

The Social Construction of Femininity: Motherhood Norms, the Social Clock, and Women's Autonomy

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Introduction

This paper aims to offer a conceptual discussion of motherhood norms and the social clock within the framework of cognitive flexibility, rather than presenting empirical findings.

Lives of women have historically been greatly impacted by gender roles and cultural standards, which have shaped both their social standing and their very private choices. Among these, maternity and fertility have long played a major role in defining femininity (Gillespie, 1999; Türkmen & Bakıman, 2021). Women who decide not to have children are still commonly stereotyped as selfish, unfinished, or careless, while motherhood is regularly presented as the pinnacle of womanhood (Yıkımsı, 2018). This social categorization of deliberate childlessness emphasizes the conflict between cultural norms and individual liberty and shows how ingrained traditional expectations are.

It is rare for women to make decisions about motherhood based only on their inner aspirations. These choices are frequently greatly influenced by social constraints about timing, especially the notion that delivery should take place before the age of 30 (Bilgin, 2017; Köse, 2020). The idea of the "social clock" becomes particularly pertinent in this situation. According to Erten and Eroğlu (2020), the term "social clock" refers to culturally built timeframes that dictate when people should go through significant life events like marriage, parenthood, or job advancement. Women who are afraid of "being late" may experience stress or anxiety, which could make their reproductive decisions more difficult.

Individual psychological capacities become more significant at this point where social norms and personal choices converge. According to Martin and Rubin (1995), cognitive

flexibility—which is the capacity to come up with diverse answers, adjust to changing conditions, and take into account other viewpoints—may serve as a protective barrier against social pressures. Those with higher cognitive flexibility may show resilience in the face of such normative expectations, whereas those with strong social clock awareness may experience time-related pressure to fit in (Erten & Eroğlu, 2020).

The pressure to adhere to traditional reproductive roles is still very much present, despite recent changes in Turkish society, including the increase in women's educational attainment, increased labor force participation, and later marriage ages (Türkmen & Bakıman, 2021). Capturing the complexity of contemporary femininity in transitional civilizations requires an understanding of the psychological and sociological factors that influence reproductive decision-making.

Throughout history, the social construction of femininity has been intimately linked to fertility and parenting. Motherhood has frequently been presented as a culturally glorified position that completes a woman's identity rather than just a biological process (Türkmen & Bakıman, 2021). Because of this, the desire to have children is rarely seen in a vacuum; rather, it is analyzed and assessed in the context of a broader social and moral framework.

Gillespie (2000) asserts that women who choose to forgo having children are frequently viewed as unfeminine, selfish, or abnormal. On the other hand, as involuntary childlessness is viewed as the result of external medical or situational barriers, it is typically viewed with empathy. This difference emphasizes how societal expectations surrounding motherhood are firmly ingrained, and how not having children is still stigmatized in many societies. Motherhood is frequently linked to womanhood in the Turkish context, and women who meet this ideal are rewarded socially (Yıkımsı,

2018).

Motherhood is still a primary expectation placed on women, even in the face of considerable social shifts in recent decades, such as advancements in women's autonomy and educational attainment. Decisions on childbirth are now influenced by economic considerations, professional aspirations, and personal growth objectives, but these elements are rarely separate from cultural influences (Bilgin, 2017).

The term "social clock" describes the culturally established schedules for reaching socially significant life events including marriage, parenting, and professional promotion (Neugarten, 1968). It establishes unspoken standards for when specific life events should be taken. Having children before the age of 30 is still considered the best time in many cultures, including Turkey (Erten & Eroğlu, 2020).

Stress, anxiety, or self-doubt can arise when people believe they are not in line with this culturally prescribed timeframe. Family members, particularly parents, may put pressure on women in particular by reinforcing certain social norms. As a result, social clock beliefs are frequently internalized and passed down over generations (Yıkımsı, 2018).

The social clock not only shapes conduct but also affects life satisfaction and subjective well-being. A woman's sense of being "on time" or "too late" in relation to social norms might have a significant impact on her decision to have children, postpone, or avoid childbearing. Because of this, social clock perception is a crucial aspect of reproductive psychology.

The ability to modify one's thoughts or actions in response to shifting objectives, surroundings, or situational demands is known as cognitive flexibility (Martin & Rubin, 1995). It enables people to manage stress, adjust to ambiguity, and come up with different solutions when faced with problems or disagreements.

Cognitive flexibility may assist women in balancing their own goals with those of society when it comes to birthing decisions. High cognitive flexibility women are more able to make independent decisions that fit their circumstances and ideals and are more inclined to critically examine enforced norms (Erten & Eroğlu, 2020). On the other hand, people who lack flexibility could feel pressured to live up to social norms, even if it means experiencing stress or personal discontent.

Cognitive flexibility can be a psychological tool that empowers women in Turkey, where cultural norms surrounding maternity are still quite strong, to defy prescribed deadlines and create their own unique definition of fulfillment and life happiness.

In conclusion, judgments regarding motherhood cannot be

comprehensively understood without acknowledging the significant interplay of societal norms, temporal expectations, and individual psychological capacities. The social clock persists in influencing women's reproductive decisions by presenting motherhood as a moral imperative and a time-sensitive necessity, especially in the Turkish environment. Cognitive flexibility serves as a crucial psychological asset enabling women to reinterpret societal expectations, endure uncertainty, and formulate alternative life narratives that transcend culturally mandated deadlines. This study emphasizes the necessity of transitioning the discourse from the timing of maternity to the consideration of whether and under what circumstances parenthood corresponds with women's personal values and life objectives. Identifying cognitive flexibility as a protective and powerful element may enhance inclusive, autonomous, and psychologically sustainable perceptions of femininity and reproductive choices.

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