

Avery Tan

Mr. Greco

English 3 H

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Modern Motherhood: Single Mothers By Choice

Dedication:

To my mother and strong, independent women raising their children on their own.

Acknowledgments:

I am grateful to the women that I interviewed for graciously allowing me to learn about a particularly private and sensitive part of their lives: motherhood. I thank my family and friends for supporting me throughout this process. I extend my appreciation to my teachers and peers at Freestyle Academy for the feedback and tools necessary to complete this project.

Preface:

For the Junior Documentary project at Freestyle Academy, we were challenged to explore an aspect of our community that we were curious about. I excitedly began brainstorming topic ideas and initially intended to pursue something to do with Buddhism. However, I had to think about the feasibility of that topic and ultimately decided that my view was too broad. My mother suggested following her friend around

for a day and writing about that experience. That friend happens to be a single mother by choice. I was curious because I knew that my mother's friend was a single mother, but did not know what her daily life with her child was like. I also became interested in finding out what parenting entails, and the different roles that single mothers have to take on. Just like that, I knew that my final topic was going to be on single mothers by choice. While I did consider interviewing and writing a portion of my book on single fathers, the idea did not pan out due to inaccessibility. I also limited my interviewees to professional women because they were the only women that I managed to get into contact with.

Along the way, I developed many skills that I hope to use in the future. This project gave me an opportunity to practice photographing people on-the-go, a departure from my usual architectural shots. I also learned how to tailor interview questions and conduct an interview; knowing how to navigate this process will help me get the information I need for future research-based projects.

Introduction:

Sitting at a restaurant table amongst scattered toys and haphazardly strewn Tupperware containers is Quynh Pham and her son, Ethan. He alternates his attention between showing off his toys to me and in relishing his food as noisily as possible, much to his mother's chagrin. To an outsider, this scene looks every bit like the typical interaction between a parent and child. What is less obvious is that Quynh is a single mother raising Ethan on her own.

According to a 2018 Pew Research Center analysis, the percentage of US children living with an unmarried parent “has more than doubled since 1968, jumping from 13% to 32% in 2017” (Livingston, “Living With Unmarried Parent”). The upward trend of children living with a single parent means that there is an increased possibility of teenage girls today becoming single mothers a decade or two down the line. Alternative family structures (i.e. anything other than the “traditional” nuclear family structure) are becoming more commonplace, and if they’re a permanent fixture in American society, then the rest of society should try to understand them rather than categorizing them as impermanent anomalies or vexations. As of 2018, single-mother households make up 25% of all American households (Fu, et. al), while single-father led households make up 12% (Livingston, “Changing Parent Profile”).

The number of single mothers is on the rise. The American public “[objects]... to discussing the topic for fear of stigmatizing single mothers and their children,” but avoiding such a discussion does not mitigate the problems faced by these women and the children raised by them (McLanahan). It would be useful for women contemplating single motherhood to know what being a single mother involves and what they should take into consideration. They might want to know what support programs would be available for them should they choose to have a child, and be assured that their children will not necessarily suffer disproportionately as a result of being raised by a single mother.

It is true that women can be single mothers due to circumstances such as divorce or the passing of a partner or spouse and that those women can experience hardship;

however, members of “[s]ociety... [categorize] single mothers in gradients of respectability depending on... how [they] became a single mother” and cannot understand why some women choose to be the sole parent of their child from the outset (Allers). Even for those not looking to become single mothers, it would help to broaden their perspective on single mothers and their contributions to society.

Chapter 1: A Historical View of Single Motherhood

In 1992, the TV Show, *Murphy Brown*, made waves. The protagonist, a fictional newswoman named *Murphy Brown*, chose to have a child on her own. The concept of a professional career woman choosing to become a single mother was so foreign that the show made headlines. Even the then-Vice-President, Dan Quayle, commented on the episode in a speech, blaming “the character for the breakdown of family values” (Gajanan). He argued:

Bearing babies irresponsibly is, simply, wrong. Failing to support children one has fathered is wrong. We must be unequivocal about this. It doesn't help matters when prime time TV has *Murphy Brown* - a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman - mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another ‘lifestyle choice’. (Quayle)

Quayle’s sentiment is still mirrored by 70 percent of Americans, who in 2011 reportedly thought of single mothers as “bad” for society. Perhaps these people think that most single mothers are teenage girls still living at home with their parents, unfairly

benefiting off of the system due to a serious lapse in judgment. In contrast to that image, the Pew Research Center reports that the birth rate among American teenagers has dropped 42% since 2007 (Patten, Livingston). The National Center for Health Statistics found that “[t]he largest percentage drop in nonmarital birth rates between 2007 and 2012 was for teenagers” (Curtin et. al). Therefore, the single mother population is not mainly comprised of immature teenagers that had accidents with ill-consequences.

There also exists the worry that growing up without a central male guiding figure is detrimental to a child. While some may argue that it is merely the smaller number of single fathers that leads to these men not receiving the same scrutiny as single mothers, the negative view towards single mothers by choice is a feminist issue. Even before a child is factored into the equation, women already experience discrimination in the forms of “economic, social, and legal discrimination” (Worell). Ruth Sidel, the author of *Unsung Heroines: Single Mothers and the American Dream*, was raised by a single father. She states that “my father was never vilified, never criticized for being a single parent. In fact, my father was widely admired and praised. Because he was raising a daughter alone, he was seen as caring, self-sacrificing, truly committed to his family” (Sidel 32). This becomes a feminist issue when a woman’s ability to care for her child on her own is called into question. People bemoan women without husbands’ “lack” of morals, thinking that a woman’s marital status is an indication of her immorality; women apparently gain morals by marrying a man. Some also use a woman’s marital status as grounds for them “to draw sweeping conclusions about family relationships,” making assumptions about a woman’s maturity or social abilities (Kaffer). These

misconceptions infantilize single mothers and allow people to avoid constructively addressing the women's challenges. The issues facing the single-mother population will not diminish if members of society continue to ostracize these women and their children.

Chapter 2: To be, or not to be, that is the question...

Two main factors contribute to the rising trend of older, professional women consciously choosing to become mothers on their own: greater economic independence of women and change in social norms.

A recent article from Forbes states that "Millennial women are poised to be the most financially independent generation in history" (Gorman). Increased wages have given women greater control over numerous aspects of their lives. Declining financial dependence allows women to be more selective about romantic partners, and whether or not they will marry their partners. They also have more say in how many children they can afford to raise, as well as whether or not they will raise their children with the help of another partner.

Being ambitious about attaining higher education and building a career is a major reason that a professional woman might push back the age at which she has her child. Margaret Harris (name changed to protect her privacy), a Bay Area physician that considered single motherhood in the past, states that "there's not... much flexibility in terms of pursuing a career and also having kids. For women who really want to pursue a career, you... devote a lot more of your time [so that] you can advance... [T]hen, having a

relationship or starting a family becomes secondary.” The point at which a woman has worked to a certain “level in [her] career where [she] can negotiate more flexibility in their schedule” is when thoughts of the fertility window start to come to the forefront of her mind.

Some women find that having children of their own is, in a sense, a frantic race against their biological clocks. Researchers from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) found that “[n]onmarital birth rates fell in all age groups under 35 since 2007; rates increased for women aged 35 and over” (Curtin et al.). Margaret comments that “[s]ome women have a dream of waiting to find a husband to settle down with before having kids. But you often can’t plan out these things, and your career might take up too much time. There’s also a time limit because you’re only fertile up until a certain point, so if finding someone in time doesn’t happen, then women have to consider single motherhood if they want children.”

Quynh, a registered nurse, finds that having a child at an older age has its advantages: “I’m glad I’m raising [Ethan] at a much older age than younger... [at a younger [age] I would have [had] a lot of my own... ego of showing [Ethan off as] a successful product.” In other words, being older allows Quynh to raise Ethan without feeling as if she needs to constantly showcase her child and compete in an “I raise my child better than how you raise yours” race; this is not to say that younger mothers are egotistical, but rather that the passage of time generally allows people to relinquish insecurities, which may translate into better parenting. As people get older, they tend to become more financially secure as well. Andrea Scicli, a strategic medical writer at

Stryker Neurovascular, believes that having had time to build up a successful career has put her in a financial state where she could send her son to a private school if she so desired.

If finding a husband/partner is not in the books, there are alternative solutions to conceiving. The options for women looking to become single mothers include adoption, in-vitro fertilization (IVF), intrauterine insemination (IUI), and sperm donation.

Although I could not find statistics for IVF users in America, it is worth noting that the number of single women from the United Kingdom choosing to have IVF has doubled from 2007 to 2012, as found by the United Kingdom's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) (Holman). The drawbacks to assisted reproductive technology (ART) are that the numerous rounds of treatment are costly; additionally, if no baby is conceived after years of treatment, ART can take a psychological toll on the woman. A woman could also suffer social consequences from doing IVF because of the ongoing bioethics debate surrounding it (Siegel). An especially gray area is how a woman should manage her leftover embryos, and whether or not discarding the embryos qualifies as "disposing of human life" (Siegel).

Although Andrea is no longer a single mother, she started her journey alone. She initially tried IUI, but her efforts were fruitless so she turned to adoption. Andrea found that adoption had its own set of challenges, namely in convincing birth mothers to allow her to adopt their child. She explains, "I got rejected many times because I was single, wasn't part of a couple. Birth moms... can be particularly selective and will go for stability." Birth mothers are less inclined to allow a single woman to adopt their child for

fear of the child being harmed by a potential stream of short term partners walking in and out of the child's life. Midway through the adoption process, Andrea found a husband and eventually was able to adopt a son.

She is glad to raise her son alongside her husband, as “people bring different things to the table. [Her] husband is an outdoorsy person, and [she is] more of the math and puzzles person. [Andrea thinks] it's better to have two parents because as a single mom you're so busy with work and trying to put food on the table.” Quynh affirms Andrea's opinion, stating that “if [she] had to choose between [interacting] with [Ethan] or [feeding] him something healthy, [she] probably [would] feed him as part of showing affection [and it being her] responsibility.” She cites not having two parents to interact with and provide stimuli for Ethan as his greatest disadvantage. Researchers widely agree that the best arrangement for a child to grow up in is a two-parent household. However, this does not necessarily mean that children of single mothers are severely disadvantaged.

Society inflates the difference between children of single mothers and children of two-parent households, especially in school dropout-rates — a commonly referenced point of comparison. In her 1994 study, sociologist Sara McLanahan, Ph.D., found that the high-school dropout rate of children of single-mother households differs from children of two-parent households only by a negligible 6 percentage points. While time spent on education is one indicator of productive time use, it should not be the only aspect that people use to judge children of single mothers; other types of activities besides school work include household duties, leisure time, and paid work. Cathleen

Zick and Corinne Allen examine the correlation between family structure and adolescents' productive time usage in their 1996 study, "The Impact of Parents' Marital Status on the Time Adolescents Spend in Productive Activities." Zick and Allen conclude:

The current analysis shows that the impact of a parent's marital status on adolescent time use pales in comparison to the impact of... the resources that the mother brings to her parenting role as measured by her education, her age, and her employment status... these resources exert considerable influence on adolescents' productive time use...To the extent that adolescents in single-mother households miss out on some social capital because their fathers are absent, it would appear that this situation does not translate into large shifts in adolescent time use. (qtd. in Yarber and Sharp 188-190)

While children of single-mothers might not spend as much time on school work, they are allotting time for paid work and are generally not found to be idle.

Chapter 3: The Ins and Outs of Single Mothering

To represent the daily life of a single mother as accurately as possible, I spent a day accompanying Quynh and Ethan to various activities.

Sunday Service at the Palo Alto Buddhist Temple has just ended, and temple-goers are either headed off to Dharma School (sessions to impart understanding and appreciation of Buddhist teachings) or to the snack table. I catch up to Quynh and Ethan inside of the Dharma School's preschool classroom. Ethan gazes longingly at the

cracker snacks his classmates are nibbling at as Quynh tries to entice him with healthier options. Put off by his mother's discipline, he remains sullen throughout the class and only perks up when the teacher begins storytime. Quynh looks relieved that he is finally paying attention. In accordance with the study conducted by Zick and Allen, Quynh also finds that "social capital" is what Ethan lacks. She started bringing him to temple recently because "[she is] always looking for [a] community [so that they can] be in a group that helps [them] feel connected, [which] is important for happiness and for wellbeing." She hopes that if Ethan grows up attending temple and the Dharma School, that he might hone his emotional intelligence and develop respect and appreciation for the people in his life.

Once class has ended, she wrangles her bags (her personal bag, Ethan's food bag, and a bag for various toddler supplies) together and redirects Ethan from petting a temple-goer's dogs to the parking lot. It takes her a couple of minutes to buckle in the very wiggly Ethan, and another five to locate the car keys in one of the bags. Finally making it to a health-foods restaurant for lunch, Quynh realizes that she left Ethan's food bag in the car.

"Shoot," she says to me, "I'm glad you're here. Would you mind watching Ethan for a sec while I run and grab the stuff?"

Finding adequate childcare is a daily hurdle. Some days, Quynh wakes up, frantic, not knowing if she can secure coverage for Ethan until she returns from work. Around half a year ago, her need to find a caretaker was so great that Quynh turned to "finding someone randomly on the street that [she] thought... looked [safe]." Upon noticing a

woman that “was pushing her grandchild [in a stroller], [Quynh] thought, ‘Oh, that’s a grandmother, she looks safe! So I’m gonna ask her if she wants to babysit Ethan.’” The time that many couples have to screen potential caretakers is all but a luxury to Quynh. The possibility that she might lose her job if she has to stay home and take care of Ethan lurks at the back of her mind.

She plays hide-and-seek with Ethan among giant flower pots for a while after lunch and ushers him back to the car when he starts displaying signs of a meltdown. We stop by a grocery store on the way back to her house, and Quynh closely examines the nutrition labels of a few different types of milk before selecting a carton. She carefully crafts quality meals for Ethan as a way of showing affection. By the time they arrive home, Ethan’s energy levels are back to normal and he can barely get through his afternoon shower. Quynh also tries to teach him to pee standing up, a lesson typically taught by the father of a household. While some may say that she’s fulfilling the role of mother and father, Quynh views her role differently: “at the end of the day, I don’t really care what the role of Mommy or Daddy is, it’s [more] of how I want to treat him as a person [and] trying to overcome my own deficiencies in terms of anger management and frustration... I don’t think it’s necessary to define [gender roles in parenting].”

Ethan finally is put down for a nap, and Quynh gets a quiet moment that does not truly feel like a break to her. She describes the restrictiveness of her situation: “I’m in a playgroup where there’s a mom that says ‘...I feel like I’m a single mom because I’m always looking to bring my child to places by myself... [so my] husband is sort of like an absent father. He’s just there.’ But... even if the husband is ‘just there,’ at least [she has]

the ability to run off and do other things. If you're just [by] yourself, you don't have that option." She likens having to accompany Ethan everywhere at all times to being imprisoned in her own home.

After his nap, Quynh and Ethan sit down to dinner. Quynh pulls out storyboard cards (cards with images on them that can be ordered in any way to create any storyline) for Ethan to exercise his imagination. Upset at having to share the trajectory of his story with his mother, Ethan begins to throw a tantrum; in response to him insulting her and calling her names, Quynh sits with a calm demeanor and firmly scolds him. When it comes to making decisions regarding discipline, she finds that "[o]ne of the things [she thinks is] nice as a single parent is that [she gets] to make all the decisions and that [she doesn't] have to negotiate and depend on other people" to take a desired course of action.

Although Quynh does not have to communicate with a partner, she does consult relevant people if a situation calls for her to do so. Just like any other parent, she reads, researches, and then decides.

Conclusion:

As with any other major decision, both the benefits and tradeoffs of being a single mother should be taken into consideration for women considering single-motherhood. The women that I interviewed offered multiple pieces of advice.

Margaret encourages women to consider whether they can make children a priority. She states, "[motherhood] can be such a special calling, you have to... be willing

to make [it] a priority because ultimately the goal is to raise a happy and healthy person. If you have a lot of doubts whether you can give the child everything that that child needs to succeed, then... you have to think really hard [about] whether you're making the right decision [or not]." Resources such as money and mental stability are part of the "everything."

For Quynh, motherhood tests the limits of unconditional love: "think about the worst relationship you've ever been in, and then multiply that by several times more where you're underappreciated and you're asked to constantly be giving." Parenting often is thankless work and requires an extraordinary amount of dedication.

Andrea stresses the importance of having a strong community: "They should make sure that they have a network, a community to rely on." No person would be well off without the support of close friends and family.

In addition to ensuring financial stability, knowing how to think far in advance is crucial, since kids are "constantly evolving [and] you're always behind... It's one of the things [Quynh wishes she] had known [before having Ethan]." She warns against the pitfall of researching the current stage that your child happens to be in: "I wish I hadn't spent th[e] nine months of pregnancy reading about pregnancy and delivering. It's so unimportant compared to what happens after the [kid comes] out."

In the end, a woman's marital status might matter less than her emotional maturity in determining how well a child will be raised, how accomplished, and how happy that child will be. According to Karen Friedland-Brown, the director of the Parents Place Palo Alto, "research has shown... that when parents manage their conflict

and protect their children from their own challenges and negative feelings,... and they communicate reasonably well, children do well.”

I asked Quynh what the best part of being a single mother by choice is. She laughed and gently reminded me that the highs of single-motherhood could be applied to any parent’s experience. To her, “[t]he best part of being a mom in general... is [that] you get to go back and experience some of your childhood [and] seeing things with wonder. It’s another opportunity for growth... it’s a period of... developing. You’re evolving, too, and you get to see yourself [from] a different perspective.” It would do society well to remember that single-mothers are working alongside everyone else to raise the next generation. Single motherhood by choice definitely is not for the faint-hearted.

Author Bio:

Avery is a high school junior in the San Francisco Bay Area. She highly enjoys being a design student and hopes to extend her artistic and technical interests to studying architecture or graphic design in college. In her free time, Avery can either be found plunking out classical pieces on the piano or wandering around capturing intriguing architecture through her camera lens. She also has an affinity for learning and rooting around in the etymology of Asian languages.

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