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## EXPERIENCE OF UNPLANNED MATERNITY: CASE STUDIES OF TWO YOUNG SINGLE MOTHERS IN BELGRADE<sup>2</sup>

### Iskustvo neplaniranog majčinstva: Studije slučaja dve vanbračne majke iz Beograda

**ABSTRACT:** *The paper is based on the analysis of narratives from the case studies of two young single mothers from the longitudinal qualitative research in Belgrade. The aims of the paper are exploration and interpretation of the positioning and meaning of motherhood within social biographies of the working-class single mothers. The intention is to study experience of single motherhood among young women with lower social-economic status by exploring how it is contextualised within structural, normative and institutional frameworks, as well as within relational and biographical contexts. The analysis proved the assumption that, although the position of motherhood within their life courses is similar, its meaning within their social biographies is different due to their different experience and subjectivities. In the concluding discussion, I argue for taking into account feelings as part of maternal experience, as well as to interpret agency as embedded in relational and biographical contexts within a young woman's social biography.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Experience of single maternity; social biography; agency; maternal identity and subjectivity.*

**APSTRAKT:** *Rad se zasniva na analizi narativa u okviru studija slučaja dve mlade vanbračne majke uključene u longitudinalno kvalitativno istraživanje u Beogradu. Ciljevi analize su eksploracija i interpretacija pozicioniranja i značenja majčinstva unutar socijalnih biografija vanbračnih majki iz radničke klase. Namera je da se iskustvo vanbračnog majčinstva mladih žena nižeg socio-ekonomskog položaja*

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*analizira ispitivanjem kako je ono kontekstualizovano unutar strukturalnih, normativnih i institucionalnih društvenih okvira, kao i u unutar relacionih i biografskih konteksta. Analiza je potvrdila pretpostavku da je značenje majčinstva unutar socijalnih biografija dve vanbračne majke različito, kao posledica njihovih različitih iskustava i subjektiviteta, iako je njegovo poziciranje u njihovim životnim tokovima slično. U zaključnoj diskusiji predlažem da se u sociološkoj analizi majčinstva u obzir uzimaju i osećanja kao deo iskustva, kao i da se dejstvenost tumači kao uklopljena u relacione i biografske kontekste unutar socijalne biografije mlade žene.*

KLJUČNE REČI: *Iskustvo vanbračnog majčinstva; socijalna biografija; dejstvenost; majčinski identitet i subjektivitet.*

## Introduction

The paper deals with experience of maternity and it is based on the analysis of narratives from the case studies of two young single mothers from the longitudinal qualitative research with twenty young people from the two social strata in two Belgrade settings (Tomanovic, 2004; 2012; 2019). The aims of the paper are exploration and interpretation of the positioning and meaning of motherhood within social biographies of the working-class single mothers. I argue that, although the position of motherhood within their life courses is similar, its meanings within their social biographies are different due to their different experience and subjectivities. In the first two parts of the paper, I outline conceptual and contextual frameworks of the analysis. After presenting the research and analysis method, I explore the positioning of motherhood in the life course of two young mothers, and interpret through analysis of the narratives the structures and experience of mothering and how they are related to their agency. In the concluding part, I will discuss similarities and differences in structures and agency in motherhood of the two young women. I will in particular discuss how their experience of maternity is related to their maternal identities and subjectivities. The intention of the paper is also to contribute to knowledge on experience of single motherhood among young women with lower social-economic status by exploring how it is contextualised within structural, normative and institutional frameworks, as well as within relational and biographical contexts.

## Conceptual framework

Due to their particular status, modes of formation, and ambivalent attitudes towards them, one-parent families are in the focus of family studies – perceived at one side as ‘social group under risk’ and as ‘the sign of social changes’, on the other side (Klett – Davies, 2007: 11). Four dominant academic and public discourses on one-parent families were recognized by Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards as *social threat, social problem, life-style choice* or *escaping*

*patriarchy* (Duncan, Edwards, 1999: 25ff). The *life-style choice* discourse has been contested for neglecting the structural factors limiting presumed individualization through single parenthood. As evidenced by research findings, lone motherhood is significantly different experience for working-class mothers as compared with those with different socio-economic status (Rowlingson, McKay, 2005). Ambiguity between a desire for traditional intimate relations, at least because of relationship stability that is relevant for growing up children, on one side, and an emancipatory feeling of independence and greater gender equality, on the other side, comprises dynamic duality of the process of identity formation of lone mothers (Cheal, 1991: 39). On the other hand, this relates more to identities of middle-class single mothers than to those from lower class, for whom motherhood has a priority over marriage, as evidenced in an USA study (Edin, 2000), while for some 'it can become virtually the only source of identity and meaning in a young woman's life' (Edin, Kefalas, 2005: 11). This points at the fact that among the other one-parent families, single mother families represent the most varied group diversified by a mother's age, social class, socio-economic context and institutional framework of their living conditions etc., which makes cross-cultural comparison very difficult, if not impossible. Comparison with the findings from studies on lower class single mothers in the USA (Edin, Kefalas, 2005) and in the UK (Rowlingson, McKay, 2005), reveals that structural, normative and institutional contexts, which consequently influence their identities and subjectivities, are very different as compared to the findings from Serbia. Therefore, one of the aims of this paper is also to emphasise the significance of contextualisation: exploration and interpretation of experience of single motherhood within a certain social and biographical context.

I will put the case study analysis within the broader framework of life course perspective (Heinz, Kruger, 2001) as to present the position of motherhood in the young women's trajectories related to other key life events such as education, employment, housing and partnership.

Against the background of the longitudinal study perspective, the analysis is based on framework of social biography, interpreted as to be formed through the process whereby the individual shapes his/her biography related to social context – its structural features (enabling and/or restricting), available resources, agency, and personal identity (Tomanovic, 2012). I analyse the two young single mothers' interpretations of life circumstances as structures within which they experience transition to motherhood and current mothering, their active response to situations as agency, and subjective side of maternity through maternal identity, experience and feelings in relation to structures and agency. The concept of *socially bounded agency* defined by Karen Evans as 'a socially situated process, shaped by the experiences of the past, the chances present in the current moment and the perceptions of possible futures' (2002: 262), provides perspective for analysing both objective and subjective structures as it is 'influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalized frames of reference as well as external actions' (Evans, 2007: 93). This conceptualisation enables narrative analysis to assess both structure and agency as continuum, by providing interpretation of how a person explains situation (structures) and acts upon

reflections (agency). Structures comprise individual, family and institutional resources, as well as family relations as the basis for individual's resourcefulness (Adkins, 2005). Actors adjust their projects to the practices that they believe that they can realise (Archer, 2007: 22), concentrating their agency within fields where they feel more competent and where they perceive that others recognize their competence (Henderson *et al.* 2007). In exploring and interpreting subjective aspect of maternity, I adopt distinction between gender identity and gender subjectivity as proposed by Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen (1996; 2017). Applied to maternity, *maternal identity* considers how young woman sees herself as a mother, while *maternal subjectivity* refers to how young woman acts and feels as the mother (Bjerrum Nielsen, 2017: 10). Maternal identity is strongly influenced by normative gender order (Walby, 2004; du Bois-Raymond, 2008). Following post-Bourdieu feminist authors' focus on reflexivity (e. g. Adkins, 2003; McNay, 2004), I will include reflexive impact of experience in order to explore its role in shaping agency and practices in motherhood. Examining young women's experiences of the maternal involves exploring of complex and often contradictory feelings of shame, anxiety, fear, desire, guilt and ambivalence (Allen, Osgood, 2009). It also includes exploration of the relational dynamics – the role that both parents (Bjerrum Nielsen, 2017), and mothers in particular, play in identity construction within biographies of young mothers (Thomson *et al.* 2011), and how it is related to social class (Walkerdine *et al.* 2001).

The experience of maternity will be explored through practices, feelings and meanings as *displayed* in the young mothers' narratives on transition to motherhood and mothering practices (Miller, 2005; Dermott and Seymor, 2011; Thomson *et al.* 2011). Displaying refers to the process by which 'individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships. (Finch, 2007: 67). The 'relevant other' who is supposed to understand certain actions as constituting 'family' practices of mothering (Ibid: 65) in this study is me as the researcher.

## Contextual framework

Census data show that one parent families comprise 17.3% of all families in Serbia (13.7% are mother and child/ren families; Census 2011). In order to present the status and living situation of single mothers' families (hereafter SMF), I will draw on the findings from the survey on three types of one-parent families from national representative sample of 855: 328 divorced parents, 255 widowed parents and 272 single mothers with children respondents under 18 in Serbia, done between October 2010 and February 2011 (Tomanović, Ljubičić, Stanojević, 2014).

Compared to the other two types of lone parents – divorced and widowed, single mothers had the lowest level of education: almost half (48.5%) had secondary education, but more than one in six (16.7%) single mothers had just primary education, and three-year vocational school (12.6%), while less than quarter (22.2%) was with college/university degree (Ibid.: 72). Consequently, the single mothers were less employed as compared to the divorced or widowed

parents: one third was unemployed and one tenth was inactive (Ibid.: 61), while their income was lower as compared to other lone parents (Ibid.: 51, 53). Almost half of the children in SMF were not acknowledged by their fathers and almost two-thirds did not receive alimony and child support (Ibid.: 109). Analysis of the composite index for household material status, which included real estate ownership (tenure status) and housing equipment, car ownership and income per household member, revealed that two-fifths of SMF households had low material status and also low tenure status (Ibid.: 58), since just one quarter of SMF own their property (Ibid.: 54). Single mothers also had the lowest educational aspirations for their children, as compared to the other two types of lone parents (Ibid.: 76).

Since they were more often financially dependent and were bounded to live within extended households more often than other lone parents (43.7%; compared to 32.3% of divorced and 19.2% of widowed parents; Ibid.: 42), SMF are very dependent on their social networks – particularly their parental families. Nevertheless, the analysis shows that their social capital index was lower as compared to other one-parent families (Ibid.: 71). Single mothers were more exposed to stigmatization than divorced and especially widowed parents (Ibid.: 113). Less than a half of the fathers were seeing their children regularly, less than a third occasionally, while one quarter did not see them at all (Ibid.: 109). Over a half of single mothers stated that they were very unsatisfied with their children's father participation in upbringing and organizing the child's everyday life, while the number of completely satisfied was very small (Ibid.: 112).

Dominant gender order of good motherhood in Serbia includes perception of single motherhood as a social problem and a source of inadequate mothering (Ibid.: 216). Those features comprise normative framework within the young single mothers shape their maternal identity.

## Study design and method

The paper is based on two case studies from the longitudinal qualitative research with twenty young people from the two social strata in two Belgrade settings, which has been carried out in four waves every seven years since 1993 (Tomanovic, 2004; 2012). The subjects are 10 children/ young people from workers' families and 10 children/ young people from families of professionals. The study has been done through case studies: based on semi-structured interviews with the children and their parents done separately, except in the last wave, when I interviewed just young people. The interviews included retrospective of seven years in the young person's life, through reconstruction of events in main domains such as education, material situation, work, housing, emotional relations, leisure time and sociability, family relations etc. within *biography backwards* approach (Henderson *et al.* 2007). Prospective accounts were also included in the last two interviews as 'look into the future' through so called *lifelines* accounts (Thomson *et al.* 2004), when respondents imagined their lives in areas such as education, work, housing, and personal relations at the age of 25, 30 and 35.

Among the twenty young people who have been involved in the longitudinal study, only three working class young women have experienced parenthood: one was pregnant at the time of last interview, and two became single mothers in their early twenties. In the paper, I analyse the narratives of the latter two. In order to reconstruct interplay of structure and agency, I will look for similarities and differences by analysing and comparing their life circumstances and strategies they use in coping with structural contexts, but also their relations, feelings, satisfaction, aspirations and plans for the future. I will reconstruct interplay between maternal identity and subjectivity by interpreting how the two mothers display transition to motherhood and mothering practices through their narratives. Vertical comparison by using longitudinal data from their life histories will enable better understanding of emerging patterns of maternal experience.

### **Life-course perspective: positioning of motherhood**

Branka (26) has finished vocational school at the age of 19 and did not have plans for further education. She has been working in various precarious jobs since finishing school, but she was unemployed at the time of the interview in 2014. She got pregnant from a short relationship at the age of 21 and stayed at her parents' home during pregnancy. She moved at her partner's home after childbirth to live with her partner and his family – mother and sister, but returned to her parents' home when the baby was six months old.

Jelena (27) finished vocational school at the age of 20, after having a break in the final year due to her involvement in prostitution and psychological crisis. She enrolled into a technical college, where she studied part time while combining school with precarious jobs. She dropped out of the college when she got pregnant from a short relationship. Jelena gave birth to her son when she was 24 and she has been living in her parents' household all the time.

The two young mothers' life trajectories show several similarities: finished vocational education followed by precarious jobs and unplanned pregnancy that led to single motherhood followed by precarious employment and staying in parental home. Through analysis of their narratives I will look for similarities and differences in structures, subjectivities and agency that comprise their motherhoods.

### **Case study one: Branka**

Branka comes from a working-class family: her mother is unskilled worker – cleaner, her father has skilled manual job as a civilian in military service. The family has three children among whom Branka is the oldest. Paternal grandmother, a retired worker, also lives with the family. Constantly struggling with material deprivation, the family had to sell parental flat in town and move to a house in suburban village, where they all live together. After finishing

vocational school, Branka has been employed in precarious jobs (waitressing and sales) and striving for material security. She receives some institutional support as a single mother: social security and child allowances and child care for the daughter (age 5) who is attending kindergarten. She also receives a small alimony from her child's father who acknowledged paternity and sees the child regularly. As for many single mothers in Serbia, living in extended family household is a main coping strategy for Branka. Five adult household members (younger sister is still in school) are pulling together material resources. By sharing domestic chores and care, they provide organizational support for Branka's single mothering, while she has also frequently stressed the significance of emotional support provided for her by her parents. Another important aspect for Branka's resourcefulness is her stable relationship with a new emotional partner.

Branka provided an elaborated narrative on her transition to motherhood, which included three main themes: making the decision on having the child, experience of child-birth and early motherhood, and making the decision to leave her child's father.

Branka got pregnant after six months in relationship. When she learned that she was eight weeks pregnant, she informed her boyfriend first as if she had already made the decision:

*I let him know, of course, and he was lost, of course. I thought, since he was younger, I was 21 then, he was 19, I told him: listen, I am pregnant, I will have the child, you don't have to, you have no obligations, I understand everything...*

She reports on her feelings of happiness and anxiety over her parents' support for her decision:

*I didn't think about me or him, not for a minute. I wished her to survive, that I wanted her so much. And I was happy. I was happy despite how everything turned out. Of course, I had thought about what my parents would say. It was very important.*

Branka's mother was ambivalent because of her young age, but they all perceived her father's reaction as the most important. When he gave her his full support and promised their help in raising the child, Branka was capable to express her agency against the will of her boyfriend's mother:

*I told her: I am pregnant, this is my body, I will choose what I want to do. It is my matter, I put no obligations on him (child's father – S. T.) ... I acted solely as I wished, but of course, with help from my parents. I repeat: if there wasn't their support, I wouldn't live and suffered all my life with the child, I wouldn't give birth.*

Branka's accounts on child-birth are detailed and personal, with honest expression of her confusion that does not reflect the dominant normative of 'happy new mother':

*Some say 'I felt amazing', but I didn't feel anything at that moment, I was totally lost ... I looked at her, I was totally ... I don't know how to explain. Simply I didn't feel anything at that moment.*

She has also expressed her feeling of sadness during early days of motherhood, which was highlighted by her experience of loneliness:

*I felt horrible. I was crying constantly ... Every night, alone in the room with her (the baby) I cried ... He (child's father) was in the other room playing on the computer ... and I cried alone in the room. And she (the baby) feels my nervousness and becomes even more nervous. And she (her partner's mother) was in another room watching TV. I was all alone in all of that. I felt so bad, like a leftover. Awful.*

Comparing her situation with the support and warmth she felt when she was visiting her family, Branka made the decision to return to her parents' home, in spite her previous decision to try to live with her child's father:

*I stayed and tried to live with him just because I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't ... that no one could tell me tomorrow that I separated the child from the father. I wanted to see how it will go. I tried, it didn't work, and goodbye ... I do not have to regret anything.*

The key theme of Branka's narrative is relations that are displayed through juxtapositions: conflicts with the child's father and his mother vs. supportive relations with her parents and new partner. She has portrayed her daughter's father as insensitive and indifferent: *'He didn't feel it at all, when you have your child and take it into your arms' ...* and also as violent: *'He told me that I had ruined his life by having a child with him 'You've ruined my life, now I am going to make the hell of your life and for your folks too' That's what he said.'* She characterised her current partner as: *'... very caring and my opinion is very important to him, which is not important to others. I am acknowledged, I exist, my opinion is important to him, also how I feel'*, and also as supporting: *'He was there all the time. He looked after her when I was working, he goes to pick her from the kindergarten and helps me materially, everything, everything, everything.'*

Branka portrayed her ex-boyfriend's mother as manipulative and bigoted, but acknowledges that she has changed and cares for her granddaughter: *'She has really grown to love her, I can't lie about it.'* Her own parents are displayed as caring and supportive throughout the interview.

When talking about her mothering practices, Branka did not go into details, giving the impression that those are part of normal routine, which she did not feel need to emphasise and display. Her maternal identity is reflected in the account that being the mother means a loving person that is responsible to her child:

*It firstly means a great responsibility. I can't behave as I used to, although it wasn't bad, but simply she is in the forefront, not me. That is a big change. A child is not a toy or something ... It is something that remains for life. First responsibility and then that unconditional love that a mother gives to a child.*



*It is something one can't describe, or show, or record. It has to be felt. And it is a most beautiful thing that I felt in my 26 years.*

Several parts of the narrative reveal her ambivalence about her motherhood as compared to normative of married couple family – ‘proper family’, as well as to her own experience of family life in parental family:

*Psychologist (at the job interview –S.T.) asked me what were my greatest success and failure. My greatest success is my child, as well that is my greatest failure, meaning that she is growing up without proper family. I know that is not terrible, but it is different from what I had. That I didn't manage to keep the family for her ... You can't force that. I really couldn't ...*

The above interview extract reflects her ambivalent feelings as she has experienced both positive and negative emotions at the same time. Several other parts of Branka's interview display that she feels disappointment with being a single mother:

*There are, unfortunately, a lot of single mothers. I am sorry in a sense, I've always thought that I will have a family like my folks have, that I will have a husband, marry, that is normal, he will love me, I will love him ...*

Her feeling of shame is echoed several times in the interview when she displays her worries that she has disappointed her parents:

*I thought somehow that I had disappointed them in a way that I always thought that I would have a family like my mom and dad have, that it would be normal ... I didn't think something like this would happen at all.*

Branka's gender and maternal identity are based on identification with her parents as a married couple, which also supports the dominant normative. The father is, nevertheless, latently portrayed as a stronger figure and influence, which points at him as the dominant parent. Her shame about being single rather than ‘proper’ mother in ‘normal family’ is displayed also in her anxiety that her school friends would gossip and pity her, so she did not go to the school reunion. Branka felt a need to justify during the interview her decision against the normative model that she supports as a part of her gender identity by constantly emphasising her wish to have the child: ‘*from the very beginning I wished to give birth to the child, to give birth to her, to give birth to her...;*’ ‘*I did it because I wished to do it.*’ – are some of the examples of the displaying.

The main sources of her gratification are relations: with her daughter, her family and her new partner:

*I am satisfied that I gave birth to a healthy child, that she is such a smart and nice girl. I am satisfied that I have such a family, that we are healthy, that is the most important to me. That I have found in my boyfriend a man who understands me the most as compared to previous one and who is someone who matches my expectations. I didn't do that bad all in all, really ...*

Material deprivation is her constant source of discontent, which is again related to the relations: *'... that I can't provide and help, first for my family – sister, brother ... that indigence that I have to strive to take the child to the seaside. Me personally to provide, as her mother, not my mom, dad, my current boyfriend ...'*

Branka's maternal identity and subjectivity are directing her agency and aspirations for the future that combine responsibility and love – stable employment and family life. She applied for a job as a civilian in military sector, where her father works:

*Because it is the best thing for the future ... For my life, because I don't know whether I'll get married, I don't want to think like that. I will rely only on myself, so whatever tomorrow brings – that I can provide for my child.*

Besides material security, Branka states that *'love is one the most important things in my life ... since I realized I am that person who always needs affection from someone, to feel that I mean to somebody, that I take care of someone and so on.'* Therefore, her prospective 'look into the future' involves both aspects that are crucial for her:

*I would like to get married and make a family; I would very much like that with this boyfriend of mine. I would like to have a good job, for instance this one in military service. To be a soldier and get things together somehow so ... not to be discontent with some things any more, but to be satisfied.*

The crucial points for constructing Branka's biography are relations and relational domain is a source of her satisfaction, her sense of competence and focus of her agency.

### Case study two: Jelena

Jelena (27) comes from a family of workers – her both parents worked at the factory and also struggled to cope with deprivation through informal work and starting a small family business (grocery) that failed. The housing situation of the family of four was very deprived – they lived in a single room in communal living building during Jelena's childhood. They later moved in a small flat and then decided to build a house in suburbia with maternal parents and brother. At the time of the last interview, Jelena lived with her parents, both pensioners, with her ten year older brother, who has been working steady ever since he finished a vocational school, and with her two and half old son, while her grandparents and uncle's family lived in a separate flat in the same house.

After finishing the vocational school, Jelena has been working occasionally in precarious jobs, e.g. fast food, both parallel to her studying at the college and after she became mother and left education. At the time of last interview, Jelena was unemployed for half a year. As many other single mothers, Jelena appreciated strategy of pulling resources within extended family household:

*Since I have the problem that my son's father has not yet acknowledged him, I would not separate from my folks. Because mom and dad and my brother and my cousin and uncle and aunt and grandma and grandpa they all help with the little one that I could go to work. Why would I suffer if I don't have to? Why would I pay for a flat if I have my comfort here.*

There is, nevertheless, the other side of living in common household. The incomes of her household are calculated together, therefore, since they are above the census, she was not eligible for institutional support, nor social security or child allowance, due to the state regulations. At the time when she was at full-time employment, Jelena managed to put her son (age two and half) on waiting list for the nursery, so he was expected to start attending at the time of the last interview. She did not receive alimony or any support from her son's father who refused to acknowledge the paternity. Jelena had no emotional partner since becoming the mother.

Jelena has passed through personal turmoil and severe psychological crisis before she became single mother, followed by psychotherapy and medical treatment. In her last interview, she insisted that the key event in that period was her decision to stop taking antidepressants and to take control over her life when she was 23: *So, I handled that so fast ... I tried suicide in September, while already in December I managed with my psyche. Moreover, I went at the end of December to my cousin abroad and I had a great time. I felt as that in my life everything is back to normal.* During that visit, she got pregnant from a short relationship.

Jelena's narrative on transition to motherhood was detailed and focused on the themes of discovering about pregnancy, recognition of her motherhood by her family members, and child-birth and early post-natal period.

She described that she found out about the pregnancy when she got back home and that she felt satisfied: *'Very happy, because that was what I wanted.'* She anticipated that having a child was a mutual wish: *'I thought everything will be all right with him, but it wasn't even after just a couple of days...'* Her boyfriend has withdrawn from the relationship and kept her pregnancy a secret from his family. Jelena later exposed, through their relatives to his parents that they had the grandson. She even, with the help from her brother, took her son to their country for the DNA analysis, but her son's father family refused to pay for the analysis. At the time of the last interview, Jelena was contemplating whether to request the court order for acknowledgment of paternity in order that the child's father takes on some responsibility, at least financial.

Her narrative related to making decision about her pregnancy discloses her agency of taking control over unplanned life event and also resisting her mother who was contesting her decision:

*Mom told me that she would kill me if I had an abortion. And then she changed her opinion – no, you are not ready yet ... do not do it ... I told my Mom then: 'You can kick me out of the house, but I have decided (to have the child) and that is how it is going to be'. ... I was sure that I will have it. ... First, because I already had an abortion and second that was recommended*

*by the doctors since I have HPV. Every year the risk of not having the child was greater with that virus. And because I like children and I wanted that. So, that all got together and revealed to me ...*

A great part of Jelena's narrative on transition to motherhood was dedicated to the importance of family recognition of her decision to become a single mother:

*Dad and grandma and grandpa supported me straight away, but my brother and mom didn't really. And I persisted and told them 'whether you wanted or not'. But, my brother's support was very important to me. Since we haven't for a long time ... when I was younger, we did not have even that brother – sister relationship. Just later, when I grew up ... Because I knew if he would agree, mom is not important. And he agreed and persuaded her.*

Jelena provided detailed and vivid narrative of experience of hardship of pregnancy due to her several health issues and also of difficult delivery and her feelings of worry and fear. She reports that the main support in her early motherhood came from her mother: 'Mom said a hundred times joking: 'as if I had the child and you are helping me', and of her satisfaction with the support: 'I have always had and I still have full trust in my mother.'

Jelena spoke a great deal in the interview about her family relations, particularly with her mother. Mother is portrayed as stronger and controlling person, in contrast with the father who is presented as weaker, nervous, but caring. Jelena reports that their marriage has always been full of conflicts and that she suggested that they divorce: 'As a little girl I asked them to divorce, because they have constantly been fighting to this day'. According to Jelena, her mother has been always criticizing the father for not being educated, smart and literate, unlike her and Jelena's brother who do not have higher education but became educated through reading a lot. In a similar manner, mother disputed Jelena's ability and will for learning and education. She describes their relationship as: '... very hard. She is a heavy person. She is not satisfied with anything in her life, neither with herself nor with her life'. Jelena also perceives her mother favouring the brother, whom she treats better and gets a lot of work (ironing, cooking, etc.) done for him.

Jelena reports on her mother's support as ambiguous because the mother was opposing her decision on motherhood and is contesting her mothering practices:

*I am really devoted to my child, while my mother doesn't think so. ... 'You are the only one he has', that's how she imposes guiltiness on me, like I was to neglect him or something, but I truly don't neglect him ... Well, I do not know ... Because he doesn't have his father besides him and I am his whole world ... I don't know, she thinks like that ... But how the other women do – they take care of themselves and commit to the child.*

This quote reflects a situation common particularly in early motherhood: that mothers are not recognized by others as subjects – independent agents, but as objects – service to the child: '... perceived as largely subservient to the child(ren)

for whom they care' (Stone, 2012: 2). In her 'strive to regain subjectivity where it has been compromised' (Ibid: 2) also by mother's imposing guilt at her, Jelena contests this objectification of motherhood by pointing at experience of other women, who managed to be committed both to their children and to themselves.

Experiencing another frequent experience among mothers – loss of control over their lives (Miller, 2005), Jelena feels that she has been controlled and her personal freedom has been limited:

*Mom gives me a guilt trip ... He has just me, so I can't go anywhere. She sometimes drives me crazy by asking why I don't have a boyfriend. I say: 'he won't find me at home, if I don't go out'. Even if I go out, it is for a cup of coffee or we gather when children play. Wherever I go, the child goes too .... 'He has only you', that's how she is guilt tripping me, as if I would neglect him or the like, but I really don't neglect him. I say: 'with you with that attitude, I will never get married until you die'.*

Jelena's experience of motherhood is displayed in different and contradictory ways that point to her ambivalent maternal identity. On one hand, she expresses the need to justify her contested motherhood through repeatedly displaying mothering and herself as devoted mother:

*I am more sensitive now, more caring, although my mom doesn't think so, even my brother doesn't think that I am sensitive sometimes. He thinks that I first take care of myself and of the child second. But it is not at all like that, as one can see. I don't wear make-up, don't go to a hair dresser. Since I have the child, I didn't buy more than ten small things for myself ... I neglect myself and I am devoted to the child. Everything the best for the child first, while my neighbour saves on her child ...*

On the other hand, she reported that she has never felt unaccepted because she is a single mother, but that she felt good about it: 'Wherever I show up, at the health centre, for instance, everyone supports me: 'Bravo, you are very brave to have decided to have the child without a husband' ... It feels good.' She also expressed pride when stated that she is the most satisfied: 'With my child, that I have a child.'

The core aspect of Jelena's gendered subjectivity – that she is reluctant to identify with typical feminine identity of mother is reflected in her gendered identity, as indicated in her response to the question to describe who she is: 'I wish I was an engineer. I am the mother'.

The sources of her discontent are also her struggle with material deprivation 'because of material situation, I am not that much satisfied', disappointment with her son's father who refused to acknowledge the child, and not having an emotional partner.

Jelena's gender identity and subjectivity are directing her aspirations towards continuing with technical college education that she dropped, as she perceives getting a university degree as her way out of deprivation:

*I: What would you say is the most important thing for you in the moment?*

*J: Apart from the child, the most important thing is to provide a good life to him and me. To struggle to accomplish good life for two of us, not to be as my parents who strive their whole lives ... It depends solely on me.*

*I: How you plan to accomplish that?*

*J: I know that, if I wish to go to university, my parents would help me financially if needed. But it depends solely on me how much I would study, how much I would dedicate to that and to my child... And I have strength and a will and desire.*

The conditional that Jelena used in her narrative reveals that her agency was still at a stage of reflection and not elaborated into plans. Jelena's agency is a part of her struggle for ontological security related to rebuilding her self-confidence and to be recognized as a competent actor— both as a caring mother and as a student and future professional who would provide secure family life. Those aspirations are reflected in her prospective account on the future, which also displays anticipation that higher education would provide change of working-class habitus:

*I see myself as graduated from the faculty. I don't see myself here in Serbia, but somewhere abroad. That is also my wish – to go somewhere and work with that degree I would graduate. In a good firm, so that I provide for me and the child ... And to find somebody who will accept me and the child and that all would be normal.*

For Jelena's biography, including her gender and maternal identity and subjectivity, the most important is ambivalent and mostly negative relationship with her mother. She is trying to meet mother's expectations in her projections of future: to be a good mother and also an educated person. In her aspirations for upward mobility, it is noticeable that she has internalized mother's ambitions and importance of cultural capital: having education and also reading: '*Although I didn't read so much, I educated myself through mother and brother.*' The particular of mother-daughter dynamic is partly reflected in above described criticizing of the mother's way of life, as well accusing her for not understanding who Jelena really is (Lawler 2000, in Bjerrum Nielsen 2017: 244).

## Discussion

Positioning of motherhood in the life course of two young women is similar: it is following vocational education that did not provide foundations for qualified work and stable employment. The structures of their motherhoods are also similar, including precarious employment, material deprivation, and extended family pulling together economic and social capital as the main coping strategy. These structures resemble those discovered in other research within Serbian society: single mothers are on average less educated, underemployed, materially – in housing and financially, and organizationally – in securing work-family balance, very dependent on parental support within insecure institutional

and risky structural contexts (Tomanović, Ljubičić, Stanojević, 2014). Parental support is part of working-class families habitus, where early motherhood is not perceived as an obstacle to pursuing education that is a prerequisite of middle-class – ‘the bourgeois subject’ (Walkerdine *et al.* 2001: 166–7).

Both of the young single mothers stressed in their narratives the great significance of supportive family relations, particularly the family recognition of their motherhood. They both stressed and displayed in their narratives distinctive agency in transition to motherhood. There are also similarities in their maternal identities: they both see themselves as a devoted and caring good mother, but also a provider for the child and the family. The latter is related both to legacy of socialist ideology of full employment of women and to their experience of living in material deprivation, which points at woman’s income as the necessity for family survival. This kind of maternal identity is orienting their aspirations for the future and their agency towards providing for their children.

There are also differences in maternal identity that two young women expressed in their narratives and those are related to differences in maternal subjectivity – experience and feelings related to motherhood and mothering. Branka’s gender and maternal identities support normative of married couple with children family model, and they are based on identification with her parents as a couple. Branka’s maternal subjectivity is partly in accordance with her gender identity, so she that she feels no need to elaborate and display practice of mothering. At the time, nevertheless, her experience of single motherhood is marked by feeling that she has been a disappointment for her parents. Since her gender identity is related to normative of ‘proper’ family, her personal experience is one of the major sources of her discontent, and also an incentive to her agency. Her biography focus is on relational domain – apart from securing employment and material stability, her agency is directed towards securing support that would lead to more conventional form of family life.

Jelena’s is experiencing conflict between two aspects of her gender identity, as she is reluctant to identify with typical feminine aspects like motherhood. Unlike Branka, observing her parents’ marriage as conflictual, she does not identify with a norm or parental experience of married couple family. Her maternal subjectivity is formed related to anticipated and internalized expectations of the dominant parent – her mother. Relation with her mother and contesting of her motherhood are major sources of Jelena’s discontent; she does not feel confident and recognized as good mother and feels the need to justify her mothering. Facing with constant degrading from her mother, Jelena focuses on individualized agency for securing recognition as competent actor – single mother and professional. Education is one of the key themes in displaying her family relations, as symbolic capital of aspired middle class (Walkerdine *et al.* 2001). In her anticipation that higher education would provide mechanism for changing class habitus, Jelena is anticipating support from her most significant relationships. This also refers to ‘conflicts in the habitus’ (Aarseth *et al.* 2016) related to frictions in family habitus and dynamics (Atkinson, 2012) and to interaction with significant others (Aarseth *et al.* 2016: 151).

Different meanings of motherhood in the social biographies of the two mothers are related to maternal subjectivity: to motherhood as lived experience, to relations and feelings. Within Branka's biography focused on relations, single motherhood is experienced as a phase leading to more satisfactory form of family life. Although Jelena experienced her motherhood as an obstacle in her educational trajectory, she perceives it also as an incentive for more individualization – agency towards self-normative biography in which she would be recognized as independent actor and which would resolve her identity conflict between relational and professional aspirations.

## Conclusion

Young women's agency in motherhood is formed in interplay between structures, including normative gender order and family habitus, reflexivity and experience, and relations with significant others, notably parents. The paper points at significance of situating maternity within particular social context, particularly as compared with studies dealing with similar group – single mothers with low SES (e.g. Edin, Kefalas 2005; Rowlingson, McKay, 2005). The findings show how structural, normative and institutional frameworks influence experience of motherhood and mothering, agency, identity and subjectivity of young single mothers.

The analysis in this paper supports perspective pointing at the significance of experience and interpretations of maternal subjectivity 'which can take into account the ways that fantasy, meaning, biography and relational dynamics inform individual women's positions in relation to a variety of discourses concerning motherhood' (Featherstone, 1997: 6; in Hollway, 2002: 6). It has also revealed feelings as the emotional aspect of meaning, related to Bjerrum Nielsen's comprehensive concept of 'feelings of gender' comprising 'the floating border between gender identities and gendered subjectivities' (Bjerrum Nielsen, 2017: 11). Relational dimension of agency is aspect that is usually overlooked in sociological analyses, while the paper argues that, in order to understand maternal experience, it would be valuable to interpret agency as embedded in relational and biographical contexts within a young woman's social biography (Tomanovic, 2019).

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