

"Eu vacilei": The Epidemics of Teenage Pregnancy at the End of the Twentieth Century in Brazil¹

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Abstract

In 1996-97, we conducted an interdisciplinary investigation of the influence of television on family values and reproductive behavior among, mainly, low-income Brazilians. The communities we studied were a small town in the interior of the Northeast, a favela in the city of São Paulo, and a mid-size city in a remote part of the state of Minas Gerais. There were two main tensions that we observed during our fieldwork. The first was that between the values, norms, and ideas portrayed on television shows, especially telenovelas, that were targeted for an audience of upper and middle-class Brazilians living in the main metropolitan cities, and those of the communities which we studied, many which considered themselves to be far less "modern" or more conservative than people living in cities such as Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo. The other was the intergenerational conflict or friction between youth and their parents. The question we address here regards the epidemic of teenage pregnancy that seems to have taken place in the end of the 20th century in Brazil.

Introduction

In Brazil, fertility has declined precipitously since the 1960s. The national TFR fell below the replacement level around the turn of the century, and now, at perhaps 1.6 or 1.7, seems to be well on its way toward a level well below replacement. Remarkably, in this extremely unequal and heterogeneous society, below replacement fertility has become common even among those with low levels of education, and people living in rural areas in the poorest regions of the country. Moreover, this transition has not been driven by "tempo effects". Indeed, there has been a shift in the age-pattern of fertility toward younger rather than older ages.

The Brazilian fertility transition, although we will do not know when and at what level it will bottom out, does not seem to fit the predominant typologies of the Second Demographic Transition or Lowest-Low fertility. First, it has occurred in a society where a large fraction of

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the population lives in poverty, and has very low levels of education. This characteristic separates it from both the Eastern and Western European cases, as well as those in East and Southeast Asia. Second, the Brazilian fertility transition has **not** involved the postponement of union formation and childbearing. Finally, there was no population policy to drive the transition (as in China). Clearly, such a shift has to have involved a major shift in values and ideas, and affected the circumstances in which Brazilian children are being raised.

Fourteen years ago, we conducted an interdisciplinary investigation of the influence of television on family values and reproductive behavior among, mainly, low-income Brazilians. The communities we studied were a small town in the interior of the Northeast, a favela in the city of São Paulo, and a mid-size city in a remote part of the state of Minas Gerais. Our research focused on values related to family, virginity, sexuality, marriage, gender relations and consumerism, and how mass media played a role in transforming them in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. There were two main tensions that we observed during our fieldwork. The first was that between the values, norms, and ideas portrayed on television shows, especially *telenovelas*, that were targeted for an audience of upper and middle-class Brazilians living in the main metropolitan cities, and those of the communities which we studied, many which considered themselves to be far less “modern” or more conservative than people living in cities such as Rio de Janeiro or Sao Paulo. The other was the intergenerational conflict or friction between youth and their parents.

The question we address here is whether the low levels of fertility prevailing in Brazil for the last five years were, in some sense, foretold in the interviews and focus groups we conducted a decade earlier, some of which included young women who are now in the prime childbearing ages. Our main objective in this paper is to piece together these “qualitative” results with a view toward uncovering the way that popular culture has shifted among the poorest segments of Brazilian society so as to drastically alter the way childbearing is conceived and carried out. Unfortunately, this is not a happy story, and it raises important questions about what might be done to ameliorate a troubling situation. Before proceeding, however, we need to review briefly the demographic and social context, and the concepts and methods on which our study was based.

The Role of Television in Brazil’s Fertility Transition

While Brazil remains a highly unequal society, with a large fraction of the population living in poverty, since 1960 there have been dramatic changes in the circumstances in which people live. These changes were related to urbanization, transformations in the nature of work, transportation, levels of education, sanitation, and access to health care (Potter, et al. 2002; Soares 2006). The period in which the fertility transition took place also parallels the development and spread of television broadcasting in the country (See Figures 1 and 2). The central hypothesis, originally advanced by Vilmar Faria (1989; Faria and Potter 1999), on which we based our earlier study, was that the mass media in Brazil contributed to fertility decline in an unintended but synergistic manner along with the other transformations that were taking place in the society.

In terms of the wider debates concerning the factors responsible for declining fertility, Faria's reasoning invoked both changing material conditions (access to consumer durables, medical care, and social security) as well ideational shifts related to consumerism, family life, and the separation of sex and sexuality from reproduction. The shifting "family values" were related to the roles of men and women, as well as the authority that parents wielded over their children and the support that was expected from them. It accorded government policies an important place among the determinants of fertility, but in contrast to most of the literature on fertility, emphasized the unintended impact of social policies rather than the direct impact of programs designed to promote family planning. As we learned more about the Brazilian television industry in the initial phase of our research, it became clear to us that the main broadcasting companies paid virtually no attention to a large part of their viewership. Any influence that it was having on the low-income segment of their audience was, indeed, unintended.

Feedback: The Key Dynamic and Disjunction

Brazilian television operates in a way, based on economic logic, which virtually guaranteed that it would transmit ideas and models of behavior that were both novel and foreign to much of its audience. The key fact is that, in a very heterogeneous transitional society, entertainment programming was, for the most part, "tuned" to, and reflective of the tastes, values, mores, and behaviors of the middle and upper class women residing in the largest metropolitan areas. What was normative and normal for this segment of society was, however, anything but normal for much of the rest of the rapidly expanding audience, especially in the domains of family life, gender, and sexuality. It seemed to us that this essential disjunction led television to play a strategic role in facilitating and accelerating the spread of "modern" ideas regarding the roles and rights of women, sex, and reproduction in the rest of the population.

Much has been written about the particularities of Brazilian television, and the emergence and consolidation of its central product, the telenovela, which is now exported to countries around the globe (Refs. Mattelart and Mattelart, Marques, Ortiz, Hamburger). In what emerged to be the dominant network, TV Globo, audience research was given a pivotal place in the overall production scheme, and was used by the programming manager and producers as an important lever on script-writers and directors, as well as members of the cast of ongoing telenovelas. Moreover, in addition to quantitative research on the number of households watching (or television sets tuned to) individual programs, Globo also developed the use of qualitative methods (focus groups) for evaluating their ongoing programs. Each type of research was commissioned by Globo to private firms. Both constituted a pressure or demand that the production team had to reckon with. A lot was at stake for nearly everyone concerned, as Hamburger (1998) has convincingly documented. Second, because of the relatively short lead time between the production and actual broadcasting of chapters, the script writers, especially, but also the directors, and casts could, in fact, respond to the incoming results of this audience research as a telenovela progressed. The combined result of the pressure on the production team to achieve high ratings, and the fact that these ratings as well as the qualitative research on the ongoing telenovela were available to script-writers, directors, and cast as the telenovela was being written and produced was that the telenovelas were quite accurately tuned to the tastes, preferences, and values of the audience sampled by these procedures.

The spread of the signal came about, first, by way of network broadcasting and retransmission by way of a growing network of microwave towers, and, after 1983, by way of satellite. Ownership among households within reach of the signal increased as the price of television sets declined over time, with increasing availability of consumer credit (Faria 1989), and, after 1994, with the increased real purchasing power of poor households that resulted from the sudden abatement of hyper-inflation. A prerequisite for both ownership and the transmission of the signal, of course, was electrification which also increased dramatically in Brazil over the last forty years (Potter et al. 2002).

In Figure 2, we display maps of Brazil where the spatial territory has been divided into “minimum comparable municipalities”, defined consistently across the four census years of 1970, 1980, 1991, and 2000. The coloration indicates the proportion of households residing within each municipality that own televisions. The maps provide dramatic evidence of the remarkable increase in ownership over time, and how it spread outward from the coastal metropolitan agglomerations to the interior of the different regions of the country. While ownership of television was still concentrated in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo in 1970, the predominance was considerably decreased in 1980 when less than 40 percent of the urban households owning a television were located in these two cities, and by 1991 this proportion was below 25 percent.

One of the oldest questions concerning the existence of various kinds of effects on television is whether television follows and reflects what is going on in society rather than transmitting new models of behavior that the audience might be unfamiliar with. We would argue that the chances of the latter rather than the former occurring are much greater in a context such as Brazil’s where there are large differences in behavior, norms, and values across segments of the society, and where television is so closely “tuned” to a narrow segment of the society. As evidence of this gap in behaviors, norms and values, perhaps the best evidence at hand is the difference in fertility that existed between the different parts of the country. In 1980, the uncorrected estimate of the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for the city of Rio de Janeiro was 2.3 while it was 2.8 for São Paulo. This same estimate was above 5.4 for three quarters of the municipalities in the Northeast region of the country at that point in time.

A Study of Reception in Three “Unrepresented” Communities

To learn about the role and possible impact of television in the regions and classes not included in the feedback process that guided the content of Brazilian television, we decided to conduct a study of television reception in some communities that would never have been tapped by any of the kinds of audience research they performed for the television industry. The decision was to select communities that would, successively, would fall in the following categories: a) a small town in the interior of a state not characterized by a high standard of living, b) a small city at a considerable distance from a metropolitan area or state capital, and c) a *favela* in either São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro.

The strategy for learning about television relied on three separate research methods, all of which were deployed during the period extending from July 1996 to February 1997 while our subject telenovela, “Cattle King”, was on the air. Three ethnographies were conducted during the entire period, and a survey was implemented in each community as the telenovela was ending. Following the same methodology used by the industry for gauging reception, we also conducted

a series of focus groups in the three sites. One series of groups was aimed at collecting reactions to the telenovela itself, while another was directed toward gauging attitudes and norms concerning adolescent sexuality, and how these might be influenced by television. In the remaining sections of this paper, after describing the three sites selected for the research, we will provide some selected and necessarily schematic findings from the focus groups with adolescents and mothers of adolescents conducted by the second author.

The locations that were selected as sites for the fieldwork were Vila Feliz in the city of São Paulo⁴; the city of Montes Claros in the state of Minas Gerais; and Macambira in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. Vila Feliz is among the largest *favelas* in the city of São Paulo with an estimated population of about 33 thousand inhabitants. It was selected on the basis that its poor live side by side with the rich. Vila Feliz is surrounded by a very upscale neighborhood where the upper-middle class lives in mansions and highly guarded skyscraper condominiums with a view of the *favela*. The two worlds are separated by an avenue, and meet when the *favela* inhabitants "cross the border" to work in the rich neighborhood as security guards, nannies, cooks, cleaning ladies, drivers, gardeners, and other domestic jobs. Montes Claros, the most important city in northern Minas Gerais, is 260 miles North of Belo Horizonte, the state capital. It had 250 thousand inhabitants in 1991 and its economy is based on cement and biomedical industries, as well as cattle grazing, sugarcane, and commercial forestry for industrial fuel (Schneider, 1996). It plays an important role as a regional commercial and medical center, yet it has relatively low socioeconomic status vis-à-vis other cities of the same size in the state and has a large proportion of its population in poverty. Finally, Macambira is a village of two thousand inhabitants (in 1991) located in the sertão do Seridó, an arid region 190 miles West of Natal, the state capital, less than 20 miles from Caicó, the fifth largest city of the state with approximately 50 thousand inhabitants. The main streets of Macambira are paved and the city owns a bus that goes to Caicó three times a day during the week. Students and educators ride for free.

Based on the survey conducted between January and March, 1997, we can present a brief statistical overview of each community. The survey respondents included males 20-59 years of age and females 20-49 years-old in 872 households in Montes Claros, 291 in Vila Feliz, and 200 in Macambira. In the case of Montes Claros and Vila Feliz, a probability proportional to sampling size was designed according to census tracks. The sample in Macambira includes roughly one in every four households. In the three sites, females age 20 to 49 were interviewed in every household sampled, whereas males were included only in every fourth household. Therefore, the sample is composed of 75% females and 25% males.

Poverty is evident in the three sites. During the period of data collection, the Brazilian minimum wage was close to 100 dollars a month. The proportion of household heads earning less than three minimum wages per month corresponded to 51.2% in Montes Claros, 31.9% in

⁴ Following the anthropological tradition to assure that participants will not be identified, the real name of the favela in Sao Paulo and the village in Rio Grande do Norte will be omitted.

Vila Feliz, and 78% in Macambira. The proportion of household heads that had less than four years of education was 32.3% in Montes Claros, 61% in Vila Feliz, and 57% in Macambira. In all three communities, nearly 90 percent of households had running water and bathrooms. Most households were also connected to a sewage system in Montes Claros, about half were in Vila Feliz, and almost none were in Macambira.

Data on the ownership of goods and services by the households and their heads is presented in Table 1. Modern services such as telephones, private health insurance and credit cards are relatively rare among the households in the three sites, although the share is a bit higher in Montes Claros. Consumer durables such as washing machines and refrigerators are more widespread. About forty percent of households have a washing machine in Montes Claros and Vila Feliz, with ownership of refrigerators exceeding 75% in all three sites. Automobile ownership is highest in Montes Claros at 28 percent, while the proportions of households owning a VCR, a CD disk player, were highest in Vila Feliz.

A set of socioeconomic variables associated with the three sites are summarized in Table 2. The age group and sex composition of the survey respondents, which were largely fixed by design, do not differ among the three sites. There was, however, considerable variation with respect to education and church attendance. There were more adults with secondary education in both Montes Claros and Macambira as compared to Vila Feliz. The level of church attendance in Montes Claros is much higher than in the other two sites, although Macambira has the problem of not having a local priest.

Another survey item that reveals something about the nature of life in these communities is the report concerning the respondent's main leisure activity. The distributions shown in Table 3 reflect the more tightly knit and social character of life in Macambira where chatting, strolling, and having drinks with friends is the main leisure activities. Watching television is reportedly more likely to be the main leisure activity in Vila Feliz and Macambira than in Montes Claros. The pattern of TV viewing habits revealed by the survey indicates that at most one fourth of the individuals surveyed never watch television. The 8 o'clock telenovela and the prime-time news are very popular in these sites as in the rest of the country.

The Transformation in Family Values and Reproductive Patterns among Lower-Income Brazilians Visible in the Late 1990s

Looking back at the transcripts of the focus groups we conducted with adolescents and the mothers of adolescents in the three study sites, we will attempt to distill the way these people viewed and experienced the changes taking place in their world. In their statements/expressions/ discourse, we can hear about the way things used to be, and the contrast with the way things are now. We use the term “*Antigamente*” to introduce quotes referring to earlier times, taken from focus groups with mothers of teenagers, and “*Hoje em dia*” to introduce quotes regarding life as it was when the research was being conducted in the late 1990s. In what follows, we will focus on three aspects of family and reproductive life: virginity, marriage, and pregnancy. Along the way, we will give particular attention to changing ideals and values regarding gender relations, the decline of parental authority and control, and access to and use of birth control.

Virginity

One of the most radical changes that have taken place in the three communities we studied concerns virginity. It used to be the ideal, if not always the practice, that women would marry as virgins, often with the first man they had ever dated. Young women kept their virginity out of respect for their parents and family, and perhaps fear as well. Those who did not, felt guilty and “lost” (*eu me perdi*) and those who did, were enormously proud that their dream had come true. However, brides had little or no knowledge about sex before getting married, and had more illusions than information about what living with a man would be like. Today (in fact, the late 1990s), it seems that virgins are few and far between, and actually marrying as a virgin is an historical artifact. Yet, the ideal is not totally eradicated, and many young teenage mothers think that it would be desirable to have married as a virgin, and wish that they could turn back the clock, and pursue that ideal. Some but not all mothers also dream about their daughters marrying as virgins, and warn them about the dangers of losing one’s reputation.

Antigamente

“..... I was 17 when I first heard what intercourse was, I was engaged. It seems unbelievable that at age 17 ...”

“But I was just like that. [I only learned] when I got married.”

(Montes Claros, Mothers of Teenagers)

*“I lost it (*eu me perdi*) when I was 20, but I thought that you only lost it if you got pregnant. The guy had invited me out, he had done this and that, that way... when I was telling someone about this, I finally realized that I had lost it, and I felt awful, so much so that it was a long time before I had a relationship with another man, and I was very afraid. It was very sad.”*

(Vila Feliz, Mothers of Teenagers)

"I didn't know about any of this [sex], I was very afraid, perhaps out of the respect I had for my parents, where I was raised, I had a lot of respect for my father and myself. So I thought if I was going to go beyond the boundaries for a man, if he didn't want me, it would be very shameful for me. It would be very shameful for me and my family. But nowadays, nobody even thinks about it. Because it is too liberal, people don't care."

(Vila Feliz, Mothers of Teenagers)

"I got married as a virgin at age 28, almost 28, 27 to be exact. I didn't know how a man was. I didn't. I had never seen it in a telenovela, had never seen sex anywhere, not on television or anywhere else. And they, my children, see and know about it all."

(Vila Feliz, Mothers of Teenagers)

"I have a 14 year old daughter, I tell her 'look all the richness of the world that you have is there [virginity]'".

"Nowadays it doesn't exist anymore".

(Vila Feliz, Mothers of Teenagers)

Hoje em dia

"Virginity became, how do you say, fashion, it fell out of fashion".

"Here there is some of that, but in bigger cities, no. I met a boy from Sao Paulo who said that, given a choice, he would prefer an experienced partner"

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

(Paula) *"Why is it (virginity) important?"*

"Oh, because it is very beautiful"

"I think that a full church wedding, virgin, and with the right man of her choice is beautiful."

"Well, maybe some girls... because when you lose your virginity, it is hard to stop. You start, you don't stop. That is the truth. It's hard for a woman who has had sex to go for a year or two [without sex]. Only if no man shows up in her life. And, I don't think that happens any more. I believe it is hard for a woman to marry as a virgin. That time is over. If you know who you are with, and know what you are doing, and I don't think there is much [problem]..."

(Paula) *"No? You don't think so? If you could go back in time, would marry as virgins, or not?"*

“No”

“I would marry”

“So would I”

(Paula) “You would marry?”

“[I would not.] You know why? Because there are a lot of women who when they marry as virgins later regret that they never knew another man. [She might ask] why didn’t I take a little advantage of my life. Why not at least one more man?”

“I got pregnant with my first boyfriend, I am with him now, I wish I had taken more advantage”

(Vila Feliz, Young Mothers)

“If it were up to me, and I could go back to being a virgin, I would love to.”

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

(Paula) “Do believe a woman should stay a virgin until marriage? Or do you think she should [have sex] before marriage? The first man should be her husband, or not?”

“...if the person was going with a guy she really liked, even if marriage were not in the picture... if she wanted to, I don’t think there is a problem..”

“No, there is no problem of any kind. Today, that isn’t a hangup. My mother said that the most beautiful thing is for a girl to marry as a virgin and be religious, but today nobody is either.”

“There are few religious [girls].”

“But that is not a problem.”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Boys)

Marriage

As in many other societies, marriage and union formation seems to be undergoing an important transition in Brazil. The change, however, has much less to do with a change in the age pattern of union formation than with the type of union, and the circumstances under which it was formed. According to census data, the proportion of informal unions among all unions tripled between 1970 and 2000, and in 2000 only 21 percent of mothers age 15-19 were legally married, and for mothers age 20-24 only 38 percent were legally married. This situation is completely out of line with way things were, or at least as they were supposed to have been.

In earlier times, marriage was a woman's main goal. Dating and courtship were supposed to lead to marriage, and most women had few boyfriends before they got married. Marriages were supposed to last, even though some did not, and women mostly depended on their husbands financially and otherwise. Yet, some entered the labor force, raised children on their own, and gained a sense of independence. Others put up with a lot from their husbands including infidelity and gender violence.

Nowadays, dating and marriage are not necessarily connected. Some still dream of a church wedding. Some are afraid of marriage and the dependence it might entail. Some mothers would like to see their daughters attain a degree of financial independence before forming a family--something they never enjoyed. But there is a diminishing tolerance for a bad union, and especially for unfaithful or abusive men. As a consequence, many unions are either never formed, or are quickly dissolved, and separations and divorces have become frequent and accepted.

The bad news for many women is that, after a pregnancy and a bad first union or relationship, second chances may be hard to come by.

Antigamente

"..my husband, he was my first man.."

(Vila Feliz, Mothers of Teenagers)

(Paula) "How many boyfriends did you have?"

"just one"

"I had just a few, real boyfriends, only 2 or 3".

"1"

"2"

"2, I had 2."

"In those days, going out was really a step toward marriage."

(Montes Claros, Mothers of Teenagers)

“But a woman who works never senses the lack of a man. Because when a woman has courage (...), she doesn’t need a man, on that I agree with anyone. [Someone’s name] raised her children alone, I raised mine practically alone, and if you have the courage to work, you don’t need a man.”

(Montes Claros, Mothers of Teenagers)

Hoje em dia

“I think the dream of every adolescent, at least girls, is to get married, isn’t it? But not for me, no. (...) I think men only bring trouble.”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Girls)

“I didn’t like the idea of marriage, but then I saw several women getting married [in the telenovela], and now I am beginning to like the idea.”

“Really? Cool! (...) You don’t want to marry?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t get married before [having a baby], so getting married now...”

“Well, I would really like to marry, with a priest, in a church.”

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

“(...) because men like women who have vanity, and don’t like it if a woman works, the most difficult thing [for them] is an independent woman, they don’t like it, a man likes a woman to depend on him, but I don’t believe a woman should ever do that, depend on a man... I will never be dependent on a man, I tell you, and have to go around begging him for money.”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

“Occasionally she shows up with a black eye.”

“Never was my face messed up!”

“She got hit in the face and let it pass.”

“She let it pass?”

“Yes, and now it happens all the time, it became a regular habit.”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

“I had a relationship with the father of my child who is now 7, but it did not work out, I separated...”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

“I am in the sixth month [of pregnancy]. The father is history, gone.”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

“... if he does something that I don't like, I am going to want a quick separation, because I can then see that it won't work out.”

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

Pregnancy

Over the past four decades, adolescent fertility rates have been remarkably constant. The fertility of 15-19 year olds actually rose between the 1986 and 1996 DHS, and declined only slightly between 1996 and 2006. Over this period there was an expansion of education, albeit from very low levels, as well as a major increase in the use of modern contraception that led to a major decline in fertility among women over age 20. How can the seemingly anomalous maintenance of high teen fertility in Brazil be explained? How does this process relate to the emergence of below replacement fertility? The focus groups we conducted provide dramatic evidence of not only how these adolescent pregnancies were experienced and perceived, but also of the childbearing goals and values that would guide the reproductive careers of these young women over the next decade.

As should be clear from the preceding sections, in earlier times there were far more stringent restrictions on adolescent sexual activity, and more pregnancies took place in unions. However, there was little effort to, or possibility of, postponing a first birth by way of contraception or abortion, or to control fertility after a first birth with these methods. By the late 1990s, there was the general perception of an epidemic of teenage pregnancy in these communities. Many of the pregnancies seem to have occurred soon after the girl became sexually active, and the vast majority (but not all) seem to have been unintended. Many times the father would not be around by the time child was born.

Although contraception was by then widely practiced by women who had had a child, there were a host of factors conspiring against the successful use of contraception among teens with less resources and education. There was limited knowledge of reproductive physiology, much misinformation, little or no counseling or sexual education, and limited access to some methods. There also seems to have been some ambivalence about pregnancy, and the illusion that having a child might lead to a better life situation.

After the first birth, the trajectories varied. Some girls remained in the parental household, while some moved out and lived with the father but in differing circumstances. Many seem to have become very careful about preventing a subsequent pregnancy and stopped taking chances. And most seem to want to have at most two children, and some only one. And in one of the communities, after two children, some are sterilized at very young ages.

Antigamente

Comment: This first set of quotes show teens referring, often with disdain, to the large numbers of children their parents had.

“My dad has a lot of kids.”

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

“She [My mother] already has eleven children, she’s having one after the other (...).”

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

“(...) I’m a mother of twelve children, I’m a mother of twelve. Only seven worked out [survived].”

(Montes Claros, Mothers of Teenagers)

“I’m a mother of seven children. (...) I have a 31 year-old, a 25 year-old, and also a 28 year-old. (...) The youngest is 13.”

(Montes Claros, Mothers of Teenagers)

Comment: The following shows that there were “shotgun” weddings in earlier times as well.

"(...) when my mom got married she was 4 months pregnant, my aunt too, and my aunt always told me [not to get pregnant] and my mom too, so when I got pregnant, I said 'You told me ...,' then she [said] 'But you are acknowledging my advice only after it has already happened,' (...) 'now it's too late.'"

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

Hoje em dia

Comment: The first set of quotes refers to different dimensions of the epidemic of teenage pregnancies that the participants perceive to be taking place in their communities and elsewhere in Brazil. Some refer to the intendedness of the pregnancy, and how, in most cases, it resulted from taking chances.

"I'm married, I'm 47 years-old, I have two sons. (...) One is 18 and the other is 14. To begin with, the 14 year-old is a father. (...) So my youngest, I gave him orientation, I advised him, but he got a little girlfriend ("namoradinha") and she got pregnant. She just had the baby. Tomorrow she will be 8 days old, she is 7 today. Because when I advise them, they say 'mom, but we have to begin early.' In my time it was not like that, but I have to respect what it is today. But it's not right, do you think it's fair, a 14 year-old child being a father? I don't think so, I don't agree. But in any case, what can I do? It's done now.

(Vila Feliz, Mothers of Teenagers)

My people live in Ceará, where I was born and raised. (...) There are so many things that happen there now that I've never seen in my life. My girls, when I stayed there [in Ceará] for a little over a year ago, this one is 15 years-old. Last year, when we were talking, she said 'Mom, that group from school who used to go to our house to study, the girls are all married, they all have kids. These people are crazy, aren't they?' Because they [my girls] don't have boyfriends, none of them, they've never dated. They say 'Me, getting a boyfriend and hinder my studies? God forbid. And those beasts in Ceará all married at age 14, my age'. All married at the age of my daughter, there's not one [virgin] left. (...) When I went there, [they were] all married, or all with a little belly, single mother, you know."

(Vila Feliz, Mothers of Teenagers)

“It happened to my sister, but for me it’s already natural, because we looked for her boyfriend, he was her boyfriend. Then he said he was glad to take responsibility, and he took her from our house, took her to live [with him] and they still live together. They’re happy, he helps her with everything, at home, he works (...)”

“In my house it happened too. With two sisters. (...) The father of the kids didn’t take responsibility. My oldest sister married another guy. He took responsibility for her son. The other one has two kids. I don’t know if she’s going to get married. (...) [She] lives in my house.”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Boys)

“I live with my sister. (...) [My baby’s] father vanished, instead of taking responsibilities, he vanished in the world.”

(Vila Feliz, Teenager Mothers)

“(...) when I really lost it [virginity], I got pregnant very fast, three months.”

“I said that when I was no longer a [virgin] I wasn’t going to try to hide, but I never had the chance to hide it... I fiquei [had sex] for the first time and got pregnant, and now I can’t hide it.”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

“(...) you can ask around anywhere, you ask an adolescent or a young woman if she got that kid because she wanted to, and everyone says: I took chances (eu vacilei).”

Paula: *“Is that true?”*

“It’s true.”

“It’s true because eu vacilei too.”

(...)

“I know all about it [sex].”

“I knew all about it too “

(...)

Paula: "You wanted [the baby]?"

"I did. Yes, it was all arranged because I was in a [sexual] relationship with the father of my baby for six months, about that, and I always dreamed of having a child, so I wanted to take care of that, so on the right day of my menstruation is when it happened, so, it was just about having a baby, so this business of taking chances, I didn't take chances."

Paula: "You didn't?"

"I did, I knew that if I was going to stay with him I was going to get pregnant, you know, but I've never had the experience of someone telling me something, that I don't take the pill correctly, I never knew how to take it and always stayed [had sex] with him [the partner], but thinking like this, because many of my friends, older than I, they said 'Oh, you're too young, you won't get pregnant now, you have the uterus of a child, and I bought that, you know, it was three months, and I was three months pregnant.'"

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

"I think that when we are dating, we don't want to know (...), you don't want to know if you have to use a condom. Only later that we see it, that we make a mistake, "oh, why didn't I [use it?]" Yes, I was in love, but at the moment [of sex] we don't want to worry about anything."

(Vila Feliz, Teenage Mothers)

Comment: The next quote is one of several in which teenage mothers openly reveal that if they could do it all over again, they would have done it differently, and avoided or postponed the pregnancy. The teenage years, in the view of both mothers and children, should be enjoyed, and an unplanned pregnancy makes that very difficult.

"I guess it's crazy to get pregnant so young."

Paula: "And why do you think it's crazy to get pregnant so young?"

"Because we suffer so much! I have suffered a lot!"

"A child having another child, not able to raise [a child]."

Paula: "Why do you suffer so much?"

"I got pregnant when I was 14 years-old, but if I could go back [in time], I wouldn't have had any [child] yet."

Paula: "Really? Why is it? Do you think it has changed your life?"

"Because we suffer so much... We suffer with abandonment. Sometimes, the man changes so much! I got pregnant and when he learned about it he despised me. (...) So I was left alone and when we are lonely, we suffer so much! We suffer with abandonment, we miss the tenderness. I don't know, I guess if I could choose, I wouldn't have ever had a man."

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

Comment: The next set of quotes refers to the different ways to prevent or end a pregnancy, and why people do or do not make use of them. We begin with the pill.

"(...) because there are pills that drive you crazy (...)"

"I used to take those, I stopped because they made me fat."

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

"I got pregnant taking the pill, I took it correctly and got pregnant!"

"Me too."

"I spent nine months without intercourse. (...) Then I had a boy, I took the pill for three months and (...) The boy is 21 months-old. I stopped taking it for six months."

"And I spent ten months without taking the pill. I only took it for a month."

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

Comment: There was some use of condoms, especially in the Sao Paulo site.

"(...) one thing I never forget, the condom and my pill. I was always on time, after I had my son I never took chances anymore. Now, for instance, I'm in that state [in my period] and I'm happy, because once again I'm like that [in my period],

you know, because a child is a lot of responsibility, I say it because I have one myself, because a child is a great responsibility.”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

“At least close to my house, most of them [girls] use the condom. We go to the gynecologist, they give us a lot. A mountain, a truck load. (...) I’m by myself [without a partner], so I distribute them to the girls there. I think they use more condoms, although they use the pill a lot.”

“I think the pill is better.”

“I think it’s safer.”

“Me too.”

“(...) [After] you took it, you are free.”

“(...) you go and put [the condom] on, you have to put it on, it takes time. Then when it is done [in place], it’s gone [too late].”

(Vila Feliz, Teenage Mothers)

Comment: We turn next to abortion, the most common form of which was chemically induced using misoprostol sold under the brand name *Cytotec*.

Paula: “When you got pregnant, all of you, in any moment did you think of having an abortion, of that didn’t cross your minds?”

“It crossed my mind.” (...)

“I guess it crossed the minds of all of us.” (...)

“I thought, but I never thought like...”

“You did want to take it out.”

“I only thought of it.”

“But deep inside, deep inside I wanted him, because before I had my boy I worked as a nanny.”

“Deep, deep inside we want [the baby].”

“But I tell you, my sisters told me, told me to take it out, but I said ‘I’m not taking it because it’s my first child and I’ll be taking a sin to God if I take it out’, then I didn’t take it out, I didn’t because I didn’t want to, because I had the opportunity and didn’t want to, I made the baby because I wanted to, I didn’t take chances because I didn’t avoid it, I don’t like to take the pill.”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

“My sister, because she couldn’t take the pill nor [use the] condom, she had six abortions, six at age 18.”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

“There are many girls having abortions. They drink teas, this kind of thing.”

“And the medicine that is forbidden, they go to the pharmacy and the girls who work there give it to them, they don’t care.”

“But I guess the pharmacy here [in Macambira] doesn’t sell it, only in [the largest city nearby].”

“Here in Macambira they have it!” (...)

“Do you know how much it costs? Four pills, 70 reais.”

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

“I took Cytotec, that medicine she mentioned, but it didn’t work.”

(Vila Feliz, Teenage Mothers)

“(…) my three sisters managed to take it out [have an abortion] with Cytotec. I have three older sisters. The three of them got pregnant (...) [and] got it [abortion].”

“But it’s dangerous, this medicine.”

Paula: *“Really?”*

“They say that, when they don’t take it [when the baby does not come out], I mean, when it’s late [the period], when you take Cytotec, a lot of stuff comes down.”

“Sometimes it’s like, you take it and the child doesn’t die. But when it’s born, then it’s born with defects. It depends. They say if you take it, until you complete two months [pregnant], than everything is fine, but after two, three months, then it’s dangerous. There are many girls who have even died.”

“Yes, there is the little mute girl [mudinha] who died because of Cytotec.”

(Vila Feliz, Teenage Mothers)

Comment: Finally, we provide a number of quotes regarding female sterilization, the most prevalent method of contraception in Brazil. Sterilization was probably most easily available in the Northeastern site, for many of the reasons set forth in Caetano and Potter (2004). Some of these quotes also elucidate the respondents motives for having a small number of children.

“I’m 19. (...) I like to (...) take care of my son, I’m pregnant with another one (...) He’s 21 months-old. (...) [I’m] 3 [months pregnant]. I wanted to get sterilized, but at this age I can’t do it.”

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

“I’m 18 years-old. (...) What I like to do best is to have fun and enjoy myself, but nowadays it’s very difficult. I have two sons, one will turn 4, but it’s my mom who stays with him, who raises him. The other one is 16 months-old. I’ve had sterilization, I can’t have [children] anymore (...)”

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

Paula: *“And why are such young women willing to get sterilized?”*

“I don’t know, I wanted to have it, because I didn’t want to take the pill anymore, because I don’t like to take it.”

“Because you know, I think we are poor with too many kids. There are too many kids who are suffering. These are my thoughts. We are already poor, then we have the baby, the baby gets sick, we have to buy medicine.”

"I think this is very normal, because some people say one kid is too much and it's no big deal. Who is going to help us when we are about to die, are they the ones who will look after us?"

"I told [my husband]: '[Husband], I'll have a girl only when we are living in our house.' He said 'ok, when we have at our house we, we can have another [child]'. Now, as long as I can take the pill, I want to take it, because I'm only 17 years-old."

"You're right, if it is to bring [a child] to this world to suffer, to be sick..."

"...suffering, leave him sick..."

"There are mothers who have children and don't want to take care of them. They have no responsibility to take care of them."

"Sometimes we have a hard time with one, imagine with two!"

"Imagine with two!"

"Or three!"

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

Comment: As the previous dialog suggests, teenagers have a small family size as an ideal, well below that of their parents' fertility. The main rationale is to be able to provide for their children, and achieve some social mobility. Here is another example.

"If I get married one day, I want to have one child, at most two. I am going to struggle [to] give him an education. I want to see him graduate from school, and well off."

(Montes Claros, Teenage Girls)

Comment: The final set of quotes have to do with the difficulty that mothers of teenagers have in controlling their children's behavior, and to keep them from "going out". Part of the difficulty is their declining authority, and part is the structural circumstance that children are often alone and unsupervised for large parts of the day from an early age. Churches, both Protestant and Catholic, seem to be one of the few institutional resources that mothers can draw on in this endeavor.

"Even if I wanted to rein my daughter in, I couldn't, because since age 7 she stays home on her own, because I work from Monday through Saturday."

(Vila Feliz, Mothers of Teenagers)

“I get very angry, sometimes I say ‘Look, I’m going to put you in a convent, [so] you’ll become nuns there and won’t go anywhere.’”

(Vila Feliz, Mothers of Teenagers)

“[Among] us here, we are the majority, we have a very good support that is the [Catholic] Church. The Church works with adolescents, so they have their own group, they have fun, sing, play the guitar, serenade, they get along really well, they are very playful with one another, so they work on that together and get more mature.”

(Montes Claros, Mothers of Teenagers)

“Mine [my daughters], thank God, go from home to school, from school back home, and from home to the church. Thank God never in life they were getting lost [fooling around] in a ball, a party, not even a birthday party. (...) I lived in another neighborhood [before] and [my daughter’s friends] would come and say, ‘Oh, M’am, let [your daughters] come with us to a birthday party, there is a ball’. I would say “No, she won’t come.” They would come to me and ask, but I said “she is not coming.” It doesn’t help saying ‘they will come’, I’ll never push them to a ball, I won’t. Never, by no means.”

(Vila Feliz, Mothers of Teenagers)

“Here (...) [teenagers] give birth [to children] for the parents to raise, here it’s like this.”

(Vila Feliz, Teenage Mothers)

“(...) she is going to keep herself for a moment later [in life], like I tell [my daughter], time will come that you will have your first intercourse, [when] you are mature enough to take responsibility for the consequences, because we, we get very anxious and afraid that our daughters may get pregnant. Why? Because we will end up with the baby in our arms.”

(Montes Claros, Mothers of Teenager)

“(...) if I were in their company [‘good’ girls I know], I wouldn’t have done anything [sex] yet. Because I followed other friends’ heads, then it happened.”

(Macambira, Teenage Mothers)

“Telenovelas influence especially the youth. Because, although I’m young, I have like, knowledge of God, the bible and so on. But there are young people who don’t care about anything, they only want, they only want to live out there, they don’t want to know about anything [they don’t care about anything].”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Girls)

“I think that education, the real education comes from home, it doesn’t matter for me, I have a sister, I raise her since she was 7 years-old, since she was 7 years-old, you know?. She sees everything, everything on television and she comes to me and asks if I think that’s right or how that is. I’m not ashamed to say ‘It’s like this, this, this, if you want to do it it’s your problem, but this is wrong and this is right’. I think that the real education comes from within the house, if you know how to educate [your child] then television, at least in my house it doesn’t influence [anyone], but as long as you know how to educate [your child].”

(Montes Claros, Teenage Mothers)

“[Our children’s generation] is another generation, completely different from ours, but we try the best we can to keep a little bit of what we were (...)”

(Montes Claros, Mothers of Teenagers)

Discussion

In the initial description of this conference, it was said that: “The economic, technological, and social sources of falling fertility rates are well understood. Less well understood is how cultural changes—in views toward children, popular conceptions of the good life, and beliefs about gender roles—have played a central role in fertility declines the world over.” In this paper, we have attempted to explore the cultural sources of declining fertility in a country that does not

seem to fit the predominant typologies of the Second Demographic Transition, but in which popular culture and changing gender expectations have both played a large role. In this endeavor, we have focused on low-income segments of the society in which, from a traditional point of view, the emergence of below replacement fertility is particularly surprising.

We chose to focus on shifts in values that had an influence on three domains: virginity, marriage and pregnancy. Comparing two generations in three different communities, we found that both generations acknowledged dramatic changes in all three of these realms. However, in none of these domains was the transition complete, at least in terms of aspirations if not in real life. In the 1990s, large numbers of youth were having sex at an early age, mostly in relationships that could by no means be considered a prelude to marriage. Losing one's virginity was fast becoming acceptable, and yet some mothers and some teens still believed virginity was important and valuable. Early pregnancy was rampant. At the same time, marriage was in decline, and out-of-wedlock childbearing was practically exploding. Unwanted pregnancy sometimes resulted in an informal (and probably quite unstable) union, other times the father vanished, and took no responsibility for either the child or the mother. Yet, what resembles the earlier times is that some girls dream of a church wedding in a white gown with "Mr. Right" (*o homem certo*). At the time of our fieldwork, the idea of having a large family was a relic of the past, and youth pointed disdainfully to the ridiculously large number of children their parents had had. The teenagers' desired family size seemed to be either one or two children. However, these adolescents seemed to be almost powerless to prevent their first pregnancy once they themselves became sexually active.

What was the context in which all this took place? What factors drove the changes? The research project which generated the discussion excerpts used in this paper was designed to find out how people who were not included in the television industry's audience research reacted to its programming, and what influence the residents of the three communities felt that television had on local culture. While in this analysis we have focused more on cultural change rather than the role of television in stimulating that change, the vast majority of people in our focus groups believed that television had a large influence in their communities. Along with our respondents, we (the authors) believe the influence worked to, among other things, diminish the authority of parents and family over children, legitimize casual sex, and promote the model of a small family. But it also worked to change gender relations, especially in regard to diminishing women's willingness to suffer the indignities of infidelity and even domestic violence.

Another important contextual change was increasing participation of women in the labor force. In part, this change was brought about by women having to provide for themselves and their children after having been abandoned by a man, but having an income also made it possible for some women to leave the man, and get out of a bad situation. But one down side of women entering the workforce was that it often meant that, from an early age, children spent many hours without supervision, thus limiting the ability of mothers to control their behavior and activities.

There were few institutional resources available to help educate teens about sex and contraception. Schools, although expanding their enrolments, were of very low quality, and provided little or nothing in the way of sexual education or after-school activities. Health

services, especially at the local level, had few if any programs for nulliparous teens, although they attended more thoroughly to mothers. The ability of parents to provide their own sons and daughters with sexual education was also extremely limited given that they had never received such counseling in their youth. Their ability to educate their children was also limited by their own very low levels of education.

In this situation, about the only institutional resource some parents had to call on for help with keeping children involved in “healthy” activities, and restricting their behavior were Churches. Good descriptions of both the successes and failures of both Catholic and Protestant churches at reaching teenagers are available in several ethnographies (see the review in McKinnon et al. 2008 and Burdick 1993). But while some churches may have drawn some youth into more conservative environments, they only seem to have reached a minority of teenagers. Moreover, their efforts were directed toward promoting virginity and marriage rather than giving teens the means to deal with what is going on around them.

Overall, the picture we have painted is both grim and sad. There is ample reason for concern with respect to the conditions that many Brazilian children were raised in during the last decade and a half. There also seems to be reason for concern that Brazilian fertility will soon reach a level at which there may be negative consequences for the age structure. Recently, however, some positive changes have been taking place as well. Poverty is no longer as severe and as far reaching as it was when we did our fieldwork. Education, especially secondary education, and health services have expanded considerably. Finally, the latest vital statistics for places in which registration is nearly complete indicate that fertility in the ages 15-19 may have declined by about 20 or 25 percent between the late 1990s and 2007.

Going back to the question we started with, “Should we have seen it coming?”, the answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, everyone in these communities was aware that young women were having children at an unprecedented rate, and nearly all of these children were unwanted. Generally, across the world and through time, it has been the case that the earlier reproduction starts, the more children women have, and vice versa. That is certainly the case in the Second Demographic Transition model. Thus, if we just looked at the epidemic of teenage pregnancies going on in the late 1990s, we could not have foreseen how far fertility would fall over the next 14 years. If, on the other hand, we had: 1) taken the younger women at their word regarding their desired number of children, 2) fully credited their unwillingness to put up with an unhappy or abusive relationship, and 3) appreciated the determination of those who already had a child to limit their fertility with effective contraception (even if this involved getting a sterilization before reaching the age of 20), we might have accurately forecast the future!

REFERENCES

(To be provided)

Figure 1

Total Fertility Rate: 1960-2000

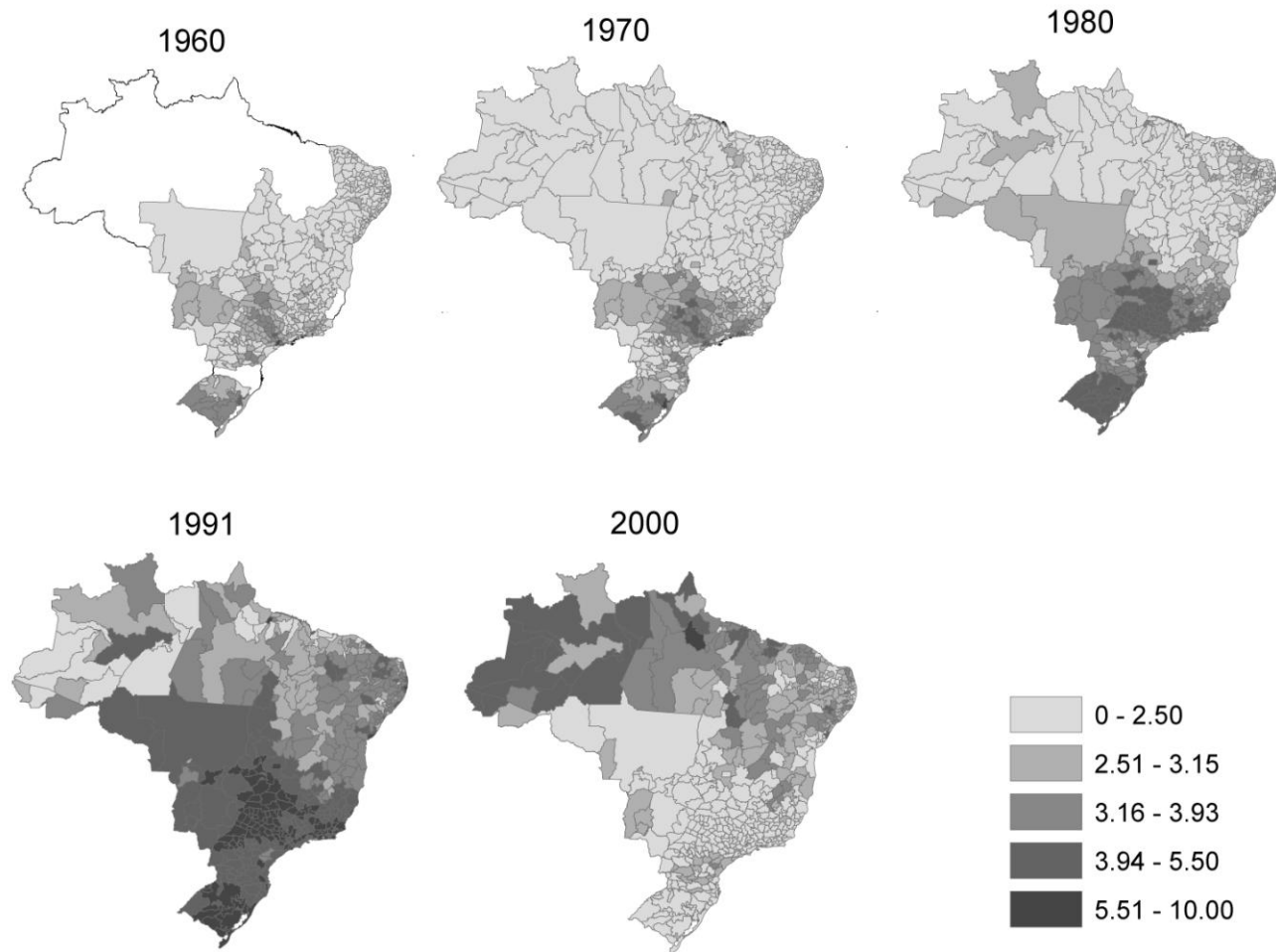


Figure 2

Percentage of Households with TV: 1960-2000

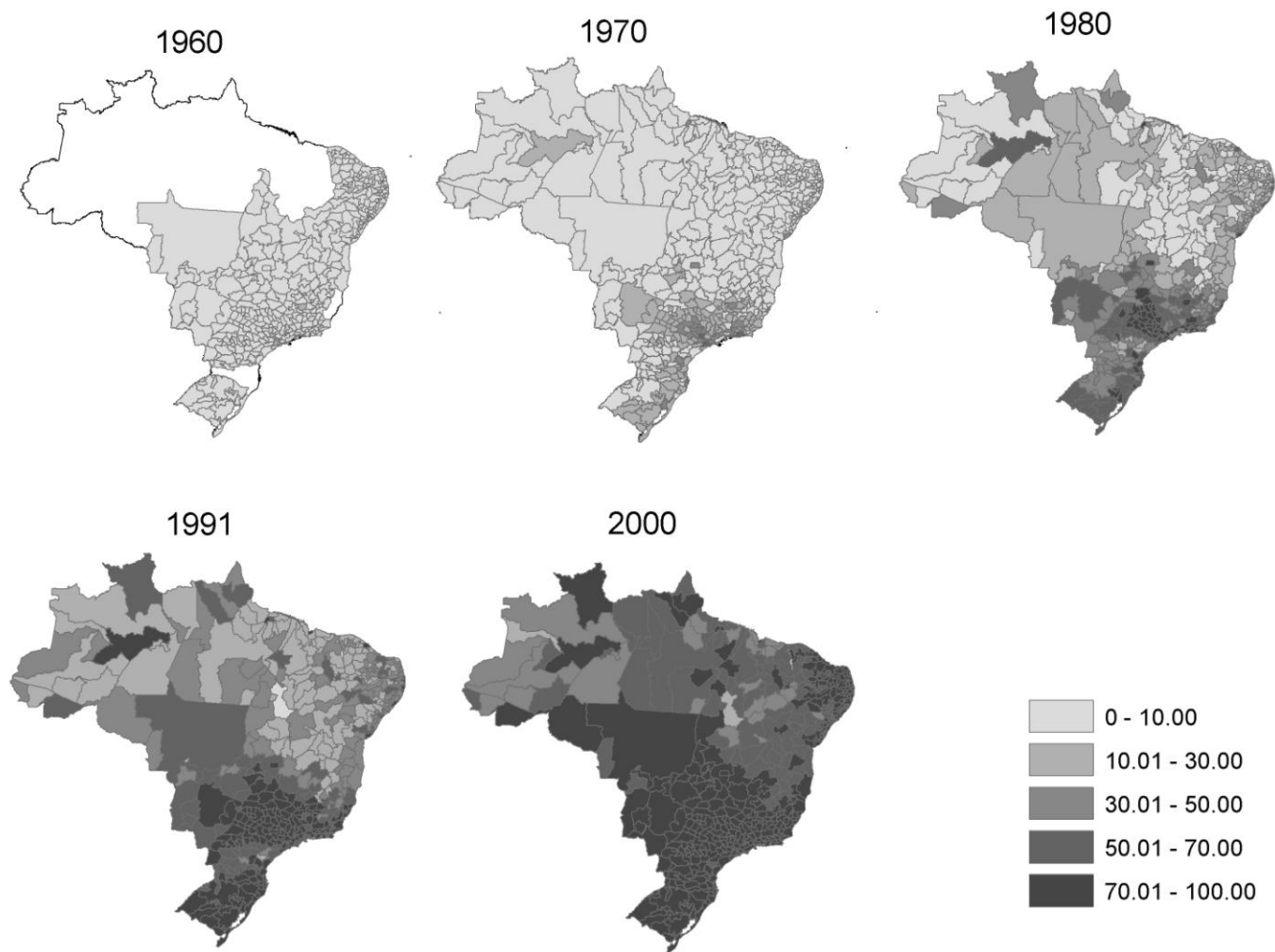


Table 1
HOUSEHOLD OWNERSHIP OF GOODS

		Montes Claros N=872	Vila Feliz N=291	Macambira N=200
% Telephone				
	No	73.3	92.5	98.5
	Yes	26.7	7.5	1.5
% Club Membership				
	No	82.8	98.3	98.5
	Yes	17.2	1.7	1.5
% Freezer				
	No	94.1	90.5	92
	Yes	5.9	9.5	8
% Private Health Insurance				
	No	77.3	90.2	94
	Yes	22.7	9.8	6
% Credit Card				
	No	84.5	92.2	96.5
	Yes	15.5	7.8	3.5
% Video Equipment				
	No	77.4	76.6	92.5
	Yes	22.3	23.4	7.5
% Washing Machine				
	No	59.5	61.4	96.5
	Yes	40.5	38.6	3.5
% Refrigerator				
	No	15.1	12.2	23
	Yes	84.9	87.8	77
% CD Disk Player				
	No	83.4	75.9	90
	Yes	16.6	24.1	10
% Cars				
	No	71.5	81.45	87
	Yes	28.5	18.55	13
% Color TV				
	No	16.9	10.5	42
	Yes	83.1	89.5	58

Table 2

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

	Montes Claros	Vila Feliz	Macambira
Age Group	(N=1144)	(N=351)	(N=266)
20-29	42.3	47.3	40.2
30-39	31.9	32.2	39.8
40-59	25.8	20.5	19.9
Sex	(N=1144)	(N=351)	(N=266)
Female	77.1	73.6	76.3
Male	22.8	26.4	23.7
Schooling	(N=1144)	(N=351)	(N=266)
Ed 0-4	34.9	61.5	40.2
Ed 5-8	30.9	29.1	27.4
Ed 9+	34.2	9.4	32.3
Religion	(N=1144)	(N=351)	(N=266)
Catholic	78.1	70.7	86.1
Evangelical	13.3	13.4	4.1
Protestant	1.3	0.0	0.0
No Religion	3.2	12.3	6.0
Others	4.1	3.6	3.8
Church Attendance*	(N=1144)	(N=351)	(N=266)
No	49.4	77.8	86.5
Yes	50.6	22.2	13.5

* Goes to Church at least once a week.

Table 3

PREFERED LEISURE ACTIVITY - SELF-REPORTED

	Montes Claros N=1140	Vila Feliz N=351	Macambira N=266
% listen to music	5.6	11.1	7.9
% stroll (<i>passear</i>)	10.0	11.1	14.7
% chat/visit friends	4.5	4.0	20.3
% go to Church, pray	8.3	3.7	4.6
% TV viewing	16.6	24.8	21.1
% drink, dance, party	5.8	4.0	6.4
% read	7.5	2.0	1.5
% travel	3.8	3.1	0.4
% household tasks	5.9	7.1	2.3
% family life/play with children	6.1	8.0	2.3
% others	25.9	21.1	18.5