

Book Discussion Session

Community, Work and Family II International Conference
"Making the Connections in a Global Context" April, 2007 | Lisbon, Portugal

Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice By Rosanna Hertz

Reviewers Orly Benjamin and Ann Nilsen

**Reviewer 1: Orly Benjamin, Department of Sociology and Anthology,
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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. A set of legal and cultural changes and the development of reproductive technologies have given women the power to resist the hegemonic expectations that marriage should come first. Consequently the women described in this book could ignore the prevalent cultural knot that conditions the joys and challenges of motherhood on being chosen for a 'normal' marriage. The women in the book revolutionized the area of gender relations by defining themselves as not dependent on men for attaining their life goals. They rescued themselves from intimate relationship that could not promise shared parenthood, intimacy, self-growth, passion and self-fulfilment and got rid of the powerful myth that 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, financial considerations, potential sources of support and worries regarding issues of whom can be trusted as a source of 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 rejected this dependency whatever the prices 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' account celebrates a feminine victory that allows women to fulfil motherhood outside heterosexual dependency but does not fall into the trap of essentializing it.

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 among the single mothers who participated in the study, their own mothers were the best sources of support, both practical and emotional.

Mothers are central but usually not on their own 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 seen in partnership with raising the children; grandparents provide crucial financial gifts; ex-partners often provide either financial support or emotional ones – 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 mother's social support networks; ex-partners' new girl friends provide some support as well. Hertz shows, like several other researchers in this area (Henly, Danziger, and Offer 2004), that being part of a social-network requires intense negotiation over issues of boundaries and reciprocity. Ex-partners' relationships may be important in a different way as well, as these may provide some crucial genetic information that may help single mothers in the daily construction of the narrated image of the absent father.

One additional innovation in the book is the differential meaning of social support networks for women in different class positions. Apparently, in the experience of single mothers, a social support network operates as a representation of class position. Upper class women report the centrality of gift giving from their families. These gifts allow women to purchase homes and pay for childcare. Other single mothers who are unable to receive such gifts from their families because they are positioned lower down on the class ladder creatively use their social support networks in alternative ways, broadening the meaning of family life. This can involve renting a room in return for caring responsibilities, or sharing an apartment with another person. Some of those with the least schooling and poorly paying jobs (childcare workers) had family who took care of their children during the day. One woman who worked multiple jobs had a neighbor who cared for her child and the child's father's family was involved as well. Thus the reality of single mothers also highlights the importance of examining the accumulation of resources beyond the world of employment. One interviewee supports her family through a roommate who pays part of the rent and dances with her daughter. Her accumulation of resources challenges the understanding of workplace alone as a basis for breadwinning. The active and creative construction of social support networks is an important basis for breadwinning as well.

In her emphasis on women's success in becoming both breadwinners and sources of primary care for their children Hertz departs from feminist debates regarding power and resistance. She places her interviewees' daily struggle to accumulate resources for their children and themselves outside the terrain of male domination. Working towards destigmatization of single mothers as dependent on State funding, Hertz emphasizes economic independence among her interviewees. Working towards destigmatization of single mothers as selfish, Hertz stresses responsibility and links to the wider American culture and community life. In the Israeli context, Ruth Lynn has argued on the basis of interviews with single mothers, that for women in the Israeli collectivist spirit, which was certainly stronger in the past than it is in the present, women experienced their motherhood, their single motherhood, as the path through which they paved a sense of belonging for themselves. Lynn's interviewees compared giving birth on their own to compulsory reserve army service which men are obliged to do. Hertz' interviewees do not talk of this implication but motherhood enables them to lead a less isolated life style, by actively seeking social relations for themselves and their children.

The single mothers in Hertz' 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 high prices for their constant negotiation. It emerges from the study that single mothers have to make sacrifices which often lead to not taking promotions, finding employment that is less demanding and hence less rewarding. Income loss is also caused by cutting back on hours. These prices are paid because single mothers see the family as central, as coming first. They reject the kinds of work hour/load and stress that they are expected to take on 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. Work history studies show that women pay high prices for such prioritization of their caring commitments. Thus, whereas in the past working mothers struggled against discrimination in the work place, it seems that a major lesson from the experience of single mothers is that work places need to change. And of course, acting for changing workplaces, so that caring work is appreciated and taken into account, would benefit all families and all women and men who care for children or other dependents. The importance of single mothers' reality is that in their case the same employee changes her functioning at work, so that her need to cut back on hours cannot be related to her motivations, skills or devotion. She has already established a reputation of being a good employee, perhaps like in the case of some divorced fathers, and the good employee now undertakes 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.

Nevertheless, even if single mothers make care visible in workplaces and in high ranked employment positions, they probably won't be the ones who will undertake to lead the political struggle to changing the workplace. Their resources are already exploited in their daily struggles around their families. The women's movement should be there for them in this way. Will they join? Or, has feminism been the political force which enabled the interviewees in this study to overcome the myth of heterosexual normative imperatives? In fact, the interviewees mention their feminist attitudes at times but often they are not active in any feminist organization and they do not speak of feminism as a source of support in the present or in the future. They are completely given over to an individualist way of coping with their issues. At times, as explained by Karen Hansen in her "not so nuclear families" they will look for support from other women such as neighbors, friends and family members, but they are mostly on their own. That is, on their own in the sense of generally not connecting to other single mothers for either practical or political goals. Their step away from normative imperative does not initiate political ways of action. Once their children leave home, they experience the empty nest and even those who maintained singlehood over the years contemplate searching for a relationship. In this sense Hertz' 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 individualist problem solving strategies which the interviewees demonstrate we learn that feminist messages regarding the political nature of child care and workplace treatment of caring commitments have not received good enough exposure to the wider public. From the different meaning of social support network which emerged 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 them. These conditions could include among other things good quality stable jobs which 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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Comments on Rosanna Hertz: Single by Chance, Mother by Choice
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The topic this book focuses on is in one sense thoroughly researched in the social sciences, that of lone motherhood. What makes this study transcend the boundaries of this more common research topic is the fact that the interviewees are mostly middle class women who have opted for motherhood without a partner. In most national contexts this is an unusual and unconventional course of action. The study describes in a thoughtful and analytical way the different steps on the way towards the decision to become a mother without a partner, and the alternatives open to women who choose this way of becoming mothers, as well as the dilemmas involved in choosing one over the other. These alternatives include pregnancy by chance, anonymous or known donor pregnancy and adoption. The group of women consisted of both heterosexual and lesbians.

The book provides thorough and lively accounts of the different strategies and practices these women choose as mothers, and describe and analyse in detail, yet systematically, the ways women juggle wage work and family life. The typology construction 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 friends and some relatives, and others involved their birth families as well as neighbours and friends.

One of the important conclusions in 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 enters into their lives. 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 methodological design. 65 women have been interviewed in depth; forty three 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 a balance between ‘scientific detachment’ and ‘personal closeness’ that the presentation of such data needs.

One of the strengths of this study which makes it into a very good sociological text, is that it draws much on structural context in the analysis and interpretations 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 of the study 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 on comparisons with this context. I cannot help thinking that 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 not much in the way of a welfare state in the US. Whereas education at all levels is public and free in the Norwegian context, very much of this is privatised and very expensive for families in the US. Health insurance is provided by the market and associated with employment in the US, 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 child care and education are more of a collective responsibility, such as is the case for Norway.

All this said, there are differences that make American (middle class) women have 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 can not have assisted pregnancies unless they have a male partner and have tried unsuccessfully to conceive over a period of time. However, for those who have the means they 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 at levels 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 what is the case in Norway?

The way the Norwegian debate over these issues has been going over the past few years, fatherhood has 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 over time. I find it interesting to elaborate a bit 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 to be very different indeed.

In the 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 child support in terms of money. 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 amount of time with each. This is symptomatic of a shift in attitudes towards fathers *from fatherhood to fathering*.

Policies and shift in ideology do not necessarily mean changes in practices, so mothers are by far the parents who spend most time with their children. Likewise, only 10 % of single parents in Norway are fathers. What the everyday reality of the workplace concerns some of the issues mentioned in Hertz's book seem very familiar to what Norwegian parents experience, in spite of entitlements given the latter by workers protection legislation and welfare state policies towards parents. However, the shift in rhetoric on men and fathers in the equal opportunities debate is important for the way parenthood and reproduction as a wider social issue is approached.

I would argue that the introduction of new reproductive technologies has not meant that Norwegian women have gained more autonomy in choices and options. 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 seem very different. Hence, Hertz' 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 US, 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' 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.