Placing a Child for Adoption and the Myth of Maternal Love

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Abstract: The article discusses the circumstances of placing a child for adoption and its relation to the myth of maternal love. It examines the research related to this issue, questioning the idealization of motherhood expressed in the idea that every woman is "naturally" a mother. It also examines the justification commonly found in literature that perceives the act of placing a child for adoption as the result of difficulties associated with socioeconomic factors. It shows the relevance of the research on the subject involving different professionals who deal with this reality.

Key words: Myth of maternal love, adoption, motherhood.

1. From Infanticide to Child Protection

Although child and teenage protection has nowadays become a key social priority and is supported by laws that attempt to guarantee their rights (1990's ECA, PNCFC and 12.010/2009's law), documented studies and research indicate that throughout history child care and protection were not a relevant issue to society.

Historically speaking, if we look back at the aspects involving abandonment, Marcílio says that in Western antiquity, both abandonment and infanticide were recurrent and often encouraged practices under some circumstances [1]. The author mentions that in Greece the parents' power over their children was absolute, they could kill, sell or display their newborn children. Abortion and infanticide were socially natural and legitimate. Additionally, in ancient Rome, rejecting children and infanticide were ordinary events, the head of the family would decide whether to include or not a newborn into society.

The rich and the poor abandoned their children in ancient Rome for different reasons. They rejected or drowned malformed children; as the poor could not support their children they were displayed until a benefactor decided to keep the unfortunate baby; the rich were either doubtful on their wives' fidelity or had already decided how their inheritance would be shared by their existing heirs [2].

It is believed that in the three first centuries, the urban Romans abandoned approximately 20% to 40% of their children. It is important to emphasize that about a century ago in Western Europe, one newborn child in every two was abandoned [1]. In the face of this reality, in the first instance at the initiative of the Church, attempts have begun to emerge, in Europe, to ban infanticide and to legislate on issues involving the exposure and abandonment of children.

One of the efforts to protect children was the idea of creating the first "wheel" where babies were displayed,

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in 1203. According to Ref. [1], a large number of drowned babies found by fishermen in the Tiger River led Pope Innocent III, under the impact of this situation, to allocate a hospital to receive the displayed and abandoned babies. Children were placed outside the hospital in a small rotating compartment. Taking into account the needs at the time, this reality of the "wheel" and that of charitable assistance spread throughout many centuries across several European countries, including Portugal that introduced it into Brazilian society during colonization.

In addition to these protective initiatives, society reflected on the assistance system for children throughout history. This led to a growing concern regarding their well-being and future. Following this line of thought, Ariés [3] states that in the Modern Age the child is seen as a social individual and the family is concerned about his/her health and education [4]. This concerns the society in general and it leads to the "Universal Declaration of Children's Rights", promulgated by the United Nations in 1959 when the child was considered as a subject of law.

2. The Myth of Maternal Love

Myth is an all-embracing word that has several meanings. In this article, our reference is the understanding that the word myth is related to a belief that has no scientific ground. From the individual's perspective it is, therefore, considered as something real and this shapes his/her point of view.

If we focus on the issue of motherhood and follow Nuñez perspective, the myth of maternal love concerns itself with false truths relating to the idealization of motherhood [5]. According to the author, these false truths may be linked with "poetic beliefs", conventional wisdom ("being a mother is like suffering in paradise", "the mother is the queen of the home", "motherhood is the ideal condition of women's fulfilment", "to a mother all her children are equal", "the mother knows what is best for her child", "no one knows her child better than the mother", "holy mother")

or with ideas on which behavior is grounded; consequently, changing it requires a stronger counterargument ("every woman is a potential mother", "a mother is only love").

Authors such as Ghosh stress how this type of social representation may foster discursive practices imposing on women the idea of caring, loving, nurturing and bringing up their children and consequently giving up their interests and wishes for the child's benefit [6].

Speaking out against the idea that "a mother is only love", authors such as pediatrician and psychoanalyst Winnicott indicate some reasons why a mother may "hate" her baby:

"The baby is not her own (mental) conception… The baby is a danger to her body during pregnancy and delivery… The baby interferes in her private life, it is an obstacle for her previous occupation… At the beginning the baby dictates the law, it is necessary to protect him from coincidences, life must flow according to his rhythm, and this requires from the mother a continuous and detailed study." [7]

According to Winnicott [7] hate is inherent to human nature and therefore, it is present in the experience of motherhood. When Catafesta [8] draws our attention to the importance of recognizing and integrating hate in the parental practice, the author mentions a clinical case where the mother looks for specialized help for having noticed how hate is present in her relationship with one of her daughters.

The feeling of hate against one's own child is addressed by pediatrician and psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto [9] when she describes the case of a woman who had been strongly rejected by her own mother when she was born. Hence, she was kept away from her mother as a protective measure for the sake of her life. Later, after giving birth to a baby girl she went into a coma. Despite the coma, Dolto asks her husband to tell his wife this part of her life that had been omitted. In this case, Dolto noticed that getting in contact with unconscious aspects allowed this woman to integrate

hate in her family experience which in turn enabled her, when she came out of the coma, to take care of her daughter. In this respect, according to Dolto, the unconsciousness may greatly influence our choices and attitudes both on an individual and social level.

While examining the myth of maternal love, Badinter [10] claims that motherhood is a historically built concept, connected with ideological and cultural models prevailing at each time. The thesis that motherhood is socially and culturally built is demonstrated by this author through the apparent indifference and coldness that the Middle Age women manifested regarding their newborns.

Although some authors argue this attitude arises as a defensive resource used by the mother, in light of high infant mortality rates before the first year, Badinter [10] inverts this logic, claiming that many children died because their parents expressed no interest in them: "It was not because children died like flies that mothers showed little interest in them, but rather because the mothers showed very little interest in them that the children died in such great numbers."

Additionally, refusing to breastfeed their babies and delegating this to a wet nurse or another person to take care of them during the first year of life were recurring practices in the early times of society. Although it is possible to state that the mother at that time could not really understand the consequences and implications of such behaviour towards a child, the author enquires how it was possible that a mother whose babies (a few of them) died while under the care of wet nurses would continue to delegate her other children to them. Badinter [10] states that when we try to justify this type of maternal attitude, in fact we want to absolve these women from what would be seen as an unbearable "sin", which is her lack of interest for the child.

According to the author, after 1760 there is a meaningful movement recommending and "ordering" the mother to take care of her babies and breastfeed them: "They created an atmosphere of obligation in which women were told to be mothers first and foremost, engendering a myth that is still tenaciously supported two hundred years later: maternal instinct or the spontaneous love that every mother feels for her child [10]".

Based on this idea, the author reflects critically upon the idealistic way motherhood was looked upon. On one hand, it was considered as inherent to woman's nature, on the other hand, it was connected with positive aspects grounded on the belief that a woman is "naturally" born to be a mother; and even more so, to be a good mother [10]. An indifferent mother or one who mistreats her child defies this logic and promotes a duality of views towards women within society—the idea that a mother may be indifferent to her child is denied and women who do not express the wish of taking care of their children "suffer" from some kind of pathology.

Grounded on Badinter's ideas [10, 11], authors such as Iaconelli [12] remind us that pregnancy does not necessarily lead to the parental role and a woman is not naturally a mother. Iaconelli states that, from a historic perspective, we have come from a perspective of no concern whatsoever and disregard of the child's needs (a situation that had previously led to infanticide and abandonment, widely accepted by the society) to another extreme which is an excessive concern over babies, the search of "perfect" care and its "idealization" [12].

According to this approach, Gosh [6] adds that the "ideology of the motherhood" fosters the construction of a role for a woman as a wife, mother, stepdaughter, sister-in-law (etc.). This ideology is built as a stereotype in most societies and additionally, it is built and developed right from the little girl's childhood.

If we observe history, we see significant changes in our societies previously characterized by women who focused on their household duties and a transgenerational learning of how to take care of a child [12].

A woman's role in the family changed over the past centuries and allowed her to take up an active

participation in other roles in society. This increased participation produced in turn a decreasing know-how concerning the babies' care, and very often the birth of a child was the first contact with such a reality. Based on these changes, Iaconelli believes that it is wrong to see motherhood and the child's care as something that is innate or instinctive [12]. On the contrary, motherhood is associated with historical, social and cultural factors related to learning processes grounded on experiences. The author concludes that a paradox seems to be apparent, on one hand, women and caretakers see their knowledge on baby care diminishing, which in turn facilitates the "access" and interference of technical and expert knowledge provided namely, by doctors, nurses, psychologists, pedagogues. On the other hand, the arrival of such specialists exacerbates the emergence of non-realistic expectations of what motherhood should be, interfering in the knowledge and experience lived by these women [12].

In this respect, it is worth mentioning the studies carried out by pediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott. Contradicting the technical and expert knowledge, Winnicott emphasizes the importance of respecting the knowledge of those who take care of the child and warns us against the risk of establishing an idealization of motherhood. Even though Winnicott referred to the concept of "good-enough mother", Iaconelli draws our attention to the danger of this concept for being repeatedly used and not duly contextualized [12]. As previously mentioned, the author thinks that the mother's knowledge is not provided by nature, but it is rather a learning process; not a formal learning offered by a specialist, but a knowledge that comes from what is experienced by the individual throughout their life:

These experiences come from a cultural conception preceding the woman about what a baby is and what a mother is; they come from the baby that she once was; they come from the experiences she could witness and watch with babies and caretakers; lastly, they come

from the need of building her own identity in view of these identifying milestones, whether conscious or unconscious [12].

Azevedo and Arrais [13] in turn describe how the issue of the romanticized idea of motherhood associated with gender is emphasized by the way that girls from their early childhood are taught to play the role of a good mother. In families, schools and society in general very often the girls, rather than the boys, are encouraged to play the role of taking care of a child.

In this way women were encouraged to play the role of the mother and remained for centuries of being limited to domestic life and were asked to not "destroy" the family and social order. "The meanings of motherhood associated with love and care were seen as ideal values. Throughout centuries cultural speeches incited women to adhere to identify themselves with them, accepting them as truths which constituted their feminine identities [2]".

Rodrigues and Gomes [14] showed how still today the role of taking care of a child is associated with the feminine gender and that of the provider with the masculine gender. Although there is a growing acceptance of seeing a woman as the provider, there is still a significant resistance to see a man as the one who plays the role of taking care of a child. This situation is especially evident when a child is adopted by homosexual couples.

Despite the prevalence and reinforcement of positive and enjoyable aspects in motherhood [6, 15], it is clear that throughout the 20th century when a formal and professional education started to become available, women also started to play a role outside the home, in spite of taking a significant responsibility in the role of raising their children.

Once devoted to satisfying the wishes of others and those around her (very typical of the Middle Ages' feminine subjectivity), today they devote themselves to their personal satisfaction and development, and also are willing to show a desire of consolidating changing social practices, although this may sometimes come at

some subjective and social cost [6].

In an effort to conciliate social, professional and family life, women—especially from the middle class—try to find individual solutions such as having fewer children, postponing the motherhood or even choosing their professional career and giving up being a mother.

Thus, the decision of being a mother or not has a reflexive nature and becomes more rational. It is influenced by several factors, namely those related to the women's subjective, economic and social conditions as well those concerning the couple [16].

Today, postponing motherhood is something more commonly adopted by women. Upon engaging in their professional careers, they postpone the pregnancy or even choose to not have children in order not to interrupt their professional ascension, considering that the child's birth implies full-time attention and care [6].

Patias and Buaes [2] also show how in Western societies the woman's choice of not having children is something increasingly present today. However, as previously mentioned, it is possible to notice how the choice of giving up motherhood has a significant connection with the woman's historical, social, economic and cultural context.

While reexamining the literature concerning the issue of whether to have children or not, Biffi and Granato [17] concluded upon extensive review of the international and national literature on the matter that a volume of more specific and widespread information allows us to perceive the emergence of opted parenthood projects, more personalized and individualized, hence differing and more remote than that of the traditional model which involves getting married and having children in any loving and stable relationship.

Nevertheless, even if women are highly encouraged to professionalize themselves, to study and invest in their professional careers, it is still expected that one day they will "perform" their role of mother. Also, one should consider that maybe some individuals believe

this is the main role they must play [18].

In fact, reexamining other research on couples who choose not to have children, carried out by Rios and Gomes [19], it is possible to understand how women who decide not to have children are usually submitted to pressure, questioned, and sometimes criticized, having to justify their option of not engaging in motherhood.

Moreover, it is important to mention Donath's research [20], including 23 Israeli women who report having regretted being a mother. The author reminds us that two aspects are involved: motherhood and the object of motherhood (in this case, the child), emphasizing that in this research the regret refers to the motherhood experience not the relationship with the child. Additionally, the researcher claims that the idea of the motherhood experience is always related to the feminine condition and a joyful experience for the woman, an experience that is always "worth living" and that is meaningful for her.

The society has promoted a very "romanticized" and "idealistic" view of what the motherhood is, and the word "mother" has meanings such as sacrifice, unconditional love and full availability [6, 10, 11].

However, these aspects are currently opposed to the real experience of the maternal role; this being added to the denial of the woman's possible frustration in performing the role of mother and in her relationship with the child. There is also the intention of excluding and not showing the suffering and ambivalence that the motherhood might cause [18].

3. Placing a Child for Adoption

According to Motta [21], the myth of maternal love, which offers the idea that motherhood and the other's care are seen as something natural and present in every woman, is the origin of the prejudice related to the situation of placing a child for adoption.

In this approach, we find a tendency to face every separation between the mother and the child who is placed for adoption as abandonment [22]. The

misunderstanding between abandoning and placing the child for adoption socially stigmatizes and blames these women for their behaviour, making it difficult for them to have a more conscientious and mature attitude regarding the decision of taking care or not of their children [23]. Women are afraid of being judged and punished; this also prevents them from searching the legal system to legally place a child for adoption, which consequently reinforces illegal adoption procedures.

In order to avoid a negative judgment on these women's behaviour, emphasis has been put on the importance of replacing the word abandonment (usually understood as rejection, not accepting, refusing, despising, repudiating, repelling) by the concept of placing [21, 24]. In this regard, Dolto [9] differentiates abandonment from placing, she sees the latter as a protective gesture towards the child.

Another aspect examined in this literature refers to the motivations for placing a child for adoption. Studies conducted by Freston and Fonseca associate the woman's decision with economic and social problems, placing her in a very fragile and difficult situation, submitted to external pressures that determine her choice [25-27]. However, Jones believes that indicating the financial problem as a woman's vital motivation to place her child for adoption is a fallacy, as it derives from multiple factors [22].

Motta [21] in turn agrees that there are other aspects in addition to socioeconomic limits present in the woman's decision. However, according to the author, the decision of placing a child comes from the abandonment to which these women are submitted, with particular emphasis on the absence of the child's father and the lack of family support.

In this respect, March [28] conducted a relevant research by interviewing thirty-three women who placed their children for adoption and who reestablished contact with their children when they became adults at their request (the contact was mediated by an adoption agency). The purpose of the agency was to analyze these women's understanding on the child's pregnancy, placing the child in an adoptive family, the symptoms experienced after having placed the child for adoption, how she saw herself as a mother and her feeling towards reaching out to the adult child. In general, the authors argue that during the elaboration process of placing the child for adoption it is important to pay attention to the aspects related to mourning, guilt and loss. However, rather than placing these women into a fragile and abandoned state, but moreover promoting the encounter with their children, the key issue is whether these encounters generate effective benefits for the elaboration process of these situations. March [28] declares that the meeting between these women and their adult adopted children must be analyzed and contextualized, prioritizing the individual situation of every woman. It is noticeable, on the other hand, that more important than promoting this type of encounter is to offer these women a professional and therapeutic space where the decision of placing a child for adoption is properly discussed. Additionally, professionals should draw their attention to the verbalizations and how the process is experienced by these women.

By analyzing the interviews, March [28] believes that the encounters themselves may come as a paradox for these women. On one hand, if they mention any joy and relief for having information and understanding about their children; in contrast, the idealistic image of the baby that they placed for adoption, which somehow helped them to integrate the experience, is broken up, causing them discomfort and suffering. Moreover, the biological mothers mention the difficulties surrounding a reestablishment of a deeper relationship with their children, that is to say, some sort of relationship close to filiation. In the research, the author states that these women describe themselves as friends or someone who is close, but not as being able to establish a relationship of parenthood with their biological children.

In the light of the above, we emphasize the need to consider the risks of a partial view regarding this issue

when associating these women to a difficult socioeconomic situation, a background of abandonment and/or the use of toxic substances. Apart from these considerations, we think that it is vital to observe, as mentioned in the study by March [28], the need of exploring and examining more thoroughly these women's conception of motherhood, what "a good or bad mother" is according to their perspective and how this image may interfere in their analysis about themselves regarding the decision of placing their child for adoption. Additionally, the author reminds us of the importance of helping these women to see more clearly the differences concerning the biological and social aspects involved in motherhood and the future perspective they have for themselves and their child. According to March, all these aspects must be discussed with these women in a professional relationship of support and help, allowing a more grounded decision on their part.

Besides the research mentioned above, authors such as Menezes et al. [29-32] also conducted studies on this issue, but they oriented them to the characterization of the women who placed their child for adoption and identification of the underlying reasons of this situation.

4. Final Considerations

Despite the large volume of studies and research on adoption, most of them put emphasis on the issues involving those who adopt, those who are adopted and their meeting (or their failure to meet). Fewer studies with particular interest on the adopted child's biological families are available.

The issue of placing a child for adoption is barely studied, and the existing research places emphasis on the characterization of these women and the reasons which underlie their decision. We believe that some of these studies have limits or a methodological bias because they tend to generalize from a limited number of participants and a given socioeconomic and cultural condition. Careful consideration must be taken on these studies as they may reinforce prejudices such as the myth of maternal love. In this respect, we insist on how placing a child for adoption relates to something that is negative and pathologic. Moreover, there is the underlying idea that childcare is related to the feminine condition and that motherhood is idealized.

According to this approach, we believe that research that seeks to study the influence of the myth of maternal love on the professionals' behaviour is important, especially professionals working with women who wish to place their child for adoption such as the legal and health system professionals. That is the reason why we investigate the conceptions of the nursing professionals (working in hospitals/maternity hospitals) about placing a child for adoption. We want to understand more specifically how the myth of maternal love influences their perception and behaviour concerning the situation in the context of a hospital/maternity hospital. Additionally, it is important that the studies and researches focus on the father of these children, taking into account that the invisibility of the paternal figure is commonly present in the investigation of this issue.

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