

Teenage Parenthood: What's the Problem?

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Teenage Parenthood: What's the Problem?

edited by

Simon Duncan, Rosalind Edwards and Claire Alexander

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Chapter 1

What's the problem with teenage parents?

Simon Duncan, Claire Alexander, Rosalind Edwards

1. Introduction: demonising teenage parenthood

On 13th February 2009, the front page of *the Sun* newspaper carried the headline, 'Dad at 13'.¹ Alongside a full-page photograph of 'Baby-faced father' Alfie Patten, with his new born daughter, Maisie, the story told of the baby's birth to Alfie, aged thirteen, and Chantelle, aged fifteen, 'after just one night of unprotected sex'. The paper quoted Chantelle: 'We know we made a mistake but I wouldn't change it now. We will be good loving parents ... I'll be a great mum and Alfie will be a great dad'. Sun columnist Jane Moore was more sceptical, dismissing their aspirations as 'heartbreakingly naïve', blaming both the failure of sex education in schools and the declining moral values of society—'the thin end of a wedge that will break the existing cracks in society so wide open that there'll be no hope of repair'. Over the following weekend, a storm of moral condemnation and outrage grew throughout the print and TV media and from politicians across the political spectrum. In the press, the focus—and the blame—settled squarely on the 'underclass' family background of the young parents, with the *Daily Express* commenting:

You only have to take a look at their parents to see where it all went wrong. Imagine everyone's surprise that Chantelle's parents live on benefits and, despite her dad being jobless, have six children. Alfie, meanwhile, is the son of a single mother and a father who's fathered no fewer than nine children ... a world of broken homes and benefits, where irresponsibility and fecklessness reign supreme. (*Daily Express* 15th February 2009)

The Sunday Times similarly saw the event as a symbol of a Britain in moral decline and symptomatic of the growth of an underclass living parasitically on

1. After a DNA test Alfie was later found not to be the father, which reportedly left him 'extremely distressed' (the Times Online. May 19 2009).

the welfare system—something, they argued that the country could ill-afford in a time of recession:

Britain is doing low-life better than almost all other developed countries. A growing segment, which Charles Murray ... called the underclass, is devoid of the values and morality of a civilised society which foolishly provides the financial incentives to behave badly ... As each generation moves further away from family stability, we lumber ourselves with the enormous cost of propping up failed families and living with the social consequences. It is a grim prospect, especially as the country moves into deeper recession. (*The Sunday Times*, 15th February 2009)²

Responses to the news from politicians, left or right, followed this agenda. Labour's children's secretary, Ed Balls, was quoted as saying 'It's not right—it looks so terrible ... I want us to do everything we can as a society to make sure we keep teenage pregnancies down' (*The Sunday Times*, 15th February 2009). The Conservative Party went further in making teenage parents a symbol for wider breakdown. For example former party leader Iain Duncan Smith, responsible for the Party's report on *Family Breakdown* (Social Justice Policy Group, 2007) argued that 'The case exemplifies the breakdown in British society. The problem of family breakdown has sadly become deeply intergenerational'. Teenage parents, he went on, were linked to other social 'problems' such as youth crime and drug addiction, criticising 'ineffective remedial policies, whether they take the form of more prisons, drug rehabilitation or supporting longer and more costly lifetimes on benefits' (*The Sunday Times*, 15th February 2009). David Laws, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for children, schools and families, resisted these broader societal implications but pointed to the social marginalisation and individual pathologisation of young parents, claiming 'It's clearly not the case that all of Britain is broken ... (but) ... Because of their poor backgrounds we have a significant segment brought up in chaotic and unloving situations. Unsurprisingly, they often become chaotic and unloving themselves' (ibid).

This is hardly a new story. Periodically tabloid frenzies erupt when atypical cases of young mothers or fathers are seized upon and luridly sensationalised (Selman 2003). For example in May 2005 a furore erupted over three teenage pregnancies in one Derby family (Bunting 2005). This can directly influence

2. The article even went so far as to compare Alfie and Chantelle to Karen Matthews, who in 2009 drugged and imprisoned her daughter to get money from the public and the media

policy, thus media reports in September 1999 of a fourteen-year-old boy who got his twelve-year-old girlfriend pregnant (Freely, 1999) stimulated the Child Support Agency to 'vigorously' pursue young fathers, so as to make them recognise their responsibilities through financial payments (SEU, 1999, 11.2). All this lends credence to extreme 'solutions,' like Fay Weldon's idea (apparently following government propositions) that all girls at twelve should be implanted with long term contraception, and so 'effectively sterilising girls for a long period of time' (Daily Mail 15.2.08). Journalists do try to put a different view on occasions—thus in the *Guardian* articles quoted above Madeleine Bunting claims that it is not babies, but social disadvantage, that 'ruins young mothers' lives', and Maureen Freely asks just why we should assume that a fourteen-year-old boy cannot be a good father. Nonetheless, the majority—according to a 2008 Ipsos MORI poll—believe that the country is in the grip of a socially catastrophic 'teen pregnancy epidemic'.

The reaction to the story of Alfie and Chantelle, like these earlier stories, points to a broader set of discourses around teenage parenting that consistently mark out the media and political responses to this issue. First, there is the taking of what are extreme and untypical cases as representative, and as a lens through which the broader social issue of teenage parenting might be understood. Second, there is the construction of teenage mothering as a uniformly negative experience for the mothers themselves, their children and for society as a whole. Third, there is the linking of teenage parenting with moral and cultural breakdown, placing children, parents and extended families beyond the pale of 'civilised society' (*The Sunday Times*, 15th February 2009). In this way teenage parents are positioned in some assumed 'underclass' where teenage mothers are commonly portrayed as ignorant and irresponsible, or even immoral, and young fathers are pictured as feckless. Both may be criminal. In this way the public discourse about teenage parenting has become conflated with a wider social threat discourse about the decline of marriage, single parenting, and teenage sexuality. Finally, there is the conflation of social problems with economic costs, most particularly around the supposed 'benefits culture' that 'encourages' young women to get pregnant at the expense of the rest of society. Tony Kerridge, of Marie Stopes International, was thus quoted:

We have got the social aspect of young girls in the UK seeing having a baby as a route to getting their own place. These sorts of lifestyle choices can be dealt with on an educational level if teenage girls realise what

they are contemplating is a route into social deprivation and being in the benefits culture for the rest of their lives.

(*The Guardian* 14th February 2009)

Indeed, the idea of ‘cost’—moral, social and economic—appears to stand at the heart of the issue of teenage parenting, and points to the prevailing concern, in the media, politics and policy, with an overwhelmingly individualistic and economistic model of the good mother/father, the good family, and the good citizen. In this view the ability to work, to earn and to pay are assumed as the primary prerequisites of social participation and recognition. Caring for others in families and communities is downplayed and under-valued. What seems axiomatic in this discourse is that teenage parents are necessarily and incontrovertibly *bad people, bad parents* and *bad citizens*, condemned to a lifetime of poverty, social handouts and economic apathy, and destined to repeat these failures across the generations. In this way the issue of teenage parenting, as presented publicly, combines a potent fusion of moral and economic crisis, of cultural and social dysfunction, wrapped in the virtuous certainties of impending disaster.

There is a severe problem with this ‘public’, axiomatic, view of teenage parenting, however—the evidence does not support it. As the chapters in this book show, there is little evidence that lack of knowledge ‘causes’ pregnancy, or that increased knowledge prevents it. Teenage birth rates are much lower than in the 1960s and 1970s, and overall are continuing to decline, while few teenage mothers are under sixteen. Age at which pregnancy occurs seems to have little effect on future social outcomes (like employment and income in later life), or on current levels of disadvantage for either parents or their children. Many young mothers and fathers themselves express positive attitudes to parenthood, and mothers usually describe how motherhood makes them feel stronger, more competent, more connected, and more responsible. Many fathers seek to remain connected to their children, and provide for their new family. For many young mothers and fathers parenting seems to provide the impetus to change direction, or build on existing resources, so as to take up education, training and employment. Teenage parenting may be more of an opportunity than a catastrophe.

It is the task of this book to present a range of research evidence about the real nature and experience of teenage parenting in Britain. Fulfilling this aim throws up another problem—for, like all axioms, the public myths around teenage parenting have proved strongly resistant to any evidence to the contrary.

This presents us with a follow-up question—why is there such an invested need in presenting an unremittingly negative image of young parents, and what does this say about the values placed on family and the role of paid work in twenty-first century Britain? How—and why—have policy makers and news makers got the story about teenage parents so wrong?

2. New Labour and teenage parenting: an economic or moral agenda?

2010 marks the year by which New Labour pledged to halve the number of pregnancies for under-eighteen year-olds in the UK. The government's ten year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy was launched in 1999 in a report from the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), then at the heart of government in Cabinet Office and itself resulting from a putative 'underclass unit' set up by Peter Mandelson, then Minister without Portfolio, in 1997. The report, which has set the framework for government policy since then, saw teenage pregnancy as a major social and economic problem, where Britain did much worse than other west European countries (SEU 1999). Or as Tony Blair, then Prime Minister, put it, in his forward to the Social Exclusion Unit report:

Some of these teenagers, and some of their children, live happy and fulfilled lives. But far too many do not. Teenage mothers are less likely to finish their education, less likely to find a good job, and more likely to end up both as single parents and bringing up their children in poverty. The children themselves run a much greater risk of poor health, and have a much higher chance of becoming teenage mothers themselves. Our failure to tackle this problem has cost the teenagers, their children and the country dear. (SEU, 1999, 4)

The SEU report identified the causes of this problem as low expectations and ignorance among teenagers, and mixed messages from the media. While the SEU report made clear a strong relationship between teenage pregnancy and social disadvantage, this association was downplayed either as cause or remedy, rather young parenting was seen to strongly reinforce disadvantage. And the way out was through a dual goal of prevention and direction—to reduce the number of under-eighteen pregnancies by half, and increase the number of teenage parents entering education, training or employment to sixty per cent (*ibid*).

The heady political symbolism and mobilisation created by the media's moral panic reinforced the need for government to be seen to tackle what was already identified as a problem for 'teenagers, their children and the country'. All this was underlined by contrasting national teenage birth rates or, as Tony Blair put it in his foreword to the SEU's 1999 document, Britain's 'shameful record' (p. 4). British rates remained among the highest in the 28 OECD developed countries (30 per 1000 in 1998, compared to 10 or less in Germany, France, Scandinavia and the Netherlands). Only the USA at 52.1, and more marginally Canada and New Zealand, had higher rates (UNICEF, 2003). This comparative failure has an important policy impact, as suggested by the highlighting of international comparisons in most government and policy reports. For while the UK seemed to be 'stuck', as the SEU put it (1999,7), the experience of western Europe implied that teenage pregnancy and parenting, perceived as a difficult social problem, was nonetheless amenable to policy solution. Underlying this comparison is an issue around economic, as well as social, competition—how can Britain compete with an inadequate workforce, where teenage pregnancy supposedly restricts educational achievement and employment participation.

This international comparative lesson was emphasised by the appreciation that local rates also vary widely across Britain; it is not just young women who are poorer that are more likely to become pregnant, and least likely to use abortion to resolve pregnancy—they also live in poorer areas. In contrast, some richer areas in Britain have teenage abortion and pregnancy rates more like supposed European exemplars such as The Netherlands (SEU 1999, Lee et al. 2004). The 'problem' of teenage pregnancy was ripe for intervention by a reforming new government.

Hence the New Labour government rolled out its teenage pregnancy strategy from 1999 onwards, originally under the direction of a Ministerial Task Force, and co-ordinated by the Teenage Pregnancy Unit (TPU). Starting in 2001, each top tier local authority had an agreed teenage pregnancy strategy to reach local 2010 targets around the desired national average. Each local strategy was led by a Teenage Pregnancy Coordinator, working with a Teenage Pregnancy Partnership Board, and supported by a Local Implementation Grant. These local Strategies were supported and performance managed by a Regional Teenage Pregnancy Coordinator, based in the regional government office. Local indicators, such as levels of conceptions in targeted age groups, availability and use of services, and health outcomes, were devised to help monitor progress towards achieving these targets (see TPU 2000). In line with government objectives

for 'joined-up' approaches to service and policy development, work locally was intended to proceed in conjunction with other national government initiatives such as Sure Start, Sure Start Plus and the Children's Fund, and other national government departments were expected actively to support the strategy. In this way the TPU would hopefully reach the two main targets, as set by the Social Exclusion Unit—to halve the under-eighteen teenage conception rate by 2010 and to substantially increase the participation of teenage parents in education, training or employment

This is an impressive machinery. But the 'low expectations' explanation—which points towards tackling social disadvantage—seems to have been neglected. Rather, policy in practice focused on the 'ignorance' explanation (Arai 2003 a, b)—British youth were seen as deficient in their sexual health knowledge, poor users of contraception, shy about sex, and wary about accessing services. Perhaps this focus was the more appealing when current policy thinking tends to stress individual behaviour and motivations, rather than structural influences on behaviour, like social disadvantage. Certainly on a relatively low budget (the initial TPU budget was only £60 million) it might have been here that the policy implementers hoped for 'quick wins', when taking on social disadvantage would cost a lot more and take a lot longer. Policy then ended up pathologising teenage pregnancy and childrearing, when it was seen to arise from 'inappropriate motivations, ignorance and sexual embarrassment' (Arai 2003a, 203), rather than supporting the positive features of parenting.

How has this approach endured the experience of implementation? The Department for Communities, Schools and Families report *Teenage Parents: the next steps* (2007) was to give new guidance to local authorities and primary care trusts given the previous eight years experience. The report recognises failures in reaching the desired targets—the reduction rate in teenage births was only 11.8% over the period, rather than approaching the desired 50% by 2010; similarly only about 30% of teenage mothers were in employment, education and training (EET), rather than 60%. Hence the need for a 'refreshed strategy' as the report's introduction puts it (p. 6). There was also a whole battery of research produced since the SEU's original 1999 report, which as a whole pointed to a substantial gap between policy and experience, indicating both that the outcomes for teenage parents were not as dire as assumed and that young parenting encapsulated many positive features as well as problems. This includes research reviewed, or directly commissioned, by the TPU itself (TPU 2004, Teenage Pregnancy Evaluation Team 2005). But despite recognition of 'What teenage mothers

and young fathers say' in the new 2007 report (in its chapter four), the existing two-track approach remained. Teenage parenting was as a problem in and of itself and should be cut, and the further need was to integrate remaining young parents into a productive workforce. 'Refreshed' was more about changing the implementation channels from specialised services into mainstream midwifery and health visiting services, Children's Centres, and Youth Support Services.

The report bases the essential continuation of the two-track approach on its enumeration of the disadvantaged characteristics of teenage mothers, and the poor outcomes they—and their children—experience, using a whole range of social and economic indicators (in chapters two and three). There are a number of key features that can be identified in this policy portrait of teenage parenthood, and that echo the media and political representations discussed above. First there is the clear gendering of this discourse, with the focus being primarily on young mothers, while young fathers play a very secondary role. This links into an assumed conflation between young motherhood (where many will live with partners or grandparents, and others will have 'live apart together' relationships') and single motherhood. Second, there is the insistence on the negative consequences of teenage pregnancy on both the mother and child, in which health, emotional and economic 'wellbeing' are taken as the key problem areas (and largely seen as interchangeable). Third, there is the emphasis on prevention of pregnancy rather than support for teenage parents—and in the 2007 report, rather chilling, concern to prevent further pregnancies for young mothers (for some young mothers, especially those with partners, would like to reach a desired family size). Fourth, is the conflation of socio-economic deprivation with teenage pregnancy, the implication being that teenage pregnancy is a cause of poverty. The report asserts that these poor outcomes are partially independent of wider factors of social deprivation and rather points to 'the lifestyles and behaviour of teenage mothers' (p. 13) as contributory factors. Fifth there is the 'classing' of the issue, with teenage pregnancy linked to specific socio-economic groupings, and their associated problems, in particular the low levels of labour market participation. Sixth, there is the insistence on education, training and paid employment as the sole legitimate pathway to social inclusion and to ameliorating the negative effects of young parenthood.

Hence Beverley Hughes, then Minister for Children, Young People and Families, wrote in her forward to the 2007 report that:

Children born to teenage mothers are more likely to live in deprived areas, do less well at school, and disengage from learning early—all of which are risk factors for teenage pregnancy and other poor outcomes.

(DCSF 2007: 3)

Equally, one could write that teenage mothers commonly show resilience and motivation, and become more socially connected and purposeful, where pregnancy usually marks a turning point for the better, become more likely to take up education and employment, and do no worse—and often better—than their social peers once pre-existing disadvantage is allowed for. This contrast is the terrain of this book.

3. The myth of the teenage pregnancy epidemic

The perceived social threat from teenage parenting is buttressed by a negative public consensus around teenage conception and pregnancy itself. This consensus assumes that teenage pregnancy is increasing rapidly, that this increase is particularly marked among younger teenagers, that all teenage pregnancies are unplanned, that all these unplanned conceptions are unwanted, and that new teenage mothers are inevitably also single mothers without stable relationships with partners. All these assumptions are unfounded, but all serve to bolster the negative evaluation of subsequent teenage parenting, and hence the nature of the policy response.

Newspaper headlines frequently announce 'soaring' teenage birth rates, creating an 'epidemic' of births to teenagers. Indeed as many as 81% of respondents to a 2008 Ipsos MORI poll thought that teenage pregnancy was increasing, while about a quarter of the 16-24 age group thought that 40% of 15-17 year-old girls became parents each year. In fact there have been substantial declines in both birth rates and absolute numbers of births to teenagers since the 1960s and early 1970s (see Table 1). By 2007 only 11.4% of conceptions were to women aged under 20, with an even smaller share of births—6.4%. In addition few teenage mothers are under 16, only around 6% in 2006, accounting for just 0.9% of all births in Britain by 2007, while around 80% of teenage mothers were 18 or 19 years-old. Overall, teenage birth rates are now at around the same level as in the 1950s, that supposed 'golden age' of family.

Table 1 Live births and birth rates for women under 20, 1951-2008

| | Numbers of live births | Birth Rate per 1000 women aged 15-19 |
|------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1951 | 29,111 | 21.3 |
| 1956 | 37,938 | 27.3 |
| 1961 | 59,786 | 37.3 |
| 1966 | 66,746 | 47.9 |
| 1971 | 82,641 | 50.6 |
| 1976 | 54,500 | 29.8 |
| 1981 | 60,800 | 30.9 |
| 1986 | 57,406 | 30.1 |
| 1991 | 52,396 | 33.1 |
| 1996 | 44,667 | 30.0 |
| 2001 | 44,189 | 28.0 |
| 2004 | 45,028 | 26.9 |
| 2005 | 44,830 | 26.3 |
| 2006 | 45,509 | 26.6 |
| 2007 | 44,805 | 26.0 |
| 2008 | 44,683 | see note |

Sources: ONS Birth Statistics, Health Statistics Quarterly

Note, 2008 birth rate not available at time of press

What is different is that in the 1950s and 1960s the majority of teenage parents married—although many seem to have been hastily enforced ‘shotgun marriages,’ notorious for high rates of dysfunctionality and breakdown (Coombes and Zumeta 1970, Thornes and Collard 1979). In addition probably around 20% of the children were adopted shortly after birth. In contrast, by the 2001 census only 9% of teenage parents were married; although around 30% cohabited; in addition around another quarter jointly registered the birth with the father at another address—which suggests some continuing parental relationship on the ‘living apart together’ (or LAT) model (Selman 1996, 2003). There are now very few adoptions of teenage mothers’ children. These trends away from marriage, and towards unmarried cohabitation and ‘living apart together’ reflect those for the population as a whole, especially among younger age groups (Barlow et al. 2005, Haskey, 2005). Thus in 2006, around 0.5% of all 18-24 year-olds in Britain were married, with 12% cohabiting, while as many as 35% were in ‘living apart together’ partner relationships (Duncan and Phillips 2010).

Whatever the level of teenage pregnancy, it is assumed in the public and media discourse that all teenage pregnancies are unplanned, that all unplanned conceptions are unwanted, and that most result from ignorance if not wilful immorality. Certainly the Social Exclusion Unit's framework 1999 report identified 'ignorance'—the 'lack of accurate knowledge about contraception, STIs (sexually transmitted infections), what to expect in relationships and what it means to be a parent' as major cause of teenage pregnancy (SEU, 1999: 7). This is repeated in succeeding policy and guidance documents (see Pam Alldred and Miriam David in chapter two). But there is little support for the assumption that teenage parents are particularly ignorant about sex, contraception and parenting, that low levels of knowledge 'cause' teenage pregnancy, or that increased knowledge reduces pregnancy (Arai, 2003a, b, Graham and McDermott 2005). It is hard to find young mothers who become pregnant due to ignorance about sex and contraception (Phoenix, 1991, Wellings and Kane 1999, Churchill et al. 2000). Similarly, a meta-analysis of preventative strategies focusing on sex education, and improved access to advice and contraceptive services, concluded that this did not reduce unintended pregnancies among young women aged between 11-18 (DiCenso et al. 2002).

Indeed a significant minority of teenage mothers, and fathers, positively plan for pregnancy. Some are hoping for birthing success after an earlier miscarriage, others in this group, especially those with partners, plan for subsequent children so as to complete their desired family size and hence 'build' a family (TPS Evaluation Team 2005). Many other teenage parents are 'positively ambivalent' towards childbirth—that is they do not actually plan it, but would quite like a baby and do not use contraception for that reason (Cater and Coleman 2006). For most teenage parents pregnancy may well be 'unplanned', but then so are many, if not most, pregnancies for all women—the very idea of 'planning pregnancy' is something of a grey area to say the least (Fischer et al. 1999, Barrett and Wellings 2002). Few teenage mothers, it seems, regret early childbirth, as many of the succeeding chapters show. As with other women 'unplanned' pregnancy does not necessarily mean 'unwanted' pregnancy for teenage parents. Or as Germaine Greer put it: 'We have 39,000 unwanted pregnancies a year unwanted by the Government that is. No one is speaking for the mums' (The Times, 11. 3. 08).

This set of policy and public assumptions is the starting point for Pam Alldred and Miriam David (chapter two) in their examination on the role and importance of education in young mothers' lives, and on their gendered expectations regarding parenthood. For their research shows how the values and

priorities expressed by young mothers do not fit comfortably within the model presented in the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (TPS), nor with many of the values assumed in, or explicitly asserted by, the TPS. In particular, the chapter questions the assumptions that early mothering is undesirable or aberrant; that education or training in the child's early years is desirable or even accessible to young mothers; and that either 'parenting' or 'studying' can be assumed to be gender-neutral activities. The logic the authors find at work in the young women's lives in their study seems to reflect the dominant values in their community and this logic questions the link between teenage pregnancy and social exclusion asserted in government policy. Similarly, in chapter three Jan Macvarish and Jenny Billings discuss how the teenage mothers in their study, living in Kent, made moral and thoughtful decisions about contraception, proceeding with their pregnancy, and engagement with health and welfare services. Rather than suffering 'broken' family circumstances, teenage parents were often embedded in networks of support, and were optimistic that parenthood would shift them onto a positive life trajectory.

4. Statistical outcomes—social disadvantage versus teenage mothering

The influential UNICEF report *Teenage Births in Rich Nations* claims that:

giving birth as a teenager is believed to be bad for the young mother because the statistics suggest that she is much more likely to drop out of school, to have low or no qualifications, to be unemployed or low paid, to grow up without a father, to become a victim of neglect and abuse, to do less well at school, to become involved in crime, use drugs and alcohol.

(UNICEF 2003, 3)

But in fact the statistics show nothing of the sort—if we deal with the errors committed by statements like these. For the statement does not compare like with like in reaching its 'much more likely' attribution of statistical causation; ascribing causal effects to teenage motherhood is pretty meaningless if we compare teenage mothers with all mothers, rather than those of a similar background. Rather, if we wish to measure the statistical effect of teenage motherhood (and then go on to ascribe a social effect, which is not necessarily the same thing) we need to control for variation in other variables, so that we do compare like with like. In more formal terms, statistical analysis needs to

control for 'selection effects.' This is a variant of the correlation problem so beloved in statistical textbooks. Variable X may be highly correlated with 'dependent' variable Y, but this does not mean that X causes Y; rather both may be caused by an unacknowledged variable A. In this case becoming a young mother may not cause the poor outcomes—in terms of education, employment and income—experienced by many teenage mothers; rather both young motherhood, and poor outcomes, may be caused by pre-pregnancy social disadvantage. In this sense social disadvantage may 'select' particular young women, and men, to become teenage parents, and this disadvantage will continue post pregnancy. Teenage parenting may therefore be a part of social disadvantage, rather than its cause. But if statistical studies do not control for these selection effects, then they will not be able to recognise this.

In fact there has been a tradition of statistical studies which do try to take account of these selection effects. Some researchers devised 'natural experiments' where selection effects would be better controlled, such as comparisons between cousins whose mothers were sisters, between sisters, or between twin sisters (only one of whom was a teenage mother), and between teenage mothers and other women who had conceived as a teenager but miscarried (who presumably would have gone on to become mothers). This type of research began in the USA, and found that the social outcome effects of mother's age at birth were very small, or as Saul Hoffman (1998, 237) put it in his systematic review of the US research 'often essentially zero'. Indeed, by their mid/late twenties teenage mothers in the USA did better than miscarrying teenagers with regard to employment and income and this meant, ironically, that government spending would have increased if they had not become young mothers (Geronimus, 1997).

The UK based studies available at the time the 1999 SEU report was produced did not take this 'natural experiment' approach to controlling selection effects, and instead relied on more general statistical controls of social background, like educational level, socio-economic status, housing type and so on (for example Babb, 1994, Botting et al. 1998, Corcoran, 1998; see Graham and McDermott 2005 for review). Although they also concluded that much of the adverse social conditions linked with teenage parenting were associated with pre-pregnancy social disadvantage, this is perhaps why they nevertheless came to more ambivalent conclusions about the social effect of teenage pregnancy in itself. Since the publication of the SEU report, however, a number of British studies have taken up the 'natural experiment' approach, with the same results as in the USA. John Ermisch and David Pevalin (2003a), using the British Cohort Study

to assess differences between miscarrying and successful teenage pregnancies, found that teen birth has little impact upon qualifications, employment or earnings by thirty years of age. While teenage mothers' partners were more likely to be poorly qualified or unemployed, and this then impacted on the mothers', and their children's, standard of living, this is also akin to a selection effect. In itself, age of birth has little effect. A complementary study using British Household Panel data to follow teenage mothers over time came to similar conclusions (Ermisch 2003), as does a study by Denise Hawkes (2003) on twins, where only one became a teenage mother. Finally, Karen Robson and Richard Berthoud (2003) used the Labour Force Survey to assess the link between high rates of poverty and high rates of teenage fertility among minority ethnic groups, particularly for the extreme case of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis where both variables are particularly high. They concluded that teen birth has little effect on future poverty, and does not lead to any further disadvantage beyond that experienced by the ethnic group as a whole.

In chapter four, Denise Hawkes follows this work in providing a wide-ranging statistical review of the life experiences and circumstances of teenage mothers and their children in Britain, compared with other mothers, based on the Millennium Cohort Study. She uses three indicative sets of statistical analyses to examine: (1) life course experience for mothers prior to the birth of the first child, (2) the early life circumstances of children at nine-months, and (3) health, cognitive, and behavioural outcomes for children at ages three and five. The first set of analyses, confirming earlier statistical studies, shows that teenage motherhood is really a symptom of a disadvantaged life course rather than the cause of it. The second set shows that those children with teenage mothers are indeed born into families experiencing multiple disadvantages. However, it is not the mother's age at first birth which is the main driver of these disadvantages—rather it is the prior disadvantages experienced by the young mothers during their own childhoods. Again, this finding substantiates earlier research. The final set of statistical analyses takes comparison into a new area, and show that having a teenage mother does not significantly affect the chances of a pre-school child experiencing poor health, and makes little difference to how children score on cognitive tests. There is some difference for a few behavioural indices, but this largely disappears once prior life disadvantage is accounted for.

Hawkes notes that the starting point for most policy interventions around teenage parenthood is that the root of the problem is that the mother is a teenager— but her statistical analyses find that being a teenage mother does

not in itself lead to poorer outcomes either for the mothers themselves or their children. Rather teenage motherhood often signals a life of exposure, for both mothers and children, to a range of social and economic disadvantages. She concludes that these results suggest a shift in government policy away from incidence of teenage motherhood itself, and a refocusing on the social and economic causes of teenage motherhood. What is more this sort of policy would be sensible because the factors associated with becoming a teenage mother appear to be the same factors as those influencing the life chances of their children.

Perhaps there can never be an accurate statistical measurement of the 'effect' of teenage motherhood, in the sense of finding some ultimate truth (Wilson and Huntington, 2005). Nonetheless, this statistical research tradition shows that—in these outcome terms—teenage childbearing in itself can be seen as only a minor social problem. It is not the teenage bit which is particularly important in these terms, but rather it is social and economic disadvantage which produce poor outcomes. In so far as teenage mothers are over-represented among the disadvantaged, this is because of their 'selection' through pre-existing disadvantage. A policy focus on being a teenage mother can only approach this wider problem of social disadvantage obliquely. Or as Hoffmann concluded for the USA, this sort of statistical study 'no longer supports the notion that teenage childbearing is a devastating event' and 'casts considerable doubt on the received wisdom about the consequences of teenage childbearing' (1998, 238-9).

5. Qualitative accounts of agency—young parents' values and experiences

What about the mothers and fathers themselves? A tradition of small-scale qualitative research focuses on their actual understandings and experiences of becoming a parent. In this way qualitative research can help explain just why the statistical studies find that age of pregnancy has little effect on social outcomes, and may actually make things better. While Hilary Graham and Elizabeth McDermott (2005) see quantitative and qualitative research as contradictory (the former seeing teenage motherhood as a route to social exclusion, the latter as an act of social inclusion), this contradiction perhaps relates more to the way these results have been framed, interpreted and used within opposing discourses (Wilson and Huntington 2005), rather than to the findings themselves. Instead, we can profitably see quantitative and qualitative studies as complementary in providing, on the one hand, extensive evidence about overall social patterns

and, on the other, intensive evidence on the social processes that create these patterns (cf. Sayer 1994).

What these qualitative studies find is that many mothers express positive attitudes to motherhood, and describe how motherhood has made them feel stronger, more competent, more connected to family and society, and more responsible. Resilience in the face of constraints and stigma, based on a belief in the moral worth of being a mother, is one overriding theme. For some, this has given the impetus to change direction, or build on existing resources, so as to take up education, training and employment. There has been less research on young fathers, but what there has been tends to contradict the 'feckless' assumption. Like teenage mothers, most of the fathers are already socially disadvantaged, and it does not appear that fathering will in itself make this any worse. But, also like teen mothers, most express positive feelings about the child and want to be good fathers. Most contributed maintenance in some way, and many were actively involved in childcare (this varies by age, with the youngest least likely to be involved.) And, like teenage mothers, there is some evidence that successful fathering could be a positive turning point in young men's lives (see Duncan 2007 for review). In fact it was an invisibility to professionals, as well as housing problems, which often excluded them from the parenting they desired. Again, like teen mothers, young fathers may be less of a social threat, more of a social possibility.

That teenage motherhood has a positive side is an enduring finding over time in this research tradition. Nearly two decades ago, the study by Ann Phoenix (1991) of teenage mothers in London, in the mid-1980s, found that most of the mothers and their children were faring well. Most (and their male partners) had already done badly in the educational and employment systems, and it did not seem that early motherhood had caused this or that deferring motherhood would have made much difference. Rather, if anything, motherhood was something of a turning point which 'spurred some women on' (*ibid*, 250) into education and employment. Contributions to this edited collection testify that, two decades later, this more positive picture remains pertinent.

While Phoenix's research prefigures the statistical 'natural experiments', it remains unacknowledged in that tradition, and does not feature in the SEU 1999 framework report. The positive side to research findings about teenage mothering seems to be regularly disregarded in the more official literature, even when government commissions the research. Recent examples include TPU commissioned research on teenage mothers in rural and seaside 'hotspots' (Bell

et al. 2004), and on teenage mothers and education (TPS Evaluation Team 2005, Hosie 2007). The former noted how for some young women, motherhood: 'increased their self-esteem and enhanced their lives, providing a sense of security and stability in lives characterised by transience, detachment and low economic aspirations' (op. cit. p. *v*), while the TPU's own evidence showed that having a child provides motivation for young mothers to aspire to new educational and employment goals.

That teenage parenting can have many positive sides is a theme that reappears in most of the chapters in this book. In chapter five Eleanor Formby, Julia Hirst and Jenny Owen provide a compelling illustration across three generational cohorts of teenage parents from Sheffield and Doncaster. Having a baby as a teenager did not necessarily predict adversity, and the problems experienced arose more from the particular social and economic circumstances the mothers and fathers found themselves in, rather than the age at which pregnancy occurred. For mothers, difficulties in accessing appropriate housing was a major problem, while fathers recounted their sense of exclusion or marginalisation from the processes of antenatal care, childbirth, and postnatal care. While the mothers and fathers in the sample had not planned pregnancy, all recounted their pleasure at having a baby and never regretted the decision to continue with the pregnancy. Parents across all generations and social classes spoke of their parenting in positive terms, even if early parenthood for the mothers (but not the fathers) was accompanied by a sense of 'loss' of teenage life. All made explicit references to the positive 'turning-point' offered by pregnancy: the opportunity to make new plans, including the beginnings of a strong family unit or renewed efforts to gain qualifications and secure more certain futures. Despite the pleasure and pride that all participants described, stigma was also a feature of parenting that each generation, but mostly mothers, highlighted. Hence, living in a community where young parents were not unusual was cited as hugely influential, contrasting to the isolation experienced by some older and middle generation mothers who lived in middle-class communities where young parenthood was less visible. This theme is continued in chapter six by Ann McNulty. Exploring three generations of related young mothers down the generations in particular families, in the north-east of England, she challenges ideas about intergenerational transmission of low aspirations, and shows how each generation of young mothers in a family wanted to achieve, and wanted their daughters to achieve, in education and employment. Unmet expectations in relation to career options were more a matter of the (often declining) economic

circumstances in their localities, rather than any culture of low aspiration. The chapter also notes the marked shift, over recent decades, towards a negative conceptualisation of young motherhood.

This positive theme is replicated in other national contexts. Lee SmithBattle's research in the USA is paradigmatic (SmithBattle 1995, 2000, SmithBattle and Leonard 1998). She followed a small, diverse group of teenage mothers over 8 years, finding that many described mothering as a powerful catalyst for becoming more mature, and for redirecting their lives in positive ways. Mothering often 'anchors the self, fosters a sense of purpose and meaning, reweaves connections, and provides a new sense of future' (SmithBattle, 2000, 35). Indeed, two of the themes identified in a meta-synthesis of US qualitative studies of teenage mothers undertaken during the 1990s are 'Motherhood as positively transforming' and 'Baby as stabilising influence' (Clemmens 2003).

In this way qualitative research can explain the patterns found by extensive statistical studies; they suggest just why teenage parenting does not produce particularly poor outcomes, and can sometimes make things better for young people. In addition, the qualitative research can go further in explaining the processes involved in teenage parenting just because it allows more attention to context and diversity—usually stripped out by extensive studies in their concentration on average measurement (cf. Sayer 1994). This is not just a qualification to the statistical results, whereby teenage parents' experiences can be shown to vary significantly in different social groups and geographical places. For this also takes us to a vital 'missing link', and a key to understanding the agency of teenage parents—the life worlds in which they live. Becoming a teenage mother, and it seems a father, can make reasonable sense in the particular life worlds inhabited by some groups of young women and men. Recently, Rachel Thomson (2000) has conceptualised this as the 'economy of values' particular to different communities, and earlier Ann Phoenix (1991) found that early motherhood was common, and normally uncensured, in the social networks inhabited by the working-class teenage mothers in her 1980's London sample. BattleSmith (2000) shows much the same for the USA; early motherhood often made sense in terms of local constitutions of opportunity, constraint, and social practice.

In chapter seven (Alexander et al.) we discuss our own research findings, from a small sample in Bradford, that teenage parents saw themselves unexceptionally as 'just a mother or a father' like any other. They were motivated to achieve well in education and employment so as to provide a stable future for their children,

while at the same time they lived in communities where family and parenting was placed centrally as a form of local inclusion and social participation. The case of the two Asian mothers, who were married, is an indicative example. In this way ethnicity, as well as class, shaped expectations around motherhood. The young mothers and fathers in the sample spoke of their positive experience and the ways in which having children had given them a sense of responsibility and adult status. The teenage mothers in the study were little different from many other mothers who morally and socially prioritise motherhood, not employment. It is not that the young mothers rejected education and employment, rather self-esteem and identity are centred round motherhood; paid work was important more as a secondary and supportive part of life. While they faced many struggles, these were often linked to problems of wider social disadvantage, and they themselves strongly challenged the idea that these were related to their position as *young* parents. They resisted being characterised solely as a teenage mother or father and saw themselves as having multiple roles and identities, as individuals, partners, workers, students.

In chapter eight Jenny Owen and colleagues develop this theme with respect to ethnicity. Drawing on a study of teenage mothers in Bradford, Sheffield and three London boroughs, they examine in depth the transition to motherhood by young minority ethnic mothers. This reveals the strengths that these mothers draw on to deal with double-faceted prejudice—based on age and race/ethnicity—and their determination to make something of their own and their children's lives. However, at the same time many of the experiences of these young mothers are 'strikingly unremarkable': like older mothers, they are proud of their children; they aim to put them first; and they encounter familiar dilemmas in reconciling 'care' commitments with making a living and reaching accommodations with partners and other family members. This adds further weight to the general argument that 'teenage parents' should not be described as a homogenous group somehow separate from other mothers.

6. Conclusions: experience v policy?

The evidence substantiated in the chapters which follow shows that teenage childbirth does not often result from ignorance or low expectations, it is rarely a catastrophe for young women, and that teenage parenting does not particularly cause poor outcomes for mothers and their children. Expectations of motherhood can be high and parenting can be a positive experience for many young men and women. Furthermore, becoming a teenage parent can make

good sense in the particular life worlds inhabited by some groups of young women and men. Policies about teenage parenting, however, assume the opposite. Unfortunately, this also means that policy will be misdirected in its aims, use inappropriate instruments, and may be unhelpful to many teenage parents

This brings us to the last question posed by the 'problem' of teenage parenting. Why then, is there such a yawning gulf between policy assumptions and the experiences of its subjects? And why does policy seem so resistant to evidence? This is the subject of our concluding chapter nine (Edwards et al.); the way forward, we claim, necessitates a 'smashing' of the policy making mould maintained by the 'epistemic community' existing around teenage parenting. We refer here to a network of professionals and policymakers with a shared set of normative, analytical and causal beliefs, with an agreed, shared and self-reinforcing knowledge base, and a common set of interests. Parameters of preferred policy models and narratives of cause and effect are set, to the exclusion of other ideas and information, even if those other data are more representative of everyday reality. The impetus is to retain these dominant and agreed conceptions in developing (further) policies, protecting them not only from critical scrutiny but even from recognising the existence of challenging alternative scenarios. Researchers working outside of these favoured models, with messages at odds with current policy directions, are unlikely to be heard or, if heard, considered relevant.

In this way a monochrome, negative, stereotype of teenage parents and parenting has become embedded in policy, bolstered by shared assumptions about social participation and the nature of social mobility, and by neo-liberal ideas about individual choice and rationality. Ideas about what is 'rational' are integrally linked to what is held to be socially acceptable, which in turn is regarded as a universal 'common sense' applicable in all contexts, rather than being rooted in the specific perspectives of a particular classed and gendered group of people who have the ability to judge others and place them as outside of rationality. In the case of teenage mothers and fathers, they are envisaged as ignorant, immoral or both because they have deviated from the cost-benefit calculative, future-oriented planned pathway of life. As other chapters show, this thinking is at odds with the complex reality of young mothers' and fathers' understandings and motivations, and yet is unequivocally accepted as an accurate portrayal. And all this, we suggest, is underlain by idealisations of children and childhood, where teenage parents, and mothers especially, are regarded as taking on the 'adult' responsibilities of parenthood before they have undergone

the necessary sloughing off of the immaturity of childhood. They are (almost) children who have disrupted the regulation represented by the boundaries of adulthood and childhood, embodying the breakdown of social order and the nation's moral turpitude.

The question remains of how to move on. On the basis of the evidence presented in this book, we suggest there needs to be a refocus on the value of parenthood in itself, both socially and for individuals. For teenage parents, this might focus on the positive experience of becoming a mother and father, and on young parents' own resilience and strengths. Education and employment for young parents should be recognised as a components of parenting (which would also include 'full-time' mothering at home), rather than as a return to individualised rational economic planning where children are seen as an obstacle. Policy may also be better directed at improving employment for young people as a whole in declining labour markets, and regenerating disadvantaged neighbourhoods, rather than targeting teenage parenting in itself. Teenage parenting might then be approached as a way through and out of disadvantage, given its positive potential, rather than a confirmation of it. It could be seen as more opportunity than catastrophe. Certainly stigmatising policies directed at the assumed ignorance and inadequacy of teenagers will be inappropriate.

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