

## Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 9(1), 2017, pp 193-198  
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta  
<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/cjfy>

Boyd, S., Kelly, F., Chunn, D.E., & Wiegers, W. (2015). Autonomous Motherhood? A Socio-Legal Study of Choice and Constraint. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Reviewed by : Emmanuelle Turcotte, M.A., M.Sc., Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)

“Autonomous Motherhood? A Socio-Legal Study of Choice and Constraint” (by Susan Boyd, Fiona Kelly, Dorothy Chunn and Wanda Wiegers) is a multimethod study that addresses a classic feminist topic: women’s autonomy towards their own bodies and reproductive choices. However, the Canadian and Australian socio-legal scholars innovatively tackle in this book the rarely studied issue of autonomous motherhood which refers to the capacity of women to birth or adopt and raise a child outside an intimate partner relationship. Through a refined investigation showing sociological, legal and historical depth, the authors offer many insightful answers to the problem of social reproduction which continues to be framed in terms of private and personal matters. In a spirit of concision, I will present and comment on only a few key analytical moments from the study, and show how successfully Boyd and colleagues demonstrate that the experience of single motherhood is still nowadays constrained by patriarchal and neoliberal power dynamics.

The concept of autonomy is multi-faceted, and throughout their study Boyd and colleagues constantly make use of the tensions opposing a more liberal individualistic definition and one based on feminist relational theory. The liberal individualistic perspective generally idealises such values as personal and financial independence, self-reliance, self-aggrandizement, and mutual indifference as a roadmap to personal success and happiness. Feminists, among others, have suggested an alternate version of autonomy which considers the many constructive

*relationships* required by everyone in order to develop personal autonomy. Relational autonomy constitutes a continuum where one is *more or less* autonomous according to opportunities and constraints that are offered in interpersonal relationships, institutions, politics, etc.

One main empirical path followed by the authors is a historical and legal perspective on single mothers' rights. Through an examination of judicial decisions through time, Chapter 2 serves to demonstrate the slow erosion of lone mothers' autonomy during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, from the late 1800s and up to the 1970s, women obtained de facto care of their children born out of wedlock unless they were legally declared "unfit" or if the child was considered at serious risk (which was relatively infrequent). These decisions were mostly motivated at the time by the rationale of the so-called "natural bond" that unites a mother and her child. Lone mothers then easily obtained legal and exclusive care of their children, but in a challenging and very often stigmatizing social and economic context.

Boyd and colleagues further illustrate single mothers' gradual loss of exclusive rights to their children in chapter 4 where they present a survey (n=154) of judicial decisions regarding custody and legal access disputes of non-cohabiting and never-married birth parents, in four Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Saskatchewan), between 1945 and 2009. In the 1980s and 1990s, legal decisions progressively favoured joint custody for non-married parents who had never cohabitated. Fathers became increasingly visible on the legal access and custody scene. The survey also presents cases of joint custody decisions between biological parents where fathers had not shown moral or financial support during and after pregnancy, or had displayed prior "questionable conduct." The authors explain this shift in part because of improved technical means to prove paternity, but mostly because of the global importance that was given to one's rights to know their biological identity, recognized in the

1989 UN *Convention of the Rights of the Child*. Boyd and colleagues sustain that Canadian judges, at least from the four aforementioned provinces tended to broadly interpret the children's right to know their biological father as also including a relationship with him and his relatives.

But what about the actual experience of raising a child alone for women? The authors present qualitative results from 29 interviewed mothers who decided to raise their child outside a parental relationship, after a planned or unplanned pregnancy, between 1965 and 2010 (chapter 5). This part of the study reveals a more complex and subtle avenue. For example, the experience of autonomous motherhood does not seem to be more or less difficult today, on social support and financial grounds, that it was decades ago. The mothers' discourse is clear though on how difficult it has become to conform to neoliberal norms where social reproduction is considered an individual and private matter. Lone mothers from the study generally feel a moral obligation to provide for their children's every need. However their experience also demonstrates that it is very difficult to raise children in complete self-sufficiency. Social and financial support is always needed. Boyd and colleagues' highlight in this chapter an important paradox: on one hand, the legal autonomy of lone mothers seemed to have eroded in the last decades, and on the other, their own experiential accounts show a definite increase in perceived individual responsibility for their choice of raising a child alone.

One last key moment of the book that I want to mention is the authors' innovative exploration of the actual *choice* of autonomous motherhood *from the start*. They interviewed 10 self-identified single mothers by choice (SMC) to apprehend possible social and legal constraints related to the "free choice" to mother alone in Canada. Interestingly, the SMC's accounts reveal that autonomous motherhood from the start is most probably accessible to women with greater financial and social means. As mentioned before, biological fathers' and children's rights have

taken a greater place in the last decades, judicial decisions demonstrating an increased interest in children having access to their biological identities. In order to guarantee a complete legal care of their children, many SMCs have thus opted for an anonymous donor often requiring extensive costs when dealing with private agencies. Boyd and colleagues point to an additional intersectional tension in women's autonomy: socio-economic and racial privileges seem to be crucial in getting the complete latitude to legally raise a child outside of an intimate relationship.

It is important to emphasize the authors' strategic and perceptive use of mixed methods in their study of autonomous motherhood. The book's chapters individually exploit different kinds of methods that convert into multiple types of data and analysis being cross-compared, triangulated or opposed. For example, the use of survey data in chapter 4 serves to demonstrate, in a mostly unilateral manner, the gradual loss of lone mothers' legal rights in four Canadian provinces across time. The exploitation of qualitative in depth interviews with single mothers (chap. 5), on the other hand, reveals a spectrum of easy/uneasy experiences regarding lone motherhood in general. The respondents' accounts show a whole range of possible factors (ex.: personal, social, financial, etc.) constricting or enhancing their autonomy as single mothers. The synergy between the two methodological perspectives sheds a more nuanced and complex light on the phenomena of raising a child alone for women. Mixing methods, in my opinion, not only enables an exploration of different dimensions of autonomous motherhood, but also engender a critical dialogue by confronting multiple points of view emerging from both private and public spheres.

In my view however, the study is missing one key aspect of single mothers' autonomy: what impact does the decision to mother alone have on close relationships? The greater part of the authors' conceptual treatment of autonomy is related to the freedom of choice and actions

towards single motherhood (ex.: complete capability to become a mother without a partner, having the complete legal care of their children, etc.). They mainly expose the social and legal constraints on this freedom to choose and act. But the actualization of autonomy has also the potential to increase the risk of disruption in interpersonal relationships (Friedman, 2003). One's range of autonomy necessarily impacts that of others around her. What lacks in the discussion is a critical consideration of single motherhood's choice on close family members and, especially, the children. Keeping their feminist epistemological stance, Boyd and colleagues could have explored, from the mothers' perspective, the possible negative repercussions of choosing to parent alone. For example, this decision could hypothetically force an increased and uneasy (emotional, financial) dependency on close family members. It could also mean conflictual relations with teenagers in their individuation and identification processes. I believe that the exploration of such potential relational difficulties would have added a very interesting dimension in theorizing autonomous motherhood.

Apart from this concern, Susan Boyd and colleagues offer us an innovative study of an over-neglected topic. The book will certainly appeal to feminists who specialize in reproductive justice and the experience of motherhood in general. Legal historians interested in family issues will find a methodic account of changes in Canadian family law regarding the rights of mothers, fathers and children. In this sense, legal experts will also appreciate the book's concluding chapter that offers reform possibilities to Canadian family law, especially in relation to a needed redefinition of the genetic father's status. But most significantly in my view, this study will certainly be engaging to family sociologists with its refined theoretical and empirical narrative related to the growing phenomena of single-motherhood (and single-parenthood in general), one of the many mutations of the western contemporary family.

## Book Reviews

### Reference

Friedman, M. (2003). *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.