Thematic analysis of the experience of being a single mother by choice

Análisis temático sobre las vivencias de ser madres solteras por elección

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ABSTRACT

This study explores single motherhood by choice analyzing the discourse of selected women who actively decide to become single mothers. Specifically, it focuses on knowing their experiences and investigating the challenges faced by these mothers. A qualitative method was used, in particular, a thematic content analysis. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the information. Through a detailed analysis of the interviews, two thematic blocks were obtained that help to understand the experiences of the mothers interviewed: "The decision to form a family" and "Challenges of being single mothers by choice: Normalization". It is found that the conventional family model is present in the construction of the social practices that shape the fact of being single mothers by choice. It is considered necessary for psychosocial intervention professionals to have a set of knowledge and tools that allow them to understand the aspects linked to social change that arise from the experience of new family forms. It is demanded that these professionals, mainly social workers, include family diversity as a central field of research and intervention in their disciplines.

Keywords: family diversity, qualitative method, single mothers by choice, Social Work, thematic analysis

RESUMEN

Este estudio indaga sobre la maternidad en solitario por elección a partir del discurso de determinadas mujeres que deciden ser madres solteras por decisión propia. Específicamente, se centra en conocer sus experiencias e investigar sobre los desafíos a los que se enfrentan estas madres. Se empleó un método cualitativo, concretamente, un análisis temático de contenido. Para la recogida de la información se realizaron 16 entrevistas semiestructuradas. A través de un análisis minucioso de las mismas se obtuvieron dos bloques temáticos que ayudan a conocer las vivencias de las madres entrevistadas: "La decisión de formar una familia" y "Desafíos de ser madres solteras por elección: La normalización". Se comprueba que el modelo de familia convencional está presente en la construcción de las prácticas sociales que conforman el hecho de ser madres solteras por elección. Se considera necesario que los profesionales de la intervención psicosocial dispongan de un conjunto de conocimientos y herramientas que les permitan comprender los aspectos ligados al cambio social que se desprenden de la experiencia de nuevas formas familiares. Se reivindica que estos profesionales, principalmente los trabajadores sociales, incluyan la diversidad familiar como un campo de investigación e intervención central en sus disciplinas.

Palabras clave: análisis temático, diversidad familiar, madres solteras por elección, método cualitativo, Trabajo Social

Social relationships within the family framework have been influenced by the processes of change and democratization experienced by modern societies since the end of the 19th century (Alberdi, 2006). In relation to the Social Sciences in general and in particular for Social Work, one of the most relevant manifestations of contemporary social change is the set of changes that these relationships and associated family dynamics have undergone. In fact, several authors have suggested that the current practice of fatherhood and motherhood is a consequence of the increasing democratization of family bonds (Flores, 2017; Moreno, 2013).

Technology has revolutionized reproduction, thus challenging the links between consanguinity and kinship (Bravo-Moreno, 2019a). Consequently, the prototypical family has changed profoundly. The concept of family is increasingly "flexible" because it depends on individual choice and personal projects that are not socially shaped (Hertz et al., 2016). It would be difficult to understand these changes without examining the influence on them of the feminist movement as a mechanism of critical self-awareness (Domínguez & Arroyo, 2001).

Feminism and the recognition of new family models

Feminism, as a social and protest movement, surged internationally in the '60s, but arrived to Spain during the political transition in the mid-'70s. Feminism has become a driving force, contributing significantly to the social and labour participation of women, a deeper understanding of gender inequality, and the transformation of family relationships (Benhabib & Cornell, 1990). The deconstruction of the hegemonic family model has been an essential aspect of both women's emancipation and the progressive introduction of equality and freedom into the family nucleus (Humm, 1995). In this sense, feminism has forced governments to design laws and public policies that cover new forms of marriage and kinship (Del Valle et al., 2002).

According to Alberdi (2006), feminism facilitated the coexistence and recognition of family alternatives, weakening the patriarchal gender-based relationships existing within the family. In fact, it is no longer exceptional to encounter nonmarital unions, childfree couples, intercultural families, homoparental families and single-parent families that have chosen to have children through alternative routes such as adoption or assisted reproduction. The decision to become a parent -which has been strongly accelerated by the options of assisted

reproduction technologies- has reactivated the classic dichotomy between monoparenting and parental conjugality (Bravo-Moreno, 2019b). This study addresses the latter type of family. Specifically, it investigates families comprising mothers who have chosen to be single mothers via assisted reproduction, otherwise known as voluntary single mothers.

Many of the aforementioned family modalities have been socially and legally censored or stigmatized due to their being considered flawed or inadequate relative to the "normal" traditional family model (Martínez & Fernández, 2017). Various political, academic, and professional agents have become committed to eradicating the belief that the conventional model is the only possible or acceptable kind of family. Thus, attempts have been made to abolish institutional practices that discriminate against certain familial realities by labelling them as deficient or pathological (Domínguez & Montalbán, 2017; Flores, 2017).

Single mothers by choice[1] as an alternative family reality in Spain

The emergence of different family structures can be observed in Spain as in other modern advanced societies. These structures mirror new social models of the family institution. Single mothers by choice began to play an important role in the deinstitutionalization of the hegemonic family model in the '70s, and established the basis for new family structures such as single parenthood. For decades, single mothers by choice needed the support and reinforcement offered by the feminist rhetoric of equal rights and opportunities because most of these women had been subject to social rejection and exclusion (Jociles & Villaamil, 2012). This type of family was commonly referred to by expressions such as "incomplete families", "defective families", and "dissociated families" (Avilés, 2015). The struggle of certain countercultural movements, such as feminism and the LGTB+ liberation movement, have begun to prepare societies to tolerate the plurality and diversity of personal and family lifestyles (Alberdi, 2006).

In a setting in which political, social, legislative, and technological factors converge, single parenthood is beginning to take shape as an alternative family reality. In Spain, there have been a wide range of legislative reforms in favour of laws that support a more democratic and egalitarian understanding of family relationships (Domínguez & Montalbán, 2017). One such example is

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[1] The terms "single mother by choice", "single motherhood by choice", "voluntary single mothers" and "voluntary single motherhood" are referred to women who have decided to become single mothers by choice. The term "single-parent

families", "single parenthood" and "singles mothers" include both single mothers by choice and other forms of single parenting. The exact meaning of these terms is extracted from the context.

Organic Law 21/1987 (November 17, 1987), which modified certain articles of the Civil Code and the Law of Civil Procedure in matters of adoption. Another example is Organic Law 35/1988 (November 24, 1988) on Assisted Reproduction Techniques, which allows women without a partner to become single mothers (Díez, 2015). These legislative changes and the feminist movement have contributed to this family model becoming a new social reality that is distant previous androcentric perspectives (González et al., 2008).

In Spain, the number of single-parent families has increased, especially due to divorce. At present, it is not possible to provide figures about single motherhood by choice through assisted reproduction or adoption, since hospitals and private clinics are not obliged to publish their statistics. It is likely that the number of families composed by single mothers by choice will increase given the demographic shift towards later first-time motherhood. Indeed, at present, a significant proportion of mothers seeking fertility treatment are single women (Bravo-Moreno, 2019a).

Empirical interest of the single parenthood study

Empirical interest in the study of single parenthood dates to the 1950s in North America. Initially, research addressed possible deficiencies in these families due to the lack of a male referent that provided the family with a sense of stability and authority rather than addressing the absence of biparentality *per se* (Barrón, 2002). Thus, within the field of Social Sciences, numerous quantitative studies compared the well-being of children raised in traditional families to those of families in which the father figure was absent. The literature on this topic was extensive and, in some cases, contradictory. Some of the studies suggested that children who grew up without a father had difficulties in certain aspects related to gender identity, sexual roles, behaviour, psychosocial well-being, and academic success. In general, these results referred to single mothers rather than single-parent families headed by a widow. In fact, a hierarchy was established in which involuntary single mothers (widowed and divorced) received the most support from different social sectors and were therefore those that received state support. In contrast, the moral and social panic caused by the issue of single mothers was so pronounced that for many years single-mother families were associated with reduced educational potential, psychopathological abnormalities, cognitive and social problems, a lack of control over negative emotions, and drug abuse (Vercellino, 2017).

In this context, many workers in the field of social intervention considered choosing to be a single mother as an immature act. In fact, in the early 1950s, psychosocial research portrayed these mothers as pathologically imbalanced women (Finch & Summerfield, 1999; Song, 1996). In general, the results of these studies showed that the children of single mothers experienced strong stigmatization. Similarly, at that time, social workers and researchers were convinced that children raised in a single-parent family would achieve lower levels of personal and professional success than those born in traditional two-parent families.

Starting in the '60s and early '70s, research in the United States and the UK began to obtain more favourable results on the suitability of these families. This shift occurred as a consequence of profound social, ideological, and demographic changes in these countries, which led to a considerable rise in the number of single-parent families (Treviño, 2006). These changes coincided with numerous criticisms of social policy at that time. A few years later, these changes were repeated in other geographical areas, including Spain.

Specifically, these studies addressed the absence of the father figure, available social and economic resources, and support networks from the perspective of social intervention. On the other hand, they concluded that these mothers had scarce economic, labour and educational resources. Because of that, these families were among the groups with higher risk of social exclusion (González et al., 2008; Laparra, 2014). Thus, single-parent families headed by women ceased to be conceived of as an exceptional phenomenon that caused social rejection. Instead, it came to be viewed as an unforeseen and relatively sudden event that could happen to anyone. The single-parent construct has been traditionally conceived of as a direct or indirect risk factor for children. In fact, such studies were framed within a deficit model (*i.e.*, one that addresses the deficiencies/inadequacies of these families).

Until relatively recently, most approaches have maintained this model or have been influenced by it. The first quantitative-comparative studies that attempted to offer an alternative vision of these families appeared toward the end of the 1980s. These studies showed that households made up of voluntary single mothers (*i.e.*, women who have opted for maternity by choice) are suitable for raising and educating children. Children growing up in these families tend to have high self-esteem and do not significantly differ from children raised in two-parent families in terms of school adjustment or academic skills. Neither do these children have issues regarding gender identity. Studies show that they clearly identify with their gender (Díez, 2015). Overall, these children do not appear to have significant problems and have the same expectations of health, adjustment, and

psychosocial development as children in a traditional family. Furthermore, no differences were found between two-parent and single-parent families in terms of the psychological well-being and socialization of the mothers and their children (Murray & Golombok,2005).

In general, research has shown that voluntary single mothers are women who have financial and professional stability and work in good jobs. Most of these women do not become mothers by pure choice, but because they do not have a romantic partner and feel that they are passing their fertile age. They usually become mothers between the ages of 30 and 40 years old (Graham, 2014).

Unlike single mothers or divorced single mothers with unplanned pregnancies, single mothers by choice make a conscious decision to raise their children alone. In this sense, these children are not exposed to parental conflicts and are less likely to experience financial difficulties or psychological problems that often occur as a result of marital breakdown or unplanned parenthood (Bravo-Moreno, 2019b; Jadva et al., 2009).

Although these studies have provided valuable information on the sociodemographic characteristics of these women, their children, and living conditions, much remains to be investigated. Despite them having obtained favourable results concerning the psychosocial well-being of these families, they still incorporate patriarchal biases that delegitimize this form of upbringing relative to the two-parent family (Di Nella et al., 2014). Some examples are the repeated argument that these mothers would have preferred to have children in a traditional family environment, the need to justify the absence of a father figure, and the endless comparisons with hegemonic families (Fransquet, 2018).

Based on the foregoing, we developed a qualitative approach to address the issue of how these women decide to be single mothers by choice. Specifically, we wanted to know their experiences and, thus, attempted to investigate the challenges they faced in becoming single mothers. Our aim is to contribute to a better understanding of the process of considering, becoming, and being a single mother by choice.

Method

A qualitative approach was used because it is the most appropriate for the kind of data collected. A descriptive method was employed to analyse the narratives of the voluntary single mothers. Thematic analysis was chosen as the phenomenological method. This kind of design is based on the theoretical sampling concept developed within the Grounded Theory framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The description of the phenomenon allows us to understand participants' experiences (Espinosa-Ibacache & Íñiguez-Rueda, 2020). The social reality of voluntary single motherhood is a product of the way participants explain, describe, and experience this phenomenon within their social and cultural settings. We suggest that it is relevant to not only consider the subjective information provided by these mothers, but also to take into account their social reality and the contexts in which they participate.

Data collection

We used a semi-structured technique. The interviews attempted to identify and describe the central themes that make up the lives of these families. The interview script was structured in two sections. The first section addressed sociodemographic information on the mother's age, number of children, current relationship status, and work situation. The second section addressed the initial research question and the overall aims of the study, thus obtaining a brief description of the decision-making process involved in starting a family. The main lines of inquiry addressed the challenges women faced in becoming single mothers, the resources they drew on to deal with them, and the social and emotional costs of raising this kind of family. A space was reserved for specific comments, suggestions, or messages that the participants would like to send, such as tips for other voluntary single mothers. This section was relevant because it highlighted certain aspects of community development among these families, which is a topic for further research.

To facilitate participation, the interviews were conducted in familiar places where the interviewees would feel comfortable and respected. Thus, most of the interviews were conducted in the interviewees' homes, whereas others were conducted in previously agreed locations such as parks and cafés. The interviews were conducted during September and October 2019 and their duration ranged from 58 to 92 minutes.

Ethical considerations

The objectives of the study were explained to each one of the participants who gave their consent to be interviewed. Similarly, they were informed about their right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time from the process. The interviews were recorded for their subsequent transcription and analysis, guaranteeing the privacy of the personal data and the anonymity of the testimonies of the participants. It was also clarified that the information obtained through the interviews would be treated as confidential and anonymous, respecting the ethics and professional conduct precepts of the Social

Work discipline in Spain. Especially those included in the Deontological Code of Social Work and in the White Paper of the degree of Social Work (Giménez, 2014).

Participants

The sample comprised 16 women from Málaga city (Spain). They had decided to become voluntary single mothers using assisted reproduction techniques. In 2020 these women were single mothers by choice in a democratic Spain, by far Europe's most active country in assisted reproduction, according to the European Society of Human Reproduction & Embryology (ESHRE, 2017). There were plans to interview at least 15 more women, but the saturation point was reached at the ninth interview. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the saturation criterion is used to stop collecting data on the various groups that belong to the same category because there are no additional data that can be used to describe it.

The women were recruited through snowball sampling because it is difficult to get in touch with families that fit this parental model. The search for single-parent families was conducted using informal approaches such as contacting the Association of Voluntary Single Mothers (AMSPE), the REDMADRE Foundation, and an assisted reproduction clinic. We also used the participants themselves to put us in contact with other such families.

The choice of participants was made using a personal strategic criterion (Ruiz, 2012), which is type of purposive sampling method. Thus, we ensured that the sample comprised key informants who were involved in the study and also immersed in the social discourse on the family dynamics that constitute this type of family. The aim was to recruit participating families comprising voluntary single mothers with children who had been single mothers for at least two years.

The sample selection criteria included homogeneous and heterogeneous characteristics. We chose these criteria because the situation of each family varied according to their circumstances (civil status before access to maternity) and to the sociodemographic characteristics of the mothers (age and socioeconomic and educational level). Regarding age, the only requirement was that the participants were over 25 years. No applicant was excluded on grounds of nationality, academic background, work status, current, or the number or gender of her children.

The characteristics of the 16 participants were as follows:
- They were between 41 and 59 years old, were Spanish nationals, and lived in the city of Málaga.

- The children were between 3 and 13 years old. Six of the participants had two children and the rest had one child.
- All of the participants became mothers using assisted reproduction techniques (artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization (IVF).
- All of them had completed higher education and were currently working. Fifteen of the participants worked in the public sector (*i.e.* teachers, counsellors, doctors, university professors, and civil servants) and one of them worked as cabin crew. Eight of the participants worked part time.
- Regarding marital status, 14 of the participants were single, 1 was divorced, and 1 was widowed. Both the divorcee and the widow chose motherhood after their divorce or widowhood.

Data Analysis Procedure

We conducted an inductive textual thematic analysis to identify common patterns in the interviews. This analysis describes and reveals the meaning of the data obtained from the interviews used in the study according to the initially defined research objectives. The analysis allowed us to identify, organize, analyse, and specify different themes relating to voluntary single motherhood, which was achieved through a meticulous reading of the information collected and transcribed. The construction of the emerging discursive categories led to a better understanding of the phenomenon and allowed us to identify the themes related to voluntary single motherhood. Themes are common patterns that derive from the literal transcription of interviews in relation to the objectives of the study that were used to describe and explain the research topic (Domínguez & Montalbán, 2017).

The analysis consisted of six stages:
1. Data collection and preparation of the material for analysis.
2. Literal transcription of the interviews. A comprehensive reading of the transcripts was conducted to ensure that they included all the information obtained during the interviews.
3. Familiarization with the material through repeated readings, confrontation of messages, and follow-up of the main lines of argument (citations). This process was conducted independently by each researcher. At this stage, a careful blind reading of the interviews by two researchers with experience in qualitative analysis identified the lines of argument that were part of the general themes. In order to define these lines, the main topics of the interview script were taken into consideration, since they were elaborated from the theory used to define the object of study and to formulate its objectives.

4. Organization of the information into same-meaning categories in order to code the data. This was accomplished by establishing relationships between the lines of argument and the same-meaning categories most frequently used by the participants to represent their reality as voluntary single mothers. We ensured that the categories were coded by the two researchers and that the thematic dimensions of the interviews were taken into account.

5. Searching for themes by detecting patterns in the coded categories. The coded categories were examined to identify common patterns that could serve to build the themes. Different techniques were used in the review process, such as identifying and classifying themes, searching for words in context, searching for coherence, and identifying issues in the analysis process that could be relevant to future research. At this stage we used the Atlas.ti version 7.0 software package. The process was divided into two distinct non-sequential phases: the textual level and the conceptual level. In the first phase (textual level), the software was used to facilitate the identification of lines of argument (citations) during code construction. In the second phase (conceptual analysis), the software was used to establish relationships between codes to identify themes (Domínguez & Montalbán, 2017). In effect, we used the software to check and confirm the relationships previously proposed by the researchers.

6. A consensual report was prepared by the researchers that explained the common themes that help describe the dynamics and daily life of these families.

Results

Two themes were identified to describe how these women decided to be single mothers and the challenges they had to face. The patterns detected during the analysis of the material were coded into several categories such as the desire to be a mother, the difficulties of motherhood, the supportive social networks that helped them, and the absence of a father figure. We organized these categories into two main themes: The decision to start a family, and Challenges of being a single mother by choice: normalization. Table 1 shows the common themes and the coded categories generated after analysing the interviews.

In the following subsections, we illustrate each theme with real-life examples, describe some of the links between the categories, and indicate the relevance single mothers place on them in their discourse.

Table 1
Themes

The decision to start a family	Challenges of being a single mother by choice: normalization
The desire to be a mother: breaking the "motherhood-couple" link	Absence of a father figure
Economic security	Normalization: "We are normal families, like any other"
Late motherhood	Lack of support networks in the extended family: civic associations
Empowerment	

The decision to start a family

This theme constitutes the main foundation of the interviews. It comprises a set of discursive strategies (codes) indicating that an array of elements influences the decision to start a family. Some of these elements stand out: the desire to be a mother, breaking the link between motherhood and having a partner, economic security, late motherhood, and female empowerment.

The participants generally supported the idea of creating a life project with a partner, but only if it was founded on the happiness of both members of the couple. Therefore, not being happy in the relationship would be enough to explain and legitimize breaking the partner-motherhood link.

> *'I think life with a partner is overrated and it shouldn't be because, if you're not happy with your partner, why would you want that life? After 10 years with my boyfriend, I decided to give up everything and start a new life alone with the desire to be a mum, and I did it. Now I'm finally happy'* (42 years, teacher)

The desire to have a partner was thus separated from the project of motherhood, and some of the women interviewed even stated that "It's time to reverse the typical order of our life projects" and be a mother without a partner.

In most cases, these women had not fulfilled the project of creating a family with a partner. This led them to form their own mother-child families. However, they explained that they did not rule out the possibility of incorporating conjugal love into their lives later on.

> *'I don't rule out having a partner again. A few months*

ago I met this man, I dated him for 3 months, and he's great. He offered to be my daughter's father and to have a second child with me and so on... What I mean by this is that I don't rule out having a partner, although now that I have my girl, I am more selective' (45, civil servant)

Such "decoupling" is connected to a set of social factors and processes. This reality would not have been possible without women's participation in the labour market, which was facilitated by increased educational standards. All participants mentioned economic security and the ability to organize their lives as indispensable factors that allowed them to be single mothers. They explained that the decision to become a mother was made possible by achieving their professional and financial goals. They also described the pressure of the "biological clock". Both circumstances were, to a large extent, the triggers that led them to venture into single motherhood as a new life project.

'I was worried because I thought I was too old to get pregnant. Now I see my children, I'm happy, I have my flat, a good job, I think I'm going to get a promotion, I'm financially independent. It's not like I have lots of money to spare, but it's fine for my children and me... Everything's been worth it' (53, civil servant).

The interviewees repeatedly explained the need to start a family based on their desire to be a mother.

'My girl is the most longed-for girl in the world, I spent 10 years trying to get her, longing for her, and imagining her, one failed IVF after another, and an adoption process that was going nowhere, and the time has finally come and I've got her with me, and for me the reality is even better than the dream. My reality is even more beautiful, after all I dreamt about her and wished for her, and then she arrived and it got even better' (45, university teacher).

Some women link this desire with the idea of achieving total fulfilment in their lives:

'As I'd already achieved everything at work, I have a high-ranking job, my salary is very good, I've already enjoyed life a lot. So to find complete happiness, I wanted to be a mother and combine my achievements with raising my daughter' (44, counsellor)

The discourses of the participants indicated that, as postulated by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2003), the individualization promoted in current societies has favoured the departure from heteronormative gender roles. In turn, this has led to a decline in the traditional family model. In this setting, the phenomenon of female empowerment can also be seen as a way to fight for the equal opportunity to take action and make choices. This

has allowed women greater individual freedom to start a family alone. These mothers incorporated motherhood as a new core dimension of empowerment, but it also forced them to reorganize their lives and their priorities in relation to the hegemonic society.

'I think that all women who decide on this form of family share an enormous feeling of responsibility. Motherhood has made me more responsible, and I have learned to prioritize and organize many aspects of my life. It is clear that it's my life, my children's lives, my project, and I do what I can and always think about what is best for my kids. In other words, just like any other family' (51, medical doctor)

As Moncó et al. (2011) noted, the option of being a mother by choice, together with the professional and work aspects, is a further experience of self-realization that confirms their image of being self-sufficient and independent women.

'I've been through very hard times, but now it's my time, our time, I feel super happy with my daughter. I feel fulfilled as a mum. I have a daughter that I want, I love her, she's the best thing in my life. She's what makes me happy' (44, counsellor)

Although they have the opportunity to build their own story, the next theme suggests that they are still influenced by other factors, such as role models in family dynamics, which mainly manifested in relation to the absence of a father figure, the constant reiteration of being families like any other family, and the lack of an extended family network due to late motherhood.

Challenges of being a single mother by choice: Normalization

The second theme comprises common and homogenizing topics that centred around the need to find a balance between maintaining equality and protecting their families through normalization. Analysis of the discourses suggested that there was continuous negotiation between single motherhood and hegemonic (heteronormative) family options. These negotiations alluded to some common aspects such as the absence a father figure, normalization (assimilation), and the lack of a family support network due to late motherhood.

'The thing that worries me the most, and always will, is that she may ask me why she doesn't have a dad. I want everything to go well and that she'll find it totally normal, my daughter is still very young and I still hope that everything works out fine and that she'll still find it natural because I want her to see that her family is just like any other... Well, her mother is a little older than her friend's, because the mother of her friend..., but what can you do?' (41, cabin crew)

One of the main topics in the discourses was the absence of a father figure. The mothers explained their decision to start a family project without a father for their children by repeating that they had not found a partner who would make them happy. They also justified their decision by highlighting their good professional and financial situation.

'I was married for five years and we went through three embryo transfers. I was very happy in the first two years of marriage, but then I was unhappy for the rest of the marriage. I didn't know how to end the relationship because I thought he could be a good father ... but it finally ended. My situation was and is good, I have a good stable job, so I decided to go on this adventure alone' (43, university teacher)

They also described their family model as just one more among the diverse models of contemporary families. In fact, they considered family diversity to be a logical and unstoppable development in current social trends.

'Yes, in my son's classroom there are two children from China, two from South America, and there are more single-parent families and a couple of homosexual fathers. And divorced families as well. I mean, our society is changing, this is the diversity that enriches where we live' (48, civil servant)

In this way, they highlighted the idea that the traditional family model has been replaced by new family configurations, which reflect societal complexity. The mothers also argued that a father figure in their families was not really absent, because it had been replaced by other male referents from their support networks: "Our children have no father, but they have uncles, grandparents, cousins, and so on".

In most of their comments, they did not allow themselves to step outside the heteronormative framework. In fact, there was a continuous attempt in their discourses to justify their family model and normalize their situation. These types of subversive arguments could prompt society to question their right to form a family in the absence of a father figure.

'My single motherhood is voluntary, I felt alone when I was married, it was a heartbreaking loneliness and it hurt a lot. And my voluntary solitude makes me feel strong, a fighter, powerful, we are responsible mothers who have a great desire to provide love' (43, university teacher)

'Because I'd say that the most important thing is how you raise your child, with discipline, with a certain outlook, respect and love, that gives them values. They may lack a few things, but they'll never lack affection, fondness and love, just the opposite, they know that we

love them very much and that they are very wanted children' (46, school teacher)

Although all the mothers argued that their families "are not like the rest", they insisted on proving that the lack of a father did not affect their children. Thus, they considered that their children were just as happy as any other children. The messages in their discourses helped them normalize and legitimize their family situation. The mothers also mentioned the happiness of their children as a way to reaffirm and convince themselves that their decision was right and that, therefore, the lack of a father figure did not prevent their children from being raised with love, affection, and happiness:

I just see them so happy, they live in their own world, it's different to having it and losing it than to never having had it at all. Also, with my love and affection and that of my whole family, it's enough' (59, university teacher)

The interviewees emphasised that fatherhood and motherhood are organized on the basis of gender difference and roles pre-established by society. They stated that the importance of their family was based on offering security and love without having to resort to the difference and permanence of both roles.

'Children do not need to have a father and mother to be happy. We are very responsible mums and our motherhood hasn't been easy but it's what we wanted. We give our children everything we can, up to a point, of course... I mean giving them self-confidence for the future, and above all we are full of love and affection' (59, university teacher)

However, the mothers coincided on being concerned about how to explain to their children that their family was different, and the reason why they did not have a father. In most cases they tried to resolve this issue with the support of other families that shared similar characteristics. They considered that if their children grew up in an environment where their type of family was common, this would help them to normalize their families.

'She is growing up in a good environment, during the week she socializes with traditional family models, where everyone has a mum and a dad, because there aren't any other types of family in her nursery school. But every weekend she interacts with families like hers, some bigger some smaller, and her best weekend friends have families like hers and they're all families without dads, so it's normal for her not to have a dad' (52, university teacher)

This theme also included the difficulties these mothers faced in finding help from their closest relatives, due to

the fact that voluntary single motherhood often comes at a later stage in life.

> *'I've got to say that I have no family support, rather the opposite, as I've got a family burden in the sense that my mother and father are elderly, so I have to look after them quite a lot. It's different when you have children at a younger age, not at 42 like I did, as my child's grandparents are also older'* (43, civil servant)

In many cases, rather than relying on their closest relatives (fathers and mothers), they relied on their friends and a group of professionals to whom they delegated some of their care activities.

> *'More than on my parents, I've had to rely on my friends, nursery school, I've even had to find babysitters. I've had to rely on babysitters to go to the doctor, or to work and many other things'* (47, university teacher)

Discussion and conclusion

We observed that in their discourse the mothers favoured the use of arguments that normalized and assimilated them into the experience of two-parent families.

Generally, participants assessed their motherhood as a process they approached with responsibility and full awareness of the family project they had decided to undertake. These women defined being a mother as a source of satisfaction that filled them with happiness. They also considered this process as an essential part of their lives and, therefore, of their self-realization. However, we observed that the exploration of an alternative model of motherhood led them to develop legitimation strategies for their type of family. Thus, they reiterated their autonomy, independence, economic and professional security, as well as how they had longed for their children. These aspects led them towards a self-image of being an ideal mother but, at the same time, an "atypical" one in their society (Rivas et al., 2011). In this regard, it is worth emphasizing the influence of feminism in female empowerment, as well as the inclusion of women in the labour market, which in turn provides women with security and stability to access motherhood voluntarily.

The recurring narrative in the participants' discourse that they are independent and self-sufficient mothers with the professional and financial stability to be ideal mothers is a justification strategy rooted in the prevailing concept of the conventional family. In this regard, their image of being empowered and atypical women is closely linked to a continuous self-worth and self-defense strategy toward their family project based on the idea that it could be socially perceived as being subordinate to the prevailing family model. For this reason, they tried to show society an image of themselves as ideal candidates to exercise responsible motherhood by alluding to how much they wanted and loved their children and how happy they were. Furthermore, this approach helped them to convince and reassure themselves that their decision was the right one. The fact that this type of family is generally associated with both late motherhood and disappointment with previous romantic relationships could foster the need for reaffirmation based on a view of current society as being patriarchal and heteronormative.

In line with Rivas and Jociles (2013), we showed that the participants shared the belief that a male and a female figure are essential for the correct development of children. In such cases, the male figure does not have to be the father, but can be anyone who is established as a reference, such as "grandfather" or "uncle". They also fulfil the functions of the father figure through support networks or through "friends" (Vanegas et al., 2014). In all cases, the participants addressed the absence of a father figure. Although the lack of a father figure was a common and shared topic in their discourses, it was usually masked by a set of normalizing strategies. In most cases, the participants attempted to solve this issue through support from other families that shared similar characteristics. Thus, the participants considered that their situation could be normalised by their children growing up in an environment where their type of family was common. However, they expressed some worry regarding explaining to their children the reasons for being a "different" family and for not having a father.

Finally, this study demonstrates that the conventional family model underlies the construction of the social practices that shape voluntary single motherhood. This underlying model can even permeate or pervade professional activity. Thus, we suggest that present and future psychosocial intervention professionals (i.e. social workers) should have the knowledge and tools that will allow them to understand the aspects related to social change that emerge from the experience of new types of family. Social intervention has always been orientated toward the traditional family model. However, interventions can no longer be exclusively centred on the heteronormative ideal of a two-parent family. Individuals working and studying in the setting of social work and its related disciplines should be provided with strategies that facilitate the development of intervention programs addressing new types of family and that deemphasise heteronormativity. Social workers, psychologists, and social educators in schools should be encouraged to "naturalize" this type of family on behalf of the children and prevent potential discrimination.

We suggest that social intervention professionals and, in particular, social workers should include within their discipline family diversity as a both a research field and a central focus of intervention. Thus, it would be a priority to include social workers as key players in the development of policies for the social protection of new types of family. These professionals could develop new operational criteria that would act as guidelines for intervention and allow family diversity to become a legitimate field of research and intervention within the profession.

This study encourages further research on diversity in family configurations that adopts a perspective other than that of normalization. Such research would result in a better understanding of the topic, which would have a positive impact on social and community intervention.

Further research is also needed on the community development of these types of families and of new family arrangements, such as reconstituted families. Research on family diversity has generally used quantitative methods, but we recommend the use of qualitative methods or a combination of both approaches. Understanding the experiences of these mothers is relevant to constructing a theoretical foundation by which to improve professional practice in the field of family intervention. It will also strengthen our knowledge of family diversity and therefore allow us to expand the range of intervention choices. Based on the results, we suggest that policies, raising awareness, and intervention plans and strategies should be jointly developed by public administrations, social organizations, professional groups involved in social intervention, and the communities themselves.

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