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Choosing Single Motherhood?

Single women negotiating the nuclear family ideal

Susanna Graham

In recent years there has been a rise in the number of single women intentionally embarking upon motherhood without a partner. These ‘Single Mothers by Choice’ (SMCs), predominantly heterosexual women in their thirties and forties who are well educated and financially independent (Murray and Golombok 2005a, 2005b; Hertz 2006), can achieve motherhood via various routes but often do so through attending fertility clinics for treatment with donor sperm (Jadva 2009). As a consequence of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology (2008) Act no longer including the clause in the original (1990) Act requiring clinics to consider the child’s need for a father in decisions about whether or not to offer fertility treatment, the number of British women able to embark upon single motherhood through this route is likely to increase (Jadva, 2009). However, the prospect of single women accessing fertility treatments has generated much public and political debate. Conservative MP, Iain Duncan Smith, described the bill as ‘the last nail in the coffin for traditional family life’ (Gamble 2009) and as another blow for fatherhood: due to its departure from the nuclear family, the ethics of the choice to embark upon motherhood without a partner is questioned.

This chapter will explore the ethical connotations surrounding single heterosexual women becoming parents through the use of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs), namely donor sperm. It will explore how the phenomenon has been framed as challenging the nuclear family ideal, the role of men as fathers and in doing so potentially jeopardizing the welfare of children. However, by reviewing the current literature on single motherhood by choice, as well as drawing upon new empirical research exploring the motivations, experiences and decision-making of single women in the UK embarking upon motherhood through the use of donor sperm, this chapter will show that in their pursuit of motherhood these women are not outwardly rejecting the nuclear family but instead reworking their ideas about motherhood and relationships in an aim to salvage at least some of the nuclear ideal they had imagined for themselves. Finally, by examining research detailing the wellbeing of children raised by SMCs, and the experiences of women pursuing this choice, this chapter will

suggest that although single motherhood by choice may not be seen as the ideal by those who embark upon it, their children are very much planned, loved and wanted and appear to be functioning well. It is perhaps the planned nature of their parenthood, their creative and flexible approach to achieving it, as well as their class and financial privilege, that allows the successful reworking of the nuclear family into what appears to be a thriving emerging family form.

Single mothers by choice: Rejecting the nuclear family ideal

Much of the concern surrounding women actively pursuing single motherhood pertains to norms and ideals about what a family *should* be like (Graham and Braverman, in press). Consequently single motherhood by choice is compared to the ‘gold standard’ family: the traditional nuclear family with its married mother and father and genetically related children. The choice to create a family that diverges from this norm is criticized; the nuclear family is deemed ‘natural’ and ‘good’ whilst families that diverge from it, including the single mother by choice, or circumstance¹, are depicted as ‘unnatural’ and ‘bad’ (Correia and Broderick 2009; Fineman 2009).

Of course this traditional imagery has already been challenged and redefined through social changes such as voluntary childlessness, out of wedlock births and high divorce rates leading to single parent or ‘blended’ families. Likewise the genetic basis of parenthood in the nuclear family has been challenged through the practice of adoption as well as infertile heterosexual couples utilizing third-party assisted conception. Nevertheless, in this context ARTs have generally been used to replicate the image, if not the reality, of the nuclear family. Donor sperm can be seen as a ‘treatment’ for infertility, chosen to match the physical characteristics of the infertile male partner who will assume all rights and responsibilities of the resultant child: they will be able to ‘pass’ as the genetically related nuclear family. However, the role of ARTs in creating single parent families can be seen to *purposely* undermine the nuclear family ideal. Single motherhood is no longer the result of circumstance, the breakdown of the nuclear family, but actively created from the outset. Through the incorporation of a medicalized route to conception, the concept of this choice and men’s absence from it become more visible in the public realm. As such, the reduction of men’s contribution to procreation and family life to that of a distant sperm provider has been described as ‘the feminist dream come true’ (Davies 2009). Moreover, in contrast to the ideology of traditional procreation, single women using donor sperm to conceive draws connotations of consumerism, ‘buying a baby’ (Soiseth 2008: 104), picking a ‘father’ from a catalogue of sperm donors. Single motherhood by choice can therefore be seen to depart not only from the physicality of the nuclear family ideal consisting of a mother and father and their genetically related children, but also the ideology behind it.

Mother and father as best

Why is the nuclear family held as the ideal and the decision to become an SMC deemed ‘unnatural’ and ‘bad’? Much of the concern regarding single parent families arises from the poor child outcomes thought to be associated with this family form. Research has consistently shown that children raised in single parent families are more likely to experience a variety of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural problems than children living with married parents (Amato 2005; Coleman and Glenn 2009; Dunn *et al.* 1998; Pryor and Rodgers 2001).

However, the processes affecting single parent families, and subsequent child outcomes, may vary considerably (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). For example, children of divorced parents tend to experience more disruption, parental conflict and ‘father loss’ whilst unmarried, lone mothers may experience more stress and economic insecurity (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Coleman and Glenn 2009). It could be assumed that SMCs will not experience such difficulties. They are typically older, financially secure professional women (Murray and Golombok 2005a,b; Hertz 2006; Jadva *et al.* 2009). Nor will their children experience the conflict and ‘father loss’ associated with the separation or divorce of their biological parents. Moreover, SMCs can be differentiated from all single mothers by circumstance through having chosen to be single mothers from the outset. Children from SMC families may therefore not experience these poor outcomes.

The importance of fathers

Despite *choosing* to enter single motherhood, the practical difficulties of parenting without a partner remain. Moreover, central to the ideal of the nuclear family is the belief that a child should have a (genetically related) mother and father. Based on stereotypes of what mothering and fathering entail, it has been presumed that children need both a mother and father for appropriate psychological and sex-role development. Studies have shown that mothers spend more time interacting with children in a nurturing and care-giving role whilst fathering involves more breadwinning, stereotypically masculine tasks and play with children (Yeung 2001; Hawkins *et al.* 2006; Lamb 2010). Thus the ‘essential father’ theory has evolved: boys need fathers to inhibit antisocial behaviour and develop appropriate masculine identities and girls need fathers to help deter promiscuity, teen pregnancy and substance abuse (Blankenhorn 1995; Popenoe 1996). However, a recent review exploring how parental gender influences child development did not identify any gender-exclusive parenting styles (Biblarz and Stacey 2010); mothers and fathers may differ in their parenting roles within the traditional division of labour but this does not mean that women can’t, or won’t, take on traditionally masculine parenting styles.

Men may not be required for adequate parenting but does this mean that a child does not need a *father*? The majority of children from divorced families still have contact with their fathers and will be influenced by them. Likewise, children born to lone mothers are likely to know who their father is even if they have minimal contact with him. However, when single women pursue motherhood through an unknown donor not only is there an absent physical and legal father but also no intimate knowledge of him. Proponents such as Velleman (2005) claim that such knowledge is necessary to inform a person's identity and as a consequence deem gamete donation morally wrong. Even when an open-identity² donor is used, offspring will not have the opportunity to obtain identifying information about their genetic father until the age of eighteen, perhaps too late to be incorporated into identity formation. The ethics of single motherhood by choice is therefore questioned not only due to its departure from the structure of the nuclear family but also by undermining the perceived importance of knowing one's genetic origins.

Single mothers by choice: Reworking the nuclear family ideal

How do SMCs feel about forming families outside the nuclear ideal? How do they perceive the choice they are making and what are their thoughts regarding the importance of fathers? By drawing upon the current literature regarding single motherhood by choice as well as in-depth interviews carried out with twenty-three single women in the UK embarking upon motherhood through the use of donor sperm³, this section will explore how these single women conceive of their departure from the nuclear family ideal and how they rework their plans for motherhood by forming a family they hope will not be to the detriment of their future child.

'Single mothers' by choice?

In contrast to the view that SMCs purposely embark upon a parenthood that deprives their child of a father, research suggests that these women did not necessarily *choose* single motherhood. Studies have shown that the decision to pursue solo motherhood has only been taken when faced with limited prospects of finding a partner with whom to have a child in the time frame that their increasing age and decreasing fertility will allow: many SMCs would have rather become mothers in the context of a relationship (Mannis 1999; Bock 2000; Hertz 2006; Jadva *et al.* 2009; Murray and Golombok: 2005a).

My own research further elucidates the ambivalence many feel in pursuing this 'choice'. The majority of the participants experienced grief in giving

up the prospect of a nuclear family, both for themselves and their future child. Single motherhood by choice was never the plan but an option that had to be incorporated into their life trajectory if they were to pursue motherhood:

Maybe there are single women out there who are completely happy being single and never want to be in a relationship but I think underneath it this is always either Plan B or C, or even Plan Z for most people. For me this is definitely Plan Z. (Melissa⁴, age thirty-six)

The majority of participants were in their late thirties or early forties when finally deciding to embark upon motherhood through the use of donor sperm, many only really starting to seriously consider it as an option when they realized that ‘even if [they] met someone tomorrow it would be too late’. Even at this point, embarking upon motherhood alone was not something embraced wholeheartedly. All had put much effort into dating, many ‘ferociously Internet dating’, joining clubs and societies and embracing all social situations with the hope of meeting a suitable partner. As one participant, Rachel, disclosed, even when preparing for her IVF cycle she was hoping that ‘any minute something [would] happen and [she] wouldn’t have to go down this route’. At the heart of this ambivalence lay grief at departing from the ideal of having children with a loving partner. Abby described how she repeatedly rejected her friends’ suggestions to use a sperm donor:

It felt like, as much as it was a positive suggestion from them, it felt like they were saying you don’t have to have the husband and the family unit. Why don’t you just do the one bit of it on your own? And I just thought no I want what you’ve got. I want the whole package. My drive to have children was never, ‘I want to have children at all costs and I’ll do it on my own’. It was ‘I want to have a family’. Me and the bloke and the children we have created together. That’s what I wanted. I didn’t want to go down this route.

Despite the sadness at being unable to have the family they had imagined for themselves, being single and experiencing an ‘overwhelming drive’ for motherhood meant these women had to overcome their grief and think about pursuing motherhood without a partner:

It took a very long time thinking about whether it was right to do it. Because in a way I really believe that children are made from two people that love each other and want to create a family. But if that is not an option you just have to draw a way around really. Because if you are running out of time you just have to see what option you have to have a child. And then have a father. (Anna, age forty)

The nuclear family ideal is reworked: finding a partner is temporarily put on hold whilst motherhood through donor sperm is pursued.

Donors as fathers

It was not just their desire for motherhood within the context of a relationship that caused these women uneasiness about departing from the nuclear family ideal but also what their decision would mean for their future child:

Throughout the whole thing my main concern has been whether I am being selfish and whether a child, a teenager, an adult is at some point going to turn round to me and ask ‘Why did you do that? You’ve denied me knowing my father’. (Sally, pursuing motherhood with an open-identity donor at a UK clinic)

None of the participants mentioned poor child outcomes in single mother families as a concern about embarking upon single motherhood. However, they did feel that men and women parented in different ways and that a balance of male and female influence would be beneficial to children. As such, and in line with the existing SMC literature (see Hertz and Ferguson 1997; Hertz 2002, 2006; Jadvá *et al.* 2009) all participants had thought about men in their lives who could act as male role models for their children. However, their concern regarding the absence of a father extended beyond the practical importance of a masculine influence to a more symbolic importance that included *knowing* one’s father. Similar to Velleman’s claim that gamete donation ‘purposely severs a connection of the sort that normally informs a person’s identity’ (2005: 363) these women feared that using a sperm donor would be detrimental to their child’s sense of identity. As Ruth who was particularly interested in her own family history stated,

I just thought I can’t bring a child into the world where it doesn’t have that; it will only have half the knowledge not the whole of it. I felt it would be difficult for the child not to be able to know half of itself.

The desire for their child to ‘know’ themselves through ‘knowing’ their father initially led many participants to seek known donors who would play some role in the child’s life. In doing so they were decoupling having a child from the context of a relationship but holding on to the idea of their child having a physically present father. However, finding the ‘right’ known donor proved difficult. Some potential known donors didn’t feel comfortable taking on a ‘part-time father’ role whilst others were rejected because they didn’t take the role seriously enough. A sperm donor was seen as preferable to a man who could, but didn’t, take on an active father role; they wanted to spare their child from feelings of ‘father loss’.

Normalizing the incorporation of an unknown sperm donor into their trajectory for motherhood proved difficult for most participants. One woman, when initially researching options for motherhood, was unable to even type the words ‘sperm donor’ into Google. Several described how they had joked with friends about resorting to donor sperm if single at a certain age but none had

ever really thought they would be 'a woman who used a sperm donor'. Jessica shared her uneasiness with the situation:

You imagine the person who you'll have a child with and they have all these things. They come with a history and friends. They come with stories and bad habits and they come with physical characteristics and favourite jumpers and the bazillion things that make up a person. And then I can strip everything away and I have some genetic fluid in a vial and that's it.

Conceiving a child with an unknown donor was far removed from the imagined conception between 'two people who love each other and want to create a family'. The absence of a physical father for their child, and the knowledge about him as a person, was a stumbling block for many: they wanted their child to have a father, not some 'genetic fluid in a vial'.

There was much complexity and ambivalence regarding the meaning of the sperm donor and his role in enabling this family form (see also Gurnham, this volume, for a more detailed discussion of the ambiguous role sperm donors play in family formation). However, the donor was a visible actor (albeit symbolically) in the majority of participants' pursuit of motherhood:

Some people think it should be anonymous completely and so it's just you – you are the parent and there is nothing else, just a blank. And I'm saying that there is never just a blank because you come from one other person too. You can't be a blank. (Anna, importing open-identity sperm into the UK)

Kirkman (2004) has proposed that in the absence of another man claiming the role of father (as is the case where donor sperm is used by heterosexual couples), the sperm donor is more likely to be publicly represented as the child's father. Indeed, for the eleven women in the present study who had imported sperm from abroad, they had done so in order to seek information that could fill the 'blank' left by the absent partner and father: they wanted to be able to tell their child as much as possible about their 'father' and felt limited by the amount of information available about UK donors. In contrast to the fear that single women accessing donor sperm is a 'blow to fatherhood' and 'the feminist dream come true', it appears that even when single women use 'genetic fluid in a vial' to conceive, this fluid is personified in an attempt to recreate an image of a father. From long medical and family histories to baby pictures and audio-tapes of the donor talking about himself, the European and American sperm banks give single women an opportunity to *choose* a particular donor. However, despite the eugenic fears that this choice may ignite (see Hanson 2001; Pennings 2000) and the consumerist connotations of 'buying' 'designer babies', the most commonly cited reason for choosing a particular donor was that he sounded 'nice' and 'friendly'. Scheib *et al.* (2000) also found that factors such as whether the donor sounded like someone she or her child would like to get to know and whether he sounded like a good, well-rounded person, were important criteria in choosing open-identity donors. The single women

in this study were found to be more likely to care about such matters than partnered women (whether in a heterosexual or lesbian relationship) when choosing their donor. Perhaps knowledge about the donor as a person is more important for women where there will not be a second parent present in the resulting child's day-to-day life. For the participants in the current study, the extra information the imported sperm provided was certainly reassuring to the women themselves but more importantly was vital information for their child, both for self knowledge and identity formation, and telling others about their 'father':

I know a lot about his dad, his donor. Of course, it's not the same as having their dad there day to day but it's more than it could have been. Also it's easier for the child now. They can say, 'My dad is a teacher and lives in America' rather than, 'I don't know what he does. I don't know how tall he is'. (Anita, importing open-identity sperm into the UK)

Along with the male role models who will be physically present, these women hope that the stories and images they can provide about their child's donor during their childhood will mean they have adequately reworked the fatherhood expectation of the nuclear family into their own family form.

Whereas some women felt it was important to have chosen a particular donor and often likened this to choosing a partner, others felt comfortable being assigned a donor and knowing little about him as they felt this reflected the 'randomness' of falling in love:

It almost introduces that random element of the random man that you meet. You wouldn't line up ten men and decide which to marry. (Natasha, using a UK clinic's open-identity donor selected for her by staff)

Whether reifying or downplaying the significance of choosing a donor, these women were trying to recreate aspects of conventional procreation in their own plans for motherhood. Moreover, even when the significance attached to donors was reduced, the importance of fatherhood remained prominent; instead of reifying the donor as a father figure, fatherhood was perceived as a purely social role. Claire described how her ambivalence towards donors enabled her to shift from using an open-identity donor when seeking treatment abroad to subsequently using a cheaper, truly anonymous donor:

I don't think it's a father. Whilst I listen here with British opinion being able to meet the donor, I think what are you going to find out about that person in eighteen years' time? They're never going to be a father. They're still just going to be a sperm donor and what benefit does that bring? You might find out they are in prison or they've died or they are this or that. I'm just not 100 per cent convinced there is a particular benefit to that. I can see it from a genetic, family history point of view, but, no, to me a donor is a donor and that's the end of it. And I think you've got to think about it like that otherwise you are just kidding yourself and someone else.

For Claire reworking a sperm donor into a family narrative is a step too far; a sperm donor will never be a father; fatherhood is not purely genetic in origin and nor should a sperm donor be personified.

Temporary single motherhood

Whatever their thoughts about donors, all participants in the current study hoped for a partner in the future. Indeed, the importance these women placed on relationships actually led them to see single motherhood by choice as a positive step towards a lasting partnership. Focusing on motherhood at the same time as trying to find the 'right' relationship was deemed incompatible. Such a mindset meant they were judging potential men as fathers rather than partners, forcing a discussion about children very early in the relationship. With their perceived dating life longer than their reproductive life, pursuing motherhood alone was seen to 'buy time' so that in the future they would once again be able to concentrate on finding a partner:

It would be nice to meet someone in a relaxed way, without that pressure and not sort of panic and get together with someone purely for that purpose but be with someone because you love them and know them and don't want anything from them. (Rachel, 38)

Many expected that the single nature of their motherhood would only be temporary. Moreover, by pursuing motherhood through sperm donation, rather than having a child in a short-term relationship, they felt they would not only spare themselves and their children the pain and conflict of a break up, but also make it easier to form a relationship in the future without the presence of a 'messy ex'. Given the current high divorce rates (see Coleman and Glenn 2009) these women saw their own family building option as preferable to a temporary nuclear family. Furthermore, many of these women hoped a future partner would adopt their donor-conceived child who lacked a legal and present father. The idea of becoming a mother through sperm donation and then finding a partner allows them to come as close as possible to the image of the nuclear family ideal they had imagined for themselves.

Single motherhood by choice: A legitimate family form

Even if single women creating families using donor sperm do not purposely reject *the* nuclear family, nor the position of men within it, they still create families that diverge from the form believed optimal for children's welfare. Is the welfare of children in this family form jeopardized?

A long-term follow up of a small sample of single-parent families in the UK where the child had been raised since the first year of life without a father,

or father-figure, in a financially stable family home, were found to be similar to traditional families in a range of measures assessing quality of parenting and child psychological adjustment at age six (Golombok *et al.* 1997), twelve (MacCallum and Golombok 2004) and eighteen (Golombok and Badger 2010). In early adulthood those from solo mother households showed lower levels of anxiety, depression, hostility and problematic alcohol use than their counterparts from traditional families and the same levels as those raised in lesbian couple families, indicating that this family form may actually be ‘better’ for children than the nuclear family held as ideal.

Initial studies specifically assessing the psychological wellbeing of children conceived to single women using donor sperm have shown they are functioning well. Murray and Golombok (2005a,b) found these children showed fewer emotional and behavioural problems than a matched comparison of DI children in a heterosexual two-parent family at the age of one, and again at two. Likewise, donor-conceived children to single women in the US (Chan *et al.* 1998) were found to be functioning well at age seven and Weissenberg *et al.* (2007) reported the socio-emotional development of children born to Israeli SMCs to be within normal limits. In addition, research from families headed by lesbian parents has challenged the heteronormative assumptions underlying theories about what children need from their families, leading to the perspective that child wellbeing depends more on family processes and parenting abilities than structure (Patterson 2009; Stacey and Biblarz 2010). Given that SMCs have been found to express positive parenting skills (Murray and Golombok 2005a,b), in fact showing greater joy and pleasure in their child and lower levels of anger than their married counterparts, as well as not suffering from the financial instability deemed to be the most significant factor influencing the poor child outcomes in single parent families (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994), the evidence so far suggests that the SMC family can provide a positive environment for child wellbeing.

Despite being the sole parent, SMCs have described themselves as well supported (Hertz and Ferguson 1997; Jadvá *et al.* 2009). Furthermore, a few of the participants in my own study actually anticipated that the absence of a second parent might be an advantage of single motherhood by choice. Rather than depending upon the self-contained, nuclear family, they would be forced to create a robust social network and as a result their child would be exposed to many different people and personalities.

In addition, all participants were keen to stress the planned nature of their motherhood. Although Anna felt a lot of grief about becoming an SMC, she could also see how her choice could impact positively upon any future child:

I also know that these kids are going to have so much better parents than so many. They are really lucky, they’re going to have a really mature mother who has really thought this through and has thought of every angle, really wants it and is going to put everything in. They’ve got a better start than lots of kids.

Age, emotional maturity and financial stability, characteristics of this population, are marshalled to legitimize this path to motherhood. Bock (2000), described how SMCs in a support group in California used such characteristics, as well as the term 'single mother by *choice*', to distinguish themselves from other single mothers. Although ambivalent about whether they had actually *chosen* this family form, the participants in the current study were keen that others should know that they had considered all the implications, especially for the child, of their route to motherhood. The intentional and planned manner of their pursuit of parenthood, the support of others, as well as the love and time they felt they could give a child became incorporated into their ideals for family life. As one participant, Sally, disclosed, she stopped asking herself whether embarking upon single motherhood by choice was right when she realized it wasn't about families being 'black and white, right and wrong' but whether it was an 'OK' decision for the child. She hoped it was.

Regardless of whether the departure from the nuclear family is chosen or not, single motherhood by choice is clearly a planned route to parenthood where the potential child seems to be at the forefront of decision-making. There are increasing numbers of self help books and online forums promoting it as a family building option, as well as prominent media coverage including films and soap operas incorporating single motherhood through sperm donation into their storylines. Perhaps as this and other emerging family forms, both by choice and circumstance, gain prominence in the public imagination, such family forms will no longer need to be justified against the nuclear family. Whereas becoming a SMC currently seems to be a last resort for older women finding themselves without a partner but desiring motherhood, as this and other emerging family forms become more known and accepted within society, perhaps women will be able to pursue single motherhood with less trepidation and regret at its departure from the nuclear family.

Notes

- 1 The term single mother by circumstance is used here to describe mothers who have become single through separation, divorce or death of a partner, or through an unplanned pregnancy where the genetic father is not involved. In contrast, Jane Mattes, founder of the US national organization 'Single Mothers by Choice', defines the concept as 'a woman who decided to have or adopt a child, knowing she would be her child's sole parent, at least at the outset' (Mattes 2011). In this chapter only single motherhood by choice as pursued through ARTs will be discussed.
- 2 An open-identity donor, also known as an identity-release donor, agrees to have his identity released to offspring if the offspring request it after the age of eighteen.
- 3 This data has been gathered as part of PhD research exploring the decision-making and experiences of single women embarking upon motherhood through the use of donor sperm. These women all identified as heterosexual and were between

- the ages of thirty-three and forty-six. All were pursuing motherhood by accessing fertility clinics for treatment with sperm from unknown donors.
- 4 Pseudonyms have been used throughout this chapter. Any identifying information has been removed or altered to protect the identity of participants and maintain confidentiality.

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