

Original Paper

Single Mothers by Choice: True Choice or Realistic Compromise?

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Received: January 11, 2021

Accepted: January 20, 2021

Online Published: February 1, 2021

doi:10.22158/wjssr.v8n1p34

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjssr.v8n1p34>

Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study focuses on the process undergone by never-married Single Mothers by Choice (SMC) in their decision to raise a child on their own. The issue examined is whether the choice of this family structure reflects a social change or a personal compromise, a decision not to wait for a marriage partner. Semi-structured, in-depth, non-directive interviews were conducted. The findings reveal that SMC took the step as a compromise, having preferred to marry. While they are willing to compromise on family structure, SMC are not willing to compromise on a partner, nor are they willing to forego their intention to become mothers. Thus, marriage is still the most desired family structure for having children, but social change is manifested in the choice that women make to choose motherhood without a partner.

Keywords

Single mothers by choice, social change, compromise, family structure, motherhood

1. Introduction

Nuclear families, the stable building blocks of society, are giving way to new types of households. Alongside traditional nuclear families there are single-person households, single-parent households, same-sex household (with or without children), cohabitation (pre-marriage or without marriage), or the voluntarily childless couple (Adams, 2010).

Adams (2010) claimed that the shifting position of patriarchy is a major cause of the dramatically rising divorce rate since the 1970s. The prevalence of divorce has led, in turn, to more fluid family structures. Before they reach adolescence, many children may have lived as part of more than one family or family

structure (Sahu, 2016; Zito, 2015). Following their parents' divorce, children may experience life with a single parent—who may be dating and changing partners, and life in a blended family. Children born to unmarried single mothers may experience the entry of a new partner into their mother's life (Zito, 2015).

Since the mid-1980s, the number of single-parent headed households has increased dramatically—in the United States in 2018, 28% of all households were headed by a single person. This rate is more than double of that of 1960, and while the vast majority of single-parent households are headed by mothers, the number of father-headed families is growing, with the rate now at about 17% (United States Census Bureau, 2018a).

The report *Single Families in Israel* (Center for Political Economic, 2017) revealed that Israel, where this study was conducted, has the lowest rate of single-parent households among the OECD countries, with 11% of the families being headed by a single parent. Of these families, 87% are headed by women, close to 20% of whom had never married, representing a strong demographic change (Center for Political Economics, 2017). In the three decades since the mid-1990s, the rate of single mothers in Israel has increased from 15% to about 25% (Oren, 2018). These growing numbers represent a significant shift in household structure, and with it, a need to examine the societal perceptions of these single mothers.

While the death of a parent can be the reason one parent remains as head of household, most people find themselves single following separation or divorce. However, some people are not single due to the ending of a partnership, but by choice, a life decision to become a sole parent to a child.

Single mothers are often more vulnerable to economic difficulties, suffer stress and depression, often stemming from financial hardships (Berryhill & Durtschi, 2017; Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005; Pujar, Chanda, & Hittalamani, 2018; Ta, Gesselman, Perry, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017; Taylor & Conger, 2017). They usually earn less than married mothers, and consequently are at risk for nutrition insecurity and its sequelae, in addition to not having proper—or any—health insurance, and cannot always afford education, both their own and for their children (Taylor & Conger, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018b). Overall, children of single-parent families, show higher levels of psychological problems than do their two-parent peers, and have lower physical, material, emotional, and social resources, often to the point of depletion (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005; Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, O'Connor, Golding et al., 1998; Pujar et al., 2018; Sahu, 2016; Thwala, Ntinda, & Mabuza, 2014). The negative impact of single parenting on parents and children has been documented (Berryhill & Durtschi, 2017; Pujar, Chanda, & Hittalamani, 2018; Ta, Gesselman, Perry, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017; Taylor & Conger, 2017), yet the picture is different for children of Single Mothers by Choice (SMC), who are the focus of this study. Jadvá, Badger, Morrisette, and Golombok (2009) reported that the number of never-married single women who chose to have a child without a partner is on the rise. This may be due to the increasing

rates of singlehood—in the United States, 28% of all adults were never married (Jackson, 2018).

In the United States, SMC are typically well-educated, upper middle-class European-American, in their mid-to-late thirties. They hold well-paying jobs and are financially secure (Morrissette, 2008; Weinraub, Horvath, & Gringlas, 2002).

The choice to raise a child on one's own is often accompanied by social criticism, regardless of whether the situation was one of choice or circumstances. Social expectations and policies are still designed to favor marriage (Kislev, 2019), and society holds negative attitudes and beliefs regarding single parents (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; DeJean, McGeorge, & Stone Carlson, 2012; Eby, Allen, Noble, & Lockwood, 2004), particularly about single mothers (Ganong & Coleman, 1995; Rhodes & Johnson, 2000; Robinson, 2009). According to Bennett and Jamieson (1999), never-married parents were perceived as more likely than married parents to have poor family relations and poor parenting skills.

Research has turned to single-parent households, yet has not highlighted the possibility that the single parent's gender has a significant influence on society's attitudes. In a comparison by DeJean et al. (2012) between perceptions toward single mothers and single fathers, the mothers suffered more negative attitudes than the fathers. Single mothers are perceived as women who could not maintain a relationship, which is then interpreted as failing their responsibility to provide a secure family for their children. Another perception of single mothers is that they became parents without actually choosing it, and their motherhood is due to an unplanned pregnancy or bad personal choices (Maier & McGeorge, 2014). Society perceives single mothers as being less happy than mothers with partners, and as being more deviant, troubled, and possessing poor child-rearing abilities (Ganong & Coleman, 1995). Ganong, Coleman, and Riley (1988) found negative attitudes regarding single mothers' morality, including beliefs that their values are non-traditional values, that they do not value marriage, and are promiscuous. At the same time, single fathers are perceived more positively, and seen as responsible and caring for their children (Goldscheider, Scott, Lilja, & Bronte-Tinkew, 2015; Hamer & Marchioro, 2002). However, single fathers are also seen negatively and may experience societal disapproval (Chima, 1999; Emmers-Sommer, Rhea, Triplett, & O'Neil, 2003). In 1993, Meyer and Garasky claimed that the biases against single fathers in many laws and policies indicate a belief system that single fathers are not adequate parents.

However, Maier and McGeorge (2014), found that single mothers are perceived as hard workers, independent, and self-sacrificing, and that these qualities help their children develop high organizational skills, initiative, and good time management. Liblich (2009) found that attitudes toward Jewish Israeli single women improved after they became mothers. As mothers, albeit single ones, they were better accepted, perhaps because of the central role of family life in Israeli society and the traditional Jewish emphasis on procreation.

Research question and rationale

The rise of the rate of singlehood, and the almost absolute motivation to become a parent, call for an in-depth study of social insights regarding single parenting and women's motivations to become SMCs. The present study is an attempt to understand whether the choice to become a single mother reflects a compromise, an unwillingness to wait for a marriage partner, or, are these women an expression of a social change and social breakthrough in which parenting is perhaps no longer mainly connected with marriage? More specifically, in this study the personal process that women undergo as they choose to be single mother will be examined.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants in this exploratory study were 20 Jewish Israeli mothers. The women had never married, and all were secular. The participants' average age was 45.16 ($SD = 8.16$), and most of them ($n = 14$, 70%) lived in northern Israel. Just over half ($n = 11$, 55%) had one child, the others ($n = 9$, 45%) had two children. Three of the mothers (15%) were high-school graduates, 12 (60%) had college or professional degrees, 5 (25%) had advanced academic degrees. Four (20%) of the mothers had their first/only child at age 30-35, 9 mothers (45%) at 36-40, and 7 (35%) at age 41 or more. Of the latter group, one of the women 70 years old at the time of the study, and her children were 38 and 36. All other mothers had children younger than 18.

2.2 Research Tool

This is a qualitative phenomenological study, designed to reach an in-depth understanding of the process SMCs undergo in choosing this family structure, viewing both the personal and social aspects of the decision. In this study, the personal decision will be examined in the broader social context, to see whether it represents a social change whereby parenting is not necessarily commensurate with marriage. The interview question was developed by the researcher specifically for this study: "What is the personal process you went through while choosing single parenting as your family structure?"

Semi-structured in-depth, non-directive interviews were conducted with each participant to gather her descriptions of her experience. This interview format enables interviewees to expand and clarify their answers, and to give examples and a full description of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. It also enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth look at single mothers' experiences in relation to the process they described on their way to single parenting, and to develop each interview independently and individually (Groenewald, 2004).

2.3 Research Procedure and Ethical Considerations

The researcher sought and received approval for this study from the Ethics Committee at the Max Stern Yezreel Valley College. Participants were contacted using the snowball method, beginning with a call on social media to never-married mothers. The call asked for never-married mothers to be

interviewed for a research on their choosing this family structure and living it. Some of the initial responders helped reach other participants by contacting them, and the researcher contacted them after being informed that they had agreed. Interviews were conducted between January 2018 and October 2018, by the researcher and a graduate student who served as a research associate and who was guided by the researcher through the entire process. Most interviews (45-70 minutes each) were conducted at the participants' homes, and at their convenience. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and then transcribed. Anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms, and participants were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time and were informed that the findings of this study can be shared with them in time.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis began with a full reading of each interview, giving the researchers a overall view of its contents. Next, a thematic analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was conducted to derive distinct themes for each of the questions. To establish thematic reliability, each researcher separately began searching for content that was systematic, recurring, visible, and direct. They then compared their analyses to reveal mutually agreed-upon themes, which they then named.

3. Results

Content analysis yielded three themes: Choosing motherhood while not choosing singlehood, unwillingness to compromise on a marriage partner, and non-conformism.

Choosing motherhood while not choosing singlehood

Most of the participants had hoped originally to be in a significant relationship, one that would lead to marriage and family. As time went by, and they did not foresee marriage, they moved toward a decision to become single mothers. The participants saw themselves as mothers to be, and as capable persons who can reach this goal with or without marriage:

I didn't choose single parenting. I chose parenting. Period. I wish things were different but they're not. So, I decided not to give up on becoming a mother. That's the only choice I made—I didn't choose to become a single mother. I chose to be a mother (Carmit, 36, mother of a 2.5-month-old).

I didn't want to keep on waiting until I missed my chance to become a mother (Judy, 41, mother of a 3.5-year-old).

An immanent desire to become mothers was described by the participants as a major factor in their decision. Being single mothers was not their first choice, however the fact that their original wish to marry was not fulfilled, did not stop them from becoming mothers.

Unwillingness to compromise on a marriage partner

About half of the participants were in favor of marriage, and they described their efforts to find the

perfect match. However, they claimed that they became single mother of their own volition. Even if they had the chance to marry, they preferred single parenting over a marriage which they did consider good enough:

For years I dated, trying to find a marriage partner. When I turned 36, I could have marry, but I wasn't sure about him, and I realized that marriage was not going to happen soon, so I just went for it [single parenting] (Judy, 41, mother of s 3.5-year-old).

Actually, I was looking for a relationship. When I was 38, I met someone and we were together for a year and half. And then, when I realized that he won't be my partner for life, I decided to become a mother on my own. I'm sorry for the lost years,

I should have done that earlier and I put it off (Batia, 46, mother of a-3-year).

The women reported that they had tried to build what used to be called a "normative family". However, they viewed single parenting as preferable to marriage to a partner who did not meet their expectations.

Non-conformism

About half of the participants defined their own personality as unusual. They were not afraid to stick to their own values or march to their own beat. As they described themselves, being single mothers was not the only different aspect of their life, and they referred to their unusual looks, ideas, and values. They claimed that doing what is "right" and expected by society was less important to them, and that is the kind women they are:

I'm an unusual person, not your run-of-the-mill type. I'm not the kind of person you run into on the street..., because I don't follow social convention. I never did. It never interested me (Lilach, 40, mother of a 4-year-old).

Already at an early age I used to be different in many ways, trailblazing things that now seem universally acceptable. I went to war on everything, and because I believed these things were right, I had no problem fighting (Vered, 70, mother of two, 38 and 36).

It seems that single parenting was the way for some of the mothers who had always done things their own way, different from what was expected, and did not give in to social pressure and social norms. These women were ready to pay the price for social criticism as it is important for them to remain loyal to their own belief and values in many aspects in life, including parenting.

In sum, the findings show that SMCs have compromised on the family structure, as marriage was their original intention. Along with that they expressed an unwillingness to compromise on a marriage partner and yet did not give up their wish for parenthood.

4. Discussion

The current study focused on the process undergone by never-married single mothers by choice, in their decision to raise a child on their own. In this study, SMCs are acknowledged as a distinct group, who differ in some attributes from women who become single mothers due to life circumstances. Against the background of various social changes in the last decades, this study is an attempt to search for deep social insights regarding the process single mothers went through in their choice of single parenting. To do so, semi-structured open interviews were conducted, with leading questions addressing both the personal reasons and the social climate.

Although they chose single motherhood, the participants described their original intention as marriage and living within the normative family structure—a woman and man married to each other, raising their mutual children. These findings are in line with those by Waite and Gallagher (2000) who found that despite the high rates of singlehood in the United States, 93% of Americans claim that marrying is one of their most important life objectives. From a very early age people are driven to see themselves as married in the future, and are socialized to see marriage as preferable to singlehood and a healthier way of life (Hertz, 2006). The perception of marriage as preferable was demonstrated in many studies that compared married people to never-married ones, and yielded beneficial effects of marriage on mental and physical health (Barrett, 2000; Cheung, 2000; Ola & Mathur, 2016).

However, when the participants realized that marriage would entail compromising on a partner, they chose single motherhood. They were clear about motherhood being a life component they were not willing to miss. It is in line with Lampic, Svanberg, Karlstro, and Tydén (2006) who argue that the motivation to become a parent is shared by around 95% of the population whether a person wishes to be married or not. The women described their wish to become mothers as their highest calling, clearly distinguishing between marriage and motherhood.

Single parenting, according to these participants, seemed like opting for the second-best option—short of marriage and parenting, parenting alone. Although there is a significant rise in the frequency of single-parent families (Jadva et al., 2009), it seems that women have deeply internalized the two-parent family structure and try hard to attain it. Researchers (Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2015; Keefe, Brownstein-Evans & Polmanteer, 2018) referred to gender socialization which drives women to prepare themselves from a very early age to marry and take care of their household, husband, and children. Young girls are familiar with the central role of motherhood in their future life when they grow up, and in the present study, not even one of the participants described her decision to become a single parent as her first choice. Segal-Engelchin (2008) suggested that the decision to become a single parent could be related to avoiding intimacy. Such avoidance may have been a result of the relationship they witnessed between their parents, driving them to defend their own autonomy and independence.

Murray and Golombok (2005) suggested that most single mothers hope to have a partner in the future,

both out of a desire for companionship for themselves and a father for their child. In her study, also conducted in Israel, Liblich (2009) pointed out the central place of family life in Israeli society and in the Jewish tradition that promotes procreation. This social inclination can now turn into reality for more single women due to the global change in women status, which enables single mothers to feel more comfortable in society in comparison to never-married women who choose not to have children

It would seem then, that choosing single parenting was a result of a pragmatic thinking—the women considered their age, their unmarried status, financial situation, support network, and assessed their ability to cope with motherhood. Along with the finding regarding the mothers' compromise on the family structure, it seems that these women chose not to compromise on a marriage partner and their intention to become mothers. The participants described themselves as non-conformist, highly competent, and not willing to tie their lives with someone who did not meet their expectations (Hertz, 2006) or who might limit their personal freedom (McGinnis, 2003; Siegel, 1995). They also reported having been in long-term relationships with men, a finding consistent with previous studies (Jadve et al., 2009), and choosing not to have a child with their partners, whom they felt were wrong for them. All participants reported that a relationship came second to motherhood. It is possible that this tendency not to compromise on a marriage partner, represents women who feel secure enough to handle the task of single parenting by themselves, who have a high sense of competence and high levels of initiative, and a positive self-image (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2010; Jadve et al., 2009; Kumar, 2017). Bock (2000) referred to the high level of responsibility that SMCs expressed in their decision to parent. Their justification for having a child on their own was based on their age, socioeconomic class, level of responsibility, and emotional maturity. These mothers considered their decision to have a child carefully, and often consulted friends, relatives, and therapists.

Only a few decades ago, a child born out of wedlock was considered illegitimate. Women who brought up a child on their own faced severe social criticism and only few had gone that way by choice. It seems that although single-parent families are nowadays a notable and a permanent rising part of Western family life, for most women, raising children is still desired within marriage. However, with the gradual change in women's status worldwide, as well as in their level of financial independence and the prevailing values of individualism (Kislev, 2019), single parenting became a realistic path for women, albeit not their ideal one. Along with this individual choice, a social change detected, a desire to become mothers without compromising on a marriage partner. For that matter they express a breakthrough as marriage comes second to parenting.

4.1 Research Limitations

While this study adds to the body of knowledge about the process that underly women's choosing single parenting, it is not without limitations. First, this is a sensitive issue, and although the semi-structured interview allowed personal expression, we may assume that not all interviewees always

revealed their true feelings. Second, the interviews were conducted in a single region—north Israel, meaning that broader generalizations should be approached with caution. Single mothers in other parts of the country, or of a different socioeconomic background, could provide different answers, perhaps leading to additional results and conclusions, perhaps even revealing that for some women single parenting was a first choice, rather than a second one. Third, in this study we did not learn about the women's future intention regarding a close relationship with a man, now after they have become mothers. Such an insight could enrich our perspective regarding their current position. Fourth, the participants were not asked about their perceived level of religiosity. They were regarded as a homogenous secular group, but they may differ in views and in religious identity level, in a way that may affect their answers. It is recommended to gain more information on these aspects in future research. Nonetheless, based on the literature review, and to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that focuses on the process that drives women into choosing single motherhood in which their authentic voices were heard.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank Naama Matana for the data collection.

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