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Late parenthood – quantitative aspects of the phenomenon

Późne rodzicielstwo – ilościowe aspekty zjawiska

Abstract

Aim. The aim of the article is to characterize the quantitative aspects of late parenthood, distinguishing late motherhood and late fatherhood, as well as to compare the current statistical late parenthood with statistical parenthood.

Methods and materials. The study used analysis of existing data. The data used was information included in the 2011, 2016, and 2021–2023 volumes of the Demographic Yearbook of Poland.

Results. In the successive years of the period 2010–2022 included in the analysis, the percentage of live births increased in the following areas: late motherhood, late fatherhood, and late parenthood. It was found that mothers aged 35–39 had the greatest share in late motherhood live births. It was shown that married women outnumbered single women, and women with higher education outnumbered women with lower education. It was found that in terms of the order in which the child was produced by the mother, the characterized births most often concerned the second child. It was also established that late statistical motherhood in 2022 was different from statistical motherhood at that time. Differences

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and benefits of older mothers were noticed, among other things, in the level of education.

Conclusion. Late motherhood, late fatherhood, and late parenthood are socially important and spreading phenomena. The quantitative analysis presented in the article can be a starting point for further exploration.

Keywords: late parenthood, late motherhood, late fatherhood, fertility in Poland, demographic changes.

Abstrakt

Cel. Celem artykułu jest charakterystyka ilościowych aspektów późnego rodzicielstwa z wyodrębnieniem późnego macierzyństwa i późnego ojcostwa, a także porównanie aktualnego statystycznego późnego rodzicielstwa ze statystycznym rodzicielstwem.

Metody i materiały. W badaniu zastosowano analizę danych zastanych. Jako dane posłużyły informacje zamieszczone w tomach Rocznika demograficznego datowanych na lata 2011, 2016, 2021–2023.

Wyniki. W ujętych w analizie latach 2010–2022 w ogólnej liczbie urodzeń wzrastał wyrażony procentowo udział urodzeń żywych z zakresów: późnego macierzyństwa, późnego ojcostwa oraz późnego rodzicielstwa. Ustalono, że w urodzeniach żywych z zakresu późnego macierzyństwa największy udział miały matki z grupy wieku 35–39 lat. Wykazano, że mężatki przeważały nad samotnymi kobietami, a kobiety, które posiadają wykształcenie wyższe – nad kobietami z wykształceniem niższym. Stwierdzono, że pod względem kolejności urodzenia dziecka przez matkę charakteryzowane urodzenia najczęściej dotyczyły drugiego dziecka. Ustalono także, że późne statystycznie macierzyństwo w 2022 roku różniło się od ówczesnego statystycznego macierzyństwa. Różnice oraz korzyści starszych matek zauważono m.in. w poziomie wykształcenia.

Wnioski. Późne macierzyństwo, późne ojcostwo oraz późne rodzicielstwo to społecznie ważne i upowszechniające się zjawiska. Przedstawiona w artykule analiza ilościowa może być punktem wyjścia do ich dalszego poznawania.

Słowa kluczowe: późne rodzicielstwo, późne macierzyństwo, późne ojcostwo, dzietność w Polsce, przemiany demograficzne.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to characterise selected quantitative aspects of late parenthood, distinguishing between late motherhood and late fatherhood. The aim is also to describe how the characteristics of live births from the aforementioned phenomena have changed over the years and to compare current static late parenthood with statistical parenthood.

The aforementioned issues are cognitively important because they concern fundamental matters – the preservation of the continuity of the species and the fulfilment of momentous and yet common social roles: mother and father. Despite its prominence, the title phenomenon remains poorly understood. If it has been addressed, it is usually in the section on late motherhood, most often in the context of the risk of pathologies in the course of pregnancy and childbirth and in the development of the foetus, which increases with a woman's age. An exception is the study by Małgorzata Lesińska-Sawicka (2008), which includes sociological contexts of late motherhood in addition to medical aspects, as well as several later publications that highlighted the psychological and relational costs and qualities of the phenomenon (e.g., Czarnecka, 2019; Zaworska-Nikoniuk, 2019). Few researchers have undertaken an analysis of late fatherhood, resulting in its demographic characteristics and knowledge of the social perception of this phenomenon (e.g. Szukalski, 2015). Parenthood remains by far the least understood when both parents and child are separated by a large intergenerational gap of more than a generation.

Theoretical background

Assuming that there is an age limit separating groups of younger and older women of childbearing age, late motherhood, sometimes referred to as (in)punctual motherhood (Zaworska-Nikoniuk, 2019) refers to the birth of the first or subsequent child by a woman after the age of 35. (Lesińska-Sawicka, 2008). With regard to late fatherhood, Piotr Szukalski (2015) proposes to shift the age limit and attribute the title of late fatherhood to men who were at least 40 years old at the time of the birth of their offspring. Combining the two approaches presented, it can be assumed that late parenthood occurs when the mother is 35 or older at the time of the child's birth and the father is 40 or older.

Advanced maternal age is associated with many pathological conditions of pregnancy, the perinatal and postnatal period and concerning the health of the offspring (Heber et al., 2022), although, according to Marta Fulmańska and colleagues (2011, p. 380), this kind of approach is somewhat simplistic, as it is not the age of pregnant women per se that constitutes a medical problem, but rather the fact that older women have a higher prevalence of various types of diseases that can negatively affect the course of pregnancy and childbirth. According to studies, abnormalities, including gestational diabetes and pregnancy-induced hypertension (Weerasekera, Udugama, 2003), occur more frequently in the pregnancy of women aged 40 years and older than in younger pregnant women (almost 15% vs. 7% and 27% vs. 12%, respectively), and elective and emergency caesarean sections are performed

more frequently in older pregnant women than in the control group (49% vs. 20% and 21% vs. 15%, respectively) (Weerasekera, Udugama, 2003), which is a direction consistent with that observed in an earlier, national study (which found a caesarean pregnancy rate of 55% for parturients aged 40 years and older compared with 40% in the control group) (Hincz, Wojciechowska, Podciechowski, Kubiak, & Wilczynski, 2006). In addition, it is noted that increased female age correlates with an increasing rate of miscarriage pregnancies (Steć, Bojar, & Wdowiak, 2007) and fetal genetic defects*. At the same time, there is growing evidence that advanced age of the father also has an adverse effect on pregnancy and fetal development (Heber et al., 2022).

Studies on pregnancy and childbirth in the later years of a woman's life have sporadically pointed out the advantages of this type of situation. It has been noted that, compared to younger pregnant women, a woman takes greater care of her own health and, after the birth of the child, the possibility of providing better material living conditions and cognitive development, as well as experiencing more intensely the joy of having this child (Jarzębińska, 2016). The aforementioned stability of mothers-to-be at the professional and family level has furthermore been described as a factor conducive to the creation of a proper emotional bond with the child, without feeling threatened (Czarnecka, 2019).

Late motherhood, although so poorly elaborated in the scientific literature, is a phenomenon that has been known for decades. Back then, however, as emphasised by P. Szukalski, the status of women having a child in their later years of life was due to multiparity and not, as now, related to the birth of the first child (Szukalski, 2017). According to the Central Statistical Office (GUS), in 2021, the middle age of mothers at the birth of their first child was 28.7, compared to 26.6 in 2010 and 23.7 in 2000 (GUS, 2022). Thus, there is a clear tendency to postpone the realisation of the procreative function, which, according to Małgorzata Sawicka (2001), results from the social, cultural, customary and political changes taking place in the country. In her later research, M. Sawicka pointed to specific reasons for women postponing procreation, among which the dominant ones turned out to be: lack of a partner (37%), lack of readiness to take on the role of a mother (28.5%), desire for professional stabilisation (23.5%), treatment of marital infertility (14.5%), fear of the responsibility associated with raising a child (13%) and others (Lesińska-Sawicka, 2008). In the light of a more recent study conducted among women and men, on the other hand, the basic obstacle to having a first child was the too young age of the study

* For example, the estimated risk of Edwards syndrome at 12 weeks' gestation is 1:2484 for a 20-year-old woman, 1:580 for a 35-year-old woman and 1:157 for a 40-year-old woman (Nicolaidis, Wegrzyn, 2004).

participants (66%), the lack of a suitable candidate for father/mother (59%), the lack of adequate housing (55%), unstable financial situation (44%) and health issues including infertility (43%) (Wadowski, 2023).

Late parenthood also applies to the birth of a second or subsequent child. According to research, then, the decision may be dictated by the desire to have a child of a specific gender, different from the gender of the older sibling, or a child delegated to meet specific needs of the parents (e.g., looking after ageing parents, being their “mascot”). In addition, the decision to have another child may result from entering into a new relationship, including remarriage (Jarzębińska, 2020).

Methodological basis of the self-study

Based on the assumption that late motherhood refers to the birth of a child by a woman at the age of at least 35, late fatherhood occurs when a man becomes a father at the age of at least 40, and late parenthood is a phenomenon that occurs when the above-mentioned criteria are met together, the main research problem and several specific problems were established and provided with research hypotheses.

Main problem: How did the phenomena comprising late parenthood develop in Poland between 2010 and 2022?

Specific issues:

1. Against the total number of live births, what were the dynamics of the number of live births entering late motherhood?

Hypothesis: It is hypothesised that in the successive years included in the analysis, the proportion of late-term births in the total number of live births increased.

2. Against the total number of live births, what were the dynamics of the number of live births falling within the scope of late fatherhood?

Hypothesis: It is assumed that the proportion of late paternity births in the total number of live births increased in the successive years included in the analysis.

3. Against the total number of live births, what were the dynamics of the number of live births where both parents were of an age on the basis of which their parenthood could be classified as late?

Hypothesis: It is assumed that in the successive years included in the analysis, the proportion of live births where, due to the age of both parents, their parenthood qualifies as late was increasing.

4. What are the characteristics of current late motherhood?

Hypothesis: It is assumed that currently late motherhood is particularly experienced by women in the 35–39 age group, with fathers being men in the same age group, and that these are mainly marital births of a second child by the mother, and that mothers tend to have a university education.

5. What differences and similarities exist between current statistical late motherhood and current statistical motherhood?

Hypothesis: It is hypothesised that there is a higher proportion of tertiary educated mothers, married mothers and mothers of a second child among women who have given birth at least 35 years of age in 2022 than among women in general.

Answers to the research problems were sought through the analysis of foundational data, which is a non-reactive type of research. This type of research has a number of advantages: it is less expensive than reactive data-generating research (Hofferth, 2005), it allows operation on larger samples (Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias, 2001) and without the researcher interfering with the subject of the study (Babbie, 2004), it is based on quantifiable facts, which, according to many researchers, makes it more reliable than qualitative research (Kvale, 2004). The volumes of the Demographic Yearbook dated for the years: 2011, 2016, and 2021–2023.

Results of the self-study

After the collation and analysis of the data found for the selected years 2010 to 2022, it was mainly noted that there was a steady decline in the number of live births. In 2022, the decrease was 7.9%, while when the two extreme years of the analysis were compared, it was a decrease of 26.2% (from 413 300 in 2010 to 305 132 in 2022).

Live birth dynamics of late motherhood, late fatherhood and late parenthood

Turning to the cases of late maternity live births, it can be seen that from 2010 to 2020, their number increased by 32.6% (from an initial 48 930 to 72 573), after which it began to decline, reaching 64 766 in 2022. Considering the share of late maternity live births in the total number of live births, it can be seen that only increases were recorded, however, and referring to the entire period covered, we see an almost doubling of the percentage (from 11.8% in 2010 to 21.2% in 2022) (Table 1).

Variable	2010		2015		2020		2021		2022		
	n	% of live births	n	% of live births	n	% of live births	n	% of live births	n	% of live births	
Late parenthood*	father 40–44 l.	55	0,0	63	0,0	126	0,0	134	0,0	100	0,0
	mother =<45 l.										
	mother 35–39 l.	2277	0,5	2262	0,6	3009	0,8	2957	0,9	2791	0,9
	mother 40–44 l.	1610	0,4	1634	0,4	2311	0,6	2237	0,9	2138	0,7
	father 45–49 l.	136	0,0	128	0,0	189	0,0	230	0,1	242	0,1
	mother 45=>l.										
	mother 35–39 l.	911	0,2	920	0,2	1002	0,3	932	0,3	822	0,3
	mother 40–44 l.	595	0,1	598	0,2	681	0,2	654	0,2	674	0,2
	father 50 l. <	76	0,0	98	0,0	105	0,0	105	0,0	121	0,0
	mother 45 l. =>										

Annotation: births where the age of the father was not determined were not included. In determining the contribution of late paternity and then late parenthood to the total number of births, cases where the father's age was known were included.

Source: Author's own study on the basis of GUS (2023, 2022, 2021, 2016, 2011).

Trends similar to those described within the analysis of late motherhood dynamics were observed when analysing the extent of late fatherhood. Referring to cases where the father's age was known, it can be seen that from 2010 to 2020, the number of live births where the father was aged 40 or over increased (from 29 828 to 39 221), an increase of 23.9%. There were further decreases in the absolute number of live births where the father's age was the basis for including these births in late fatherhood. In 2022, 35,731 men aged 40 years or older became fathers. However, taking the total number of live births in a given year as a baseline, we see that each time there was an increase in the proportion of those births where the father was reported to be aged 40 or over (from 7.2% to 11.7% in 2022) (Table 1).

The trends characterised above also appeared to be a property of late parenthood. The number of live births where it was known that both the mother and father met the age criterion on the basis of which their parenthood could be classified as late parenthood was increasing by 2020 (from 18 024 to 27 366), translating into an increase of 34.1%. For the subsequent years eligible for analysis, a decrease in the absolute number of live births from the area of late parenthood was characteristic. In 2022, 25 105 live births from the analysed range were recorded. Eventually, however, the characterised phenomenon gained an increasing share in the total number of live births, and when the data for the first and last year included in the analysis are collated, one can speak of an almost doubling – from 4.4% in 2020 to 8.2% in 2022 (Table 1).

In the years included in the research analysis, there were increases in the proportion of the total number of live births of almost all configurations of late parenthood distinguished by the age of the mother and father. Increases, expressed in absolute numbers, were also observed among parents in the oldest age groups identified in the analysis (mother 45 or older and father 50 or older).

Features of late motherhood – currently

In 2022, there will be 64 766 live births by women in the age groups: 35–39 years, 40–44 years and 45 years and over. Most cases of late motherhood, 81.8%, were recorded in the first of the specified groups ($n = 51\,701$) (Table 1). Taking the cases where the age of the father is known as a starting point, it can be seen that 46.3% of the fathers ($n = 26\,965$) of children born to women whose maternity was classified as “late” were aged 35–39 years (Table 2). In 2022, almost three-quarters of women who gave birth at age 35 or older were married ($n = 48\,311$). More than half (57.2%) had a university education. For one third of the mothers, the child they gave birth to in the later years of their lives was their second ($n = 21\,297$). In the remaining cases, where the mother's birth order was known, it was the first or third child ($n = 16\,424$ and $n = 16\,337$) (Table 3).

Table 2
Live births in 2022 by age of parents

	Father's age*						
	19 and under	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45=>
19 and under	64	409	139	38	7	3	1
20–24	26	3962	8267	2194	405	92	43
25–29	0	1012	34442	30180	5381	836	283
30–34	0	112	5181	46794	25853	4353	1025
35–39	1	112	1091	6847	26965	13072	3613
40–44	0	9	140	579	2260	5145	2812
45 and over	0	1	8	23	59	100	363
Total late maternity births where the age of the father is known (n = 63 200)	1	122	1239	7449	29284	18317	6788
Share of live births in the late maternity range where the age of the father was known %.	0,0	0,2	2,0	11,8	46,3	29,0	10,7
Total live births, in which the age of the father was known (n = 234302)	91	5617	49268	86655	60930	23601	8140
UShare of live births where the age of the father was known (%)	0,0	2,4	21,0	37,0	26,0	10,1	3,5

Annotation: births where the age of the father was not known were not included. The total number of live births where the age of the father was known was found to be 234 302, while the number in the late maternity range where the age of the father was known was 63,200.

Source: Author's own study on the basis of GUS (2023).

Statistical late motherhood and statistical motherhood – a comparison

Based on the statistics for 2022, late motherhood differs from motherhood in general, not only due to the obvious fact that it involves older mothers (where the middle age of childbirth was 30.7 in 2022) (GUS, 2023). The difference is also related to the level of education, which has been shown to be statistically higher in the group of mothers giving birth at age 35 or later. Among older mothers, the proportion of women with tertiary education was 57.2%, while for all live births it was 48.2%. At the same time, in the group of older mothers, the proportion of women with incomplete primary, primary or lower secondary education was significantly lower than in the comparison group (2.6% to 5.1%). The matched groups also differed in terms of the order in which the mother gave birth to the child. Among older mothers, the most prominent were those for whom a child born later in life was their second (32.9%). However, among the total number of live births recorded in 2022, the birth of a child to a mother of the first was predominant (44.3%) (Table 3).

Table 3

Statistical motherhood and late motherhood in 2022 by selected characteristics

Feature		Statistical motherhood		Late motherhood	
		n	% of total live births	n	% among live births of mothers=>35 l.
number of live births		305132	100,0	64766	100,0
mother's education	Primary ^G or incomplete primary	15450	5,1	1686	2,6
	basic vocational	24358	8,0	4849	7,5
	secondary, post-secondary	92021	30,1	15517	23,9
	higher	147215	48,2	37041	57,2
	undetermined	26088	8,5	5673	8,7
marital status of mother	marital	219431	71,9	48311	74,6
	Miss	59448	19,5	8273	12,8
	divorcee	9528	3,1	5050	7,8
	widow	595	0,2	351	0,5
	undetermined	16130	5,3	2781	4,3
order of birth by the mother	first	135177	44,3	16424	25,3
	second	101377	33,2	21297	32,9
	third	47255	15,5	16337	25,2
	undetermined	21323	7,0	10708	16,5

Source: Author's own study on the basis of GUS (2023).

Summary

The study carried out provides a basis for concluding that the assumptions formulated in the research hypotheses proved to be true. Firstly, it has been confirmed that in the years 2010–2022 included in the analysis, the percentage of live births in the field of late motherhood was increasing in terms of the total number of live births, and by comparing the data for 2010 with the data for 2022, it can be concluded that this percentage has doubled. Increases, albeit smaller, were also observed in the area of late paternity, as well as in relation to cases where, at the time of the child's birth, both parents were of an age on the basis of which their parenthood can be described as late. In addition, it was observed that by 2020, increases in the share of the phenomena listed in the total number of live births were accompanied by increases in these phenomena expressed in absolute numbers. The trends described are the basis for concluding that late parenthood, and especially late motherhood as a part of it, are becoming common facts. This is an argument (although not the only one) for their further in-depth analysis, for example in the context of parental attitudes or the cooperation of older parents with the school.

Following the analysis of the 2022 birth statistics, the assumption was confirmed that women in the 35–39 age group accounted for the largest share of late motherhood live births and that, more often than not, the father also fell into the same age category. It was confirmed that women entering the maternal role in the later years of their lives were mostly married and that more than half of these women had a university education. It was also shown that, in terms of having offspring in “late motherhood,” the proportion of women who already had one child was most pronounced, followed by women who had not yet had a child and then, although with almost identical results, those for whom the child born was the third. On this basis, it can be concluded that there is an increase in the number of families in which siblings are separated by a large, sometimes generational, age difference. This is a separate, unrecognised and interesting area of research, which includes the question of possible differences in the fulfilment of the parental role towards the older and younger child or the question of the relationship and perception of each other's siblings.

The research analysis also proved that statistical late motherhood appeared to be different from statistical motherhood in 2022. For statistical motherhood, it was characteristic that the largest number of cases involved the birth of the first child in late motherhood, as mentioned, mothers for whom the child born in 2022 was the second child prevailed. Besides, after comparing statistical motherhood with late motherhood, the former was associated with a lower proportion among mothers of those with a university education and a lower proportion of married women. The observations presented here argue in favour of the latter research hypothesis.

Taken as a whole, it is worth emphasising once again that late motherhood, late fatherhood and late parenthood account for an increasing and distinct share of live births and that these widespread phenomena, which concern fundamental issues (because of parental roles), remain poorly recognised. The quantitative analysis presented here can be a starting point for exploring them further, especially with the use of a qualitative approach in the research.

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