

Being a single parent in Scotland: how well do we do?

September 2018

How well do single parents think they are doing?

Do all single parents think they are doing equally well?

How do single parents compare to other groups?

Why this matters

When others are hard on us, it might be understandable that we think less of ourselves. It is widely accepted that too many single parents personally encounter stigma and that all-too-often negative messages are shared in the media about the problems caused by single parenthood. Fighting stigma is one of the core campaigns of OPFS. It is important that we consider if this broader context of negative messaging is reflected in how well single parents think they are doing in managing different aspects of their lives.

What do we already know?

There is a large pool of evidence that tells us that single parents face higher risks in society. For example a recent OPFS briefing: [Single Parent Families, Benefit Conditionality and Wellbeing: Necessary, Just, Effective?](#) tells us that single parents face societal barriers such as social exclusion, living in poverty, labour market discrimination and mental health issues. We know that some groups of single parents have built resilience despite facing these challenges and are able to develop positive perceptions of their lives. This is noted in the book chapter: [Variety of Transitions into Lone Parenthood](#) where Bernardi and Larenza (2018) report that teenage mothers often have a positive outlook in life in that their role allows them to develop focused life goals such as returning to education, despite facing stigma on a regular basis. However, this is not the case for all single parents. Therefore, it is important we develop a fuller picture of how well single parents perceive themselves to be doing in different areas of their lives.

Our research

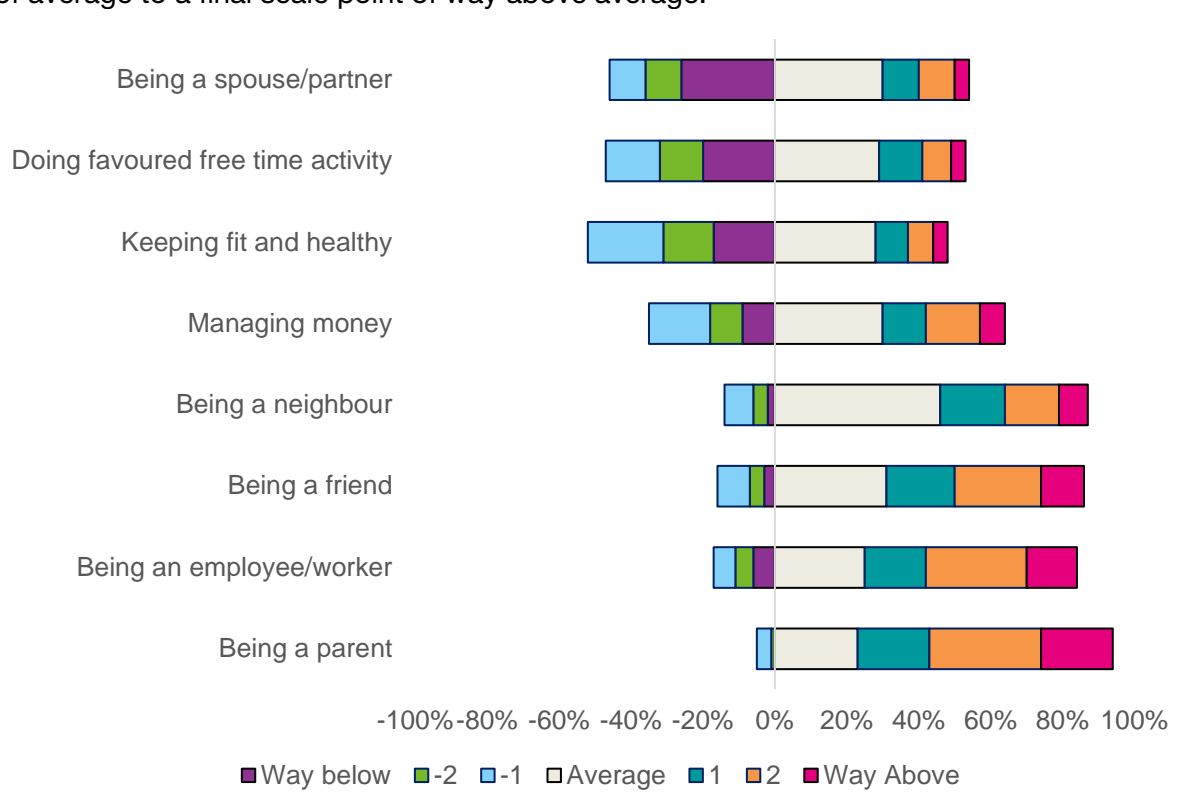
This is the fifth of seven research briefings arising from the Single Parent Community Connections project. With the support of the European Union and the Scottish Government, this [Social Innovation Fund](#) project has two aims. First, it aims to better understand isolation and loneliness among single parents in Scotland. Second, it aims to use this knowledge to design and deliver practical service delivery options to tackle these problems.

An online survey was designed by the [Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit](#) and approved by One Parent Families Scotland. Almost 900 single parents completed the survey in the Spring of 2018. The survey was introduced as aiming to find out more about the nature of the challenges that single parents face in Scotland and to explore what could be done to address them. Single parents' appraisal of how they compared to 'the average

person' was one of the broader issues that were explored to better understand whether having a more positive sense of self impacts on social isolation and loneliness. The numbers that are reported in this briefing have been quality assured, including weighting some results to ensure that they are representative of single parents in Scotland, as a whole. Twelve in-depth interviews were also undertaken across Scotland to explore the key issues in greater depth. The anonymity of participating parents is protected in this briefing. More details about the research can be provided on request.

Findings - What's the big picture?

We asked single parents to compare themselves to the *average* person for eight aspects of their life, using a seven point scale that ranged from way below average through a mid point of average to a final scale point of way above average.



On the whole, it seems that single parents are more likely to view themselves more positively (than negatively) in relation to the average person. We took away one point for every negative self-evaluation and added one point for every positive self-evaluation. We then added up the scores for the eight things we researched. We found that one in every ten single parents returned an overall score of zero (12%), meaning that they see themselves, on the whole, as being comparable to the average person. Among the remainder, single parents are slightly more likely to have a more positive self-appraisal (48%), than a more negative experience (42%).

For the individual competencies, there were both positive and negative findings. On a positive note, single parents were much more likely to see themselves as being above average in terms of being a parent, friend or neighbour. The only negative self-appraisal in

terms of personal relationships was the perception that they were below average in terms of being a partner. More negative outlook was also given over to aspects of well-being, with single parents thinking that they were less good at their favoured free time activity and less good at keeping healthy.

Interestingly, single parents consider themselves to be better than average employees and - despite the challenges of managing life on what is often a low income – they were equally split as to whether they were above, below or at average in terms of managing money.

Findings - Are there key differences among single parents?

Working single parents (whether full-time or part-time) are more likely than non-working single parents to consider themselves to be above average when compared to the average person.

Work Status	Below average	Average	Above Average
Not in paid work	42%	18%	40%
Part-time paid work	31%	7%	62%
Full-time paid work	27%	12%	62%

Although differences among other groups of single parents were also observed, these tended to reflect the impact of work status. For example, differences between single parents in different housing tenures (owner-occupiers, compared to renters and those in temporary accommodation) tend to reflect that work status influences tenure. There is nothing particular to tenure that makes it more likely that single parents will view themselves in a more favourable light.

Findings - Are single parents different?

There is very little research on what [Bruce Headey and Alex Wearing](#) called a 'sense of relative superiority' back in 1985 and therefore it is difficult to compare single parents in Scotland to groups elsewhere and to make judgement on whether there is difference. Headey and Wearing's study was undertaken in the Australian state of Victoria – a very different time and place to contemporary Scotland. Interestingly, they found very little variation among the population (single parents in Victoria were not markedly different to other groups). Even more significantly, for each and every role/competency that was considered, single parents in Scotland are much less likely to convey a sense of relative superiority. Some of these differences may not be surprising, for example in 1985 78% of Australian Victorians thought that they were 'above average' as a spouse/partner, compared to only 20% of single parents in contemporary Scotland. Others are more surprising, for example, in 1985 76% of Australian Victorians thought that they were 'above average' as a friend, compared to 54% of single parents in contemporary Scotland. Interestingly, Headey and Wearing suggested that a well-developed social network that provides 'positive feedback' may be one reason that explains why Australian Victorians had such a positive sense of self. It is worth exploring whether isolation and loneliness is contributing to a less positive sense of self among single parents in contemporary Scotland.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the suggestion that single parents view themselves less positively than others, there is also much evidence that single parents in Scotland think they are doing well. This is particularly relevant to how they see themselves within their immediate and wider social networks with the exception of a negative perception with regards to relationships with ex-spouses/partners. Other key negative perceptions include health and free time. This is an important finding given that the literature has previously identified health inequalities as an area which is challenging for single parents. As in the other briefings in this series, the findings also illuminate the role of work, with non-working single parents having a more negative self-perception than those in employment.

Referencing this paper

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