

REVIEW ESSAY

Two perspectives on *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice* (2006) by Rosanna Hertz

At the 2nd International Community, Work and Family Conference in Lisbon, April 2006 Ann Nilsen from the University of Bergen and Orly Benjamin from Bar-Ilan University participated in an 'Author Meets Critics' session with Rosanna Hertz to discuss her book *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice*. The two review essays that follow have been written by Ann Nilsen and Orly Benjamin based upon their presentations from the conference, which provide two interesting, and at times quite different, perspectives on Hertz's work, particularly in relation to women's empowerment, gendered aspects of parenting, and the politics of motherhood and fatherhood.

Cath Sullivan
Book Reviews Editor

Reviewer 1: Orly Benjamin

Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice is a book about women's power to resist the myth of 'appropriate family life' and construct a family life for themselves and their children outside the boundaries of normative heterosexual families. Legal and cultural changes, and the development of reproductive technologies, have given women power to resist the hegemonic expectation that marriage should precede motherhood. Consequently, the women Hertz describes could ignore the prevalent cultural knot that conditions the joys and challenges of motherhood on being chosen for a 'normal' marriage. These women revolutionize the area of gender relations by defining themselves as not dependent on men for attaining their life goals. They rescued themselves from intimate relationships that could not promise shared parenthood, intimacy, self-growth, passion, and self-fulfilment and subverted the powerful myth, which has tortured women's lives for years, that you should get pregnant to fix a bad relationship and then stay there for the sake of the children.

In this fascinating volume Rosanna Hertz examines the tension between the efforts women put into providing a nurturing environment for their children, in which they can develop their human potential, and the constraints imposed by workplaces, day-care arrangements, finances, potential sources of support, and worries regarding the trustworthiness of this support. In order to clarify the tension between best mothering and worldly constraints Hertz charts several stages in the process of becoming a single mother. The first key step in the narratives of becoming a single mother is the decision to prioritize motherhood over the old ideological imperative of marriage-then-motherhood. This prioritization is focused on women's

positive appraisal of themselves and their nurturing capabilities beyond any doubt. These positive appraisals contrast with Francesca Cancian's description of the (not too distant) past in which women were dependent on turning a romantic relationship into a marriage and a family both for their economic survival and for recognition of their sense of femininity and social worth. By making the decision to become a mother on their own, women fiercely reject this dependency whatever the cost entailed. At the same time, their single motherhood was a response to a major phenomenon – the reluctance of many men to enter a deal involving commitment to their children. Many men refuse to shoulder, or would rather postpone the shouldering of these two burdens, or they have already shouldered them with another woman. Thus, the numbers of potential partners for parenthood has declined. In contrast to this changing nature of fatherhood Hertz proposes that single motherhood has to do with the growing power of 'compulsory motherhood'. Self-worth as based on occupational achievements is still not enough. Among other cultural trends, several interviewees echoed the connection made by their own mothers between the meaning of life and motherhood. In this sense Hertz's account celebrates a feminine victory that allows women to fulfil motherhood outside heterosexual dependency but does not fall into the trap of essentializing it.

The women's accounts also reveal the importance of their mothers to their narratives as single mothers in another way: a negative evaluation of their mothers' positions as *burdened* with keeping family life together prompted the interviewees to escape these bad relationships. Their mothers were also important in being the first person to know of the new trajectory that would unfold into single motherhood; for many of the single mothers in the study, their own mothers were the best sources of support, both practical and emotional.

Mothers are central but usually not alone in their daughters' social support networks. Single mothers 'orchestrate a network to substitute for a man' and this network provides various levels of support. Childcare providers are valued and are viewed as part of a joint effort in raising the children: grandparents provide crucial financial gifts; ex-partners often provide financial or emotional support – some women have to give up on money if they want the emotional bond to be maintained; ex-partners' kin may be also important members of single mothers' social support networks; ex-partners' new girlfriends provide some support as well. Hertz shows that being part of a social network requires intense negotiation over issues of boundaries and reciprocity.

The single mothers in Hertz's study strive to prevent their children from being deprived of resources because of social control or economic scarcity. Words such as victims or oppression are irrelevant to the daily victories of well-educated women with satisfying incomes and some inter-generational transmission of assets. They constantly engage in negotiating better options for themselves and their children but these negotiations are not at all on the fringe of their existence. Further, these women are not positioned at the margins and their negotiation is always part of their mainstreaming of their kids' quality of life. They live in normative neighbourhoods where their children will benefit from the range of options mainstream cultures provide including friends and families of friends that include their kids in their activities. Nevertheless, single mothers pay dearly for their constant negotiation. It emerges from the study that single mothers have to make sacrifices that often lead to not taking promotions, reducing hours and, thereby, income, or finding employment

that is less demanding and hence less rewarding. These costs are born because single mothers see the family as central, as coming first. They reject the kinds of work hours/loads and stress that they are expected to tolerate in workplaces. They bravely struggle against bosses' attempts to ignore caring commitments and they insist on making their caring visible by cutting back on their working hours whatever the price they have to pay. The importance of single mothers' reality is that their change of functioning at work cannot be related to their motivations, skills, or devotion. They have already established a reputation of being good employees, perhaps like in the case of some divorced fathers, and the good employees now undertake routine commitment to caring work. Single mothers, it seems, especially those ranked higher in organizational hierarchies may become the leading edge in changing the workplace.

Hertz's account contributes to theoretical developments of the recursive relationship between agency and the structures within which it operates. By becoming single mothers, women, particularly those who manage to secure a stable source of income, demonstrate how new routines are generated to the extent of practically changing the sphere of family life. At the same time, the new routines also preserve major characteristics of family life and contribute to apparent social stability. The strength of this position is that it provides women with the foundation they need to open up choices and life paths in which they can operate while confining the power of oppressive structures.

In this sense, Hertz's book could well inform feminist political action. From the different meaning of social support network that emerges from the study we learn that if we as feminists are interested in protecting and reinforcing the option of single motherhood for more women, we need to promote the social conditions which facilitate this. These conditions could include, among other things, good quality stable jobs that provide care-takers with good pay and employment benefits for shorter working hours. Such political projects could be important in enabling the women's movement to challenge neo-liberal politics far beyond the specific reality of single mothers.

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Reviewer 2: Ann Nilsen

The topic of this book, lone motherhood, is in one sense thoroughly researched in the social sciences. This study transcends the boundaries of this more common research topic, however, because the interviewees are mostly middle-class women who have opted for motherhood without a partner. In most national contexts, this is unusual and unconventional. The study describes thoughtfully and analytically the different steps on the way towards the decision to become a mother without a partner, the alternatives open to women who choose this way of becoming mothers, and the dilemmas involved. These alternatives include pregnancy by chance, anonymous or

known donor pregnancy, and adoption. The group of women consisted of both heterosexuals and lesbians.

The book provides thorough and lively accounts of the different strategies and practices these women choose and provides detailed, yet systematic, analysis of their juggling of wage work and family life. The typology of how women manage romance and motherhood is very insightful, in that the types are open for changes over time. Mothers who at one point in time are more child-centred can, as the situation changes, become more open to romance and partners.

Most women chose to keep the fathers of the children, in those instances where they could choose otherwise, at a certain distance. This is not to say that others – both men and women – were not involved in the child rearing; some had ‘chosen families’ consisting of a mixture of friends, relatives, birth families, and neighbours.

One important conclusion of the study is that although these women choose an unconventional route to motherhood, they nevertheless adapt to a rather conventional family model once the child is born. Several reasons for this are described, but foremost is the deep rooted structure in American society where schools, neighbourhoods, and society at large are built on notions of the nuclear family consisting of mother, father, and children.

The study is both original in focus and impressive in its rigorous methodology. Sixty-five women have been interviewed in depth; 43 were re-interviewed after four to five years. This rich material is analysed and presented so as to convey the women’s thoughts, choices, and actions in a structured way (as a social science text requires) yet still retaining the balance between ‘scientific detachment’ and ‘personal closeness’ that the presentation of such data needs.

One of the strengths of this study, making it a very good sociological text, is that it draws much on structural context in the analysis and interpretation of the women’s accounts. Not all in-depth studies manage to keep this balance, especially when the topic at hand invites much focus on personal accounts.

An underlying theme is the American context of a society which is on the one hand highly individualistic, yet also very community and family oriented. It is also a class divided society, where more often than not ethical boundaries follow class divisions in a systematic way. The gender system, for lack of a better word, seems more insistently patriarchal than in, for instance, the Norwegian context that I know best. In my comments and questions I can’t help but draw comparisons with this context and think this study would be a very good case to compare to similar studies in other countries, as it would draw the context for these women’s choices even more into the fore. It would in short be very well suited for cross-national comparisons.

Compared to most European countries, especially Scandinavian ones, there is little in the way of a welfare state in the USA. Whereas education at all levels is public and free in the Norwegian context, very much of this is privatized and very expensive for families in the USA. Health insurance is provided by the market and associated with employment in the USA, whereas Norway has a welfare state based on universalistic principles. Lone motherhood is in many ways easier to combine with a job or a career in a context where costs for childcare and education are more of a collective responsibility, as in Norway.

Nevertheless, there are differences that give American (middle-class) women more choices in ways of getting pregnant. One of these differences seems to be the opportunity for single women to receive assisted pregnancies. The Norwegian policy

on these issues is highly family oriented. Women cannot have assisted pregnancies unless they have a male partner and have tried unsuccessfully to conceive over a period of time. Although those who have the means can seek such assistance in neighbouring countries such as Denmark and Finland. It is paradoxical to see how the American patriarchal family values, that seem to permeate society, are more liberal towards single women's wish to get assisted pregnancies than the Norwegian policy. I wonder whether this is related to differences in underlying gender ideologies in the two countries in such a way that the mother-child dyad is more central to the American ideology than is the case in Norway?

In Norwegian debates over these issues, fatherhood has recently become more of an issue. Both for reasons of equal gender opportunities as well as from arguments relating to 'what is best for the child' – notions of fatherhood, and implications from these notions, have become more centre stage in the Norwegian debate. I will elaborate on this, as I think it touches some crucial topics in the book.

One such topic is gender and reproduction in a context where technology has become more prominent. Hertz mentions in her book that Charlotte Perkins Gillman's utopian novel *Herland* is not the utopia these women opt for when choosing motherhood without fathers. But the impression from the book is that fathers do not figure very prominently in American children's everyday lives. When thinking about what fathers are for, the impression is that these mothers think of them as 'role models' and participants in leisure activities with children. Compared to the debates about equal opportunities and fathers as co-parents in Norway, this seems very different indeed.

In Norway's welfare state fathers now have not only rights, but also obligations to take paternity leave upon the birth of a child in two-parent households. In policies on divorce and single parenthood, fathers are supposed to play a much more significant role than only as providers of financial child support. The transfer of money between parents who do not live together is dependent upon how much time each spends with the child, and the norm for children of divorced parents is to spend equal amounts of time with each. This is symptomatic of a shift in attitudes towards fathers *from fatherhood to fathering*.

Policies and ideological shifts do not necessarily mean changes in practices, so mothers are by far the parents who spend most time with their children. Similarly, only 10% of single parents in Norway are fathers. The everyday reality of the workplace in relation to some of the issues in Hertz's book seems very similar to Norwegian parents' experiences, in spite of entitlements given the latter by legislation and welfare state policies. However, the shift in rhetoric on men and fathers in the equal opportunities debate is important for the way parenthood and reproduction as wider social issues are approached.

I would argue that the introduction of new reproductive technologies has not provided Norwegian women with more autonomy or greater choice. Since these technologies are embedded in policies that set the two-parent model as the norm and fathers have gained more importance as actual parents, the situation for Norwegian and American women seems very different. Hence, Hertz's book as read by a Scandinavian reader invites a number of issues for debate of which I will raise two.

Firstly, the role of fathers in families and the discourse of fatherhood in the wider US society. Further research into the topics that Hertz has studied could be seen

against the backdrop of the roles and practices surrounding fatherhood in the USA, with reference to, for instance, social class.

Lastly, the book inspires thinking about reproduction in a wider sense, especially with reference to reproductive technologies and the new opportunities for women to become mothers outside of heterosexual relationships. Two utopian novels that have described societies with rather ‘untraditional’ ways of dealing with reproduction spring to mind. One is the already mentioned *Herland*. The other is Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. The former describes a women-only utopian community where women have total control over reproduction and can become pregnant without men or sperm. The latter is a bleak vision of a society where a totalitarian regime with the help of technology has total control over reproduction. In Huxley’s utopia human emotions and bonds are absent other than as drug-induced experiences. As reproductive technologies continue their rapid development in the Western world, it is not unthinkable that in a not too distant future, the whole pregnancy period outside the female body might become possible. When that happens women will lose all control over an area of life that is crucial for more than motherhood. The freedom that some individual women can enjoy in the current technological situation is therefore not to be taken for granted in a future where reproductive technology has developed beyond the contemporary situation. Hertz’s research thus inspires readers to think of reproduction beyond the parent–child relationship, and to reflect on not only *ethical* issues of reproductive technologies, as is often the case, but also on the role of reproduction in societies as a wider *political* concern.

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