

# Teenage pregnancy and the construction of adolescence: Scientific literature in South Africa

By: Catriona Macleod  
Psychology Department  
Rhodes University  
P O Box 7426  
East London  
5200  
South Africa  
Fax: +27(43)7047107  
Tel: +27(43)7047036  
E-mail: [c.macleod@ru.ac.za](mailto:c.macleod@ru.ac.za)

January 2001

# Teenage pregnancy and the construction of adolescence: Scientific literature in South Africa

## Abstract

The depiction of teenage pregnancy as a social problem relies on the assumption of adolescence as a separable stage of development. Utilising a Derridian framework, I analyse how the dominant construction of adolescence as a transitional stage: (1) acts as an attempt to decide the undecidable (viz. the adolescent who is neither child nor adult, but simultaneously both) – an attempt which collapses in the face of teenage pregnancy; (2) relies on the ideal adult as the endpoint of development, and (3) has effects in terms of gendered and expert/parent/adolescent power relations.

**Key words:** Teenage pregnancy, adolescence, scientific literature.

Teenage pregnancy and childbearing emerged as a social problem in the media and social policy debates in the United States in the 1970s (Vinovskis, 1988) and somewhat later in South Africa (early 1980s). In the last decade there has been much interest in the field, and a substantial amount of work has been undertaken. Much of the research conducted in South Africa has been framed by the questions and methods dominating the early literature from developed countries which preceded it. With few exceptions, the South African literature reverberates the early American and British view of teenage pregnancy as a ‘catastrophe’ (De Villiers, 1991: 231). Phrases such as an ‘epidemic’ of adolescent child-bearing and ‘children having children’ (Boult, 1992: 16) have become common parlance.

Researchers and service providers express humanitarian concern for teen mothers and their children because the consequences of early reproduction are depicted as deleterious. This is partially to do with the ‘untimely’ nature of the activity. Teenage pregnancy, it is argued, leads, *inter alia*, to: a disruption of schooling; poor obstetric outcomes owing to the teenager’s biological immaturity; and inadequate mothering, including neglect, maltreatment and abuse, owing to the teenager’s emotional immaturity (see Macleod, 1999a for a full review of the South African literature on teenage pregnancy and its consequences). Furthermore, teenagers’ immaturity is invoked to explain why teenagers conceive. Reproductive ignorance, risk-taking behaviour and giving in to peer pressure are some of the factors mentioned in the South African literature (see Macleod, 1999b for a full review of the South African literature on the causes of teenage pregnancy). As pointed out in the above-mentioned reviews (Macleod, 1999a, 1999b) these results concerning the consequences and contributory factors of early reproduction mirror, to a large extent, those in more developed countries like Britain and the United States, with some contextual differences in emphasis (see later discussion).

Fundamental to arguments concerning the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy is the assumption of ‘teenage-hood’ as a real thing. In order to speak of teenage pregnancy, in order for adolescents’ sexual and reproductive behaviour to be

the target of interventions, adolescence needs to be accepted as a separable stage of development, as an identifiable phase in the life span of a human during which s/he is no longer a child, but not yet an adult. Certain 'truths' concerning the nature of adolescence and adolescent sexuality need to be taken-for-granted.

The dominant 'truth' concerning adolescence in developmental psychology is that adolescence represents a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood (Burman, 1994). It is seen as a time of natural, inevitable, universal development in which the organism moves, following a developmental blueprint, from a less to a more complex organisation of physiological, cognitive, emotional and psychological attributes. Adolescence fulfills the function of preparing the person for adulthood, while still maintaining some of the vestiges of childhood.

This developmentalist framework, which has for the most part been uncritically taken up in the South African psycho-medical literature, has deployed 'an entire lexicon of supposedly benign words [which] makes human development seem independent of the social and political context' (Burman, 1997: 138). Historical analysis illustrates, however, that adolescence has only emerged as a category in the West in recent history (Harari & Vinovskis, 1993). The category of adolescence furthermore, presupposes 'childhood'. There is a growing body of literature which problematises the notion of childhood, and by implication adolescence (e.g. Aries, 1962; Kessen, 1979; Smart, 1996). These writers have illustrated that childhood has a history, and that it is not a timeless, transcultural phenomenon. They have understood childhood as the product of a number of cultural processes and modernist ideas, which have come to define a specific life stage as different from others and as in need of special treatment. One of the cultural processes involved in the construction of adolescence is the social science endeavour, an example of which is featured here.

There is no equivalent study of the emergence of adolescence as separable stage in South Africa. What is clear, however, is that childhood and adolescence mean different things in different contexts. As Dawes and Donald (1994: 13) point out, 'in South Africa, as in other countries with a mix of classes and cultures, there is both commonality and divergence in the way childhood [and adolescence] is construed'. The construction of childhood and adolescence in South Africa reflects an intertwining of apartheid ideology, and historical and cultural practice. Civil law, customary law and initiation and other rites, amongst other things, construct images of and practices with regard to children, adolescents and adults.

Despite this, teenage pregnancy is generally defined in the South African psycho-medical literature off a basis of chronological age. In odd instances the ages of research participants is extended to 21 on the basis that, with extended schooling, these young women may be viewed as dependent. There are very few researchers who question the nature of adolescence and linkage between chronological age and adolescence. An example of such researchers is Preston-Whyte and Zondi (1989, 1991) who argue that childbirth confers on teenagers in urban African communities the valued status of motherhood, and is hence a potential pathway to adulthood (see later discussion in analysis section).

In this paper I highlight four issues concerning the dominant ‘adolescence as transitional stage’ construction in the South African literature on teenage pregnancy. The first is that as the adolescent is not an adult but also not a child (and yet simultaneously both), s/he acts as what Derrida calls an ‘undecidable’. Secondly, the transitional construction of adolescence is gendered. Thirdly, as a transitional stage, adolescence relies on the assumption of a particular type of gendered adulthood as the final endpoint of development. Lastly, the construction of adolescence as a transitional, but not adult, stage has effects in terms of power relations between experts, parents and adolescents.

## Theoretical backdrop

Derrida (1976, 1978) critiques ‘Western metaphysics’ as being structured in terms of dichotomies or polarities: truth versus error; man versus woman; being versus nothingness; alive versus dead. He notes that the oppositions created do not stand as independent and equal entities. ‘The second term in each pair is considered the negative, corrupt, undesirable version of the first, a fall away from it’ (Johnson, 1972: viii). The first term is given priority, creating a sense of being as presence, unity, identity and immediacy, with the second term always subordinated to it. Language is inherently unstable, but is used to create the illusion of being stable by producing binary oppositions which define each other. This stability depends on privileging the present term, while marginalising the absent one(s). Meaning is a function of presence (words which are written or spoken) and absence (the chain of suppressed signifiers upon which the meaning of the present is based). The present is *always already* inhabited by the absent, and hence is mediated and derivative. In this paper I shall indicate how ‘adolescence’ is inhabited, mediated, derived and given meaning by the dual absent traces of ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’, with ‘adulthood’ taking on the dominant opposition in the South African teenage pregnancy literature.

Derrida disrupts binary oppositions in two ways: through deconstruction and by invoking undecidables. The deconstructive aspect will be discussed further in the methodology section. Undecidables slip across both sides of an opposition but do not properly fit either. They undermine the very premise of the binarism by simultaneously including and excluding the premises of both sides of the opposition. Derrida describes undecidables thus: ‘It is the “between,” whether it names fusion or separation, that thus carries all the force of the operation’ (Derrida, 1981: 220) and ‘These “words” admit into their games both contradiction and noncontradiction (and the contradiction and noncontradiction *between* contradiction and noncontradiction’ (Derrida, 1981: 221, emphasis in the original). An example is the Greek term *pharmakon*, which, as a drug, simultaneously means remedy or poison, the cause of an illness or its cure. *Pharmakon* cannot be translated into an unambiguous term allowing the operation of dialectical reasoning. Instead it occupies (and fails to occupy) both sides of the dialectic, thereby threatening dialectical reasoning from within. Adolescence acts as such an undecidable. The adolescent is not child, not adult, but simultaneously both. Adolescence is, to a certain extent, decided through a discourse of ‘transition’ (see later discussion) – that is until a teenager disrupts the transitional nature of adolescence by conceiving a child.

Derrida (1981) stresses, however, that undecidability is determined by ‘some inexhaustible ambivalence of a word’. What is important is not the two contradictory layers of signification, but rather the *praxis* that simultaneously composes and decomposes the simultaneous contradiction and contradiction. This links Derrida’s work with Foucault’s interest in the power relations that allow for certain readings to become dominant. In Foucauldian terms power is viewed not as a possession which one group holds and another does not, nor as a commodity which can be appropriated. Rather, power is immanent to relations such as relations between researcher and subject, parent and adolescent, health care provider and patient. It is ‘exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations’ (Foucault, 1978: 94). Power is linked to knowledge through discourse. As such power is not merely repressive, but actually productive of knowledge (e.g. of the nature of adolescence). Thus, power is a ‘multiplicity of force relations’ (Foucault, 1978: 92) of which discourses and knowledge are elements. Part of the aim of this article is to analyse the power relations that allow for certain readings of the undecidable adolescent and disallow others, i.e. that attempt to decide the reproductive adolescent as a child rather than an adult.

## **Data and methodology**

Published and unpublished research and literature on teenage pregnancy in South Africa from 1970 to 1997 formed the data for this paper. This material was collected for a larger study on teenage pregnancy (Macleod 1999c) through (1) conducting searches on international and national bibliographic data archives, and (2) sending letters to heads of departments of relevant social science, education, and medical departments of all South African universities, and health- and education-related non-governmental organizations, requesting information concerning research conducted in the field of teenage pregnancy in their organizations. The result was a collection of 77 research reports, theses, articles and chapters, 41 of which are published.

In some respects the South African literature can be seen as a sub-section of the Anglophone discourse on teenage pregnancy and childbearing as, in the words of Burman, Kottler, Levett and Parker (1997: 6), ‘systems of invisible imperialism ... are played out in academic and intellectual life’. Many of the explanations of the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in South Africa are reflections of hypotheses generated in the United States and Britain. Some of the taken-for-granted assumptions (e.g. the construction of the perfect mother which underlies criticisms of adolescent parenting) are the same. The fact that the arguments created in this article could apply to literature elsewhere is a reflection of this. However, there are also points of divergence. The construction and maintenance of particular racialised boundaries in South Africa (African, Indian, white and coloured) differs to that in the United States and Britain. There is a focus on demographic population dynamics rather than welfare concerns. South African researchers, in contrast to most American and British writers, tend to use more socio-cultural (including African cultural and traditional forms and a breakdown of health services) rather than intra-personal explanations for the occurrence of teenage pregnancy, although psychologised discourse is pervasive (see Macleod 1999a, 1999b).

Most of the research analysed here was conducted prior to the first democratic elections in 1994 (given the turn around time in write-up and publication, research appearing in the 1995-1997 period would most likely have occurred before, during or soon after 1994). This was a time when racial (as well as gender and class) power relations were permeated by Apartheid ideology and practice. As expected, race appears as a robust signifier in the literature analysed (Macleod and Durrheim, in press). Furthermore, the importance of analysing this literature is summed in Burman et al's (1997) acknowledgement that pervasive notions of self, Other and legitimacy will saturate our ideas and behaviour (be it academic or professional) long after the dismantling of Apartheid.

The data (i.e. all the documents collected) were analysed using what I have termed deconstructive discourse analysis. What is analysed in this method is the discursive 'event' (Fairclough 1992), which is simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice and an instance of social practice. The discursive events in this instance are simultaneously the texts written on teenage sexuality and pregnancy, the discursive construction contained in that text, and the research practices engaged in to collect information and produce the text. This choice of discursive event is somewhat unusual as discourse analysis usually involves collecting and analysing text (whether written or transcribed from verbal data) from outside the sphere of scientific discourse. In this case, the inspecting eye of academic critique is turned back on the product of scientific endeavour.

The aim of my analysis was to deconstruct 'adolescence' by reading its claims to presence in terms of, firstly, its dependence on dominant absences (in this case 'adulthood') and, secondly, its undecidability. Derrida's concepts of '*différance*' and *sous rature* underlie the deconstructive process. '*Différance*' comes from the French verb '*différer*', which means both to differ and to defer. 'To differ' refers to the notion that all language exists as a system of differences, rather than as something essential or of intrinsic significance (e.g. 'adolescence' only has meaning in relation to 'adult' and 'child'; without these there is no meaning to adolescence). 'Deferral', on the other hand, describes the time lag or distance between the presence and the absence - 'whatever is consciously perceived (the present) may only be read in the past' (Sampson, 1989: 11). Thus, as indicated earlier, 'adolescence' can only be read in relation to the emergence of 'childhood' as a distinguishably different phase in a human life trajectory. Thus, whatever we perceive as the present is always already absent, different and deferred. This implies that the present and absent terms define, and interpenetrate each other. For example, scientific 'facts', which are analysed in this article, rely on the fall away of, *inter alia*, 'falsity', 'myth', 'fiction'. 'Facts' and 'falsehoods' operate as a system of difference, each 'falsehood' giving meaning to the corresponding 'fact' as a system of differentiation; they are read in historical relation to each other, with old 'facts' and 'falsehoods' giving form and meaning to the present ones. In *sous rature* (under erasure) a term is written, written again and crossed out: A and . This emphasises the simultaneous necessity and inadequacy of the term. Derrida attempts to discover the opposite or trace *within* the meaning of a single term. In other words, A is simultaneously A (e.g. adolescent) and not-A (e.g. not-adolescent – child or adult). Not-A is both added to A and replaces A.

Concretely, this translated into:

1. Reading and re-reading the texts (i.e. all 77 documents).
2. Chunking the material according to themes (the nature of adolescence, adolescent behaviour, adolescent sexuality, adolescent and expert and parent interactions). In this process the data were treated as one body (i.e. with no distinction between documents). In the thematic coding hundreds of sections of texts were collected together under each of the themes. In this way some of the differences between the documents used was lost; however, the formation of patterns across the documents was highlighted.
3. Applying Parker's (1992) seven basic criteria for identifying discourses (viz. that a discourse: is realised in text; is about objects; contains subjects; is a coherent system of meanings; refers to other discourses; reflects on its own way of speaking; and is historically located), and re-ordering thematic material accordingly.
4. Analysing the texts collected under each discourse utilising theoretical insights which draw on Derrida's deconstructive method and Foucault's analytics of power (for more in-depth discussion of this method see Macleod 1999c).

The selection of extracts for use in the write-up was based on their capturing the essence of the argument formulated in the analysis. In some respects this selection was arbitrary as others could equally well have illustrated the point. The data is presented in the usual narrative form of discourse analytic work.

### **Adolescence: undecidability**

Adolescence acts as a category of exclusion of both childhood and adulthood. The adolescent is neither child nor adult, but is, simultaneously, both. S/he contains and excludes the binary opposition. As such, s/he cannot be finally decided, slipping across the binarism in uncomfortable ways:

#### **Extract 1**

No more a child but not yet a woman, and now faced with a woman's role and responsibilities! (Gillis, 1990: 121).

#### **Extract 2**

Teenagers are no longer children and still have not yet reached adulthood (Mkhize, 1995: 66).

#### **Extract 3**

They have needs to be taken care of and to remain dependent, while also striving for autonomy and independence (Pond, 1987: 159).

#### **Extract 4**

Teenage pregnancy is essentially an obstruction in a girl's journey to adulthood, as she is physically on the road to adulthood while she is psychologically not adult yet (Brits, 1989: 202, translated from Afrikaans).

In Extract 1, the adolescent is defined by what she lacks – she no longer possesses the characteristics ascribed to children (presumably innocence, naturalness etc.), but she also has not reached the ultimate state of adulthood (which includes, it appears, taking on certain gendered roles and being responsible). Thus, the exclusionary aspect of the adolescent's undecidability (not child/not adult) is invoked here, as well as in Extract 2. In contrast, Extracts 3 and 4 utilise the inclusionary aspect. The adolescents described in these extracts simultaneously possess childhood characteristics

(dependence, needing care, psychological immaturity) and adult traits (autonomy and independence, physical maturity).

Adolescence is 'decided', to a certain degree, by portraying it as a normal stage of transition between childhood and adulthood. A discourse of 'transition' makes undecidability acceptable – it is to be expected that certain vestiges of the old will remain while the new is being established.

**Extract 5**

Considering the subjects are adolescents, these factors may be related to the fact that their dependence-independence conflicts ... are not yet resolved (Pond, 1987: 163).

**Extract 6**

There is a need to differentiate between young adolescents (less than 17 years) and older adolescents (17-19 years). The latter will be fully grown and may have had substantially more education than the former (Van Coeverden De Groot, 1991: 1379).

In Extract 5 we see how adolescence, as a transitional stage, allows for the resolution of the paradox of childishness (dependence) and adulthood (independence). Extract 6 intimates that older adolescents have almost completed their transition from childhood to adulthood.

Decidability, however, is only temporary, constantly threatening to slip back into undecidability. As Derrida (in Caputo, 1997) notes, undecidability is a 'ghost' that hovers around any attempt at decision. Undecidability can never be set aside, always inhabiting decision from within. For example, when a teenager becomes pregnant, her undecidability is brought into focus; she breaches the transitional nature of adolescence by, in the words of Lawson (1993: 105), 'pollut[ing] the category of *child* and becom[ing] a deviant *adult*' (emphasis in the original). The natural transition between childhood and adulthood that adolescence heralds has been subverted. Adult practices and functions (sexual interaction and reproduction) are displayed by a person who, owing to her age and developmental status, is not-yet-adult. If this person is not-yet-adult (as is stressed in the literature – see later discussion), then she must be a child, according to the adult/child binary opposition. But this she can also not be owing to her reproductive status. The pregnant teenager is thus adult, but not adult, child, but not child, an undecidable.

The pregnancy of an adolescent brings into visibility not only her transgression of the child/adult boundaries, her undecidability, but also her sexuality - a teenager who is pregnant clearly has had sex with a male at least once. The focus on adolescent sexuality further highlights the teenager's undecidability, as the female adolescent is positioned as simultaneously saturated with and devoid of sexual desire; she is knowledgeable about but also ignorant concerning sex:

**Extract 7**

The fact that 139 young teenagers were engaging in sexual activity without understanding the relationship between procreation, contraception and sexual intercourse should give parents, guardians and school authorities pause for thought (Boult & Cunningham, 1991: 110).

**Extract 8**



The emotional and physiological pressures experienced by teenagers who are discovering and exploring their sexuality are, of course, universal (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989: 60).

**Extract 9**

They [teenage women] feel confused, lonely and that no one understands them. At this stage they may become fair game to an attentive boyfriend who says he loves her (Oosthuizen, 1990: 46).

**Extract 10**

In their heterosexual relationships, most tend to be submissive, passive and unassertive (Pond, 1987: 162).

**Extract 11**

Peers and the mass media [a]re now the primary source of sexual knowledge. This information is seen as ‘erroneous and/or distorted’ (Parekh & De la Rey, 1997: 227).

The contradiction in terms of adolescent sexuality is evidenced in Extract 7, where teenagers are portrayed as simultaneously sexual (an adult function) and ignorant (i.e. child-like). This, it is stated, should concern responsible *adults* (parents, guardians and school authorities). In Extract 8 the ‘universal’ saturation of adolescence with the desire for sexual exploration is emphasised. Contrary to this, the female adolescent is depicted in Extracts 9 and 10 as devoid of sexual desire. They are the passive recipients of a male’s advances, submissive to the male’s sexual demands<sup>[11]</sup>. Extract 11 represents teenagers as simultaneously knowledgeable and ignorant of sex. Peers know about sex because they talk and ‘educate’ each other about it (something which children do not do, according to the tenets of childhood). However, their knowledge is deficient (a characteristic of children). The undecidability of adolescent sexuality is further illustrated by the simultaneous invocation and proscription of sexual interaction between teenagers. For example, in sexuality education courses, adolescents are ‘educated’ about sex, but simultaneously warned of its dangers. They are informed that sex is a natural urge, but at the same time apprised of the dire moral and social consequences of early sexual interactions. Thoughts about sex are simultaneously invited and refused.

## **Deciding adolescence: transition, experimentation and turmoil**

As indicated, adolescence is, to a certain extent, decided by depicting it as a period of transition. The ‘adolescence as transition’ discourse describes adolescence as a time of restlessness, experimentation, searching, testing the boundaries of existence, and turmoil:

**Extract 12**

[Adolescents] experience a developmental imperative of experimentation and rebellion (Nash, 1990: 309).

**Extract 13**

Normal adolescence is a time of emotional turmoil and rapid physical development that in itself necessitates additional nutritional and emotional support (Rockey, 1986: 16).

In Extracts 12 and 13 experimentation, turmoil and rebellion are normalised within a developmentalist framework – they represent a ‘developmental imperative’ (Extract 12) or are ‘normal’ (Extract 13).

However, a gendered incongruency arises. Fine and MacPherson (1994), in their work on adolescents' and women's bodies, stress the incompatibility of the image of the experimenting adolescent and that of femininity. The restless, searching experimenter is a masculinised construct, they posit. Attempts by girls to satisfy the tenets of this construct involve their 'displaying notably a lack of maturing but also a lack of femininity' (Fine & Macpherson, 1994: 220). Indeed the female adolescent as a passive recipient of external influences is fairly pervasive the South African literature on teenage pregnancy:

**Extract 14**

Many of these girls come from homes with no family structure and no values. They are exposed to the influence of the always present sex oriented advertisements in newspapers and magazines. Their friends are no example and pressure is subtly exerted on them to conform (De Villiers, 1985: 302, translated from Afrikaans).

Extract 10 presents female adolescents as being influenced by the structure and values of her family of origin, or by the media and her peers. The teenager herself emerges as lacking personal agency in the process (see also Extracts 9 and 10).

Despite this, and contrary to Fine & MacPherson's (1994) contention, the female adolescent does enter the domain of the masculinised 'experimenter' in the South African teenage pregnancy literature, but mostly obliquely so. In the following extract we see how the rhetoric of adolescent experimentation and turmoil is given a feminised bent:

**Extract 15**

Erikson believes that by the time a girl reaches puberty she has feelings of uncertainty about what she previously learned. She ... finds it difficult to accept herself and the obvious physical bodily changes which occur. ... As a result she seeks clarification of who she is and thus, according to Erikson, she reflects a blunt ego image onto the male partner. The feedback which she gets is of prime importance to the clarification of who she is as a sexual being (Oosthuizen, 1990: 45).

The female enters the domain of the experimenter in this extract but is 'uncertain' rather than 'restless' or 'searching'; she seeks 'clarification' concerning her deficient ego state rather than 'experimenting' with ways of being. Instead of resolving the conflict through exploration of her relationship with the environment, she does so as the passive recipient of information from a male.

## **The absent trace: adulthood**

Adolescence, as an undecidability, acts as a category of exclusion. The teenager is not an adult, but neither is she a child. 'Adult' and 'child' both act as absent traces to 'adolescence'. The chief opposition utilised in the teenage pregnancy literature, however, is to the 'adult'. In conceiving, the teenager displays 'adult' functions (reproduction) and disrupts the 'transitional' nature of adolescence. In order to restore the balance, in an effort to re-decide the undecidable, the adolescent's lack of adult capacity is emphasised in the scientific literature in South Africa (as will be

noted in the extracts to follow). Thus, adulthood occupies, defines and interpenetrates adolescence as an absent trace to a greater extent in this instance than does childhood.

This emphasis on adolescents' lack of adult capacity relies on certain basic assumptions concerning the nature of adulthood:

**Extract 16**

The teenagers in the sample were woefully ignorant of the costs of infant care (Boult & Cunningham, 1992a: 163).

**Extract 17**

Many factors explain these behavioural patterns [unprotected sex], such as ... the adolescent's tendency not to plan ahead (Preston-Whyte, 1991: 10).

**Extract 18**

It seemed that students were ambivalent about what they wanted, as well as unsure about how to go about obtaining what they wanted (Craig & Richter-Strydom, 1983: 244).

**Extract 19**

The baby is conceptualised as an object and not as a living being ... they do not think of themselves as mothers (Gillis, 1990: 121).

**Extract 20**

Respondents affirmed their use of contraception in the future. Such affirmation is not reassuring (Boult & Cunningham, 1992b: 307).

**Extract 21**

Self acceptance is extremely important, as a result of the connection it has with the level of maturity (Fouché, 1992: 141, translated from Afrikaans)

In these extracts teenagers are depicted as lacking knowledge (Extract 16), the ability to plan ahead (Extract 17), decision-making competence (Extract 18), conceptualisation skills (Extract 19), the ability to be realistic (Extract 19), responsibility (Extract 20), and emotional maturity (Extract 21). This implies that the adult, who acts as the absent trace – as the person whom the adolescent is not – is knowledgeable, fully self-aware, capable of 'mature' decision-making, able to reason in a linear, logical fashion, takes responsibility for her individual actions, and is reliable. This decontextualised being is given the status of the ideal, the self-fulfilling person, the final result of development. But, in the words of Sampson (1990: 117), 'When we deconstruct the prevailing conception of personhood, its political side is revealed. The dominant western understanding of personhood is based in great measure on a liberal individualist framework'. Closer examination of this ideal adult thus indicates that s/he is, to a large extent, coterminous with the characteristics ascribed to white, middle-class males living in liberal democratic environments (Sampson, 1990).

A contradiction appears here, however. On the one hand, the absent adult is premised on the ideal liberal, white, middle-class male. On the other hand, the achievement of adulthood is differentiated along gender lines. Parenthood and marriage are equated with the achievement of female adulthood. For example, in the following quotes, there is an attempt to 'understand' teenage pregnancy in South Africa and to put it into context by emphasising how teenagers may see becoming a mother as a pathway to the desired status of adulthood:

**Extract 22**

Childbirth confers on girls the valued status of motherhood and it may be the pathway to adulthood in cases where marriage is delayed by lack of money, suitable accommodation or the necessity of amassing bridewealth. By having a child a girl realises an important aspect of her femininity (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1991: 139).

### **Extract 23**

So strong is the value placed on fertility that, as we have seen, even where marriage does not occur, childbirth can and does stand on its own. Indeed having children is seen as the necessary foundation of successful womanhood and even a professional career cannot compensate for not having children (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989: 65).

Two interesting features emerge in these extracts. The first is the slippage between adulthood and femininity (Extract 22 associates the pathway to adulthood with the realisation of *femininity*, while Extract 23 depicts having a child as contributing to the successful accomplishment of *womanhood*). The underlying, unexamined assumption is that the type of adulthood achieved by women is different from that achieved by men. It is strongly gendered around the conception and bearing of children. The second feature is the association of marriage with adulthood. It is implied that where gaining adulthood through marriage is delayed, the girl may attain this status through bearing a child. Adulthood status is thus depicted as being achieved by women through a relationship with another, either a man or a child, but not through the masculinised path of career building (Extract 23). The gendering of the absent adult has implications in terms of the power relations invoked between expert and adolescent. This is further explored in the following section.

## **The construction of adolescence and power relations**

Using a Foucauldian argument, Burman (1997: 140) posits that ‘the project of development becomes a tautology, self-serving and self-maintaining: if the more developed possess what the less developed lack, then not only do those in power define what development is, they also obscure the exercise of such power within the naturalizing language of development’. In this section I analyse the power relations implicit in the ‘adolescence as transition’ discourse. As noted, the dominant category from which adolescents are excluded in the South African literature on teenage pregnancy is the ‘adult’. This depiction of adolescents (in particular deviant adolescents) as immature and dependent has powerful effects. It invokes the mature, independent adult in contrast – the adult who, implicitly, must take responsibility for the (less developed) adolescent. Take, for example, the cognitive traits assumed to be characteristic of the fully functioning adult. The mature person, in contrast to the adolescents of Extract 16 to 19, is fully informed, able to plan ahead and make decisions, and able to conceptualise about matters in a realistic way.

The ‘adult’, however, is open to deconstruction. S/he relies on the ‘child’ and, to a certain extent, the ‘adolescent’ for meaning. The historical construction of the ‘child’ has been referred to earlier. Clearly, there are implications of this line of thought not only for the ‘adolescent’, but also the ‘adult’. Furthermore the supposed defining characteristics of the adult are open to question. Take, for example, the cognitive traits listed above (planning ahead, conceptualisation, decision-making etc.). At first glance these characteristics seem reasonable (I have chosen this word advisedly).

They appear as cognitive traits that have universal and timeless utility. It is this very appearance that invests those defined as possessing these characteristics with power. The informed, logical decision-maker is able to render those lacking these characteristics as inferior, as lacking. Walkerdine (1989: 43), in talking of the possession of mathematical skill and knowledge (supposedly one of the highest forms of rational reasoning) leaves, however, a question mark: 'But what if it is all a fantasy, a very powerful fantasy of control over time and space?'. This question opens up the space for a problematisation of the absolutism assumed in a cognitive approach that renders the universe objectively knowable, as well as of the adult who possesses these skills that the adolescent (and others) do not. It cleaves open the power relation implicit in the definition of the adult as developed and cognitively mature and adolescent as developing and cognitively immature.

Not all adults are equal in the developed versus less developed power relations, however:

**Extract 24**

It appears on an extra-personal level that the receipt of relevant information is an important need. This need is not always expressed by the adolescent, and must be spontaneously provided by the medical personnel (Fouché, 1992: 143).

**Extract 25**

Mothers clam up about sex long before their daughters reach adolescence. In this way, sex is turned into a veritable Pandora's box (Mfono, 1990: 6).

**Extract 26**

Many of these girls come from homes with no family structure and no values (De Villiers, 1985: 302).

The expert, in the form of the educator, the health service provider, and the researcher, as well as the reader of the text, are implicitly positioned as the ideal adult. This implies, for example, that they are knowledgeable and capable of fulfilling the needs of the developing adolescent (Extract 24). Parents, in contrast, fall short of the ideal. For example, they lack of maturity concerning sexuality education (Extract 25) and they are unable to provide 'structure' and 'values' (Extract 26). These contrasting portrayals legitimate the professionalisation of adolescent sexuality and reproduction. The task of preventing and remedying sexual and reproductive difficulties is wrested from parents and becomes the domain of the expert. The consequences of a lack of such expertise are depicted as severe:

**Extract 27**

An unwanted pregnancy at this stage of a child's development is an overwhelming burden which, *unless properly handled*, may result in permanent personality damage and disastrous long-term consequences for the rest of life (Rockey, 1986: 16, my emphasis).

While this puts the (developed) expert in a relatively powerful position vis-a-vis the (partially developed) parent and the (less developed) adolescent, a paradox arises in that parents and adolescents (in the form of 'peers') are frequently co-opted in the surveillance and overseeing of adolescents and their sexuality:

**Extract 28**

Throughout this paper ... it has been stressed that parents are the most important sex educators of their children (Oosthuizen, 1990: 48).

**Extract 29**

Peer influence has the potential of being transformed into positive reinforcement of behaviour (Schoeman, 1990: 17).

Thus, while peer and parental influence is allowed free rein, it is negative (Extracts 11, 14, 25 and 26), but once parents and peers come under the overseeing authority of the expert (e.g. in parental training or peer counselling programmes), it (parental and peer influence) is positive (Extracts 28 and 29).

The professionalisation of adolescent sexuality and reproduction allows the developed (expert) to define the characteristics of the less developed and to explain deviant behaviour through the developmentalist framework:

**Extract 30**

Kohlberg has found that in the early teens, girls are at what he calls level 3 of moral development. At this stage the girl obeys rules, seeks approval, and conforms to her peers. This may put her at risk of possible pregnancy. If she progresses to stage 4 she becomes dutiful [sic] and respects authority. traditionally [sic] the male is seen as sexually dominant over the female, so this stage may also be risky. Mickle (1985) found that 81% of 13-14 year olds and 31% of 16-18 years [sic] are at level 3, where approval is sought and conforming to the group is important (Oosthuizen, 1990: 45).

**Extract 31**

This apparent 'ignorance' [of reproductive issues] accords well with the nature of the cognitive abilities of adolescents. Although adolescents are supposedly already able to reason abstractly, McArney and Hendee (1989) indicate that ability in this thought form is seldom completely developed in adolescence, and that it often develops only in adulthood (Fouché, 1992: 92).

**Extract 32**

Growing teenagers, unlike their older counterparts, do not utilize their body fat for foetal growth, but use it for their own physical development, resulting in lower birth weights for their infants (Boult and Cunningham, 1993: 48).

These extracts illustrate how, through medicalised and psychologised discourses, the teenager's developmental status is used, firstly, to explain her propensity to become pregnant and, secondly, to render her incapable of motherhood. The teenage woman is clearly put into a double-bind situation in Extracts 30 and 31. She is subject to a developmental blueprint which sees her progressing through various invariant stages of moral and cognitive development. Yet it is this very process which renders her vulnerable – either to external influences (peer pressure and male authority) or to ignorance. This, in turn, puts her at risk for the 'unnatural' occurrence of teenage pregnancy. Having conceived, the teenager's developmental stage is then used to pathologise her ability to mother. In Extract 32, for example, the authors argue that the teenager's physical developmental blueprint is detrimental to the infant, as she utilises her body fat for her own rather than her baby's physical growth.

Finally, the gendered nature of the 'adolescence as transition' discourse and of the ideal adult who represents the endpoint of adolescent development adds a further dimension to the expert/adolescent power relations. The expert implicitly takes on the aspect of the decontextualised, rational, masculinised adult whose task it is to ensure that the female adolescent fulfills the tasks demanded of her in her transitional stage.

These include displaying the characteristics of feminised adolescent exploration and working towards and desiring the qualities of feminised adulthood.

## **Conclusion**

In the literature on teenage pregnancy, the terms 'teenager' and 'adolescent' are, in Derridian terms, the presence. They are given priority, creating the impression of a stability and unity of meaning. The 'teenager' is credited with identity and immediacy through the suppression of the absent traces, the marginalised terms which inhabit and give meaning to the terms 'adolescent' and 'teenager'. The aim of this paper has been to de-stabilise these oppositions by indicating that: (1) adolescence has a history which is linked to the invention of childhood (Kessen, 1979); (2) adolescence relies on the dual absent traces of 'childhood' and 'adulthood', with 'adulthood' taking on the dominant position in the South African teenage pregnancy literature; (3) adolescence acts as an undecidable which can only be partially decided by the 'adolescence as transition' discourse.

A further aim of this paper has been to link the effects of the binary opposition contained in the language concerning adolescent development and teenage pregnancy to relations of power. The adult/adolescent opposition legitimates the intervention of the mature, responsible, adult expert as the adolescent, as a 'not-yet-adult' person, as a person in transition, requires assistance in the prevention of pregnancy as well as the remediation of the negatives effects of early childbearing. Gendered power relations are re-produced through the gendered rendition of the transitional nature of adolescence and the normal adult resulting from 'normal' adolescent development.

Social sciences have achieved a privileged knowledge position by claiming to reveal the truth about ourselves through rationality and efficacious method. While these sciences claim an externality to the workings of power, they are actually part of the deployment of power (Foucault 1970). Various modernist or structuralist assumptions within mainstream psychology (viz. a basic, knowable subject exists; there are universal psychological processes that can be discovered; research is progressive; correct method provides a guarantee of truth) underlie its 'imprisoning effects' (Gergen, 1992: 23). The South African literature on teenage pregnancy assures us that: (1) a basic, knowable adolescent exists; (2) rationality and efficacious method will enable us to discover the psychological, social, cultural, physiological and medical processes involved in adolescent development and reproduction; (3) the knowledge acquired in this manner may be used in techniques of prevention and reform to benefit society. The purpose of this paper is to deconstruct the first of these, thereby putting the second two into doubt.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Prof Kevin Durrheim for his willingness to comment on my work. I also acknowledge the financial contribution of the Johan Jacobs Foundation to the larger research project of which this paper forms a component.

## References

- Aries, P. (1962) *Centuries of childhood*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Boult, B. E. (1992) 'Children having children: black adolescent multiparas', *Salus* 14: 16, 17, 23.
- Boult, B.E. and P.W. Cunningham (1991) *Black teenage pregnancy in Port Elizabeth*. Occasional Paper No. 26, Institute for Planning Research, University of Port Elizabeth.
- Boult, B.E. and P.W. Cunningham (1992a) 'Black teenage pregnancy: a socio-medical approach', *Medicine and Law* 11: 159-165.
- Boult, B.E. and P.W. Cunningham (1992b) 'Black teenage pregnancy: an African perspective', *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 3: 303-309.
- Boult, B.E. and P.W. Cunningham (1993) *Some aspects of obstetrics in Black teenage pregnancies: A comparative study of three age groups*. Research paper C28, University of Port Elizabeth.
- Burman, E. (1994) *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Burman, E. (1997) 'Developmental psychology and its discontents', in D. Fox and I. Prilleltensky (eds) *Critical psychology: an introduction*, pp. 134-149. London: Sage.
- Brits, W.J. (1989) *Die ontoereikende verwerkliking van sosio-pedagogiese essensies as aanleiding tot tienerswangerskap*. Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Pretoria.
- Caputo, J.D. (1997) *Deconstruction in a nutshell: a conversation with Jacques Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Craig, A.P. and L.M. Richter-Stydom (1983a) 'Unplanned Pregnancies among urban Zulu school children: a summary of the salient results from a preliminary investigation', *The Journal of Social Psychology* 121: 239-246.
- Dawes, A. and Donald, D. (1994) 'Understanding the psychological consequences of adversity', in A. Dawes and D. Donald (eds) *Childhood and adversity: psychological perspectives from South African research*, pp. 1-27. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Derrida, J. (1976) *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.



- Derrida, J. (1978) *Writing and difference*. London & Henly: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Derrida, J. (1981). *Dissemination*. London: Athlone Press.
- De Villiers, V.P. (1985) 'Tienerjarige swangerskap in die Paarl-hospitaal', *South African Medical Journal* 67: 301-302.
- De Villiers, V.P. (1991) 'Sekonderrig onder tieners in die Paarl', *South African Medical Journal* 80: 231-232.
- Fairclough, N. (1992) *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fine, M. and P. Macpherson (1994) 'Over dinner: feminism and adolescent female bodies', in H.L. Radtke and H.J. Stam (eds) *Power/gender: social relations in theory and practice*, pp. 219-246. London: Sage.
- Foucault, M. (1970) *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Foucault, M. (1978) *The history of sexuality: Vol I*. London: Penguin.
- Fouché, M. (1992) *Die sielkundige behoeftes van swanger adolessente te Pelonomi Hospitaal*. Unpublished Masters thesis, University of the Free State.
- Gergen, K.J. (1992) 'Towards postmodern psychology', in S. Kvale (ed.) *Psychology and postmodernism*, pp. 17-30. London: Sage.
- Gillis, L.S. (1990) 'Teenage pregnancy: letter to the Editor', *South African Medical Journal* 77: 121.
- Harari, S.E. and M.A. Vinovskis (1993) 'Adolescent sexuality, pregnancy, and childbearing in the past', in A. Lawson and D.L. Rhode (eds) *The politics of pregnancy: adolescent sexuality and public policy*, pp. 23-45. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Johnson, B. (1972) 'Translator's introduction', in J. Derrida, *Dissemination*. London: Athlone Press.
- Kessen, W. (1979) 'The American child and other cultural inventions', *American Psychologist*, 34: 815-820.
- Lawson, A. (1993) 'Multiple fractures: the cultural construction of teenage sexuality and pregnancy', in A. Lawson and D.L. Rhode (eds), *The politics of pregnancy: adolescent sexuality and public policy*, pp. 101-125. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Macleod, C. (1999a) 'Teenage pregnancy and its "negative" consequences: review of South African research – Part 1', *South African Journal of Psychology*, 29(1): 1-7.

- Macleod, C. (1999b) 'The "causes" of teenage pregnancy: review of South African research – part 2', *South African Journal of Psychology*, 29(1): 8-16.
- Macleod, C. (1999c) *The governmentality of teenage pregnancy: scientific literature and professional practice in South Africa*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Natal.
- Macleod, C. and K. Durrheim (in press) Racializing teenage pregnancy: 'culture' and 'tradition' in the South African literature. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.
- Mfono, Z. (1990) 'Parents and teenage pregnancy', *Salus* 13: 6-8.
- Mkhize, Z.M. (1995) *Social needs of teenage mothers in the rural communities of Ongoye and Enseleni districts*. Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Zululand.
- Nash, E.S. (1990) 'Teenage pregnancy – need a child bear a child?' *South African Outlook* 120: 307-312.
- Oosthuizen, V. (1990) 'The social problem of teenage pregnancy - a review', *Southern African Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 2: 44-49.
- Parker, I. (1992) *Discourse dynamics: critical analysis for social and individual psychology*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Parekh, A. and C. de la Rey (1997) 'Intragroup accounts of teenage motherhood: a community-based psychological perspective', *South African Journal of Psychology* 27: 223-229.
- Pond, T.S. (1987) *A psychodynamic approach to the adolescent unmarried mother*. Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Pretoria.
- Preston-Whyte, E. (1991) *Teenage pregnancy in selected coloured and black communities*. Unpublished report, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria.
- Preston-Whyte, E. and M. Zondi (1989) 'To control their own reproduction: The agenda of black teenage mothers in Durban', *Agenda* 4: 47-68.
- Preston-Whyte, E. and M. Zondi (1991) 'Adolescent sexuality and its implications for teenage pregnancy and AIDS', *South African Journal of Continuing Medical Education* 9: 1389-1394.
- Rockey, T. (1986) 'Teenage pregnancy', *Nursing RSA* 1: 16-17.
- Sampson, E.E. (1989) 'The deconstruction of the self', in J. Shotter and K. Gergen (eds) *Texts of identity*, pp. 1-19. London: Sage.
- Sampson, E.E. (1990) 'Social psychology and social control', in I. Parker and J. Shotter (eds) *Deconstructing social psychology*, pp. 117-126. London: Routledge

Schoemen, M.N. (1990) 'Sexuality education among black South African teenagers: what can reasonably be expected?' *Curationis* 13: 13-18.

Smart, C. (1996) 'Deconstructing motherhood', in E.B. Silva (ed) *Good enough mothering: Feminist perspectives on lone motherhood*, pp. 37-57. London: Routledge.

Van Coeverden de Groot, H.A. & Greathead, E.E. (1987) 'The Cape Town teenage clinic', *South African Medical Journal* 71: 434-436.

Vinovskis, M.A. (1988) *An 'epidemic' of adolescent pregnancy: some historical and policy considerations*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Walkerdine, V. (1989) *Counting girls out*. London: Virago Press.

- 
- [1]. This portrayal corresponds with Hollway's (1984, 1989) 'male sex drive' discourse in which men are depicted as having biological sexual impulses and drives that need to be satisfied. The female equivalent of this biological discourse is fecundity. Note the following extracts:

**Extract i**

It is expected that boys will seek sexual relationships with girls and the boy who does not do so is ridiculed (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1992, p. 235).

**Extract ii**

Longing to have a boyfriend, they must sleep with him, and having done so, they need to prove their fertility by having a baby (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1991, p. 1392).