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What's the problem with teenage parents? And what's the problem with policy?

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Abstract
Public discourse in Britain sees teenage motherhood as a pernicious social problem where mothers, their children and society generally will all suffer.   Fathers are seen as feckless. This is reflected in New Labour's teenage pregnancy strategy, which understands teenage parents as victims of ignorance, miss-information, and low expectations.   But a review of the research evidence finds that the age at which pregnancy occurs has little effect on social outcomes. Many teenage mothers describe how motherhood makes them feel stronger, and marks a change for the better. Many fathers seek to remain connected with their children. For both, parenting seems to provide an impetus to take up education, training and employment. Teenage parenting may be more of an opportunity than a catastrophe, and often makes sense in the life worlds inhabited by young mothers. The paper ends by asking how we can explain this yawning gulf between the experience of teenage parenting and policy, and concludes that this largely rests on assumptions of rational choice, in turn creating a 'rationality mistake'.

Keywords:
 Discourses, rationality, social exclusion, social inclusion, young parents

1.   Introduction: the official view of teenage parenting
Teenage parenthood in Britain, and elsewhere in Western Europe and North America, is typically depicted as a calamity for individual young women and as a severe problem for society. It is caused, according to the Social Exclusion Unit's 1999 report – which has set the framework

for UK government policy since then – by low expectations, ignorance, and mixed messages. First, pregnancy is an exit strategy for young women who see no prospect of a job, and fear they will end up on benefit one way or the other: 'Put simply, they see no reason not to get pregnant' (SEU 1999, 7). Secondly, the SEU continues, many teenagers are ignorant in the sense that they lack accurate knowledge about contraception, STIs, what to expect in relationships and what it means to be a parent. Mixed messages through the media – emanating from the public celebration and commercial manipulation of sexuality combined with a lack of responsible discussion and education - compound these factors. Throughout, as the SEU report makes clear, these factors are linked to social disadvantage; it is younger women in poorer areas who are most likely to become pregnant, and least likely to use abortion to solve unplanned pregnancy. Subsequent young parenting is then seen to reinforce disadvantage. Or as Tony Blair 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).

There is a severe problem with this 'official' view of teenage parenting - the research evidence does not support it. There is little evidence that lack of knowledge 'causes' pregnancy, or that increased knowledge prevents it. Age at which pregnancy occurs seems to have little effect on future social outcomes, and many young mothers themselves express positive attitudes to motherhood, and describe how motherhood has made them feel stronger, more competent, more connected, and more responsible.    Many fathers seek to remain connected to their children. 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, or as one mother put it:

Just because you've got a baby doesn't mean to say your life has ended at all. 'Coz actually, me getting pregnant and me having a baby now has actually given me a bigger incentive to go and do something with my life instead of just getting a dead-end job' (quoted in Bell et al, 2004).

Section 2 of the paper summarises the policy context, and policy content, of New Labour's teenage pregnancy strategy.    Section 3 than reviews recent statistical work on the connections between teenage mothering and social disadvantage, and section 4 goes on to review the qualitative evidence about how young mothers and fathers themselves experience parenting. Given this review, section 5 examines the stark contradiction between research evidence and policy discourse.

2. Moral panics, international comparisons, and New Labour policy
The policy understanding of teenage parents as a social problem, as expressed by the SEU, has become linked in the public debate with a wider 'social threat' discourse.    Teenage pregnancy is taken as a particularly significant indicator of the gathering 'breakdown of the family' (for example Morgan 1998). Periodically tabloid frenzies erupt when atypical cases of very young girls, perhaps from the same family or neighbourhood, are seized upon and luridly sensationalised (Selman 2003).    A recent example was the furore in May 2005 over three

teenage pregnancies in one Derby family (Bunting 2005). Typically, teenage motherhood is described as a 'toll',  'disaster' or a 'crisis' (1). If teenage mothers can be seen as victims (although possibly amoral and/or ignorant victims), then young fathers are seen more as feckless and possibly immoral perpetrators. The assumption is that they are socially rootless, with weak moral connections (Dennis and Erdos 1992). Again, current policy reflects assumptions like this in responding to tabloid campaigns based on atypical cases.   For example the idea of using the Child Support Agency to 'vigorously' pursue young fathers, so as to make them recognise their responsibilities through financial payments (SEU, 1999, 11.2), was lifted to prominence after media reports in September 1999 of a 14 year old boy who got his 12 year old girlfriend pregnant (Freely, 1999).   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 14 year old boy cannot be a good father). Nonetheless, as Selman (2003) documents, the dominant portrayal of teenage parents remains stereotyped as social threat as well as social victim.

This social threat discourse is buttressed by a widespread perception that teenage pregnancy has never been higher. This is despite the fact that teenage birth rates in Britain are no higher than in the supposed 'golden age' of the family of the 1950s, and substantial declines in both rates and absolute numbers since the 60s and early 70s (see Table 1). By 2004 only 12% of conceptions were to women aged under 20, and just 0.9% to those under 16, with an even smaller share of births - 7% and 0.6% respectively. Rates are also falling in the USA and other 'high rate' countries like New Zealand and Canada.

Live births and birth rates for women under 20, 1951-2004

| 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 |

Sources: ONS Birth Statistics, Health Statistics Quarterly

What is different is that in the 1950s and 60s 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). Probably around 20% of the children were adopted shortly after birth. In contrast, by 2000 nearly all teenage parents remained unmarried; although around half cohabited with the father, while another quarter jointly registered the birth with the father -which suggests some continuing parental relationship (Selman 1996, 2003). These trends away from marriage, and towards unmarried cohabitation and 'living apart together (or LATs), reflect those for the population as a whole (Barlow et al 2005, Haskey, 2005). Only around a quarter of teenage mothers now become 'single mothers', that is lone mothers who had not previously cohabited with the father of their child. There are now very few adoptions by non-parents, although in 1999 Jack Straw, when Home Secretary, did raise the issue of reversing an 'anti-adoption culture' for single mothers. Straw's statement was rapidly picked up by the tabloid press and interpreted as targeting teenage mothers (Selman 2003). In turn this linked into one favourite response to the social threat that single mothers represent to advocates of the family breakdown discourse (Murray, 1994, Morgan 1998), and reflects US legislation encouraging adoption of their children In this way – and despite actual trends - 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   (Duncan and Edwards 1999, Selman 2003, Williams 2004, Wilson and Huntington 2005).

The heady political symbolism and mobilization created by this moral panic reinforces the need for government to be seen to tackling what is already identified as a social problem for 'teenagers, their children and the country'. All this is underlined by contrasting national teenage birth rates or, as Tony Blair put it in his forward to the SEU's 1999 document, Britain's 'shameful record' (p4). British rates remain 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 US at 52.1, and more marginally Canada and New Zealand, were higher (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. This comparative lesson was emphasized 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 unplanned 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 under the direction of a Ministerial Task Force and co-ordinated by the Teenage Pregnancy Unit (TPU). The TPU has two main goals, to halve the under 18 teenage conception rate by 2010, and

to increase the participation of teenage parents in education, training or employment. Since 2001, each top tier local authority has had an agreed local teenage pregnancy strategy to reach local 2010 reduction targets of between 40-60%. Each local strategy is led by a Teenage Pregnancy Coordinator, working with a Teenage Pregnancy Partnership Board, and supported by a Local Implementation Grant. Local Strategies are 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, have been 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 is 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.

This is an impressive machinery.    However in the implementation of policy, the 'low expectations' explanation - which points towards tackling social disadvantage – seems to have been neglected.    Rather, policy in practice has focussed on the 'ignorance' explanation (Arai 2003 a, b) - British youth are seen as deficient in their sexual health knowledge, are poor users of contraception, are shy about sex and are wary about accessing services.    This then becomes the major cause of the problem, and a major means of reducing it. Perhaps this focus was the more appealing when current policy thinking tends to stress individual behaviour and motivations, rather than the 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. Current policy then ends up pathologising teenage pregnancy and childrearing, when it is seen to arise from 'inappropriate motivations, ignorance and sexual embarrassment' (Arai 2003a, 203).

There is, however, one crucial problem with this    'ignorance – calamity - social problem' picture of the causes and consequences
of teenage pregnancy, and the policy and political thrust that results – the research evidence does not support it. There are two sorts of evidence that combine to undermine this 'official' understanding.    First is a set of statistical studies about social outcomes for teenage mothers, second there is qualitative evidence from the mothers (and some fathers) about how they became parents, and experience parenting.

2. The statistical question - class 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. There are two major problems.    First, studies do not always compare like with like; ascribing causal effects to teenage motherhood is pretty meaningless if we compare teen mothers with all mothers, rather than those of a similar age and background. Secondly,

linked to this, 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. What researchers did was to devise 'natural experiments' where these selection effects would be better controlled, such as comparisons between cousins whose mothers were sisters, between sisters or 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 20s 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 SEU report was produced did not take this 'natural experiment' approach to controlling selection effects, and instead relied on more general 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 30 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.

Statistical problems remain with these studies – in particular how good are the 'natural experiments', for example does miscarriage really have no social effect (Hoffman 1998, Hawkes 2004). Perhaps there can never be an accurate measurement of the 'effect' of teenage motherhood, in the sense of finding some ultimate truth (Wilson and Huntington, 2005). Nonetheless, these studies show that – in these outcome terms - teenage childbearing can be seen as only a minor social problem.   Or as Hoffmann concluded for the USA, studies like these 'cast considerable doubt on the received wisdom about the consequences of teenage childbearing' (1998, 238).

4. The agency question – 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 (c.f. 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 (McDermott and Graham 2005). For some, this has given the impetus to change direction, or build on existing resources, so as to take up education, training and employment (see Graham and McDermott 2005 for review).

Lee SmithBattle's research, in the USA, is paradigmatic (SmithBattle 1995, 2000, SmithBattle and Leonard 1998; see Clemmens, 2003 for other US studies). 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).   There were three groups among her respondents. For the most disadvantaged and alienated teens in the sample, having a baby epitomized the hope of escaping a desolate past, but this proved illusory and eventually confirmed their pre-pregnancy despair. While this was indeed a negative outcome, it was pre-pregnancy conditions that were most influential, and even so childbirth could have been a turning point. At the other end of the spectrum, those with substantial family and social resources, and pre-pregnancy plans for education and employment which exceeded those of other teens, found that their plans were both complicated and strengthened as they strove to create a future for themselves and their children. Finally, a middle group described how an empty

pre-pregnancy future was transformed by becoming a mother, which provided a corrective experience - they often reported getting off drugs, returning to education, distancing themselves from risky friendships, and re-evaluating earlier destructive behaviour. Not surprisingly, therefore, two of the themes identified in a meta-synthesis of US qualitative studies undertaken during the 1990s are ''Motherhood as positively transforming' and 'Baby as stabalilizing influence' (Clemmens 2003).

Similar findings are reported for Britain. The study by Anne Phoenix (1991) of London teenage mothers in the mid-80s prefigures the statistical 'natural experiments', although it remains unacknowledged in that tradition, and does not feature in the SEU 1999 framework report. She 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. This positive view of motherhood by the mothers themselves, and childbirth as a turning point, is something of a constant theme in British qualitative work. More recently Bell et al (2004), looking at seaside and rural areas with high pregnancy rates, 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' (p. v). Similarly, writing in a separate medical literature (but using sociological techniques), Seamark and Lings (2004) show that although most of their small sample of Devon teenage mothers had not planned to become pregnant, nonetheless most had very positive attitudes about being a mother and what it meant to them. Most felt an immediate bonding with the baby, and reflected on the positive effect it had on them. They had 'grown up', found an added impetus in their lives and – although fully aware of practical problems – were planning or embarking upon educational and/ or employment careers. Far from a catastrophe, the authors conclude that teenage pregnancy was more 'the turning point to maturity and developing a career' where 'it was almost as if having a child had saved them from themselves' (ibid, 817). Even for particularly disadvantaged young mothers leaving the care system ' the birth of a child signified a remarkable turning point' (Barn and Mantovani 2006, 15).

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 (Robinson, 1998, Speak et al 1997, Quinton et al 2002). 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, fathers may be less of a social threat, more of a social possibility.

The qualitative research also finds 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 focussing 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).

In this way the 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 (c.f. Sayer 1994, although see Tabberer et al 2000, Lee at al 2004 for statistical work showing how young women's decisions to undertake abortion, or proceed with pregnancy, are heavily class and locality specific in Britain). 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.

Thus Phoenix (1991) found that early motherhood was common, and normally uncensored, in the social networks inhabited by the working class teenage mothers in her London sample. Many of her respondents probably expected motherhood in a few years anyway – just like their older friends, relatives, and their own mothers. Being a bit earlier was not incompatible with family expectations, with the educational and employment opportunities available, and with the networks of family support on hand. Rachel Thompson (2000), examining young people's values about sexual experience and teenage parenthood, conceptualised this as the 'economy of values' particular to different communities.   Pupils from a school with a middle class 'executive commuter belt' catchment area vehemently rejected early parenthood as representative of an inferior value system. But in a nearby school, located in a working class estate, young women saw much to gain from motherhood; having a baby was a means of accumulating experience and authority in a concrete and locally accepted way, and this could be superior to education, employment or couple relationships. At the same time fathers had much to gain, locally, in cultivating a sexual reputation. BatttleSmith (2000) shows much the same for the USA; early motherhood often made sense in terms of local constitutions of opportunity, constraint, and social practice. Motherhood, according to the qualitative synthesis undertaken by Graham and McDermott (2005), gives an entry to a valued social role for many young working class women, especially those from less economically and socially secure households; it can be a better way to forge an adult identity, and often confers a more secure identity and belonging, than education and employment without children. The case of many teenage mothers in poor Pakistani communities in Britain, who are usually married, is an indicative example (2).

It is not that young mothers reject education and employment, as the discussion above makes clear they may well have a more positive orientation than their peers without children.   Rather, self-esteem and identity are centred round motherhood; paid work is important more as a secondary and supportive part of life. In this way teenage mothers are little different from many

other mothers who morally and socially prioritise motherhood, not employment - however useful the latter may be (see Duncan and Edwards 1999, Duncan et al 2003). This is different in many middle class families, in what has been called an alternative 'slow lane' to motherhood (Graham and McDermott, 2005). For these more advantaged young women, adult identity and class position is forged through higher education, and in a career in the labour market, prior to childbirth. Motherhood may be more or less centrally positioned to the identities of middle class mothers, but this educational and employment position should be achieved first (Duncan 2005).

In other words, 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. Indeed a significant minority of teenage mothers, and fathers, positively plan for pregnancy and many others are 'positively ambivalent' towards childbirth – that is they do not actually plan it, but would quite like a baby and do no not use contraception for that reason (Cater and Coleman 2006). 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. Like other women 'unplanned' does not necessarily mean 'unwanted'.

5. Policies for teenage parenting and the rationality mistake
The evidence reviewed so far 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. Why then, is there such a yawning gulf between policy assumptions and the experiences of its subjects?

Critics normally appeal to the dominance of public and political discourse around teenage parenting in explaining this disjuncture between policy and research evidence. In that discourses both name and make sense of social relationships and behaviour, and assign meaning and causes to situations and actions, they shape the ways we think of, and react to, aspects of the social world. It is 'discourse', then, which can explain the 'willing opacity' (Blaikie 1995, 642), whereby evidence about the actual experience and outcomes of teenage parenting is ignored, discounted, or re-interpreted in line with the expected, 'common sense', view. Sometimes researchers do this themselves (3). There are three main interpretations of this discourse explanation of policies around teenage parenting: discourse as moral panic, discourse as quantitative social science, and the social exclusion discourse in New Labour policy. I will briefly look at each in turn, but my overall perspective is that while each explanation may be a starting point, left standing alone discourse explanations can become simply shorthand for 'ways of talking' (Bacchi 2005). The links between these conversations and how particular policy around teenage parenting is formulated remain to be established. Nor should we see policy makers as simply implementing 'discourse' in some unmediated way (Hunter 2003).

The moral panic perspective gives much emphasis to the policy influence of popular discourse created by the tabloid press, right wing academic commentators and irresponsible politicians seeking popularity. Certainly there are many lurid, biased and often completely inaccurate statements about teenage mothers and fathers emanating from these sources (Selman, 2003). The

problem remains however, of how this ferment actually results in policy. Peter Selman uses the concept of 'scapegoating', defined as a 'discrediting routine by which people move blame and responsibility away from themselves towards a target group' (ibid, 160) to plug this gap; attention is removed from the inequalities that produce the problem, and instead focussed on blaming the victims. Teenage parenting can then be subsumed within the welfare dependency debate. As we have seen, this does chime in with some aspects of new Labour's teenage parenting strategy, particularly the neglect of disadvantage explanations in favour of explanations favouring ignorance and individual behaviour.   But it still leaves the problem of showing how this 'chiming' between policy and discourse is actually achieved.   How does a particular, if inaccurate, view of teenage parents gain dominance in the charmed circle of Westminster, Downing Street and London based media pundits, and how does this result in policy?

This 'chiming' is all the more problematical because civil servants, as policy developers, are usually quite aware of the exaggerated inaccuracies of the tabloid and popular debate; indeed anecdotally they often profess to despise it. True, they must sometimes respond to the demands of their 'political masters' in placating this pressure (as with the furore over the 12 year old father quoted above), but would rather see themselves as developing policy rationally, weighing up the evidence appropriately.   A telling example is the legislation for civil partnerships in Britain, which gives gay and lesbian couples access to marriage like rights. Despite opposition from the tabloid press and earlier statements by ministers ruling out 'gay marriage', the government's Women and Equality Unit, located in the Department of Trade and Industry, introduced proposals for changing the law in June 2003. Legislation was rushed through both Houses of Parliament and became law in November 2004, with an enactment date of December 2005. (The fact that the new legislation was finally slipped through the House of Lords on a day when the tabloid press was focussed on another, more contentious, story just goes to show how 'discourse' can be circumvented (4)).   Rather than being influenced by moral panic discourse, it appears that civil servants and ministers saw legislation for Civil Partnerships as a rational response to an irrational situation.   Gays and lesbians were not previously able to avail themselves of the legal, financial and moral advantages provided by marriage, this did little for either civil rights or for 'stable family life' (Women and Equality Unit, 2003, 13), and the law should be changed to remedy this (Shipman and Smart 2006).   Furthermore, this reform would have few financial costs and civil servants hyped up its business case (the pink pound in weddings etc) in appealing to ministers (Stychin, 2005).

So while we can see popular and tabloid discourse affecting the climate in which policy is made, this alone does not give a particularly good explanation of how policy is developed. Wilson and Huntington (2006) appeal to the nature of scientific discourse to provide this missing link. Science gives social and policy claims legitimacy and, in searching for this legitimacy, policy makers select research evidence which they see as rigorous and accurate.   In practice, according to Wilson and Huntington, this means quantitative research; qualitative research on teenage parenting is 'rarely cited' (ibid 65) in government reports and documents. Certainly the qualitative research reviewed above hardly appears in the official reports (see, for example, SEU 1999 and TPU 2004). This means that policy makers then only receive a one-dimensional view of teenage parenting, which is 'unable to capture the thought and feelings of teenage mothers themselves' (Wilson and Huntington, 2006, 64). Certainly there are strong tendencies to

privilege extensive research and quantitative methods as somehow superior, partly because of their associations with economic science, figures and machines, and men (Brannen, 1992, Oakley, 2000). Ironically, this is despite its weaknesses for explanation (Sayer 1994). This will be exacerbated because most civil servants are generalists, without much social science background. In addition the few social scientists tend to be located in more peripheral research sections, while the exceptions in more managerial and executive positions are mostly economists – normally already wedded to quantitative approaches (Brannen 1986, Stone et al 2001). But, as discussed above, quantitative research can at best only hint that it may be quite sensible for young parents to go ahead with pregnancy within their life worlds, and that motherhood is so often a positive experience. These hints, without the stronger evidence from qualitative research which reports more directly on mothers' own understandings and experiences, will be easily missed.   In turn the official orthodoxy about teenage parenting – highlighting its negative aspects - will continue unchallenged. Similarly, while the popular tabloid discourse may be seen as exaggerated and one-sided, there will be little basis on which it can be fundamentally opposed.

This analysis does take us further in understanding the one-sided development of policy around teenage parenting.   But it contains a severe flaw. For, as discussed in section 3, the quantitative research evidence also challenges the official orthodoxy – it also finds that teenage parenthood has little effect on social outcomes.   Why is this evidence, which does fit into the predilections of the civil service, also ignored in policy formulation?

Perhaps challenging research can rarely be taken up in policy – it is just too much of a political embarrassment.   This is logical enough if we remember that decisions about policy are made within a political culture, concerned with political gains and losses within a balance of forces. Narrow 'feasible solutions' to implementation problems – which promise some gain - might be welcomed. But research implying that current policy is misconceived, and that a new policy paradigm is needed    - and which therefore threatens political losses - may not even be recognised (Brannen 1986, Stone et al 2001).    The TPU's   'Overview of research evidence' (2004) about teenage parenting is a remarkable example. It is not only that it focuses on technical issues within the 'ignorance' paradigm, and ignores qualitative work about the actual experience of teenage parenting; in addition the review manages to strip out the central message of the latest statistical work, as reviewed in section 3 above, that teenage motherhood makes little difference to social outcomes.

This leads us to the third 'discourse' explanation for the disjuncture between the experience of teenage parenting and policies around it – New Labour has its own particular policy paradigm which determines what sort of research evidence about teenage parents can be admitted, and how it can be interpreted. This is the discourse that sees paid work in opposition to 'dependency', where employment secures independence and identity.    It is relationship with the labour market which determines an individual's status as socially excluded or socially included. This analysis of New Labour's policy view, and the critique of its effects on policy – notably the lack of recognition of unpaid caring work as socially useful, personally valid or even existing- are by now well established (for example Levitas 1998, Williams 2004).   Graham and McDermott (2005) contrast this official discourse with the research evidence showing how, for many young mothers, social inclusion is achieved more by motherhood than paid work. Given that policy

makers also normally neglect the qualitative evidence which better shows the importance of this alternative route to social inclusion, they simply miss the point and end up stigmatising teenage mothers as welfare dependants.    Hence, Graham and McDermott imply, the disjuncture between policy and experience.

But why do policy makers and shapers make these assumptions about paid work and social inclusion?    This takes us to ideas about choice and rationality.    Politically, the dominance of neo-liberalism sees markets as allowing individual freedom and choice – divorced from the social circumstances which structure freedom and choice (Brannen and Nilsen 2005). Furthermore, choice is conventionally and dominantly defined as that rational economic choice which maximises personal benefit (Duncan and Edwards 1999). Hence government policy assumes, as a behavioural foundation, that people universally make individualistic, economic cost-benefit type, decision making. However, in order to be effective and rational 'consumer citizens' in this way, people need a given level of disposable income, and this is assumed to be found in paid work. Hence the emphasis on benefit reform 'to make work pay', for example. This may not be the only 'rationality assumption' made by policy makers and shapers, but it is the dominant, foundational assumption – and it tends to be more dominant the higher the level of power and responsibility, and in the more dominant government departments like the Treasury and Department of Trade and Industry (see Grover and Stewart, 2000). The fact that most civil servants are generalists, and the only social scientists to have any senior position are likely to be economists, allows this paradigmatic view to remain relatively unchallenged.

This view of choice and rationality lies some distance away from that apparently held by many teenage parents; becoming a young mother or father can be rational and moral in terms of their everyday worlds of family, community and locality, and parenting can be seen as more valuable than employment.    This parallels research showing that decisions by mothers about how to combine mothering and employment usually reflect socially negotiated judgments about what is morally right. In this way a socially constructed 'gendered moral rationality' pre-empts and incorporates an individual 'economic rationality' (Duncan and Edwards 1999, Duncan et al 2003).    Furthermore, these gendered moral rationalities, and hence the type of decision made, vary between different class, ethnic and social groups of mother.

The disjuncture between these different views sets up a 'rationality mistake' on the part of policy makers. Young parents act according to a different form of rationality to that policy makers assume; and thus their actions will then proceed according to different criteria, and what may appear as problematical behaviour for policy makers and shapers may not be at all problematical for them. Worse, when government policy is thereby ineffective, then policy shapers go on to make a 'morality mistake'.    They assume that teenage parents behave irrationally because they are ignorant, or immoral, or both. In this case it is assumed that teenagers should hold individualized, cost-benefit type plans for future education and employment. Consequently, severe deviations from economically rational forward planning – as assumed for teenage pregnancy – are seen to result from ignorance and low expectations, if not irrationality or even immorality. Or as SmithBattle arrestingly puts it 'The sin that modern teen mothers commit is not the sin of desire, but the sin of not planning and rationally choosing their future' (2000, 30, original emphasis).    But as we have seen in this review, many teenage parents can see both social inclusion and personal fulfilment in having a baby. In other words they can have both

'knowledge' and 'high expectations', and can make rational and moral decisions on this basis.

The rationality mistake in policy formulation is buttressed by the social location of policy makers. First, most policy makers will themselves have progressed along the middle class 'slow lane' to adulthood (see above), where achieving human capital through education, training and career development is prioritised over early parenthood as a means of achieving adult identity and autonomy.    Their professional and personal identities are partly formed through this particular life course experience, which is heavily classed. As Hunter (2003) points out, policy makers are not simply rational actors simply weighing up evidence or responding to powerful discourses, but also emotional actors; policy decisions are to do with feeling as much as reasoning. (The 'war on terror' is a good example, see Burkitt 2005). In this case the contrasting 'fast lane' to adulthood through early parenting taken by young mothers and fathers is not only foreign to policy makers' experiences, but becomes socially disparaged as the epitome of its inadequacies (as Thompson 2000 shows for middle class schooling). Secondly, there is a notable lack of teenage parent 'grassroots' or 'bottom-up' organisations, which can express their feelings and experiences as welfare subjects, based around some collective identity.    The impact of father's groups (such as Father's Direct, Families Need Fathers and    - more extremely – Fathers for Justice) on policies around divorce, child contact and custody is a telling contrast (see Featherstone et al forthcoming). For both these reasons, then, there is apparently little way that policy makers can easily appreciate the experience of teenage parenting, or give much weight to qualitative research which can present this in a scientific way.    Again, official orthodoxies and popular discourses remain unchallenged. This helps answer what Arai calls
'the puzzlement expressed by researchers for continuing differentials in teenage pregnancy and fertility despite widespread availability of free contraception and legal abortion. … they cannot understand why youth (in poor communities) appear to be poor users of contraception and are unwilling to have abortions' (2003, 200).

This simplistic and universalising type of image building around teenage parenting is compounded further through the particular method of explanation employed. When they use the term 'teenage mother' politicians, the media and even voluntary organisations invoke a particular categorical representation of a type of person.    'Teenage mother' is seen to stand for an a priori, unitary, fixed, coherent, inherent and essentialised set of attributes and characteristics - which in Britain and the USA easily becomes a negative stereotype as social victim or threat. The trouble is this short cut in image building and explanation is misleading- most teenage parents do not fit this caricature, as the review above shows.

So why does this categorical image of the teenage mother persist? This returns us to the nature of social science research, particularly (but not exclusively) quantitative work. It often proceeds as if taxonomic or categorical groups accurately delineate social groups, and hence also encompass similar social positions, social relations and social behaviour. This assumption is often quite wrong.    Taxonomic groups, for example teenage mothers distinguished by age as a particular parental form, are often different from the real substantive social groups which actually carry through social actions and relationships.    It is not only that teenage mothers are not a homogeneous or unified population, so that different social groups of mothers may behave differently.    This is important enough. In addition it may not be teenage motherhood in itself that is substantively or causally most important for their social behaviour. Rather, as we have

seen, it is quite likely that it is membership of particular class or ethnic group, or location in a particular area, that explains why some young women become mothers while others do not, and how they carry out there parenting. For example, White teenage mothers living in an peripheral housing estate in a northern city undergoing economic decline will have more in common with other mothers in the same area, than they will, for example, with teenage mothers living in middle class suburbs in an economically advantaged area, Black teenage mothers living in inner London, or married Asian teenage mothers in Bradford. But these social divisions around class, ethnicity and location can remain unspoken when research    - and policy – remains based on a taxonomic category based on the mother's age. To use Andrew Sayer's memorable phrase (1992), policy will be addressed to a 'chaotic concept' – an image of 'teenage parent' which may have little parallel with actual social practices.

This conceptual disjuncture then spills over into the policy disjuncture - those social rationalities used by different groups of teenage mothers, influenced by class, ethnicity and location, will not coincide with an assumed categorical rationality depending on the age of the mother.    It also returns us to the moral panic and 'scapegoat' discourses. Media and political portrayals of teenage mothers will also reflect, and impose, their own categorical version of teenage mothers and fathers – a version which does not admit diversity or context. In these ways the rationality mistake will interact with New Labour's own discourse about social inclusion and exclusion, the political embarrassment of challenging research, the bias towards the supposed superior 'rigour' of quantitative research, and the media stimulated moral panic around teenage parenting.    Put this way, the gulf between the experience of, and policies about, teenage parenting is perhaps hardly surprising. Unfortunately, this also means that policy will be misdirected in its aims, use inappropriate instruments, and may be unhelpful to many teenage parents.

6 Conclusions

The evidence reviewed in the paper 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.    Indeed, as we have seen, expectations of motherhood can be quite 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.

At this stage most studies recommend the policies should be redirected towards support for teenage parents.    This is indeed one half of the SEU's original twin track strategy of 'better prevention' and 'better support' (SEU, 1999, 9,10), where the latter is identified as helping teenage parents into education, training and employment. However, as we have seen critics claim that the 'better support' component of the teenage pregnancy strategy is underplayed.    But policy reformulation needs to go beyond a restoration of balance between these two policy arms. Rather, 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 (Wilson and Huntington, 2006). Education and employment for young parents should be recognised as a components of parenting (which could also include 'full-time' mothering at home), rather than as a return to

individualised rational economic planning where children are seen as an obstacle. This conclusion is not unlike that made by other critical accounts of New Labour's 'family policy' (eg Duncan and Edwards 1999, Williams 2004). 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 teen 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.

As we have also seen, however, such a policy shift would be difficult to establish given the dominant rationality assumptions made by policy makers, and the political threat of policy change. Perhaps a translation of these policy shifts into terms of economic rationality and political gain would produce more leverage. For example, according to the EU, Europe is economically and socially threatened by a 'demographic time bomb' where the problem is precisely that of low fertility and late childbearing. And this particular 'hard' economic discourse has proved an effective way of profiling otherwise 'soft' social policy in the past (Duncan 2002).

Notes
1. To quote from recent headlines in my local newspaper, the Halifax Courier. See also Wilson and Huntington, 2005.

2. This is nothing new; historical research shows that young parenting and illegitimacy could be both individually relevant and culturally sanctioned in many communities (for example Viazzo 1989, Blaikie 1995).

3. For example Saul Hoffman, in his review of quantitative evidence from the USA, concluded that 'current research no longer supports the notion that teenage childbearing is a devastating event' (1998, 239) but nevertheless went on to discount this evidence in supporting a 'conservative', 'bottom line' (ibid 239/ 243).

4. The Abolition of Hunting with Dogs Bill, which had claimed huge symbolic space. The Civil Partnerships Bill was introduced into the House of Lords for its final reading, without advance publicity, one hour afterwards.

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