MOTHERHOOD AND AGE: YOUNG MOTHERS IN STOCKHOLM

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Introduction

Motherhood has long been a central focus for feminist writers, activists and scholars, aiming to understand women's experiences and social positioning in relation to their reproductive abilities. As a woman, I have myself been made aware, both physically and socially, of my potential to become a mother. This has motivated my personal inquiry into understanding what motherhood entails. Moreover, it has stimulated me to consider the topic from an academic perspective, resulting in this ethnographic research project on young mothers in Stockholm, Sweden. My findings from the study will be presented and examined in this text.

Before conducting my study I engaged with literature on motherhood. I found that the western feminist discourse on the topic examines 'the power and powerlessness embodied in motherhood in patriarchal culture' (Rich 1986: 14). Motherhood was considered and scrutinized in relation to gender constructs and historical mechanisms that enable the subjugation of women in their role as mothers (Tronto 1993). In light of this literary background, I was prepared to use the construct of gender as the primary tool when analysing my research findings. However, against these expectations, my open-ended conversations with the mothers consistently moved away from discussing motherhood in terms of gender construct and the subordination of women. Instead, the interviews added a dimension to motherhood that I had not faced in the literature – the factor of age. The mothers I met with expressed that they were predominantly allocated a social role of motherhood in relation to social norms of age. I do not wish to dismiss the influence of gender on women's roles as mothers; however, this text aims to add to the existing literature by focusing on age, and particularly young age, in relation to motherhood.

I will initially clarify the social context of my project and describe my ethnographic method and approach. On the basis of my ethnographic data, I will then consider how the women I spoke to transitioned into motherhood. Both physical and social aspects of motherhood will be examined and ideas of van Gennep (1960) and Layne (2000) will be incorporated. This will be followed by an examination of how the societal ordering of age affected the women's role as mothers. I will illustrate how Peatrik's (2005) findings of the Meru people's societal structures have some similarities to the Swedish age norm. It will further be illustrated that the societal ordering of age functions to define social roles as well as legitimizing mistrust towards people whose actions conflict with the age norm, such as young mothers.

Ethnographic method and approach

I am myself not a mother, and my study focuses on other women's first-hand experiences of motherhood. Originally, I sought to gain an understanding of the transition in becoming a mother. I therefore believed that women who had more recently experienced their first pregnancy would be the most suitable to approach. Rather than speaking to my own mother, I therefore approached a childhood friend who is currently the mother of two children, both under five years old. She was not only willing to share her experiences, but also to introduce me to other mothers as well as provide me with channels through which I could reach other women who had experienced their first birth during the last five years. Through my friend's connections, I made contact with women who all had their first child at a young age relative to Swedish standards.

According to the governmental body Statistics Sweden, the average age for women in Sweden to have their first child is currently 29 years. However, within the country there are regional variations with the highest average age of 31.4 years in Stockholm. This has been generally constant, with the average age of first time mothers only increasing by one year over the last ten-year period (Statistics Sweden 2015).The mothers that I spoke to were all living in Stockholm and were aged between 24 and 26 at the time of my study. They had one or two children and had given birth to their first child when they were between 18 and 20 years old. In

reference to the presented statistics, they thus had their first child more than ten years earlier than the average woman in their region. This illustrates that the women in my study deviate from the current norm. Layne has argued that 'women whose experience of motherhood is at odds with the normative standard are exposed to the judgment of others' (1999: 11). This was confirmed by the women I spoke with, as they emphasized the societal importance of the perceived age norm for motherhood. For example, the age norm legitimized others to categorize them as 'young mothers' instead of just mothers.

I spoke with five women, all of whom came from a middle class background. I never met with any of the fathers of the women's children, so my study should be read in light of motherhood only, and not as a study on general parental personhood. My interaction with the women was in the form of longer one-on-one conversations. I sought not to position myself as an interviewer, but as a listener who was interested in their personal experiences. This was an attempt to allow the women to decide what factors of their transition into motherhood they considered to be of importance. Consistently, I opened the conversation by asking the women to tell me about the first time they found out that they were pregnant and then proceeded from there. I attempted mostly to listen, but I did at times direct the conversation onto a certain track by asking for clarification concerning certain comments. After having heard more than one woman express certain feelings, I sometimes asked questions relating to that topic in my proceeding conversations.

Becoming a Mother

My interactions with the women showed that becoming a mother included both physical and social transformation. The first step towards motherhood for the women began with realizing that they were pregnant. None of the women I spoke with had planned their pregnancy. Like others, one woman had been on a birth control that prevented her from having her period, a common side-effect for some hormonal contraceptives. Her menstrual cycle could therefore not indicate that

something in her body had changed. She described the moment she first realized that her body was different:

'I was lying on my back in my grandmother's apartment. I was exhausted from traveling back and forth between Stockholm and Uppsala [her university town]. As I lay there, I started to feel with my hands over my belly. I then realized that my stomach did not go in the way it used to when I sucked in. This made me realize that something had changed. I called my friend and told her that I thought I needed to take a pregnancy test.'

All the women referred to the moment when they realized that they were pregnant, in terms of change. One woman expressed that she felt that 'finding out meant that I was no longer just I. I was I plus something, or maybe someone'. Another woman said that 'it somehow made sense that there was something inside of me that had made me feel nauseous, but knowing was such a change'. As these comments suggest, 'finding out' affected the women's relation to their bodies, primarily in terms of a confirmed awareness of a physical change. The pregnancy test showed that there was something within them that was different, and for these women, it came to be the first conscious part in their process of becoming mothers.

'Finding out' not only made these women aware of a physical change in their bodies. It also meant that they had to make a decision, whether or not they wanted to have a child. Each woman's decision process differed. One woman made a 'pros and cons' list for having a child, and she then decided before she looked at the result of the pregnancy test. Another expressed that she immediately felt certain that she wanted a child, and a third consulted with her sister before deciding. Some women consulted the fathers-to-be and some did not. Despite the overwhelming and conflicting feelings associated with the decision, the women portrayed it as something joyful and the start of what would become a new part of their life.

Van Gennep states that pregnancy and birth are associated with transition, as a formulation and reformulation of the mother's identity (1960: 41-45). As the women

in my study had not planned their pregnancy, their transition into motherhood started with the 'finding out' and then the decision that they wanted to continue with their pregnancy. This first step meant that the women reformulated their identity in relation to the new physical state of their body. At that stage, their motherhood equated their awareness of the physical change. Van Gennep further argues that the social reformulation of identity can be considered in terms of passages between different social groups. He states that this 'progression from one group to the next is accompanied with certain acts' (1960: 39). Both social reformulation and the acts that it required were included in the next part of the women's transition into motherhood. This meant establishing themselves socially as expectant mothers and this encompassed telling their friends and family about their pregnancy.

'After knowing that I would be a mother, I had to let my friends and family know. Most of them were very surprised and some questioned my decision and told me that I was too young to be a mother. I usually answered that I was not too young since I was in the process of having a child'

The responses this woman received illustrates that her social environment did not necessarily believe that her pregnancy granted her motherhood. Her age appeared to speak against it. Furthermore, negative comments concerning age were often connected to the women's financial situations.

'My mother kept reminding me of all the things and possibilities I had enjoyed as a child because my parents had been older and therefore had good economical possibilities. I must admit that I was stressed and anxious over my economic situation, but at the same time I was not expecting to live a luxurious life. A simpler life would not make me less of a mother.'

Other women had similar experiences whereby people around them framed their potential for motherhood in terms of questions such as; 'How will you buy everything that a child needs?' and 'Can you afford to be a mother? When you are a

mother, how will you provide the best for your child?' The people in the women's social environment regularly appeared to consider financial prosperity as the critical factor, an 'act', of being a mother. Thus, the women's ability and legitimacy as mothers was, to varying degrees, questioned upon the basis of their economic outlook at their age. This complicated the women's transition into motherhood by hindering a smooth progress from one social group (young women) to the other (mothers).

In her study of women who experienced pregnancy loss, Layne (2000) highlights the relation between purchasing 'baby things' and claiming motherhood. The women in Layne's study stated that they were mothers of unborn children and that their motherhood was an important part of their grief. However, the women struggled to attain the social position of motherhood as they never gave birth to a child that could verify them as mothers. For these women, buying things for their lost baby helped them claim motherhood as it provided tangible proof that there had been a real baby (Layne, 2000). The women in Layne's text and the women in my study face inverted issues. The first group's motherhood was questioned because they lost their child before birth, while affirmed through the things they bought. The second group's motherhood was affirmed by their pregnancy and the child they later had, but questioned because of suspicion that they did not have money to buy 'baby things'. A woman's purchasing of items for her baby can be understood as an 'act' which van Gennep argues is central for social transition. In becoming mothers, the women in my study had to reformulate their identity physically and socially, suggesting that motherhood includes both of these factors.

Motherhood and the Ordering of Age

The societal connection between motherhood and age proved to also be a central feature of my findings.

'I knew that I would face questions. I mean, I was a teenager when I had my first child and it is not that common. People assume that older mothers do things right and have everything in order.'

For the women in my study, being a young mother meant rejecting socially established assumptions of both motherhood and youth. By deviating from the age norm and having their child at a young age, their behaviour conflicted with the stereotypical order. The women described how youth was always portrayed to them as a time of selfishness where adventures and crazy behaviour was encouraged alongside studies. The time for care and motherhood belonged to a later age. This suggests that certain behaviours and actions are socially ordered into different age groups and that people are assumed to comply with this system. If an individual in one age performs another age's actions, such as being a young mother, it is questioned by others; 'People told me that I was too young to be a mother because I had not "got it out of my system" yet.' This woman's motherly ability was questioned on the basis that she, because of her age, she had other actions to do. What those other things were was not obvious, but what was clear was that whatever she was supposed to 'get out of her system' was not a baby. Furthermore, the ordering of age appears to also affect the status of certain events and behaviours. As one of the women stated: 'When young mothers have a child it is viewed as a failure, but when mothers in their thirties have their baby people praise it'. This suggests that events that occur in accordance with age norms are generally valued more by the social environment than events that deviate from it. By not complying with the age norm, young mothers are unsynchronized with these structures that seemingly order society and give value to actions.

Peatrik (2005) illustrates how societal structures among the Meru people in Eastern Africa have generated a discrepancy between biological and social age. There are four recognized age groups in the Meru society. Entering the first age group signifies entering into adulthood which means that a Meru can engage in sexual activities and have children. Due to regional changes however, the ruling third age groups ought to remain in power for longer than the system previously allowed for. This resulted in younger Merus rarely being allowed to enter the first age group, meaning that they could be up to forty years old when they finally were allowed to enter adulthood. This further created an unsynchronized relationship between the

biological and social age, as puberty and adulthood were over twenty years apart (Peatrik 2005). Although very different from the Meru society, I believe that Sweden also has societal structures that create a distancing between biological and social age. The age norm allocating motherhood to women in their later twenties to early thirties ignores younger women's biological ability to have children. Social understandings further reinforce these societal structures, such as connecting motherhood with certain economic living standards.

Furthermore, from the experiences of the women in my study, the age norm of motherhood appears to cause problems for young mothers. As it creates a belief that young women are more suited for other things than motherhood, the age norm serves to legitimize mistrust of young women's motherhood.

'When people see me with my child, even if they don't know me, they can ask me questions like "How old are you?", "How can you raise a child if you are not yet an adult?", "Are you still with the father?" Older mothers that I know never get asked such questions.'

All women I spoke with expressed that they faced questions relating to their motherhood and youth. As one woman told me: 'People feel entitled to ask me all kinds of private things, and I feel like I must defend myself'. The societal age norms continually place these women under scrutiny. The way that the social environment complies with the age norm thus causes women unnecessary trouble and discomfort.

The age norm however, is not only upheld by the women's social environment, but to some extent, also by the women themselves. When I asked the women of how they pictured an ideal mother, they often formulated an answer in accordance with the age norm. They described an ideal mother as 'someone who owns a house', 'has a car and a well-paid job', 'someone who gets their child when they are around thirty'. Although all women viewed themselves as good mothers and did not believe that young mothers were worse than older mothers, sometimes the opposite, they

still pictured the ideal mother in accordance with the societal structures. However, one woman argued that 'being the ideal mother is not the same as being the best mother'. Furthermore, the connection between a particular age and certain behaviour was also present when the women spoke of their own age.

'I feel like I am living the life of a 32 year old, taking my kids to day care and so on. However, when I, every now and then, go out to a nightclub with friends I feel younger than them. I feel like a teenager, the same age I was when I got my first child. You know, I haven't done the youth things that others do.'

When the women formulated how they perceived age they did not refer to their biological age, but their social age defined by the age norm. This further illustrates both that the age norm functions to both define others and oneself by preformed behaviours, and that Swedish understandings of motherhood correspond directly with this societal structure.

Conclusion

Through this text I have examined findings from my ethnographic project among young mothers in Stockholm, Sweden. Initially, I described how the women's age affected their transition into motherhood. For the women in this study, the first step in becoming a mother was to 'find out' that they were pregnant and to decide that they wanted to have the child. This physical reformulation of their bodies was followed by the stage of socially establishing themselves as mothers within their social environment. This was met by concern as their age was viewed as detrimental to achieving and attaining everything that the social understanding of motherhood required, for example economic prosperity. This illustrated that there were not just physical but also social factors that affected motherhood. Secondly, I examined how the young women's experiences conveyed a societal structure that ordered different behaviours into certain ages. This age norm was shown to affect the status attributed to different actions, such as giving a lesser value to young motherhood than to 'age appropriate' motherhood. The age norm further legitimized a social mistrust of young women's motherly abilities. The societal ordering in age however

was not only used by others to define the women as young mothers, but was also adopted by the women themselves when they spoke about their own age. To conclude, this study on young motherhood in Sweden has shown that motherhood can be understood in both physical and social terms, as well as highlighting that the social ordering of age functions to define people into categories, such as young mothers.

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