Fatherless families

Are they the future?

Over a quarter of all families in Britain today are single-parent families. Some female lone parents are ‘single mothers by choice’. But who are they, and what do we know about them?

The nuclear family — made up of two married, heterosexual parents and their children — has long been thought of as an important area of sociological research and theory. Since the 1990s, functionalists such as Talcott Parsons have argued that the nuclear family specifically evolved to meet the economic and emotional needs of people in modern societies which, unlike their premodern predecessors, are characterised by industrialisation and an ever-growing culture of individualism. Others, from the Marxist tradition, have taken a more critical view of the nuclear family and its ideological basis.

But since the 1970s, family life in Britain has been changing. Today, families in Britain are characterised by increasing levels of divorce and parental separation. In 1971, 8% of all families with children were single-parent families. By 1998 this figure had risen to 24%, and in 2012 26% of all families with children were single-parent families. In the UK, there are currently 2 million lone parents with dependent children, and approximately 3 million children currently living in a single-parent household (Office for National Statistics 2012). Sociologists have proposed different explanations for this rising trend (Box 1).

Single-parent families

Most single-parent families in Britain today are the result of divorce. The children in these families have generally been shown to fare less well than children in two-parent families. They are more likely to experience emotional, social and academic difficulties than the children of married mothers, and these difficulties can persist into adolescence and adulthood.

However, research over the last 20 years has shown that the difficulties children in these families may face are less the result of being raised by a lone parent than they are the outcome of the types of experiences these families have. In particular, it has been shown that the issues facing children in single-parent families following on from divorce are the result of changes to their financial circumstances and social networks, and are better explained by the fact that their families have ‘broken down’. Such families are more likely to be characterised by conflict, and it is more likely for the parents within them to be experiencing emotional distress (Golombok 2000).

In spite of this evidence, the idea that there may be single women deliberately pursuing parenthood on their own has been met with scepticism. Described as ‘single mothers by choice’, these women have recently been at the heart of a political debate about the future of family life and the consequences of raising children without fathers. They have been condemned by Conservative MPs such as Iain Duncan Smith for ‘hampering the last nail in the coffin for family life’ but who are the women choosing to parent alone, and what are their experiences of single motherhood?

Box 1 | Explaining the rise in single-parent families

There are two key sociological schools of thought that have tried to explain the rise in single-parent families. These can be broadly thought of as ‘pessimistic’ and ‘optimistic’ accounts.

• The pessimistic perspective, scholars have suggested that the rise in the number of single-parent families is tied to the decline of community and the ‘social fibre’ of society. New Right thinkers such as Charles Murray (1996) have argued that single parents are evidence of a new and morally degenerate ‘underclass’ who are dependent on social welfare.

• Seen more optimistically, the increase in single-parent families may be due to the modern transformation of intimate relationships. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have argued that intimate relationships are more difficult to sustain in the current cultural climate of detraditionalisation and individualism, in which the institutions of the family and marriage are less socially significant than they were historically. In this view, relationships today can be entered into more freely, for their own sake, and through choice on the part of individuals.

At the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge, we wanted to find out more about this new type of single-parent family (Box 2).

Choosing single motherhood

The decision to become a single mother was carefully considered by all of the women we interviewed. Most mothers described having a child on their own was not their ‘first choice’, and that being a lone parent was not what they considered ‘ideal’. When we asked one mother, Mary, about why she hadn’t had a child previously, she responded:

“I wanted the rosy picture. I wanted the man and everything that went with it, and I always expected that to happen, and when it didn’t…that’s when you’ve got to make that decision.”

November 2014

Sociology Review

Like Mary, the vast majority of mothers we spoke to described their decision as the result of not having a partner at the time when they wanted to become a mother. Many explained that their preference would have been to raise a child within the context of the nuclear family, and several described having thought thoroughly about the consequences of their child not having a father in the home. However, participants generally suggested that although they would have preferred to have had a child in the context of a heterosexual relationship, they were grateful for their child not having experienced conflict and, potentially, divorce.

Most also explained that they had carefully planned for a change in their financial circumstances, and had created a strong social support network for their future family before becoming a parent. In this way, the ‘single mothers by choice’ in our study seem to use what Bock (2001) has called a ‘hierarchy of motherhood’, differentiating themselves from women who have unintentionally become single mothers.

The majority of participants depicted their decision to become a parent as ‘natural’, and several suggested that they always knew that they wanted to be a mother. For Rachel, the desire to parent was stronger than any other. She explained:

“I always wanted to have a child and I think I’ve been broody and maternal. I think I’ve always wanted to be a mother more than anything.”

Box 2 Methods

We interviewed 46 single mothers for this study. The mothers had to be heterosexual, currently single, and to have at least one child currently aged between 4 and 9 years old. All of the mothers in the study had used a sperm donor to help them become a parent. We recruited mothers through the UK-based fertility clinic they used to access fertility treatment. We conducted most of the interviews at participants’ homes.

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Interview questions focused on:

• becoming a parent, including making the decision to ‘go it alone’, choosing to use a sperm donor, and discussing this with others
• being a mother: including pre- and post-motherhood experiences, thoughts about other families, and relationships with their children
• being single: including romantic relationships, family history, feelings about future partnerships, and talking to others about their family type

(All the women’s names used are pseudonyms.)
At the same time, many participants also described how their decision to become a single mother was encouraged by being witnessed to friends and family members raising children. These narratives complicate the idea that motherhood is a 'natural' feature of the female identity, and cause consideration of the socially constructed nature of the relationship between womanhood and motherhood (Hertz 2006).

**Past and future relationships**

Most of the mothers we interviewed described having previously had relationships with men. Several had lived with partners, and some had previously been married. Many of the participants described how they would like to have a romantic relationship in the future. One mother, Humera, told us, "I thought I could just have a baby now, whilst I'm the right age for it, then I can worry about finding a partner in good time, with the right focus, not just trying to get a beke to have a baby with.

Although Humera and the other mothers we interviewed had clearly gone against the marriage-the-motherhood path they described as 'ideal', they were reluctant to see their single status as permanent. Instead, as work by American sociologist Rosanna Hertz (2006) has also shown, they spoke of the prospect of motherhood-the-marriage in the future.

"Being single was described as varying in importance, both by different participants, and by the same participants reflecting on different stages of their path to parenthood. Some, like Anna, described being single and pregnant as a particularly difficult time. I was more concerned when I was pregnant about being a single mum than if I was when I had a child. Others, like Lucy, explained how her status as a single woman in what she described as a 'traditional part of the world' made it difficult for her to socialise with other parents.

Lucy's experience of living in a community in which most families were headed by two parents was in stark contrast to that of Elizabeth, who argued that after having her child, 'everything became normal.' Although the vast majority of participants did not personally come under any criticism for their decision to become a single mother, listening to the past and present experiences of mothers in different social contexts helped to explain to the narrators why some mothers described feeling more stigmatised than others.

**Views of the nuclear family**

Although the mothers in our study generally described the ideal family as one in which a mother and father together raised a child, they also explained how this ideal did not square up to the experiences of many of their friends and family members who were married with children. In particular, many

Finally, most mothers explained how they had felt able to raise their children outside of the nuclear family ideal because they had the support of their family, including their parents and siblings. Some participants lived with these family members, and others lived with other people, such as their children's nanny. In explaining their circumstances, these mothers called into question the idea of a linear transformation of family life from premodern to modern societies, during which it is commonly suggested that a shift from extended to nuclear family units took place.

**Conclusion**

Despite concerns that 'single mothers by choice' might be leading us to a future of fatherless families, our study shows that single women who deliberately parent alone would have preferred to parent in the context of the nuclear family. Their narratives tell us that they are ambivalent about their identities as single mothers by choice.

They are women who want to be mothers, but do not want to become mothers in unhappy nuclear families. Not only do they want to risk the perils of divorce, or for their children to suffer the consequences of family breakdown. Although they generally acknowledge that contemporary society is characterised by different types of families, their feelings about being single are determined by the local worlds in which they live.

These women are generally hopeful for partnership in the future, but they make a clear distinction between good and bad fathers, and question the reality of the nuclear family that they nevertheless depict as the ideal family form.

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