Donors and Daddies, Fathers and Lovers: The Presence of (Mostly) Absent Men in Narratives of Single Mothers by Choice

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Since the 1980s, a growing number of American women are choosing to start a family without a male partner. These Single Mothers by Choice (SMCs), also known as Choice Moms (CMs),[1] are for the most part heterosexual, white, well-educated,[2] and over age thirty-five.[3] No one knows just how many women are pursuing this path, but indicators of growth include the establishment of two organizations to help women who have chosen this form of family formation or are considering doing so.[4] The first, Single Mothers by Choice (SMC), was founded in 1982 by Jane Mattes, a clinical social worker, who at age thirty-six decided she wanted a child, even though she had not yet found a "suitable life partner." After giving birth to her son in 1980, and realizing how much she needed support, she organized a small group of other single women she knew who were either pregnant or considering becoming mothers. By 1994, SMC had more than 2,000 members in twenty chapters (Mattes 1994:xxii), and by 2005, membership had doubled to about 4,000 (Egan 2006). Its mission is to support women who choose to have children without a "daddy." Mattes (1994:126) uses the term "father" to refer to the biological progenitor and reserves "daddy" for the social role. This handy distinction has been adopted by many SMC/CMs and is used in this essay.

Choice Moms (CM) was founded by Mikki Morrissette, a journalist from Minnesota who gave birth in 1999 as single woman in New York City, four years after her first marriage had ended in divorce. In 2004, while pregnant with her second child, she met a widower with two children. They married, moved back to Minnesota, and have chosen to maintain "two separate homes—and to squeeze in as much alone time" as possible (2008:52). Morrisette's daughter "generally considers him to be the man married to Mom," rather than her "Dad" (2008:122). Morrissette moderates the ChoiceMoms.org website which features podcasts, blogs, webcasts, articles and other resources for the Choice Mom community. Her weekly web talk radio show launched in July 2009 averages 4,000 listeners a week (webtalkradio.net).

It is estimated that about three-quarters of SMCs/CMs create their families using artificial insemination with the sperm of an anonymous donor (Harmon 2005a). Smaller numbers do so with the sperm of someone they know; some have sex for this purpose, with or without the man's knowledge; some get pregnant accidentally and decide to keep the pregnancy as a single mother; some adopt. Statistics on birth outside of marriage, on single-parent families, on sperm donation and adoption to single women, all of which have grown dramatically in recent years, point to the growth of this mode of family formation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, "the percentage of children living with a sole parent—typically the mother more than doubled (to 28%) between 1970 and 2006….[representing] about 20 million out of the 73 million children living in

America" (Crowley 2008:4). These figures include mother-headed households that became so through divorce or widowhood, but according to the National Organization of Single Moms, the fastest growing type of the female-headed family households "is MOMs (Mothers Outside of Marriage)" (NOSM 2009). Vital statistics are consistent with this. In 2007, 39.7% of U.S. births were to unmarried women, up from 34.0% in 2002 (Ventura 2009). The greatest rate of growth (an increase of 34% between 2002-2007) has been among women ages thirty to thirty-four years (Ventura 2009), the prime age group for SMC/CMs. There was also substantial growth (14% between 2002-2006) of nonmarital births among nonHispanic whites (Ventura 2009), the ethnic group of most SMC/CMs.

The number of children born via donor insemination in the U.S. is also growing. An estimated 30,000 to 40,000 of the approximately 4 million annual births in the U.S. are estimated to have been conceived this way (Moore 2007:93) and the proportion of these born to single women is increasing. In 1998, single women represented about 40% of the clients at the California Cryobank, the largest sperm bank in the U.S.; by 2005, single women accounted for nearly 60%. That same year, Xytex, a sperm bank in Atlanta, reported "at least 50%, and probably closer to 75%" of their patients were single women (Parry 2005). In response to this growing market niche, sperm banks have started advertising in the SMC newsletter (Parry 2005), and California Cryobank is one of the sponsors of the Choice Moms radio show.

Adoption by single women has also grown, even though some report that adoption rules are even more restrictive for single women than they are for gay couples (Harmon 2005a). Morrissette estimates that about one-third of the nearly 125,000 adoptions in the U.S. each year are to single parents (2008:xvii).[5]

Another suggestive sign of growth can be found in publishing. The first books on the subject appeared in the early 1990s (Mattes [1994] 1997, Stonesifer 1994). In the mid-nineties an anthropologist conducted a fascinating study of Israeli SMC/CMs (Kahn 2000) and child psychologists in the U.K. and the U.S. undertook a series of studies comparing the psychological health of children of SMC/CMs with those of single and partnered lesbian women, and with married heterosexual couples (Golomobok, Tasker and Murray 1997, Chan, Raboy and Patterson 1998). In the second half of the 2000s, a boomlet of books appeared, including two more how-to books (Sloan 2007, Morrissette 2008), a beautifully-written SMC/CM memoir (Soiseth 2008), and excellent scholarly studies by a psychologist (Drexler 2005) and a sociologist (Hertz 2006). A series of articles on, or relating to, SMC/CMs also appeared in the *New York Times* (Harmon 2005a, 2005b, 2006, Egan 2006). Other indications of this social trend are found in television, film, and broadcasting. "Oh, Baby," a situation comedy that aired on Lifetime from August 26, 1998, to March 4, 2000 (and from 1999 to 2003 on Canada's W Network), was written and produced by Susan Beavers after she became a single mother by choice. In the show, a marketing executive

in her thirties "decides to start a family on her own [using donor insemination], much to the surprise of her commitment-phobic boyfriend and the consternation of her controlling mother. In 2007, the pilot episode of "Misconceptions," was aired by WB Television. In this series a woman whose teenage daughter, conceived via sperm donor, wants to meet her biological father, who, it turns out, is not the "well-bred, handsome, athletic, well-educated and a successful doctor" he pretended to be on his sperm bank profile, but just "a man who needed a little cash after junior college" (www.tv.com accessed November 2009). A documentary film chronicling the lives of members of an SMC group in New York City over a two year period was produced in 2000 (Rudavsky and Katz). A final sign of the growing importance of SMC/CMs as a social phenomenon is the fact that the term "Choice Mom" made it onto the short list for the New Oxford American Dictionary Word of the Year in 2009.

Present/Absent Men

Single Mothers by Choice and Choice Moms are predominantly heterosexual, so unlike lesbian mothers, the absence of a male partner is remarkable. And remarked upon they are. Men are prominent topics in the books, newsletters, blogs, and chat rooms of the support organizations. Based on these sources and my personal experience of witnessing a close friend become an SMC twice, this essay explores the role of men in narratives of single mothers by choice. I have identified eight ways men regularly feature in SMC/CMs narratives. Four of these address men primarily in relationship to the SMC/CM; in the other four, men are considered mainly in relation to the children.

As Inhorn (2006) has noted, men have been grossly neglected in recent scholarship on reproduction. Over "150 ethnographic volumes have been devoted to women, reproduction and women's health in the past twenty-five years" (2006:345). During this same period, the scholarship on men and reproduction is practically nil. Inhorn et al. (2009:3) call on scholars to bring "men back into the reproductive imaginary." Documenting the presence of men in the narratives of single mothers by choice is one, albeit ironic, way of doing so.

Men and SMC/CMs

Self-presentation as NOT Man-haters. When Jane Mattes started doing interviews about SMCs in the early 1980s, she was often asked why they hated men (1994:17). Ten years later, she reported, such questions were less common, but the issue remains a concern among SMC/CMs. The lead item on the community news page of the Choice Moms website in November 2009 reported the findings of Susan Golombok's research about SMC/CMs— "we have a high percentage of post-graduate degrees...and we don't hate men. But, of course, we knew that."

It is not surprising that SMC/CMs are still concerned about the potential for public misapprehension and strive to assure others that they are not anti-man. In his famous 1992 critique of television sitcom Murphy Brown's decision to keep her baby even though she was unmarried, Vice President Dan Quayle declared that doing so "mock[ed] the importance of fathers" (Pro-family News 1995) and SMC/CMs still fear that their decisions will be interpreted in this way.[6] Sloan asserts that women who choose single motherhood actually value men more than those women who marry simply in order to have children. Single Mothers by Choice "really value men and see them as equals, partners, lovers, soul mates—not as turkey basters attached to a paycheck" (2007:xiii).

A regular theme in the narratives of SMC/CMs is that they did not choose to be single. This is reflected in the title of one of the how-to books, Rosanna Hertz's *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice*. As Sloan explains in her book, *Knock Yourself Up: No Man? No Problem*!, it is "not that we were against the idea of a dad." Almost all of the thirty-seven heterosexual members of Single Mothers by Choice she interviewed for her book "would love to find the right guy" (2007:xi). Indeed, accounts of reaching the decision to go it alone sometimes involve a description (often humorous) of the men that they "serial dated" in their quest for a mate and father for their children. Among SMC/CMs, the dream "of a glorious wedding followed by babies" (Morrissette 2008:43) is referred to as "Plan A"; "Plan B" is what they do when this preferred path to parenthood doesn't work out.[7] This usage of "Plan B" is part of popular culture now, as evidenced in the 2010 movie by that name starring Jenifer Lopez, who plays a single woman who conceives twins through artificial insemination (and then meets the man of her dreams). While looking at potential sperm donors' profiles, Alexandra Soiseth, author of the memoir, *Choosing You,* realized that she was still hoping for a husband and father and that she needed to mourn the loss of her dream of "romantic love and the white picket fence and life in the normal lane"(Soiseth 2008:109, 129). A related theme is worry of being mistaken for a lesbian. Soiseth recalls how uncomfortable she was when she and her girlfriend, Pat, met with a genetic counselor during her pregnancy. She introduced Pat as friend and birthing partner but felt that the counselor was "wondering what the real deal" was (Soiseth 2008:164). I experienced a similar sense of discomfort when I accompanied my friend to childbirth classes. All the other participants were heterosexual couples who, we suspected, were observing us for signs of whether we were lesbians. My self-consciousness and discomfort increased when couples were instructed to sit on the floor with the pregnant women leaning their backs against their partners' chests for support.

Sperm Selection and Feelings for the Male Donor. Many of the SMC/CMs who select sperm from sperm banks liken the process to dating. One of the SMC/CMs described by Mattes, said the process felt like "a bizarre sort of blind date" (1994:34). Soiseth recalls how as she considered the profiles of

potential sperm donors, she was "thinking about their dating potential while forgetting that I'll never actually meet them. I…confused looking for a sperm donor with looking for a date" (2008:108). Some SMC/CMs have mentioned that they felt a kind of crush on or love for their donor after having been inseminated or after having conceived a child. Some women report getting "a crush on the doctor doing the insemination and occasionally they develop a fantasy that it was his sperm…rather than that of an unknown donor." Mattes interprets this as "a natural desire to feel some real and positive connection with the man who is the biological father of" their child (1994:34).

But some report other feelings—the feeling that comes from having more control than one does when in a relationship. One of the SMCs interviewed by Sloan said, "I felt like Madeline Kahn as Empress Nympho, picking escorts, 'Yes, no, no, no, no, yes'" (2007:38). A SMC/CM from Long Island "saw her ability to select a 6-foot-2 blond, blue-eyed, genetic-disease-free donor as some consolation for not getting to fall in love with someone who would most likely have been more flawed" (Harmon 2005a).

Soiseth explains that because the term "insemination" made her uncomfortable, she chose to use the term "injection" instead (2008:97). She found "choosing a father…a strange and somewhat creepy process…Frankly, as I go from donor to donor, characteristic to characteristic, my most prevalent feeling is one of sheer consumerism. I feel like I am buying a baby" (2008:104).[8] Elsewhere, Soiseth likens sperm selection to choosing the ingredients for something to bake. One of the SMCs interviewed by Sloan (2007:38) describes how bizarre it felt to be "picking out the father of your child like you're picking out shoes."

Both dehumanization and personification are made possible by the disembodiment of sperm, "whereby [it] is removed from its physical and somatic contexts and viewed as independent of" the male body from which it comes (Moore 2007:56). Once the sperm arrives, many personify it. Soiseth vividly describes her relationship with her chosen sperm/man, in its container, which she names Olaf. "I take the container with me to the living room to sit beside me as I watch TV. There's not a peep of complaint when I keep changing the channel" (2008:119). Sloan describes introducing her chosen sperm/dad to other family members: lying in bed at her mother's house after inseminating herself she introduced "the empty inch-long plastic vial" to her sister and her mom—"Caroline this is Dad. Dad, Caroline"; her mother replied, "Nice to meet ya, Dad."[9]

Sloan and Soiseth both report taking "tons of pictures" of him. Remarkably, both chose to photograph their sperm on the move—after having strapped him in the backseat of their cars, much as they would soon be doing, if lucky, with the infant he would help produce (Sloan 2007:5, Soiseth 2008:118). Treated as precious and fragile, requiring special care, one might read this as infantilizing the sperm/man.

Romantic/Sexual Relationships with Men after Becoming an SMC/CM. One of the questions frequently addressed in the SMC/CM literature and chat rooms is how feasible it is to find a male sexual partner and/or life partner after having made the choice to become a single mother. Some share their stories of finding "Mr. Right" after having made this choice, like Mikki Morrissette, founder of Choice Moms. She explains "she knew she would marry again someday" but assumed it would be after her two children were grown. When she met her future husband during the early months of her second pregnancy, she wrote him a letter "lay[ing] all the cards on the table." She said she was looking for "male-role model material and friendship." He was interested, they started dating, "everything clicked," and he proposed six months later (2008:52).

This doesn't work out for most, however. One of Soiseth's friends had encouraged her, saying that it would probably be easier to find "the right guy" after having had a child because "you can be more relaxed…No desperate searches" because of the biological clock (2008:63). But at the end of her memoir, written when her daughter was three and beginning to grapple with the fact that she doesn't have a daddy, Soiseth realizes that "part of my being able to go ahead and have her was thinking that she wouldn't be fatherless for very long, because I would find a man soon after she was born….Long before she would be aware of her fatherlessness" (2008:283).

Others no longer seek a life-long partner but are happy with more casual relations with men. Sloan (2007:170) warns, "men can get a little weirded out when they find out the woman they are dating is trying to get pregnant with another man's sperm. When they find out she is pregnant, it can get even weirder."

A single mom who is the dating columnist for mylifetime.com posted the question, "Can a Single Mom Have a Boy Toy?" which she defined as "a laid-back lover with whom I could have some safe, responsible sex every once in a while" (Sarah 2009). Eighteen readers (most of whom were single moms but at least one of whom was the grown child of a single mom) submitted responses about how to go about having "Mr. Short Term" in lieu of "Mr. Right." In addition to advice about using protection against STDs, the main concern was the need to protect the children from these short term encounters.

Effect of the Men in SMC/CM's Lives on their Decision. Many SMC/CMs reflect on the role that men played in shaping their decision to go it alone. These men include former husbands or boyfriends, and most notably, their own fathers. Like the populace at large, some had nice dads and others didn't; some had dads present in their life, others did not. And like so many Americans of this era, many had experienced the pain of divorce when they were children. These experiences with men (both positive and negative) influence, not only their decision to become a single mother, but also the method by which they choose to do so.

One SMC/CM explained that her dad had left "before I was even born" and her mom had thrown out all reminders of him. She had "always wanted to know who my dad was. I just wanted to see him, even just a picture." In her view, "knowing your father is, well, embedded…. I needed it like breathing" (Soiseth 2008:162). Because of this experience, she chose an "open" or "ID release" sperm bank, so her children could contact their father if they wished once they turned eighteen. (With such banks, the donor is not allowed to initiate contact with the children or their mother.)

In contrast, an SMC named Debbie explained how her choice of an anonymous donor was influenced by her experience of having "been raised in a family that was shattered by a bitter divorce and custody battle when she was a small child. She was determined that she would never put any child of hers through such a devastating experience, nor did she ever want to have to go through anything similar herself" (Mattes 1994:38).

Men and the Children of SMC/CMs

The Risks of Mothering without a Man. It is not surprising that SMC/CMs worry about the impact of raising children without a dad. Not only are these women going against the norm, they do so in an era of "intensive mothering" (Hays 1996, Douglas and Michaels 2004), which places enormous responsibility on mothers to assure that their children have every possible advantage, and judges mothers for the way their children turn out. Furthermore, the perils of fatherlessness have been a frequent topic in the press during the decades in which choosing single motherhood has become increasingly common.[10] The perils of fatherlessness were the focus of President Barack Obama's remarks on Father's Day in 2009. According to Obama, who was raised by a single mother, "more than half of all black children live in single-parent households, a number that has doubled since we were children." He summarized the oft-quoted research on the consequences this has on the children. "We know the statistics—that children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of schools and twenty times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioral problems, or run away from home, or become teenage parents themselves."

To counter these concerns, SMC/CMs marshal studies of their own. For example, Mattes (1994:18-19) cites a 1992 sociological study of teens which found that adolescents "whose mothers had never married had fewer conflicts with their parents, better school grades, and fewer personal and adjustment problems than children from either divorced or step-parent families" even though the never-married families in this study were younger and had less money than the divorced and step-family parents (1994:17). More recent studies in the U.K. and the U.S. have found no significant difference among children's adjustment as

a function of the number of parents in the home. In both cases, "family process" was found to be much more significant than "family structure" (Chan et al. 1998:545, Golombok et al. 1995:296, Golombok, Susan and Clare Murray 1999). In contrast with the characteristics of single-parent homes in which children may be at risk, the lesbian and heterosexual SMC/CMs tend to be "fully adult, well educated, and relatively affluent" (Chan et al. 1998:453).

The SMC/CM literature addresses the importance for both girls and boys of having a man or men in their lives, given that "half the population is male and being able to feel comfortable and get along with both sexes is important for all of us" (Mattes 1994:162-171). Critics of single motherhood (whether by choice or chance), however, tend to focus on what they see as the special risks to boys (Panettieri 2008). Drexler, a psychologist who studied thirty single mothers by choice and their sons (along with thirty single mothers by circumstance and sixteen two-mom lesbian parents), believes these concerns stem from the notion that we live in "an age characterized by anxiety and uncertainty" about masculinity (2005:xv). She found that contrary to dire predictions, these "maverick moms" are raising "exceptional men," in part because they "reject social judgments about their family structure and in the process model strength, character, and conviction to their sons," and because "they accepted who their sons were rather than consciously molding them into what they thought their boys should be" (2005:16, 27).

SMC/CMs often make a special effort to compensate for the absence of a "daddy" by making sure their children have other men in their lives who can serve as role models, including their own fathers, brothers, male friends, the husbands of their girlfriends, coaches, babysitters, and tutors. Sometimes these men's surrogate role is reinforced by the designation of "godfather." In the case of my friend, she asked all three of her brothers and my male partner to be the godfathers of her children. (I was delighted to have been designated "godmother".) Another SMC/CM strategy is to make sure their children grow up knowing other children who do not have daddies in their life. This was one of the reasons Mattes organized the support group for herself that grew into the SMC organization (1994:xix).

The Risks Men Pose to Mothers and Their Children. Some SMC/CMs discuss the risk male partners may pose to mothers and children. Soiseth describes a disturbing incident she witnessed in a grocery store while pregnant: a man yanked a five-year old girl out of a shopping cart being pushed by the mother, and yelling at her, stormed off with the child. The mother just "cast her eyes down" and did nothing. After witnessing this Soiseth promised her unborn daughter, "I am never letting any man near you, ever. …I can never get married now. I can never put her in jeopardy. All men are violent and unpredictable, angry and hurtful." Later, she puzzled over these feelings because apart from the young man who had raped her as a child, the men in her life had been wonderful.

The most common risks discussed are that of unwanted involvement and/or custody battles. These issues are a regular feature of discussions of the pros and cons of known vs. unknown donors. As Mattes explains, "a known donor may present legal and/or emotional complications later on" (1994:25). She warns, if you conceive with a man you know, you cannot "keep the father out of your child's life if he wants to be involved" (1994:25). This is because in most states the child's rights to having both parents involved are legally protected. This is the case even if the donor signs a legal document agreeing never to contact the child unless it was mutually agreed upon, for such documents are not legally binding since no one is able to sign away the child's rights. Although the how-to books abstain from advising women on the best route, the option of anonymous donation with an "open" donor who agrees to allow the children he has fathered to contact him seems to offer a welcome compromise.

One of the women described by Mattes explained her decision to go with an unknown donor because of her fear that "a known donor might change his mind and decide he wanted to have frequent contact." Her worst case scenario was that the donor would later marry and discover his wife was infertile and then win a custody battle for their child since he was married and she was not and the court might decide it was "in the best interest of the child to live with two parents" (1994:38).

"The Daddy Question". According to Mattes (1994:123), once SMC/CMs have a child, "what to tell our children about their fathers is by far the biggest concern of single mothers by choice." This issue is referred to by SMC/CMs as "the Daddy Question" since it is prompted by their child asking "Do I have a Daddy?," a question often provoked by questions from other children.[11] The how-to books give advice about when and how to explain to children why they don't have a daddy, and how to help them explain this anomaly to others. Mattes stresses that it is important for the SMC/CM to resolve her own feelings about the matter before the child is of age to ask.[12] She suggests practicing answering the daddy questions out loud while alone, making a picture book for the child, talking about him in a positive way to others while in the presence of the child, and she gives advice on age-appropriate answers for toddlers, three to four year olds, four to five year olds, and school-aged children.

SMC/CM chat rooms predictably have threads on the daddy question or the daddy issue in which members share tips on dealing with this issue. One woman recommends, "Nature programs…, since there are many species where the parents have no social connection or where the social father isn't necessarily the biological father (very prevalent in sparrows, apparently)." In a 2002 posting, a forty-four year old mother shared that she had recently started telling her 2.7 year-old daughter "her birth story as a bedtime story, and she asks for it very frequently. I talk about having an egg in my tummy, but needing to get a sperm to make a baby. I talk about finding a man to give a sperm to the doctor to put into

me. I talk about the sperm and egg meeting up to make a baby. I stumble over this part of the story a bit and it is a work in progress. Sometimes I emphasize finding 'just the right man' and other times I make it sound more like I just went to the doctor and he got a sperm from his medicine cabinet. I guess I am sort of searching for what feels comfortable." She notes that her daughter "has no apparent interest in this part of the story. She loves the part about when she first kicked me, and about how she made my stomach big, and about how we both pushed and pushed to get her out. She delights in my telling about her relatives coming to the hospital and holding her." In another post this woman shared her worry about the fact that her daughter sometimes refers to her grandfather, who she sees regularly, as her daddy. She explains, "I have never said to her: 'I have a Daddy and you don't,' because I think it would upset her. I have said 'there's no Daddy in our family,' which creates a disconnect whenever it comes up that my father (whom she views as part of our family) is my Daddy."

Soiseth (2008:278) ends her memoir describing how one Father's Day she learned that her daughter "had an elaborate fantasy about her father (and fantasy brothers and sisters) who, like an imaginary friend, is present in her life and comforts her" and who she firmly believes would soon be coming to live with them. Soiseth explained that her father lives in Denmark, they don't know him, and he would not be coming to live with them. Unfazed, her daughter told her mom his name. Soiseth (2008:281) said they could call him that, then together they considered other names they might choose for him (much as people do when selecting the name for a baby).

"Paternal Heritage." A less common but no less interesting way that men appear in narratives of SMC/CMs is in discussions of how much to emphasize the ethnic heritage of the biological father. These discussions are reminiscent of the practices of American families who adopt internationally and then make an effort to educate their child about their culture of origin (Anagnost 2004, Yngvesson 2004). In 2009, a SMC member posted the following query on the internet Community Message board: "If your child(ren)'s biological father is of a different nationality or ethnic group than your own, I am curious about how much of an effort you make to educate your children about their paternal ethnicity or to connect your child(ren) to the cultural heritage from their paternal side."

An Italian-American woman who responded to this post explained that the father of her child is Turkish and that he objected to her keeping the pregnancy and returned to his homeland when she was six months pregnant. Her feelings on the matter of paternal heritage are conflicted. She begins by saying, "In some ways, I feel her father's leaving U.S. has forfeited his right to have his culture taught to her," but grants that when her daughter "is old enough to comprehend more of her ethnicity, I will be open to reading books about Turkey…I do love to cook and we can learn how to cook Turkish food when she gets older. It might be a good way to learn about this side of her ethnicity

together." Another member who contributed to this thread explained that she used both donor egg and sperm. She knew about the egg donor's heritage but not about the sperm donors. She commented, "My family is so strongly Jewish that it is the predominant feeling in my home…. So, I think for us, it will remain our family's culture and heritage, She concluded by reminding readers that according to Jewish law, children born to Jewish women are Jewish, regardless of the provenance of the gametes. My friend, who is half Korean and half Polish-American, picked a Cuban sperm donor for her children because there were very few Korean donors to choose from and because she felt that by introducing genetic diversity, her children would be healthier. At the same time, this chosen difference also meant that her children would likely resemble her nieces (their cousins) since two of her brothers married and had children with Puerto Rican women. She was attracted to Cuba in particular because Cubans "are beautiful, cosmopolitan, and highly educated." Since making this choice she has made a point of learning more about the country.

Whereas in these cases the fathers' ethnic background is at issue because it is different than that of the mother, sometimes women choose donors who share the same ethnic background. For example, in explaining how she came to choose Danish sperm,[13] Soiseth remembers "the cozy feeling of knowing that Olaf's blood and mine, when joined, would go back through Danish generations to the Vikings, even as far back as the cave dwellers. That linking was important—it included my aunt whom I lived with at fifteen, my uncle whom I saw sing at the Gothenburg opera house" (2008:163). In other words, the ethnic background of the biological father can be ignored, used to introduce cultural diversity, or selected to reinforce the ethnicity of the mother and maternal kin.

"Donor Siblings": Kinship via an Absent Man. Another way men sometimes feature in narratives of SMC/CMs is with reference to "donor siblings." This term is used, not so much for children born to a single SMC/CM via sperm from the same donor (either via sequential pregnancies or simultaneously via a multiple gestation pregnancy), in which case they are full siblings, related through both biological mother and father, but to refer to children born to other women who used the same donor, in which case they are half-siblings, related only through their biological fathers.

The Sperm Bank of California, a non-profit organization based in Berkeley, established a program to facilitate half-siblings, and their mothers, locating one another in 1997 at the request of their clients. In the first ten years after starting this program about 20% of the TSBC families (more than 380), joined the list and of these over 60% had at least one "match," that is, they identified another family on the list who had used the same donor; some had as many as six (TSBC website accessed November 2009). Other sperm banks now provide similar services and Single Mothers by Choice recently added a sibling registry to the services it provides free to its members.

In 2000, Wendy Kramer, a mother who had used donor sperm, and her grown son, Ryan, established The Donor Sibling Registry (DSR) to help "other donor offspring" learn more about their "genetic origins." Their organization creates the opportunity for "mutual consent contact between people born from anonymous sperm donation." According to their website (accessed November 2009), they have "helped connect more than 6,839 half-siblings (and/or donors) with each other. The total number of registrants, including donors, parents and donor- conceived people, is currently at 25,667." As evident from the name of the organization, the primary intent is to help siblings make contact with each other, and "the vast majority" of the matches made on this site are between half-siblings (Harmon 2005b). This emphasis on the children rather than the man through whom they are linked is reflected in their logo, the hands of two children who together hold a bouquet of flowers whose intertwined stems are made of DNA.

Much less frequently, the DSR is used for contact with men who donated anonymously but now are willing to be located. As of 2007, several dozen previously anonymous donors had contacted offspring via the registry (Harmon 2007). And whereas "many donor-conceived children prefer to call their genetic father 'donor,' to differentiate the biological function of fatherhood from the social one, they often feel no need to distance themselves, linguistically or emotionally, from their siblings" (Harmon 2005b).

Although the DSR also helps people who were conceived through egg or embryo donation to make connections, sperm is the most common form of gamete donation and the cover of their brochure has the image of a sphere-shaped egg made up of jigsaw puzzle pieces with a single piece missing, surrounded by sperm, each of which contains a puzzle piece, only one of which presumably fits. This strikes me as an accurate depiction of the relative magnitude of the importance of the donor in the world of SMC/CMs. Their world (the egg) is made up almost entirely of the biological and social resources of the mother. All that is missing is one small piece. Furthermore, this mother/egg/world is singular, not replaceable or interchangeable. In contrast, while only one of the sperm is the one needed to make the egg/puzzle/child's origin story whole, it could just as easily have been any one of the others.

All types of families use sibling registries, but SMC/CMs couples are much more likely to use this service than heterosexually-partnered parents.[14] It makes particular sense that SMC/CMs would be eager to avail themselves of sibling registries because, relative to nuclear families and lesbian-couple families, they are kin-poor, lacking not just a dad, but all the other kin that come with him (or a lesbian partner)—the other set of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins for their children.

In addition to the kin created between children through a man's sperm, the mothers who find each through these registries sometimes claim each other

as "sister moms" (Balzelton 2007). Just as their sisters' children are related to their own children via one parent (the mothers), the children of mothers who meet and develop family-feelings for one another through the registries are related to each other via just one parent, but in this case, through the biological father. One donor has had so many matches (twenty-three girls, fifteen boys) on the DSR, the mothers set up a website of their own and planned "a mass vacation" (Mundy 2007:171).[15] One of the women likened being part of this group to "being in a sorority" of interesting professional women. She also observed that the children of other moms who had used the same donor were like cousins, even though they "were genetically closer than my children are to their cousins" (Mundy 2007:171.)

Discussion

From the vantage point of SMC/CMs, what can we learn about men and motherhood? Many critics and even some supporters believe that the existence of SMC/CMs "marginalizes men" (Hertz 2006:195). According to Hertz, SMC/CMs have questioned "the place of men" in their families "and the best conclusion many can muster is that men are a luxury item." As Hertz puts it, impregnation "and the job of financially supporting the family, both of which traditionally bound the man to the mother and child, no longer require men" and these facts, "revolutionize the meaning of men in families." Their place is no longer "implicit," no longer are men automatically "entitled to a special place in children's lives" (2006:195).

But, as this essay shows, men are implicated in motherhood in many ways other than as co parents. Men (SMC/CMs fathers and brothers, former husbands and boyfriends, men observed in public and in relationships with friends) are involved in these women's decision to go it alone. Men (donors and doctors) are involved in helping them become mothers, and men complement and support their mothering as grandfathers, godfathers, uncles, coaches, teachers, and friends. Indeed, one of the most striking things about the narratives of SMC/CMs is the prevalence of men.

The fact that SMC/CMs form their families without the intention of co parenting with a man is perceived as a threat by Father's Rights Activists. One of the most outspoken critics of SMC/CMs is David Blankenhorn, founder of the Institute for American Values, one of the pro-marriage father's rights organizations that were established during roughly the same years that SMC/CMs were taking root.[16] Blankenhorn condemns sperm banks for promoting "No-Dad Families" by selling to single women. Writing in 1995, he decried the "at least 3,000 fatherless babies…produced each year through artificial insemination." In his view, "the rise of the Sperm Father constitutes nothing less than father killing, the …enactment of cultural patricide," and he denounced donors for collaborating "in the eradication of their fatherhood" (Blankenhorn

quoted in Moyes 2007). According to another critic, Wade Horn (2000), former president of the National Fatherhood Initiative (another of the pro-marriage father's rights groups), fathers are "heading for the endangered species list" and may "become extinct in the next century" to be found on view in the Museum of Natural History "right next to a display of the Wooly Mammoth." He has criticized "extremist groups" like the National Organization of Women, and social scientists who have studied the children of fatherless families and found that "there is very little in the way of scientific evidence that supports the assertions about the consequences of fatherlessness" (Horn 2000). According to the Fathers' Manifesto of 1995, "Fathers' problems stem from "the present feminist concept of women's 'independence'."[17]

Yet, father's rights critics are at least partially right to blame the emergence of SMC/CMs on the women's liberation movement. The rise of SMC/CMs as a new family form would have been inconceivable without second wave feminism and the career opportunities it brought about. SMC/CMs do not undertake motherhood unless they have first established that they can afford to raise their child or children as the sole bread winner. The first chapter in Morrissette's book for women contemplating become Choice Moms is, "Am I Single Mother Material?" which includes a section, " Do I have enough resources to be a good single parent?" Chapter 2 is "Can I Afford It?"

It is not just that second wave feminism made it possible for more middle-class women to support families on their own. As Barbara Ehrenreich explains in her book *The Hearts of Men*, starting in the 1950s, men of the managerial classes started balking at the nuclear family system which required them to be the breadwinner for "parasitic" wives and children, to submit to the conformity required in their white collar jobs in order to pay for the mortgage and life insurance and take the family on vacations. According to *Playboy* magazine in 1953, the first year it was issued, women so craved "security", they were "perfectly willing to crush man's adventurous, freedom-loving spirit to get it" (Zollo 1953 quoted in Ehrenreich 1983:47). Men of this class continued their revolt throughout the 1960s and by the 1970s, "it was probably easier for men to 'free themselves' than at any time since the California gold rush of 1849" (Ehrenreich 1983:119). In that decade the number of men living alone doubled (from 3.5 million to 6.98 million), an increase twice as large as that for women during the same period. Two-thirds of these men had "never-married" and one study indicated 70% of them viewed marriage negatively, as "restrictive" (1983:121). She concludes, "The collapse of the breadwinner ethic, and with it, the notion of long-term emotional responsibility toward women, affects not only the homemaker …, but the financially self sufficient working woman, …most of [whom] grew up expecting" to share their lives and to have children within "long-term committed relationships'' with men (1983:180). By the end of the 1980s, educated American women were faced with "the prospect of briefer

'relationships' punctuated by emotional dislocations and seldom offer[ed] the kind of loyalty that might extend into middle age" (1983:180-181).

This trend has continued. Writing in 2008, Michael Kimmel describes middle class, college-educated American "guys" who in an earlier era by their mid-twenties would have been "engaged to be married, [on the road to becoming] civic leaders and Little League dads" but instead are perpetuating the pleasures of college life. They tend to "spend more time online playing videogames and gambling than they do on dates (and probably spend more money to), "hook up' occasionally with a 'friend with benefits,' go out with their buddies, drink too much, and save too little...and watch a lot of sports" (2008:3). Finding a reasonable partner with whom to begin a family is especially difficult for professional women nearing the end of their childbearing years like most SMC/CMs. A psychologist "who bought herself some sperm for her 35th birthday" explained the problem that women like her have finding marriage partners. "You're looking to date an equal, and men are looking down, not across" (Harmon 2005a).

Family "improvisations," like being an SMC/CM, "grow out of a clear-headed recognition that there is no male breadwinner to lean on and probably not much use in waiting for one to appear" (Ehrenreich 1983:181). In a review of Sloan's book *Knock Yourself Up* in the Single Mothers by Choice newsletter, one woman explains, "in an effort to ensure our own security and happiness…, [we are] often becoming the very person with whom we wanted to partner" (Tujak 2008:8).

SMC/CMs are purposively creating ties, most notably with their children, but also with a host of others (ancestors, descendents, and contemporaries), including men in a variety of roles, some of which are new. As SMC/CMs initiate new ways of child getting and rearing, they do so not without men, but in ways that give them more power to enjoy the good and protect themselves from the bad things that relationships with men can bring. Although SMC/CMs still represent a tiny, if growing, minority of families, they do signal changes in relations between women and men which could be beneficial for both.

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End Notes

1**.** I use the term "single mothers by choice" and the abbreviation "SMC/CMs" to refer to women choosing motherhood this way, regardless of whether or not they are members of a particular support organization. When referring specifically to members of one of the organizations, I capitalize the term.

2. According to a U.S. Census Bureau report, the number of "never-married mothers with graduate or professional degrees" doubled between 1982 and 1992 (Abrams 1994:114).
3. Although the age at which women join the organization Single Mothers by Choice has gotten lower over the years, in 2006 the median age of members was 36 (Egan 2006). Seventy percent of the Sperm Bank of California's clients are over 35
4. A number of other organizations and books cater to single mothers regardless of whether they became so by choice or by chance. One is the National Organization for Single Mothers which was founded in 1991 by the nationally syndicated columnist, Andrea Engber and has helped over 30,000 single moms (website accessed June 29, 2009). Other organizations offer support to single parents, i.e., both single moms and dads.
5. Up until the 1970s adoption was not an option for single parents, unless the parent was already related to the child. The dramatic growth in one-parent households due to divorce and to unmarried women having and keeping their children in the last quarter of the twentieth century made adoption agencies "more willing to consider unmarried men and women as prospective adopters."
6. In fact, Quayle is still quoted as a leader among pro-family conservatives. For example, in a 2009 article, Allan Wall decried the moral breakdown in the Republican Party from the time of right-minded Quayle, to Sarah Palin and her supporters.
7. See also the title of the article, "With No Mr. Right in Sight, Time for Plan B: More Women Are Silencing Their Biological Clocks via Sperm Donation" which appeared on msnbc.com on July 14, 2005. According to some Single Mothers by Choice though, having a baby without a partner has "quietly become a socially acceptable choice," "it's not necessarily Plan B anymore, it's just the plan" (Harmon 2005a).
8. She also tells of how she used the photo matching service her sperm bank provided because she wanted a donor who looked like her so that her child would resemble her. Later, she realized that the service was probably not intended for this, but for "matching the donor to the parenting father, or perhaps for lesbian couples, so the baby might look a little like the non-gestating mother (Soiseth 2008:106). In other words, she is attempting, to the extent possible, to create a child in her own image.
9. Sloan, a lesbian, personified the sperm in the "Dad" role, rather than as a date or husband.
10. Public concern with fatherless African-Americans has been present at least since Moynihan's Report of 1965 in which he argued that because of slavery's legacy, "the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is to out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole…. There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another." Despite this understanding, elsewhere in the report he uses pejorative terms like "family pathology" and "disorganized families" to describe these family patterns.
11. Lesbian families also deal with this issue. Moore (2007:70) gives an account of how she (Mommy), her partner (Mom), and her daughter handle the daddy question.
12. One contributor to the chat rooms shares that "Our primary term of reference remains 'donor,' but we do use the other term [father] from time to time."
13. In 2005 Danish Cryos International Sperm Bank distributed 10,000 units of "donor semen to clinics in more than 40 countries… resulting in about 1,000 pregnancies" (www.cyros.dk quoted in Moore 2007:103).
14. Heterosexual couples use this service much less frequently because many such couples hide the fact that donor sperm was used. In addition, they may not feel comfortable meeting and forming kin relations with the children of nonconventional families. As the DSR website observes, "For some heterosexual families, this may be their first exposure to different kinds of families, adding an extra stress to the anxiety and excitement of making a match." While Plotz (2005) was researching the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank, which had not accepted single or lesbian women as clients, most of the women who contacted him in the hopes of finding other kin were divorced or planning a divorce. "The divorce had shrunk their families. They hoped [Plotz] could find new relatives for their kids" (2005:62).

15. Many sperm banks now limit the number of children born using a single donor but according to Bazelton, Cyrobank allows twenty-five families to have children using the same sperm before they retire that sperm from circulation. According to Kramer, there are groups of families on her website who have forty to sixty kids, all from one donor. The most she knows of is sixty-six from a single donor www.dsr.com,

16. It is worth noting that that "fathers' rights advocates are usually white, middle-class, heterosexual men," i.e., have the same social characteristics as the majority of SMC/CMs (Gavanas 2004: 11).

17. According to the manifesto, "The power of feminism to destroy families is illustrated by statements like: 'mother-women give up whatever ghost of a unique and human self they may have when they 'marry' and raise children.'"

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