

# Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women are Choosing Parenthood Without Marriage and Creating the New American Family By: Rosanna Hertz

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Robin Rogers-Dillon

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In *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice*, 2006, Rosanna Hertz examines single motherhood in the lives of middle class women. Interviewing 65 single mothers, Hertz found that many of the women believed in marriage (or committed partnerships) but found themselves single when, through age or circumstance, they reached a critical decision point in having children. Some chose to become mothers through the fairly conventional means of adoption. Others chanced pregnancy or became pregnant through insemination. Although the book's focus is on the choices these women made to have and raise children outside of marriage, it also explores broader cultural tensions around marriage and childbearing. Most provocatively, Hertz suggests that the women's stories are a part of a larger social shift away from the centrality of the husband/wife bond and toward a new family form based on the mother/child bond.

The interviews in *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice* present a fascinating and nuanced empirical look at how women chose to create families without steady partners. Around these stories, Hertz weaves normative conclusions that highlight key tensions and questions raised by the social shift toward single motherhood. Hertz writes: "The bottom line of this book is clear: we can no longer deny that the core of family life is the mother and her children.....This sea

change is rendering sexual intimacy between husbands and wives obsolete as *the* critical bond of family life"(xviii).

There is a lot to unpack in that statement. Descriptively, it is true that sex has been decoupled from marriage in the United States and that childbearing appears to be following quickly after it. Implied in the statement and elaborated within the book, however, are ideas about family membership and the primacy of mother/child relationships over others within the family that have profound social implications, some of which are left largely unexplored. It is to Rosanna Hertz's credit that she raises such critical issues in an empirical context. In doing so, she highlights the complex and sometimes tenuous relationships between political ideology and daily life. It is easy for many of us, myself included, to champion the rights of individual women to choose to have children without regard to marital status. But what happens when such choices become the norm? When women shoulder the burdens of child rearing alone and men are only tenuously connected to families?

## The Sea Change

The well-documented changes in women's rights and social roles over the past 40 years, of course, play a part in permitting women to choose motherhood without marriage. Citing Mary Shanley, Hertz also notes that the legal distinction between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" children was abolished through the civil rights movement, minimizing the penalty to the children of single mothers as well as to the women. For lesbian and bisexual women (17% of Hertz's sample), the dramatic change in attitudes toward sexual orientation has also

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R. Rogers-Dillon (✉)  
Department of Sociology, Queens College,  
65-30 Kissena Blvd.,  
Flushing, NY 11367, USA  
e-mail: Robin.Rogers-Dillon@qc.cuny.edu

made motherhood a more viable option than it was in the past. It has been a seismic shift.

Although the majority of women interviewed said they believed in the ideal of marriage, particularly as a context for childbearing, many also saw it as unattainable in their own lives. To me there seemed to be a high level of ambivalence about marriage interwoven with these women's accounts of why they had not married. One woman explained: "The guys that are straight—well, they've just broken up with the most fabulous woman on earth. Or they've just broken up with a bitch who happens to look just like me. Or they are in transition from marriage and they need more space....There are men who want to get close but those are the men I don't want to get near" (10). Though this particular woman was obviously expressing frustration, she also illustrates a point that comes through in other women's stories in both this and other research: Marriage may be held as an ideal by many women, but it is one often seen to have little relevance to real life.

### Real Life

A friend of mine once summoned a group of women, all of us in our 30s, to a party to debate the merits of marriage. On the verge of being proposed to by a man she loved, she felt unmoored. Although she believed in marriage, the closer she got to it the queasier she felt and with good reason. Her mother had spent much of her life as an unhappy suburban housewife—in a pretty stunning house, as I recall. Externally, her mother had it all. When my friend was in her teens her parents divorced. Her mother came out as a lesbian, which carried a great stigma at the time, and then died of lung cancer at 42 years old. She left four children, my friend the oldest.

We drank wine, though probably not enough given the subject matter. The question of children inevitably came up in relation to marriage. I married in my early twenties and had two children, facts often treated socially as aberrations in my otherwise respectably urban academic life. A woman leaned over to me and asked with some desperation: "How did you decide when to have your children?" I tried to recall my decision process. There must have been some complex calculus. I took a breath and told her the truth: "I had my children when my arms hurt." Before each child, I felt a strong heaviness in my arms. They ached incessantly. I could not bear the weight of their emptiness. When I held my babies, my arms were full and light again. My health was terrible. I narrowly averted career suicide. My marriage pitched back and forth like a light plane in a bad storm, but my arms were light.

And that is the point: marriage can be debated, delayed, and even discarded. For many women, however, perhaps me more

dramatically than most, the desire for children is visceral. As a society, the desire or hunger for—and pure unexpected arrival of—children keeps breaking through our marriage debates.

### Day to Day Choices

Hertz makes her most important contribution to the literature by focusing the day-to-day choices made by women who desire children but by choice, accident, or ambivalence, are not married. To have a baby outside of a heterosexual partnership requires many steps and choices, some obvious but many less so. Women may choose to adopt. This is often a more socially acceptable option, particularly if the child is seen as being "saved" in some way. Women may also chance pregnancy with male partners—the ethics of this in cases where the man does not consent receives little treatment in the book, perhaps because it is not a particularly popular or new approach. They may choose insemination by donors, known or unknown. Virtually all of these methods require contractual agreements that spell out the rights of the parties involved. These can be complex and, as Hertz rightly notes, creative.

In cases that were not open adoption or known donors, the women strategized ways to address the inevitable question "who is the child's father?" The children have "imagined fathers" and "bio dads." There are, of course, "father figures" but those have been around a long time. The role of biology in shaping temperament challenges the mothers, who may know little or nothing about the father. These issues have been faced by adopted children. They are not insurmountable. Parenthood, we all know, has far more to do with day-to-day care than genetics. But still, there is something unresolved about the issue of fathers. Biological, social, and imagined, they seem to hang like ghosts.

For children internationally adopted, Hertz notes that questions about the child's birth country often become a stand-in for questions about his or her father. It may be that an internationally adopted child is more easily identifiable as adopted, thus heading off questions of paternity. I think that Hertz is right when she notes that "country" is also a stand-in for lineage.

To survive, and in many cases thrive, most of the women interviewed established networks to help them raise their children. While the networks did seem extensive and thought out, this is the topic in the book that most begged for a comparison group. Are the functions of networks of single mothers substantively different from those of married mothers? Are they more extensive? Hertz seems to suggest that they are and that they are, but I am not sure. Because social networks are so central to child raising of many kinds of families, it was difficult for me to see the ways in which these families are different, though they may be different.

## New Families?

From her findings, Rosanna Hertz draws several conclusions with which I strongly disagree. Specifically, I disagree with Hertz on the social benefits of families without men at the core and the desirability making the mother–child bond the core of the family in place of an adult–pair bond. Whether we like it or not, men detached from families are more likely to end up in jail than they are to “rethink their place in the family because it is no longer implicit” (196) as Hertz suggests. I am even more skeptical of her claim that “Without automatic membership [in the family], men must find a different connection to families. This will mean that men will need to exert new energy to claim a place” (196). These connections, she suggests will be more positive and perhaps even lead to more equality within the work place. I have done a lot of research in neighborhood’s where men’s membership in a family is not automatic; I have never seen this lead to renewed energy of any kind. It tends to end in alienation and destruction.

I am also personally troubled by the suggestion that men’s place in the family should be dependent on what they can give to women and children. As Hertz writes, “But what will win men a place in family, making them once again important to women and children, is the question. What men have to offer today is obsolete...” (196). Ouch. Again, this may reflect the way many women feel, but normatively do we want to base family membership on utility to other family members? Is that not what the market does, judge us by our utility and abandon us when we lack it? Should the family not provide something more than that? Should we chuck grandparents out when they no longer benefit the other family members? Perhaps we already do. It is not a tendency in our culture that I think we should take further.

Family membership should not have to be earned. It may be that sometimes the bonds of family are so broken that someone loses the support of the family. But I think that the human family should make room for all based on nothing other than their innate humanity. The separation of men from families that Hertz seems not only to be describing but endorsing as a means of promoting social change violates my own view of the good society. But again, descriptively, I think she is right.

For very different reasons, I am troubled by Hertz’s suggestion that the family *should* be centered on the mother-child bond rather than on a committed and sexually-based bond between two adults (in my view, it is irrelevant whether these adults are heterosexual or homosexual). American culture idealizes the mother-child bond. (This is not to be confused with actually valuing mothers

and children by providing things such as paid maternity leave and quality public education.) Yet it undervalues the sexually-based adult bond in families. I suspect the term “sexually-based adult bond” rings strangely to many. Yet it is really just a description of what was implicit in marriage, and what we are moving away from as childbearing becomes separated from marriage and even from sex itself.

There is something important here that we are glossing over. In many religions, Judaism in particular, sex is seen as a powerful and important force within marriage that provides strength, pleasure, and release to the adults who deplete themselves regularly caring for children. Today, many parents publicly turn themselves into asexual mop-pets. At parties, children are far more likely clinging to their mothers or fathers than the parents are clinging to each other. This is backwards. Sexual energy is such a generative force that whether procreation is separated from it or not, it has a place within the central pair-bond relationship of a family. Can one have a real family without it? Of course. But we should not lose sight of its value simply because other variations successfully exist.

I fear that Rosanna Hertz is right. The mother (note: only mother, not woman—just a portion of a full identity and notably—in our culture—a desexualized one)/child bond is replacing the bond between adults that used to, however dysfunctional or oppressively, form the core of the family. The mother and father (or mother and mother or father and father) are the core of the family. If a woman (or man) parents alone, I do not think the dynamic changes that much—although for the most part it is much harder. It is the adults’ strength that raises the children. This is the core of the family. How has our culture forgotten this?

To borrow a central theme of the book, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. We should not toss out the centrality of men and adult relationships in the family as we abandon patriarchy and wholly accept new family forms including single motherhood. The mother/child bond should not form the core of the family. It burdens children to be too central to the family core. How can they assert themselves as individuals or rebel against something that does not exist outside of them? Adults are the core of the family and sometimes it is a core of one.

**Robin Rogers-Dillon** is Associate Professor of Sociology at Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center. She is the author of *The Welfare Experiments* and is currently working on a book about faith and politics.