

Rosanna Hertz, *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women are Choosing Parenthood Without Marriage and Creating the New American Family* Oxford University Press, 2006, Paperback, \$26.00

Steven R. Marks

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Are unmarried women with careers and babies conventional or do they challenge society and seek to dispense with men? My own answer is better informed after reading “*Single By Chance, Mothers By Choice: How Women Are Choosing Parenthood Without Marriage And Creating The New American Family*, a useful text for upper division classes and graduate seminars on family, the law, women’s studies, nursing and other fields such as medical anthropology. It will likely be useful to give to friends contemplating parenthood as well as to place in family courts, and clinician offices.

Rosanna Hertz, Luella LaMer Professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies at Wellesley College, has written this telling book on motherhood in nine chapters, an epilog, detailed chapter notes and a methods appendix. Her work lets us look into, more than at, some of the complex and heartfelt processes of single women’s womanhood, motherhood, and parenthood.

I say parenthood rather than motherhood, because many of the 65 women interviewed take on both the performance of motherhood and a sort of “Imagining” of fatherhood. Indeed while the interviews were with women-become-mothers, fathers (their absence, their biological and social roles, their imagined, wished-for, contractual, emergent and departing presence, and even these mothers own fathers) are also a focus throughout the book and especially in chapters four “The Father as an idea” and seven “A world without men, Amen?”

In the earlier chapters and introduction, the author reviews feminist notions and many women’s standoffish acceptance of feminist values. This stance appears in the informants’ acceptance of feminist goals such as more nearly equitable pay and opportunity and more acceptance as well as respect for, women’s decisions. Even decisions like single mothering that a generation ago would have lead to stigmatization and public rebuke.

S. R. Marks (✉)
Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Arizona, PO Box 210033,
Tucson, AZ 85721-0033, USA
e-mail: smarks@u.arizona.edu

The first chapters also explore the romantic relationships with men (most informants were heterosexual) that might have become husbands, but did not. Some of these men were rejected for their abusiveness. Most were seen as romantic partners or even mates, but not as fathers. Hertz's informants live in the social context that now permits us to de-link love, marriage, sex, reproduction and parenting. However, while the permission and possibility are present, the reality is more complex.

Later chapters address the adoption process and the bumps along the way that these women negotiated and how the informants (or many of them) never lose hope of marriage, with some finding it, and others resolving the issue with circles of friends, extending family to biological kin and communities of shared experience. The book as a whole illustrates the reality as well as ideologies of married life; despite our expectations, married or single, few of us are guaranteed the full package of parenthood, passion, trust, and security.

Hertz offers extensive quotes interspersed with sufficient authorial interpretation to orient the reader to the larger themes of modern family formation. Women (and men too it seems by implication, though not so articulated in the text) have more “free” choices, more access to careers, and face the vagaries of multiple individuals’ timings in coming to answer the questions of adulthood: when and who will I marry? Is this the one? Should I wait or move on? We get an empathetic view of the women as they “make choices” and choose to parent as best they can as many men are ready to still leave parenting to others.

The interviews reveal the multiple goals and processes that underlie how American women may chose, or perhaps more accurately, live into their singularity (non-marriage) and family forming. One value of this research is to interrogate the policy and popular assumptions that women are choosing single motherhood. Unmarried women beyond the teen years become mothers via several routes: “trans-racial” and international adoption, “accidentally” conceiving, or more deliberately through in vitro fertilization. Their mothering includes adjustment to parenthood and strategies to find fathering figures (“dads”) for their children. Singleness is not so much desired as adapted to, often successfully.

Because the issues Hertz's informants raise are sufficiently important and representative to bear additional consideration, the reader may find “*On the frontier of adulthood: theory, research, and public policy*” by Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut (2005) a useful complement to Hertz's qualitative research. Their edited volume documents with demographic data how adulthood and thus motherhood, fatherhood (and childhood as well) have been changing in modern societies whether in North America, Europe or the developing states of Asia. All modern populations seem to be experiencing shifts in the traditional norms of adulthood: the social ordering of employment, marrying and having children. Within this other “New World Order”, Hertz documents the adaptations women appear to have taken up reluctantly and out of necessity. In the interviews and the chapter notes, we learn about these women's lives as well as demographic trends.

For example, Hertz, in chapter four, addresses the complexities of even simple genetic fatherhood. Genetic data, including that on sperm donors is making its way to the Internet and women are using this data to help locate their sperm donors. They do this not to force men into being dads (parents), but to enhance the picture of this “father” for their children and to develop networks of informal half-sibling kin. Given the health as well as psychological issues emerging at the intersection of social and genetic family formation (e.g. Featherstone, Atkinson, Bharadwaj,

& Clarke, 2006), we need to attend equally to demographic and technological change, as well as the voices of those negotiating these changes, changes that are going to affect many families, not only those headed by single mothers.

Although her sample is small in statistical terms, her informants appear to represent a rapidly growing “demographic.” One can speculate that these women foretell changes in the economics of parenting and inheritance among these smaller relatively well-off families (Brashier, 2004). More research will be needed to understand the economic as well as social implications of such family structures. Indeed, Hertz’s work will likely encourage students and researchers to build on her exploration of modern family formation and maintenance.

Despite their supposed unconventionality, the single mothers interviewed, regardless of sexuality, are conventional in their desire for good men in their child’s lives, men who can build bicycles and careers, who can co-construct a good and passionate relationship and even create a more equitable society, as well as sire a child. In this sense, these women are both conventional and seek to challenge society, but they hardly discount men. Rather the interviews show that it is men who too often discount what is worthwhile. Hertz and the women she met are indeed telling us something important about what goes into making a healthy family and society.

References

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