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Exploring fertility in the context of culture

Clare Brusin, Student, Degree Programme in Nursing

Tampere University of Applied Sciences

Finland

Ronnell Victor Mat-An, Student, Degree Programme in Nursing

Tampere University of Applied Sciences

Finland

Elina Botha, PhD, Senior Lecturer in Midwifery

Tampere University of Applied Sciences

Finland

Abstract

Culture plays a very important part in sexual and reproductive behaviors and motivations. Understanding culture's role as a background factor, one can understand fertility better. For most cultures, little girls are expected to become mothers, little boys as future fathers and their offspring as protection from support against the ailments of old age. Nowadays, the survival instinct has superseded the reproductive instinct in many cultures and the current generation is opting out of the prospect of child rearing because of the lack of security and poor outlook of the future. It is known that events in the world history and the development of different cultures has formed peoples view on sexual and reproductive health, specially fertility. With time, cultures and paradigms change. It is time to start planning for and implementing sustainable fertility. Actions to safeguard reproduction health must be put into place not only for better health but also to better include cultural and societal factors in fertility education.

Keywords: culture, society, fertility, birth rate

Tiivistelmä

Kulttuurilla on erittäin tärkeä rooli seksuaali- ja lisääntymiskäyttäytymisessä ja motivaatioissa. Kulttuurin roolin ymmärtäminen taustatekijänä, voidaan hedelmällisyyttä ymmärtää paremmin. Useimmissa kulttuureissa pikkutyttöistä odotetaan tulevan äitejä, pikkupojista isiä ja heidän jälkeläisistään suojaa vanhuuden vaivoilta. Nykyään selviytymisvaisto on ohittanut lisääntymisvaiston monissa kulttuureissa ja nykysukupolvi jättäytyy pois lasten hankinnan mahdollisuudesta turvallisuuden puutteen ja tulevaisuuden huonojen näkymien vuoksi. Tiedetään, että maailmanhistorian tapahtumat ja eri kulttuurien kehittyminen ovat muovanneet ihmisten ajatuksia seksuaali- ja lisääntymisterveydestä, erityisesti hedelmällisyydestä. Ajan myötä kulttuurit ja paradigmat muuttuvat. On aika alkaa suunnitella ja toteuttaa kestävää hedelmällisyyttä. Lisääntymisterveyden turvaamistoimia on otettava käyttöön, eikä ainoastaan terveyden edistämiseksi vaan myös kulttuuristen ja yhteiskunnallisten tekijöiden mukaan ottamiseksi ohjaukseen ja opetukseen.

Avainsanat: kulttuuri, yhteiskunta, hedelmällisyys, syntyvyys

Introduction

Fertility is an integral part of the human condition. Although it is a concrete biological concept, a means for the human species to ensure its survival through the transfer of genetic information from one generation to the next, fertility is very much intertwined with abstract human concepts such as culture and history. The interplay of these two has profound and far-reaching consequences to the lives of each one of us today, to those who came before us and the lives of succeeding generations. To have a better understanding of this, we need not look further than 70 years ago, in the aftermath of the deadliest crisis in human history: World War II. Following the horrors of two global wars and the Great Depression during the first half of the 20th century, the post war era was characterized by rebuilding and optimism.

A new global culture was born, with the United States at the forefront. (Greenwood, Seshadri & Vandembroucke 2005.)

Economies from Asia to Europe were rising literally from the ashes and these brought forth wealth and a burgeoning middle class. Because of newfound wealth and optimism, along with the advances in technology and health care, couples were getting married and having children earlier, their new circumstances allowed them to be stable enough to support multiple children. The widespread phenomenon and the unprecedented rise in fertility after the greatest crisis in human history led to the generation of our parents, the so-called baby boomers (Greenwood et al. 2005). This is the generation that is leading the world today and in turn they have shaped modern culture and politics. Their collective actions, decisions and behaviors as a generation had a ripple effect to us -their children. They gave precedence to our contemporary culture and to the belief systems we have now, and their influence can be seen in how we ourselves explore fertility. The excesses of the previous decades have caught up with us, unfortunately.

Accelerated climate change, a shrinking middle class, and stagnant wages characterize our times which is a far cry from the bright and optimistic times post-war. In effect, we have as a generation a more cynical culture and more pessimistic view on the future, leading many couples to put off getting married, let alone have children. Birth rates are falling in many industrialized nations and governments are supplementing this with immigration (Alho 2008). Like knots in a gigantic proverbial ball, we find our economics, politics and culture tangled up to the mess we are witnessing in the world right now. However, we often neglect to see the driving force behind it all – fertility.

Female fertility through changing times

The broad definition of fertility according to Britannica (2019) “is the ability of an individual or couple to reproduce through normal sexual activity. Normal fertility requires enough healthy sperm by the male and viable healthy eggs by the female, successful passage of the sperm through open ducts from the male testes to the fallopian tubes, penetration of a healthy egg, and implantation of the fertilized egg in the lining of the uterus.” Any interference in the process interrupts the fertilization process.

It is inherent for every species to have the biological need to reproduce to ensure its survival. This was more evident for most part of human history when most cultures were agrarian. Before the industrial revolution, infant mortality was higher and life expectancy was generally lower and consequently, families needed to have more offspring to inherit and look after the land. Women’s roles were completely different as opposed to the situation we have now. Women were limited to perform mainly domestic duties at home. A woman unable to conceive at the time was looked at with pity and concern. In some cultures, if a couple was unable to have children, initially the woman was divorced, or the husband took a second wife if the culture permitted polygamy (WHO 2015). Reproductive health was also unheard of during those times and nearly everything was governed by superstition and beliefs imposed by the doctrines of the time. Fertility during that era was seen like the land itself, the very thing that ensured life and survival. A fertile land meant more food and prosperity. Fertility goddesses were even worshipped in certain cultures to ensure a good harvest. Womanhood and the land were perceived interchangeably. Here we see how fertility and culture have an equal effect on one another. And this continues to hold true even in the modern era.

With time, cultures and paradigms change. Alongside the development of technology and safe healthcare, also came the rise of progressive ideas such as feminism and freedom of choice. Women, for the last 100 years, have been able to forge their own careers and the conventional views regarding motherhood has become increasingly obsolete, especially in the western world. Developing countries however still maintain a traditional view on fertility and womanhood, as seen in cultures in Asia and Africa.

Today, Africa remains among the highest in fertility rates with an average of 5 children per woman throughout their lifespan, compared to an average of 2.5 children per woman globally. Research has shown that the democratic transition in terms of high fertility and mortality rates to lower fertility and mortality rates, has a proceeding difference as compared to other regions in developing world. Based on research, countries like Sub-Saharan Africa, experienced a much later onset of transition, in addition, the transition pace was slower. There was a decline of fertility rates by 37 percent between 1960 and 2005 which was a lower percentage compared to the 61 percent decline in Asia and Latin America over the same period. Despite the decline of fertility rates between 1960 and 2005 in Sub-Saharan Africa, it's evident that the fertility rate is higher compared to the resources available to meet the demands of the growing population at the desired pace. In turn these are having a toll on economic development, living standards, education attainments and health care resources (Mueni 2016).

Cultural Paradigms and Fertility

The word culture has been given different definitions throughout the centuries based on different contexts and settings. However, the anthropologists approach its definition from a different angle. Culture is a shared set of (implicit and explicit) values,

ideas, concepts, and rules of behavior that allow a social group to function and perpetuate itself. Rather than simply the presence or absence of a particular attribute, culture is understood as the dynamic and evolving socially constructed reality that exists in the minds of social group members. It is the 'normative glue' that allows group members to communicate and work effectively together. (Hudleson 2004.)

The most extreme example of cultural shift from the traditional agrarian culture to the modern era is most evident in Japan. The same may also be said for the United States and Europe but this phenomenon is more accelerated in Japan and has happened only within the last 70 years post-war. For thousands of years, Japan held a very traditional view on fertility, it being an agrarian society for centuries. However, to rebuild the society after the war, a collective shift occurred in Japanese society in a sense that women were to become an integral part of the workforce (Makoto 2001). For decades this has worked to help the Japanese in building the ultramodern nation we know of today. Most Japanese families during this era were nuclear- meaning for most households, where only the children and their parents lived. Both parents usually worked in demanding office jobs while the children were at school. This was vastly different from the traditional Japanese household in a rural setting where generations lived under one roof and women were at home tending to their children.

The effect of this new familial set up comes with a price, however. No one has foreseen that the work and productivity culture Japan has built for itself would lead to an unintended consequence; the nation now has the lowest fertility rate in the world. Women are putting off pregnancy and working on their office careers and families are opting for less children. The population is aging, and this has exacerbated the infertility issue as the younger workforce

is under pressure to maintain Japan's highly developed economy by working the longest working hours in the world. Younger people have put off being married and having children altogether. With current trends, the population of Japan is expected to drop from the peak of 120 million today to 100 million in 2050. This sheer drop could potentially have major economic and social consequences for the country. Solutions to the current situation has yet to be identified as Japan is known to be averse to mass immigration. Being the innovators that they are, they would much rather look to robotics to maintain and sustain the population than to immigration. Based on a research conducted in Japan in 2013, it was confirmed that Japan had the world's oldest population with a median age of 46 years, an average lifespan of 84, and a quarter of the population over 65. The population have declined by a quarter of a million in the fifth consecutive year. As a result, falling birth rates have put Japan's fertility at 1.4 children per woman. (Pearce 2014.) This raises questions as to what the future holds for the country?

On the opposite end of the spectrum is Nigeria. Nigeria has one of the highest fertility rates in the world. By 2050, Nigeria is expected to be the third most populous country, overtaking the United States. Lagos is expected to be one of the largest future megacities on the planet. With its recent oil boom and a semi agrarian culture that holds traditional views on fertility and womanhood, families are encouraged to have more children. Nigeria also has a developing health care system which in turn has decreased infant mortality rates and increased overall life expectancy. It is also established that East Africa (Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, and Ethiopia) has the highest fertility rate globally with one woman having an average of 5 children. The total fertility rate ranges from 3.8 to 6.3 children per woman. Despite the high fertility booming rate in these countries, gender

attitude research show that males between the ages of 15–24, want 0.2–0.7 more children. Some of them believe that the husband has ultimate decision-making authority in a household and therefore always have the right to have sex. (International Perspectives on Sexual & Reproductive Health 2013.)

These facts raises questions as to why this is the case whereby, on the other side of the globe there's a crisis and worry about population depletion while on the other side there are high fertility rates and large population which affects the country's economics with high strain due to lack of basic amenities to maintain the growing population.

Health consequences of high fertility rate remain a threat to the health of women and children to a worrying extent. Women are at a higher risk of dying from maternal causes due to a higher birth rate. According to WHO, in 2015 303 000 maternal deaths occurred globally of which 300 000 were in low and middle-income countries. An average ratio of maternal deaths was 242:100 000 live births. With these ratios, it was found that the higher the number of children the woman had, the higher was the chance of dying from maternal causes. The risk of maternal death increased in Sub-Saharan Africa by almost 5% for women with many children and for women of older ages who still have children. (WHO 2015.) It's therefore beneficial and essential for these women to have enough knowledge regarding family planning to avoid the high-risk pregnancies and births. While culture and industrial factors play a big role regarding human fertility, it's possible to achieve reproductive health by correct means. Actions to safeguard reproduction health must be considered and put in place and not only for better health but also should involve and include cultural and societal factors in fertility education (Stover et al. 2016).

Human Instinct and Fertility

It has been stipulated that the human desire to have children albeit driven by biological processes, is not a basic drive at par with the need for food, water, and shelter (Lorimer 1954). On the contrary, reproduction is viewed as a motive, controlled by social rewards and punishments. Childbearing behaviors are observed to be affected by promises of security, happiness, and approval from the immediate social environment. For most cultures, little girls are expected to become mothers, little boys as future fathers and their offspring as protection from support against the maladies of old age (Lorimer 1954).

The drive for reproduction is not a basic survival instinct. The need for food, water and shelter are all driven by biological processes but the need for reproduction although necessary for the continuation of our species, is driven by societal contexts. Hence culture plays a very important part in reproductive behaviors. This explains the phenomenon occurring in many industrialized countries with falling fertility rates. The survival instinct has superseded the reproductive instinct in these cultures and the current generation are opting out of the prospect of child rearing because of the lack of security and poor outlook for the future. Many households in the West need both parents nowadays to have a stable and sufficient income to support the daily upkeep of looking after children. Stagnant wages, poor job prospects and rising costs have put young people of today into survival mode and have pushed aside societal expectations of having children in order for them just to have a roof over their heads and food on the table. The consequences of these current trends are still way ahead at some point in the future but with great probability, they would be negative if no long-term solutions are found.

So, one might ask, what would explain the rising birth rates and positive attitudes to fertility and child rearing in developing countries? For one, many of these cultures still uphold the traditional views of men and women. Women play a less substantial part of the workforce and for many, child rearing and domestic duties at home comprise the woman's family life (Nahar & Mengo 2019). Social norms dictate that a woman must perform a certain role which is in the opposite of the accepted view in the West where women are more empowered, have more choice and have greater leverage against what the society dictates is expected of them.

Reproductive health and education as well as family planning methods are also lacking in many developing countries with rising birth rates. Contraception may even be viewed as against the doctrines of the prevailing religion in these societies. Many catholic countries are averse to the use of condoms and IUDs since it goes against the dogma of the Church. According to the research conducted in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, women have no voice, and their autonomy does not taken into consideration their sexual and reproductive health in issues like childbearing, contraceptives, marriage and abortion due to the societal norms and cultural restrictions in the society and immediate community (Nahar & Mengo 2019).

Research has also been done on what motivates reproductive behaviors to help give light to the cultural phenomena attributed to fertility in the examples above. Several studies have been done to explain human behavior and culture as it correlates to fertility and the drive for reproduction. Many of them are based on the following theories. The first of which is the Attachment Fertility theory which states that human beings are set apart from other species in terms of fertility and reproduction in general as we tend to only have one mating and reproductive partner as opposed to

other animal species that have several partners and short mating behaviors. (McAllister et al. 2016.) In the case for humans, strong and enduring relationships according to this theory motivate us to reproduce. This can be seen in our contemporary culture where most people would aim for a long and stable relationship with someone before setting the stage for familial life.

Another premise used by the research done by McAllister et al. (2016) is the Life-History theory, which suggests that we make trade-offs in the road to achieving needs in life due to our finite time and limited resources (McAllister et al. 2016). This explains the economic factors as it relates to fertility and why there have been periods of high fertility during times of plenty but lower rates of childbirth during periods of history marked by hardship. Humans have the tendency to put off fertility to meet the needs necessary for survival.

The third theory in McAllister's research (2016), is the Terror Management theory which explains the psychological conflict we have as a species that our mortality induces in us a fear of death that we alleviate by reproduction as it ensures that something from us is passed on.

The theory of Planned Behavior is also an important premise as it suggests that societal expectations influence individual decision making as it relates to reproduction. From here we can draw out that a person's culture and other learned behaviors from that cultural context influence whether a person decides to have children or not and how many offspring they intend to have. McAllister et al. (2016) also points out that surrounding macro environment like government policies and economic crises also affect individual decision making. This is important in shaping legislature affecting people's reproductive health and well-being.

The transmission competition hypotheses explain well the phenomenon in high income countries in which the fertility rates are below-replacement fertility levels as in the extreme cases in Japan, Korea and Europe which has been discussed beforehand. It correlates with the thought mentioned earlier suggested by the Terror management theory that our fear of mortality drives us to reproductive behaviors to ensure a sense of legacy. In the case of highly developed countries, instead of having children as a form of legacy, many people are driven to have career achievement and wealth accumulation which in a sense gives an individual a feeling of fulfilling something within the limits of finite time and passing on something to the next generation.

Conclusions

To understand high human fertility rates in developing countries and threatening population depletion in developed countries, cultural and industrial factors affecting human fertility must be identified and amended. While current studies show population depletion globally, overpopulation remains a global challenge (World Economic Forum 2021).

Culture is an important aspect in understanding the fluctuating fertility rates globally. The values of culture and religion are to be taken into consideration while trying to modify sexual activities in relation to reproductive sexual health. Subjects of sexual activities and reproductive sex are to be addressed without feeling of shame or fear of cultural retributions. Some societies still hold strict taboos against open discussion of sexual related subjects and education while others bare no restriction. There still begs for more reliable and educative information to the society and community. This dilemma of lack of informative, evidence-based information regarding fertility and population still leaves unanswered questions. According to Jennings (1970), despite

the developed and sophisticated methods of communication, a pool of reliable information, and the effectiveness of inexpensive contraceptives; why are the birth rates still high in developing countries? Why do parents in some cultures continue to have large families despite the privation and starvation confronting them? What influences affect women and cause them to bear unwanted children? What has the government done to initiate successful educative and control measures regarding fertility? What role does cultural norms and religious values play in affecting the fertility rates? An understanding is needed in these areas to be able to effectively develop measures that will help control the fertility rates. (Jennings 1970.)

We have also discussed some important theories that help to explain our motivation for reproduction. Each culture is different and have different perspectives to life and mortality but the one thing that ties everyone together is our mortality and that we have a finite time on earth. Knowing this, we react and have the primal desire to leave a mark on this earth before passing on. Most cultures ensure this sense of “immortality” in the form of children while other cultures emphasize achievement and prosperity which is a deterrent to fertility replacement rates. Other theories purport how our environment influences mating behaviors. Humans tend to have positive attitudes to childbearing and reproduction during periods of rapid economic development, but we also have the tendency to put aside reproduction in times of hardship to ensure our survival by meeting other basic needs.

To improve reproductive health, its essential to pay attention to the cultural and societal norms, as well as environmental factors affecting fertility. It’s important to recognize and reinforce correct intervention measures and educative programs in the needed areas. Educative programs about reproductive health and fertility, will help people make better and more effective future choices.

The legislative bodies of each country must be aware of the context of their contemporary cultures before passing any form of directive on reproduction and studies must be made on how these affects everyone's decision making on an individual level.

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