



The solo mum, feminism and the negotiation of 'choice'

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ABSTRACT

Discursive constructions of single women who have children via sperm donation invoke the significance of feminism as an implicit/explicit frame in explaining the rise of the 'solo mum'. Drawing on qualitative data from 25 interviews with single (UK) women who have decided to have a child this way, this article explores whether the participants saw this route as emerging out of - or connected to - feminist ideals, paying particular attention to the discursive negotiation of 'choice'. As the women were ambivalent about discourses of 'choice' here, they did not see the decision to become a solo mum as one that emerged out of female empowerment or agency. Nevertheless, the role(s) of feminism here emerged as shifting and complex, and in analysing these contradictions, the study contributes to the on-going conceptual dilemma about how feminist research can approach the difficult question of women's 'choices', especially in a context in which feminism is inextricably enmeshed with neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies.

Introduction

In an article entitled 'Daddies be damned! Who are the British women who think fathers are irrelevant?' (Davies, 2009), the *Daily Mail* contributed to the cultural meanings of single women using donor sperm to conceive a child. Describing how such women - sometimes referred to as single/solo mums 'by choice'¹ - tend to be 'educated, middle-class, financially independent females who have succeeded in every area of their lives but have failed to find a husband to father their children', the article quoted a sociological expert who insisted that having a child without a man was a misguided 'feminist dream come true' (Davies, 2009). The construction of the story as a thinly-veiled caution about the 'dangers' of women pursuing a career at the expense of building a family is a familiar one in postfeminist culture, and the right wing perspective of the *Daily Mail* is typically alarmist in this regard. Nevertheless, the article attests to the ways in which 'single women using donor sperm remain at the heart of concerns about the choice to have a child, the meaning of motherhood, and the future of family life' (Zadeh & Foster, 2016: 552). Although the *Daily Mail* article is now nearly 10 years old, the issue of whether the solo mum might be somehow connected to the impact of feminism continues as an implicit/explicit frame in popular discourse (Maher, 2014) – whether feminism emerges as demonized, distanced or disavowed.

In contrast to the *Daily Mail* article, the solo mum has also been positioned in both academic and popular contexts as a new form of family-building enabled by the gains of feminism (Hertz, 2006; Mannis,

1999), a context in which Western women are now 'given increased choices about whether, when and how to mother...' (Feasey, 2012: 2). As feminism has invested substantially in the significance of both 'choice' and 'autonomy', the term 'solo mum by choice' appears to immediately orient us toward feminist discourse. That said, it does not do so unproblematically. As both academic and popular commentary has observed, the term 'single/solo mum by choice' creates a hierarchy of single motherhood which is both raced and classed (Bock, 2000), and when situated in relation to the history of feminism, this tension speaks to a longer legacy of debates about whose interests and voices are served and heard. But if the term 'choice' may be seen to refer to the history of feminism (albeit in complex ways), it also invokes the prevailing neoliberal landscape in which greater 'choice' among flexible options is presented to girls/women as offering unprecedented autonomy and agency, and an apparent re-writing of a once pre-ordained female life course (Baker, 2010; Harris, 2004; Rich, 2005; Scharff, 2012). Feminist scholars have invested considerable energy in thinking about the complex entanglements between feminism, femininity, postfeminism and neoliberalism, worrying that concepts of "choice" and "autonomy"... are vulnerable to co-option' (Budgeon, 2011: 62), whilst recognising that feminism cannot be understood *outside* of this constellation in its contemporary forms (Budgeon, 2011; Gill, 2007a; Scharff, 2012). In this regard, and in conceptual terms at least, the idea of the 'solo mum by choice' may be seen as sitting at the nexus of these debates, whilst offering a terrain for their continued exploration and interrogation.

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¹ The terms 'single/solo mom by choice' or 'choice moms' emerged in the US context, and are often attributed to Mikki Morrisette http://www.choicemoms.org/about/about_mikki/. The terms are less widely used in the UK but – as the interview data will show – they certainly have a currency.

Drawing on qualitative data from 25 semi-structured interviews with UK women who have made the decision to become a solo mum, and prompted by a discursive context that has linked solo motherhood with discourses of both 'feminism' and 'choice', this article explores the ways in which the relations between feminism and solo motherhood were negotiated by the participants. In order to do this it asks: to what extent did the women now see their decision as a 'choice' or possibility enabled by the social changes feminism has fostered, and what understandings of feminism were adopted or rejected in this regard? What role (if any), does feminism play in making the decision to become a solo mum, and what other discourses of gender (such as those of heterosexual femininity) might shape and influence how this relationship is articulated? How and in what ways do the women draw on feminism as a means to make sense of/resist wider cultural discourses on the (still unconventional) choice they have made?

In pursuing these questions, this research can be seen to matter in three key ways. First, the idea of the 'solo mum by choice' offers a particularly fertile terrain upon which to explore feminist perspectives on how women are currently 'oriented toward subjectivities defined by choice, empowerment and individuality' (Budgeon, 2011: 11, see also Harris, 2004; Rich, 2005; Riley & Scharff, 2012), as well as the structuring limitations and contradictions within which this occurs. Second, the research seeks to offer insight into the ways in which women – in this case a group of mid-life women – use feminism to negotiate the very 'choices' the movement has helped to produce (Budgeon, 2001). Third, this article seeks to contribute to empirical work on the solo mum. There is now a small body of work which has examined the motivations and experiences of solo mums, and this has explored the discursive complexities of 'choice' in this context (Bock, 2000; Golombok, Zadeh, Imrie, Smith, & Freeman, 2016; Graham, 2012; Jadva, Morrisette, & Golombok, 2009; Zadeh, Freeman, & Golombok, 2013). But what is missing here, and is crucial to the intervention of this article, is that although the solo mum has been seen as discursively connected to feminism in various ways, there has been little attempt to bring these two spheres together: the debates about the influence of 'feminism' and 'feminist' perspectives, and the identities, narratives and experiences of *the women themselves*. Given that ideas about 'the feminist' and 'feminism' have implicitly/explicitly attended the discursive construction of the solo mum, it seems important to offer the women themselves an opportunity to respond to these framings, and to evaluate their implications for how they conceive of their identities and experiences.

Motherhood, feminism, 'choice'

Both single women and lesbian couples have been using donor insemination (DI) to reproduce since at least the 1970s, but the trend has grown sharply since the millennium (Graham, 2012), and it continues to accelerate with the trend toward older first time mums (Golombok et al., 2016). But although the press discourse referred to at the start of this article positions single women using DI as essentially subverting constructions of gender, family and reproduction in transgressive ways (see also Hertz, 2006; Michelle, 2006), this idea of an agentic 'subversion' has been complicated by both popular and academic discourse on the solo mum. In analyses of popular representations (Zadeh & Foster, 2016) as well as empirical/qualitative research (Bock, 2000; Golombok et al., 2016; Graham, 2012; Jadva et al., 2009; Zadeh et al., 2013), there is an emphasis on how such women have reluctantly 'deviated' from the "traditional" family and "natural" conception' in their desire to have a child (Zadeh & Foster, 2016: 562). For example, Zadeh, Freeman, and Golombok discuss how the solo mums in their study 'rarely expressed themselves as deliberately non-traditional' (2013: 113), navigating a complex path between of 'tradition', 'choice' and agency. Going further, Graham describes how such women are 're-working' their ideas about motherhood, relationships and family in order to 'salvage at least some of the nuclear ideal they had imagined

for themselves' (2012: 92), whilst Bock suggests that solo mums can be conceived as "unwilling warriors", who... stress the importance of having the option of single motherhood, yet... cling to hegemonic fantasies of normative family structures' (2000: 70). Whether due to a 'failed' relationship, the difficulty of finding a partner, or the ticking of the 'biological clock' (Zadeh & Foster, 2016: 558), the women are seen as making a decision to solo parent in compromised circumstances, thus presenting the significance of negotiated 'choice'. But although Hertz's (2006) *Single by Chance; Mothers by Choice* clearly refers to the context of feminism and touches on whether solo mums situate such a choice in relation to the social changes feminism has wrought (pp. 16–19), there is little qualitative work which explicitly claims to explore the solo mum from a feminist perspective, nor considers the views of such women about how or whether there is an intersection *between* their decision and feminist politics – however broadly this may be defined.

As indicated at the start of this article, the notion of 'choice' has emerged as a particularly fraught concept for feminism in a landscape structured by ideologies of postfeminism and neoliberalism. The individualization characteristic of the late modern era has been understood as weakening the power of tradition (Baker, 2010: 187; Giddens, 1991), requiring 'enterprising' neoliberal subjects who reflexively navigate their own biographies and life narratives. Apparently 'untethered by gendered constraints' (Baker, 2010: 187), girls and women have been positioned as the exemplar beneficiaries of such 'choice narratives' (Harris, 2004; Rich, 2005), with judgements around success or failure thus holding them accountable for their own fates.

Similarly, given that the key discursive and material characteristics of western neoliberalism are consistent with those of postfeminism (Budgeon, 2015; Gill, 2007a; Harris, 2004), feminist scholars have observed how "choice" has become the bottom-line value of post-feminism' (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011: 99). Whether conceived of as proclaiming the 'pastness' of feminism because gender equality has been achieved (McRobbie, 2009), or as a complex constellation which incorporates the mainstreaming of feminism alongside virulent constructions of misogyny and anti-feminism (Gill, 2007a), discourses of postfeminism have been seen as similarly foregrounding choice, autonomy and individualism, whilst effacing the significance of the wider social structures which might limit such possibilities (Baker, 2010; Budgeon, 2001, 2011, 2015; Gill, 2007a). It is within this neoliberal, postfeminist landscape that feminist work exploring the vexing question of women's 'choices' has emerged (Budgeon, 2015), with research exploring such terrains as beauty work (Riley & Scharff, 2012; Stuart & Donaghue, 2011), marriage and motherhood (Jacques & Radtke, 2012), and religious practices (Zine, 2006). In this regard, and in contrast to the endlessly flexible promise of a 'neoliberal panacea' (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011: 118), whilst feminist perspectives seek to make space for individual agency and resistance, they also foreground the continued power of normative femininities, and thus how women's choices are always 'historically and structurally conditioned' (Budgeon, 2015: 308). With an emphasis on negotiated choice which is constrained by traditional ideological structures and judgements, these feminist perspectives have something in common with the existing work on the solo mum.

Finally, such dilemmas around agency, choice and the structuring role of gendered subjectivities have emerged as particularly apparent in qualitative research on how feminism is negotiated. In exploring how girls/women respond to, conceptualise or make use of feminism in their everyday lives, this research has broadly suggested that young women are not keen to call themselves feminist; that they perceive the women's movement to have done its 'job', and that they prioritise narratives of individual choice and biography – as commensurate with prevailing discourses of neoliberalism and postfeminism (Budgeon, 2001; Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016; Harris, 2004; Rich, 2005; Scharff, 2012; Schuster, 2013; Harris, 2004). Although we appear to have seen signs of change – with the greater visibility of feminist discourse/activism leading to claims of a 'feminist zeitgeist' (Gill, 2016) – such an apparent

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