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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### The situation of mothers in crisis under the pressure of decision Research report about decisions related to childbearing of mothers who were participated in the 'Baby Saving Program' in Hungary

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#### Abstract

This study presents the mothers' decision about childbearing who were included in the Hungarian Baby Saving Program. The basis of the examination was the 147 mothers' psychological counselling opinion. The study examines the reasons that induce a mother to keep or abandon her baby. We also mention what kind of role the professional help gets in the decision making. Research results indicate the problems that the mothers have to face are very manifold, but in all cases they are because of the presence of basic and social environmental deficits. Their childhood are characterized with bad relationship with their own mother. Often the woman is left alone, her partner leaves and does not have supporting family background. This can be considered as a dependency situation when the "mother's personality is not emancipated", she puts herself into the situation of dependency where the conditions for existential or mature adult life are not met.

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## Introduction

### THEORETICAL FRAME

According to Stern (2004), the status of motherhood is not created by the changes in general development of culture. After the baby's arrival, the mother (consciously or unconsciously) starts to re-evaluate her own mother; a mother's notions of her own mother greatly influence her, that is, what kind of mother she will be to her child. The individual can learn not only from the positive models. Stern says, the determining factor is not the good or bad mothering that the pregnant woman experience, it is rather how she thinks of and talks about her mother currently. In the judgement making of her mother, not the actions in past are determining but the actions in present. The mother's actual status of bond to her own mother, that is, the current bond is more predictable than the experienced stories from childhood (status of bond in the past). According to Stern's theory, in our culture the state of motherhood relates four responsibilities: 1) Is the mother able to maintain the child's life? 2) Can she ensure the child's emotional development? 3) Can she set and maintain support system with which she can carry out the two above? 4) Can she transform her own identity i.e. can she fulfil the role as a mother?

Stern argues that the state of motherhood is not universal or inborn; it is a compulsory developmental condition. Contrary to Erikson, who argues that an individual can get to the normal degree of her personal development without experiencing motherhood, therefore, it is not a developmental crisis. However, there is a biological age of becoming a mother obviously, but we need to mention that there are psychological and hormonal effects that initiate the feeling of becoming a mother.

### THE EXPERIENCES OF THE BABY SAVING PROGRAM

**About the research**

The Schöpf-Mérei Hospital's Baby Saving program was established in 1996 in Budapest (Hungary) with the aim of preventing infanticide primarily, so the babies could be placed anonymously in a non-stop working incubator. The babies found in the incubator and children whom about the mother filled a waiver form were placed in adopter families when they were a few weeks old. The hospital cooperated with the capital's Child Protection Agency. Paediatricians, health visitors, lawyers, social workers and psychologists worked together. The mothers came from all over the country to participate in the child saving program who were in crisis, because they could not or did not want to take care of or raise their children.

This study presents the mothers' decision about childbearing who were included in the whole period of the Hungarian Baby Saving Program (1997-2002). The basis of the examination was the 147 mothers' psychological counselling opinion. For the analyses a database was made based on the obtainable data of the documents. Besides analyzing the data, we present some cases briefly which can be considered as typical of the mothers in the program in terms of decision. During the research, an interview was made with a psychologist, who worked in the program. In the study, we sought for how the mothers decided before and after the delivery and what (can) determine their decisions about childbearing.

**Socioeconomic background of the mothers**

53,1% of the mothers lived in the capital, 9,2 % of them in the county ranked city, 21,5% of them were from city and 16,2 % of the women lived in villages. The largest proportion of women in the sample was between the age of 19-25 (40,8%). 15% of them were under 18 years and 33% of the women were between 26 and 35. The rest 12% of women were older than 35 years old. According to their marital status, the majority (68,3%) was single, 29 mothers (20%) were married and 17 of them (11,7%) were divorced.

52,1% of the mothers grew up in normal families, 25,7% of them in a broken family. 23 of them (26,4%) lived in children's home or in foster care in her childhood and 8 mothers were raised by grandparents or relatives.

Regarding the number of children that the mothers have, most of them had one child (39,7%), 32 mothers had two children and 13 of them had three children, whereas 14 mothers had more than 3 children. 16% of the sample was childless. The total number of children of the 147 mothers was 162. In view of all the children, from the perspective of raising place, we can say that 61 children (37,7% of all children) were growing up in broken family, 25% of them lived in normal family and 22,2% of them lived in children's home or foster family. 18 children were raised by grandparents or relatives, 9 children were adopted.

As for the number of the father, it can be told that 57,8% of all children were from 1 father, 33,6% of them were from two fathers and in 10 cases the children were from three fathers.

According to the mother's profession who participated in the Baby Saving Program, 30,6% of them were skilled workers (34 people), nearly 20% of them were unemployed, 19,8% of them had intellectual job that required secondary education. 15 mothers were semi-skilled or unskilled workers, and the same amount was student. 3 mothers of the 147 had intellectual job last time that required tertiary qualification. 77,3% of the unemployed mothers had fewer than 8 grade education or only had primary education. 32,8% of the fathers who the mothers was pregnant from that time, worked as a skilled worker. The proportion of unemployed fathers is the same. 4 fathers were semi-skilled or unskilled workers, 5 of them had an intellectual job that required secondary education and the same number was for tertiary education. 7 fathers were students.

**Experiencing motherhood, decisions about childbearing**

According to the psychologist's view, the majority of the mothers (35,2%) were in relationship crisis or struggle with problems related to becoming adult or parent. 25,5% of them had to face with housing and social problems. Shockingly high rate of them (24%) struggled with mental health problems (sub debility, schizophrenia etc.) The psychologist considers the 15,2% of the mothers' problems with childbearing, resulted from problems in the psychosocial environment. The diagnosis that the psychologist firstly made is accompanied by life situation/lifestyle problems (51,4%) and in the case of 48,6 of them, the mothers were in difficult social situation.

Nearly 80% did not use contraception and more than 80% of them noticed their pregnancy after the third month. After realizing the pregnancy, 45% of the mothers were happy, 36,8 % were not happy and 23 mothers hid her status during the pregnancy. 37,7% of the fathers broke up the relationship after the pregnancy was revealed. 36,8% of them were happy to it, 17,5% of them did not break up with his partner, although, he was against the pregnancy. 9 fathers did not even know about it or did not recognize it. The mother's parents reacted happily and supported their daughter and her decisions about it, in the 61,8% of the cases. However, in the 32,7% of the cases the parents were angry with their daughter because of the pregnancy. In 3 cases, the parents did not even know about the child's arrival.

As regards the pregnancy 51,7% of the mothers decided to keep the baby and 34,5% (50 mothers) chose adoption. 16 mothers asked the children's temporary placement in children's home. In two cases abortion was done and in also two cases the child was stillborn. According to the mothers, the reason of their decision was due to their difficult social situation 47,5%, the fear of losing their job or housing problems, in 22 % of the cases it was due to their relationship crisis and the complete or partial absence of supporting background. In 3 case, the decision was made due to sexual abuse and 4 mother decided this way because of their psychiatric illness. In the cases of 18,6%, the decision was resulted from other reasons like shame because of the child, father's deviance, etc. In most cases, the mother's parents gave advice to the decision making and in 11 cases was the opinion of the father decisive.

### **The reasons for the decision and plans for the future**

A strong connection can be observed between the decision about the pregnancy and the arrangement of the future. It seems the biggest problems of mothers who chose adoption are finding job (25%) and financial situation (53,1%). The mothers' greatest challenges who decided to keep their babies arranging their unsolved housing (36%) and financial (32%) situation. For mother who requested their baby to be placed in infant's home, the biggest challenges were finding a job, solving housing and financial problems.

Overall, we can state that the mother's decision about childbearing is determined by the following factors: 1) How did the mother reacted to the turn-out of her pregnancy? 2) How did the father react to the turn-out of the pregnancy? 3) How did the parents of the mother reacted to the turn-out of the pregnancy? 4) What kind of nature does the relationship have with the father? 5) What kind of emotional relation does the mother have to becoming a parent?

### **The decision**

In the following, we present three decisions with three mothers' cases, highlighting the moment that led the mother (or somebody in the background) to make decision about childbearing.

The mothers felt guilty, remorse and anxiety because of their situation and decision. They were afraid of the society's and their mezzo-environment's prejudices. However, the data show that others' (parents of the mother, father) reactions, underlying decisions and in some cases their threatens were determining. Several of the mothers considered adoption more humane than placement in children's home; upbringing in institutions ran by the government is less considered to be a good solution than a family longing for a child. Adoptive families are typically mystified; they considered them to be a highly qualified person in good financial conditions, who cannot have a baby due to medical reasons. The mothers in crisis think of adoptive families as an ideal family which is surely the best place for the child. Good financial conditions might be a highlighted value in the imagine of the adoptive family, because the bad social conditions is usually an important factor of mothers' crisis. However, it is shocking that the supportive power of the family, neighbours and friends is not enough for the mother to have (or give herself) a chance for keeping the baby.

Adoption: Csilla grew up in a rural village. She was raised by her parents and she graduated from catering vocational secondary school in 1997. She had got pregnant by the age of 19. She did not use contraception and by she noticed her pregnancy she had broken up with the boy. "She did not dare to tell her parents, kept postponing it, in hope of they would notice (...). She felt, she could not postpone it any longer: She turned to a doctor because of abdominal pain and the doctor asked her to tell her pregnancy to her parents." Csilla parents were angry and together they decided that the adoption was the best solution. She characterized her relationship with her parents as not open and honest enough which are because the high expectations and strict moral value system of the parents. The parents did not accept the grandchild because of the humiliation in front of the environment and encouraged their daughter to give up on the baby. Csilla's plan for the future was getting a job. "She told about her child's fate: it is still better for the children than the abortion, at least she/he can live and grow up in a loving family." The psychologist opinion: "the baby would not have had father if she/he had stayed with Csilla and the baby would have been looked down because he was a bastard."

Placement in infant's home: Anikó was in her early 20's. She grew up in normal family but her brother and she were abused because their parents' alcohol problems. She moved away from home and lived with her partner and his family, but they quarrelled over her partner's mother when she was three month pregnant. She was happy for the pregnancy even they had not planned a baby. She could not take the baby in the boarding house with her where she worked and if she would have been on subsidy for child care, she had lost her job. As being alone, she considered her situation to be hopeless, so she asked the baby's temporary placement. She would have liked to visit the baby as many as she could She could rely on her brother perhaps.

Placement in mother's home: Margit was 33 years old and married before. She grew up in normal family and had commercial vocational education. She married her husband at the age of 27, but her husband later became an alcoholic, so they divorced. Her mother raised her one and a half-year-old son. After the divorce she needed neuro-medical treatment. She met her son once a month who with she had good relationship. She worked in a pizza restaurant as a scullery maid. She had a relationship for two years with a divorced man who had two children. They lived at her partner's parents, but they argued a lot with her partner's mother. Margit went to mother's home with her child from the hospital. Previously, Margit thought about adoption since he could not rely on the man, but then she thought she would look for a tenancy and go back to work meanwhile her baby is in the nursery. She says about her partner: "he is under the influence of her mother." She considers adoption as the worst solution and rejected it because: "not even an inferior gypsy would do that."

According to the psychologist's experience who participated in the Baby Saving Program, the real help was: "that the mothers came with their shame, being broken, neglected and left alone with their problems, then there was someone who listened to them, had somebody who for they were important and there was a place where they were accepted."

## CONCLUSION

Research results indicate the problems that the mothers have to face are very manifold, but in all cases they are because of the presence of basic and social environmental deficits. Their childhood are characterized with bad relationship with their own mother or were raised by foster mother there was not a positive mother model for them or mother role with which they could have identified themselves. Often the woman is left alone, her partner leaves and does not have supporting family background. This can be considered as a dependency situation when the "mother's personality is not emancipated", she puts herself into the situation of dependency where the conditions for existential or mature adult life are not met. In addition, the mother is blamed for the situation all the time, since she is the one who is pregnant and according to her environment, her lifestyle led to it. Although, the conversations with the psychologist reveal that they are in dependency situation which in they have no possibilities for independency.

We must see that the mothers made serious decision, no matter how they decided finally, and in the decision making process they were left almost alone in terms of natural and artificial supports. Most of the mothers had bad relationship with their mother in childhood and talk about them negatively at present too. The supportive matrix could not fulfil its functions since it sets conditions for providing help, support and the feeling of belonging to someone. Preservation of family unit or the relationship mostly depended on the waiver of the baby. In the families, where the mother hid the pregnancy, the absence of honesty was obvious. Cseres' (2000) research on mothers who committed infanticide, pointed out that the family communication is asymmetric, in the hierarchical family structure there is not real discussion. It leads the mother to hide her pregnancy or to kill the baby in the case of mothers who did it. The more we move up in the social hierarchy, family planning is more conscious. Fewer women from the worse conditions plan and have baby consciously. (Losonczy, 1999)

Based on our research results it can be concluded that in terms of keeping the baby, the mother's level of emancipation and the family organisation are determining. At the same time (regardless to the level of emancipation and family organisation), the mother is entrusted with the decision-making, suggesting her that the only right choice in order to preserve the family unit or the relationship. The burden of the decision is hers, so does the experience of loss.

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