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Choice and sole motherhood in Canada 1965–2010: An interview study

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Introduction

Historically, women who were pregnant outside of marriage in Western cultures had relatively few options. They and the fathers of their children were frequently pressured or forced into marriage in order to legitimize their child and avoid the disabilities of bastardy (Teichman, 1982). When marriage was not possible, some mothers resorted, under extreme circumstances, to illegal abortion or even infanticide (Backhouse, 1984). More often, in the mid-twentieth century, mothers attempted to hide their pregnancies by leaving their communities and giving birth in maternity homes or the homes of relatives where they were pressured to place their child for adoption (Strong-Boag, 2006; Kunzel, 1993; Solinger, 1992). Relatives could also raise the child as if he or she were their own (Morton, 2004).

Despite unfavourable social, economic and legal conditions, some women did decide to give birth and raise their children as single mothers. Chambers (2007) found that only 27.8% of women who had not cohabited with the fathers and sought assistance from the Children's Aid Society in Ontario between 1921 and 1969 opted to release their children for adoption; most such mothers were young, white (but non-Anglo-Saxon), unemployed and lacking the support of their parents. Strong-Boag (2006) has also noted that many mothers in Nova Scotia, particularly African-Canadian mothers, kept their children but it is unknown how many or for what length of time. There is little current research that documents the experience of these mothers or explores how they perceived their options and outcomes. Although the emergence of self-identified "Single Mothers by Choice" (SMC) and related online support networks have acquired some recognition in the past decade (Hertz, 2006; Bock, 2000; Boyd, Chunn, Kelly, & Wiegers, 2015), little is known about mothers who decided to adopt or to bear and rear children alone throughout the post-WWII period in Canada.

In this article, we draw on extensive interviews with women who either adopted or gave birth to a child and parented outside of an intimate partner relationship for at least one year between 1965 and 2010. In providing an account of the process of decision-making participants experienced in becoming sole mothers, we identify their assessment of significant pressures or constraints, the nature or quality of their interpersonal relationships, their available options, and the new modes of thinking and being they developed in the course of becoming sole mothers. We emphasize changes in the context and the perceived process of choosing sole motherhood over time and examine how participants made sense of and assessed their decisions in retrospect, in light of their actual experience.

We describe these women as having 'chosen' sole motherhood because most participants saw themselves as having made a choice, most often in the face of significant stigma and adverse economic conditions. However, as many feminist critics have noted, choice rhetoric can both falsely isolate individuals from their relationships and obscure the broader socio-economic conditions that constrain and shape their options (Meyers, 2001; Madhok, Phillips, & Wilson, 2013; Showden, 2011). We are guided by a conception of choice that is not simply the individual ability to act rationally according to one's desires, but is also sensitive to the relational, cultural and material context that constructed and constrained those desires as well as the available options (Madhok et al., 2013; Boyd et al., 2015). Like other studies (e.g. McMahon, 1995), our study suggests that a decontextualized binary model of choice/no choice is an inadequate depiction of the situation identified by most participants, who saw themselves as neither 'freely' choosing in a market-oriented, consumerist sense nor simply reacting passively as victims of oppression, exercising no agency or autonomy whatever. When examined in context, their paths to motherhood were complex and our analysis is sensitive to the different degrees of choice and agency participants identified in different social locations, at different historical periods and at different points in their personal life histories.

In Canada, as elsewhere, the post-WWII period was a time of significant change with women experiencing both an increasing range of reproductive choices and new constraints (Boyd et al., 2015). On the one hand, over the last four decades, women have experienced a greater capacity to choose the timing and the relational context of their parenting, matters that in the past were largely left to chance or rigid social conventions. Since 1969, a range of contraceptive devices and services, including condoms, intrauterine devices, birth control and morning-after pills, as

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well as surgical abortions, have been legalized and become more widely available (McLaren & McLaren, 1986). Additional supports for the prenatal and birthing process have also developed, and new reproductive technologies (NRTs), such as in vitro fertilization and surrogacy, have extended the time period in which women can reproduce. Moreover, with the challenge to sexual norms surrounding marriage and the activism of women's, gay and lesbian and anti-racism movements since the 1960s, the relational context for childbirth is more diverse. Divorce laws were liberalized in 1968 and 1985 and the legal disabilities of illegitimacy were abolished in all Canadian jurisdictions by 1990 (although Nova Scotia still allows for legitimation of children upon marriage) (Boyd et al., 2015). Women are increasingly opting to give birth within non-marital, cohabiting heterosexual relationships and lesbian women are also choosing to become mothers, both within and outside marriage. Although sole motherhood is itself still widely seen as a less desirable family form, the fact that far more single mothers are keeping their infants suggests that the social pressure on such mothers to surrender their children for adoption has greatly diminished. Undergirding these developments has been the dramatic increase in the labour force participation of women since the mid-1970s, including women with young children (Ferrao, 2010–11).

While these technological, social, legal and economic developments appear to have presented women with a growing array of options in relation to reproduction, many Canadian women still confront constraints and onerous conditions. Abortion is not easily accessed and is highly stigmatized in many regions. New reproductive technologies are typically very expensive and parentage through NRTs lacks legal recognition in some jurisdictions. Moreover, the financial challenges in supporting a child alone remain daunting as female lone parent families continue disproportionately to experience low incomes (Statistics Canada, 2013). Unmarried mothers have been eligible to apply for social assistance since at least the 1970s (Gavigan & Chunn, 2007) but payments in most jurisdictions have failed to keep up with inflation, particularly the increasing cost of shelter. In a neo-liberal political culture, cuts to social housing and social services have been substantial and childcare remains largely a private parental responsibility. Increasingly accurate paternity testing and a greater emphasis in law on the involvement of fathers, as vital sources of both financial and affective support for children, have also limited the ability of mothers to parent independently (Boyd et al., 2015).

These conditions provide the general socio-economic and legal context in which the 29 women in our study experienced sole motherhood. However, the single mothers in our study were also negotiating two hegemonic, and for them contradictory, norms that profoundly shape gender identity and family formation in Western cultures. A dominant ideology of motherhood defines motherhood, or the nurturance and care of a child, as a natural identity for women, our primary, if not our "only creditable form of fulfillment" (Meyers, 2001; Rich, 1977). Motherhood is not only "entwined with notions of femininity" but also intersects with "idealized notions of the family" (Arendell, 2000; Kline, 1993). The privileging of the marital heteronuclear family form, as the normative setting in which to rear children, was historically grounded in the disabilities related to illegitimacy (Strong-Boag, 2006). At common law, heterosexual marriage defined legitimate motherhood and legitimate offspring (Teichman, 1982). In the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries in Canada, marriage established in law and through dominant social norms a moral hierarchy of sole motherhood, with widows and deserted married mothers perceived as more worthy and having greater entitlements than those who experienced "unwed motherhood" (Gavigan & Chunn, 2007). Despite recent challenges to the dominance of this familial norm on several institutional fronts in Canada - through the legal abolition of illegitimacy, rising divorce rates, increases in non-marital cohabitation and same sex marriage - it continues to be reinforced by undercurrents of social conservatism, an increasing emphasis on bio-genetic ties and by a social structure that relegates unpaid domestic labour and the primary care of children largely to mothers. Studies also suggest that the norms of motherhood and familialism have been experienced differently by different groups of women. Black, indigenous, lesbian, poor and single mothers historically have faced significant barriers to having and rearing children and are less apt to be seen as fit and deserving mothers (Solinger, 2001; Collins, 1990; Kline, 1993; McCormack, 2004; Park, 2013). In an earlier paper, we analyzed how the participants in our study described their experience of and response to stigma and social sanctions and how the cultural scripts used to explain or assess their circumstances changed over time (Wiegers & Chunn, 2015).

In this paper, we begin by briefly describing the interview sample and methodology. Using our interview data, we first examine the process participants described of becoming a sole mother and the range of alternatives or options available to them. We try to illuminate how the participants understood their options and how they came to imagine sole motherhood as a viable life path for themselves and their children, despite the economic constraints and cultural stigma. We then examine how mothers viewed their choice in retrospect, identifying the perceived positive and negative aspects of their experience and the incidence of and reasons for ambivalence or regret. Given our historical focus, we try throughout to track changes in the perceived impact of different factors on options over time.

Since memories can be selective, our study can only convey the assessments of participants at the time of their interview. Since most participants were white, heterosexual and well-educated, our research is also limited in its ability to capture diverse accounts of women who have become sole mothers in these circumstances. However, our study is unique in its historical reach and in its inclusion of women who adopted or planned their pregnancies as well as those who became sole mothers after an unexpected pregnancy. In our conclusion, we contrast the experience of these two sub-groups.

Overview of the study and interview participants

Our sample consisted of 29 women, all of whom had been lone mothers for at least one year after the birth or adoption of a child. All participants were at least 18 years of age at the time of the interview and none were affiliated with SMC or other groups for single mothers. The participants were recruited between 2010 and 2011 through posted notices, emails to women's and family organizations and list serve notices. Under our interview protocol, we could not initiate contact with potential participants. While our small sample is not necessarily representative of the entire population, we made conscious efforts to create a sample that would help to illuminate similarities and differences among mothers across time. Although no one who gave birth in the 1950s responded to our recruitment efforts, we ultimately interviewed 3 mothers who gave birth in the 1960s, 3 in the 1970s, 10 who adopted or gave birth in the 1980s, 6 in the 1990s and 7 in the 2000s. In total, our interviewees birthed or adopted 38 children, including a still birth, an interrupted adoption and a baby death.

Despite our efforts to be inclusive with respect to age, race, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of difference and inequality, most participants were white (non-racialized) and heterosexual. Three women identified as lesbian and two as bi-sexual. Two women identified as Aboriginal and one as African Canadian while two of the biological fathers were identified as Aboriginal and four others were identified as racialized. Clearly, further studies are required to capture fully the unique context and diverse circumstances affecting racialized mothers and Indigenous mothers in particular. Only two of our participants were minors who had not yet graduated from high school when they became pregnant. Fourteen of the 35 children were born to, or adopted by, women under 30 and 21 by women over 30 years of age. Most mothers remained lone parents while raising their children with about one-third partnering at some point after their child's infancy.

While there were substantial differences in income across the sample, most participants were highly educated. Almost half had or were