Between 1982 and 1992, the birthrate doubled among never married college-educated women and almost tripled among never married women who work in a professional or managerial capacity. This research examines why older, single women want to become mothers and how their premotherhood motivation and experience compare to those of married mothers. A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit 51 women who were single when they became mothers and 51 demographically similar married mothers. The two groups were alike regarding their motivation for becoming a mother, although the single mothers were more likely to have considered their marital status and other related factors (e.g., finances) prior to becoming a mother. The single and married mothers differed in how they viewed relationships with men. The composite picture that emerged from the single mothers was one of ambivalence toward marriage—a combination of an idealized image of what marriage should be with an unwillingness to accept compromise as an essential relationship strategy. Older, single women who become mothers are contributing to the trend in American society toward an increasing separation of marriage and childbearing.

Looking for Mr. Right?
Older Single Women Who Become Mothers*

JUDITH M. SIEGEL
UCLA School of Public Health

The census of 1990 confirms that births to unmarried women are no longer an oddity. The birthrate among unmarried women rose almost 60% in the last decade with about one quarter of unmarried women of the age of 18 to 44 years becoming mothers (“Census Reports,” 1993). Although single Black women continue to have the highest birthrate among single women—over half of never married Black women in this age range have children—single White women have the most rapidly increasing birthrate, more than doubling from less than 7% in 1982 to almost 15% in 1992. The birthrate doubled among never married college-educated women and almost tripled among never married women who work in a professional or managerial capacity.

* This research was supported by funds from the Western Consortium for Public Health. The author gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Vicki Ebin, M.S.P.H., who ably served as the interviewer, assisted in transcription of the materials, took major responsibility for data entry, and commented on an earlier draft of this article. Michael S. Goldstein is also acknowledged with appreciation for his thoughtful comments. Address reprint requests to Judith M. Siegel, Department of Community Health Sciences, UCLA School of Public Health, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1772.

JOURNAL OF FAMILY ISSUES, Vol. 16 No. 2, March 1995 194-211
© 1995 Sage Publications, Inc.

194
This research examines why older, single women want to become mothers and how their premotherhood motivation and experience compare to those of married mothers. Although the proportion of all births that are to single, college-educated women is small, the magnitude of change in their birthrate, as well as the attention that has been given to single motherhood as a choice, raises questions regarding why this change is taking place. Simply put, was the choice made because these women were unable to find husbands or because they were unwilling to find husbands?

The possibility that single mothers were unable to find husbands can be interpreted in two ways: either that they were undesirable marriage partners or that the pool of marriageable men was unsatisfactory in some way. The former has not been evaluated in a systematic matter, although some researchers using convenience samples of single mothers have concluded that such women have a confused sexual identity and anxiety about close relationships (Engelstein, Antell-Buckley, & Urban-Klein, 1980). In contrast, other researchers have noted that the negative attitudes toward men evident in interviews with single mothers were no different from the attitudes expressed by married women (Rexford, 1976), or that single women who became mothers were socially mainstream and did not “fit the stereotype of unattractive and unlovable” (Merritt & Steiner, 1984, p. 3).

The alternative interpretation for the inability of some women to find husbands, that the marriage pool is inadequate, has been widely publicized. Using a mathematical model to describe census and other population-level data from the mid-1980s, researchers at Harvard and Yale Universities predicted that a White woman with a college education who had not married by the time she was 25 years old had less than a 50% chance of ever marrying. The chances of marrying dropped to 20% for unmarried 30-year-old women and to about 1% for unmarried women over the age of 40 (“Changing Women’s Marriage Market,” 1986). In the published version of the study, the authors proposed a dual-factor explanation as responsible for this “marriage squeeze” phenomenon: (a) Men prefer to be older and more educationally accomplished than their wives and (b) the size of the mid-1940s’ birth cohort is smaller relative to the birth cohort of the early 1950s (Bennett, Bloom, & Craig, 1992). The implication of these data is that never married women, 25 years or older, can choose between having a baby without a husband or not having a baby at all.

Other researchers have questioned both the method and conclusions that underlie the marriage squeeze phenomenon. Coontz (1992), for example, interpreted the available data as showing that a woman over 35
has a better chance of getting married in the 1990s than she did in the 1950s. First-time marriages for women between 35 and 39 years old have increased 12% since 1980. Data from several national surveys concur that women who pursue a college education are postponing rather than abandoning marriage (Goldscheider & Waite, 1986; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Qian & Preston, 1993), with women’s average age at first marriage higher in the 1980s than at any other time during this century (Cherlin, 1992). Furthermore, women’s educational attainment is positively associated with the probability of marrying (Lichter et al., 1992). It should be noted that, when women do not expect to marry, none of the factors relevant to the marriage pool (e.g., ratio of unmarried men of a certain age and race to unmarried women) have an impact on their probability of marrying (Lichter et al., 1992). Thus the independent impact of attitudes toward marriage and the conditions of the marriage market are difficult to assess.

Research examining the marriage patterns of women relative to men has also cast some doubt on the marriage squeeze theory and, instead, suggests that the appeal of marriage may be diminishing for women. Analyses based on interviews with a national sample of women and men born between 1949 and 1954 showed that the rates of marriage for both women and men have declined, with lack of employment being one of the strongest predictors of not marrying among men (Goldscheider & Waite, 1986). There was some support for the marriage squeeze theory, in that the decline in marriage with age was greater for women than it was for men. However, the rates of marriage for men were also dropping, a pattern that is inconsistent with the notion that lack of availability of a partner was driving the marriage rates down. According to these authors, men’s difficulty in entering the labor market and women’s increased options outside of marriage, including the ability to support themselves, was probably having as great an effect on marriage patterns. In a similar vein, Wilson (1987) described economic factors, particularly the decline in inner-city entry-level jobs and subsequent male unemployment, as having a major influence on the likelihood of African American women marrying. Overall, Goldscheider and Waite (1986) characterized the decline in marriage rates as a reflection of women’s greater options outside of marriage, rather than a reflection of emerging barriers to marriage.

The most significant of the options available to women is labor force participation. In increasing proportions, women have entered and remained in the labor force since the end of World War II. The greatest change has been among mothers with infants and preschool-age children. Of all women who gave birth in 1990, over half (53%) were working
outside the home within the year following the birth (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). This figure compares with 38% in 1980. Both age and education were positively associated with the probability of being in the labor force with 59% of women between 30 and 44 years old, and 68% of college-educated women in the labor force within a year of giving birth (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). Thus, for the 1990s and the foreseeable future, the norm is for women, regardless of marital status, to be wage earners both before and after giving birth, and to resume the wage-earning role within a year of giving birth. For a woman who chooses not to marry but still wants to be a mother, economic self-sufficiency is an enabling factor for single parenthood.

Regardless of whether women are unable or unwilling to find a marriage partner, the proportion of never married women is increasing among every age group (Goldscheider & Waite, 1986). As of 1991, about one in four adults (age 18 and older) had never married compared to one in six in 1970. For women in their thirties, the percentage never married doubled between 1980 and 1992, from 10% to 19% for women 30 to 34 years and and from 6% to 13% for women 35 to 39 years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). According to data from the National Center for Health Statistics, marriage rates in 1991 were the lowest since 1965 and dropped at a faster rate in 1991 than in previous years (“Rate of Marriage,” 1992). Thus, by the end of the 1980s, three phenomena were unprecedented among women over 30: the proportion who had never married, the size of the cohort, and the proportion who were becoming mothers as single women.

Despite the sporadic attention by the news media and popular press, there are few systematic studies of the older, economically established woman who chooses single motherhood. The available articles and books have either described government statistics or relied on the testimony of a handful of single mothers. The statistics provide an accurate picture of family formation in the numerical sense, but they do not inform us as to why women are forming their families in a particular way. On the other hand, building on the testimony of a few women can present a distorted view. Without also drawing on the experiences of married mothers, we do not know whether any aspect of single motherhood is unique to being single. A study that uses a scientific sampling scheme and gathers data from married as well as single mothers is needed to reach any conclusions about the phenomenon of interest.

In this research, I focus on older, single mothers to explore whether single and married mothers differ regarding their motivation for motherhood and to assess how these single women reconcile becoming mothers in an unconventional way. As the presence of a spouse is what distin-
guishes the married from single mothers, I ask whether single and married mothers differ in their experiences with, and feelings about, men—in regard to both their own fathers and to the romantic partners in their lives. I determine if single and married mothers are equally satisfied with their current marital status, and I consider the question of whether these single women looked for a marriage partner. In other words, did they search for Mr. Right? Are they single mothers by lack of a better choice, or are they women who wanted to be mothers, but not wives? In this article, using both quantitative and qualitative analyses to address these questions, I draw on interview data from 51 single and 51 demographically similar married mothers.

METHOD

RESPONDENT RECRUITMENT

A snowball sampling technique was used for the recruitment of study participants. We began by recruiting single mothers, who then referred us to married mothers, as well as to other single mothers. The first source for single mothers was the Alternative Parenting Network, a loosely structured self-help group in the Los Angeles area for unmarried women who are thinking about single parenthood, who are trying to become a single parent, or who became mothers as single women.

We sent a letter to mothers who had contacted the Alternative Parenting Network, regardless of whether they had ever actually attended a meeting of the group. The letter introduced ourselves as researchers, described our study’s purpose and procedure, and included a return postcard for the woman to indicate whether she was interested in participating. The research was described as an investigation of similarities and differences among single and married mothers in regard to their children, themselves, and how they balance their responsibilities. An in-person interview was scheduled for the women who agreed to participate. These women, once they were interviewed, acted as referrals for other single mothers and also for married mothers. In turn, each person interviewed was asked if she knew of single or married mothers in her neighborhood, with similar aged children, who might be interested in participating in the interview study. A letter was sent to each new potential participant. The purpose of asking for mothers of similar aged children was to enhance the comparability in the types of parenting issues with which the mothers were coping. Asking for mothers in the same neighborhood increased the likelihood that the
referred women would be of similar social class to the referral source. The eligibility criteria were that the women be at least 25 years old when they became mothers, and for the single women, that they not be in a marital-like relationship with the father of their child at the time of the birth or afterward.

Of the women who received our letters, 77% agreed to participate, resulting in 102 completed interviews (51 single mothers and 51 married mothers) between September and December of 1991. The interview was conducted in the setting of the mother’s choice, most often her home (n = 74) or place of employment (n = 18). Of the remaining 10 interviews, 6 were conducted in a restaurant, 2 were conducted at a park, and 2 took place in the University office of the graduate student interviewer. We received permission from each women to tape-record her interview, which was subsequently transcribed. Most interviews lasted between 1 and 1½ hours.

INTERVIEW

Interview questions were from standardized inventories or were designed specifically for this study. Questions designed for this study used mostly an open-ended format, but there were also some close-ended questions. Some of the open-ended questions were fairly broad in scope; for example, "What were some of the things that you thought about when you considered bearing or adopting (a, your first) child?" For many of these broad questions, we had a list of probes that were addressed to the mother if she did not cover a specific topic of interest to us in her answer. For the example above, the probes were the following: "Why did you want to do it?" "Was the birth planned?" and "What difficulties did you anticipate?" Some demographic questions, such as number of children or employment status, were incorporated into sections of the interview that assessed similar content. Other demographic information, including age, income, education, and ethnic group, was collected at the end of the interview.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE

The demographic and other relevant characteristics for the sample as a whole (102 women), and for the single and married women separately
(51 women each), are presented in Table 1. The modal characteristics of the 102 women were non-Hispanic White, late thirties, coming from two-parent families, having grown up with siblings, well educated, upper-middle class, in the labor force, and having an oldest child of 4 years. As can be seen, the profiles of the two groups were highly similar in regard to racial-ethnic group, number of parents and presence of siblings in their family of origin, years of education, proportion in labor force before birth or adoption of first child, hours working per week (among those in the labor force), planning of births, and age of oldest and youngest child. In comparison with the married mothers, the single mothers were about 4 years older, had lower total household incomes, were more likely to be currently in the labor force, were more likely to have only one child, were more likely to have adopted, and were more likely to have ever divorced. With regard to divorce, in no case was the single mother’s former husband the father of her child. Also relevant, but not included in the table, is that among the single women who gave birth (i.e., did not adopt) 30 conceived by sexual intercourse (in the context of relationships of varying length) and 9 conceived with donor sperm. In addition, 6 of the married women were pregnant with their future husband’s child when they married, and 1 married woman gave birth before marrying her child’s father. Overall, we achieved our goal of recruiting a sample of single mothers who match the demographic profile of the fast growing group of single mothers: older, non-Hispanic White, and well educated. On balance, we met our goal of recruiting a group of married mothers who had similar characteristics to those of the single mothers.

MOTIVATION FOR MOTHERHOOD

The study participants were asked, “What were some of the things that you thought about when you considered bearing or adopting a (your first) child?” After listening to and transcribing all of the interviews, 11 different themes were identified. The transcriptions were subsequently reviewed again and classified according to the presence or absence of the themes. This process led to some refinement in the classification scheme, resulting in rating the responses in regard to 8 different themes. Looking first at the single mothers, 5 of the response categories were mentioned by more than 20% of the participants. These categories were the following: wanting to be a mother/part of a family (67%); her marital status, for example, being single (42%); readiness for motherhood (37%); mothering ability (29%); and finances (27%). The other 3 themes (time, job/career, and other relationships) were mentioned by less than 20% of the respondents.
TABLE 1
Demographic and Family Characteristics of Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Total (N = 102)</th>
<th>Single (n = 51)</th>
<th>Married (n = 51)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean, in years)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race-ethnicity (proportion)</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-Hispanic White</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family of origin (proportion with two parents in household)</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings (proportion with siblings in family of origin)</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (proportion with bachelor of arts/bachelor of science)</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (median annual household)</td>
<td>$60,000-$70,000</td>
<td>$50,000-$60,000</td>
<td>$70,000-$80,000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor force participation before first child (proportion)</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current labor force participation (proportion)</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>71%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per week paid employment (mean, for those in labor force)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children (proportion with only one child)</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>51%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of oldest child (mean, in years)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of youngest child (mean, in years)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathway to motherhood, first child (proportion biological mothers)</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>96%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned birth, first child (proportion)</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever divorced (proportion)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12%*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Groups differ at p < .05.

Among the married mothers, only 2 themes were mentioned by more than 20% of the respondents: wanting to be a mother/part of a family (71%) and readiness for motherhood (47%). Comparing the two groups, the single women were significantly more likely than were the married women to recall that prior to becoming a mother they considered their marital status, $\chi^2 (1) = 18.19, p < .0001$; their mothering abilities, $\chi^2 (1) = 3.84, p < .05$; and their finances, $\chi^2 (1) = 8.97, p < .01$. 

Copyright (c) 2003 ProQuest Information and Learning Company
Copyright (c) Sage Publications, Inc
As noted above, the most common response to the question about motivation for becoming a mother, and equally probable in the two groups, was the basic desire to be a mother. In the words of a single mother:

For the same reason I think anyone wants a child. I couldn’t imagine not having a child. It’s a greater passion than anything else.

Both groups also thought about the timing of becoming a mother, with mid-thirties being the average age at first birth in this sample. The single mothers’ concern with their marital status, and with how they would manage as a mother, reflects the ongoing process of reconciling their unconventional behavior.

I always wanted a child. When I was 20 years old I said if I weren’t married by the time I was 27, I would have a child. I was worried about having a child. I did not want my child to have to grow up being different. I wanted her life to be perfect. The most painful part in having her was whether it was fair to do this to her. Ninety-nine percent of me wanted to have a child, but I was not sure if it really was right, or a fair thing to do to another person. I am still not sure.

I sort of felt bad, but I thought that there are so many kids today who grow up without a father. It wouldn’t be like he was unique. But I was concerned about a male role model and I still am. I don’t have an answer to that. I really don’t have a right to resent my son’s father, but I do feel a little hurt. Sometimes, I feel insulted for my son.

I really wanted to have a child. When I got pregnant, I felt like this might be my last chance. The ideal is two parents but I did not have that and I did not see that evolving. I felt a deep sadness about this not being the ideal situation—resentment and anger, too. Both myself and my son were losing out by not being able to share with the person closest to it.

I think the whole process by which someone decides to become a single parent is the hardest part. For me, it was because of all the emotional elements that are involved in dealing with your own expectations about what a woman is, what a family is, and what a child is. How difficult it is to really acknowledge your expectations and then let them go. I think if I were to reflect back, I had enormous anger and sadness. Like everyone else, I grew up believing there would be a wonderful man—even in my thirties, I thought there would. There is a certain amount of pressure to have a child by marriage. As much as you can say in your head that you understand this is a modern world and there are lots of different ways of doing things, it is emotionally hard to really let that be okay.

Stated simply, both the single and married women became mothers because they wanted to, and it was time to do it—even when faced with an unplanned pregnancy. Merritt and Steiner (1984), in their study of
motherhood without marriage, also observed that the desire to be a mother was “widely experienced at a level that permits little explanation beyond ‘I wanted a family’ or ‘I’ve always wanted children’” (p. 10). There was no evidence in our study that the single women had a greater need than the married women to be part of a family, or that these single women became mothers to reduce their loneliness, to have a companion, or to have someone to love. No mention was made of wanting to be a trendsetter, radical, or iconoclast when discussing motivation for motherhood.

Not surprisingly, the two groups differed in their premotherhood contemplation in regard to the importance that they placed on their marital status. The single women gave serious consideration to the potential impact of not having a father for their child in the household, which likely contributed to their greater probability of questioning whether they could handle motherhood. Some reconciled their concern about the father by noting that “many kids end up without fathers” or that “no father is better than a bad father.” Others were clearly still wrestling with whether single motherhood compromised their child’s life.

The single and married mothers also differed in their likelihood of considering finances before becoming mothers. Despite adequate incomes (median of $50,000 to $60,000), in almost all cases the single women were expecting to be the sole provider for their child, while living in a city with a financially beleaguered public education system and a costly real estate market.

SATISFACTION WITH MARITAL STATUS

We asked the women, “What are some of your thoughts about marriage in terms of your life? Has the choice been right for you?” Responses were categorized as either basically positive or expressing a wish that things had been different. The married mothers were much more likely to feel basically positive about their choice (94%) than were the single mothers (48%), $\chi^2 (1) = 24.94, p < .0001$, who were equally divided between those who were satisfied and those who wished things were different (52%).

The single mothers who were satisfied with their marital status tended to either put a low priority on marriage or feel certain that marriage was not something for them. A woman who became a mother by adoption, about 5 years after her divorce, reflects:

It is not something I care whether it happens or not. I think it is wonderful, being in love and finding someone you can live with. But I am not seeking it out. If it happens, it happens.
The single mothers who opposed marriage often expressed a concern that they would not do well in a marriage, either because they were not sure how to make a marriage work, or because they were not interested in doing what they thought was necessary for a marriage to work.

I never wanted to be married. In actuality, I always thought I would be but I have not wanted to be in a real way and was probably not well suited to it. Now, I feel I have a little more the hang of what it is like to get along with someone else on a day-to-day basis, although I think someone can be a very good or a very bad parent and that doesn’t determine how they would be as a spouse necessarily.

The single women who wished that things were different portrayed marriage as a desirable and sought-after goal, although many felt somewhat bewildered by marriage. This latter group expressed uncertainty about what a good relationship is and how to achieve that goal.

The point of view that marriage is desirable was evident in the comments of a physician, who was actively pursuing marriage at the time of our interview. Before adopting a daughter and then a son, she spent 6 months trying to get pregnant, eventually attempting in vitro fertilization and other aggressive medical techniques.

I want to get married. I am concerned about that but I don’t think I have to get married to raise these children to be well-adjusted. Most people don’t come from nuclear families; they are in the minority these days. But it does concern me and I am dating and I do want a husband, especially as a father figure for my son . . . and for my daughter. I do think it’s important.

The viewpoint that marriage is desirable but a puzzlement is mostly expressed by single mothers who had never married, although some of the divorced single mothers shared this sentiment. The never married mother of a 6-year-old girl described her situation in this manner:

I’ve always wanted to be married and still do but I don’t think I will. I feel unlucky in relationships, they don’t materialize at all; they evade me. I don’t even come close. I’ve asked two men to marry me.

A single mother who gave birth in her early forties characterized her brief marriage in her twenties as being an unconsciously motivated bad choice:

Marriage is something that I’ve always wanted and never been able to put together. I go to the single-mothers groups and they say we are stronger and more independent, and that’s why we don’t have relationships or successful relationships with men. Then, when you really get to know them, you find that most of us come from highly dysfunctional families and there are real problems there in not having successful dual relationships. I used to pick
the wrong kind of guy because of unconscious factors motivating me to pick people who weren't treating me well.

In sum, a smaller proportion of the single than married mothers were satisfied with their marital status. Still, half of the single mothers were satisfied with their marital status and did not characterize themselves as having been inclined toward marriage. Some of the reasons for this lack of interest in marriage are discussed in the section that follows. As a group, the single mothers cannot be described as having looked for Mr. Right, as there was marked variability within this sample in the propensity toward marriage.

FEELINGS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

The single mothers found more opportunities during the interview to comment on their feelings about men and relationships than did the married mothers. This was in part a function of questions that were directed only to the single women (e.g., how do you feel now about the absence of a father in your child's life?) and in part a function of the lack of a male partner being salient in discussions of adopting, childbearing, and child rearing. Thus statistical comparisons were not possible in regard to how the single versus married women feel about relationships. I present below what emerged from listening to and transcribing the interviews, identifying common themes and weaving the themes into a composite picture.

Many of the single women mentioned their disappointments in their relationships with their own fathers, or they portrayed their parents' marriage as not the kind of relationship they would want for themselves. Many wondered whether they should or could expect something different in their own lives.

I would prefer to be married, but I feel very strongly that I don't want to be trapped in a relationship that is not good for me. That almost happened with my daughter's father and I would either be divorced now or miserable if I were in a marriage with him. This is a hard one for women who have never been married because part of you thinks it is because I can't get a man, I can't do this thing. I really think it is hard to find a good match, especially if you are a woman, as opposed to a man. There is statistical stuff about that. If it works out, that would be great, but I can't go through life worrying about it. I felt pressure in my thirties, and I think a lot of women do, to get married, be married, have a baby. Having the baby relieves so much of the pressure of ending up in a relationship that was not going to work out. My feeling is that no relationship is worth a bad one. My parents were divorced...
when I was 21 years old. I’m not interested in subjecting my child or myself to a relationship that doesn’t work because I know what that is about.

When they contrasted their child’s situation with their own childhood experiences, several of the single mothers described the absence of their child’s father as potentially beneficial. None of the married mothers who described a similar childhood experience saw the absence of one’s father in positive terms. They felt that the lack of closeness with their own fathers made it clear to them how important it was to have a relationship with one’s father. This view was shared by some, but not all of the single mothers. A married mother of three described her situation in this way:

I was raised without a father in my home. I think it was very damaging. If it is a girl, how do you select a husband? The role of the father in the home is to nurture and teach. Not only to nurture but to teach a female how to look for a husband, what to look for in a husband; hopefully, it was positive. Hopefully, she will choose a husband who will treat her as well as her daddy did. For a male, to learn to be a good father to his children, supportive to his wife. That’s the parents’ role, to give those children the skills to grow up to be good parents and good spouses themselves so they, in turn, can teach it to their children. We have failed in our society in the last few years to accomplish any of those things. Most of us come from very dysfunctional families. Most of us find ourselves in a huge mess and we need to fix it quickly before we ruin another generation. We’re growing up at the same time that we’re trying to rear our children.

The married mothers were more likely than were the single mothers to view unhappy marital relationships as lessons or warnings rather than as indicators that happier relationships are not possible. For example, a married woman notes, “Even if it’s not positive, [you] can say I’ll never be like mom or dad.” In contrast, a single mother sees “a lot of people in marriages that I wouldn’t want to be in.” Overall, it appeared that the single mothers were more likely to reject relationships that they perceived as unhappy, rather than using their observations as tools for defining what might make them happy.

Aside from finding their own parents’ and other marriages less appealing, the single women were less likely than were the married women to accept the give-and-take that is a part of a marital (or any) relationship. The lack of acceptance was exhibited in two ways: the feeling that relationships were too demanding and stifling of personal freedom and, in contrast, an idealized image of what marriage should be. Regarding the demands of a marriage:

I can only tell you what married friends have said. Having a husband is like having another kid. Giving undivided attention to a lot of people becomes
virtually impossible. When you are single, you can give your full attention
to your child without feeling your husband is being cheated of attention or
time.

Men are very demanding, unless you happen to find a husband who just
parallels and parrots everything you do. A husband would be like another
child. If I want to make dinner, it can be at four o’clock or five, whenever
it is. I raise my kids the way I raise them. I do not have to worry about how
my husband feels. It is like owning and being the president of your own
company. I run the ship, what I say goes, there is no second-guessing. I do
not think I would be a good partner to someone with the strain and the stress
and the amount of time you have to put into your children. I would not want
someone expecting me to get into bed looking great, smelling great, caring
about how my hair looks. I would not be able to do that if I were married.

For the single mothers, feeling that marriage is too demanding was
intertwined with wanting to do things their own way.

We want all the control. I think that is a very core issue. None of the men
are as capable as we are. It is just a whole different thing being a mother
than being a father.

The married women were not oblivious to the merits of control. In fact,
the married women frequently commented on the strains that would be
eased if they never had to negotiate child-rearing decisions. Such com-
ments were usually followed, however, by acknowledgments that the
benefits of having a partner outweighed the hardships of compromise.

I was talking to this single woman and I realize that being married is not
necessarily better. We have the resentment of having a spouse who does not
do anything as far as child care and work around the house. A single parent
knows what they’ve got and they cannot resent a partner they don’t have.
In actuality though, married women are better off, assuming they have at
least an average marriage.

It has to be worse to be a single mother, although sometimes I wonder about
it. When I have talked to single mothers about certain issues, they don’t
have to ask anyone else what they think. They can just think about it and
make the decision. They don’t have to deal with disagreeing with someone
else about the decision. So, on some level, I think it might be easier, but
overall, it has to be rougher.

This theme of avoiding compromise and being in control was promi-
nent in three interview studies of unmarried women: one of older women
who were childless (Simon, 1987), one of women who chose to bear a
child on their own (Engelstein et al., 1980), and one of women who chose
to bear or adopt a child on their own (Miller, 1992). None of these studies
included comparison groups of married women. Simon interviewed 50
women, 65 years of age and older, who were born around the turn of the century. The majority of these women made comments about the importance of their independence and their distaste for what they saw as the subordinate role of the wife. Simon quotes Susan B. Anthony, who in 1877 stated, “The woman who will not be ruled must live without marriage.” Likewise, on the basis of her dissertation and others’ work, Miller (1992) concluded that single women who chose to become mothers viewed romantic relationships as something that would deprive them of their independence and autonomy.

Engelstein and colleagues interviewed the first eight women who responded to their advertisements or heard about their study from friends. Drawing on psychodynamic themes, these authors concluded that the women who bore children on their own had a fear of marriage because of their rejection of their own parents’ marriage. Further, the authors surmised that the single woman’s need for a child was grounded in the need for a constant object and one that could be controlled.

Overall, the unformed notion on the part of the single women of what constitutes a good relationship emerged as an image of the ideal marriage that denigrated by comparison to any past, current, or potential relationship in their own life. Likewise, Jarrett’s (1994) focus group study of poor, African American single mothers illustrated that the women consistently expressed a desire for marriage in the idealized sense, even though they felt pessimistic about attaining that ideal. Some of the single women in this study noted that their image of a relationship may be unrealistic, whereas others were angry that things had not turned out as they expected. Some of their visions are shared below.

I like being involved with a man. I’ve never been able to alter the 1950s’ picture in my mind—the strong man and a weak woman looking up to him. When I’m with a man, I’m never totally myself. I feel somewhat stifled, like I’m being regarded by the world as a part of this relationship, not for myself. Like I’m a reflection on him. When I’m by myself, I’m clear about what I need to do. When I’m with a man, it gets tied up with his goals. I get confused.

I’d like to be married but I just haven’t found the right person that fits the picture that I see. I might be unrealistic in wanting a 50/50 proposition, things in common, same standards and goals.

I’m in a single-parents group and everyone of us, no matter how we became single parents, have a certain anger, a certain hurt that it didn’t come out the way we thought it would when we were little girls. We didn’t grow up, get married, and have a house. No matter what the process was, we’re just
CONCLUSIONS

In their role as mothers, the single and married women were more alike than different. For both groups, there seemed to be an acceptance that motherhood is a fundamental part of their own womanhood and they described similar concerns in their premotherhood contemplation. Perhaps surprisingly, the single women could not be characterized as feminists or progressive thinkers as a group, even though there were many in each group who individually fit this description. Some of the single women were quite traditional in their values—motherhood being part of this tradition.

The women were different in how they viewed relationships. Although the single and married women were equally likely to have had two parents in the household in their family of origin, the single women were more likely than the married women to experience the breakup of their own marriage. Still, fewer than one third of the single mothers had divorced prior to becoming a mother, so it is unlikely that experiences with unhappy marriages were the sole contributor to their divergent sentiments. The composite picture that emerged from the single mothers was one of ambivalence toward marriage—a combination of an idealized image of what marriage should be with an unwillingness to accept compromise as an essential relationship strategy. These accounts, however, are largely retrospective. Thus the extent to which their current circumstances influenced their recall and presentation of past events is unknown.

Family sociologists have observed a 30-year trend in American society toward an increasing separation of marriage and childbearing (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Cherlin, 1988). Older, single women who choose to become mothers are contributing to this trend. The single mothers we interviewed were about equally divided between those who were satisfied with their choice regarding marriage and those who wished things were different. These and other data suggest that not all of the single mothers searched for Mr. Right before settling on single motherhood. Rather, some of the women never looked very hard in the first place. Thus whether or not there is a shortage of marriageable men is probably beside the point. What seems more likely is that these single women, just like the married women with whom they were compared, considered the emotional costs and benefits
of marriage and of motherhood. They came to different conclusions regarding marriage but reached the same conclusion, in much the same way, regarding motherhood. These findings are consistent with the interpretation that increased options outside of marriage are more important factors in women not marrying than increased barriers to marriage (Goldscheider & Waite, 1986).

REFERENCES


