

Giving Birth From a Danish Perspective, a Narrative Study of Childbirth in
The Danish Society

The Danish system is often thought of as a socialistic system almost on the edge of being communistic. This is mainly due to the high taxes as well as the free healthcare and free education system. In reality, Denmark is a free-market economy and is among the top three best countries in which to operate a business with a very flexible job market (Petersen, 2015)¹. There is an entirely different mentality regarding human interactions which may highly affect structural processes and a woman's emotional state related to pregnancy and childbirth ("Workplace culture in Denmark", n.d.)².

There seem to be a significant difference in the childbirth experience for women in the United States compared with women in Denmark. Diving into the Danish system may provide us with important inside on how to improve the US system and, thereby, provide a better experience for the women prior to and during childbirth. Cultural norms and structural factors are thought to be highly impacting a woman's experience related to pregnancy and childbirth. This study will use a narrative conducted on a Danish woman as well as relevant published works in order to determine the cultural influence on the entire process from conception to childbirth, which may have a significant impact on the structural process.

Analysis of cultural factors that may affect conception, pregnancy, and childbirth

The three lifegiving phases conception, pregnancy, and childbirth are all crucial in shaping a woman's experience. At the moment of conception, the culture may affect the average age range in which it is found appropriate for a woman to become pregnant, as well as how well-established a romantic relationship – marriage vs. not marriage – is required prior to conception.

During pregnancy, the culture may greatly affect how likely the child is to be born, and the childbirth itself may be highly influenced by the norms in a society. The paper will in the next few sections investigate the importance of these factors for a woman's overall experience.

At the moment of conception

Important factors that seem to highly impact the decision of conceiving include career goals and a break with old traditions in society. These factors are thought to be a product of distinct cultures that are highly integrated into modern Danish society.

Career goal

The importance of age seems to be an indirect result of a woman's desire to establish a reliable career and achieve career goals before conceiving a child. From the narrative conducted we see that the pregnancy was not spontaneous but rather a product of plan- and scheduling (J. Christensen, personal communication, July 9, 2020). Janne Christensen was 29 when I was conceived. This is – according to statistical data – the average rate for women in Denmark to have their first child and the age is still increasing (Statistikbanken, 2019)³. Looking back – before the women entered the labor market in the 1970s (Rasmussen & Brunbech, 2009)⁴ – the average age for first-time pregnancies was approximately 23 years. Women were working stationary in the house and had, therefore, no career goals whatsoever. After the spike in represented women in the labor force in the 1970's the average age rose to approximately 27.6 in 1997 – when Janne became pregnant – years and has since been rising steadily to 29.5 in 2019. The general pressure on a woman to be in possession of a reliable job before conceiving may have been the reason for the average age.

A break with traditions

Traditionally, a woman married before the decision of conceiving a child was made between her and the husband. It may very likely have been an unspoken tradition related to the wedding night. If we compare the data on first-time pregnancies with the average age of first-time marriage, we see that the numbers are almost identical (Statistikbanken, 2019)⁵. However, as women increasingly entered the labor market, it became more normal for couples to live together before marriage, which is shown in an exponential increase in children born outside of marriage (Danmarks Statistik, 2000)⁶. It is not unreasonable to imagine that the time spent in the workforce slowly separated the women from the church, thereby, making social disgrace following out-of-wedlock childbirths less severe. This may be the reason for the decision made by Janne, who lived with her husband and conceived a child before marriage without having to worry about being socially excluded from society (J. Christensen, personal communication, July 9, 2020).

During pregnancy

The time when a woman is pregnant is crucial for the development of the child. The risk of miscarriage is highly affected by lifestyle behavior and food availability which may be controlled by cultural factors within a society (Geraghty, et al., 2015)⁷. The emotional impact of pregnancy on a woman may also be impacted by the general cultural viewpoint on pregnancy.

Cultural controlled lifestyle.

Smoking

Smoking has been shown to be the leading preventable cause of preterm deaths (Scherman et al., 2018)⁸. Back in 1970, almost 50% of all women smoked in Denmark (Brink,

2020)⁹. It was, however, not until 1995 where smoking became a concern and that the first legal bill was signed limiting smoking in a variety of public areas including kindergartens, schools, and public transport (Brink & Gawron, 2020)¹⁰. Janne Christensen became pregnant in the year 1996 (J. Christensen, personal communication, July 9, 2020). The population's awareness of smoking's harmful effect was decreasing rapidly. In 1997 the number had fallen to approximately 30% of all women. This is thought to have greatly benefitted Janne who stated that she had nothing to worry about during the pregnancy and that she actually really liked the experience. The sudden change in culture may, therefore, have made it very convenient for many pregnant women who now could travel freely around the country without having to worry about their babies getting exposed to potential toxins.

Weight gain

During the pregnancy, gestational weight gain is an important factor for the health of your baby. Through research, certain guidelines have been determined for adequate weight gain. However, these guidelines seem hard to follow, especially in the United States where almost 50 percent gain too much weight during the pregnancy, which may lead to various complications during childbirth as well as increase the risk of childhood obesity (CDC, 2019)¹¹. The United States is a country with easy access to fast food compared to Denmark. Where a big part of the population still lives in villages and smaller towns where fast food is 45 min. away. Though data on average gestational weight gain is lacking for Denmark, the theory is still considered a potential factor contributing to maternal health when comparing the data on obesity in the two countries with Denmark having approximately 17 percent obesity and the United States having approximately 42.5 percent obesity in 2017 (Danskernes Sundhed, 2017)¹² (CDC, 2020)¹³. More research is needed to draw any conclusions.

The cultural impact on emotions

Denmark is quite famous for one specific word. *Hygge*. It is described as followed by the Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment: “ ‘Hygge’ is a very important term in Denmark, which covers the warm and friendly atmosphere of spending quality time with friends, family or other loved ones.” (“Culture and leisure”, n.d.)¹¹. The term is penetrating in Danish culture and has become a marketing strategy for many companies, especially among restaurants and cafés. It is also a significant part of the Danish homes where most people have 90 percent of their garden placed behind the house and surrounded by large bushes to *keep the neighbors out*. ‘Hygge’ is a state in which there is no need to show off, no stress, and no worries at all. It is simply a state of complete enjoyment which the Danes are amazingly good at. This aspect of the Danish culture may likely have contributed to Janne’s very comfortable pregnancy.

The childbirth

Childbirth is the push for a woman before she is able to see the beauty that she has been carrying around for 9 months. It is also a process that is most likely believed to be quite similar throughout cultures across the world. However, the culture in a society may have a bigger impact than first thought. As we hear in Robbie E. Davis-Floyd’s book “BIRTH as an AMERICAN RITE of PASSAGE”, Cesarean sections have been increasingly used during the later years reaching between 25 – 50 percent among hospitals in the United States (2003)¹². It is an extremely quick and easy way for doctors to deliver a baby. The frequency of childbirths for a doctor may, therefore, be an important factor related to a woman’s experience during childbirth.

Cesarean delivery vs. vaginal delivery and doctor-to-patient relationship

As described above, the cesarian section is relatively popular. Even in 1997 – the year Janne Christensen became a mom – the rate of cesarian sections performed was approximately 20.7% (Martin, et al., 2019)¹³. In Denmark on the other hand the numbers were significantly lower reaching only 7.5% of all childbirths (“Fødte og Fødsler”, 2019)¹⁴. The difference is clear, but what is the reason behind this difference. A theory could be that doctors – due to a tight schedule – would often choose to perform a cesarian section if the birth would seem difficult and long-lasting. Comparing the density of medical doctors relative to the population seem to be in favor of this theory. Compared, Denmark has 73.5 percent more medical doctors pr. 10,000 population (WHO, 2020)¹⁵.

Janne Christensen was encouraged by her doctor to do a homebirth. The doctor had good experiences with homebirths and thought that many women found it more comfortable than hospital births. Janne agreed to do a homebirth; however, things ended quite differently. She went over time and went to a check-up. At that moment, the doctors decided to start the birth due to a deteriorating placenta. The baby was big; however, instead of going directly to the cesarian section, the doctors decided to perform a vaginal delivery. The delivery was carried out successfully with help from a suction cup placed on the baby’s head (J. Christensen, personal communication, July 9, 2020). Now the question: why did the doctors not use the cesarian section if they knew it was going to be a hard birthing-process? One of the reasons why it may be better to perform a vaginal birth compared to a cesarian section is that the bacteria of which the baby is exposed to during childbirth may help develop its immune system. This is primarily due to the use of antibiotics and disinfectants related to cesarian sections which are not present during vaginal delivery (Neu, 2012)¹⁶.

Janne's experience with medical personal may be said to be optimal. First: the doctor would gladly offer her to do a homebirth and provide her with Labor and Delivery Nurse. Janne was informed of all the benefits as well as being ensured by the doctor that everything would turn out fine. Second: when things did not go as planned the doctors did not rush to perform a cesarian section but rather use the extra time on performing a vaginal delivery to benefit for the baby and the mother. Thus, there seems to be more maneuverability among doctors in Denmark compared with doctors in the United States. The extra time may create a better doctor-to-patient relationship making it easier for the doctor to make the best decisions for the patient.

Conclusion

A woman's experience seems to be heavily impacted by cultural norms and structural processes. The average age for having a first child is currently 29.5 years old and may be linked to women recently entering the labor-market and the establishment of career goals. The importance of marriage has also been decreasing during the later years contributing to a safer environment for women conceiving outside of marriage. During pregnancy, cultural lifestyle and government regulations seem to be the most important factors impacting a woman's experience with more regulations limiting potential pathogens in the public space, such as smoking. Cultural nutrition, food availability, and healthy gestational weight gain may be related to a decrease in complications during and post-childbirth. The Danes' ability to relax associated with *hygge* may be important for a comfortable pregnancy. At last, a woman's experience with childbirth may be heavily affected by the doctor-to-population ratio, with a high ratio allowing for more time with the patient. This may result in fewer cesarian sections which may positively affect the

development of the baby's immune system. It may also allow for a woman to have a more comfortable childbirth for the woman and the doctor with only limited stressors.

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