

## THE THIN LINE BETWEEN MOTHERHOOD AND SCHOOL EVASION

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### ABSTRACT

The need to interrupt their studies is the reality for a large number of young Brazilian women who experience motherhood during their school years. This research aimed to analyze the mechanisms used by educational institutions from the perspective of students and former students, teenagers, and young adults in the Federal District. Such mechanisms can be used to support or hinder the studies of young mothers. Six semi-structured individual interviews were carried out with adolescents and young women, between 17 and 30 years old, who experienced motherhood during their studies. Thematic content analysis was used to interpret the information. The article focuses on the first analytical category constructed. From the analysis, it was possible to understand that the phenomenon of school evasion is supported by historical and cultural biases related to sexist conceptions about binary gender norms that do not contemplate the diversity of women's experiences regarding motherhood and femininity itself.

**Keywords:** maternity; gender; psychology

### La línea Tenue entre Maternidad y Evasión Escolar

#### RESUMEN

La interrupción en los estudios es la realidad de gran fracción de jóvenes brasileñas que vivencian la maternidad durante el período escolar. En la presente investigación se tuvo como objetivo analizar los mecanismos que las instituciones de enseñanza utilizan para apoyar o dificultar los estudios de jóvenes madres a partir de la perspectiva de alumnas y exalumnas adolescentes y jóvenes adultas del Distrito Federal. Se realizaron seis entrevistas individuales semiestructuradas con adolescentes y jóvenes mujeres, entre 17 y 30 años, que vivenciaron/vivencian la maternidad durante los estudios. Se utilizó el análisis de contenido temático para la interpretación de las informaciones. En el artículo se focaliza la primera categoría analítica construida. A partir del análisis, fue posible comprender que el fenómeno de la evasión escolar es sustentado por bases históricas y culturales relacionadas a concepciones sexistas acerca de las normas binarias de género que no contemplan la diversidad de vivencias de las mujeres con relación a la maternidad y a la propia feminidad.

**Palabras clave:** maternidad; género; psicología

### A linha tênue entre maternidade e evasão escolar

#### RESUMO

A interrupção dos estudos é a realidade de grande parcela de jovens brasileiras que vivenciam a maternidade durante o período escolar. A presente pesquisa teve como objetivo analisar os mecanismos que as instituições de ensino utilizam para apoiar ou dificultar os estudos de jovens mães a partir da perspectiva de alunas e ex-alunas adolescentes e jovens adultas do Distrito Federal. Foram realizadas seis entrevistas individuais semiestructuradas com adolescentes e jovens mulheres, entre 17 e 30 anos, que vivenciaram/vivenciam a maternidade durante os estudos. Foi utilizada a análise de conteúdo temática para a interpretação das informações. O artigo focaliza a primeira categoria analítica construída. A partir da análise, foi possível compreender que o fenômeno da evasão escolar é sustentado por bases históricas e culturais relacionadas a concepções sexistas acerca das normas binárias de gênero que não contemplam a diversidade de vivências das mulheres em relação à maternidade e à própria feminilidade.

**Palavras-chave:** maternidade; gênero; psicologia

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## INTRODUCTION

Interruptions and delays in education are the reality for a large number of young Brazilian women who experience pregnancy and motherhood during their school years. Such reality makes it necessary to rethink the sociocultural factors involved in these issues. According to data from the Fundo de População das Nações Unidas – UNFPA, or United Nations Population Fund (2016), Brazil presents a rate of 65 pregnancies for every one thousand teenagers aged between 15 and 19 years, which ranks Brazil as the seventh highest rate of teenage pregnancy in South America.

The scarcity or absence of information regarding sexuality and contraception seems commonplace among teenagers and young people. Nevertheless, they are expected to show maturity and responsibility in their love relationships. In this sense, we can observe the presence of a conflict-ridden ambiguity in these social expectations. That is, on the one hand, there is very often no space for conversations on contraceptives, whether in the family or school environment. On the other hand, teenage girls almost always get the blame for their pregnancy (Hoga, Borges, & Reberte, 2010).

These matters are interconnected with the discussion developed by Soares, Amaral, Silva and Silva (2008), who emphasize that feminine virginity and chastity are social assets, and women are consequently expected to delay the beginning of their sexual life, and to regard their own virginity as a virtue to be protected.

What Medeiros et al. (2016) verified, in their qualitative research realized in three basic health units, in Pernambuco, with 15 female interviewees, was that teenage girls get information on the means to avoid pregnancy with the help of friends or from sources other than the family environment because of a lack of dialogue.

Unfortunately, most teenage girls hesitate to use contraceptive methods because that would imply their admission of having an active sexual life (Medeiros et al., 2016). More specifically, being honest about one's sexual life, no matter how privately, might represent a set of conflicts that are subjective (related to their own sexuality) as well as social (for example, prejudiced judgements). Although it is clearly something inherent to human existence to get emotionally involved in relationships with other people, women are still culturally expected keep themselves "untouched" until marriage, and then never get close to any man but their husbands (Parker, 1991). This is due to the way human sexuality is experienced. It is always mediated by systems with historically established cultural meanings (Paula, Holanda, Barreto, & Madureira, 2018).

By getting pregnant and/or having children during their teenage years, many young women have to quit studying, and school evasion is recurrent in this

contingent. According to the report by Zinet (2016)<sup>1</sup>, the Ministry of Education (MEC) published data according to which teenage pregnancy is responsible for 18% of the school evasion among Brazilian female students. Which ends up negatively reflecting on their professional qualification and on their insertion into the job market, due to "limitations" in their educational trajectories.

On the other hand, school evasion is not an exclusive reality of adolescents that get pregnant during their Basic Education years. It is a reality experienced by young women in their academic careers at public and private institutions of higher education in Brazil. According to the Ministry of Education – MEC (2015)<sup>2</sup>, 55% of the students entering universities are women, and they also represent 60% of the students who finish the graduation courses. However, how many of these women are pregnant or become mothers? Which barriers or difficulties do they face in order to stay in their graduation courses?

According to Hoga et al. (2010), women are often considered the only ones responsible for the fact that they got pregnant (which is also observed in the case of adolescents) and thus they are the only ones to "pay for the consequences of their choices". In this case, the "choice" of becoming a mother and caretaker of their children and families compulsorily turns into a priority in the plans and obligations of these women. Consequently, their dedication to studies and professional careers become secondary.

The research was realized by means of the theoretical perspective of cultural psychology. In general terms, cultural psychology is situated somewhere among sociogenetic theoretical movements, which present the consideration of the social genesis of individual psychological development as a central premise, while highlighting the constitutive role played by culture regarding human psychology (Madureira, 2018; Valsiner, 2012).

Thus, based on cultural psychology theoretical referential and the perspective of students, former students, adolescent and young mother of the Distrito Federal, the research underlying the present article had the general objective of assessing the devices of education institutions that can end up either benefitting or disturbing the studies of young and adolescent mothers.

## METHOD

The realized research used an investigation qualitative

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<sup>1</sup> Pregnancy is responsible for 18% of the school evasion among girls. Available at: <http://educacaointegral.org.br/reportagens/gravidez-e-responsavel-por-18-da-evasao-escolas-entre-meninas/>

<sup>2</sup> Most of the students entering and finishing their university courses are female, available at: <http://portal.mec.gov.br/ultimas-noticias/212-educacao-superior-1690610854/21140-maioria-e-feminina-em-ingresso-e-conclusao-nas-universidades>

methodology. According to Minayo (2016), “Qualitative research provides answers to very specific questions. In the social sciences, it deals with the universe of significations, of motivations, of aspirations, of beliefs, of values, and of attitudes” (p. 20). In other words, qualitative research refers to a methodological proposal that aims at comprehending, in depth, the significations attributed by the participants to the investigated themes (Madureira & Branco, 2001).

In a more specific way, after approval of the research project by research ethics committee at the University Center of Brasilia - CEUB, the interviews scheduled by the project were realized. Six women participated in the research. They were aged between 17 and 30 years, and (had) experienced motherhood or pregnancy in their school years, whether in basic or in higher education in the Distrito Federal.

For the realization of this research, semi-structured individual interviews were used in combination with the presentation of previously selected images. Researchers used a cell phone for recording the interviews. Participants signed a printed copy of a Free Informed Consent Term – TCLE. The methodological tools were: a semi-structured individual interview script with guiding questions, as well as significant previously selected images (Madureira, 2016).

On Table 1, there is a display of the participants’ sociodemographic data, considering their ages, marital status, and whether they were attending any education institutions at the time of the interviews. Fictitious names were used in order to protect the identities of the participants.

**Table 1 - Participants’ Sociodemographic Data.**

Fictitious name	Age	Marital status	Attending school/ University
Martha	28	Divorced	Yes
Juliana	21	Single	Yes
Verônica	30	Married	Yes
Yara	20	Single	Yes
Wanda	17	Single	NO

It is important to mention that the interviews were recorded, with the consent of the participants, in order to proceed to the posterior task of transcription and of assessment of the constructed information. In order to do it, the content analysis method in its theme aspects (Gomes, 2016). After the transcription of the interviews, researchers created the following theme analysis categories to provide guidance to the interpretative work: (a) Maternity, gender issues, and school evasion discussion; (b) The importance of the social support network in the continuity of the studies; (c) Mechanisms used by the education institutions that can end up

benefitting of disturbing the participants’ studies. In the present article, the previously mentioned analytical category will be the focus.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With the objective to present and discuss the most significant results obtained in the realized research, the present section will focus on the first analytical theme category previously mentioned. It is also important to emphasize that the names of the participants were fictitious in order to preserve their identities.

### Motherhood, gender issues, and school evasion in discussion

More than words and phrases, the encounter and close contact with the participants, or rather, with the protagonists of this study, by means of their histories, experiences, and world views were probably the richest contributions to the present research. At different moments during the realization of the interviews, it was possible to observe the mixed feelings with which the participants reported their motherhood experiences. Yes, from each one. No matter how universal the motherhood experience is, each mother is unique and live the mother experience in a particular way.

However, although we have in mind the singularity that is present in every human experience and in every meeting, certain standards are morally and socially expected regarding motherhood and femininity. In this sense, diverse authors, such as Almeida (2014), Del Priore (2014), Donath (2017), Madureira (2010, 2018) and Parker (1991), discuss the behaviors of women regarding the fact that their sexuality as well as the other aspects of their lives are monitored by the community. The behaviors that are considered “wrong” and/or “indecent” are frequently repressed, which normally leads to shame and guilt among women that do not fit into social expectations, which lamentably perpetuates their silence.

In addition to the vigilant eyes of community, it is also possible to notice increasing demands that can be quite exhausting regarding the responsibilities and the role played by women-mothers, which is not recognized because society attributes all the effort to “maternal instinct” and does not recognize the dedication and the investment in time and resources (Badinter, 2011). Such demands came up in the participants’ discourses as a romanticized motherhood ideal, which is different from the “real, undiluted” motherhood they experience in real life, according to the following excerpts from the interviews realized with Yara and Juliana:

*“(...) A girl sent me a message telling me that I really needed to stop complaining because I sounded like I telling a daughter off. People have no idea how guilty that makes a mother feel” (Yara).*

*“There are several idealizations on what it*

*means to be a mother and such ideals are often contradictory. I believe the strongest thing to say is "Mothers have to be up to the task". Everyone has an opinion about what mothers should do. If you do not stay home all the time, they will regard you as a bad mother. If you leave your child at the nursery to go to work, you might be called negligent (...) Mothers are not free to choose other priorities in life other than their children" (Juliana).*

Based on the presented reports, we can observe how social expectations influence women's decisions regarding their own lives. Such expectations also make them feel like "terrible" mothers because they do not correspond to the community ideal of motherhood. What happens is due to the fact that culture plays a constitutive role in human psychology as it promotes a communion of the different ways of thinking, feeling, and acting on behalf of our fellow human beings (Madureira, 2016, 2018; Valsiner, 2012).

Such concept of cultural channeling is, in addition, an important concept in the theoretical perspective adopted in this research, cultural psychology. Such concept highlights, on the one hand, as we have mentioned before, the constitutive role played by culture regarding human psychology, and, on the other hand, the active participation of people in their own psychological development, as well as regarding context in which they are inserted (Madureira, 2016, 2018; Valsiner, 2012).

Such social expectations, which serve the purpose of devices for cultural channeling, contemplate could considered some sort of "sacred motherhood manual", which provides guidelines regarding what mothers should do. This matter is assessed by Badinter (2011) and Neder (2016), by emphasizing that the belief that a "good mother" is the one who happily dedicates all her time to her children is a cultural construct. In other words, mothers should always be fully available for their children, always prioritizing them disregarding the mother's other interests, without externalizing any negative emotions of feelings that are inherent to such situations.

Thus, when a woman does not act in accordance with these principles, considered "sacred", she frequently gets morally judged and struggles with feelings of guilt. In this sense, by not fitting into society's expectations, they reveal the way they have internalized ideals of motherhood and womanhood. More specifically, we cannot effectively separate motherhood from womanhood because, culturally speaking, there is a notion that being a mother is an essential part of being a woman. Motherhood is a structuring element of what is socially understood as womanhood (Badinter, 2011).

Thus, frequently, more commonly that what is believed, motherhood becomes the most important

structuring factor in the identity of women, reducing in this manner, a woman's the multiple possible identities (as daughter, student, Brazilian, spouse etc.) to one exclusive identity: mother (Zanello, 2018).

The following testimonies can be used as examples: *"Being a mother means understanding that the children always come first. There is nothing we can do but putting them first in everything" (Wanda). Being a mother is a contradiction. I believe that when woman becomes a mother, she gets reborn" (Juliana).*

This feeling of lack of identity, or its reduction to maternity, is considerably legitimated in the everyday cultural practices, by understanding gender relations from an essentially biological perspective. In other words, women are seen as the antithesis of men and are equipped with the "mother instinct", which makes them "natural born mothers", which reinforces not only the ideal of how a mother should behave, but also the ideal position of natural caretakers, when "maternal qualities" are naturalized as typically feminine, including their capacity to take care of others, affection, dedication, attention, and patience (Bourdieu, 2005; Donath, 2017; Zanello, 2018).

Thus, activities that are socially considered female are directed to the private sphere (Bourdieu, 2005; Madureira, 2010, 2018; Parker, 1991), such as the ones concentrated in the home environment, which includes taking care of the family. It is understood that the supposed "mother instinct" overlaps the other interests of women, and then "becoming a mother" is something stronger and more urgent than the other expectations and "obligations" that are part of "being a woman". Therefore, when women want to think about themselves, rather than their children, as priorities, their attitude is socially unacceptable and regarded as selfishness and a sign of "questionable" motherhood (Neder, 2016).

Thus, we can perceive how the news that they are going to have a baby or the arrival of a newborn changes the lives of these women so completely. There are changes not only in the way they see themselves but also in the way other people (institutions, family, friends, etc) see them and what they consider to be her new obligations within her identity. Such matters are illustrated in the following excerpt:

*"After she was born, my routine really changed completely. The thing is, it seems like we no longer have a life. We live for the children (...). That this was my mission and being a mother includes a lot of tasks and obligations" (Brenda).*

According to what was discussed by Parker (1991), the concepts of masculinity and femininity were defined by means of the binary gender system, in which women were not only stereotyped as "inferior", but as beings of "delicate nature", in contrast with characteristics associated to the masculine, where men are stereotyped

as strong, virile, and powerful.

Thus, concerning women, there is praising of their maternal potentials for raising children. On the other hand, concerning men, their potentials should be projected onto the public sphere, which became the justification for casting women into their caretaking role at home with the children, whereas men are supposed to find paid work out of the home.

Thus, it is by means of the belief that motherhood culturally constitutes a structuring dimension of the female identity, according to what is discussed in the present article, influencing a lot of women not to feel complete in their absence of maternity or of a stable union, that is, they believe that they lack something or that there is something wrong with them.

According to the discussion by Zanello (2018) and Badinter (2017), despite the fact that many women reach success at different instances of their lives, such as in financial or professional terms, they frequently feel inferior or sad for not playing the caretaking role socially assigned to them in such a naturalized way. Consequently, motherhood appears many times to be the root for feeling like “a complete woman”, while creating a favorable context for feelings of affiliation regarding some specific social position. In this sense, according to participant Brenda:

*“Becoming a mother was everything to me. It gave me a place in the world. Being a mother provides women with a place, which is something sad because we were supposed to have our place no matter what. But I see that this has changed my life (...). Of course a lot of things change, such as responsibilities, but now that I am a mother it is something legitimate”.*

In this excerpt, it becomes evident how identities are articulated and legitimized by means of everyday practices that involve contact with other people and with the community in which this person is inserted. Therefore, it becomes necessary to have in mind that the national character of identities constitutes itself by means of interactions between individuals and groups in different social context, involving the symbolic outlining of differences (Galinkin & Zauli, 2011; Madureira, 2018; Woodward, 2000).

Specifically regarding the female identity, we can say that it was historically constructed in connection with caretaking. Women, in the words of Donath (2017), are normally considered “objects”, and the purpose of their existence is to serve others in every way. In the sense, it is pertinent to mention that Berger (1980), by discussing femaleness and its orientation towards others, emphasizes that:

Being born a woman within a confined condition of someone submissive to men (...) You have to be careful about everything you do, especially your

appearance to men. It is of decisive importance for what will generally be considered your success in life. Your own concept yourself is submitted to the appreciation of another person (...). That is how a woman turns herself into an object (pp. 50-51).

With this in mind, we can say that, in the tradition of visual arts in our Western countries, the female body has been particularly expected to serve the male eye, according to the analysis by Berger (1980) and by Loponte (2002).

In a more comprehensive sense, women, by being traditionally treated as an object, many times end up internalizing this conception regarding their own image and the gender relations, which produces significant impacts in the field of sexuality. After all, objects as inanimate beings do not have desires or aspirations, their sole purpose is to serve others or their “owner”. We can point out that the “owner”, regarding women-mothers, would not be exclusively a husband (in heterosexual relationships), it would also include the children, when we become aware of the conception that a “good mother” would be fully available to satisfy the needs of their children.

Consequently, with the constant pressure for women to correspond to socially promoted standards of what a mother should be like, Being or doing professional activities. Thus, according to Boris and Cesidio (2007), quitting or delaying a studies can be related to social expectations on the female position historically constructed towards domestic attributions including motherhood.

In this sense, it is important to highlight the following excerpts from the interviews with participants Veronica and Martha. According to Veronica: *“My daughter is a priority in my life. I study when I have the time. If I have to be with her have to stop studying. I do not have the time to do things like I used to. There are interruptions all the time”.*

Likewise, Martha commented that:

*“Are you asking me if being a mother affected my studies? Of course it did! I had to cancel my course twice. To me, it was quite difficult (...). I started smoking again when I returned to my studies, I used to smoke all the way to college and back as a means to mitigate anxiety”.*

Based on the mentioned examples, we perceive that the arrival of a baby and motherhood brings new demands to women, which might trigger psychological suffering due to motherhood that is not considered ideal or suitable, like having to realize activities other than taking care of the children and let them spend the day with someone else. Besides that, out of the six participants of realized research, five reported during the interviews that the birth of their children did not bring any significant changes to the everyday lives of the

fathers. In other words, they reported that while their routines changed unquestionably, and they needed to realize the difficult conciliation of myriad activities and tasks whereas the routine of their partners remained virtually the same: no additions no loss regarding their obligations towards the baby.

Orlandi and Toneli (2008) contribute to the following discussion by exposing the fact that, regarding men, the birth of a child does not necessarily mean school evasion. Interruptions or delays in their studies are commonly associated with other factors such as lack of interest. In this sense, it is pertinent to mention that out of the six fathers of the children of the participants, 4 kept studying during pregnancy and did not have to interrupt their studies during the birth or early growth of the children, five of the husbands kept regular jobs.

The relation between interruption or difficulty to conciliate studies with motherhood is directly connected with the greater demand for attention during the raising of children for women in comparison with the men. Thus, mother is get overloaded and under pressure regarding the task of taking care of their children, which makes things more difficult and creates obstacles regarding the continuity of their studies.

In this sense, it is important to mention that according to the discussion by Zanella (2018), despite the fact that nowadays women are active members of the job market as well as of other environments, there is still the prevalent conception that it is the women's exclusive responsibility to be home and raise the children.

On the other hand, paid work out of the home does not come out as an expectation associated to women, but it consists of a possibility for action that does not exclude her main or responsibility that would be, according to social expectations, home and family.

### **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

When Martha took the pregnancy test and tested positive in 2005, she was becoming a mother for the first time and the little did she know that she was starting a new phase in her life at that moment, that you would have to interrupt her studies, and her professional formation for over 10 years. Juliana, when she was about to see her dream of entering the psychology course come true, had to quit the cars in the early semesters in order to provide a home and support for the little life that she was carrying. She ran through moments of utter loneliness and got kicked out of her home by her own father; later on, she was abandoned by the father of her daughter too.

Wanda, who had been informed by a gynecologist that she was unable to get pregnant, saw her world come upside down when she found out she was pregnant at 17 when she was just about to graduate from high school. People got judgmental and she had to listen to a lot of criticism by her classmates and teachers, she did her best

to attend all classes nevertheless.

Among the six participants of the research, five reported during the interviews that the birth of their children did not bring any changes to the lives of the fathers of the children. In addition, among the six participants, three received support from female parents exclusively, whereas only one participant declared that her husband, her daughter's father, took turns in helping out with the baby. Besides that, in the realized research, two participants quit studying to take care of their children and three had to interrupt their studies for a while, periods of time ranging from months to years.

The authors of the present article got sad with the observation that the experiences of the participants of the research got quite naturalized. The experiences involve exclusion, and the resignation of young mothers who had to quit studying. Nobody bothered to ask them why they were making that decision.

Based on the discussion developed in the present article, as well as the realized theoretical articulations, the objectives of the research and the information constructed in the field research, it is possible to conclude that the phenomenon of school evasion and/order interruption of studies by young mothers is connected to gender stereotypes that have deep roots in Brazilian society.

As social and historical basis, we can consider the prevalence of patriarchal ideals and the gender binary norm as major obstacles for progress and conciliation of studies by young mothers. Those are the foundations of traditional social expectations regarding activities that are considered "female", which confine women in the home and family environment (Bourdieu, 2005; Madureira, 2010, 2018; Parker, 1991). That reality reflects the young mothers' difficulty to conciliate studies with motherhood because of the great demand of attention by their children, and men usually do not share the same load of responsibility (Boris & Cesidio, 2007).

The participants of the research expressed also a desire to resume there are studies and and understanding of the importance of education in their lives, whether in terms of quality of life or in terms of identity. It was a matter of taking back the things they had to give up in order to have their babies. Consequently, this perspective contradicts the understanding that these women left the university for merely personal reasons, such as well lack of interest. This perspective also recognizes more comprehensive social, historical, and cultural matters. Which indicates, in this sense, that such scenario involves other factors such as factors related to the support network and to the unequal division of parental tasks.

Considering that the development of a critical, reflective perspective on social norms is of fundamental importance in the practice of psychologists, which must express the social and ethical commitment with the

promotion of health and well-being among people, we recommend the realization of future research works in this field, while diversifying the types of groups of participants. More specifically, we suggest the realization of future research works with the participation of a greater diversity of women in terms of age, school education, marital status, as well as in terms of racial or ethnical factors and social class.

Besides that, considering the scarcity of research works that contemplate matters of gender, motherhood, and the school evasion in a way that is articulated to critical analysis of gender stereotypes, it is necessary to highlight the relevance of the realization of new research works in the field of psychology, as science and as field of professional practice, in order to contribute to the gradual deconstruction of extant sexist forms of discrimination that happen nowadays.

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