisher (1989) explains, how these concepts fuel the desire to tell stories to ourselves and others to establish meaning within the real world. Narratives have the power to change people's lives and are an influential tool when communicating important ideals.

When using the narrative paradigm, there are five concepts that make up its foundation. First, humans are naturally born storytellers (Fisher, 1989). People have a desire to share their lives with others through the mode of stories. Second, the paradigmatic mode of decision-making is fueled by moral reasons which can vary from person to person (Fisher, 1989). Third, these moral reasons are shaped and influenced by history and past generations (Fisher, 1989). Fourth, rationality is determined by the nature of people being storytellers. Last, the world is made up different types of stories that people choose and recreate to live their lives (Fisher, 1989). Also, when using narrative it is important to take into consideration four features that help further explain the theory. The narrative paradigm has the ability to resolve dualism, provide moral constructs, is consonant with the concept of reason, and offers a way to solve moral arguments (Fisher, 1989).

All people tell stories, and viewing discourse through the lens of the narrative paradigm helps establish insight into those stories. Stories are the fabric connecting the people who tell them to their reality, or they can be called "rhetorical fictions" constructed of facts and beliefs (Fisher, 1989). Narrative is interwoven into people's beings and is part of the natural process of socializing, and narrative is a feature of life and crosses through all generations (Fisher, 1989). Narratives create "meaning for persons in particular and in general, across communities as well as cultures, across time

and place” (Fisher, 1989, pp. 65-66). Narratives have the ability to create clarity and establish rationality and fidelity within people’s lives. Rationality and fidelity are part of the narrative paradigm. Narrative rationality offers an understanding of human choices and creates room for critique (Fisher, 1989). Rationality is paired with hierarchy and implies people judge the stories they hear to be true but not all stories told are true, and not everyone is equipped to tell them (Fisher, 1989), although, the narrative paradigm implies all people have the ability to tell stories with a sense of cohesion and fidelity. According to Fisher (1989), the narrative paradigm is a “fabric woven of threads of thought from both the social sciences and the humanities...and seeks to account for how persons come to believe and to behave” (p. 98).

### **Five Storytelling Languages**

Telling stories has been a form of communication across all generations and cultures. Stories bring life to things once passed and excitement for the future.

Storytelling is capable of transforming ideals and connecting people together.

Storytelling, unlike writing, has five languages which draws the audience in and helps the audience to understand the most important thing of the story (Davis, 2000). First, the language of gesture. Gesture creates a picture of the scene and describes objects (Davis, 2000, p. 34). Gestures help create the story’s environment and construct a world around the audience. A storytellers facial expressions can give context in a horror story or portray pure joy in a fantasy story. Second, the language of sound. Sounds are all around us and have an impact on our daily lives. Whether it be the sounds from music, cars, babies crying, or keys typing on a keyboard society is motivated and affected by sound. Davis (2000) explains, “by using pitch, volume, and intonation, the sound of our words

helps listeners understand what is happening in the story” (p. 39). Third, the language of attitude. The idea of bringing attitude into a story helps portray feelings (Davis, 2000). Society is interwoven with emotions and those emotions come out in many different forms. The feeling of happy, sad, anger, boredom, or many other emotions connects the audience on an emotional level, and possibly resurrects their own memories allowing connection on a different level (Davis, 2000, p. 41). Attitude, paired with sound and gesture, is a powerful tool for storytellers to create another dimension for their stories (Davis, 2000, p. 43). Fourth, the language of feedback. Telling a story is not the whole picture, being able to respond to the audience and take feedback is crucial (Davis). Feedback has the ability to help improve, correct, or guide future stories (Davis, 2000, p. 47). The ability to read the audience feedback, verbal or non-verbal, can help guide the story. Lastly, the language of words. A world without words would be meaningless. Words shape characters, people, places, environments and connect people (Davis, 2000, p. 48). When telling a story, the word choice the teller uses is crucial because they have the power to open the listeners imaginations and picture the story. Each one of these languages is important and all together they create a vibrant, stimulating, remarkable story.

### **Successful Storytelling Program**

The ability to effectively use these languages may be combined with Elizabeth’s Ellis’s idea of how to construct a successful program (Stallings, 1997). There are four categories in the sequences; *ha-ha*, *aha*, *ahhh*, and *amen* (Stallings, 1997). Starting a program with a funny story helps get the audience on the storyteller’s side and builds trust between the teller and their audience (Stallings, 1997). Afterwards, the storyteller

shares a story with a plot twist or a surprise ending intriguing the audience and ignite their imaginations (Stallings, 1997). Next, it is important to connect with the audience's emotions and tell a heartfelt or deep story allowing the audience to see within themselves (Stallings, 1997). Ending, the storyteller concludes with an "amen" story inspiring hope (Stallings, 1997). The "amen" story inspires the audience to go into the world and make a difference with the confidence they will succeed (Stallings, 1997). The five languages, paired with Ellis's sequence, creates a perfect symphony of attributes that when put together produce an exhilarating performance.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 3 provides insight into the narrative paradigm and how all people are natural storytellers. Chapter 3 explains the importance of the five languages when telling a story: gesture, sound, attitude, feedback, and word, concluding with the importance of organizing a successful storytelling performance to be able to connect and draw in the audience.



## CHAPTER IV

### PERFORMANCE PLAN

By using the five languages of storytelling, the performance answered the questions: Why is learning about single parents families important and what is it like living in a single parent home? I believe, by telling other single parent families' stories, and my own, I informed the audience of the struggles, disavowed stereotypes, and emphasized positive qualities of this unique family system. By telling their stories, I helped challenge America's views on single parent families and how they construct their home life. I performed in the Blackburn Reading Room in the Cornette Library. The Frank M. Blackburn room is warm, intimate, and surrounded by old books, which provides for a setting appropriate to discuss generational views of single parent families there were four tables, each with different colored roses, symbolizing the most important element of each single parent's story. Each rose color has a different meanings and their meanings were reflected in the attitude of their stories. Storytelling, and the narrative paradigm, gave me a motivating vehicle to use to eloquently tell their stories, and the importance behind why this unique family structure should be explored.



*Figure 1: Bouquets representing each narrative*

My performance was evaluated by my thesis committee members and their narratives about the performance comprise the final chapter of my thesis in addition to my own self-evaluation. The performance videotaped, with a copy of the DVD included in my completed thesis.

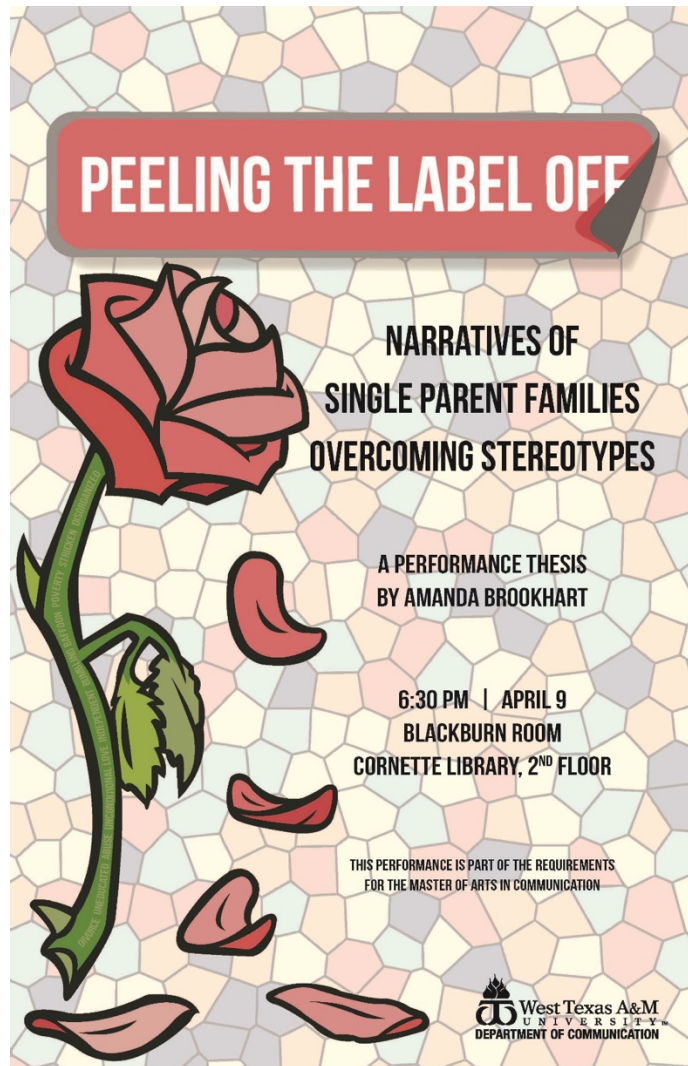
I used three different types of criteria when choosing my narratives. First, the narrators had to be single parents, or a single parent child, either by choice, divorce, death, unseen reasons, and from different generations. Second, their stories needed to discuss how they dealt with one or multiple stereotypes as a single parent family or single parent child, and discuss how those stereotypes affected their family structure and themselves. Last, the narratives had to portray how they, the single parent family or child, overcame or peeled off those stereotypes. The importance of seeing how single parent families overcome stereotypes has the potential to persuade the reader or audiences to change their own negative ideals about single parent families their children. The narratives came from public cites, blogs, or conference pieces throughout America. After reading 20 narratives I reached saturation and chose three, and my own personal

narrative as a single parent child, that met the criteria and showed their struggles and how they overcame single parent stereotypes.

### **Publicity**

To make the public aware of my performance, I distributed posters designed by graphic designer Brittney Thoene. This poster depicted my vision of the performance—a single rose with some petals dropping to the ground. On the stem of the rose were such words as *divorce, uneducated, abuse, unconditional love, independent, bumbling buffon, poverty stricken, disorganized*. The poster is pictured in Figure 1.

With the assistance of Deborah Howard, the Public Relations Assistant for the Department of Communication, I sent press releases to the local print publications and to the WTAMU Office of Communication, Marketing Services and Events. The complete text of the press release is included as Appendix A.



*Figure 2: Performance Poster*

Because a printed program allows the audience to understand whose narratives I am performing, I put together a program, using the poster design as the program cover, including a brief biography and the titles of the pieces I performed. A copy of the printed program is included as Appendix B.

### **Script**

The definition of a “normal” family has changed greatly over the years and what was once considered a unique family situation is becoming more prevalent. Single parent

families are becoming more common and understanding their struggles can help peel off negative labels given over the years. [Put on S. E. Smith's name tag]

### "I'm Over The Bumbling Single Dad' Stereotype"

By: S. E. Smith

[start by standing] I was raised by a single father in a household with a shoestring budget — and sometimes the shoestring was perilously close to snapping [snap] altogether. He was a bartender and later an English professor, picking up an adjunct position at the junior college that paid not much better than his job at the bar, though at least it had better hours. He dealt with a culture that's often hostile to single parents, male and female alike, for different reasons, but when we talk about single parents and stereotypes, we rarely have the [act like you are confused] 'what about the menz?' conversation that needs to happen, because men raising children alone encounter hostility too. More importantly, it plays into the way we talk about women and parenting.

[Move left center] I'm not just talking about the people who were convinced that my father was kidnapping me, who would lean in to ask me [act like your whispering into an ear] if I was okay and if I needed any 'help' when they saw me alone with my father. Or the people who thought that my father and I were involved in some kind of [act like a creeper] creepy May/December romance when they saw the two of us out together when I was a teenager (yes, this actually happened). Or the people who argued that I would fundamentally miss out on important moments in the life of a young girl — for I still identified with my assigned gender at the time — by not having a female influence (similar, though not identical to, claims that children can't be raised by single mothers because they need a strong father figure, whatever that means).

Today, I'm thinking about the stereotype of single dads as benevolent, bumbling [say with a dumb accent] buffoons who don't know the first thing about parenting and can't keep it together. This stereotype is especially popular in film and television (hello, Judd Apatow), where we see 'hilarious' depictions of bro culture at its worst as perplexed men attempt to cope with babies, young children, and teenagers. There's an implication that men can't take care of children alone.

[Move to right center] Single dads absolutely do struggle with raising kids — though they can access gender-associated privileges to make this easier through tools like earning more and getting more respect than single moms — but it's not because they're inept and helpless in the lives of their children. It's because raising kids is hard [show expression with your face], no matter how many parents are involved in a household, and dealing with children of any age presents challenges that parental gender cannot overcome.

But I'm particularly tired of hearing that single dads can't provide basic care to their kids, because it's a ridiculous stereotype that reinforces some negative attitudes about fathers in general, single and otherwise. You know the myth: The bro [say with a bro voice] who can't change a diaper, doesn't know how to soothe a crying infant, can't cook to save his life, doesn't know how to deal with the hormonal shifts young women experience, can't help his kids buy clothes, can't decide how to walk the balancing line between parent and pal.

[elevate voice] All of this is utter tripe. Women are put in the position of being expected to be caregivers — they'll be shamed if they don't know how to do these things, even if they've never had a model for doing so, but for men it's expected and almost

comic. A sort of ‘well, [look perplexed and frustrated] boys will be boys’ thing pervades these kinds of attitudes and in turn flips the load back on women and the expectations we have of them. Since dads can’t handle the basics of parenting, obviously someone needs to, and that person is a woman, a mother.

[come off kind and warm] I have two older half-sisters, so believe me, my father knows how to deal with a diaper, and he can do it efficiently and in record time. He also knows how to deal with a crying child, how to spot colic and upset and differentiate it from fussiness — all skills that people insist that women should have and men can live without. He can cook, and cooked meals for us every night using fresh but affordable ingredients because we didn’t have money for luxuries. And he was prepared to deal with the dramas and crises that accompany growing up as a woman in this culture, right down to picking up pads at the grocery store without comment.

He trusted me to make my own decisions, and backed me if I got in trouble but let me have my own learning experiences. As I aged, our relationship to each other shifted: Now, he’s a friend but also a relative when I was young, he was a relative but also a friend. He didn’t live the draconian dad stereotype complete with strict curfew and ominous warnings to prospective partners, but he’d defend me in a heartbeat [put hands over heart] if I was actually in danger or trouble.

[place hands by your side and be serious] To hear single dads treated like doofuses who can’t raise their kids is insulting to single dads who raise their kids every day — and in every way. And it’s also a strange insult to women as well, feminizing the work of raising children and simultaneously denigrating it by delegating it to women. It must not be very important, after all, if it’s only a skill that women need and men can

coast by without it. It's a classic and infuriating case of the double bind of sexism and how it harms all genders: By fighting the stereotypes surrounding single dads, we can also chip away at one angle of the hostility directed at single moms, too.

Single fathers are constantly overlooked and the majority of research focuses on single mothers leaving single fathers forgotten. Single fathers are smart, encouraging, and have the ability to nurture their children as well as mothers. There are many challenges of being a single father and Dave Taylor fights to peel them away [Move down center to next table, while putting on next name tag]

“The Challenge of Becoming a Single Father”

By: Dave Taylor

[start with arms on legs leaning towards audience, and move down center] No one goes to the altar expecting to end up divorced, but it's a distressingly common occurrence nonetheless.

Couples get together with the very best of intentions, full of hopes and dreams, white picket fences, 2.5 kids, or even a penthouse uptown. A life together, a future as a team, and perhaps some little people added to the mix.

That's what was running through my head when I walked up the aisle almost 18 years [sit back in chair] ago, anxious, teary and excited to take the next step in my life with the woman I loved.

Then we had [count with fingers] one, two, three children and somehow bringing tiny little people into the mix didn't make our relationship any easier, didn't help us find a common ground and get along smoothly. Every parent knows this, but you have to find out yourself anyway: having a child is hugely stressful on a relationship.



[stand up and move down right and then down left] We tried to make it work. We talked, we tried different approaches to parenting, we worked with counselors, we went to workshops and seminars. But that fateful day came to pass where we just realized that, kids or no kids, we were really not making it as a couple and were both perpetually unhappy and resentful. [spilt with hands and disappointing voice] So we split up. Theoretically, to have a break from each other, but I could read the writing on the wall and started preparing myself for what ended up being a long, contentious divorce.

***Single parenting is hard. Single fathering is even harder.***

I suddenly found myself a single dad, with children who were 10, 6 and 3. And [talk with a slight panic in voice and pace] while I'd always been an active, involved dad, it was a completely different experience when I didn't have someone to help out if I was getting frustrated, was tired, not feeling well, or just had a vision of things going one way while they were quite clearly headed in another direction.

Like going from tag-team wrestling to having to take on the other opponent solo. Worse, in a lot of situations, far from "having your back", your ex can be eagerly waiting to point out your failings, digging that knife in just a bit [jabbing motion] deeper, while telling the children "daddy has issues, but at least you have me."

***Let me be blunt. It's not easy being a single parent.***

I think it's tougher on us men, however, because we aren't raised to nurture [have worry in your voice] and be empathetic. In fact, Western society does its best through a culture of shaming, bullying, crass images of masculinity and dismal media portrayals of fathers to teach us men that we're just not going to be successful parents.

[the next two paragraphs stand down center, with a serious voice]

We don't tote babies around when we're little, we aren't the one hired to babysit the twins down the street when we're in our teens, we're instead pushed to physical activities, sports, video games and other activities that emphasize the testosterone factor rather than help us learn how to balance it with the more traditionally "feminine" aspects of humanity.

And so retrospectively, it's no surprise to me that the first year of my single parenthood was damn hard. I had always been the disciplinarian in our household, the one who actually had - and enforced - rules and behaviors. Suddenly life was about a lot more than just being the drill instructor and I didn't know how to handle it. A crying toddler? A grumpy daughter because a boy snubbed her? A boy devastated because he failed to make the winning shot? All new because I couldn't rely on mom to be the sympathetic parent.

It was rocky, and there were definitely moments I look back on with great sadness [alter voice to sound sad, and pace from down right and down left] and disappointment. I could have done better, I could have handled them better. Or perhaps not. Perhaps the journey of man to loving father does require some turbulence along the way.

[speak in a manner you are not surprised] Interestingly, my ex's household was chaos for years because as a single mom she faced the opposite challenge, that she's wonderfully sympathetic and therefore rarely had rules and certainly hated to enforce them or impose consequences for violations. Her household was a zoo, with no bed times, no meal times, all replaced by lots of mom/kid cuddling and sharing.

Time has a way of healing and improving things, and after almost 7 years of flying solo [be sentimental], I've learned a few things about finding the balance between

innate male reactions and the need for a child to have a parent who is present, who is tough when needed but who is also sympathetic. Sometimes a hug and a treat are the best response while other occasions require a time out or extra chore.

What I will share with any man who is just stepping into this new world of single parenting is to take a deep breath [actually take a deep breath] and let go of your expectations. [open hand to audience and stand in down center until the end] Parenting really isn't about tomorrow as much as it is about this very moment. Rules are good, but their little hearts, their expectations, their dreams are what it's all about, so pay attention. Listen. Don't "fix" things that don't need fixing. And have fun. It took me years to be able to really just relax and enjoy my children.

And cut yourself slack. It's a tough job, this solo parenting thing. You'll make mistakes, but with positive intention and love, you'll all make it through. If it's going really poorly? Reach out and get some help. No shame in that, brother.

Having a family is hard and asking for help can be even harder, but being a single parent it is crucial to know there are people willing to help and you are not alone.

Remember you are not alone, something Becca felt most of her life [Move upstage left and peel off Dave's name tag and put on Becca's name tag]

"Becca"

By Rebecca Smith

[Move upstage left and start by sitting on a stool] My story begins with me being born into a home of instability. I had a mother who had two daughters already from previous relationships and I had a father who was in the process of losing his way from the Lord. They were married for the first 2 years of my life. The home was very

tumultuous, there was constant fighting, yelling, screaming. My mom would go into fits of rage and break things. She also was physically abusive to my dad. It was very unstable but at the time being 2 years old, it was all I knew. And I had a mother and father and a sister who lived under one roof. Our home. There's a lot to be said for a feeling of home, even an unstable home. When I was 2 years old my mother decided that being a mom and married wasn't for her so she left. It was her pain cycle. When things got to be too much, to leave. I still remember the day she came back after having been gone a couple of days already. She had come back to [seem heartbroken with face and voice] say goodbye for good. She hugged me and told me she wouldn't be returning. I knew then what it was like to feel loss and abandonment. But at 2 my mind couldn't comprehend what was happening. I believe that's the first time I fully registered heartbreak.

[move hands back and forth] My dad moved my sister and me into his mother's house. She was elderly and unable to live alone. I moved from one unstable home straight into a highly dysfunctional one. I lived in this home from the time I was 2 until I moved out at 16. [look straight at audience] The feeling of being abandoned grew. It never left me. I was always alone. I would lay on my blanket at night and wonder why my mother had decided I wasn't someone she wanted in her life. I would wonder why my dad would rather be in a chat room online than talk to me. I would wonder why I wasn't enough.

[stand up and walk from upstage left to upstage right] When I was 16 I moved out of the house. I had a few jobs and I had an apartment above a garage. I was very naive to the world, but excited to be out on my own. Still the ache.. deep in my soul, wasn't lessening. Being naive in a big world, I got a job working in a restaurant and it was just like being thrown to the wolves so to speak. There were so many drugs and alcohol was

everywhere and for someone who never experienced school or any of the sort, I fell for it all. It was a very slow burn.

At 18 I married a guy I had known about a month. [come across to the audience as overwhelmed] We were wrapped up in drugs and convinced we loved each other. We were married a year and I even moved to Spokane Washington with him. He was caught up in things I had never imagined someone would be and so I left him and came back home to Amarillo. My job at the restaurant was open to me, [lift hands as in you are giving up] so I started back. Another hole had formed. A broken marriage. More darkness. More reason to run.

[Move to upstage left and sit back on the stool] By 21, after years of drugs and partying and lies, and deceit I had lost almost all of my friends, and I had burned a lot of bridges by my behaviors. This time it was endless drinking...but it was then I decided to move to NY. Parties every night. I had no real responsibilities, and I always managed to work and keep a steady job. I continued not having any respect for myself in the dating world and by 23 I was pregnant from a “fling”. I see this as the beginning of a turning point of change for me [talk with hope and bright eyes]. Even though that was 10 years ago, the process has been long and slow, but the Lord hasn’t stopped fighting for me.

[stand up] I decided to keep the baby, despite his insistence that I have an abortion to keep from ruining both our lives. [talk with urgency] I somehow convinced him that this child was a good thing and we decided to try and have a real relationship, which ultimately ended when she was 1. When I was 23 weeks pregnant with my daughter I went into labor. [Pace upstage left and right while elevating voice] This was a terrifying moment for me but one where I can distinctly remember feeling the Lord walking

through it with me. All the doctors told us there was little chance of survival and if she did live she would be severely impaired for life. I was not afraid [have a sober look on your face]. Somehow, which now I know was the Lord, I was convinced she would be fine. Nov 9th, 2006 after 72 hours of labor my daughter was born. Weighing 11lb and 9oz. She is now a perfectly healthy 9 year old and never had one issue except for breathing in the beginning and weight gain. She's my little miracle [bright smile]. When she was 1 year old her father deployed to Iraq for a year. By the time he returned she was 2 and he filed for full custody of her. I was a single mom, living with an unsteady boyfriend. Continuing my cycle of guy to guy to help fix me. He was a NYPD officer, a Sargent in the Army Reserves. He had a house and so on. [be completely defeated and heartbroken] The girl who's life I'd fought to keep, was taken from me. I lost custody of my girl. Just like that.

In the years that followed I spent a lot of time partying and not doing much with my life. Having my daughter on weekends, and [draw hands down] watching myself lose more and more of myself. In March of 2010 I reconnected online with an old boyfriend. He had been the only stable Christian person I knew while working at the restaurant, so when I met him I wanted what He had, which was Jesus. [slump down] I ended up breaking things off with him because everyone thought he was not cool enough. He didn't drink or do drugs. he read his Bible and drank Dr. Pepper. So when we reconnected at this point in my life all I wanted was stability. [begin talking normal and gradually speed up to the end of paragraph] And Christianity. I wasn't surrounded by anyone who knew of the Lord. We spoke online and on the phone for 3 months and then I flew to Amarillo to see him for the first time in 7 years. We were married in a big

backyard wedding in Bushland 2 days later. We have been married now 6 years. He came back to NY with me. We were poor, no jobs and living in a trailer. But we had the Lord and each other. I found out in July I was pregnant with our first child. By August we moved back to Amarillo. Unable to keep up with the financial strain that there was in NY. So we built our new life here in Amarillo Texas, our old home, but new to us as a married couple. Life threw at us 5 moves, and 3 babies in 6 years. With that came great joys and blessing, but also trials and separation in our marriage, in our unity.

So my turning point? My moment of understanding this about Him?

[sit down and speak with love and tenderness] He loves us no matter what we've done. No matter what the sin. No matter how broken. No matter what the world thinks is lost and damaged and of no use, too far gone, a waste. He sees His child. He sees His creation. He will continue to see you and me that way, no matter what we have done or continue to do. So in that if we can step into this unending grace, and accept His unconditional love, we can choose to chase Him back and all we will want to do is please Him. Follow Him. Seek Him. And walk in the fullness of joy.

My favorite scripture is written on my right arm.

*Psalm 16:11*

*You make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

I want that.

I'm going to chase that.

Being a single parent, mother or father, is difficult and the world can be cruel, but it is up to us to change those stereotypes and peel away those labels. We need to

encourage all types of families and raise children to love and understand the world. I was a single parent child and this is my story. My story is different because I was raised to not see myself as a victim and fight single parent child stereotypes from day one, and this is the joy of being a single parent kid. [Put on my name tag and move down center]

Amanda (Myself)

[Move to down center and talking straight at audience] I remember sitting in my elementary class on Father's Day looking around as all the kids were decorating cards [act like you are decorating cards] for their dads and finally realizing I was different. It was this day I realized I did not have a true father like traditional families but my family structure was unique [say in a positive way]. I have experienced all the troubles and difficulties of single parent families many times, but when I was putting my narrative together I wanted to show the opposite side of the spectrum. I wanted to show the joys, [speak in a joyful tone] connections, and how I chose to overcome and peel off single parent family stereotypes.

[Move down left] Growing up my mother instilled in me, at a young age, independence and the ability to not see myself as a victim of my circumstances [make a strong arm]. I learned how to wash my own clothes, fix my own food, do my own chores because in our household I was the "other" person. I remember financial struggles, people judging my mother, and negative comments but my mother held her head high and ignored the negativity. I remember watching her put a smile on her face, even in the hardest times, and tell me [smile and look hurt at the same time] "everything is going to be alright Amanda." One of my fondest memories is, when I was in middle school my mother and I would get Taco Bell tacos and rent \$.99 cent movies from Blockbuster, I



always rented the same movies which drove her crazy, and spend the evenings together enjoying our small and quite life [look whimsical]. We would do this activity once a week and it is still one of my favorite highlights growing up. Being a single parent kid was normal to me and my mother always made sure I had an excellent education and upbringing.

Growing up, I would try my best in school and try to be the best at anything the world through my way. In elementary and middle school I was made fun of often [seem sad and depressed], not for being a single parent child but my appearance, resulting in me being a shy and reserved person. Eventually, I found my calling for Band and Colorguard in high school and started to blossom into a vibrant person. Band, the directors Mr. Sealy and Mr. Rath, saw greatness inside of me [seem excited and vibrant] and consistently pushed me to be the best in Band, Colorguard, and school. I was never the top of my class but I graduated from high school, college, and now I am attaining my master degree. I never allowed my circumstances to stand in the way of my education or accomplishments.

Throughout the years, I would adopt father figures in my life and my greatest father figure was my Papa. [speak calmly and lovingly] My Papa was one of a kind and every day of my life, until he passed away nine years ago he would tell me, “Amanda, you can do anything you put your mind to and don’t let anyone hold you back!” If any of you know me, I am a force to be reckoned with and will achieve success no matter the circumstances. I have since made the Lord my number one father figure, and he has shown me He is all I need.

[Move down right and list items on your fingers] I have been made fun of, given up on many times, failed, told I would not be able to afford a higher education, and destined to be a single mother myself. I have faced all the stereotypes single parent children face and decided, like my mother and papa, I would not be labeled by the world. I peeled [pretend to peel petals off your arm] every negative comment off step by step throughout my life and decided to achieve greatness. I have graduated with my undergraduate degree, the second person in my family, and hopefully graduate with my Masters this Spring. I have won numerous awards, undergraduate and graduate, for papers I have written over the years when teachers thought I had a reading and writing disability, I had an amazing son with my husband, and I continue to break the mold of single parent children daily.

Negative stereotypes will continue to be part of America's society but it is up to us to stand up against them and fight for what is right. I am a single parent child but I have peeled off the labels, was not a victim, and broke through the stereotypes to simply become Amanda Sharlene Brookhart.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter IV is my script, including my own single parent child story paired with three other single parent related stories. for my thesis performance. The stories show the infrastructure of a single parent family and how each one peeled off negative stereotypes.

## CHAPTER V

### SELF-REFLECTION & EVALUATION OF PERFORMANCE

#### **Chapter Preview**

This chapter includes my reflection about the performance, as well as evaluations from each of my thesis committee members. My performance took place in the Blackburn Reading Room of the Cornette Library on April 9, 2019 at 6:30 p.m. There were approximately 20 audience members present. After an introduction by Dr. Hanson, I performed the script, “Peeling Off the Label: Narratives of Single Parent Families Overcoming Stereotypes.” Following the performance, there was a brief question and answer session.

#### **My Own Reflection**

The art of storytelling is a performance measure that comes natural to me. Dr. Hanson presented the idea of doing a performance thesis and I knew this was how I wanted to present my thesis. First, the sheer idea of reading through blogs and research to pick narratives was daunting but my knowledge on single parent families grew significantly through reading their stories and relating them back to my personal story.

I learned three major things from performing my thesis performance: emotional connection, laughter, and growing. I knew from performing stories before the importance of connecting to the audience on an emotional level was crucial for them to

be able to connect to the story, but it surprised me the emotional connection I developed to my narratives. I tried to portray the hardship, excitement, and empowerment each story gave to the audience. This task became easier with time because after reading through each story multiple times I developed a bond, an emotional connection, with each person who wrote the story. In my heart, I felt I knew each character personally, could feel their pain, and understood their hearts. The emotional connection I developed flowed through me as I presented each narrative. Second, I grasped the importance of laughter. I knew my performance piece was going to be emotional and connect with the audience on a deep level, but it was not until I performed for one of my professors that I understood the importance of laughter. My professor brought to my attention that I had the emotional connection but my personality needed to be present. I have a dry sense of humor and an ability to make people laugh, and my performance was lacking those characteristics. The day before my performance, I sat down and ran through each piece adding a little bit of “Amanda” in each narrative. While I was performing, I could feel the audience connecting more with each time my personality came out and it was then I understood the importance of inserting laughter moments, my personality, in each piece. Lastly, this performance not only grew my intellect on family structures but I grew as a person. This performance stretched my time management skills, performance skills, and opened my eyes to tolerance. I consider myself tolerant of most family structures, whether they align with my beliefs or not, but this performance helped me to see how

important tolerance is for any type of family structure. I have learned to agree to disagree on my ideals throughout my life, but I learned through this journey that families can take many forms and showing people their positive qualities, how we see them as a society, and to stand up for what is right is what matter the most. This performance has empowered me, even more than before, to go and reach out to single parent families and families in general to show them what resources are available, that they are significant and not alone, and most importantly they do not have to conform to negative stereotypes.

The one thing I would like to change about my performance is being able to share more stories of single parent children. The perspective of single parent children can differ between siblings and family members. I wanted to present different perspectives, single parents versus single parent children, but I feel there was a lack in how different genders deal with the stereotypes of single parent families. Especially, the view of male single parent children who grew up with a single parent. I believe expressing their views would have added a deeper emotional connection to the performance. The views of female versus male single parent children vary greatly and each of their views play a vital role in peeling of negative stereotypes.

Overall, this performance, and my graduate career, has given me a confidence I never thought I needed. I have grown monumentally throughout the past three years and have discovered and uplifted knowledge about single parent families. My desire is to go

out and show single parent families, new or old, the resources available to them as well as support for their unique family structure.

### **Evaluation Performance**

#### **Amanda Brookhart-Performance Thesis**

**By: Trudy L. Hanson**

On April 9, 2019, an audience of about 25 people listened intently to Amanda Brookhart's performance thesis, "Peeling the Label Off: Narratives of Single Parent Families, Overcoming Stereotypes" in the Cornette Library Blackburn Reading Room. From the moment Amanda delivered her opening story frame, we went with her on a journey that helped increase awareness of the challenges encountered by both parents and children of single parent families. As we entered the Blackburn Reading Room, the floral arrangements on black readers' theatre blocks captured our attention. Amanda had placed rose bouquets in four different colors (red, light orange, pink, and yellow) at the front of the room.



*Figure 3: Bouquets representing each narrative*

On tables at the perimeter of the room, Amanda had placed framed quotations. One of them read “Family is where life begins and love never ends.” The other read “Kindness is always in style.” Even the refreshments Amanda chose reflected the theme of her performance through decorated sugar cookies in the four main colors that she chose to symbolize the different emotions called forth by each of the four narratives. As Amanda related each of the narratives in her very relaxed conversational way, she placed a peel-off name tag on her shirt with the name of the person whose narrative she was relating. As each narrative ended, Amanda peeled off the label before moving to the next narrative. At the end of her own personal narrative, Amanda took off the nametag and carefully tore it to pieces which reinforced the words she was saying: “I peeled every negative comment off step by step throughout my life and decided to achieve greatness. . . . I will continue to break the mold of single parent children daily.”

Amanda’s arrangement of the four narratives was in keeping with storyteller Elizabeth Ellis’ suggested program order from Ha Ha, to Ah Ha, to Ahhh and finally Amen. While the content of the four narratives included difficult and sad moments, Amanda was able to bring a note of lightness to even the saddest parts through her delivery. Her careful preparation was evident in the pacing of the pieces and in the transitions she provided between each narrative. One of the lines that brought chuckles from the audience was when Amanda described the situation S. E. Smith’s father faced when purchasing tampons for his daughter: “And he was prepared to deal with the drama

and crises that accompany growing up as a woman in this culture, right down to picking up pads at the grocery store without comment.”

Amanda’s use of vocal emphasis and vocal variety also helped the audience “see” the unfolding narratives. She created a picture in our minds of each person’s story. As she moved from each flower arrangement to the next, the audience was able to easily follow the narrative and imagine what was happening in each account. She also provided variety in her stance, sitting in a wooden chair for a portion of Dave Taylor’s narrative and then sitting for a few moments on a stool as she related Rebecca Smith’s compelling story. One of the audience members following the performance came up to me and said, “I could see each person as Amanda told the story.” That type of response indicates that Amanda was successful in conveying the narrative.

Amanda’s choice of attire also reinforced her narrative. She was dressed in white and black which is a symbol of good and evil, but also symbolized the false dichotomy that we have for those we label as “single parents.”





*Figure 4: Amanda Brookhart Performing Single Parent Narratives*

Amanda's performance lasted about 30 minutes. Following the performance, we had a brief question and answer period. The content of the questions and the discussion that followed revealed that those present wanted to take the knowledge they gained from the performance and make changes in their church programs and other community based programs to better serve those we label as "single parents." Amanda Brookhart was successful in helping each of us "peel off the label" that we had unconsciously given to single parent families we know.

## **Evaluation of Performance**

### **Amanda Brookhart-Performance Thesis**

**By: Dr. Noah Franken**

Amanda Brookhart, in her performance of *Peeling Off the Label: Narratives of Single Parent Families Overcoming Stereotypes*, performed four narratives, including one about her own experiences, on the topic of single families and the myths that surround them. Her performance took place on April 9, 2019 in the Frank M. Blackburn Reading Room in the Cornette Library at West Texas A&M University. The room had the feeling of being open and full of light, and was decorated by Amanda with pots of flowers atop four small tables, each representing one of the four narratives Amanda performed. Cleverly, Amanda also wore separate name tags for each narrative, literally putting on the persona of each narrative's author before dispelling a stereotypes of single parent families and "peeling off the label," which she did at the conclusion of each narrative.

The structure of Amanda's performance attempted to follow Ellis's format of Ha Ha, Ah Ha, Ahhh, and Amen, but it seemed as if Ha Ha and Ah Ha dominated throughout; thus, the Ahhh and Amen moments could have been more pronounced. It was also the case that Amanda's transitions were strongest in the first half of the performance. More effective transitions into the Ahhh and Amen moments could have made these elements of the structure stand out more. Nonetheless, Amanda brought each narrative to life with a strong delivery. In the beginning, her nerves showed, but

quickly she got comfortable and embodied each author. Her movement across the “stage” was purposeful and confident, and her vocal delivery always matched the tone of the content.

However, I would have liked to have heard, during the performance, more about how each narrative was selected and how each fit into the performance as a whole. This could have been simple to do by adding a sentence or two in the introduction, or by including this information in the transitions, but as it did not come out until the question and answer segment, when Amanda spoke more about her methods (and, in fact, made a good case for how she selected the narratives). Overall, though, Amanda’s performance was entertaining and effective. Most audience members, I would guess, heard something in Amanda’s performance that did challenge an assumption they previously held.

Amanda Brookhart’s thesis presentation performance was held on April 9, 2019, but before it was ready for an audience many rehearsals were required. I was able to listen to her run-through the day before her scheduled performance and my evaluation notes will reflect accordingly.

Because this was a rehearsal, not all blocking elements and props were in place. This is an important step in getting to the bare bones of a story. Even without props, each persona was clearly identified. Her movements were reflective of the character which included natural use of gestures and space. Vocal elements were equally strong for creating a connection with each individual’s story.

## **Evaluation of Performance**

### **Amanda Brookhart-performance Thesis**

**By Paula Schlegel, MA**

Amanda's narrative selections on single parent families had impact, giving us a clear picture of something that is too often uncomfortable to look at and feels invasive to ask about. Her narratives did an excellent job of giving previously "unheard" voices a way to be heard.

Using Elizabeth Ellis's performance order of Ha Ha, Ah Ha, Ahhh, and Amen is an excellent way to draw audiences into a story trance and take them on a journey. The initial run through took me into a dark area too quickly and left me there too long. It began with the first story. It was powerful and was supposed to draw me in with humor. It had a few phrases that brought a smile, but needed to be expanded upon to make me laugh and then want to lean into the rest of the performance. We revisited that story after her rehearsal and noted key moments that could be developed for a full laugh and help build connection to the audience. Amanda was encouraged to let personality show without compromising each character's persona.

Overall, the performance was powerful. The research was incredibly interesting, but often hard to read because of the cognitive dissonance that was created so I was anticipating an emotional journey. Amanda delivered that well. Her ability to make me look deeper at this demographic was done in a way that was not judgmental, but gave

permission to really look. She raised awareness to something that we often give civil inattention with the intent of giving respect when in fact, we should open our eyes and LOOK directly at single parent families so that we can offer much needed support and give well earned praise.



*Figure 5: My Family: Brook, Amanda, and Owen Brookhart*

## **Limitations**

As I look back on my performance I have drawn out a major limitation. I chose 4 narratives, including my own, from a public domain that I felt best displayed single parent families peeling away negative stereotypes. The narratives show the internal

structure of a single parent family and how they each overcame negative stereotypes. The limitation I discovered was the restriction on the number of narratives I could perform. The ability to perform narratives from all the different types of single parent families would have given a true and deeper insight to the struggles of these unique family structures. I would have been able to show the point of view of single parents by choice, single parent by adoption, different genders of children of single parents, and the vast variety of these family structures. Nonetheless, the four narratives I chose gave a glimpse into the surface of single parent life, but with more narratives I feel the audience could have seen the complexity of single parent families.

### **Chapter Summary**

This project has been an monumental experience and has stretched my knowledge about single parent families. Single parent families face challenges and negative stereotypes every day making them a vital family structure to research. It is imperative to encourage society to peel away these stereotypes and to understand their family structure leading to my research question:

RQ: ‘Why is learning about single parent families important and what is it like living in a single parent home?’

Single parent families face stereotypes about their children, the parents’ personal life, well-being and economic status, and how their children are viewed in the educational system. These stereotypes affect their discourse interpersonal and intrapersonal.

Single parent families are slowly becoming the norm in America's society and understanding their internal family structure plays a role in their future of how we, as a society, view unique families.

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## Appendix A

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Graduate Student Performance Thesis to Focus on Single Parent Families

By

Deborah Howard

CANYON, TX. West Texas A&M Communication graduate student, Amanda Brookhart, will perform her master's thesis on April 9 in the Blackburn Reading Room of the Cornette Library at 6:30 p.m. Brookhart's thesis addresses the challenges of single-parenting stereotypes and how to overcome them.

Brookhart will perform personal narratives as part of her thesis to portray the different kinds of stereotypes single-parents face, as well as their children. Growing up in a single-parent home herself, Brookhart will share her own personal narrative. "Growing up my mother faced a lot of stereotypes, but she taught me that I am not a victim of my circumstances," Brookhart said. "My narrative focuses on the positive sides of things about how we created community with the two of us."

Brookhart said her research is important because it addresses how communication within family structures affects where people go in life. "The challenges people face within their families are going to go with them whether they go to college, or to a job, or whatever it

may be,” Brookhart said. “I’m trying to open up peoples’ minds to see that just because something is different does not mean it is bad and take those stereotypes, specifically over single parents and their children, off.”


Part of the research in her thesis also includes the origins of certain stereotypes. “I was interested in knowing how stereotypes developed through different family structures over several generations, because older generations have a stronger view of what a normal family is versus the generation today,” Brookhart said. “Now I feel like I understand where these stereotypes come from, and just like a weed, if you pull it from its roots it won’t come back.”

Sharing her personal story along with others in a narrative form gives Brookhart a chance to connect with her audience in a different way. “More people are willing to listen to and watch something, especially the current generation, versus reading my fifty page thesis,” Brookhart said. “I want to have an emotional connection with my audience as well as intellectual one, and I think hearing something from someone who has experienced it firsthand gives it more value.”

The performance is overseen by Dr. Trudy Hanson, who is directing Brookhart’s performance thesis, and thesis committee members: Dr. Noah Franken and Mrs. Schlegel. The performance is open to the general public. For additional information, contact Dr. Hanson at 806 651 2800 or by email, [thanson@wtamu.edu](mailto:thanson@wtamu.edu)

## Appendix B

### Program



*Peeling The Label Off*

Narratives of Single Parent Families  
Overcoming Stereotypes

**A Performance Thesis**



By  
*Amanda Brookhart*

**"I'm Over The Bumbling Single Dad  
Stereotypes"**  
By: S.E. Smith

**"The Challenges of Becoming a  
Single Father"**  
By: Dave Taylor

**"Becca"**  
By: Rebecca Smith

**"The Joys of Being a Single Parent  
Kid"**  
By: Amanda Brookhart



*Amanda Shawtene Brookhart*

Amanda has a B.A. in Speech Communication with an emphasis in Speech Performance from West Texas A&M University, and will be receiving her M.A. in Communication in May of 2019. Amanda was awarded Top Student Paper from the Rhetorical and Communication Theory Interest Group at the Texas Speech Communication Association in 2018, awarded Best Graduate Presentation Award at the 2018 WT Student Research Conference, and has performed many creative stories at community events and WTAMU's Storytelling Festival. Her hope is to follow the path the Lord has for her and peel the negative labels off of all unique family structures.

*Acknowledgements*

I am truly honored and blessed to not only share my own story, of being a single parent child, but of other single parent families who have struggled to peel off negative stereotypes. Most importantly, I want to thank God for giving me the courage to leap into this graduate school life and allowing me to learn more than I could have imagined.

Also, I owe my success to my beloved husband, Brook Brookhart. He has supported me through this journey and has been my number one supporter...this one is for you!

And I dedicate this performance to my handsome son, Owen Brookhart, may you grow up fighting for what is right! Thank you to everyone who has helped me along this journey...family, friends, and my WONDERFUL professors!

