

Forms of (dis)engagement: abortion among adult men in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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Abstract: This paper analyses sociological dimensions influencing the abortion decision-making process, drawing on a larger anthropological study of the affective-sexual, contraceptive and reproductive trajectories of women and men, of different social classes and generations in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. We explore 15 in-depth interviews with men aged 40-49 about their partners' pregnancy and voluntary abortion. Two arguments are discussed: (1) the crucial role of gender and class position in determining male behaviors with regard to abortion by a partner; 2) men's externality in relation to the event as a gender-structuring trait in different generations. Producing analytical reflections to understand how relational ways influence reproductive decisions in the context of conjugality or outside it sheds light on many difficulties that surround abortion in general and the male role in this tensioned scenario.

Key-words: abortion; men; gender and health; sexuality; contraception.

Formas de (des)engajamento: aborto entre homens adultos no Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

Resumo: O artigo analisa dimensões sociológicas que intervêm no processo decisório para o aborto a partir de uma pesquisa antropológica sobre trajetórias afetivo-sexual, contraceptiva e reprodutiva de mulheres e homens, de diferentes classes sociais e gerações, no Rio de Janeiro, Brasil. Neste texto, explora-se as narrativas presentes em 15 entrevistas em profundidade com homens de 40-49 anos sobre a gravidez e ao aborto voluntário das parceiras. Salientamos dois argumentos: 1) a centralidade do gênero e da inserção de classe na determinação dos comportamentos masculinos em relação ao aborto; 2) a externalidade masculina ao evento como traço estruturante de gênero, em distintas gerações. Produzir inflexões analíticas para compreensão dos modos relacionais que engendram decisões reprodutivas no âmbito da conjugalidade ou fora dela lança luz sobre as muitas dificuldades que cercam o abortamento em geral e o papel masculino nesse tensionado cenário.

Palavras-chaves: aborto; homens; gênero e saúde; sexualidade; anticoncepção.

Formas de (des) compromiso: aborto entre hombres adultos en Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

Resumen: El artículo analiza dimensiones sociológicas que intervienen en el proceso decisorio para el aborto a partir de una investigación antropológica sobre trayectorias afectivo-sexual, anticonceptiva y reproductiva de mujeres y hombres, de diferentes clases sociales y generaciones, en Río de Janeiro, Brasil. En este texto, se exploran las narrativas presentes en 15 entrevistas a profundidad con hombres de 40-49 años sobre el embarazo y el aborto voluntario de las parejas. Enfatizamos en dos argumentos: 1) la centralidad del género y de la inserción de clase en la determinación de los comportamientos masculinos en relación al aborto; 2) la externalidad masculina al evento como trazo estructurante del género, en distintas generaciones. Producir inflexiones analíticas para la comprensión de los modos relacionales que engendran decisiones reproductivas en el ámbito de la conyugalidad o fuera de ella lanza luz sobre las muchas dificultades que cercan el aborto en general y el papel masculino en ese tensionado escenario.

Palabras claves: aborto; hombres; género y salud; sexualidad; anticoncepción.

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Introduction

Investigating the male perspective with respect to abortion calls for the theoretical and methodological effort of considering reproductive events in the context of the relationship dimension. Recently, as part of a broader study on which this article drew, we conducted an initial study on male involvement in voluntary abortion based on experiences of young men aged 18-27 years (Brandão et al., 2020). Furthering build on these results, albeit in a tangential manner, we envisaged a comparative investigation of the experience of older men aged 40-49 years, considering what this empirical data might reveal in terms of a broader understanding of men in this event.

Defending women's autonomy in the decision on the outcome of a pregnancy is congruent with efforts to understand how men view and experience the abortion. If we regard the outcomes of a pregnancy as a decision-making process that involves the relationship dimension, considering the illegality of the practice of abortion in Brazil (Diniz et al., 2017), it is important to reflect on men's involvement in this context, even though this participation is often marked by different forms of externality. Akin to contraception, unplanned pregnancy and abortion are not solely "women's issues". Determining the social position of men in these processes, as defined by class position, helps shed light on the gender dynamics which perpetuate in different generations, albeit with subtle distinctions.

The Heterosexuality, contraception and abortion research (HEXCA Study) was conducted between 2007 and 2010 in four capital cities of Latin American countries: Buenos Aires, Argentina (Pettracci et al. 2012), Bogotá, Colombia (Vigoya et al., 2012), Montevideo, Uruguay (Rostagnol, 2012) and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Heilborn et al., 2012a), coordinated by the Centro Latino-Americano em Sexualidade e Direitos Humanos (CLAM) (Latin American Center for Sexuality and Human Rights), based at the Instituto de Medicina Social da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (IMS-UERJ) (Institute of Social Medicine of Rio de Janeiro State University). This article explores the sociological dimensions influencing the decision-making process for abortion, i.e. positions of gender, social class and generation, drawing on the affective-sexual, contraceptive and reproductive trajectories of men aged 40-49 years from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Without doubt, addressing a male narrative on abortion entails dealing with an event that is, in essence, external. This external dimension can be induced by choice, but may also arise because women exclude the man from the situation. The fact that pregnancy takes place in the female body renders men, at best, coadjuvants in any decision-making process on possible outcomes of a pregnancy. The possible discourse centers on an event which takes place within women's body. Notwithstanding, understanding the social conditions surrounding a pregnancy – carried to term or terminated – is furthered if the nature of the relationship and male voice are considered in the specific circumstances of support, coercion or total externality to the event.

Based on empirical data collected on male perspectives of unplanned pregnancy and decision-making regarding abortion, among men aged 40-49 years at time of interview, from middle and working-class social strata, living in Rio de Janeiro, we discuss the following arguments: 1) the centrality of gender and class position in determining male behaviors on their partner's abortion, in the context of the generation dimension; 2) men's externality to the event as a gender-structuring trait in different generations, where this position manifests in different ways for younger versus older men.

Method

A socio-anthropological study was conducted involving biographic interviews based on a script addressing the following aspects: sociodemographic data, family origin and composition; educational and work backgrounds; affective-sexual trajectories; contraceptive practices; and reproductive events (pregnancies and abortions). The present study was carried out in Rio de Janeiro city, Brazil, between 2007 and 2010 (Heilborn et al., 2012a). Despite the time elapsed since study execution, the impact and relevance of the empirical data provided in the article remain, given the analytic discussion broached, the continued illegality of abortion in Brazil, and also the gender norms underpinning heterosexual relationships.

The plan to include men in a research on abortion yielded some initial surprises. Finding men who would agree to take part in the study proved challenging, since this inclusion was associated with some degree of reluctance and discomfort. Upon questioning, both men and women inquired: "*do men go through this abortion situation?*" After overcoming the initial reluctance, some men proved willing to give long interviews, predominantly conducted in this middle-age group by male researchers. In these interviews, abortions were not central in the biography, but were explored together with sexual and affective relationships, birth-control

choices, fatherhood, life phase, unawareness of the abortion event and issues encompassing aspects of class, race/color, age and religion.

The study participants comprised a group of 58 respondents (30 men and 28 women), selected by quota criteria according to social position (middle class (MC) and working class (WC)), gender, age group, and experience of at least one terminated pregnancy in their biographies. Given the objective of covering two different generations, study participants had to be early in their sexual career (aged 18-27 years) or at the end of the reproductive period (the reference were women aged 40-49 years). The decision to interview men in this age bracket (40-49 years) provided the comparative contrast and relationship dimension required. This design methodology was employed with the aim of elucidating how reproductive decisions are taken among heterosexual couples at different stages in the lives of men and women, during youth and mature adulthood, and under which social circumstances. These circumstances included greater or lesser influence of family members and/or partners, during periods of study or work, within or outside a long-term relationship, having had children or otherwise, greater or lesser professional stability, autonomy with regard to the maternal family, among other dimensions of the biographic trajectories which change throughout life and are decisive in commencing parenthood or not (Bajos et al., 2002).

Participants were selected via informal social networks. The complexity inherent to the subject, allied with the context of illegality for the practice of abortion in Brazil, proved a major barrier to the field work (Menezes, Aquino, 2009; Cabral; Heilborn, 2014; Domingues et al., 2019). There was greater reluctance among men to grant interviews. As outlined in the analysis of young male experience (Brandão et al., 2020), the issue had been deemed strictly female, and many men stated the matter had nothing to do with them or said this was a topic they felt unable to comment on. Refusal to take part was justified by the uncertainty over who had fathered the unborn child; doubt on whether the pregnancy was true; awareness of the pregnancy only after the abortion had been carried out (thus with no detailed information); and doubts over the outcome of the pregnancy (miscarriage or abortion).

Interviews were conducted in a quiet reserved venue to assure total privacy during meetings. The duration of accounts given, all of which were sound recorded, averaged around 2 hours. Researchers were roughly the same age as respondents and had been previously trained/qualified in the area of social sciences. The anonymity of the participants was assured by the use of codenames throughout the manuscript.

This article addresses the narratives of men about the abortion episodes experienced in their trajectories. This group totals 15 participants, aged between 40

and 49 years at the time of the interview, comprising 9 men of low (working) social class (WC) and 6 of middle social class (MC). In the analysis of the empirical data collected, the theoretical-methodological premises underpinning the investigation were: biographical perspective with a retrospective approach of sexual, contraceptive and reproductive trajectories; gender and generation perspectives, combined with stratification of subjects by social class; conception of the abortion as a reproductive event corresponding to the exercise of sexuality and contraception between the couple. The type of affective partnership (casual or with emotional ties between couple) and elements such as material circumstances, intersubjective and sociocultural dimensions of the decision-making process, typically including family members and friends of those involved, were also considered in the analysis.

The analysis of the empirical data as a whole confirmed that gender and social class were stronger determinants than generation in the abortion issues among the male narratives. The empirical data from the older men and on the analysis performed in younger men (Brandão et al., 2020) is expected to confirm that externality in the abortion constitutes a determinant of male involvement in the event, irrespective of generation. In addition, it is evident that men from poorer social strata invariably become parents at a younger age, a situation common to interviewees of both age groups (18-27 and 40-49 years), corroborating that fatherhood in this social class is an attribute defining masculinity (Costa, 2002; Cabral, 2003; Figueroa-Perea, 2004).

The present study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the IMS/UERJ in 2007 (CAAE - 0005.0.259.000-07) and the Free and Informed Consent Form was signed by all interviewees.

Results and Discussion

Profile of interviewees

A total of 15 men, aged 40-49 years, with at least one episode of pregnancy termination in their biographies, were interviewed: 9 of working-class (WC) and 6 of middle-class (MC) strata. A variety of indicators was used to classify the socio-economic level of interviewees, including income, place of abode and educational level. Elements such as place of abode and educational level are central factors in determining the ethos and worldview, which characterize social aspects, particularly among interviewees from a generation that did not enjoy the wave of expansion and democratization of higher education, which took place in the early 2000s in Brazil (Brasil, 2001; 2005; Barros, 2015).

By the way, educational level is a critical aspect (re)affirming the gulf between social classes in Brazil: of the 6 MC men interviewed, 5 had degree-level education, 1 of whom held a post-graduate degree. By contrast, the educational background of the 9 WC men was more fragmented: 2 had studied to primary school level; 3, incomplete secondary; 2, complete secondary; and 2 studied to higher education level (1 not concluded). The interviewees from poorer backgrounds educated to incomplete secondary level held the following jobs: marble polisher, general services in a hospital, pest-control technician, doorman and security guard. The group educated to complete secondary level held jobs as insurance broker (unemployed at time of interview) and truck driver. There was an assistant administrator who worked in a non-governmental organization with incomplete higher education, and an administration technician at a public University with higher education (later qualified in Letters, not employed in the profession). The MC men worked as University teachers (2), entrepreneur, designer, journalist, and jewelry designer (the only member in group with incomplete higher education).

Of the WC men, 5 were black, 2 brown and 2 white, while MC men comprised 5 white and 1 black (self-declared according to IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) categories of white, black, brown and indigenous). Most interviewees (11) were born in the state of Rio de Janeiro, 3 were from the Northeast region of Brazil and 1 was from Minas Gerais (in the southeast of the country). In terms of religious affiliation, five of the men stated they practiced no religion, 5 identified as Catholic, 3 Protestant, and 1 Spiritist (all WC group), while one individual (MC) was Jewish.

With regard to pattern of marital status, among the WC men, the vast majority (8) declared they lived with a partner, while 1 stated they were separated. The pattern for marital status found among middle-class men differed, where 2 lived together with a partner, 3 were separated and 1 was single.

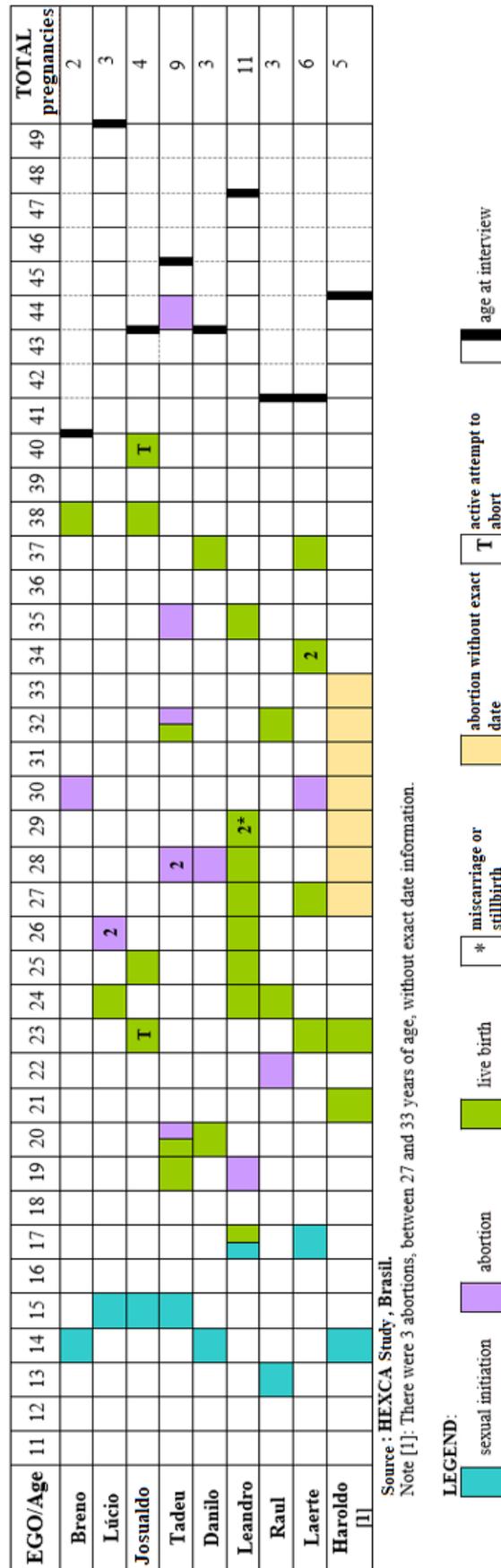
A total of 46 pregnancies were reported by the men from the WC stratum: the number of abortions (16) was lower than the number of pregnancies carried to term (29). An inverse pattern was found in the MC group: a total of 18 pregnancies were reported, where abortions (11) outnumbered live births (7). This numerical difference in type of outcome of reproductive events among WC men suggests that they were not aware of some cases of abortion (non-disclosure of a pregnancy to a partner is frequently seen in interviews with women, particularly when reporting abortions which took place during casual relationships). In the MC stratum, as shown later, abortions tended to be disclosed, but in most cases the male partner was merely notified of the event.

Abortion context in biographic trajectories of men aged 40-49 years

With only one exception among the 14 interviewees, all of them were fathers at the time of interview. There are, however, nuances which warrant investigation. Among WC individuals, successful births preceded the abortions in 7 out of the 9 cases, pointing to a greater desire for fatherhood among these men, who became fathers at 17-24 years of age. This same pattern was not found among MC individuals: of the 6 WC men, 3 were fathers before experiencing the abortions, 2 were involved in abortions prior to fatherhood, and one had no children. The fathers had their first child at 22-36 years of age, i.e. at a later stage compared to the WC interviewees.

Differences in the contexts of abortion events for the two social classes are depicted in Charts 1 and 2, respectively. Pregnancy terminations occurred earlier among the WC group (except for the case of Tadeu, who was involved in 3 abortions after the age of 30). However, these abortions took place nearer the time of interview among MC men (who experienced abortions during their 20s, 30s and 40s). Several theories might explain these class behavioral differences. Again, marital status appears to be pivotal, because it is associated with a synergic dimension regarding contraceptive methods used by the couple. Although not the focus of this article, it is important to note the contraceptive profile of Brazilian women, where a considerable proportion, particularly WC individuals, opt for female sterilization as a form of birth control (Brasil, 2008).

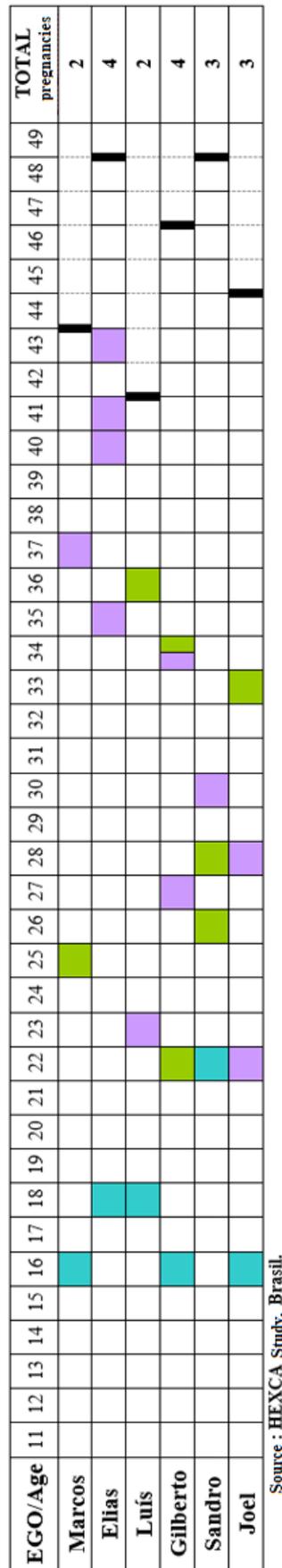
1) Sexual initiation, abortions and children by age, in trajectories of working-class men aged 40-49 years from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil



Source: HEXCA Study, Brasil.
 Note [1]: There were 3 abortions, between 27 and 33 years of age, without exact date information.

LEGEND:
 ■ sexual initiation
 ■ abortion
 ■ miscarriage or stillbirth
 ■ live birth
 * miscarriage or stillbirth
 ■ abortion without exact date
 T active attempt to abort
 ■ age at interview

2) Sexual initiation, abortions and children by age, in trajectories of middle-class men aged 40-49 years from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil



Source : HEXCA Study, Brasil.

LEGEND:
■ sexual initiation ■ abortion ■ live birth age at interview

Decision-making processes in abortion: gender and social class

Class position proved central to explaining the outcomes of reproductive events from a male perspective, and to understanding the values and moral stance that patterned the discourse of the subjects interviewed. On the one hand, the men's social position in middle or working-class strata exerts different influences on the abortion itinerary of their partners and on their opinions about government regulation of abortion. On the other hand, some consistencies were evident in this older age bracket.

With regard to contraception, for example, condom use was frequently cited as a practice not adopted by these subjects. It is worth remembering that these men's sexual careers began before the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and certainly prior to concerted public campaigns promoting condom use. There was universal adherence of men of this generation to the notion that "*in those days nobody talked about that*" in reference to condoms, and comments about lesser infections such as the STDs gonorrhea or chancroid as "*the worst thing you got*". Of the 9 WC men, 4 had their sexual debut with prostitutes and all reported using no condom; the others debuted by practicing *coitus interruptus* (1), use of the pill by partner (1), and no method of contraception (3). The discourse about AIDS as a new era suggested there had been a subsequent change in terms of condom use, but this proved not the case.

In order to deal with heterogeneous ways of engagement by the interviewees in episodes of abortion experienced by their partners, a typology was built which largely encompassed, as far as possible, all the experiences of abortion reported in this group. Although this classification can help visualize the way these men experienced termination of the pregnancy, it is important to bear in mind that many reports were somewhat unclear, that the men were unaware of how the process actually occurred and, there was selective memory, given that some events took place over 20 years earlier. The challenge was to convert this "unawareness" into concrete analyzable empirical data to provide a picture that does not simplify the experience of the subjects.

In cases where the interviewee was involved in more than one abortion, this classification difficulty became even more apparent. The same individual can thus be classified under more than one of the typologies, because the dynamic may be of a relationship nature, the dyads may have been different, while new factors may come into play such as family, the extramarital nature of a relationship, its stability, financial circumstances, or a recently born child.

Considered these aspects, two different structural ways of male involvement or participation in the negotiating process between the couple and/or their family

members follow, both of which culminate in the outcome of pregnancy termination. These approaches were clearly correlated with the class position of the subjects, where in poorer class strata, the dimension of marital status introduces the sub-classification outlined below.

1. “Notified abortion” refers to contexts in which the father is previously unaware of the abortion and told about the termination only after the event, i.e. no negotiation takes place between the dyad. This was the most frequent situation seen among the MC men: Joel (1st abortion), Marcos, Gilberto, Sandro and Luiz. This situation also applied to two of the WC men: Leandro and Breno.
2. “Coercion” takes place between the man and partner over the decision to abort, a situation more common among the WC respondents. There is less negotiation between the couple and more coercion in the form of male imposition to see the pregnancy discontinued. It is noteworthy that this position of male coercion with their partner was not evident among young men aged 18-27 years (Brandão et al., 2020). With regard to this aspect, although gender and class were identified as central in determining behavior among interviewees, there is clearly a generational influence.

Among older men, despite not having reported situations of use of physical violence, there were different levels of coercion, shaped by the dimension of the couple’s relationship, i.e. whether the unplanned pregnancy occurred within or outside of wedlock. Thus, this indicates that the forms of (dis)engagement with the pregnancy outcome toward an abortion differ if the event takes place with a steady partner or within a casual relationship. This suggests that the coercion involves a paradoxical dimension of being a type of engagement which confers a masculinist externality to the event, an aspect which elucidates the role of the relationship dimension and gender in reproductive processes.

Lastly, another form of the man’s involvement in the abortion decision-making process is addressed: the scenarios in which a mutual decision on the pregnancy outcome is reached by the couple. However, this was not considered a significant third dimension among the alternative forms of male participation in the abortion decision-making process among the older men given that: (i) based on the men’s narratives collected, this scenario was rare; (ii) given the empirical content derived from interviews with women (Heilborn et al., 2012a; 2012b), this type of situation is also extremely uncommon. Nevertheless, a bias in this view should be noted, in as far as this applies to the processes that unfold in the context of the older generation studied.

Albeit very slowly, a shift in the social landscape is taking place with regard to a reduction in the hierarchical imbalance characterizing gender relations: situations

of mutual agreement on the abortion decision are evident in the empirical evidence from younger men and women (Brandão et al. 2020; Heilborn et al. 2012a; 2012b). In another study, a change in the construction of forms of engagement on contraception was found: the contemporary discourse on new male contraceptive technology is emerging underpinned by the image of an actively-engaged man, with a sense of entitlement to rights, and no longer someone who merely shares the burden of this process with a partner (Pereira and Azize, 2019). These indicators reflect shifts that are subtle, yet becoming increasingly evident in both practices and discourses.

“Notified abortion”

A large proportion of the subjects, for different reasons, come under the category of “notified abortion”. This proved the most common situation among MC men, likely explained by the greater financial independence of their partners (even though they later seek reimbursement for the cost of the procedure), and also by a more secure and less complicated moral and physical context for carrying out the abortion. In the context of its illegal nature, class position allows partners access to safer private clinics for voluntary termination of the pregnancy (Heilborn et al., 2012b). The common situation in this segment is that of abortion notified by the partner – an analytical category which appears to clearly define the common empirical context –, a decision from which they are excluded and often become aware of only after the event.

Some respondents appeared to be comfortable with being removed from this process. Gilberto (MC, age 46 years, 2 abortions) was paradigmatic and particularly light-hearted in the account of his two abortions, at 27 and 34 years, with casual partners. In the first case, he claimed falling “victim to a set-up”: the nature of the relationship was unclear, they had spent a weekend together and according to the account, the partner left saying that she had gone to the date because she wanted to have a child by him. The partner was pressured into having an abortion by the family, with termination occurring at the fourth month of pregnancy. In the second case, the lover (who later became his fourth wife) only informed him after the event, saying she had good news (that she had had an abortion) and some bad news (that he owed her part of the cost of the procedure). The justification given by the partner was that it would have been a “high-risk pregnancy” at 41 years of age, and no negotiation about the decision took place. Likewise, Sandro (MC, age 48 years, 1 abortion) was notified of an abortion which occurred during a brief relationship (3 months dating) at 30 years of age. She informed him of the pregnancy and abortion – at which juncture she also told him that she had had 3 previous abortions –, refusing to accept financial assistance or the presence of the partner at the clinic.

During the interviews with Luis (MC, age 41 years, 1 abortion at 23 years) and Marcos (MC, age 43 years, 1 abortion at 37 years), different negative sentiments were expressed over the “notified abortion”. In the case of Luis, he was a strong advocate for use of condoms as a means of men controlling their reproduction and not being vulnerable to the interference/decision of a partner. Marcos was particularly embittered over having been excluded from the debate, although he did not regret his partner’s abortion: “(...) *I don’t regret this abortion, I think it was a good thing it happened. Looking back on it, the more I see it, the less I’m into the idea of having a child with her, (...) but there was no discussion*”.

Although “notified abortion” was more common in the affective-sexual relationships of MC men, two working class men, Breno (WC, age 40 years, 1 abortion at 30 years) and Leandro (WC, age 47 years, 1 abortion at 19 years) also had this profile. Breno experienced the abortion from afar, in a brief relationship, and was unaware of it. Leandro was also unaware of the pregnancy and the decision to terminate it. He felt totally betrayed, to the point of making remarks such as “I hope she dies, those who kill deserve to die”, upon learning the partner was in hospital following complications of an abortion carried out at a “backstreet clinic” in unsafe conditions. Leandro only found out what happened afterwards, through her partner’s brother, who told him about the abortion. He is opposed to abortion, comparing it to “a murder”.

This mode of disengagement of men is involuntary, given that the partners decide on the abortion in their absence, do so with their own money and have other forms of support among family members and/or friends. Male externality associated with “notified abortion”, in a sense promoted by the woman, certainly differs to the externality which occurs in the second type, where there is coercion on the part of the man over the decision in favor of his partner having an abortion. In this second modality, as will become evident, the *modus operandi* of the men differs, depending on whether the pregnancy is inside or outside of a marital relationship.

(Dis)engagement: forms of coercion to terminate pregnancy

Different forms of coercion are brought to bear so that the unplanned pregnancy ends its termination. These forms of coercion are subject to different levels of negotiation, which include disagreements between the couple and explicit stances against continuing the pregnancy. These different forms of disagreement/coercion can be understood as an intrinsic form (to men) of an active manifestation of male externality with respect to the abortion. In other words, if in “notified abortion” the condition of masculinist externality is given predominantly by prior unawareness of the event, and mediated by female handling of the situation, we consider here that certain contexts of coercion correspond to a strategy actively employed

by the man toward abortion as a desired outcome of an unplanned pregnancy. To exemplify, disengagement is promoted, whether in the situation of a couple in which he disagrees with the partner and does not desire abortion, thereby removing himself from the pregnancy and its outcome, or because he threatens not to accept paternity should the pregnancy be carried to term, in extramarital relationships. Thus, the active production of this externality (or disengagement) differs according to the dimension of the marital relationship upon examining the terms or conditions proposed in the process of negotiating abortion.

Notably, among the 6 MC men interviewed, there were no situations that could be interpreted as subjecting the partner to coercion. In this social stratum, having similar values, in which supporting independent decision-making on the women's part regarding the outcome of the pregnancy is one such example, means that men do not voice their disagreement. In addition, their MC partners tend to take decisions alone, i.e. "notified abortion", leaving no room for disagreements. As outlined earlier, disagreement which emerged among MC men were mostly over the fact of being excluded from the decision-making process in which they felt they should have an active say, even though they supported the woman's decision.

In the case of WC men, situations of coercion and disagreement were present in several decision-making processes. The biography of Tadeu (WC, age 45 years, 6 abortions), involved in the highest number of abortions in the group aged 40-49 years, seemed paradigmatic given the relatively high number of pregnancies, in most of which there was no agreement on what to do. Tadeu experienced the first and last of his abortions with his current partner. The first child was born after the couple's first sexual encounter, without using any method of contraception; he was 18 years old, while his partner was 16. He insisted on an abortion, because the pregnancy was not part of his life plan. However, the partner, out of "*fear of dying*", stood her ground on not seeking an abortion and on continuing with the pregnancy.

Two years later, the reverse occurred: in another pregnancy, she decided on and paid for an abortion at a suburban clinic in Rio and Tadeu accompanied her during the procedure. The couple was not cohabiting and he suspected he may not have been the father. After the abortion, she started using the pill, discontinuing birth control only for a planned pregnancy; Tadeu was 32 when this child was born. She stayed on the pill after the pregnancy, but had stopped using it one year prior to the interview on doctor's advice, because she was "obese" and experiencing nausea and blood pressure problems. Despite disliking it, he began using a condom with his partner. She became pregnant again owing to an act of "carelessness", when Tadeu was 43 and his partner 41 years of age. His partner took into account her age, the chances of this being a high-risk pregnancy, and the fact she already had a teenage son, before deciding on abortion. She received support and financial help from a sis-

ter and terminated the pregnancy. He was against this last abortion, deciding not to get involved and was unaware of the details of the procedure. He stated his wish not to be “*complicit*”. Tadeu’s experience also seems emblematic in arguing that being a couple is no guarantee of greater engagement on the man’s part; on the contrary, it can exemplify situations of promoted externality. Tadeu was actively involved in 4 abortions with extramarital partners: in one, the abortion was carried out by ingesting tea infusions and use of misoprostol medication (the pregnancy occurred at a time he intended to “*leave the relationship*”); in the second instance, the partner threatened to continue the relationship, but he convinced her to have an abortion, which he paid for by taking out a loan.

Narratives of explicit coercion are unusual. Respondents reporting coercion is highly unlikely. From a male standpoint, no situation emerged, for instance, associated with violence or threats, where such a portrayal would indicate certain coercion. However, the empirical accounts collected revealed elements suggesting different forms of coercion in the decision-making process for an abortion. With Danilo for example, this emerged in the form the deliberate mobilizing of the partner’s support network and in citing “*psychological war*”; another case was Raul, in which there are knowledge about pregnancy, absolute externality/non-involvement with the pregnancy and abortion carried out without any support from him.

For Danilo (WC, age 43 years, 1 abortion at 28 years), married for around 25 years with the same partner, the abortion situation took place in a stable extramarital relationship which lasted for 2 years. He held that she had intentionally got pregnant, given the partner was on the pill and the “*relationship was cooling off*”. The abortion decision was permeated by much duress. At one point, the partner affirmed that “*she would have it on her own*”, that “*she won’t remove it*”, which the informant referred to as a “*psychological war*”. He pressured her directly to go through with the abortion, and convinced his partner’s mother about the awkwardness of the situation, thereby gaining an “*ally*”. The negotiations revolved around a future project, in which they could stay together, after a possible separation.

The negotiations continued over the venue where the abortion was to take place and who would pay for the procedure. The respondent knew a place recommended by friends, but the partner opted for a specific clinic:

She turned round and said “I’ve sorted a place”, and I replied “how much is it?”, she said “R\$2,000”; she was making things as hard as possible so I’d back down, so it costs R\$2,000; I asked “can you afford to chip in, have you got any money set aside?”, her reply was “No, no I haven’t”. I recall it was in the month of June, when we get half the Xmas bonus salary paid by the company, and I had some savings, so I said “I’ll pay it”.

He paid for the abortion, performed in a clinical on the outskirts of town, part paid by money lent by an older sister, who was “*better off*”. The abortion was kept secret from everyone, except for the partner’s mother, who was the intermediary in the decision, and a male friend. The relationship continued for another month, during which time he began “*gradually withdrawing*”.

The situation of Raul (WC, age 41 years, 1 abortion at 21 years) also helps shed light on the dimensions of coercion in the abortion decision-making process. He had two relationships at the same time. One of these partners later became his wife. The abortion happened with “the other woman”. The fact he was engaged was used as justification for opposing continuation with the pregnancy with the woman who, according to his account, wished to start a family with him. Raul is explicit in saying he could not afford to care for the child, nor commit to the relationship. His stance against continuing the pregnancy does not mean he is in favor of the abortion: he stated being “radically against” abortion and, therefore could also not support the partner with the resources needed to carry out the procedure. The modulations acting in promoting this (dis)engagement also emerge in this biography: his (apparent) absence cannot be interpreted as simple masculinist externality in the abortion process; to the contrary, his firm stance against the pregnancy has a major influence on the outcome.

The forms of coercion could include withdrawal of commitment, in the crux of the tension which is to actively produce (engagement) a situation of shrugging off the responsibility (disengagement), encompassed in the current emic expression “*deal with it on your own*”. Raul had a bride and made it clear he had no intention of committing to another relationship and/or child. This externality in relation to the process, replaces the “*order to remove*” the fetus, a manifestation of explicit violence, but imposes a sufficient degree of coercion to make the partner seek an abortion by herself, without the support or presence of Raul.

Laerte (WC, age 41 years, 1 abortion at 30 years) experienced a situation in which his partner initially disagreed with the abortion, but eventually backed down. This was a stable but extramarital relationship, and he argued that the pregnancy would end in a “fatherless child”, just as he was. This appears to be a clear-cut situation in which the partner consents as a result of coercion by the man. The abortion took place at a decent clinic (although clandestine) in the Northern area of the city, paid for with his money and accompanied by him.

The 4 abortions in which Elias (MC, age 48 years) was involved took place between the ages of 35 and 43 years, within two stable relationships, associated with rejection of paternity on his part, claiming financial reasons. The interviewee reported the use of unreliable natural methods of birth control (timing of ovulation, *coitus interruptus*), where this changed only after the fourth abortion, at which

point his partner had an IUD (intrauterine device) fitted. When asked about the decision process, he stated: “*it was easy, I had no job, I had nothing, I said look: I’m not going to bring up the child, I can’t, and I really wasn’t into the idea*”.

The type of involvement of the man in the decision process of the abortion is intertwined with the marital situation in which the pregnancy is conceived. Men show greater engagement in abortions which occur within extramarital relationships. This attitude is not removed from the logic of preserving the conjugal/matrimonial ties, an aspect which can be severely impacted by the news of an unplanned pregnancy with another partner. Such a pregnancy, if carried to term, can cause different sorts of interference in the couple’s relationship, with potential to expose the man’s infidelity at any time. Thus, the outcome of the pregnancy in an extramarital relationship must be negotiated and controlled, and coercion strategies appear to be a way of effecting this. The literature shows that the stance of the partner with regard to the unplanned pregnancy is pivotal in the women’s decision-making process, and outweighs many other dimensions or reasons for the abortion (Bajos et al. 2002; Salem, 2004; 2006; Brandão et al., 2020). Therefore, this again underscores the primacy which the relationship dimension and gender have in decision-making processes on reproductive events.

Exception to rule or upholding certain ideology/ethos of masculinity?

Among the WC interviewees, two narratives distinguish them from the other respondents, in which the consensus on the outcome of the unplanned pregnancy seems clear. Lucio (WC, age 49 years, 2 abortions at 26 years) was involved in these abortions, one immediately after the other, with the same partner, and shortly after a desired consensual pregnancy, arguing that “my job wasn’t secure” at the time and his partner was unemployed. The report is synthetic when mentioning the second abortion, carried out “*in the wake of the first*”: “*same thing, same agreement, same money borrowed, same clinic, only the day differed*”. After this second abortion, the partner became sterile, with “twisted uterus” and the couple was no longer using any method of contraception at the time of the interview. An exception among WC men, Lucio stated he was in favor of abortion, and would support his daughter in doing so, should she so desire. His only daughter was training to be a lawyer and upwardly mobile, where his income was above-average for WC individuals.

Haroldo (WC, age 44 years, 3 abortions between 27 and 33 years of age) was married for 17 years with the same partner, with whom he had two children and was involved in 3 abortions, mutually decided on by the couple, in view of the kind of life they would be able to provide for the children. The abortions were performed in clinics located in the Northern area of the city, but not before first

trying misoprostol, tea infusions and concoctions. He was unable to recall his exact age at the time of these events; he accompanied his partner in the first abortion, but she went with a neighbor for the subsequent two. Haroldo is not clear on his position on being for or against abortion, but advocated the “need for each individual” to decide.

It appears no coincidence that these 2 situations amongst the 9 WC interviewees took place after pregnancies carried to term, i.e. when some reproductive expectation had already been met. Fatherhood occurred at age 24 for Lúcio and at 21 (and again at 23) years for Haroldo. The intricate relationship between the value of fatherhood and construction of the male identity were previously addressed in our analysis of the events of pregnancy and abortion among working class youths (Cabral, 2003). This same notion appears to apply for the 2 exceptions reported. While there was no delay in fatherhood, evidenced by the first pregnancy in both cases, the possibility of carrying subsequent pregnancies to term was considered in the context of the need (or imperative) of being a “good head of the family”, a dimension undoubtedly involving the size of the family and image of male provider – again aspects underpinning a certain ethos of masculinity present in the WC stratum (Duarte, 1986; Nardi, 1998; Sarti, 1996; Cabral, 2009).

Final considerations

Classifying subjects and events as complex as the decision-making process regarding the outcome of a pregnancy is by no means straightforward and can culminate in simplifications. In the case of men aged 40-49 years, these events took place, in some instances over 20 years ago. Equally, the partiality of recounting an abortion from the male perspective cannot be ignored, whether because it was not his body involved, or because a highly bias point of view is conveyed. In this sense, the line between shrugging off responsibility for the pregnancy and coercing the partner to undergo an abortion can be blurred, especially when living conditions are poor.

This externality was not homogeneous and the nature of the partnership is an evidently factor which heavily influences the decision-making process. It is noteworthy that these data can be surprising: relationships that are stable do not always translate to major engagement or support. Greater male involvement in the abortion appears to occur: (i) when the men have this option (given that female autonomy often makes them secondary to the process, being notified only after the event); (ii) when the pregnancy puts the life projects of these men in jeopardy, such as in cases of extramarital relations or at given stages in life; (iii) when father-

hood status is already firmly established, such as for abortions which are mutually agreed in similarly consensual pregnancies; (iv) lastly, but no less important, the financial situation of these subjects at the time of the event.

Strong opposition to abortion was evident among men of working class. A system of justification allows the coexistence of a moral denial of the abortion, support for criminalizing it, at the time that the understanding of the need for it on a case-by-case basis is observed.

On the one hand, we reiterate the dimensions of gender and social class as preponderant analytical perspectives in elucidating the decision-making process of pregnancy termination. On the other hand, we highlight the specificity of the generational dimension: both “notified abortion” and “coercion” (in its facet of non-negotiated imposition) are specific to the older generation investigated in the present analysis, set against younger men as a counterpoint.

Addressing abortion from a male perspective brings to the fore the debate over the apparent contradiction between male exteriority versus engagement in the event, an aspect addressed in different ways in the contexts studied. Underlying this disparity is not only the dimension of the importance of fatherhood in the masculinist biography and element of male identity construction (Reich, 2008; Fuller, 2000), but also the role played by women in the abortion decision: all hinges on whether the event is concealed from the partner. This situation gives rise to different arrangements for the possible outcomes of a reproductive event: an abortion decision made by the women alone or mutually with the partner; silencing of the desire for fatherhood; direct or indirect pressure to terminate the pregnancy, etc. Thus, different arrangements come into play in the process of negotiating the abortion, and man’s (dis)engagement is a form of male agency in this scenario.

Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conception, writing and review of the manuscript and they assume responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the study.

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