

Deconstructing “Single” Mothers by Choice: Transcending Blood, Genes, and the Biological Nuclear Family?

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Abstract

The concept of biological kinship is a sociocultural construction of facts taken for granted as “natural.” The concept of blood, of “bond,” of “connection,” symbolizes the fact that relatives are perceived as having claims on one another by virtue of DNA. It is taken for granted that the biological relation attains a meaning in human relations. Yet, this taken-for-grantedness is rarely deconstructed. Thus, the purpose of this article is threefold: (a) to examine the conceptualization of the links between the social and the biological in societies of the Global North, and to analyze the assumptions that implicitly underpin the literature on new forms of family, in particular, “single” mothers by choice with donor-conceived children. Two of the most prolific scholars on the subject, from the field of psychology in the United Kingdom and from the field of social anthropology in Spain, will be discussed, taking into account a preliminary analysis of 35 ethnographic interviews with “single” mothers by choice that I have conducted during my fieldwork in Spain and in the United Kingdom; (b) to interrogate the discourses that categorize this group of women who have chosen to be mothers; and (c) to suggest a new research agenda building on the critical insights produced from addressing the first and second aims.

Keywords

single-mother-by-choice families, donor conception, genetics, UK, Spain, ethnography

Does Genetics Make a Family?

The genetic–biogenetic model that associates sexuality with reproduction, reproduction with heterosexual relations, heterosexual relations with marriage, marriage with the family, and the family with the middle-class nuclear model is dependent on a chain of significations that have been rendered outdated by developments in reproductive processes (Kroløkke et al., 2015; Stone, 2013; Strathern, 1992). The symbol par excellence of this cultural kinship system is consanguinity: blood, together with other biogenetic substances such as the semen and the egg that represent genealogical “legitimacy” and biological traceability as the basic component of individual identity for societies in the Global North, wealthy industrialized countries (Odeh, 2010). Sharing and passing on one’s blood and genetic information as a result of the sexual act is the natural element that legitimizes the establishment of social, filial, conjugal, and fraternal relations that extend upward and downward to make the genealogical tree, the basic underlying layer of these societies’ idea of kinship.

This conceptualization of the links between the social and the biological, between nature and culture, is particular to the Global North (Schneider, 1980). This was the dominant trend in kinship studies until the 1960s, in which

kinship was defined as the sociocultural interpretation that a group constructs out of the biological facts of reproduction. Kinship, as defined in anthropology and associated with the facts of reproduction, biology and genealogy, cannot be made universal because it is always particular to a culture in a particular context. Schneider (1984) suggested that most anthropologists had in one way or another defined kinship in relation to human biological reproduction. They did so because of an implicit and mistaken assumption, namely, that their own Western cultural notion that “blood is thicker than water” is a human universal. Schneider suggested that this idea of kinship might only exist in Euro-American society.

What the biological facts of reproduction represent for US, British, or Spanish kinship can for other societies be represented by other types of practices: common, shared acts such as residing together, the eating of food, the raising of

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children, the land, heritage, or rituals, among other aspects (Stone, 2001). In some New Guinea groups, people became members of descent groups through common residence, reinforced by food sharing (Strathern, 1992). The analysis of kinship became transformed through the incorporation of the ideas of social processes as opposed to structures; of the individual as an active agent with capacity for initiative as opposed to the conception of the individual as a simple, passive subject in structures; and of social action as deliberate action and human agency. And thus the perspective that, until that time, had prioritized kinship as a principle of social organization and integration was abandoned (Lamphere, 2001; Stone, 2001).

Numerous theorists and researchers have also pointed out that power is embedded in kinship as well as in other domains such as politics, religion, ethnicity, and nation (Chodorow, 1978; Glenn et al., 1994; Okin, 1989; Phoenix et al., 1991; Rich, 1995; Yanagisako & Delaney, 1995). The new possibilities of reproduction, in-vitro fertilization, gamete donation, and surrogacy have raised new possibilities for thinking about kinship. Women themselves have confronted situations where the “biological facts” can no longer be considered “natural.” For example, surrogate mothers downplay their genetic contribution and view the adoptive mother as someone who has conceived the child “in her heart” not through her body (Ragoné, 1994).

These issues give rise to wider questions about how to tackle the interaction between nature and culture and how anthropology and other disciplines, such as psychology and family studies, can reproduce or question these concepts (Strathern, 1992). As cultural facts, such ideas inform our representations, descriptions, and analyses of kinship. At the same time, we envision possibilities through ideas that already exist and are part of the cultural repertoire. The premise of social anthropology is that what is taken for granted as being facts of nature are themselves sociocultural constructions (Strathern, 1992). The “natural” facts of procreation are enshrined in the law. Currently, legal parents need not be the biological or genetic father and/or mother of the baby but can be the donor of genetic material. Being a donor or providing a womb, or being the person who takes care of and educates the child, are separate things and none is sufficient by itself to produce a social, emotional, or psychological bond. A decision must be made about what type of relation is to be practiced as a consequence of the biological connection (O’Reilly, 2007; Strathern, 1992). Professor Daniels (2006), who has worked in the field of assisted human reproduction for the past 30 years and, who adopted twins with his wife, says that we have to reflect on how assisted reproduction and its impact makes us think about the meaning of “family”:

We are still stuck in a very genetic connotation that family is only a family if there’s a biological link between the parents and the child and that represents something of a challenge for people like ourselves who just don’t fit into that norm. (p. 266)

Another relevant issue concerning genetics is the nature versus nurture debate. “How much of children’s make-up is from genes and how much from the environment they grow up in?” (Daniels, 2006, p. 63).

Most mothers and fathers whose children have been conceived through the donation of genetic material agree that it is the relationship that they build with their children that is the most important. It is not necessary to share genetic material to form an intense emotional, psychological, and emotional relationship with a child and be a good mother or father. Janet Carsten is one of the anthropologists who have most developed the concept of “relatedness” as an alternative to the term “kinship,” seeking to avoid Western ideas on kinship centered on the facts of procreation and the division between the biological and the social. Her proposal is to study the emic conceptions and perceptions of the modes of establishing relations and of being related, thus enabling transcultural comparison (Carsten, 2000).

Her contribution to kinship studies as a process that is constructed through daily practices has proved to be a highly useful tool when it comes to studying the current modes of becoming related in Euro-American societies, in which blood appears to have ceased to be “thicker than water,” or at least seems not always to be, nor in the same way, for all social actors. The increase in divorce and successive marriages or unions with children of one or both partners, homosexual couples with children, single parenthood, international adoption and assisted reproductive techniques, or the transnationalization of families has generated new modalities of relatedness that are stripping biology of its symbolic character in the construction of kinship, by questioning its position as the “natural” basis and unique factor in the creation of kinship (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Kroløkke et al., 2015).

This does not mean that choice and will have taken the place of biology in the construction of kinship, but that we are witnessing a tension between biology and choice, in which, according to Stone (2013), choice is presented as a new “order.” Making the relational aspect of kinship, the nonbiological process of procreation, explicit and visible confronts individuals with an exercise in self-reflection and definition of family identity in which “the thickness of blood” is no longer fundamental. This does not mean that it does not continue to exert pressure on the representations and conceptions of kinship and family. “Single” mothers by choice constitute an important case where that pressure is visible.

Studies on New Family Forms

The study of families produced through assisted reproduction is still sparse. Susan Golombok in the field of psychology in the United Kingdom and Maria Isabel Jociles-Rubio in the field of social anthropology in Spain are the most prolific authors in this area, according to a Scopus search carried out at the end of 2018. The purpose of this section is to critically analyze these authors’ theoretical approaches and consider the elements necessary to developing a holistic and

intersectional analysis that incorporates contemporary theorizations of new family forms and overcomes narrow biologicistic outlooks. To that end it considers the questions, the analysis, and the interpretations of the studies conducted. In the case of the United Kingdom, Golombok's (1984) studies began in the 1980s in the context of the debates of the "Committee of Inquiry Into Human Fertilisation and Embryology." This was concerned with the possible negative impact of the new technologies of assisted reproduction on the functioning of families and the psychological development of the children, as well as with attitudes toward semen or egg donors and the parental bonding to children conceived via these techniques (Bolton et al., 1991). The U.K. debates on assisted reproduction at the time included whether lesbian or heterosexual single women should be allowed access to assisted reproductive technologies, and specifically to sperm donation, to be able to conceive a child without the involvement of a man (Englert, 1994). Access to sperm donation had been denied to lesbian and single heterosexual women because it was argued that they could not provide a suitable family environment for children in that the children would have two mothers with no genetic connection to one of them.

For lesbian as well as single heterosexual women, it was argued that the lack of a father could be detrimental, in that both the existence of an anonymous donor and the lack of a father might lead to psychosocial difficulties for the child. In response to such fears and assumptions, the research by Golombok and her co-authors were designed to compare biological nuclear families and families formed through assisted reproductive technologies. Over the last three decades, evidence from their studies on the psychological development of the children of families formed by single heterosexual or lesbian mothers have failed to find empirical support to endorse the assumptions that (a) the children would show atypical development, (b) they would develop behavioral and emotional problems and difficulties in peer relations, and (c) the mothers would not be good mothers (Falk, 1989; Golombok & Tasker, 1994). Contrary to the concerns expressed in these debates, the results of Golombok's studies and of other research showed that "the quality of parenting in families with a child conceived by assisted conception is superior to that shown by families with a naturally conceived child" (Golombok et al., 1993, p. 17). No differences were found in the groups with respect to the emotions of the children, their behavior, or their relationships with their parents. Moreover, the consistent conclusion from these studies over the last 30 years is that the genetic bond is less important for family functioning than a strong desire to be parents by having children (Golombok, 2018; Golombok & Tasker, 1994).

In the case of Spain, Law 14/2006 establishes that all women older than 18 years of age can be a beneficiary of assisted reproduction techniques regardless of their marital status and sexual orientation. Jociles-Rubio and her co-authors (2010) began to publish studies at the end of the first decade of this century on single mothers by choice,

above all adoptive mothers and to a lesser degree single mothers who used assisted reproductive technologies. Her publications reproduced research questions similar to those posed by Golombok in the British context, such as the following: who become single mothers by choice (Jociles-Rubio et al., 2008), how families with children from gamete donation deal with the origins of their children (Jociles-Rubio, Rivas-Rivas, & Poveda-Bicknell, 2014), or the representation of kinship as a result of assisted reproductive techniques with a donor (Jociles-Rubio & Rivas-Rivas, 2016). Jociles also compares single mothers by choice in Spain and the United States (Hertz et al., 2016), showing that single mothers by choice in Spain are far more vocal and politically active than in the United States. However, Jociles's samples are limited because she draws her qualitative sample of single mothers by choice from associations such as *Madres Solas por Elección* and their participation in the media, thus excluding "single" mothers by choice who do not belong to any association and who are not politically active. Another qualitative study undertaken in Spain reveals that half of the sample of single women who have children through assisted reproduction are not politically active and, in addition, opt for a male chauvinist and Roman Catholic education for their children (Bravo-Moreno, 2019). Therefore, the families of "single" mothers by choice are highly heterogeneous and should not be homogenized by forcing them to fit into a stereotype. As can be seen from the above discussion, the studies of Golombok and Jociles-Rubio orient to the same issues and begin with the same questions. Both focus on (a) comparing families that are formed through assisted reproduction or adoption with what might be considered "traditional biological nuclear families", (b) analyzing the adjustment of children in the new families (who "lack" genetic bonds) compared with "biological nuclear families", and (c) examining how the mothers and fathers of the new families reveal or do not reveal the information that their children were born thanks to assisted reproductive technologies, and the effect that the revelation can have on their offspring.

These studies have helpfully shown that concerns about the children born from assisted reproduction or adopted children are misplaced. It would, therefore, seem timely to shift the focus of research away from comparing them with biological nuclear families. In her 2017 article, Golombok draws conclusions from her longitudinal study (started in 2000) on families formed through egg or sperm donation, and the consequences of assisted reproductive technologies on the development of their children. In her article, she asserts that, contrary to the concerns (she does not specify whose, perhaps the debates in the 80s mentioned earlier), the new family compositions are characterized by positive parenting and well-adjusted children, because the children were very much wished and planned for.

She goes on to state that, from a theoretical perspective, what this study tells us is that the number, gender, sexual

orientation, and biological relation of the parents and children have less influence on the children's psychological development than the quality of the family relationships and the social context in which the children are raised, much the same conclusion that she reached in 1994 (Golombok & Tasker, 1994). However, at no point does Golombok or Jociles-Rubio call into question the premise that the biological nuclear family as a structure and yardstick for other types of families. The question is whether there is a link between genetics and the well-being of the children. A wealth of research makes clear that this is not necessarily the case. For example, there are fathers, "deadbeat dads," who demonstrate that biological ties are no guarantee that fathers will ensure continuing investment of their resources in their own children (Dermott, 2008).

Why, when Golombok and Jociles-Rubio discuss the structure of the hegemonic nuclear family, do they not delve deeper into its variety and explain the particularity of various structures? If the structure is formed by a father and a mother whose roles are unequal in a patriarchal family, how does this affect their children? or When in a biological nuclear family the father is absent due to work or when both mother and father hire a succession of babysitters to look after their children because they both work until late, how do these circumstances affect their children? (Li et al., 2014). In their research, Golombok and Jociles-Rubio analyze the disclosure of the information regarding donors and the impact its concealment might have for children, presumably influenced by principles of good practice in adoption (Ghera, 2014; Morgan, 1999).

However, they do not discuss the disclosure of other issues that are also important, that could affect children, but that are normally kept from them in biological nuclear families, such as infidelities, addictions, or toxic relations between family members. Similarly, Golombok and Jociles-Rubio do not mention the importance of other aspects such as managing injustices that lie at the heart of the hegemonic nuclear family. In particular, how does the lack of shared responsibilities between mothers and fathers with regard to the children, their care, and the household chores that has been repeatedly documented in both Spain and the United Kingdom (World Economic Forum, 2018) affect children in their upbringing and education? Furthermore, in the case of the United Kingdom, how does the fact that wealthy nuclear families send their children to boarding schools affect them? This is a phenomenon that has been called the "privileged abandonment" of children and that—according to Schaverien (2015), "Many adults are suffering long-term emotional or behavioral difficulties" (p. 84)—"boarding school syndrome" being recognized as a specific syndrome according to psychiatrists and psychologists. Strathern (1992) argues that new ideas are imagined through old ideas; what already exists may be set in common values and institutions and what people think is morally correct. Ideas are always put forward in contexts already occupied by other thoughts and

images. Finding a place for new ideas becomes an act of displacement (Strathern, 1992).

For this reason, the concepts we employ to think other ideas are of importance. In this sense Golombok and Jociles-Rubio utilize old ideas to think about new phenomena. They pose old questions that are more suited to former eras to understand a new phenomenon that requires new questions and conceptualizations informed by the narratives and experiences of the women themselves who experience assisted reproduction without a partner. Families in Europe and the United States are more diverse than ever. However, the biological nuclear family still holds a strong symbolic significance and ideological relevance. Indeed, it is constructed as the gold standard of the family and the "best" environment for maternal and parental practices, particularly in the eyes of the creators of public policies and politicians. It has been argued that those who grow up in this type of family structure attain better academic results, experience less psychological distress, and less conflictual relationships with their parents, and who probably provided greater emotional support, cognitive stimulation, and supervision (Dunn et al., 1998; Goldberg, 2015; Neale, 2003; Setién, 2017). These assumptions, when combined with the ideology of the middle class of intensive parenting in the heterosexual nuclear family of two parents seen as ideal, ensure that mothering (from women who choose to become mothers on their own and who also work outside the home) is perceived as inferior, as there is no dedicated caregiver (aka mother) to provide full-time care to the child.

As the rate of divorce began to increase in the West after 1945, and in the case of Spain from 1981 (due to the Franco dictatorship and the strong opposition of the Catholic Church, 45 years after the country's first divorce law, from 1932, was repealed), there have been many research studies on the impact of divorce on children. Two significant studies (Jenkins & Smith, 1993; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2002) found that divorce was often extremely difficult and disruptive to children and that the effects were long lasting. Their findings were influential on both public opinion and social policy in the United States, the United Kingdom, and beyond. However, O'Connor et al. (2001) argued that this was not the case for all children and that while studies suggest that on average children progress in particular types of families, there are many children who progress in families that do not "fit" the norm, making the generalizations debatable. In fact, Mooney et al. (2009) in their report on the "Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Well-Being. Evidence Review" conclude that "the majority of children will not be adversely affected in the long-term by family breakdown" (p. 3).

How can we approach the subject from another angle? I believe the time has come to change the focus of attention of comparing families whose children have been born through assisted reproduction or adoption with biological nuclear families escaping the assumption that there is a link between genetics and the well-being of children. We need to

interrogate the biological nuclear family as yardstick for other types of families, and we must reveal not only children's genetic origins but also all the information that may affect children's upbringing and psychological adjustment.

New phenomena need different questions. To break new ground in understanding families produced through assisted technology, it is crucial to ask new questions and interrogate the very assumptions that have fuelled research in the last two decades. DePaulo and Morris (2005) can help us to question one of the premises that Golombok and Jociles-Rubio use in their studies: the heterosexual biological family as the normative with which to compare other types of families. DePaulo (2014) explains that there exists in society a broad ideology that is neither contested nor recognized on marriage or couple cohabitation (and the biological nuclear family). Its premises are simply assumed, they are not questioned, perhaps because they offer a simple and satisfactory world view. DePaulo (2017) argues that when the number of adults not in a relationship was rising dramatically in the United States and Europe, academia was dominated by perspectives rooted in marriage or coupledness and in the nuclear family. It is undeniable that psychologists and other researchers who examine intrapersonal and interpersonal processes relevant to close relationships are inclined to studying dating relationships and marriages. This is a research bias that has neglected singles and other meaningful close relationships (Clark & Graham, 2005). Nevertheless, those who come to research from other perspectives see that there are other questions to pose and other modes of analyzing and understanding these issues. According to DePaulo (2014),

A Singles Studies perspective would bring to the field of interpersonal relationships a bigger, broader view of the people and relationships important to us in our lives. No longer would conjugal couples stand at the center of our relationship universes, with other adult relationship partners acting as the bit players orbiting around them. (p. 66)

Perspectives are needed that are anchored in the lives of "single" women, which represent people who have been marginalized for a long time or ignored in academic research. According to Reynolds (2003),

Academic research on singleness has largely assumed, if not quite pathology, at least that the psychology of the single woman will be shaped by "difference" and, possibly, personal "dysfunction." Women in long-term relationships do not tend to be asked "how did you end up married?" Single women, in contrast, are expected to explain her "condition," preferably a story of "circumstances" and "missed opportunities" or one that blames herself for being "unable to hold on to her man." (p. 492)

Without "single" women's perspectives, academic research becomes narrow and suppositions are made that have not been adequately tested and that have an influence

on the questions that are formulated, the data that are provided and how we interpret it. The diversity of experiences in the way that we live and think on the concept of family helps us to think about the world in modes that are not "too male, or too white or too married" (DePaulo, 2014) or too biological nuclear family. Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) and DePaulo and Morris (2005) argue that it is necessary to begin a conversation about single people and their place in society and in science. Both in society and in scientific texts, certain habitual ways of thinking have endured and remain implicit. In science, these habits have guided the type of questions that are posed, or the studies that are carried out, and how the results are interpreted. They have also shaped social interactions and public policies. The persistence of "singlism" (discrimination against single people, particularly against women) is manifested in the uncontested domination of the ideology of marriage or coupledness and the nuclear family (DePaulo, 2014).

While sensitivity about diversity is more acute and it has become a commonplace that identities are multiple, including ethnicity, racialization, sex, gender, religion, social class, sexual orientation, age, and diverse capacities, that sensitivity does not extend to shifts in thinking about marital status, and the nuclear family which persist as key today. More than 30 years ago, F. Williams (1995) explained that

By the 1980s changing patterns of women's paid employment, especially within welfare states, changing household patterns particularly in relation to marriage and parenthood (increases in divorce and lone parenthood), an ageing population, increased female poverty, and the articulation of women's demands through women's movements have all challenged the relationship of the family to the needs, demands, and support for social policies. (p. 143)

According to DePaulo (2014), singlism endures, because the ideology of marriage or partnership and the nuclear family goes on and the welfare state continues to be predicated on it. The persistence of the ideology of the nuclear family is central in the world view of Global North societies, the heterosexual nuclear family as a site where racialized, religious, and patriarchal Western notions of gendered hierarchies have been naturalized and institutionalized to maintain heteropatriarchal power. For those single women who have chosen to be mothers, this ideology sustains the myth that in the heterosexual couple and the nuclear family there is a level of happiness and completeness that a woman alone cannot reach or understand and therefore, cannot offer to her children. More than 20 years ago, Yanagisako and Delaney (1995) argued that

Gender definition and value have been inherent in the Western theory of procreation but procreation is not just about the natural; it includes an ontological dimension. Because gender is at the heart of these socio-religious systems it is not surprising that issues of gender and procreation—marriage, family, birth

control, abortion, sexuality, homosexuality, new reproductive technology—are at the centre of contemporary debates in our society, for new beliefs and practices challenge the entire cosmological order. (p. 9)

The ideologies of nuclear family personal responsibility are prepackaged understandings that normalize them and protect the institution from criticism. To forge productive understandings of new family forms, it is, therefore, important to disrupt the taken-for-granted normalization of biological nuclear families. One way in which this needs to be done is through interrogating the terms used to define women who mother outside nuclear families.

Problematizing the terms “single” and “solo” (mothers by choice). I consider that the use of the expressions (a) “single” by choice, (b) “solo mum,” or (c) “choice mum” is problematic because the term “single” is defined by its opposition to “married”: the defining element continues to be that of marriage or couple cohabitation. Orbach and Eichenbaum (2014) and Eichenbaum and Orbach (1987) argue that it has been an assumed norm that women need a partner relationship with a man. This explains why, socially and culturally, it is expected that women should establish heterosexual relationships instead of celebrating their identities as autonomous and independent. Orbach and Eichenbaum indicate that the women in their psychotherapy center admit that they stay in unsatisfactory relationships for fear of losing themselves. They suggest that women think that their identity is constructed in a partner relationship and for that reason, they seek a relationship not only to connect with someone but also to construct their own identity. The term “solo” (mums) is a Spanish usage that refers to being “alone; without family or friends.” This entails a falsehood in the case of the majority of women who decide to have children on their own, as in general they have family and friends that support them. The expression of “choice” (mums) alludes to the conscious choice to have children, but does not include the fact of choosing to be mothers without the involvement of a partner. Those women who are in a relationship can also choose whether or not to become mothers. Each of the three expressions discussed above present difficulties when it comes to defining this group of women who have decided to have children on their own. Creating categories through language means labeling experiences, yet the categories come into being with attendant social power relations that exist in the sociocultural context concerned. They are not neutral, but can serve to recreate relations of dominance and subordination that are reflected in dominant discourses (May, 2006), influencing the ways in which we perceive those groups and how they can feel about themselves (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). By defining women by their lack of a relationship with a man, the categories of “single” or “solo” reproduce the hegemonic viewpoint of mothers and families. These women’s transition to

motherhood on their own has, according to them, brought about an experience of empowerment and emancipation, enabling them to fulfill their wishes to be mothers and to provide their children with positive models of motherhood enacting their reproductive agency. Therefore, a different term is necessary, one that recognizes this group of women as autonomous and independent, living differently the normative forms of procreative life.

Theoretical and methodological underpinnings. One of the aims of this ethnographic study, from which this article draws, is to illuminate how becoming mothers-by-choice families may be empowering and a site of social change for women who resist replicating “conventional” forms of motherhood and raising children who may conform with gendered expectations. This study employs a standpoint approach which focuses on three principal issues: (a) knowledge is socially situated; (b) the research aims to study the in-depth insider conceptualization and understandings of the participants’ ideas on motherhood, mothering, and their children’s education; and (c) research which focuses on power relations should begin with the lives of the marginalized. Standpoint theory, therefore, makes a contribution to epistemology and to methodology, taking women’s lived experiences, particularly experiences of (caring) work, as the beginning of scientific enquiry (Harding, 2004) with the aim of increasing knowledge and understanding of the complex interaction between women-mothers, sociocultural contexts, the state, laws on assisted reproduction, and social policies.

Indeed, according to Purdon et al. (2001) qualitative approaches allow for an investigation of the range of factors which can affect overall outcomes and provide detailed exploration of the factors underpinning participants’ experiences of laws and policy programs. I am conducting this ethnography from my position as a woman who became a mother on my own by choice in 2011 using assisted reproduction in Spain, by far Europe’s most active country in this technology (European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology [ESHRE], 2017) and third in the world after the United States and Japan (Fuentes, 2018). This experience has enabled me to immerse myself bodily and experientially as a technique of observation and analysis (Wacquant, 2004).

However, this text is not an autoethnography and it is not autobiographical in its content orientation; although in a previous article the analysis was anchored in my own experience (Bravo-Moreno, 2017). I am conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Spain, in Madrid and Andalusia, and the United Kingdom, in London. So far, I have interviewed a total of 35 mothers by choice. From January 2017 to August 2018 I conducted in-depth interviews with 18 mothers by choice in Spain, between the ages of 39 and 54 years old, heterosexual, university educated, middle class, and Spanish. And since September 2018, I am interviewing women in London who have chosen to have a child on their own. Of the 17 women I

have interviewed so far, 16 are heterosexual and one bisexual, and they are university educated and between the ages of 38 and 64 years. Ten of them are white British, one is a white South African, and six are from European countries (Belgium, France, Sweden, Italy, Spain, and Poland) who migrated to London and became Londoners years ago. Their children are between the ages of 5 weeks and 25 years old, and were conceived through sperm donation, and in some cases also with egg donation.

These women were recruited through the snowball method which began among different groups of acquaintances, charities, websites, and associations of “single” mothers by choice. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms. In-depth interviews were conducted, mostly at the women’s homes but also in workplaces, cafeterias, and parks. They were organized around several topics: the decision to become a mother by choice, the women’s family of origin, support networks, mothering, work–life balance, public policies, feminism, and their children’s education. Participant observation and in-depth interviews were undertaken as well as writing a fieldwork diary. Ethnography is characterized by a high internal validity due to the production of data and the analysis techniques used: Living among the participants and collecting data over long periods of time offers opportunities for continuous data analysis. Second, to compare and refine the concepts and categories of analysis guarantees the correspondence between the analytical categories and the realities of the participants. Third, the in-depth interview with the participants is an important source of ethnographic data that is written more closely to the empirical categories of the participants.

Participant observation is another key source of ethnographic data that is performed in natural settings that reflect the reality of participants’ life experiences more accurately than artificial environments. Finally, the ethnographic analysis incorporates a process of reflexivity that exposes all phases of the research activity to the continuous questioning and re-evaluation of the researcher. Ethnography is based on the assumptions of understanding and interpretation of social events being processual, within the framework of naturalism and holism (Attia & Edge, 2017; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

Thus, the observations for this study took place in parks where mothers, for the most part, some of them from my sample, and their children, aged between 1 and 8 years, would gather, as well as my participation in parent meetings and children’s parties over a 7-year period (2012–2019). I also kept a research diary and field notes of my interviews and observations made in different contexts: parks, schools, and outdoor excursions. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim; data collection and analysis were interrelated processes. The data analysis is based on grounded theory which helps the researcher using the empirical data to generate concepts and theories, moving through a process of

discovery allowing the researcher to derive meaning from the data and analysis using creative, inductive processes (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Grounded theory also assists the ethnographer in maintaining control over the research process in focusing, structuring, and organizing it as this analytical method sustains a flexible approach to analyzing the empirical data and adds rigor to ethnographic research “by building systematic checks into both data collection and analysis” (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2007, p. 162), arriving at an understanding of a particular phenomenon from the perspectives of those experiencing it.

Themes that were identified through the coding of initial interviews were explored in follow-up interviews. I was vigilant about my own experience and perspective, engaging in a self-reflective process where I put aside my own assumptions and experiential knowledge and paying attention to the participants’ accounts with a broad mind.

Preliminary Findings

It is key at this point to empirically create new insights and knowledge setting up a dialogue between (a) the persistence of the comparative focus on the nuclear biological family, new forms of family, and the children’s well-being, in the publications of Golombok, Jociles, and their co-authors analyzed in previous sections, and (b) the analysis of the preliminary findings of my ethnographic fieldwork in Spain and in the United Kingdom as well as the examination of the children’s drawings on their family, which will be discussed in the next section. This dialogue is relevant as some of the preliminary findings contrast with the conclusions reached by the studies explored in previous sections.

Before choosing to become mothers, the 35 interviewees in this study have already made a decision as to the emotional, psychological, and social irrelevance of the genetic material. Genetics is important regarding the heredity of diseases, in the same way as it is for other families in society: none want their children to get inherited diseases that will condition their lives. However, genetics loses symbolic relevance in the face of their persistent desire to be a mother (regardless of their national, ethnic, religious origin, or social class). Depending on the case, for the women I interviewed, being a mother has involved sperm, egg, or embryo donation; in one case seven cycles of assisted reproduction and for some of them years of failed attempts, and in other cases they suffered numerous miscarriages. For this reason, genetics and disclosure are not at the top of their list of priorities as one might think reading some of the scientific literature or some of the media coverage on this subject. All the women interviewed for this study started explaining to their children how they were conceived since they were babies with story books that dealt with their specific form of family. In fact, some of the participants made their own story books with their own words and pictures of their children.

Participants in both countries demonstrate a broad knowledge of assisted reproductive technologies and different reproductive national laws. They know where to find (non) anonymous donors, have read the latest research on epigenetics, and have engaged in physical and virtual forums, networks, and associations specialized in becoming a “solo” mother. Jen and Toni are two examples that epitomize this. Jen, one of the participants, a Londoner who arrived from Poland in the 1990s flew to a clinic in Spain to become pregnant with her child from an anonymous double donation at the age of 45. She explains how she gathered information years before deciding to become pregnant:

I went several times to a big fertility show which runs in November every year in Olympia, attended lots of seminars where fertility experts and clinics shared the latest research, there were also women who shared their personal experience. I started researching about epigenetics which really inspired me.

Toni, a 42-year-old Spaniard living in Andalusia explained how she arrived at the decision of becoming pregnant with the help of an anonymous sperm donor in a clinic in Spain:

First I got all the information I could for a year, I read a lot, visited many specialised websites and clinics. I ended up writing 5 pages of questions to which I expected answers from each clinic I visited. At the end I chose the clinic not only for their success rates, treatment and price, but also for the human team behind it.

Their handling and knowledge of the reproductive technologies as well as their preparation for making the decision puts them in a privileged position in that they have consulted specialist literature and visited websites where genetics and epigenetics are explained, and where experiences of the different phases of the process of becoming a mother by choice are: thinking about the decision to become a mother, trying to get pregnant, failing in the attempts, going through the first phases of pregnancy, becoming a mother of a baby through donation; visiting various assisted reproduction clinics. These women have researched what the reproductive technology market has to offer on a national and international level.

Eleven of the 17 women interviewed in London had been treated in clinics or had obtained genetic material in Spain, Greece, Denmark, or the United States. When I attended a 1-day workshop in London run by a charity dealing with issues on assisted reproductive technologies and disclosure to their children, out of 13 cases 54% of that sample (7) were treated in Spain, 38% in the United Kingdom (5), and 7% (1) somewhere else in Europe; eight were white British heterosexual couples, one was a white American lesbian couple, and there were four mothers by choice (two from Britain and two from European countries).

Therefore, their knowledge places them in an advantageous position when it comes to thinking about genetics and whether it is relevant or not in their lives with their future

children. This does not mean dismissing the importance of the genetic conditions that may affect their children, or that social issues may arise for the children, but it has nothing to do with relating biology or genetics with kinship or the family, dismissing the assumption that family is only a family if there's a genetic link between the parents and the child. These women also decided that they had sufficient economic resources and the appropriate social networks for when the baby arrived. This means that they have already thought strategically about all these issues before their pregnancy and they accept the consequences of what it involves, including how best to deal in an age-appropriate way with all their children's queries, as well as thinking beforehand about the possible questions arising in their family, work, and social settings.

How do children think of “family”? The phrase “blood is thicker than water” in Europe and the United States suggests that biological relations are fundamental to how the idea of family is conceived. However, for most children in these places, genetics holds little significance, especially before the age of five, as the psychologist Jean Piaget (1929) discovered. He studied the ideas about family given by children of different ages and found that, before the age of five, children saw the family simply as the people who lived with them and did not talk of kinship. More recent anthropological and sociological research suggests that this is still the case: The idea of biological relatives only begins to be important for children over the age of eight (Christensen & James, 2017; Cooper et al., 2018; Zvara et al., 2014), although depending on the socio-cultural and religious environment the emphasis on biology can vary, as for example in the case of the Jewish community. Jewish children were found to be particularly aware of their biological relatedness, reflecting a specific world view of the religious relation with genetics, the basic belief of which is the transmission of Jewish identity through genetic heredity from the mother (Blake et al., 2013; Roe et al., 2006). In the case of two Jewish participants for the study that I am conducting, Sonia who is a 43-year-old woman, originally from Europe and resident in London, did not wish to reveal to her synagogue and the rabbi that her child was the result of egg donation, as well as sperm donation, because the egg donor was not Jewish. Sonia had migrated to London more than 20 years previously, while her family remained in her country of origin, and therefore she felt that she only needed to give explanations to those in her most immediate surroundings: to her acquaintances, her synagogue, and her rabbi; but she had decided to conceal the information that her baby did not possess her genes for fear that her child would be excluded from Jewish identity in her religious community.

The other participant, Claire, 63 years old, Jewish, who was born in a former British colony and who migrated to London 40 years ago, has a 23-year-old son who was conceived with the sperm from a Jewish donor. She claimed it was important to her that the donor was Jewish even though

the Code of Jewish Law states that a child of a Jewish mother is Jewish, regardless of the father's lineage (Posner, 2019). Therefore these mothers' views may influence the importance that their children attribute to genetics in relation to their Jew identity. Does the importance children give to genetics depend on the world view of the mothers/fathers and their family and friendship environments? In the case of the Jewish community, the fact that a child is the result of egg donation from a non-Jewish donor can mean exclusion from their religious community, but if genetics lacked importance, would it be relevant for the child? Carol Smart (2002, 2003) and her colleagues carried out three qualitative research projects in the United Kingdom that involved speaking with children about their families after divorce to analyze how their views developed and changed. The first study entailed in-depth interviews with 52 children, most of them aged between 7 and 14 years, from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The majority were living with one parent and seeing the other at weekends. In the second study, they interviewed 65 children who were being "coparented" (spending equally amounts of time with both parents, after divorce or separation). She argues that genetics do not matter to children, what matters to them is that in their homes the adults provide them with love and security, and that it is the quality of family relationships and the provision

of emotional and material security that has a much more significant meaning for children than the structure of the home, the gender, or the number of adults that it contains. Smart (2002) and her colleagues identified three aspects of family relations that the children valued and that take on different meanings depending on their age: (a) residence, who lives where and with whom, which is particularly important for children up until 7 or 8 years old; (b) the family roles, what the family members do for one another, a debate that is a concern for 8- to 12-year-olds; and (c) the quality of these relations: the love, care, and respect that the children perceive within the home, being important issues for children. Smart (2002) and Tipper (2011) who analyzed children's own perspectives on their connections with animals conclude that, in many senses, children are more flexible than adults about what constitutes the family and they include a large number of people in their description of their families, as living and dead relatives and members of other households, including pets.

This is epitomized by an example of the study I am conducting: the drawing made by Vera, the 6-year-old daughter of 51-year-old Paula, a Spaniard who conceived Vera with the help of anonymous egg and sperm donors in a clinic in Spain. At school they asked Vera to draw her family, and she did so, thus:



Starting from the left-hand side: (a) her godmother (her grandmother's friend) auntie Julia; (b) her godfather, whom she calls uncle Antonio (married to Julia, and a friend of her grandparents); (c) Juan, her cousin (12 years old at the time); (d) Pedro, her cousin, Juan's brother (14 years old at the time); (e) Vera, 6 years old; (f) Bimba, her cousins' dog; (g) her aunt (her mum's sister who is Pedro and Juan's mother); (h) her mother; (i) her grandmother (her mother's mother); (j) her grandfather (her mother's father) who died when Vera was 2 years old, Vera drew him in a coffin with a cross on top; and (k) her great-grandmother (her mother's grandmother) who died 27 years before Vera was born. She also drew her in a coffin with a cross on top. Hence for Vera, her cousins' dog and her great-grandmother who died many years before she was born, or her grandfather whom she

can't remember because he died when she was a toddler, are all part of her family: Human beings and a pet that, in Vera's imaginary of affective relationships, are meaningful. Kaplan and Main (1986) found that drawings by children with secure attachment were realistic; figures were complete, grounded, and individuated, not drawn exactly alike. There was also a natural proximity between family members and an impression of happiness in the family. Almost 30 years later, Zvara et al. (2014) state "that children's drawings are a window into the way they view their home life." In their study, in which 962 first-graders (6- and 7-year-olds) participated, the children were asked to draw their families, and those children from "high-functioning" homes represented the members of their families with appropriate differentiation, for example, with the parents drawn larger than the children.

Blake et al. (2013) and her team have also studied children born in a variety of family structures—including single mothers by choice and same-sex couples—and they concluded that children younger than 7 years old showed little comprehension about what egg or sperm donation means. By the age of 10, they can understand the nongenetic heredity of their mother(s) and/or father(s), and their reactions varied between indifference and curiosity. In another study, Golombok et al. (2016) compared 51 families of single mothers by choice with 52 biparental families, all with children between the ages of 4 and 9 years old, conceived by the donation of genetic material, and analyzed the psychological adjustment of the children of single mothers by choice, comparing this with families of divorced and separated families, with families in poverty, and with families whose parents suffer from depression. The only difference, they conclude, in parenting quality between these types of family is that there are fewer conflicts between mother and child in the single-mother-by-choice families. The perceived economic difficulties, the gender of the child, or parental stress was associated with the children's adjustment problems in both types of family. The results of this study suggest that single motherhood by choice, in itself, does not cause psychological problems for the children. Twenty-five years ago Golombok and Tasker (1994) had arrived at the same conclusion:

The finding that the quality of parenting in heterosexual families created as a result of assisted reproduction is particularly good and that the children are functioning well suggests that the use of donor insemination by lesbian or single heterosexual women would not, in itself, lead to difficulties for the children. (p. 1975)

Nonetheless, Golombok et al. (2016) do declare that “the single mothers showed lower levels of interaction and sensitivity responding to their infants than did the married mothers” (p. 410), without explaining how they reached this conclusion, and indicating that it was “possibly because the presence of a partner allowed the married mothers more time with their babies” (p. 410). However, the authors do not support this assertion with interview quotations or observations from fieldwork. On the other hand, they state that although the mothers of both family types showed positive relationships with their children, the single mothers showed greater joy and less anger toward their children, according to the Parent Development Interview, an interview technique designed to evaluate the nature of the emotional bond between mother and child (Slade, Belsky, Aber & Phelps, 1999, cited in Golombok et al., 2016). Despite the fact that applying a 1999 methodological tool in the current context may be inappropriate, Golombok et al. (2016) do not specify what is understood by “emotional bond” and how it is expressed. It certainly varies over the first 12 years of life. Cooper et al. (2018) argue that motherhood and fatherhood change over time and over the lives of individuals: “the same person who has two children will be a very different parent to the first child than to the second” (p. 8). Therefore, I

understand that the same mother may show different emotional bonds with her children, and that emotional bonds also may change over time.

Third, the emotional bond would vary depending on the sociocultural, historical, religious, and economic context. Weinraub, Horvath, and Gringlas suggest that single-parent families that arise from different circumstances differ in a number of important ways, and that these differences must be considered for understanding of the more general effects of rearing children in a single-parent family. “One of the most important characteristics of single-parent families and their children is their heterogeneity” (Weinraub et al., 2002, p. 110). However, Golombok et al. do not take these aspects and variations into account as limitations of the methodological tool that they use and therefore as limitations of their study.

Reflections: A new research agenda. The aim of this article was to compare and contrast the preliminary findings of the ethnographic study that it is being conducted in Spain and the United Kingdom and a meta-ethnography, in which studies on “single” mothers by choice from the most prolific scholars, according to Scopus (2018), were examined to produce new understandings and knowledge. First, the terms of “single” and “solo” mothers by choice found in the literature as categories for women who chose to become mothers on their own have been critiqued, as those adjectives reproduce the hegemonic viewpoint of defining women by their lack of a relationship with a man. This treatment denies women's autonomy and self-determination. Furthermore, the terms “single” and “solo” do not represent the experiences of the majority of women interviewed for whom family, friends, social networks, and community groups are important.

Second, the premises found in the literature on the conceptualization of the relationship between the social and the biological in societies of the Global North on new forms of family persistently persevere on the comparative focus between the biological nuclear family and new forms of family. My argument is that this is controversial because (a) we need to call into question the premise of the biological nuclear family as a yardstick for other types of families and (b) it essentializes diverse types of families, silencing differences within the categories. The question thus arises of why one type of family—donor-conceived families and adoptive families—is routinely compared with another type of family—the biological nuclear—without raising questions about the variety and complexity of each type of family in work by, for example, Golombok, Jociles-Rubio, their co-authors, and other scholars. Consequently, how can the family diversity within each of the categories the authors study affect children? I consider that those authors strip the families in their studies of complexity, reducing and simplifying their difference to one element: the lack of genetic relation between mothers, fathers, and children erroneously linking genetics with kinship or the family.

Third, Golombok and Jociles-Rubio repeatedly focus on the children's adjustment in donor-conceived families as if there was a relation between genetics and the well-being of the

children, instead of taking on board research studies examined in previous sections that conclude that what matters to children is not genetics, the structure of the home, or the gender of their parents, but that adults in their homes provide them with love and security. As discussed in the preliminary findings, for the women interviewed genetics were only relevant regarding the heredity of diseases, but lost symbolic importance when participants faced their deep desire to become mothers.

Moreover, their children's drawings show the irrelevance of genetics; their pictures include alive and deceased human beings and pets that form their imaginary of affective relationships. Geneticist biologist Prof. Kornblihtt (2018) claims that there is a tendency to exaggerate the role of genes and underestimate the role of the environment, culture, and society; he stresses that genetic identity is not the same as human identity. Furthermore, Lipton (2015), a cell biologist, underlines the importance of epigenetics, how the environment including nutrition, stress, and emotions can modify the donors' genes in the woman's womb without changing the basic blueprint. Likewise, James (2016), a clinical child psychologist, emphasizes that "the myth that we are carcasses for reproducing our genes should be replaced with the fact that traits are passed down through patterns of nurture" (p. 212). Therefore, situating the issue in the genes of the child displaces the focus away from the society that created that family, in particular, in societies of the Global North where the hetero-normative construction of "family" in biological nuclear terms is embedded in patriarchal, religious, and racialized power relations, and therefore must not be taken for granted as a concept.

Neither of the authors (Golombok and Jociles-Rubio) adopts an intersectional methodological perspective (Collins, 2000) that recognizes that all families, regardless of their genetic makeup, are formed through different positions and different structures of oppression—singlism, ageism, heterosexism, sexual orientation, social class, ability, racialization, ethnicity, religious beliefs—and that, consequently, the effects of these intersections may influence families and their children's experiences. The theories of intersectionality are useful in this case because they argue that social structures are complex and interact between one another (Browne & Misra, 2003; Crenshaw, 1991; May, 2006). There is no uniform structure in which the individuals of the same social class or the same ethnic background live. Rather, each individual inhabits a multitude of structures that intersect. For example, compare two cases taken from my fieldwork in London: Rose, white British, lives in London and used a non-anonymous sperm donor from a U.S. sperm bank. She earns £100,000 a year, pays £1,500 a month for her child's nursery school, and has a network of babysitters, family, and friends that supports her. Tania, on the other hand, is a European Jew who arrived in London in the 1990s; she used anonymous egg and sperm donors from a clinic in Spain and was concerned about her egg donor being non-Jew. She is a key worker with a salary of £28,000 a year and has to depend on the city council for housing; her family of origin is abroad; and her friendship network

is limited. The only category these participants share is that of women who decided to have donor-conceived children on their own. Some of the social structures they occupy could lead to discrimination or vulnerability, such as not being British in the United Kingdom (especially now with Brexit), being a key worker (low salary), and dependent on Council housing, or having meager support networks. Other structures can represent social privilege: being white British in the United Kingdom, belonging to the middle class, and enjoying several support networks. We also need to consider (a) the differences in laws on assisted reproduction that are constrained by elements such as accessibility and affordability, and moral approval or rejection of society, and (b) the (non) anonymity of gamete donors in different countries and how those factors may impact donor-conceived families. Therefore, these structures are intersected and cannot be reduced to each of the categories that form them. In other words, the analyses presented by Golombok and Jociles-Rubio reduce the categories of singlehood and, in this case, the biological nuclear family to one-dimensional categories.

Finally, there is a need to study families as intersections of diverse social structures, as loci of power relations, and as processes which take place inside individuals that belong to culturally embedded groups. The intersection of all those positions are important to analysis, as are different reproductive politics, affordable and good-quality child care services that contribute to child development, gender, and socio-economic equity.

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