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Postmodern families

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Rosanna Hertz

**SINGLE BY CHANCE,
MOTHERS BY CHOICE**

How women are choosing parenthood
without marriage and creating the new
American family

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In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennett's ageing and still single friend Charlotte Lucas is, at twenty-seven, faced with a kind of Hobson's choice. She must decide between accepting the marriage proposal of the pompous clergyman Mr Collins, whom she describes as neither sensible nor agreeable – and spinsterhood, which would essentially mean falling off the social landscape into a kind of wasteland. She chooses the former. Charlotte is clever, educated in the manner of her day, and eminently sensible. However, without a dowry or a strikingly pretty face to attract men with fortunes, her options are almost nil. Given her advanced age (by the standards of the time), she must not so much choose as settle for Mr Collins if she wishes to have a "respectable establishment" and children. Her virtue lies in graciously accepting her fate.

Single women have been redefining spinsterhood or rather relegating the negative connotations of the condition (being unchosen, having few options) to the dustbins of history for the past half century. Many of their latter-day sisters are reproductive entrepreneurs at the vanguard of social revolution, not because they necessarily want to be – indeed Rosanna Hertz in *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice* calls them "reluctant revolutionaries"

– but because marriage simply did not happen in their twenties and thirties. Either Mr Right (or Ms Right, for that matter) failed to materialize and they refused to settle for a Mr Collins – or for any variety of reasons, they found it in their best interests to separate out romantic and parenting relationships. In short, they opted for motherhood without marriage or a long-term cohabiting partner. These women are creating a new taxonomy for kin relations and family-making and, according to Hertz, quietly but irrevocably laying the groundwork for a new model of the family.

Hertz's book is based on in-depth interviews with sixty-five middle-class and upper-middle-class single mothers in Massachusetts, where she is a Professor of Sociology at Wellesley College. In both the United Kingdom and the United States, about four out of ten babies are born to unwed mothers. Some are born to co-habiting couples, especially in the UK, and so the mothers are not really single – but most are born to mothers who are young, poor and single by default. In this study, Hertz is not concerned with this disenfranchised majority, but rather with their privileged counterparts: the still small but burgeoning population of established women who actively choose single motherhood: “single mothers by choice”, or “lone mothers by design”, as they call themselves. Significantly, most of the women in her sample were between their mid-thirties and their early forties when they had or adopted their first child; this is precisely the age group that is experiencing the most precipitous rise in single motherhood.

It could be argued that their age in itself is an asset in so far as the long stretch of adult living before motherhood enables them to accumulate not only an education, but resources and life skills. Hertz's sample mostly consists of women with distinct advantages by way of some combination of a stable income, home ownership and degrees. These “late breeders” are thus a far cry from the single mothers living at the taxpayer's expense so often depicted by the media – and a far cry from “Charlottes” of the past. They are in a position to actively create the terms of their lives rather than having to follow a script. Hertz shows her subjects choosing from among a panoply of options while also

having a sensible view of constraints: ticking reproductive clocks for one thing, workplace demands for another (many purposefully downgraded their jobs after having a child), and finances in general for a third.

Hertz emphasizes the intense deliberative process that goes into making and raising a child – when nothing is a matter of course. Her study was in fact triggered by an advertisement in a small Massachusetts paper that read “Is single-motherhood for me? Nine sessions on decision-making for women whose biological clock is ticking”. Local chapters of “Single Mothers by Choice”, a national organization that runs workshops for “thinkers” and “try-ers”, have mushroomed in US metropolitan areas. “Thinkers” gather together to debate the pros and cons of single motherhood – and then whether to opt for a known versus an unknown sperm donor; or for adoption, which in itself involves a host of decisions (whether to opt for domestic versus international, same-race versus different-race, infant versus child). Before and after conception or adoption, they must also consider the degree of involvement they want from known biological parents.

Of course, this is only the beginning of a seemingly endless number of decisions. Later, they have to figure out how to answer their children’s questions about origins. If their donors are unknown, they have to decide how much imaginatively to fill in the gaps in their knowledge – whether to create a personality from a vial. On the other hand, if their donors are known, they have to decide how much contact will benefit their child: how much a flesh-and-blood “bio dad” can function in a constructive way in their child’s emotional life – despite the fact that he provides no financial help. These women act as both “gatekeepers” (keeping undesirables out) and “kin keepers” (keeping desirables in), to use Hertz’s terminology: they carefully patrol the ever-negotiable boundaries of their constructed family networks. Contrary to some stereotypes, all the women were eager to involve some men in their children’s lives – whether by cultivating a known donor or new romantic partner as potential or

part-time “social dad”, or by enlisting their own genetic kin, as well as “big brothers”, coaches and male teachers.

“Transactional” parenting is apparently another term in the new taxonomy of the postmodern family. Prior to conception, some prospective mothers enlisted specific men to play the role of “social dads”; these men had no romantic relationship to the mother. One of Hertz’s lesbian mothers, for instance, entered into a “transactional” parenting relationship before the birth of her child with her gay sperm donor and his partner. The child rotated between households and the co-parents formally met once a week to schedule events and make parental decisions. A long legal contract carefully delineated the rights and obligations of all parties. In some ways, as Hertz is quick to acknowledge, transactional parenting stretches the definition of single motherhood. A live-in grandmother doing all the babysitting does as well. These various partnerships were remarkably stable, if sometimes messy.

Indeed, Hertz is at her best when she captures the messiness, the idiosyncrasies of individual choices and compromises, rather than when she tries to fit disparate women into sometimes clunky sociological categories. The term “compulsory motherhood”, which she applies to mothers who have no other co-parent and no outside romantic relationships, seems unhelpful, not only in its odd use of the word “compulsory”, but because these mothers’ lives are hardly static. Her portraits, however, are richly textured – and part of the interest for the reader lies in how individual mothers confront the unexpected: for instance, on a psychological level, their child’s desire to picture a father, or the vagaries of their child’s looks or personality; and, on a more material level, the loss of a job, or protracted illness. Hertz is clearly gifted in drawing out her subjects. One mother expressed vexation that her daughter was the carbon copy of her known donor. Other mothers actually lost parenting partners in the course of the study; in fact, as Hertz puts it, mothers were far more likely to lose than gain them. Only the mother-child dyad remained uniformly watertight.

When Hertz reconnected with her study participants four years after the end of her formal study, she found that most had added a member by way of another child or a romantic partner. Her subjects explained that the mother-child dyad had in some sense been too intense and that they craved a group dynamic. Thanks to the internet, some found genetic siblings for their children by using anonymous sperm donor ID numbers. All the mothers described radically streamlining their lives for the sake of their children; as Hertz rightly points out, single mothers are on the faultline of work/family orchestration. Finances had a huge role to play in how much wiggle room they had. Professional women with larger incomes had more control over their lives because they could quite simply buy services – and thus more quality time with their children. Those in lower-middle income brackets, who significantly tended to be younger, had to improvise more; they were more reliant on kin networks. But they, too, were determined to give their children the accoutrements of middle-class life: to provide opportunities by way of music lessons, sports camps, safe neighbourhoods, and educational support services. What united women at the tails of the middle class, then, was their commitment “for better or for worse” to their child and to the project of carefully thinking through what that child needed to prosper. In their active cultivation of their progeny, they had far more in common with conventional middle-class households in general than with households headed by single mothers in the lowest socio-economic tier. Indeed, this book provides more evidence for the liberal argument that poverty and weak family ties, not single motherhood per se, are the enemies of good outcomes for children.

On a more critical note, Hertz’s invocation of the coercive power of patriarchy, “master narratives” and “male privilege” seems dated. Male privilege may still exist in certain quarters, but laws no longer enforce male dominance. As for public opinion, several mothers feared their child might be ostracized on account of their single status. This never happened. Others were anxious that their children seamlessly “blend in” with other middle-class children, but in a landscape of increasing social diversity, this

was quite simply a non-issue. If anything, the freedom these single women exercised in raising their children without stigma was striking.

Hertz is more daring in her epilogue, where she writes eloquently and persuasively about how donor-assisted families in particular are revolutionizing the meaning of men in families. For one thing, technologies that separate men from their gametes are changing the emotional economy of reproduction. For another, Hertz's book suggests that men of the future will have to earn their place in families rather than assuming it. This almost sounds like matriarchy – or at least a shifting balance of power. Certainly, women with incomes (and ageing women at that) appear to be in the driving seat when it comes to the family and reproduction. Modern-day Charlottes still may not be able to have the likes of a Mr Darcy, but they can buy his sperm on the internet. They have options and a degree of control over their lives – and indeed over their child's genetic heritage and subsequently over his constructed kin – that would have been unimaginable to previous generations. This is not to suggest that most women no longer wish to marry (polls suggest that the vast majority still do), but now it is the Mr Collinses who risk being left out in the cold – unless they develop new skills that make them attractive to women who do not need “to settle” for the sake of a “respectable establishment”.

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