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RESEARCH

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## The Motherhood Experience of Women Crack Users: Experiences Shared Between Children and Mothers

A Experiência da Maternidade em Mulheres Usuárias de Crack: Vivência Entre Mãe e Filho

La Experiencia de la Maternidad en Mujeres Usuarías de Crack: Vivencia Entre Madre e Hijo

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The study's purpose has been to know the viewpoint of women crack users in regards to their motherhood experience. **Methods:** This qualitative study was carried out with five women who used crack during pregnancy. Data was collected from May to August 2014, through the participant observation, production of field diary and semi-structured interviews. The analysis process followed the Clifford Geertz Interpretivism. **Results:** The crack use is not a fundamental factor in the maternity process of women who do use it. Some factors may influence the relationship between mother and child, and also the women's experience during this process, such as the desire to be a mother, pregnancy planning and family context. **Conclusion:** It is imperative to think of intersectoral public health policies aiming to support the crack users in an integral manner, then reducing social inequality and proposing an approach that highlights the user possibilities, as well as the individual specificity and singularity.

**Descriptors:** Crack Cocaine, Women, Family Relationships, Social Vulnerability.

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## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Conhecer a visão da mulher usuária de crack em relação a experiência da maternidade. **Método:** estudo qualitativo, com cinco mulheres que utilizaram crack na gestação. Dados coletados entre maio e agosto de 2014, através da observação participante, construção de diário de campo e entrevistas semiestruturadas. A análise seguiu o Interpretativismo, de Clifford Geertz. **Resultados:** o uso de crack não é fator fundamental no processo de maternidade das mulheres usuárias, alguns fatores podem influenciar na relação entre mãe e filho e na experiência da mulher neste processo, como o desejo de ser mãe, planejamento da gravidez e contexto familiar. **Conclusão:** deve-se pensar em políticas públicas de saúde intersetoriais, visando atender as usuárias de forma integral, diminuindo a desigualdade social e propondo uma abordagem que destaque as possibilidades, especificidade e singularidade do indivíduo.

**Descritores:** Cocaína Crack, Mulheres, Relações Familiares, Vulnerabilidade Social.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Conocer la visión de la mujer usuaria de crack en relación a la experiencia de maternidad. **Método:** estudio cualitativo, con cinco mujeres que utilizaron crack en la gestación. Los datos fueron recolectados entre mayo y agosto de 2014, a través de observación participante, construcción de diario de campo y entrevistas semiestruturadas. El análisis siguió el Interpretativismo de Clifford Geertz. **Resultados:** uso de crack no es un factor fundamental en el proceso de maternidad de las mujeres usuarias. Algunos factores pueden influenciar en la relación entre madre e hijo y en la experiencia de la mujer en este proceso, como lo deseo de ser madre, planeamiento del embarazo y contexto familiar. **Conclusión:** se debe pensar en políticas públicas de salud intersectoriales, visando atender a las usuarias de forma integral, reduciendo a la desigualdad social y proponiendo un abordaje que destaque las posibilidades, especificidad y singularidad del individuo. .

**Descriptores:** Cocaína Crack, Mujeres, Relaciones Familiares, Vulnerabilidad Social.

## INTRODUCTION

The abusive use of crack and other drugs by women during the gestational period intends to carry out further studies and research that may contribute to the organization and guarantee of these women to access to health services.<sup>1</sup>

Society, with the massive support of the media, places crack users, especially women, as responsible for the social and family problems they face. This judgment, without thinking about the social, economic and social context in which these women are inserted, incites stigma and prejudice.<sup>2</sup>

Among the factors that may be considered problematic for the health of the mother and the child, as well as the relationship between both, are the social vulnerability, the difficulty of access to health services and consequently prenatal care in the gestational period, inadequate access to medicines, as well as the lack of family support.<sup>3</sup>

Pregnant women and crack users experience feelings similar to any other woman, such as insecurity, responsibility, and concern. The difference is that along with these feelings,

because they are users of drugs, many also experience guilt, helplessness, and embarrassment. Allied to this, one can perceive how much one needs to advance in the attention of the subjective dimensions of a pregnancy that occurs in a social context permeated by vulnerability and by the abusive use of drugs.<sup>4</sup>

It should be emphasized that the abusive use of drugs among women is also influenced by social and cultural processes and with this, it is necessary to know the factors that trigger this abusive use.<sup>5</sup>

Social anthropology is a science that studies society and aims to understand the culture and how it influences human behavior, analyzing the differences that exist within this context and objectifying the elaboration of concepts and ways of modifying reality. Bringing these concepts to the world today, one can see how cultural diversity is constantly changing, so that anthropology allows us to develop and understand daily life, valuing culture and diversity.<sup>6</sup>

Bearing this in mind, we sought to know how the experience of motherhood for women who use drugs happens and how is the relationship of these women with their children. Through the observation of the culture and life of these women, we came to an analysis of these realities.

The experience of motherhood is an extremely complex phenomenon to be explained by only one area of knowledge, it is necessary to search in psychology, anthropology, history, and sociology, for instance, elements that can contribute to understanding more about this phenomenon and how it occurs in different cultures and societies. When one looks at how the role played by the mother changes in the different societies, one already observes how much this is a multidimensional experience.

By thinking about the motherhood experience today, it is easy to come across many differences; in each culture and within that culture, every woman has her own experience of that moment. The companion, as well as the woman's own mother are important parts when trying to understand motherhood and how it occurs. In the case of the mother, many studies show that there is an emotional approximation of the pregnant woman with her mother, being the pregnancy responsible for a union of generations, because through her gestation the woman revives her infant phase, as well as her mother, experience the gestation of the daughter, revives the memory of being pregnant.<sup>7</sup>

What is important is that all the experiences do not depend only on the individual characteristics of the woman, but are in the web of all the social and cultural context, having as main characteristic the values that dominate the society in which the woman is inserted, which affects all their psychological and emotional structure.<sup>7</sup>

Given the aforementioned, this article aims to know the viewpoint of women crack users in regards to their motherhood experience. This study is justified by the

importance, in the current scenario, to understand this population and how the relationship of these women with the motherhood and with their children and families. It is necessary to give attention to biopsychosocial aspects, starting from a more subjective dimension and focusing only on the damages caused by the substance, trying to see the uniqueness and particularity of these women, outside the biological perspective of the drug. Hence, the facilities and difficulties encountered by women users to experience the maternity process were identified and the life context of these families and the influence of social and cultural factors in the experience between mothers and children were identified.

## METHODS

The data presented here come from a Master's Thesis with a qualitative approach, which was performed by the participant observation, production of field diary and semi-structured interviews.

The study included five families already accompanied by the extension project of the Faculty of Nursing, Universidade Federal de Pelotas (UFPel), named "Health promotion in the territory: following up children of users of alcohol, crack and other drugs". Data collection took place in the residence of each family and in the places where they were incorporated within the territory, since it was necessary this accompaniment of the subjects in their daily experience for the full accomplishment of the work. For the selection of the participants, the following inclusion criteria were considered: the mother was accessed by the extension project, being or having been a crack user during one of her pregnancies and the family accepting to be followed up.

All the ethical principles considered for the elaboration of the research were in compliance with the Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council from the Ministry of Health on Research with Human Beings<sup>8</sup> and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing under the Legal Opinion 643,166 on May 11th, 2014. Thus, all ethical principles were respected, as well as the anonymity of the participants, using names of flowers for women, superheroes and princesses for children and fictitious names for other family members. All participants signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF).

The data were collected over the period from May to August 2014, by doing weekly visits to each family. After each observation, field diaries were arranged. The interviews were made and recorded with each participant and were transcribed in their entirety. There were four and a half hours of interview recordings and more than one hundred pages of field diary, which were thoroughly and thoroughly read for further analysis.

The data analysis was then completed at the end of the fieldwork and Clifford Geertz Interpretivism<sup>9</sup> was used as an anthropological reference that collaborated for the

analysis and discussion of the data. In order to achieve the results, it was carried out an interpretation of everything that was observed and registered during the whole insertion of the researcher in the field, besides the analysis of the semi-structured interviews performed during the period of data collection.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the analysis of the interviews and the field diaries, it was possible to approach the understanding of how the experience of motherhood occurred with each of the participants, such as the discovery of pregnancy, if this event was planned, if the mother wanted the gestation, how they prepared themselves for that moment, how it is for them to be mothers, to be pregnant, to experience motherhood and the relationship with their children. The women were followed at different times, some while they were still pregnant, others when they had just become mothers. From this, it was possible to perceive the different facets and the different moments of the process of maternity.

Being a mother understands different meanings that can be experienced in different ways depending on the culture and the historical moment in which it occurs. Understanding motherhood and its various re-significances is not simple and easy, it depends not only on one aspect, but on a multidimensional set, an interdisciplinary view that helps to reflect on these different aspects that surround the experience of motherhood, in its historical context, anthropological and social.

Wishes and difficulties encountered by women users are very close to what all individuals feel. Regardless of drug use, women experience the same doubts, fears, joys, and sorrows when they discover a pregnancy. Motherhood is a process that women can experience in different ways throughout their lives.<sup>7</sup> For anthropology, it is impossible to find a single behavior and thought among all people, because culture interferes directly in all aspects.<sup>9</sup>

Deciding to have a child is a consequence of a series of choices and the process of becoming a mother begins before conception when the woman already begins to plan and desire the pregnancy, so the importance of a family planning to avoid an unexpected pregnancy.<sup>10</sup> For Margarida and Chrysanthemum, pregnancy was a planned and constructed life project, contrary to the common sense that women who use drugs do not want or are not capable of experiencing motherhood. For Lady of the Night, gestation was not planned but was accepted, whereas for Dahlia and Iris there was first a movement of rejection. Iris, not accepting the pregnancy at first, assumed her role of mother, Dahlia had a resistance, Lady of the Night was a surprise and for Margarida and Chrysanthemum was an already planned choice.

The substance is only one of the factors that may or may not interfere with the experience of motherhood for these women. The role of being a mother is independent of the

use of drugs and goes through many other aspects, even by the pregnancy planning, which can lead to the way in which this woman will accept or reject this new stage in her life. This may explain the difference between the time of pregnancy discovery for each of these mothers, because as reported, some had this prior desire, even to be a starting point for the abandonment of drugs, as quoted by Margarida in her second pregnancy, while for others there was no such planning or desire.

Other factors may also be directly related to the desire to be a mother and consequently to the acceptance or rejection of gestation. The social and emotional condition in which the woman is in the moment is a strong influence, as well as the number of children, being the family planning important in this process.<sup>11</sup>

Dahlia was in her third gestation, which was accepted, unlike the other two pregnancies. Age also appears as a preponderant factor in this process, since the five participants had children within the age group from 15 to 22 years old, added to the financial situation, since no participant has formal employment and fixed income, as well as the presence of the partner. Lady of the Night, Dahlia and Iris were single mothers, without the presence and support of the companions during or after gestation. All of these situations may reflect on how a woman will conduct her attitudes and feelings when discovering a pregnancy. Other factors, such as the anxiety, unfavorable environment, vulnerability and stigma experienced may also influence this process.

All of these aspects, such as desire and planning for gestation, can directly interconnect with the experience of motherhood and with the way the mother will relate to her children, because these experiences are linked to the feelings that the woman will experience throughout her life. process of life. Therefore, it is important to understand motherhood within one's own social, cultural, emotional, and family framework, not just thinking about the biological perspective and the use of a substance, which ultimately cause the fragmentation instead of integrating the individual, his family, and his experiences.

Every woman, whether or not she is a drug user, experiences motherhood according to the moment she is living and also with the sociocultural factors that permeate her. The mother-child relationship comes from the most diverse aspects of each family's life context. Between the participants this was presented at all times, being possible to prove the diversity and the singularity of each one and their experiences.

With regards to violence, crack is said to be a devastating and dangerous substance to society. Common sense turns users into individuals with the potential for aggressiveness and violence,<sup>5</sup> and so women users could never raise, take care or love their children.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the social stigma, at no time during the coexistence with these families was there witnessed or observed any form of violence or aggression, either physical or emotional, on the part of the mothers or relatives to the

children. This demystifies the vision and belief of society, which, in asserting that all women who use drugs are violent and unable to raise their children, are applying prejudice and stigma without knowing each context, changing our understanding about this population.

Understanding the functioning of the family structure is extremely necessary to delineate possible receptions, since abusive drug use can affect different scopes of the user's life, such as communication, affective relations, and family interaction.<sup>13</sup> Chrysanthemum's speech points positively to the confrontation and the solution of issues, when she says that if it were not for Cinderella, she would not know what would be in her life, reaffirming that the relationship with the daughter is what drives her to try avoiding relapses.

In observations recorded in field diaries, it was possible to realize that despite the frequent absence of Lady of the Night, who spent most of the time on the street using the substance, her son Super Man was lovely bonded to her. Whenever she got close, he would face her, and she would give love while she was with him on her lap. The two, mother and son, despite the distance that often imposes between both, have a very strong bond. According to reports of the maternal grandmother of Super Man, the grandson misses his mother very much and whenever he sees her, he wants her attention, but for Lady of the Night, in spite of assuming the importance of her presence for the development of her son, she is not that present as she thinks she should be.

Lady of the Night considered that leaving her son in the care of her grandmother would be the best alternative to ensure that he was well taken care of and protected. The Lady of the Night thinking goes according to the authors who say that many women who use drugs get pregnant in an unplanned way and decide to give up their children to protect them, choosing to pass the responsibility on to people they trust, as an attempt to keep them away from drugs and use contact. The experience of motherhood in these cases was not a starting point for the end of consumption of the substance.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, Chrysanthemum and Margarida report at all times the affection they have for their daughters, as well as the fear of losing them to the Tutelary Council, which caused them both to either stop or lower the drug use. Chrysanthemum and Margarida still report the moment of childbirth as a very important moment of great emotion. This contact between mother and child as soon as the child comes into the world helps to positively stimulate the interaction between mother and child, which promotes an increase of affection and affection and a better experience between both.<sup>15</sup>

Considering our observations, it was possible to perceive the importance of the role of the family in this relationship between mother and child and in the experience of motherhood for these women crack users, since the family becomes an indispensable piece for the way its members will experience their life experiences.

For a number of times and not just among drug users, especially adolescents,<sup>16</sup> some problem in the social or family structure, such as unexpected pregnancy, may lead some women not to feel ready to take on motherhood. This ends up reflecting in personal conflicts and even in the interference between mothers and children, since this pregnancy occurs in a context that is not favorable, as in the example of this study, the use of drugs. Dahlia, for example, who had her three children at different times in her life reports that each pregnancy was experienced in a unique way, as well as the relationship between her children, corroborating how much maturity and when pregnancy occurs are key to the formation of bonds and to the process of motherhood.

It is important to underline that the vulnerability conditions that these women are often exposed to or were at the gestation period, make it difficult to understand their feelings and experiences, and can generate a lack of adequate care for their children, noting that not only mothers users of crack will go through this, but any woman who may go through some time of social or emotional vulnerability. Some historical aspects establish that every woman, by nature, must have basic characteristics inherent in motherhood,<sup>7</sup> but we must remember that every woman is unique and with this, she has her own personality and her way of being a mother and experiencing motherhood. Society may not be able to have the right to misjudge those women who may not have the desire to be mothers, whether they are users of a substance or not.

Throughout this research, it was possible to perceive that in some way the participants maintained a harmonious relationship with their children and even those who did not maintain an affectionate relationship with their mothers, being present or in the past, did not reflect this in the relationships with their children.

We know that each case must be analyzed in a unique and unique way, so the stories of these participants can be similar to the stories of any other woman. Aspects such as fear, expectations, yearnings, rejection, anguish, are inherent in human nature and the very experience of motherhood is already responsible for awakening these diverse reactions.<sup>4</sup>

The motherhood experience and this relationship between mother and child permeates external factors to the substance use. The cultural background, for instance, is a web permeated by meanings and the human being, in this case, the women, are tied to this web,<sup>9</sup> in other words, we are fruits of the environment in which we live, so it is impossible to understand only one phenomenon of the people's life, as the motherhood experience, without understanding all the aspects involved in this situation.

## CONCLUSIONS

Every woman is unique, has her personality and her way of experiencing this reality. It is not up to society to judge and to believe that all women should act equally and that if

they are a woman who is a drug user, their maternal role will be compromised. Throughout this study, it was noticed that at all times these women are interacting with their children and feeling the motherhood experience.

Each case should be individually analyzed, but what was witnessed and intended to be reinforced among the observations were moments of affection and bond between all mothers and their children, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the conditions in which this family is exposed. Nevertheless, for all mothers, the relationship with their children is permeated by important affective bonds, emphasizing that culture permeates all relationships and must then be considered, withdrawing the look towards the substance and returning to the person and their context of life.

These people need care, attention and being seen not as drug users, but as women, mothers, human beings. Gestation, the experience of motherhood and the relationship between mother and child are experienced as in women who do not use drugs because anxieties, fear, insecurity, and anguishes are feelings lived by the general population and not exclusive users of some psychoactive substance.

The assumption of this work was confirmed when it was noticed that the use of crack is not the only factor that can interfere in the mother and child relationship and in the way the woman user experiences this experience of motherhood, because knowing their cultural context, it was observed that vulnerability, family history, relationship with the partner, gestational planning, and support networks also influence this process.

It is necessary to invest in intersectoral public health policies that aim to serve users in a comprehensive way, contemplating a differentiated look for each one, then reducing social inequality and proposing an approach that highlights the user possibilities, as well as the individual specificity and singularity.

Hence, it is essential to demystify what the media brings about all crack users, especially women users, of being unable to interact or maintain an affective bond with other people. Based on this study, it was observed that the mothers who were accompanied were able to raise their children, without neglect or violence towards the children, although some stayed longer under their grandmothers' care, all the mothers had a relationship of affection with their children.

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