

SINGLE MOTHERS BY CHOICE

A VALID "LIFESTYLE CHOICE" OR ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF DUMB SEX?

by Jennifer Roback Morse

The trend toward single motherhood by choice is unmistakable in both the U.S. and Canada. A new organization, Single Mothers by Choice, runs workshops for would-be single mothers, offering other single mothers as instructors and role models.¹ But is this new development really anything to celebrate?

Consequences for the child

Numerous studies have established that children of single mothers have poorer life chances than the children of married parents.² But the new single mothers by choice may discount this evidence, since it is weighted by the large numbers of poor single mothers. For instance, much of the impact of divorce on the child's propensity to drop out of school is due simply to the loss of income associated with the divorce.³ The new single mothers by choice are often affluent, educated, accomplished professionals. They may imagine these advantages will surely overcome these well-documented disadvantages.

Not so quick. Much of the research controls for income and education. This means that even children of relatively well-off mothers would do better if their parents were married to each other. For instance, even accounting for income, fatherless boys are more likely to be aggressive⁴ and to ultimately become incarcerated.⁵ A recent British study offers tantalizing hints about the possibility that the children of single mothers are more likely to become schizophrenic.⁶ And an extensive study of family structure in Sweden took account of the mental illness history of the parents, as well as the family's socio-economic status. Yet even in the most generous welfare state in the world, with very accepting attitudes toward unmarried parenthood, the children of single parents were at significantly higher risk of psychiatric disease, suicide attempts, and substance abuse.⁷

The career woman who becomes a mother on her own undoubtedly is counting on placing her child in some form of daycare. Perhaps her child will prove to be one of the lucky children who comes home from daycare with a better vocabulary and social skills. But not all children do well in daycare. The fact that problems are statistically unlikely is no comfort if your child happens to be one of the children who becomes aggressive or does not bond properly.⁸ A married mother has options about what to do with a vulnerable child. The unmarried mother will likely have to leave her child in daycare, even if he does not do well there.

And what if the mother discovers that she really would like to be in a relationship? Does her subsequent marriage to a different man help the child? All too often, the answer is no. The presence of a step-father actually exacerbates, rather than relieves, many of the problems of unmarried parenthood. Children in step-parent families show more developmental difficulties than those in intact nuclear families. The adjustment of children in step-parent families is similar to that of children in one-parent families.⁹ The step-father and children can easily become rivals for the mother's attention. The introduction of a new parent disrupts established loyalties and creates conflicted loyalties, creating complications for discipline.¹⁰ The probability of a boy becoming incarcerated is greater for the sons in step-parent families, than even those in single-mother households.¹¹

Two paths to becoming a single mother by choice

In spite of all these uncertainties and difficulties, many well-educated women nonetheless choose single motherhood. A woman can become an unmarried mother by choice by two different routes. She can have a sexual encounter with someone she knows, choosing not to marry. Or, she can be artificially inseminated with the sperm of an anonymous sperm donor.

Agreeing to have a child together without any kind of commitment differs slightly from children born to cohabiting couples, in that these couples may not even live together. The mother may assure the father that she has no intention of asking for financial or emotional support. She may even refrain from putting his name on the birth certificate.

The trouble with this verbal agreement is that it is not enforceable. She may decide a year or two later that being a single mother was more difficult than she expected. If the father declines to help, she may take him to court to force him to pay child support. On the other hand, the father might be the one to change his mind. He may find his child more interesting and attractive once he or she is out of diapers. If the mother refuses to honour visitation and other paternal rights, he may take her to court to have them enforced.

No matter which parent initiates this dispute, one thing is certain: The mother who intended to have a child "on her own," ends up instead with a lifelong relationship with a man she didn't like well enough to marry.

The anonymous sperm donor approach has the advantage of avoiding complications with the genetic father of the child. But what may seem like an advantage to the mother is a problem for the child. Some children of anonymous sperm donors are beginning to come forward to tell their stories in op-ed articles and on the internet. They have very definite feelings about having no father: They don't like it.¹²

When a woman chooses to have a child using an anonymous sperm donor, she is making a plan that her child will never have a relationship with his or her father. But she has no right to deprive her child of the paternal relationship. Even with the best of intentions and efforts, fathers and children sometimes have no bond. Sometimes the father dies. Sometimes, he deserts the family, or the mother ejects him from the household. Even in those sad cases, children and their fathers can sometimes create a connection. Using an anonymous sperm donor deliberately cuts off the paternal affiliation from the very beginning.

A creation of the state

This kind of parentage is an artificial creation of the state. Under the laws of most U.S. states, for instance, the anonymous sperm donor is considered a "legal stranger" to the child. The father has neither rights nor responsibilities toward his child. Anonymous sperm donorship would not exist without this legal shield. Men would not make a deposit in a sperm bank if they thought the mother could later sue for child support. Women would not make a withdrawal if they thought a stranger might land on their doorstep, demanding visitation rights with his child.

This legal arrangement deliberately separates children from their fathers, and mothers and fathers from each other. This artificial separation is not possible in the ordinary course of male and female interactions. There is no public purpose served by creating this permanent estrangement among individuals who ordinarily would be forming the most basic and most intimate of social unions. And incidentally, it contributes to the entirely pernicious social vision that fathers are unnecessary.

Why does the state do this? Simply because the woman wants it. This is a deep injustice in which the state should decline to participate.

Retreat from relationship

The trend toward single motherhood among the well-educated is unmistakable. For many women, the choice is more by default than an actual decision. They have taken their career ambitions more seriously than their fertility ambitions. By the time they have achieved enough career success to feel comfortable embarking on motherhood, they find themselves with limited options. Of the smaller pool of available men, many prefer to marry younger women. By the time a woman enters her thirties, her peak fertility is typically past. She feels the desire for motherhood more urgently, at exactly the moment that her marriage options have become limited.

And so the modern, emancipated woman who spent years trying to avoid having a baby, finds herself in a surprising situation. She wants to have a baby without having sex. Having a baby without having sex might seem a little bit like skipping dessert and going straight for the Brussels sprouts. But these two distinctively modern situations are linked by a common fear: The fear of relationship.

Fear of relationship is at the heart of the sexual revolution in which sexual activity without a live baby is considered an entitlement. We modern women do not have to take seriously the possibility of having a baby with every man we hook-up with. We can be sexual with someone we have no intention of being connected to. Young women now view the “hook-up,” a short-term uncommitted sexual encounter, as a substitute for the relationships they fear.¹³

The single mother by choice has also retreated from relationship, but by a slightly different route. She wants a baby, but has given up on finding a suitable mate.

This is all very sad, not just because of the risks for any children who result from these non-unions. It is sad that sex, that most intimate of all human activities, has become detached from genuine human connection. All of us, women, children and men alike, deserve better.

endnotes

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- 10 Amato, P.R., Rivera, F. (1999, May). Paternal involvement and children's behavior problems. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 61. pp. 375-384. Dawson, D.A. (1991, August). Family Structure and children's health and well-being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 53, pp. 573-584. McLanahan, S.S., Booth, K. (1989, August). Mother-only families: Problems, prospects and politics. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, no. 3 pp. 557-80 find that remarriage does not fully repair the loss to the children of divorced mothers. See also Furstenberg, F. (1994, Spring). History and current status of divorce in the United States. *The Future of Children*, 4, no.1. p. 37.
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“WHAT IF?”

In his new book, *The Future of Marriage*, David Blankenhorn reports the results of a study which asks, “What if the proportion of U.S. children living with their two married parents were as high today as it was in 1970?” In 1970, 68.7 per cent of U.S. children lived with their two married parents, compared with 59.7 per cent in 2000, a drop of 9 percentage points. This date is especially significant for Canada, since no-fault divorce was instituted in 1968. Conducted by Professor Paul Amato of Pennsylvania State University, this study gives a look at some very specific indicators of child well-being.¹

With U.S. family structure as strong today as it was in 1970, the yearly impact would be that:

643,000 fewer American adolescents would fail a grade each year.

1,040,000 fewer adolescents would be suspended from school.

531,000 fewer adolescents would need therapy.

464,000 fewer adolescents would engage in delinquent behaviour.

453,000 fewer youth would be involved in violence.

515,000 fewer youth would begin smoking cigarettes.

179,000 fewer youth would consider suicide.

62,000 fewer youth would actually attempt suicide.

While the corresponding numbers would be lower for Canada because of its lower population, these numbers convey a sense of the very real human price that children have paid for the revolution in family structure.

From the reactions of college students to my campus speeches and debates, I know that many educated young people believe that they will be able to avoid the costs associated with cohabitation and unmarried parenting. They believe their income and educational status will protect them and their children from many of these problems. They may be correct, in that the worst effects of unmarried parenting are concentrated among the poor.

I invite such college-educated young professionals to take this factor into consideration: Your life-style choice amounts to an endorsement of unmarried parenthood, not only for you and your peers, but for the poor as well. If the argument is correct that the worst harms are concentrated among the poor, you are in effect doing something that will be fun and perhaps not too harmful for you, but a disaster for others – namely the poor.

Think about it.

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