

Women's age at first childbearing in a Brazilian metropolitan area: a qualitative approach

Andréa Branco Simão

The birth of the first child may be considered as a unique experience, bringing a mix of feelings. As the time goes on and the woman's body start changing, new sensations arise. But this new stage is not featured by the physical changes, it also brings along a series of different consequences in the individual's life. Sometimes, projects and plans need to be changed, or at least, reviewed, since the old established order will change. A transition to motherhood implies more responsibility and obligations because we can have an ex-husband, an ex-job, but never an ex-son or ex-daughter (ROSSI, 1968, apud. RINDFUSS, MORGAN & SWICEGOOD, 1988). Consequently, diverging from the wedding vows, that may be broken, motherhood is a permanent event in life.

Demographically, the age that a woman starts her reproductive life is related to fertility patterns and levels. A woman who become a mother pretty early in life are likely to face some relevant challenges, specially if she lives in a third world country as Brazil. For example, if she, or her family, does not have a very good financial situation for paying a day care or a nurse, she will probably get out of school to take care of her child. Financial problems may take her to the work market before expected and, on the end, it may anticipated an union or a family unit formation, with or without a partner. For many women belonging to the youngest generations, pregnancy happens without been planned or wanted. Consequently, many of them confront familiar conflicts, broke up with their partners, and have hard times to assume the pregnancy and, lately, their child (ABREU, MIRANDA-RIBEIRO & CÉSAR, 2000).

Considering the aforementioned aspects, this work presents a study about the age at first childbirth of white and *negro* (black + brown) females, from 20 to 29 years-old and 50 to 59 years-old, with different educational levels, in a Brazilian metropolitan area: the city of Belo Horizonte. It consists of a qualitative analysis about norms, values, and behaviors regarding the age at first childbirth among females of different ages, race/skin color and educational backgrounds. The main goal is to investigate women's point of views,

emphasizing norms, values and behaviors concerning the timing of first childbearing, observing similarities and contrasts among females of different age cohorts, race/skin color and educational levels. This study has two main questions. First, what are the differences in the norms, values and behaviors regarding the timing of first childbirth when different cohorts of women are compared? Second, are the observed differences more pronounced due to birth cohort, educational background or race/skin color?

The data used in the present study come from seventeen focus groups meetings carried out by the first author in Belo Horizonte during 2003 and 2004. These meetings were conducted with females of the same race/skin color, age cohort, and educational level. Eleven groups were conducted with 20 to 24 years-old women and six with 50 to 59 years-old. One hundred and nine women participated in the focus groups meetings, being seventy one women from the youngest age group and thirty-eight from the oldest. In the youngest cohort, thirty-five women said they were white and thirty-six denominated themselves as black. On the other side, in the oldest cohort twenty women said they were white and 18 said they were black.

In Brazil, the use of focus groups in Demography have been increasing, and it is relevant for both informing survey results and to bestow qualitative differences in the meanings and dimensions involving a complex social phenomena. It provides important insights about norms, values and behaviors, usually not captured and expressed by quantitative methods. In other words, focus groups data brings into light what is considered the normative or acceptable behavior (MOORE, 2004).

The analysis reveals values and behavioral differences among the generations of females included in the study. For example, despite the norm spread by the majority of low educational level youngest cohorts that the proper age to have the first child is after 20 years-old, most of them had their first childbirth during the teenager years. The qualitative analysis also reveals that the first childbirth is understood as an event that brings overwhelming responsibility for females, eventually jeopardizing their school and professional lives. For men, on the other hand, they believe everything stills the same. Moreover, basically all participants say they cannot expect help from their families if they have their first child earlier than 18 years-old. At that age, they are awaited to go to school, to start in the labor market or something else, but they are not supposed to become a

mother. A participant points out a reason for that: “after you become a mother, you want your son or daughter become a better person than you ever was, a better person than you was during your entire life...this is a lot of responsibility...”

References

ABREU, Dayse Maria Xavier de, MIRANDA-RIBEIRO, Paula, CÉSAR, Cibele Comini. **A gente na adolescência acha que sabe tudo, mas não sabe nada**: gravidez na adolescência, redes familiares e condições de vida das jovens mães e de seus filhos em Belo Horizonte. In.: ENCONTRO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS POPULACIONAIS, 12, Caxambu, 2000. **Brasil 500 anos**: mudanças e continuidades. Belo Horizonte: ABEP, 2000. (Disponível em CD-ROM) Disponível também em: <http://www.abep.org.br/usuario/GerenciaNavegacao.php?caderno_id=188&nivel=2>. Acesso em ago.2004.

ATTRIDE-STIRLING, Jennifer. Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research. **Qualitative Research**, v.1, n.3, p.385-405, 2001.

MOORE, Ann Marie. **Female control over first sexual intercourse in Brazil**: case studies of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais and Recife, Pernambuco. 2004. 182f. Tese (Doctor of Philosophy) - The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, 2004.

RINDFUSS, Ronald, MORGAN, Phill, SWICEGOOD, Gray. **First births in America**. California: University of California, 1988. p.291.