

Monday, February 11, 2008
Learned Ladies Living Large

A recent review of *Ready* in the *Washington Post* asked whether a new later mom with a high school education or less would have "the same opportunity to do satisfying things" as the later moms who participated in my study. That's an interesting question--and not one I can answer on the basis of the interviews I did, since all the women I spoke to had spent some time in college, all but a very few had a Bachelor's degree, most had a graduate degree, and some more than one. This is less a flaw in the study than a relevant piece of info about later moms these days.

CDC birth data allows us to connect a woman's age at first birth with her education level at the time of that first birth.

As it turns out, of the 133,237 first-time moms in 2003 who were 35 or older, **60%** had BAs or higher, and an additional **19%** had some college. 1.54% of the birth certificates did not state mom's education level. That leaves **20%** of the population of new later moms in the category the reviewer asked about--four fifths of them with a high school diploma, and just **4%** of the total with less than a high school degree. (Note, this is not the full number of new later moms who gave birth in 2003, just those who had a *first* birth in that year. There's no way to determine at what age moms giving birth to second or later-order kids in a given year had their first child. But the educational pattern holds true for all moms who start their families later.)

Compare that **79%** with some college or more to the overall data on moms' education: of the 4 million plus moms giving birth at all ages and in all birth orders in 2003, just **26%** had a BA or more, **21%** had some college, **30%** had a high school degree and **21%** had less than a high school degree. And those stats include the later moms. Comparing apples to apples percentagewise, that's 60/26; 79/47; 20/51; 16/30; 4/21.

This data tells us loudly that education plays a big part in women's delay. **Later moms wait for family in huge proportion because they're in school**, at least for the first few years and sometimes for quite a few more. They're in school, they know that the student life is doubly difficult with kids, so many women choose where possible to finish their degrees first. Then they put that education to work for a while. A few years in, they feel ready to start their families. In the US, the

average college educated woman starts her family at 30. It's not so much farther to 35.

The question about new later moms with no college resonates a bit differently when you look at the relatively small size of the group we're talking about, though it doesn't disappear the question. As I documented in chapter three, Census data shows that the rises in wages linked to delay of kids accrue largely to women with university degrees. So to the extent that "doing satisfying things" has to do with having more cash and status, the answer is, *no*, later moms with less education would not have the same opportunities. They would be in a similar situation to moms who didn't defer in that regard. To the extent that "doing satisfying things" as a later mom has to do with being more mature, having seen a bit of the world and being ready to focus on family, the answer might well be yes. Or they may be in entirely different circumstances. That's a question I hope to explore further.

But maybe the answer the reviewer sought was really to another question--one that addressed how class impacts the experience of motherhood in our world. I'm guessing that's so because the next sentence in the review comments on how my study, like other "Mommy War manifestos," skews toward the privileged. (Why is every comment on the lives of modern mothers viewed as part of a war?) Well, we all know that class does affect the options open to moms and their families in big ways.

In so far as class relates to the new later motherhood trend, there isn't just one effect. Education, women and class can add up in at least two ways I've noticed--maybe you can think of others. If you're a woman from a middle class family of origin, as were most of the women I interviewed, whatever your racial or ethnic background, you may have grown up with an expectation that you would go to college. In the terms of the review, you come from privilege and by going to school, establishing at work and starting your family later, you're continuing on the path your parents set you on at birth, while moving into a domain newly available to mothers, of status and control of their own resources.

If you're a woman of lower class origin, as were a number of the women (white, black and Hispanic) I interviewed, you may have chosen education linked with delay of family as a way up the class ladder (see the profiles of Ava and Veronica). By the time you have your kids, you and your family may also be among the privileged. But that's not quite the same as the circumstance of women who start out there.

Later motherhood can sometimes be a way out of lack of privilege. But it's a way by no means always desired by young people, and it's often unavailable as a real option for women whose upbringing didn't involve expectation of college or a sense of real possibility for well-paid work down the line. That lack of expectation is in part created within the family but it's enforced as well by society overall, which gives so little in the way of resources or real hope of class movement to many citizens, in spite of its claims to the contrary.

There's lots of material for future discussion and debate here--but the necessary starting point seems to me that we all have to leave behind the language of mommy wars and work together toward a world not just friendly to mommies of all backgrounds and to their families but active on their behalf. Our fortunes are linked. All our learning ought to teach us that much.