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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Experiences of Motherhood in University Students in Brazil: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract:

Introduction:

The women's rise to higher education contrasts with the phenomenon of motherhood, since it instigates changes in various contexts, whether physiological or emotional, and directly affects the way of life and routine of those women, resulting in a constant conflict between motherhood and academic career. In this sense, the student has to restructure responsibilities and behaviors, as well as requires family support and laws that support her in this period.

Objectives:

To describe the experiences of motherhood in university students, and to identify the strategies developed by university students to adapt motherhood with academic routine.

Methods:

This is a descriptive, exploratory and qualitative research carried out in a private University Center in Brazil. The participants were ten Nursing undergraduate students, regularly enrolled and who experienced motherhood during the academic term. Data were collected during August and September 2019, through a recorded interview using a semi-structured form. For the treatment and analysis of the data, the Collective Subject Discourse was used. The study followed the ethical precepts and was approved by the ethics committee (opinion n. 3.419.572).

Results:

The participants' discourses gave rise to four central ideas: Feelings experienced from the discovery of pregnancy; The discovery of pregnancy and the decision to continue the course; Support relationships as a decisive factor for the non-abandonment of the course and Strategies to reconcile motherhood with academic routine. The main key expressions identified in the discourses were: joy, fear, insecurity, anguish, concern, distress, anger, sadness, interrupting, giving up, taking time off from the course, not taking time off from the course, family support, support from friends, support from the institution, adjusting schedules, studying while my child sleeps, family help, taking the baby to college, storing milk while breastfeeding.

Conclusion:

The analysis of the discourses revealed that the experience of motherhood in the university sphere is marked by a combination of different feelings, and by an important process of adaptations to the new moment, since there is a reflection and indecision about the continuity of the academic trajectory. The reports also highlight the importance of family, institutional and friend support, such as a support network of incentive to the care with the child, as well as the use of strategies to reconcile academic routine with motherhood.

Keywords: Adaptation, Behavior, Strategies, Students, Parenting, Undergraduate students, Motherhood.

Article History

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1. INTRODUCTION

The experience of motherhood for women causes intense transformations, because it is a period marked by considerable physiological transitions and involves emotional bonds, in which, in addition to the effects of hormonal, cultural, environmental conditions and stress factors, there is an impact of the personality formation of each individual, in which being a mother is seen as an arduous commitment, being essential to restructure responsibilities and behaviors [1 - 4].

Given the need for adaptations required by motherhood, university students need, in addition to emotional and family support, laws that support them in this period. In this perspective, the Ministry of Education (ME) regulates the teaching for pregnant students, through Law n. 6,202, of April 17, 1975, which provides for the home exercise regime [5].

The application of this law allows performing household activities, from the eighth month of pregnancy and for three months after the baby's birth, enabling the student mother to fulfill her academic obligations outside the Higher Education Institution (HEI), being the faculty responsible for offering the necessary support for the execution of these activities [5, 6].

The context of motherhood in undergraduate studies is a theme little discussed in the literature and is necessary, since the academic environment and motherhood are events that bring significant changes in the experienced context, as well as can generate conflicts and obstacles that can hinder the development and completion of the course.

The theme is a priority for the World Health Organization, since, among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to be achieved by 2030, maternal health is in objective 3 (health and well-being), and is composed of nine goals to be achieved by 2030.

In view of these considerations, the research aimed to describe the experiences of motherhood in university students and to identify the strategies elaborated by them to reconcile motherhood with the academic routine.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Type of Study

This is a descriptive, exploratory and qualitative research, which encompasses beliefs, behaviors, relationships, concepts and opinions, allowing for the understanding of complexity and details of the information obtained [7, 8].

2.2. Study Participants

The participants were ten nursing undergraduate students that met the following inclusion criteria: being regularly enrolled and having experienced motherhood during the academic term. Students that were on maternity leave during the collection period were excluded. Importantly, the 10 participants corresponded to all students who met the inclusion criteria, in all terms of the nursing course, which did not allow for using the saturation criterion in the statements.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected during August and September 2019 through an interview using a semi-structured form composed of two parts: the first contained data characterizing the participants (age, marital status and family income) and the second, questions related to the theme (How did you experience motherhood during the academic period? How did you reconcile motherhood with studies?). The recording was performed using a recorder.

The participants were approached during the recess between classes in order not to jeopardize their academic activities. The research was presented by reading the Informed Consent Form (ICF) and soon after, the students were invited to participate in the study. The students who agreed to participate in the research, after signing the informed consent form, had the interview scheduled according to their availability.

2.4. Data Analysis

The interviews were fully transcribed, and the discourses were analyzed through the Collective Subject Discourse (CSD). This analysis technique consists of grouping similar categories, associating the themes of opinions of analog meaning with each category, present in different statements, forming, with all contents, a synthesis and single statement, written in the first-person singular, as if the collectivity was talking with a single person.

In summary, the technique consists of analyzing the content of the collected statements, filtering, from each one, the Central Ideas (CI) and their equivalent Key Expressions (KE), uniting them when similar and composing the CSD. The KE are fragments of the discourse that point out their most considerable passages, and the CIs briefly describe the meanings of each homologous group of the KE.

3. RESULTS

The participants were ten university students who experienced motherhood during graduation, whose ages ranged from 21 to 31 years. Regarding marital status, six were unmarried, three married, and one stable union. In relation to approximate family income, five reported up to two minimum wages and five, above three minimum wages.

Considering the objective of the study, after reading the interviews and analyzing the participants' individual responses, the CI and their respective KE were selected, allowing the construction of the CSD. Four CI emerged, namely: Feelings experienced from the discovery of pregnancy; The discovery of pregnancy and the decision to continue the course; Support relationships as a decisive factor for the non-abandonment of the course and strategies to reconcile motherhood with academic routine.

3.1. First Central Idea – Feelings Experienced from the Discovery of Pregnancy

Key-expressions:

- Joy

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- Fear
- Insecurity
- Anguish
- Concern
- Affliction
- Anger
- Sadness

Collective Subject Discourse:

I was not afraid, on the contrary, I was quite cheerful. When I found out I was pregnant, my biggest feeling was fear and insecurity, because I am still in college, it is new, and not knowing what to do to reconcile my studies with motherhood, and not having a job and not knowing how to provide for my child. Then I had many thoughts, but what made me more distressed was the unknown future. I was worried and distressed because I did not know what to do, I was angry about everything. There are also people's judgments, and we get so sad about these things. (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th).

3.2. Second Central Idea – The Discovery of Pregnancy and the Decision to Continue the Course

Key-expressions:

- Interrupt
- Give up
- Take time off from the course
- Not take time off from the course

Collective Subject Discourse:

At first, I thought about interrupting the course, I thought it would not work out. I thought about giving up, taking some time off, because I got pregnant right in the term full of internships, for not knowing what to do and for living alone. But I also thought about not leaving the course, because when we become mothers, we have all the rights guaranteed, and besides, my son was about to be born and would need me. (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th).

3.3. Third Central Idea – Support Relationships as a Decisive Factor for the Non-abandonment of the Course

Key-expressions:

- Family support
- Friends' support
- Institutional support

Collective Subject Discourse:

The support of family and friends made me not give up the course. But my mother, my parents and my husband were always there for me, giving strength to move forward. I thought, it is not going to stop me, I am going to try, my boyfriend said he was going to support me so I did it. My husband's parents helped a lot, including my mother-in-law's support, which has been essential these past few days, because when I come to college, she looks after him for me. I had support from college, they helped me a lot at the beginning and

up to three months. The professors were very flexible, they were always figuring it out, they were wonderful. (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th).

3.4. Fourth Central Idea – Strategies to Reconcile Motherhood with Academic Routine

Key-expressions:

- Adjust schedules
- Study while my child is sleeping
- Family's help
- Take the baby to college
- Store milk
- While breastfeeding

Collective Subject Discourse:

Even before she was born, I already searched the internet for information on how to adjust the baby's sleep time. Since she was one month and a half, she has slept all night, so I can reconcile. When my son is asleep, I get as much material as I can and also when his father takes care of him a little, then I grab the opportunity and begin to study. For me to study, my mother or someone in the family stays with my daughter and it helps me a lot. It was hard because I had to take care of him, like, having to bring him to college. I was concerned about expressing the milk and storing it, since I had to go to college in the afternoon. Oh! When I am breastfeeding too (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th).

4. DISCUSSION

As exposed in the CSD of the first CI, the university students expressed in the discourses the various feelings experienced by them after discovering pregnancy, and that, from then on, they would have to adapt to the new situation, which left them angry, afraid, insecure, distressed, concerned, anxious, sad and joyful.

The experience of being a mother is something unique in the woman's life, which comprises transformations and adaptations. In the psychological context, there emerge emotional factors related to pregnancy, childbirth and puerperium. In this essence, in addition to the joys, the baby's arrival can be characterized as a phase of anguish, due to the psychic reorganization that parents need to go through, instigating expectations, fears and abstractions in relation to her behavior and performance as a mother [10 - 15].

The non-affection of some students in the first instant of the discovery of pregnancy is remarkable, motivating feelings of despair, concern and distress. According to a study about the feelings revealed when discovering pregnancy and in the current moment of pregnancy, these feelings are not only linked to the child, but also to other issues, such as experiencing limiting situations, lack of family support and fears about the future [11 - 18].

The ambivalence of feelings, thoughts and sensations is frequent. According to the study conducted in southern Brazil [10], the occurrence of these feelings may emerge throughout

the three trimesters of pregnancy as well as after the baby's birth. Pregnancy demands many adaptations that consequently involve achievements and losses, and there may be ambivalence of feelings even after confirmation with clinical tests. Even in cases of a planned pregnancy, the confirmation is still a surprise, in which there is a clash between the desire to become pregnant and the actual accomplishment of the news, which can culminate in the presence of contradictory feelings towards the birth.

The young women's discourses also show reflection and displeasure regarding social criticism. Pregnancy in these circumstances can be a phenomenon that threatens the moral values and reputation of the young woman in the community by contradicting the norms and social expectations they had in relation to her. The occurrence of rejection by society and the family is due to specific factors related to social prejudices [12 - 23].

Women's participation in different social areas increases every day; however, they still face obstacles, including their insertion in higher education. Despite the current society, which has undergone countless behavioral and gender revolutions, women still struggle for empowerment in different areas of social life, and not just those restricted to domestic and maternal tasks [24].

For many years, women were excluded from public, social and political life, being responsible for household chores and childcare for a long time. They were not deprived only of the right to study, but of everything not included in the domestic context, as these activities were reflected as unworthy and antagonistic to women's own aptitude [25].

Thus, in the CSD, the students reveal the ambiguity of feelings, reinforced by the current situation of being a university student and not being able to reconcile studies with motherhood, because they have no payment or employment as a guarantee and depend on the family, as well as by the criticisms and judgments of society.

The CSD of the second central idea addresses a great and important reflection of young women from the moment of discovery, which is the decision about continuing graduation. In general, students, regardless of having planned pregnancy or not, do not desire to give up the course; however, they have no idea what to do and how to deal with the new reality [13 - 18].

Women who experience motherhood during their academic lives need to deal with a new routine previously unknown. Many of them choose to take time off from the course aiming to return later, when they imagine that they will be adapted to the current situation or when they believe they will have greater family support. Nevertheless, they face new setbacks, making them rethink about the continuity of education and giving up academic life

Therefore, there are laws that regulate teaching for pregnant students, in which, from the eighth month of pregnancy and for three months, these students are supported by the home exercise regime, without attendance problems. Federal Law N. 6,202, of April 17, 1975, regulates this period of leave, as well as the home exercise regime that will be carried out outside the HEI and assisted by its faculty [5].

Heilborn [14] reaffirms that women's admission to universities does not dispense them from motherhood and, because of this, many of them choose partial hour loads, greater flexibility of schedules and sudden interruptions in academic and professional life. The point is that these temporary interruptions later delay and hinder the return to activities. The same author reports that students that decide to continue their studies as well as follow their academic career choose to postpone ideals and projects of marriage and motherhood, so that, when pregnancy emerges, women in the midst of undergraduate and scientific careers are obliged to make difficult choices, such as delaying conclusions and occupation of positions in addition to having a lower availability.

According to a study conducted in Bahia, married women with children justify their decision-making, abandonments and any changes in plans regarding the student career. They talk about the need to maintain balance as the main factor for the high stress in which they live [15].

Many university mothers interrupt the course, but aiming to resume later, essentially supporting themselves in the possible help they could have from a family member to look after their child while they study. The students face great challenges due to their motherhood during graduation, although they often delay and even stop the course due to the need for dedication and care with the child [26, 27].

The expectations of growth, family prosperity and life change after graduation help encourage the continuity of the course, together with the fact that the completion of higher education is seen as an idealized achievement [14 - 22].

The discourses highlight that the decision to continue or not the undergraduate studies generates a great reflection and analysis on the part of the students, who need to evaluate not only their desires, but also the conditions and the help they will need to maintain the balance of both functions. Thus, in the CSD of the third CI, the students report the different types of support received by them, which were essential for the non-abandonment of the course, report the strength offered by family and friends, as well as the support offered by the college and its faculty.

Regarding the social support network, the family constitutes the initial socializing agent of the individual. It offers support, help and guidance, as well as provides examples of how to live, feel, take care of oneself and others. Additionally, this type of support is extremely important during pregnancy and puerperium, because these are crucial periods, both biologically and psychologically, due to the physiological changes that prepare women for delivery, thus being indispensable to the rereading of social and family roles [19].

Social support throughout pregnancy brings beneficial influences on the attitudes and emotions of pregnant women, as well as becomes positive for the new mother. Social support is essential since pregnancy and affects the experience of motherhood and child development [20 - 24].

The students also report a huge satisfaction with the support offered by the faculty, because they are facilitators during this process. Remarkably, the professor's importance to

the student is not limited to the theoretical knowledge and skills taught. University students conceive professors as a professional mirror and source of support and counseling. Therefore, the professor-student conviviality is indispensable to the learning process and the quality of the university trajectory [18, 22].

In view of this, the discourses expressed by the study participants reveal the importance of the different types of support relationships in the student's life, as they are a starting point to define the new plans of university mothers and facilitators in the process of adaptation and reconciliation between maternal, labor and student tasks [28 - 31].

As exposed in the CSD of the fourth central idea, the university students describe strategies they have to reconcile academic life with motherhood, express in the discourses the search for information that enables organizing the care with the child, even before the birth. In this organization of care, many of them have the partner's help, which also facilitates the moment experienced.

Beltrame and Donelli [32] state that, in the new family conjunctures, there is a reorganization of social roles, both by men and women. As a result, it directly interferes with the functions of the father and mother in the family context, thus causing changes in the motherhood convictions understood thus far.

The participants reinforce the need for more time available to carry out academic tasks, since baby care represents a great demand. In contrast, a strategy used by them is to take their children to college; however, this can significantly interfere with academic performance and increase physical tiredness.

Therefore, in the CSD of the present study, the students revealed their experiences during the period of adaptation with the new routine of being a mother and university student, highlighting the ambiguity of feelings experienced, the decision about continuing the course, the importance of support relationships, as well as the strategies to reconcile motherhood with academic activities.

The limitation of the study was the small number of participants who met the inclusion criteria of the research, as well as the absence of studies involving the experience of motherhood during higher education in Brazil.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study can contribute to new reflections on the theme, as well as the development of researches that can discuss motherhood in academic life, and the relationships between this phenomenon and training institutions [33 - 38].

CONCLUSION

The discourses of the participants revealed that they experience various feelings and emotions related to motherhood in the university context, in addition to an important process of adaptations to the new moment. The reports showed that most mothers recognize that, at the time of discovery, there is a reflection and indecision about continuing the academic trajectory, in view of the challenges to be overcome during pregnancy allied to their student condition.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, there were high expectations of new opportunities and prosperity after completing the course, revealing the importance of institutional, family and friend support, and incentive network in the care with the child, which is a decisive factor for not abandoning graduation.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

This study was approved by the ethics committee of University Center UNINOVAFAP/ National Council Research, Brazil (opinion no. 3.419.572).

HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

The fundamental ethical and scientific requirements for research involving human beings were met, according to resolution 466/12 of the Brazilian National Health Council.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

The students who agreed to participate in the research, after signing the informed consent form, had the interview scheduled according to their availability.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available in the article.

FUNDING

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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