

Dagmara Kostrzewska

Akademia Pedagogiki Społecznej w Warszawie

ORCID: 0000-0003-3139-0243

DOI: 10.35464/1642-672X.PS.2020.4.03

The Cultural Codes of Motherhood

ABSTRACT: The deliberations taken up in this paper prove that motherhood has for centuries played an important role in the life of not only a family but also, in a way, of the entire community. The phenomenon of motherhood itself as well as its cultural code has undergone numerous transformations, stages, and evolutions. Motherhood once considered to be virtually the duty of every woman, today is a matter of choice and something that is not obvious. Despite numerous transformations of the phenomenon, the universal value is the role of the mother – the birth-giver, the giver of life, the personification of goodness and love for her own children. The paper presents the transformation of the cultural code of motherhood over three historical periods – the Middle Ages, the Modern Age, and the Contemporary Times. The article presents the characteristics of the code occurring in a given period – motherhood as the duty of every woman (Middle Ages), motherhood as a woman's vocation – mother as the most important person in the family (Modern Age), and the contemporary image of the cultural code of motherhood as the free choice of every woman. The paper also undertakes the subject of the component elements of each of the discussed codes, including issues related to the role and position of a mother not only in the family but also in society, marriage, and reproductive age, issues related to feeding and physical care of the child, caring for the child's education and spirituality, as well as more modern elements – the mother's return to work, sending the child to nursery or kindergarten, using the help of a babysitter, or the currently popular family model. The paper constitutes an attempt to analyze the transformations of the cultural code of motherhood and to discuss the possible constancy of its elements.

KEYWORDS: cultural code, motherhood, mother, social change.

Introduction

Cultural codes “are the framework of meaning, within which an individual operates when assessing a given social situation. They enable a precise determination of differences in the interpretation of various phenomena

between separate cultures” (Odrowąż-Coates, 2013, p. 46). In Zygmunt Bauman’s interpretation (1990), cultural codes are “instruments which ensure correspondence between the structures of social reality and the culturally formed behaviors. They are primarily a system of references and oppositions.”

In contrast, according to Coltaire Rapaille (2006), cultural codes are nothing else than the meanings which we unknowingly assign to a given thing. In other words, a cultural code is an image of how a given culture perceives a given phenomenon, item, object, sign.

An example of a cultural code might be the wearing of wedding rings by married people, an engagement ring worn on a ring finger by betrothed women, a cross on a chain worn around the neck by religious people.

“Cultural codes include gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, which may have a different meaning in different cultures” (Odrowąż-Coates, 2013, 46). The well-known gesture of ‘thumbs up’ means ‘OK’ in most European countries, i.e. the confirmation, approval, or consent to something. Whereas for the Germans, Austrians, or French, it is a gesture that has no meaning other than the most apparent indication of the number ‘one’.

The inconspicuous ‘OK’ gesture can be very risky behavior in the Middle-East or in Southern Europe, where it means something extremely offensive and vulgar, namely a form of anal sex (Zaleski, 2017).

Cultural codes can be considered in terms of the framework of meaning, within which an individual operates. This framework often functions at the level of subconscious interpretations of the world and at the same time determines not only human behavior, but also the attitudes they represent. “Cultural codes indicate the profound importance of objects and phenomena that occur in a given culture and therefore help to understand the people of that culture” (Odrowąż-Coates, 2013, p. 46). Another important fact is that for this ‘understanding of a given culture’ to occur, and thus for the cultural codes to work, it is a requirement that all participants in a given situation, form of communication, have knowledge drawn from the same cultural circle (after Odrowąż-Coates, 2013, 2015).

However, it is worth mentioning that according to Jenna Hyatt and Helen Simons (1999, after Odrowąż-Coates, 2013), upon “coming into contact with each other”, cultural codes can discover, interpret, supplement or decipher each other.

Since cultural codes are deeply rooted in the culture of a given community, it is natural that they are subject to processes, changes, and transformations along with it. It also seems logical in this case that cultural codes are often adopted by individuals of a given community, for example, in

the process of socialization, and then passed on from generation to generation “at the level of tradition and religion, through the family, the education system and media propaganda” (Odrowąż-Coates, 2013, p. 47).

Because a given cultural code is specific to a given community, it depends on the factors that directly shape that community and its culture, including demographic, political, and religious factors, as well as the period, in which the said community functions. These factors, driven by the passing of time and natural progressions, evolve, which in turn causes changes in the surrounding reality, and “reality transformations have therefore – naturally – entailed the (de)activation of codes” (Nęcka, 2016).

Cultural codes of motherhood

Motherhood is a phenomenon, the cultural code of which has been present in every community, regardless of demographics, religions, or political situations, for hundreds of years. This phenomenon is naturally inscribed in the lives of a large share of women, and in Poland alone, 375 000 live births were recorded in 2019 (Central Statistical Office [GUS], Demographics Yearbook, 2020). Moreover, “the belief that motherhood is the vocation of every woman – her fundamental biological and social role – has been established in societies of various cultural backgrounds” (Gawlina, 2003). Motherhood is often treated as “the only career that is a monopoly of women” (Reewes, 1982).

Important elements of the code of motherhood are aspects connected, among others, to marriage, childbirth, breastfeeding, childcare, or aspects that are closer to our times – institutional assistance in childcare, return to work by the mother, sending the child to a nursery, or employing a nanny.

In my paper, I would like to characterize the cultural codes of motherhood functioning in Poland in selected historical periods. The choice of specific historical periods that I would like to focus on in my paper was motivated by the desire to particularly emphasize the changes that have taken place within the cultural code of motherhood, which, in turn, were motivated by specific changes linked to the transformations of social, political and religious situations taking place in a given period.

Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, the cultural code explicitly presented motherhood as the duty of every woman; moreover, married women spent on average half of their lives pregnant, and the average life expectancy of a woman was

40 years. Despite her important function in society, a woman, the giver of life, the giver of offspring, was objectified and treated mainly as a “machine” for bearing children (after Bukowczan-Rzeszut, 2018; Delimata, 2004; Delimata-Proch, 2015). Women were also responsible for the emotional development of their offspring because they were the only ones to show affection towards children. Although women, for the most part, did not raise their children on their own, they covertly tried to show motherly concern and love when seeing them.

The vision of motherhood was closely linked to marriage, and consequently to the status of a woman both in the family and in society. Similarly to motherhood, marriage in the Middle Ages was seen as a woman’s duty, and even 12–13-year-old girls would wed, with most marriages being arranged by the parents of the young people. A young woman, whose partner was most often chosen by the head of the family, namely the father, had no right to refuse or oppose his decision. The main duty of a proper wife was to give birth to as many offspring as possible, with the insistence that they should be of the male sex – this guaranteed a higher social status and respect for the whole family, which is why the average number of births of a married woman was between 8 and 10 throughout her life. Due to the standard of medicine, only natural births were delivered, in most cases at home. It was rare to have Caesarean sections, which could only be afforded by the wealthiest women, who were accompanied during labor by the “medical servants” of the time – women called midwives. However, unlike nowadays, Caesarean sections, which are often prompted by a woman’s request, back then were most often an attempt to save her life or, more importantly, the child she was giving birth to. Childbirth assisted by a Caesarean section was also a necessity when the woman died during childbirth and the father of the child wanted to save it from death. Regardless of the course of childbirth, whether it was natural or assisted, women often struggled with postpartum complications, which in many cases resulted in their death – on average, 1 in 7–8 women died immediately after, or even during childbirth. Due to the state of medicine at that time, but also the role that was assigned to a woman in relation to the family and society, the life of the child (especially of the male sex) was of much greater importance than her own. However, in many cases, a woman’s death during labor was also linked to the death of the child she was carrying. The issue of raising children was also strongly embedded in the cultural code. In the case of wealthy women, children were most commonly raised by servants and so-called wet nurses; women from poorer families were to a greater extent forced to raise children on their own, but also to supervise the mental and

spiritual development of the child (after Bukowczan-Rzeszut, 2018; Delimata, 2004; Delimata-Proch, 2015).

Motherhood, as a duty of every woman, was so important for medieval society that infertile women were left on their own, shamed and humiliated due to their inability to fulfill their basic yet prioritized role in life (after Bukowczan-Rzeszut, 2018; Delimata, 2004; Delimata-Proch, 2015). Such women were also often left behind by their immediate families due to the shame of having a childless daughter.

Modern Age

The cultural code of motherhood in the Modern Age, compared to the Middle Ages, held the woman, and especially the mother, in high regard, both in terms of the role she plays in the family, and in society as a whole. Motherhood was no longer the unpleasant duty of a woman forced to give several or sometimes a dozen or so births during her life, but the fundamental role of the woman was still considered to be that of a mother and wife.

A woman who gave birth to the offspring became the most respected member of the family and having children, regardless of the social class that the woman came from, served as a cornerstone for the mother's high position in society. Similarly to the Middle Ages, in the Modern Age, a woman, and especially a mother, was perceived as the one who showed affection for her offspring, as well as the guardian of the hearth and home. The mother was also often treated as a person who softened the harsh practices prevailing in the family (after Wajs, 2016).

Despite the high – when compared to the Middle Ages – position of women both in the family and in society, the patriarchal model, in which the man was the head of the family and made all the decisions related to it – not only financial but also personal ones concerning its members – was still a widely accepted family model. Therefore, the most important role of a woman was still seen as being a good mother and wife, and young girls were raised from their early days to be submissive and devoted to their husbands (after Wajs, 2016; Bogucka, 2005). The modern woman was meant to be able to take care of her home, husband, and children, as well as herself and her needs. Compared to the Middle Ages, the age of women getting married changed only slightly, as they were still underage girls aged 15–16, and the partner for such a young woman was usually chosen by her father. After the wedding, the woman's newly wedded husband took over the role of her guardian from her father. The young age at which women got married was strongly linked

to the fact that marriage itself raised a woman's social status, and in turn, the status of a woman in a relationship grew depending on the dowry she brought into it (after Wajs, 2016).

Due to the priority role played by the mother in the family, any wrongdoing against her, whether it was disobedience, a bad word, or laying a hand on her, was severely punished and treated as a disgrace to the punished person – regardless of their social class (after Wajs, 2016).

The woman was automatically blamed for the inability to bear a child in marriage, arguing that she is the one who cannot give offspring to a man, and thus fulfill her vocation and fundamental role. Marriage and having children in the Modern Age was treated as something obvious and natural; therefore, single women, who had no husband and, more importantly, no children, were often accused of practicing black magic and having dark powers.

Since the maternal instinct of women played an important role in raising children until the 18th century, women were solely responsible for this. After the 18th century, the custom of sending offspring to be raised by the extended family emerged – children returned home at the age of 7 (after Wajs, 2016).

The present day

The contemporary woman is free and independent, and her role is no longer reduced to just being a mother and a wife. Today, motherhood is a choice, not an obligation or a dictate. A contemporary mother is a multifunctional person – an educated, wealthy, working woman, who at the same time takes care of her children and the home. Nowadays, a mother is a full-fledged parent, often the breadwinner, but she remains a good caretaker and guardian of the hearth and home. The social function of the mother has not changed either. The mother is still a 'role' that all of society watches closely, often judging and commenting it. Even though motherhood is still seen as one of the most important roles of a woman, social patterns related to the role of the mother have changed. Currently, a woman gets married on average at 27 years of age and gives birth to her first child after turning 29 (Report of the Central Statistical Office [GUS], 2015). Marriage itself is not a necessity these days either, and cohabitation partnerships are getting increasingly popular (Report of the Central Statistical Office [GUS], 2015). Before getting married, the woman invests in her development, education, and career, and only then she decides to start a family. Contrary to the long-practiced in previously discussed eras large-family model, it has currently changed in favor of the so-called '2+1' model. The child's sex is no longer the expectation of society

and the head of the family towards the future mother but simply a desire of the parents, which is often expressed in terms of “no matter the sex, as long as it’s healthy”.

Despite all the freedom and independence that a modern mother has, her role is heavily evaluated by society, and her every move is closely watched by other women, not just those of the older generation. All decisions related to the offspring are subject to criticism, starting with how it was delivered into the world, whether it is fed in a natural way or by bottle, through the issue of vaccination, to putting the child into the care of a nursery/kindergarten or a nanny (after Kusio, 2004).

A contemporary woman, despite her education and all the competences she possesses, most often draws knowledge about motherhood from textbooks and specialists, which in turn indicates the disconnected role of maternal instinct, which in previous eras played a key role in raising children.

Analyzing the above characteristics, a thesis can be put forward that the cultural code of motherhood has undergone many transformations over the centuries. It formed, developed, and changed. However, were all elements of the cultural code of motherhood transforming? “The image of a mother changes over the centuries. The way we perceive motherhood does not change. The mother is the child-bearer and the one who takes care of the “emotional support” of the family. The role of the mother is also institutional, more formal in nature...” (Starzak, 2019). The mother, regardless of the era, was a key figure in unifying not only the family but society as a whole. It was motherhood that determined family status, its reception by the rest of the group. A woman has always had a strong sense of belonging to the home environment, and the role of a caregiver has been predominant in her duties. “As a result of cultural and economic changes, this model has transformed. Although today, a good mother is still largely responsible for the home and her children, she shares these responsibilities with her husband, which turns out to be a necessity due to her professional activity” (ROPS research, 2015).

The transformation of the cultural code over the centuries has been influenced by many other changes related to, among others, the social and political situation, the development of education, the change in the role of the church in the state, as well as social movements. The development of technology, and consequently education and culture, are shaping people who are more and more aware – of themselves, but also the things around them. Aware of their needs, but also rights. All of this affects cultural transformations, which are components of given cultural codes. The contemporary world has evoked a need to travel and to move around in us, the consequence of which

is that different cultures meet and intertwine in different corners of the world. According to J. Hyatt and H. Simons (1999), such an encounter between different cultures can lead to mutual discovery, but also the cultural codes influencing one another. “The cultural code is falling apart before our very eyes. It seems that we could indicate two reasons for this change in the code: the slow dissociation of the Polish cultural code from European culture and, happening simultaneously with decolonization, the gradual dethroning of the European cultural code, which ceases to be a universal language” (Małochleb, 2016).

Conclusion

Cultural codes are “shortcuts” that organize our minds.

They are names, behind which lie the meanings that make us understand the world.

That is why sometimes it is so difficult to communicate with strangers. That is why sometimes it is difficult to convince someone of something – same words, different meanings. It is also the phenomenon of one’s own language, which is like the moon – always half-hidden in the shadows. This is a knowledge forgotten by generations of adults, who do not remember the moments when their childhood world took shape.

(Laboratory of Cultural Codes).

Cultural codes exist in every area of our lives, they are the phenomena that shape our views and attitudes towards often seemingly obvious and natural things and phenomena such as motherhood.

The cultural code of motherhood, despite the many transformations and evolutions that it has undergone – both of itself and of the phenomena that accompany it – as well as those that still await it, is also an example of a certain consistency of the elements in our culture, in the case of the phenomenon of motherhood – the role of the mother. In each of the presented eras, it was the mother who was responsible for providing her offspring with at least a glimpse of affection, an oasis of love and motherly tenderness. It was the mother’s task to provide the child with emotional support, and often the whole family as well, regardless of how her roles were characterized by the cultural code.

“In the life of a woman, one of the basic roles she may encounter is that of a mother. I do not just mean playing that role towards a child, but also adopting the experiences of that role from her own mother and other women, in whom that role has been activated in relation to ourselves” (Atras, 2020).

References

- Bauman, Z. (1990). *Thinking Sociologically*. Basil Blackell Ud: Oxford.
- Bogucka M. (2005). *Gorsza płeć. Kobieta w dziejach Europy od antyku po wiek XXI*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio.
- Delimata, M. (2004). *Dziecko w Polsce Średniowiecznej*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.
- Delimata-Proch, M. (2015). Ciąża, poród oraz połóg w świetle polskich ksiąg cudów i łask (od średniowiecza do XVIII w.). *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej*, 63.
- Gawlina, Z. (2003). Macierzyństwo jako wartość w kontekście przemian społecznych. *Rocznik Socjologii Rodziny*, XV.
- Główny Urząd Statystyczny. (2020). *Rocznik demograficzny*.
- Główny Urząd Statystyczny. (2015). *Małżeństwo oraz dzietność w Polsce*.
- Hyatt, J., Simons, H. (1999). Cultural Codes – Who holds the Key? The Concept and Conduct of Evolution in Central and Eastern Europe. *Evolution*, 5(1). Sage Publications: London.
- Kusio, U. (2004). Współczesna kobieta wobec macierzyństwa. *Kultura i edukacja*, 4, 40–47.
- Odrowąż-Coates, A. (2013). Kobieta za zasłoną kodów kulturowych Arabii Saudyjskiej. *Pedagogika Społeczna*, 1(47).
- Odrowąż-Coates, A. (2015). *Fatamorgana saudyjskiej przestrzeni społeczno-kulturowej*. Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza “Impuls”.
- Reewes, N. (1971). *Womankind. Beyond the Stereotypes*. New York: Aldine Publishing Company New.
- Regionalny Ośrodek Polityki Społecznej Województwa Śląskiego. (2015). *Społeczna Rola Matki – wyzwania współczesnego macierzyństwa. Raport z badań*.
- Reppaille, C. (2006). *The Culture Code*. New York: Broadway Books.

Internet sources

- Atras, A. (2020). *Rola matki*. <https://www.annaatras.com/rola-matki.html> (access: 15.10.2020).
- Bukowczan-Rzeszut, A. (2018). *Jak wyglądały porody w średniowiecznej Europie?* <https://twojahistoria.pl/2018/09/17/jak-wygladaly-porody-w-sredniowiecznej-europie> (access: 16.10.2020).
- Laboratorium kodów kulturowych. <http://www.fundacjathinktank.pl/laboratorium-kodoacutew-kulturowych.html> (access: 26.10.2020).
- Małochleb, P. (2016). *Szyfry (nie)czytelne, czyli kody kulturowe*. <https://www.czasopismopolonistyka.pl/artykul/szyfry-nie-czytelne-czyli-kody-kulturowe> (access: 21.10.2020).
- Nęcka, A. (2016). Kody kulturowe. (Nie) potrzebny bagaż. *Horyzonty polonistyki*, nr 13. <https://www.czasopismopolonistyka.pl/artykul/kody-kulturowe> (access: 23.10.2020).
- Starzak, G. (2019). *Bycie mamą nie jest łatwe*. https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/Z/ZR/db201905_matka.html (access: 17.10.2010).
- Wajs, D. (2016). *Rola i pozycja kobiety w rodzinie nowożytnej*. <https://wmeritum.pl/rola-pozycja-kobiety-rodzynie-nowozytnej/146800> (access: 30.10.2010).
- Zaleski, R. (2017). *Gesty, na które należy uważać*. https://www.logo24.pl/Logo-24/1,85831,5640489,Gesty_na_ktore_nalezyc_uwazac.html?disableRedirects=true (access: 30.10.2020)