

Motherhood, Personal Agency and Breaching Family Norms

Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women are Choosing Parenthood without Marriage and Changing the American Family. By Rosanna Hertz, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, 273 pp. (hardcover) ISBN-10.0-19-517990-0. Price USA \$26.00

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I remember as an undergraduate student conducting one of Garfinkel's breaching experiments for my first year sociology class. We were given a project to say 'Hello' rather than 'Goodbye' when we withdrew from various conversational groups. Garfinkel (1967) believed that people's reaction to disruptions of conventional interactions would reveal the unspoken rules governing standard behavior. He was right! The insight produced from observing others' responses to my violation of simple social etiquette was incredible. I was exhilarated by my new understanding of how implicit interactional norms governed my social world.

Hertz' book on single mothers creates a similar sense of excitement in me; both as a scholar interested in motherhood and family and as a woman engaged in these social processes. Despite the current diversity of family life, the majority of North American adults were raised in a nuclear family consisting of a married heterosexual couple and their biological children. The mother served as the main caregiver and the father as the family authority and major provider. Today, the nuclear family represents the stereotypical family. As Hertz (2006, p. 54) notes, the nuclear family has also become a master narrative, that is, a description of "something that may once have been real but which has, over time, grown beyond its original proportions to become both the stuff of legend and a powerful form of social control." The women in her study defy this master narrative when they become single mothers.

Hertz identifies four pathways to single motherhood and uses a grounded theory approach to develop analytical constructs for each. The two most unusual pathways entail donor assisted pregnancy with the use of either a known or an unknown sperm donor. The other two pathways are adoption and 'chanced' or 'accidental' pregnancy. All of these reproductive pathways occur within nuclear families. Each draws its own type of social stigma from breaking nuclear family norms. What sets the women in Hertz' study apart is their deliberate intention to forego the ideal of romantic coupling and create a family based on the mother-child dyad. This breach highlights conventional parenting expectations and makes their family structure vulnerable to public scrutiny, social sanctions and personal shame.

Hertz' methodology is sound. She created an interview schedule based on participant observation research with a single mothers support group. Then, between 1995 and 2004, she completed in-depth audio-taped interviews with 65 single mothers from 21 different communities in eastern Massachusetts. All of the women were economically self-sufficient at the time of the first interview and over the age of 20 when they had their first child. In 2005, she conducted follow-up telephone interviews to gain a sense of how the women's lives had changed.

Although Hertz used a purposive sampling plan, the majority of the sample is white, had achieved well-paid career positions, and had been raised by middle-class married parents with 'stay-at-home moms.' This sampling result reflects the structure of North American society whereby white, middle-class women have better access to resources such as higher education, upper-level jobs and financial stability as well as fertility clinics and adoption agencies (Shanley 2001; Katz-Rothman 2005). Still, one questions the strength and rapidity of the family transformation toward the predominance of mother-child families

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predicted by Hertz when only a select portion of the female population is likely to use the reproductive pathways she describes.

The women in Hertz' study revealed their own sense of middle class privilege through their perception of single motherhood and in their attitudes toward feminism. Few were aware of the societal changes toward women and reproduction that had occurred during either their own or their mother's lifetime, or of how those changes had affected their ability to have and raise children as a single mother today. Although the women of color thought the civil rights movement had empowered their lives, and the lesbian and bi-sexual women credited the gay rights movement for legitimizing their motherhood, not one woman described in the study said she was a feminist and none believed the feminist movement had influenced her resolve to have a child on her own. Ironically, the title of Hertz' book implies these women are consciously "changing the American family" but each viewed her motherhood as a personal event and her family arrangement as a private matter rather than a political act.

The 'biological clock' scenario also had less impact than expected. Instead, the women emphasized life-change events such as work interruptions, losing a loved one, or medical problems, in particular, endometriosis whereby they experienced a period of introspection that led them to realize waiting for the perfect relationship might mean never becoming a mother. Ultimately, "compulsory motherhood" and "the broader mandates of American culture that tie motherhood to womanhood, parenthood to adulthood" superseded their fear of having a child alone and they "abandoned the belief that marriage is an essential part of the family equation" (Hertz 2006, p. 19). Nevertheless, the women possessed middle class values and wanted to be 'good girls' who followed the rules. As such, the nuclear family narrative imposed itself into their family structure and governed most of their mothering decisions.

These mothers worried about their children being stigmatized by their family status. They spent a significant amount of time and energy, therefore, in creating and maintaining the middle-class lifestyle needed to distinguish their family from the stereotypical image of families headed by teenage welfare mothers. They cultivated connections with male friends and relatives who could model 'masculinity' for their children. More importantly, upon discovering their child required a birth narrative to help explain his or her biological origins and the unusual circumstances surrounding his or her entrance into the family, they revised their family histories to mask their own agency and reconstruct the biological father's role in their family formation.

The most fascinating part of the book involves Hertz' analysis of how the master narrative of fatherhood and the

hegemony of heterosexual parenting necessitated a resurrection of biological fathers. Even though each motherhood pathway highlighted the interconnections between genetic and social fatherhood differently, every child in the study questioned his or her biological father's identity and the parenting arrangements formed within his or her family structure. This demand stemmed as much from the child's uncertainty over how the biological father contributed to parts of self as it did from his or her need to meet the social expectations of others. Thus, despite their decision to have a 'fatherless' family, the mothers in this study had to develop a biological father identity that both affirmed their child's personal identity and made him or her appear to be similar to other children.

The most radical reconstruction occurred for women who had used 'unknown' donors. These mothers created an 'imaginary' father by taking information taken from the donor profile, combining the information with their child's own characteristics, and reflecting those characteristics back to the child. Gradually, through a process of random conversations, each mother crafted an image of "a man the child believes is a 'good' father, and because the mother created this image and the mother and child jointly imagine him through this image, the child's self is positively reflected" (Hertz 2006, p. 84). In contrast, mothers who used known donors had established prenatal contractual agreements that limited the biological father's contact with the child so another man could take on the social role of father more easily if the mother married. These biological fathers took the form of "shadow fathers" who were made available to the child if, or when, the mother deemed necessary.

The power of Hertz' book rests in her thoughtful analysis of the multi-faceted interconnections existing between the genetic and social components of personal and social identity and how those interconnections are reaffirmed by the nuclear family narrative. She modifies well-established 'textbook' terminology such as 'liminality', 'kinkeeper', 'fictive' and 'chosen kin' to conceptualize the family practices developed by these mothers and advances the reader's appreciation of the applicability of such concepts for examining past, present, and future family forms. Her expansion of father typologies into 'bio-dads,' 'paper dads,' 'shadow dads' and 'social' dads increase our theoretical understanding of the role relationships formed between fathers and children from the perspective of children's identity needs. In particular, her prediction concerning the dissolution of romantic coupling, its replacement by the mother-child dyad, and the transformation of men into a 'potential luxury item' rather than an essential component of family life is compelling.

Readers will find a resemblance between the family survival strategies described by Hertz (e.g. financial gifts,

balancing paid work with child care, sharing households) and the strategies described in other research studies on single motherhood (e.g. Edin and Kefalas 2005; Horowitz 1995; Nelson 2005; Swift 1995). Those readers with knowledge of adoption will be familiar with her portrayal of how the women managed the dilemmas of selecting domestic over international adoption, helping their children cope with missing biological information, or sorting out relationships with biological parents. Some readers may question her inclusion of mothers who had ‘accidental’ or ‘chance’ pregnancies due to the strong resemblance between their connections with biological fathers and those experienced in separated or divorced families. These types of similarities contextualize the single mother families identified by Hertz, however, and make them appear less deviant than their motherhood pathways portend. Moreover, by revealing the comparative lack of structural support for this new category of single mothers, her analysis accentuates the hegemony of the two-parent heterosexual family in North American culture and its continued negation of single parent family needs, such as flexible employment hours, adequate day care and economical housing.

The key difference between the single mothers in Hertz’ study and the single mothers in the majority of other research studies (e.g. Gustafson 2005; Horowitz 1995; Ludtke 1997) is the sense of personal agency gained from their decision to create a family on their own. Regardless of her pathway to motherhood, each woman viewed the contingencies of her single family life as part of the choice she had made and worked through them as such. Consequently, although each woman said she still kept romance as a future goal; Hertz found most had had a second child on her own by the time of her follow-up interview. These mothers reported that their yearning for more children had prevailed over their concern about how a second child might tax their limited resources. Significantly, these mothers “did not grapple with having another child the way they did when they decided to go from zero to one” (Hertz 2006, p. 203). They knew, from past experience, that both they and their children would manage somehow.

The women Hertz studied are ordinary, middle-class women who made a decision to become mothers in unorthodox ways. Due to the subtle and unobtrusive manner in which they have integrated their families into the wider culture, their actions are likely to be accepted more readily than if they had expressed more revolutionary zeal. At the very least, their stories highlight the normative assumptions of nuclear family life and heterosexual parenthood confronting family members who engage in such transformations. It is this correspondence between their family life and that of other single mothers that is more likely to place them on the vanguard of the future family transformations envisioned by Hertz. Apart from the obvious choice of courses on family, motherhood, gender and parenting, the book would make a strong addition to any discussion on the social construction of identity, biography, deviance or social stigma. On an individual level, it is a stimulating read.

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