

SINGLE PARENT ONLINE FORUMS AS LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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In this chapter we draw on findings from two research projects (one completed and one ongoing) focused on “single motherhood/parenthood by choice” in three Spanish regions (Madrid, Catalonia and Valencia). So far, we have interviewed numerous single mothers and some fathers (over 100 in the three regions over a three year period) who have started family projects through adoption, fostering, assisted reproductive technologies or planned sexual intercourse; professionals involved in these processes (34 interviews in the three regions); and children from these families (13 children). Over the last three years we have also conducted continued participant observation in formative spaces related to the adoption process, events organized by single parent associations and adoption agencies and single parent virtual networks.

A first analysis of our findings shows that there are significant differences between mothers who engage in family projects through assisted reproductive technologies and mothers who begin their family project through international adoption. The first group of mothers seems to have created a stronger group-identity and construe their parental projects in more agentic terms – appear more empowered in the process – than mothers who are involved in the international adoption route (Jociles & Rivas, 2009). These contrasts are visible across different forms of data such as semi-structured interviews, observations in social and associative gatherings, media and organizational documents in which single mothers participate. It is also visible in the activity and of the main virtual forums or online support groups (Stommel & Koole, 2010) these mothers participate in: “Single mothers by choice” (*Madres solteras por elección [MSPE]*) in Madrid, “Motherhood, an individual decision” (*Mares, una decisió en solitari*) in Catalonia and “Adopting as a single parent” (*Adoptarsíendosoltero*) in Madrid.

These two paths in the social construction of motherhood are the result of a complex web of institutional, political and biographical elements that configure single mother’s experiences – which have been examined elsewhere (Jociles & Rivas, 2009, 2010). An illustration of these differences is available in single mothers’ virtual activity, as the following extracts show.

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EXTRACT 1

MSPE Forum, 9 June 2007 (in Jociles & Rivas, 2009, pp. 145-146)

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
Dar a conocer un nuevo tipo de familia en la sociedad, y sensibilizar a ésta para que sea aceptada como una opción responsable de la mujer.	Inform society about a new kind of family and work to see that it becomes accepted as a responsible option for women.
Ser un grupo de apoyo con un denominador común que sirva de intercambio de experiencias e información para aquellas mujeres que quieran llegar a la maternidad en solitario.	Become a support group with common objectives to share experiences and information among those women who reach motherhood on their own.
Conseguir que se atiendan, por parte de organismos públicos y/o privados, las necesidades específicas de nuestro tipo de familia: sociales, educativas, sanitarias...	Ensure that the specific needs of our type of families are met by public and/or private agencies: social, educational, health related...

EXTRACT 2

**"Adopting as a single parent forum", message 30892, November 2008
(in Jociles & Rivas, 2009, pp. 147-148)**

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
Yo tampoco estoy de acuerdo en pedirle aclaraciones a China; no creo que se consiga nada y, además, como hemos dicho mil veces, son sus niños y ponen sus normas. Creo que podemos exigir aquí a nuestra Administración que se unifique el tema de adopción entre las distintas Comunidades Autónomas, pero exigirles a ellos... nada. ¿Os imagináis si cuando pusieron el cupo o cuando nos han excluido en China, hubiéramos decidido escribir para exigir que eso cambiara?, ¿le hubiera parecido lógico a alguien?	I also don't think we should request clarification from China; I don't think we will achieve much and, even more, as we have said a thousand times, they are their children and they set the rules. I think we can demand that our administration unifies issues in relation to adoption among the various autonomous communities [Spanish regions], but we cannot make demands... no way. Can you imagine that when they set the quota or when we were excluded in China, we decided to write to demand that this change? Would anyone have found this logical?

Extract 1 shows the presentation that a newly formed association of single mothers by choice posted on its web forum. This association is open to all mothers who start family projects on their own – regardless of the “procedure” that they adopt – but, in practice, a great majority of its members have done so through assisted reproductive technologies and, therefore, the association tends to represent and defend the concerns of this particular group of mothers. As the extract shows, the explicit aims of the association are political, social and personal and underscore women's agency in defining their family projects in different social fields. By contrast, extract 2 shows single mother's disempowerment in relation to the different institutions and administrative tiers that configure international adoptions. Further, although it is only tacitly visible in this conversation, involvement in an adoption process often means that single mothers align themselves with the broader concerns and mobilization of adoptive parents “in general” (be it heterosexual couples, homosexual couples or single men/women) or of those families who share the same country in the adoption process.

In this chapter we continue this analysis and explore in more detail the role that virtual relations and activity play in the configuration of these differences and in the construction

of single mothers' identities and family projects. To do this, we examine two interrelated themes that emerge in our findings: (a) how participants construe and talk about virtual forums – during semi-structured interviews, informal conversations or through online self-reflexive activity; (b) how participation and interaction unfold in each of the virtual forums we have examined. We understand these online forums (as well as other relational spaces created by/for single mothers/parents) as educational spaces, as communities of practice (Stommel & Koole, 2010) where mothers develop their subjectivities primarily through peer interactions with other mothers/parents who are at different stages of their parental and family projects (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lemke, 2000). In the conclusion, we will return to this broader question in light of the data we examine.

Forums and virtual activity in single mothers' parenthood projects

Different strands of data in our project suggest that single mothers under study construe parenthood as a process, as a trajectory where different "hurdles" have to be confronted in a stage-like course. To a large degree, these stages are particular to each of the paths that are followed into motherhood, even though there are some convergent issues in each journey. Without claiming that the proposed outline is comprehensive and completely detailed, the following list of landmarks seems to be part of trajectories for women who choose adoption: (1) making the decision to become a single parent, (2) sorting the administrative processes involved in becoming an adoptive parent in Spain, (3) bureaucratic difficulties related to adoption in the country of origin, (4) trips leading to a return with the adopted child, (5) "post-adoption" issues, (6) issues related to child-rearing. For women who choose artificial reproductive technologies, the landmarks are: (1) making the decision to become a single parent, (2) choosing among different technological procedures, clinics and professionals involved in the process, (3) confronting the multiple biomedical difficulties involved in artificial reproduction, (4) pregnancy, (5) birth and early development/motherhood, (6) issues related to child-rearing, and, more recently, (7) everything related to having/considering having a second child.

Even a short glance at these lists suggests that motherhood is a complex and often stressful process, which takes place within a sociocultural and institutional scenario where parental choice is not socially supported and may even be devalued. Single mothers by choice mobilize numerous resources to deal with all these difficulties and uncertainties (family, friends, organizations, peer mothers, etc.). Virtual spaces are one of the assets that can be used, yet these virtual spaces are construed in different ways and these differences seem to be related to the different routes into motherhood we have studied. Participants in our study set up an opposition between "information" and "support/something more" as the possible purposes that virtual spaces could have and position themselves in relation to their own and other participant's virtual activity. For several mothers involved in adoption processes, obtaining and exchanging information is underscored as the primary use of virtual forums.

EXTRACT 3

Interview with Francisca, an adoptive mother

(40-45 years of age, university degree, manager in a private financial company, May 2008)

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
<p>[-¿Qué papel dirías tú, entonces, que tienen los foros?] Yo diría que es fundamentalmente de información. (-¿Sí?) También se utiliza mucho para relacionarte. De alguna forma sí, porque hay cosas que, si tú has vivido el proceso o lo estás viviendo, las conoces y... no sé, nadie entendería de qué forma te alegras porque te han dicho que eres "idónea". Si lo dices fuera de esto, pues, te dicen: "Pues, ¿y qué? ¡Pues, ya!". Sin embargo, tú sabes la alegría que es que te digan: "Oye, ¡que ya tienes la idoneidad!" o "Tu expediente está registrado", o pequeños logros como éstos. Entonces yo creo que sirve para comunicar esos sentimientos, para saber que todos pasamos más o menos por lo mismo y nos apoyamos. Pero, fundamentalmente, yo para lo que más lo uso es para [conseguir] información en algún momento determinado. Pues, me acuerdo que cuando yo vine con S. (su hija), pues, cuándo había que ir a hacer lo de la baja maternal, dónde había que ir a hacer lo del registro..., de todo eso yo me he informado a través de compañeras y compañeros que lo han hecho antes, en el foro.</p>	<p>[- What role would you, then say, that forums have?] I would say that it is fundamentally information. (- Yes?) It is also used much to relate with other people. Somehow, yes, because there are things that, if you have lived the process you are experiencing, you know them and... I don't know, no one understands how happy it makes you to be "certified as adequate". If you share it outside they say: "so what? OK!". However, you know about the joy involved in being told: "Hey, you have passed the 'certification'!" or "your case file has been registered", or small achievements like these. Then I think that it helps communicate those feelings, to know that we all go through more or less the same and that we support each other. But, fundamentally, I use it mostly to get information at particular given times. I remember that when I came with S. [her daughter], I had to request maternity leave and find out where to go to register [the child]... I got all that information through "peers" who had done this before, in the forum.</p>

By contrast, some mothers who have followed the artificial technology route question this reductionist use of virtual forums and explicitly state that they expect them to play other roles.

EXTRACT 4

Interview with Kora, in the process of assisted reproduction

(35-40 years of age, university degree, consultant, May 2007)

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
<p>En el fondo, la conclusión es: mejor a este tipo de gente, pues, no les contestas, porque el problema es que... vamos a ver: "¿Tú, qué pasa? ¿Para qué utilizas el foro?", porque luego fue una de las cosas de las que dijo: "¡Si yo sólo quiero información!". Es que eso no es. El foro no es simplemente para pedir información y luego largarte. El foro es para estar ahí, para estar apoyando, para, en fin... que es un poco un seguro en todos los sentidos.</p>	<p>In the end, the conclusion is: to those only asking for information, it's simply better not to answer them, because this is the problem... so come on: "what's the matter? what do you use the forum for?" because this is one of the things that was said: "but I only want information!" and this is not the point, the forum is not simply to ask for information and then leave. The forum is to be there, to give support... it's a little a reassurance in all respects.</p>

As we show below, this division in expectations and use of virtual forums across the two main routes to single motherhood is not clear-cut and we do find some adoptive mothers who express other expectations in relation to the role of virtual forums – although the fact that this concern is voiced during online interaction is indicative in itself of the

dominant trends in that particular virtual space that is being questioned. However, one reason why these different uses seem to dominate in each of the forums – for “single mothers by choice” or for “adoptive single parents” – may be because within the virtual (and non-virtual world) each group of single mothers seem to have other “communities” formed by other parental configurations/criteria as natural interlocutors or relevant reference groups – regardless of whether this affinity is construed as such by the single mothers themselves or ascribed by others. Within this matrix, single mothers have to position each other and the particular dynamics of each route lead to different relations with these communities, which in turn are made visible in virtual activity.

For single mothers who (mostly) opt for assisted reproduction procedures, one of the key issues during the past few years has been to differentiate themselves from other women who may be labelled as “single mothers” or may even share the same reproductive procedures. For some time now the most visible differentiation (which takes place mainly outside the virtual world: within associations and public representation, in relation to the media, in relation to public policies, etc.) has been between “single mothers by choice” and other single mothers (divorced, separated, widowed, etc.) who are perceived as having very different life-histories and policy needs. More recently, sexual orientation and intimate relationships have become an issue and this has raised the question regarding whether if lesbian women (who may have a partner) involved in assisted reproduction procedures should be considered “single mothers by choice”. These debates are made visible in virtual activity and, ultimately, inclusion in the category and participation in this online community involves commitment with a particular collective “we” and the capacity to share experiences beyond the mere exchange of information.

EXTRACT 5

Interview with Kora (same as Extract 4)

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
Se creó ahí una polémica por una chica, que era lesbiana, que tenía pareja y que quería participar en el foro, y entonces Samantha le dijo: “Mira, no puedes participar en el foro porque es para madres solteras”. Ella se sintió discriminada. [...] Por eso, Rocío sacó ese tema y puso esa pregunta: “¿Qué pensáis vosotras del foro?”. La mayoría, yo creo, coincidimos en qué es “madre soltera por elección”, es decir, no es lo mismo una mujer a la que la ha abandonado su hombre, y aun así es madre soltera..., evidentemente va a haber momentos en que va a experimentar lo mismo que nosotras, pero habrá otros momentos en que ella va a estar más frustrada por decir: “Yo esto no lo pedí”.	There was a controversial situation over a girl, a lesbian, and had a partner who wanted to participate in the forum, and then Samantha said: "Look, you can't participate in the forum because it's for single mothers". She felt discriminated. [...] That's why Rocío raised the issue and posed the question: "What do you [plural] think of the forum?" Most of us, I think, agreed that she was a "single mother by choice", that is, it's not the same as a woman who has been abandoned by her man, and yet she is a single mother... obviously there will be moments when she will experience the same things as us, but there will be other times when she is going to be more frustrated and will say: "I didn't ask for it".

By contrast, mothers who follow the adoption route along the process may find themselves sharing experiences and needs with different women and family configurations. At times they align themselves with single mothers, other times with

adoptive parents (whether single men/women or hetero/homo/sexual couples) who deal with the same bureaucratic procedures and yet, at other times, with families who have children from the same country of origin. As a result, their virtual activity may be distributed along different sites and forums "specialized" on each of these family configurations. This strategy has as two practical consequences. On the one hand, it facilitates the development of a less emotionally intense relationship with particular virtual communities. On the other hand, it leads to an instrumental relationship with virtual forums in which the mere "exchange of information" and migrations over time to different virtual spaces are seen as legitimate forms of participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

EXTRACT 6

**Interview with Selena, in the process of adopting a child
(40-45 years of age, uncompleted university studies, administrative assistant, March 2008)**

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
[E: ¿Y quién te informó de esta ayuda del Ayuntamiento?] En el foro. [E: ¿En qué foro?] En el foro de Rusia. Sí, es que en el de monoparentales no estoy casi, porque estuve al principio, y ahora... Es que, claro, hay más información ahí. En (el foro de) monoparentales entro de vez en cuando porque no me quité, pero fue más al principio, porque ahora me interesan más esas historias también: que si es mejor por libre, que si no sé qué...	[E: Who informed you about this municipal help?] In the forum. [E: in what forum?] The Russian. Yes, I am almost never in the single parent one, because I was at the beginning, and now... well, of course, there's more information there. I entered the single parent [forum] from time to time because I did not unsubscribe, but that was more at the beginning, because now I am interested more in other "stories" also: whether it is better to go independently...

Interaction and collective activity in the virtual world

The above extracts mostly show how participants describe their relationship with virtual spaces and their own retrospective accounts of how virtual activity unfolds – which sometimes appear in the context of some other issue (e.g. Extracts 5 and 6). The methodology of the study also included direct observation and participation in virtual forums (which also have an archive of all interactions/conversations that have taken place in the past), thus we can examine how these spaces are used by single mothers and the direction that conversations may take in the different virtual communities in which they participate. Some of the differences that participants report are corroborated through direct observation. We also find other processes which are not retrospectively verbalized and illustrate participants' identities and engagement with the virtual world.

EXTRACT 7

Post thread in the MSPE forum (original message: 2 March 2006)⁴

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
<p>(1) hola, estaba buscando la definición de madre soltera en la red... en wikipedia aparecía: "Se llama madre soltera a la mujer que se ve obligada a cargar con la crianza de los hijos y el manejo del hogar sin la compañía o apoyo del cónyuge o esposo." no me he sentido nada identificada y creo que no nos hace justicia a ninguna de nosotras, así que la he cambiado!! y a partir de hoy, en el diccionario mas universal del siglo XXI: "Se llama madre soltera a la mujer que decide llevar a cabo la crianza de los hijos y el manejo del hogar sin la compañía o apoyo de una pareja." puede ser un pequeño paso para la mujer, pero un gran salto para la humanidad... ciao</p>	<p>(1) Hi, I was looking for a definition of single mother on the web... this is what appeared in wikipedia: "A single mother is a woman who is forced to bear the upbringing of children and the management of the home without the company or support of spouse or husband." I don't identify at all with this and I think that it does not do justice to any of us, so I've changed it!! and starting today, in the most universal dictionary of the 21st century: "A single mother is the woman who decides to carry out the upbringing of children and the management of the home without the company or support of a partner." This may be a small step for women, but a great leap for mankind... ciao</p>
<p>(2) Me alegra mucho que hayas introducido ese cambio, son pequeños pasitos pero que significan un montón. Creo que en nombre de todas GRACIAS!</p>	<p>(2) reply MAD01 wrote on March 3 I am very happy that you've made that change, these are small steps but they mean a lot. On behalf of all us THANKS!</p>
<p>(3) Aplaudo la inserción de tu nueva definición!!! Besos!!</p>	<p>(3) reply MAD02 wrote on March 3 My applause for the inclusion of your new definition!!! Kisses!!!</p>
<p>(4) Yo casi añadiría: se llama madre soltera a la mujer que decide llevar a cabo la crianza de los hijos y el manejo del hogar sin la compañía o apoyo de una pareja, instituciones sanitarias, apoyo gubernamental entre otras, viéndose obligada a pasar por una serie de acontecimientos que van frenando o retrasando esta decisión. Uy si me pongo a largar ya entro en temas de discriminación como el caso de los médicos sarcásticos que nos miran como si fuéramos viejas tontas y un sin fin de cosas más. Pero como estoy de buen rollo...</p>	<p>(4) reply MAD03 wrote on March 3 I would add: a single mother is the woman who decides to carry out the upbringing of children and the management of the home without the company or support of a partner, health care institutions and government support among other things, being forced to go through a series of events that hold back or delay this decision. Ups, if I get on a roll, I get into issues of discrimination, such as sarcastic doctors who look at us as if we were old fools and a myriad of other things. But since I am in a good mood...</p>
<p>(5) A mi no me gustaria olvidar las que no son por eleccion... Que tambien las hay. Dificilísima, perdida</p>	<p>(5) reply MAD04 wrote on March 3 I would not like to forget those who are but didn't choose to... There are also those. Very difficult, lost</p>
<p>(6) PERFECTA, LA DEFINICIÓN... Seguro q la anterior la había realizado un hombre...</p>	<p>(6) reply MAD05 wrote on March 3 PERFECT DEFINITION... I am sure the first one was written by a man...</p>

⁴ The single mothers in our study make up a relatively small and interrelated community. They have also recently been the focus of much media attention. To protect their identities and favor as much as possible their anonymity, in the interview extracts we use pseudonyms and provide biographical information in general terms (e.g. age is reported within a five-year bracket). In the case of virtual interactions we have eliminated "avatars" and "nicks" since many participants in these forums know each other personally and would easily identify each other through this information. In this last case "nicks" have been replaced by numerical codes that allow tracing participants in the interaction. We have also eliminated personal signature lines from the posts.

<p>(7) hola chicas....muy buena la definición...nuestra Real Academia de la Lengua necesita un meneo en género...sólo teneis que mirar algunas jugosas definiciones del diccionario de la RAE, por ejemplo: hombre, mujer, huérfano, jueza, doctora, etc. (más propias del siglo XVIII que del XXI)...no me extraña la definición que hay, pero afortunadamente la realidad social es otra y el lenguaje acabará cambiando adaptándose a esa realidad, a pesar de los carpetovetónicos de la RAE. Me apunto a la definición nueva y a la ampliación de MAD03...y no me olvido tampoco de las que tienen que serlo a la fuerza, pero ni aun así me identifico con el término "madre soltera"...¡¡qué antigualla!!!!... y no te quepa ninguna duda de que la definición la ha redactado un hombre.....uyyyyyy que me embalo!!! besitos y suerte</p>	<p>(7) reply MAD06 wrote on March 3 hello girls.... very good definition... our Royal Academy of Language [RAE] needs to be shaken a bit in relation to gender... you just have to look up some juicy definitions in the RAE dictionary, for example: man, woman, orphan, [female] judge, [female] doctor, etc. (more characteristic of the 18th century than the 21st)... no wonder we had that definition there, but fortunately there is another social reality and language will eventually change and adapt to this reality, despite the terribly traditional RAE. I am all for MAD03's new definition.... and I don't forget either those who didn't choose to be so, but even so I don't identify with the term "(spinster) mother"... that's so old!!!!... and no doubt that the definition was drafted by a man... uuuups I am warming up!!! kisses and good luck</p>
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[16 MORE POSTS CONTINUE THIS THREAD]

Extract 7 reproduces a conversation in the "single mothers by choice" forum that can be considered a form of collective action in the virtual world (Kamberelis, 2004). The intervention gravitates around how they are defined by others and how they define themselves – highlighting, along the way, how issues of identity are a central aspect of this community. In this context, virtual interactions provides a space for co-construction of a particular definition of single motherhood in which many of the structuring themes in the broader debate are inserted: (a) the role played by "choice" (posts 1, 5, and 7), (b) the various forms of male sexism (posts 6 and 7), and (c) institutional and political disadvantage in relation to other family configurations (post 4). More importantly, within this forum there is a strong convergence regarding how these central issues are structured. Among other things, this convergence is reflected by the fact that the original comment prompted twenty responses (by 14 different participants) – some of which were quite elaborate (e.g. posts 4 or 7).

By comparison, Extract 8 captures some of the dilemmas and concerns faced by adoptive single parents who find themselves in the intersection of multiple interests which are not easily addressed in a single virtual platform. Members' accounts show how their strategy is to simultaneously participate in several spaces, which may be later judged and ranked (posts 2, 3, and 4). This thread also captures participants' discomfort with the fact that exchanges in this forum lack involvement by members of the online group (posts 1-3 between MOM01 and MOM02) or that members use the platform for purely instrumental purposes (i.e. "information") (post 1). In this context, participants seem to display two alternative strategies: (a) as followed by MOM02, align more strongly with the single mother by choice community – since she finds more affinities in her involvement with this community even though adoption is the dis-preferred route in the group (post 2); (b) as the thread in general shows, propose the creation of a new online group in which, by restricting the scope of the community, involvement may be increased (from the

conversation it transpires that this new space could gravitate around discussing “post-adoption issues by single parents who have adopted older children”.⁵

EXTRACT 8

Post thread in the adoptive single parent forum (original message: 21 January 2011)

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
<p>(1) RE: ¿temas de posadopción otra vez? Foro específico postadopción (MOM01) Yo me siento identificada con muchos temas que se tratan en foros de adopción (como el de mayores, o adoptiva, por ejemplo), pero también con temas que se tratan o deberían tratar en foros de monoparentales (como el de madres solteras por elección). Me da un poco de pena que este foro, que aunaría mis dos intereses en cuánto a maternidad (bueno, tengo algunos otros, pero ya se entiende), no responda a las expectativas que tenía cuando entré en él. Yo creo que los hilos interesantes se agotan porque de los cientos de personas que integran este foro, somos un pequeño puñado las que opinamos... y claro, la cosa no da para más... Me sorprende incluso que las personas que entran y están en proceso pregunten sólo (a menudo, no siempre) sobre trámites y países, y tan poco sobre temas de post-adopción...</p>	<p>(1) RE: Post-adoption issues again? Post-adoption specific forum (MOM01) I identify with many of the topics that come up in adoption forums (such as the older children one, or adoptive, for example), but also with topics that are covered or should be addressed in single parent forums (such as the single mothers by choice one). I am a bit saddened that this forum, which deals with my two interests concerning maternity (well, I have others, but you know what I mean), does not meet the expectations I had when I joined it. I think that interesting threads are exhausted because, from the hundreds of members of this forum, only a small handful of us give our opinions... and of course, this can only be taken so far... I am even surprised by people who enter and are in the process and only ask (often, not always) about paperwork and countries, and so little on post-adoption...</p>
<p>(2) MOM02 escribió: Hola, [MOM01] Es verdad que apenas se han tratado estos temas. Bueno, alguna que otra vez sí, pero enseguida se agotan los hilos interesantes. Ahora bien, yo llevo tanto tiempo en el foro de mayores como en éste, y tampoco me siento muy identificada con las cuestiones que allí se tratan: la mayoría de los problemas que allí se abordan, no son los que a mí me preocupan, y otros que sí me preocupan, allí no se abordan. Lo cual es normal: sigo pensando que como monoparental tengo una situación diferente y circunstancias distintas que inciden en lo que me pasa y preocupa. Esta es una de las razones por las que, desde un principio, me implicué en los foros de madres solteras por elección, a pesar de que la mayoría de las participantes han ido por reproducción asistida, y no por adopción internacional. A pesar de ello, la mayoría de las cosas que tratan sobre los niños, sobre el día a día (por supuesto, no lo relacionado con "los tratamientos clínicos"), etc. son cosas que comparto con ellas. Ahora bien, como sabes, en esos "foros", los temas relacionados específicamente con adopción monoparental, o con los hijos adoptivos de monoparentales, más bien, son mínimos, porque somos "dos" (creo que literalmente).</p>	<p>(2) MOM02 wrote: Hi, [MOM01] It's true that these issues have hardly been discussed. Well, one time or another they have, but interesting threads are quickly exhausted. Yet, I have been quite a long time in the forum of older children as well as in this one, and I don't identify much with the issues addressed there: most of the problems dealt with there are not those I am concerned about, and others that do concern me are not addressed there. This is normal: I still think that as a single parent I have a different situation and circumstances that affect what happens to me and my worries. This is one of the reasons why, from the beginning, I got involved more in the single mothers by choice forums, even though the majority of the participants there have gone through assisted reproduction, and not through international adoption. Despite this, most of the stuff dealing with children, about day to day things (of course, not related to "clinical treatments"), etc. are things that I share with them. However, as you know, in these "forums", issues specifically related with single parent adoption or adopted children of single parents, are rather scarce, because there are only "two" (literally I think) of us in this situation</p>

⁵ Interestingly, the general “adoptive single parent” online group grew out of a similar sense of lack of identification of the important issues of this group of parents within general forums focused on international adoptions or adoptive families.

<p>(3) MOM01 escribió: Estoy de acuerdo con [MOM03], el mejor foro de postadopción es el de mayores de Yahoo (aunque sea de mayores, también hay padre con niños pequeños, o adoptados de pequeños y que han crecido). Con mucha diferencia. Yo entré en este foro hace tiempo, y aquí sigo, y siempre me ha sorprendido la ausencia de temas de enjundia relacionados con la postadopción y con la monoparentalidad.</p>	<p>(3) MOM01 wrote: I agree with [MOM03], the best forum for post-adoption is the older children one in Yahoo (even though it is of older children, there are also parent(s) with small children, or children who were adopted when they were small and who have grown up). By far. I joined this forum some time ago, and I'm still here and I have always been surprised by the absence of substantial issues related to post-adoption and single parenthood.</p>
<p>(4) MOM03 escribió: Para mí, el mejor es el de yahoo. Me llegué a apuntar a unos cuantos, pero el único que yo he visto en donde se pone la carne en el asador siempre es en ese.</p>	<p>(4) MOM03 wrote: For me, the best is the yahoo one. At one point I joined several but the only one I've seen where things get cooking is always that one.</p>
<p>(5) MOM04 escribió: Hola [MOM02 y NOM05], estoy de acuerdo en lo que decís, nuestras familias son diferentes y, aunque apenas visito páginas de postadopción, creo que tendríamos que compartir nuestras experiencias ya sea aquí o en otro foro... así que me apunto a cualquier iniciativa. Seguiremos en contacto. Saludos</p>	<p>(5) MOM04 wrote: Hi [MOM02 and NOM05], I agree with what you say, our families are different and, although I hardly visited post-adoption pages, I believe that we should share our experiences either here or in another forum... so count me in for anything that is proposed. We will keep in touch. Cheers</p>

[2 MORE POSTS CONTINUE THIS THREAD]

Conclusions

In the introduction we suggested understanding single parent virtual forums (alongside other contact spaces among these mothers) as educational spaces. We made this claim drawing on a notion of learning/education based on Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning model. From this perspective learning takes place in communities of practice and can be seen as a transformation in forms of participation and identification with the community (Gee, 2004; Rogoff, 2003). Within this framework, the findings we have presented can help characterize in some more detail how learning unfolds in these spaces and how the communities we have studied are structured.

First, the most salient feature is that these communities are spaces for "peer learning". Interactions in these forums are exclusively among single mothers at different stages of their maternity and family projects. In other words, expertise/mastery – and the potential forms of scaffolding, asymmetry, etc. that arise from it – is exclusively based on being at different stages of the trajectory that we have claimed defines maternity in this context. Within the single mother group we have studied, underscoring peer relations as an educational process is not an irrelevant issue. In Spain, the two main routes to maternity we have examined (adoption and assisted reproduction) are highly institutionalized processes regulated by numerous professionals (psychologists, social workers, doctors, biologists, judges, etc.) and "expert discourses" that define, constrain and evaluate the family projects of these women in very specific terms. In addition, these single parenthood/single motherhood

projects are immersed in a complex web of social representations, stereotypes and ideological constructions that circulate in Spanish society. The single mothers we have studied are often exposed and interact, voluntarily and involuntarily, with these expert discourses and social representations (e.g. in organized events with professionals, in their own process during adoption/assisted reproduction, through media appearances and debates, through the associations/organizations they are part of, etc.), so we are not claiming that peer relations are the only (or even the more powerful) source of educational influence. Rather, what we want to stress is that virtual forums and online support groups are the space where peer interactions are privileged and where the discourses and representations put forward by experts, the media, society, etc. can be contested, re-elaborated and discussed.

Second, within these interactions, foundational questions of "definition" and "self-identity" seem to play an important role. This self-reflexive concern is most visible in the case of mothers who, through their virtual, personal and organizational affiliation, have put at the centre of their concerns single motherhood – as we have shown, this is almost always the case in assisted reproduction, but may be one among several competing affinities in the case of international adoptions. Through this identity work single mothers are proposing, re-configuring and questioning common assumptions in relation to kinship and contribute to produce an increasingly complex and heterogeneous portrait of what a family is and, more specifically, of single-motherhood (Rivas, 2009). As Extract 7 clearly shows, they are also committed to make visible and present these debates in the virtual world and its emblematic public spaces.

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