



## Contemporary young motherhood: Experiences of hostility

Journal:	<i>Journal of Children's Services</i>
Manuscript ID	JCS-07-2016-0014.R3
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Young Women, Young Mothers, Hostility, Inferiorisation, stereotyping, labelling

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### Abstract

**Purpose** - The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the hostility many young women who are also mothers experience within their everyday lives.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper will draw on qualitative research, incorporating a narrative approach, to illustrate the hostility many young mothers experience on a daily basis. The research design included a focus group, semi-structure interviews and participant observations.

**Findings** - The paper reports the findings of a study that explored the experiences of young women who are also mothers. The author presents the findings that indicate that many young women, who are also young mothers, experience hostile reactions and interactions as part of their everyday lives.

**Research limitations / implications** – the small sample size means that this study cannot be generalised, but it does contribute to the growing body of qualitative evidence in relation to young mothers.

**Practical implications** – The findings suggest that there needs to be more recognition and acknowledgement of the hostility young women experience. Such hostility could have deleterious consequences on the young women, their parenting ability and also on the children.

**Originality / value** – This paper documents the experiences of young women who are also mothers and how they experience hostility as a daily occurrence. The hostility ranged from verbal to non-verbal and how they felt they were being treated, inferences about their sexuality to stereotyping.

**Keywords** – young women, young mothers, hostility, stereotyping, labelling, inferiorisation

**Paper type** – Research paper

## Contemporary young motherhood: Experiences of hostility

### Introduction

This paper explores the hostility that many young women, aged between 15 and 19, who are also mothers, experience on a daily basis. The paper will begin by exploring the social construction of young motherhood and placing contemporary young motherhood into context. This will be followed by highlighting the findings from a study of young women who are also young mothers and how they endured derogatory verbal and non-verbal interactions in everyday places and spaces of daily life.

The paper focuses on one of the findings from the study undertaken in the north of England. The study focused on capturing young women's voices, their narratives and everyday experiences. This paper represents the voices of young mothers who are often inaccurately represented in the media, due to the political rhetoric. The focus is on their experiences of hostility. It will be argued that the hostility arises from the social construction and portrayal of young motherhood, but may also have historical legacies such as the unwed mother and normative femininity, which contributes to the devaluation and inferiorisation of young mothers. The paper concludes that such stigmatisation, discrimination and prejudice would not be tolerated in other sectors of society.

### Social construction of young motherhood

It was during the 1980s and 1990s that a theoretical and political debate ensued in relation to Murray's (1990) underclass thesis. The 'underclass' refers predominately to young men who are living in poverty, are welfare dependent and long-term unemployed. They have an unwillingness to work, engage in criminal activity and have illegitimate children (Murray 1990). It would appear that the 'underclass' is an overarching term capturing different meanings depending upon the context in which it is being used. Daguerra (2006) suggests that 'there is clearly an overlap between the underclass, the illegitimacy and teenage pregnancy debates' (p. 70). The overlap is based on the generally held assumptions that teenage mothers are welfare dependent, unsuitable parents and have children who exhibit anti-social behaviour: 'the pervasiveness of stereotyping practices is such that young childbearing women are routinely scripted to become welfare dependent, inadequate mothers of unruly children who, in turn are destined to repeat the cycle' (Stapleton 2010, p. 10). However, there is little evidence to suggest that all young mothers are welfare dependent throughout their lifecourse trajectory.

As the underclass debate diminished a new phenomenon emerged in the UK. This was the introduction of the term 'Chav'. The chav, an acronym for "Council Housed

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2  
3 And Violent,” “Council Housed And Vile,” and “Council Housed Associated Vermin” is  
4 usually associated with economic status and single young motherhood (Tyler 2008,  
5 p. 20). The typical characteristics of the female chav were frequently portrayed in the  
6 UK through the television programme ‘Little Britain’ and the character of ‘Vicki  
7 Pollard’ a young single mother. According to Hayward and Yar (2006) the underclass  
8 and the Chav are interconnected, but with the significant difference being that the  
9 underclass fails to engage in employment whereas the Chav is excluded from  
10 consumption. Consumption referring to appropriate societal norms and expectations,  
11 however for the Chav ‘they consume in ways deemed ‘vulgar’ (ibid p. 14). The Chav  
12 is associated with working class women, familial disorder and dysfunction, fecund  
13 and excessive femininities (Skeggs 2005). Teenage motherhood is often associated  
14 with Chavs.  
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19 Nevertheless, the underclass thesis and Chav discourse fails to appreciate that  
20 many young girls are socialised to become mothers through intergenerational  
21 experiences: ‘processes of gender differentiation and identity construction begin  
22 within families’ (Morrow 2006, p. 94) and communities (Cater and Coleman 2006;  
23 Anwar and Stanistreet 2014; MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Based on their research  
24 with African Australian teenage mothers, Watts et al. (2015) argue that ‘race, age,  
25 gender, migration experience, the family environment, socioeconomic status,  
26 educational background, and social networks prior to pregnancy contributed to a  
27 complex web of intersecting experiences that then shape teen pregnancy and early  
28 motherhood’ (p. 8). A further contributing factor is the portrayal of femininity and  
29 female sexuality in children’s literature and girls’ magazines and through film and  
30 television where the focus is on heterosexual relationships (McRobbie 2000, Tinkler  
31 1995). Such socialisation, experiences and portrayals have a huge impact on girls  
32 and young women with regards to expectations of normative femininity.  
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38 The Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, introduced by the Labour Government (1997–  
39 2010), has ended, however, the political agenda in relation to teenage motherhood  
40 continues with the present Government through the Public Health initiatives, the  
41 reduction of child poverty and early intervention via parenting classes (Rudoe 2014).  
42 Although not identified as a ‘problem’ it could be argued that there is the implicit  
43 notion that young mothers need to be monitored in relation to public health and child  
44 poverty outcomes. The Teenage Pregnancy Strategy was criticised from a feminist  
45 perspective because it was seen to remove the freedom of reproductive choice and  
46 sexual freedom (Hoggart 2003). The historical context of teenage pregnancy has its  
47 origins in America during the mid-1960s middle-class, single pregnant teenagers  
48 were secretly sent to relatives where they would either have their child or an abortion  
49 thus, ‘the new phrase ‘teenage pregnancy’ went together with coming out ... In the  
50 early days it was a middle class affair’ (Hacking 2002, p. 425). This is in contrast to  
51 contemporary society where the term ‘teenage pregnancy’ is generally associated  
52 with the traditional working classes and poverty (ibid).  
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## Contemporary young motherhood

The tendency to pathologise and problematise teenage mothers is well documented in the United Kingdom (Arai 2009; Brown et al. 2011; Duncan et al. 2010) and internationally (Easterbrooks et al. 2011; Gyesaw and Ankomah 2013; Hunt et al. 2011; Watts et al. 2015). Contemporary young motherhood is generally identified as 'teenage pregnancy', and 'teenage mothers' and is depicted as a 'health problem' (Clift-Mathews 2010) and 'social problem' (Department for Children, Schools and Families and Department of Health 2010; Social Exclusion Unit 1999). They are represented as a 'risk' to society and to themselves (McDermott and Graham 2005). However, there have been a number of significant challenges to this dominant narrative (Arai 2009; Duncan 2007; Duncan et al. 2010; Lawlor and Shaw 2002). The 'problematization' discourse focuses on teenage pregnancy and teenage motherhood; however, it does not recognise that this is only part of the young women's identities. These young women are situated within multiple-identities, many of which are complex and intertwined within contemporary family structures and some may have experienced the care system. The problematisation thesis focuses upon, and emphasises, the social determinants of the young women such as socio-economic status and education in addition to intersectional factors, for example their age, class and ethnicity. However, there is little consideration given to the young women themselves other than the notion that they lack formal educational qualifications, are from and likely to remain, single parent families and whose children exhibit anti-social behaviour. Nonetheless, these young women are experiencing and navigating life as young women while at the same time developing their identity that incorporates motherhood.

Despite the young women's newly acquired status as mothers, they are problematised and vilified because of choosing a different path from their middle class peers (Wilson and Huntington 2005). They are regarded as being outside the prevailing cultural norms of motherhood and therefore, considered to be 'unsuitable mothers' (McDermott and Graham 2005, p. 70). McDermott and Graham (2005) identify several attributes associated with young motherhood including welfare dependency and an increased risk of poverty in addition to being constructed as a "risk" within society and a 'risk' to society ... because of their age and class' (p.60). Stereotypically, young motherhood is associated with young women from working class families. The notion of risk is further escalated by Frances (2010) who reports that if teenage pregnancy does not remain a prioritisation for central and local government it will become a 'major risk' (p. 3).

In contrast, the notion of risk is also illustrated by Macvarish (2010) however this is the risk to the young mothers in relation to the construction of young motherhood as a problem. Such risks consist of the government's rhetoric and policies, professional's discourse and individual's mannerisms and exchanges all of which promote the problematisation and negativity so often associated with young

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3 motherhood and for many young mothers resulting in hostility towards them and  
4 stigmatisation (Arai 2009, Duncan 2007, Yardley 2008). For example, Arai (2009)  
5 identified that 'nearly all the women said they had experienced hostility towards  
6 them' (p. 177).  
7

## 8 9 **Research design**

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11 The study was undertaken in a city and two towns in northern England and aimed to  
12 explore the experiences of young women who were aged between 15 and 19 years  
13 and were also mothers. The city and towns where the research was conducted have  
14 experienced, and continue to undergo, significant social and economic changes  
15 following the decline of heavy industry. They have high unemployment rates, areas  
16 of disadvantage and deprivation and conception rates for the under twenties are  
17 above the national average for England however the figures are declining (Potter-  
18 Collins and Beaumont 2012).  
19

20  
21 A qualitative research study was undertaken using a narrative approach (Andrews et  
22 al. 2013). As described by Riessman and Quinney (2005) 'narrative inquiry in the  
23 human sciences is a 20<sup>th</sup> century development; the field has 'realist', 'postmodern'  
24 and constructionist strands (p. 393). Purposive sampling (Singleton and Straits 2005)  
25 was used and participants accessed through their attendance at:  
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- 29
- 30 ▪ four support projects;
- 31 ▪ three hostels;
- 32 ▪ one Education Centre.  
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34  
35 Access to various research sites was negotiated with project managers. All of the  
36 projects, hostels, and the Education Centre provided support and education related  
37 opportunities to young women who were pregnant or young mothers who lived in the  
38 city and towns irrespective of socio-economic background. Meetings with managers  
39 provided the opportunity to discuss the research and subsequently meet other staff  
40 members. These meetings were followed by meeting the young women at each of  
41 the sites and discussing the purpose of the research. Participation was voluntary and  
42 based on informed consent. In the interests of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used  
43 throughout the paper. All of the young women were between 15 and 19 years of age.  
44 Each participant was provided with an information sheet. Ethical approval was  
45 gained from the University Research Ethics Committee.  
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49  
50 A total of fifty-six young women participated in the study including:  
51

- 52 ▪ twelve young women who were pregnant;
- 53 ▪ forty-two young women who were mothers;
- 54 ▪ two young mothers who were pregnant with their second child.  
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3 At the Education Centre there were:

- 4
- 5       ▪ twelve participant observation sessions - these sessions were conducted at the
- 6       Education Centre over the lunchtime period and were 45 minutes in duration;
- 7       ▪ six semi-structured interviews;
- 8       ▪ one focus group (one hour duration) - six participants attended.
- 9

10  
11 Participant observations were also undertaken at:

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- 13
- 14       ▪ one mother and toddler session – support project;
- 15       ▪ one activity session – support project;
- 16       ▪ three participation observation sessions – one hostel.
- 17

18  
19 Semi-structured interviews were also undertaken at:

- 20
- 21       ▪ two semi-structured interviews;
- 22       ▪ one semi-structured interview – support project;
- 23       ▪ two semi-structured interviews – support project;
- 24       ▪ three semi-structured interviews – support project;
- 25       ▪ three semi-structured interviews – one hostel;
- 26       ▪ one semi-structured interview – one hostel;
- 27
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30 In total:

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- 32
- 33       ▪ one focus group was conducted.
- 34       ▪ thirty-six hours of participant observations were carried out. Written recordings
- 35       were made during observations and afterwards. This allowed for data to be
- 36       gathered across a range of dimensions.
- 37       ▪ eighteen semi-structured interviews were carried out.
- 38
- 39

40 The interviews and focus group were audio recorded. These recordings were  
41 transcribed verbatim by the researcher. A thematic analysis of the narratives and  
42 fieldnotes was conducted manually and through a narrative network analysis  
43 (Attride-Stirling 2001). Once the interviews were transcribed two copies were made  
44 so that one could be cut into 'chunks' of text. The researcher then began collating  
45 the different chunks which formed the categories as they emerged from the process.  
46 These categories were continually re-calibrated as further transcriptions were  
47 completed. The fieldnotes were analysed using a similar process. Both were then  
48 compared until it was possible to identify overarching themes and sub-categories.  
49 The young women's narratives were rich in descriptive detail and have been retained  
50 within this paper which draws directly on the words and terminology used by them to  
51 describe their experiences.  
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## Hostility towards young mothers

The data collection methods enabled the researcher to gather data from a variety of sources that provided rich narrative accounts about the hostility the young women were subjected to on a daily basis. They gave graphic accounts of being shouted at, sworn at, and how name calling was a frequent occurrence. The young women spoke of the language used, the manner in which it was conveyed along with the name calling which was defamatory, disapproving and distressing. The hostility usually began during pregnancy and continued following the birth of the child. It is important to note that some of the following accounts are substantial as these situate the young women's experiences into the context of daily life, while at the same time illuminating the emotionality attached to the experiences. These narratives demonstrate how the hostility had previously, or continued to permeate all aspects of the young women's lives.

### *Being treated funny*

The young women shared their experiences of health appointments, being in hospital and particularly the way professionals worked with them. They discussed how some midwives were 'funny' with them. Through explorative dialogue it was established that 'funny' meant they felt they were treated with disrespect and in a patronising manner. The lack of, or inappropriate, discourse in addition to not being listened to and ignored were the most significant factors reported. The young women's experiences included how midwives would talk to their parent(s) and/or their parent's partner as if they were not there. The young women felt that they had become invisible. Louise's (16 year old) account illustrates how she felt:

We get treated like crap, so unfairly.

Molly (16 years of age) observed that she was:

Treated like a two year old when giving birth.

Louise and Molly's assertions were echoed by many of the young women who described similar sentiments and had comparable experiences from health and social care professionals.

When sharing their experiences of non-verbal and verbal actions and interactions the young women described how the 'looks' and 'intense stares' made them feel uncomfortable, intimidated and distressed. They reported that 'looks' and 'comments' evoked emotions of anger, frustration and at times intimidation. They said how they endured such experiences when travelling to and from school, college, or when shopping alone, or with friends or family members. No particular time, space or location was identified, nor specified, for these occurrences and therefore the young women could not take steps to avoid the situations. These incidents were



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3 spontaneous and often occurred several times a day. The impact of the verbal and  
4 non-verbal mannerisms resulted in many of the young women feeling disempowered  
5 while a significant number felt that they had become less confident. Additionally,  
6 many described how they felt both physically and mentally anxious and emotionally  
7 upset and frustrated. They spoke about 'feeling sick' and distraught.  
8  
9

10 The young women reported that there could be no differentiation made between  
11 gender, age or ethnicity of the people responsible for the hostility. However, when  
12 sharing their experiences the young women only described, and gave examples of  
13 the behaviour from other women. These women were of all ages and ethnic  
14 backgrounds. They said that people looked at them disparagingly. This was  
15 highlighted in the following two accounts:  
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18  
19 They [people] just look down on you. (Debbie 17 years old)  
20

21 When she, [referring to her daughter] was first born I got dirty looks. (Amy 17  
22 years old)  
23  
24

25 Debbie and Amy's comments were similar to other young women's experiences.  
26 During the focus group Sam (16 year old) said that:  
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29 It's like we're dirty or something, like we've done something wrong.  
30

31 The young women were asked to describe the 'look' and what they meant by 'looking  
32 down', 'dirty looks' and the 'intense stare'. Whether during an interview or group  
33 discussion the young women provided similar adjectives to describe the non-verbal  
34 gestures. They demonstrated these gestures through their facial expressions and  
35 body language. These included a wide eyed gaze, an intense stare, sometimes  
36 frowning, sometimes the lips curled slightly, but certainly not smiling and always a  
37 look of disgust and disapproval. Sometimes the looks were from a distance, or a  
38 passing stare, while other times individuals 'will come right up to you'. The manner  
39 to which feelings were articulated varied. Some of the mothers were more emotional  
40 than others, for example common emotions that were exhibited included anger,  
41 upset and defensiveness. Whereas others questioned why people looked at them in  
42 such a way and why people were making judgements about them. The 'why' was  
43 usually followed by 'I haven't done anything wrong'. Sometimes the look was  
44 accompanied with barely audible comments:  
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50 You get the look and when people walk past they'll murmur things, say things  
51 under their breath. (Debbie 17 years old)  
52  
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54 This was also reported by Adele who said that she frequently experienced:  
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3 Mutterings and people saying things under their breath, usually calling you  
4 names and things. (Adele 17 years old)  
5

6  
7 Harriett (16 year old) reported that she took pride in her appearance and how  
8 appearance was important for herself and her daughter reporting that:  
9

10 People always look at you.  
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12  
13 Elaborating further, Harriett explained that people looked at her as though she could  
14 not look after herself and certainly was not be able to care for her child. She  
15 concluded that there was an ever-present feeling that people were constantly judging  
16 her. Therefore for her, ensuring that she was presentable demonstrated that she was  
17 capable of being a good mother.  
18

19  
20 Bethany (16 years old) talked about how people had said to her 'you have wasted  
21 your life'. She explained how, in her opinion, people made judgements about the  
22 lives and the experiences of young mothers without knowing anything about them,  
23 their situation or circumstances. This was consistent with another group discussion  
24 where mothers reflected on their experiences of being called names and how people  
25 constantly made assumptions about their lives and lifestyles.  
26  
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28  
29 *Going out: violence and aggression*  
30

31 All of the young women shared experiences of verbal interactions and non-verbal  
32 gestures. The following accounts characterise the experiences reported by the  
33 young women. The looks and comments were reported as being subjective and  
34 personal. An example of such was Lilly (16 years old) who described:  
35  
36

37 When I was pregnant walking down the street people would call me names,  
38 slut, slag, f...ing bitch, and swear at me.  
39  
40

41 Roxie (18 years of age) reported that:  
42

43 When I got pregnant at sixteen all I got was you're a slag for having a kid at a  
44 young age.  
45  
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47 And Courtney (16 years old) explained:  
48

49 I get called names and shouted at all the time; people think cos you've got a  
50 child and look young they can have a go at you.  
51  
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53  
54 These assertions were consistent with the other young women's narratives. Each  
55 narrative was similar in content as they described how the 'looks' made them feel  
56 self-conscious and uneasy. One young woman, Annabel (16 years old) reflected on  
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2  
3 her experiences of being attacked. She explained that she was walking near to  
4 where she lived when a woman began shouting at her and calling her names. She  
5 estimated that the woman was in her forties and lived in the same geographical area,  
6 but was a stranger. Annabel reflected on how she initially ignored the woman, but felt  
7 distressed. The name calling referred to her age, an assumption being made by the  
8 woman, however, Annabel said that she was fifteen at the time, and 'heavily  
9 pregnant'. Ignoring the comments provoked further verbal abuse followed by a  
10 physical attack. Annabel said that she had to retaliate, but also disclosed that she  
11 was then subsequently charged for assault while the individual was not.  
12  
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14  
15 The young women shared the verbal and non-verbal behaviour that they  
16 experienced with expressive clarity. They reiterated the nuances and milieu of each  
17 occurrence. The following exemplifies the emotions of many of the young women  
18 who were confronted by verbal interactions. The following fieldnotes were recorded  
19 during and after attendance at a drop-in session and provide a sense of the tension,  
20 anger and frustration felt by Georgina (17 years old).  
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22  
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24 While talking to some mothers at the Drop-in, I observed another mother  
25 walking into the room. The walk was abrupt she was talking loudly almost  
26 shouting. A project worker went to see what the problem was. Following my  
27 discussion, I went to the table where the distressed mother was, introduced  
28 myself and asked if I may sit down. Some mothers recognised me from the  
29 introductory session the previous week. They were talking about the stigma  
30 they feel and receive on a daily basis. The mother who had arrived angry and  
31 distressed had been subjected to derogatory comments during the journey to  
32 the Drop-in. During the recounting of the event my observations were of  
33 someone who was angry but also upset and emotional. I thought about the  
34 potential impact this may have on confidence, self-esteem and parenting.  
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39 During the next segment the descriptive language used by Georgina showed how  
40 this was not an isolated incident.  
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43 During the discussion the mother's tone increased along with hand movements  
44 and non-verbal communication and colourful and descriptive language. One  
45 mother informed me that it was nineteen year olds who 'look down on them'  
46 while another mother stood up and adjusted her right hand to form a 'v' shape  
47 and thus could demonstrate how these 'girls' hold their handbags. She  
48 mimicked a walking motion, gently swaying her hips from left to right, raising her  
49 eyebrows and turning her nose up to illustrate the typical behaviour they  
50 encounter 'some girls call us names, some just look at us, 'designer handbags,  
51 clothes and all made up' – 'who do they think they are'. The air was tense. Five  
52 mothers each sharing their own experiences to contribute to the overall picture.  
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3 In the final segment, Georgina stated how she would have addressed the matter  
4 prior to the birth of her child. This segment also illustrates how the mother's  
5 demeanour changed when she started talking about her child.  
6

7  
8 The mother who had arrived angrily and upset stated that 'I felt like smacking  
9 her' and went on say 'before I had her [referring to her daughter] I would have  
10 done'. The remark illustrated the anger this young woman was feeling but also  
11 demonstrated how she had changed her behaviour and the way she addressed  
12 situations differently 'I can't be bothered, I need to think of, [name of child] she  
13 comes first'. She did not divulge what had been said or the actions she had  
14 been subjected to and I did not want to exacerbate the situation or cause further  
15 distress thus did not enquire further. Interestingly, the young women's  
16 discourse, and facial expressions changed almost instantaneously when they  
17 talked about their babies. There was a calm, peaceful, serenity. It was amazing  
18 to observe such a change of atmosphere and suddenly quietly spoken, smiling  
19 mothers.  
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24 The above highlights the anger and frustration that was clearly demonstrated when  
25 Georgina said, 'I felt like smacking her' and shows how she had changed since the  
26 birth of her baby through the comment in relation to placing her baby first. The  
27 feelings of intensity demonstrated by Georgina reverberated round the table as each  
28 young woman shared their own experiences of similar situations with a variance of  
29 how they might have reacted. A range of different environments, where these  
30 experiences occurred, included shopping centres, town centres, supermarkets, when  
31 on public transport and in other public spaces and places. The words resonated with  
32 resounding similarity.  
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### 36 *Sexuality*

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39 The following accounts provide an insight into how the young women felt in relation  
40 to the non-verbal and verbal behaviour:  
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43 Looking younger than what I really am people look at me and think she's slept  
44 with people at like thirteen, fourteen, so she's a slag. (Debbie 17 years old)  
45

46 Through Debbie's account the interconnectedness between how an individual looks,  
47 for example looking younger than their age, the presumed sexual activity, for  
48 example that the child is theirs, and how people consider what the appropriate age is  
49 to engage in sexual behaviour is illustrated through the account. Whereas Liz refers  
50 to being young and having a partner:  
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53  
54 When you have a kid at a young age it's not the fact that she's been with a  
55 partner three years, it's the "oorr she's opened her legs she's a slag", this and  
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2  
3 that and the other, that's typical thing you usually get it off anyone. (Liz 18  
4 years old)  
5

6 The significance of this account is Liz's own analysis of the importance of long-term  
7 relationships and their self esteem, which implies an acceptance of the general  
8 attitudes in relation to sexuality and partners. Similar to Debbie, Liz also refers to the  
9 name calling she experienced. Adele shared her feelings about assumed sexual  
10 promiscuity, but similar to Liz placed importance on long-term relationships:  
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13  
14 I get funny looks, called a slag, a slut, and people make assumptions when you  
15 are a young mother that you've slept around, go with lots of lads but I'm still  
16 with my boyfriend [the baby's father]. (Adele 17 years old)  
17  
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19 These accounts demonstrate how the young women believed that they were labelled  
20 for differing reasons. However, when analysed in the context of young motherhood  
21 assumed age was a common factor along with reference to sexual activity in addition  
22 to partners and intimate relationships. These three significant accounts typify the  
23 experiences of all the young women whose narratives resonated with similarity. Liz  
24 articulates eloquently:  
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27  
28 Because everyone automatically thinks that you've jumped into bed with  
29 someone, didn't use owt [contraceptives] and there you go you've got a kid, it's  
30 no one looks at the circumstances behind it, so yea they automatically think  
31 you're on your own, this has happened, that has happened, and that's that it's  
32 either black or white there's no in between, it happened or it didn't sort of thing.  
33 (Liz 18 years old)  
34  
35

36 Liz's account suggests a monochromic explanation as to why she thought people  
37 looked and made such comments about young mothers. Within her account, she  
38 was rationalising why people were making assumptions and judgements about  
39 young women and again there were elements within this account that had been  
40 identified previously for example age, assumed sexual promiscuity and the notion of  
41 single motherhood. In the following account, Kitty (16 years old) shared her thoughts,  
42 and although these were similar to the above accounts and the notion of sleeping  
43 around, she also highlighted the difference between having a child and not having a  
44 child.  
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49 There were somebody, same age as me, and she slept with about a million  
50 times more people than me, I've only been with one person which is my baby's  
51 dad, and she tried to say that I was a slapper and all this and that like I said  
52 "that's rich coming from you, you don't know how to pull your knickers up", like  
53 people think they can call you a slag cos you've got a baby but I've only been  
54 with one person and I'm still with him and they've been with like one hundred  
55 people.  
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4 The above accounts indicate that the derogatory labels attached to young mothers  
5 are because of their assumed age and sexual activity. There is no consideration to  
6 the young women's relationship with their partner, their personal circumstances or  
7 experiences.  
8  
9

### 10 *Stereotypes*

11  
12 During a parent and toddler group Nancy (18 years old) shared her experiences of  
13 visiting an indoor garden centre with her daughter. She explained how she used the  
14 centre as an educational experience for her daughter. This included exploring the  
15 colour, shape and size of plants and opportunities for language development.  
16 Additionally, the activities provided by the centre facilitated mother and child  
17 interactions.  
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21 When discussing these visits and especially when talking about her child, Nancy's  
22 facial expression gleamed and appeared very excited. She spoke with elation and  
23 pride when sharing her experiences. However, during a recent visit to the centre a  
24 woman with her partner and child, made a derogatory comment to her about being a  
25 young single mother. The comment made reference to her age and perceived  
26 relationship status. Once again demonstrating how assumptions are often made.  
27 Nancy reported that she felt that she had to say something, and thus replied:  
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31 You're lucky you're with your partner, but mine's at work today.  
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34 The inference that Nancy was a 'young mother' and 'single' was inaccurate and a  
35 presumption. The comment made was negative and referred to her age and  
36 relationship status, but did not consider the recreational or educational value of the  
37 visit. This is significant because it illustrates the one dimensional construct of young  
38 motherhood which is negative, but fails to acknowledge positive parenting, the  
39 mother / child interaction and the possibility that young mothers may also have  
40 partners, who are employed. This experience resonated with other young mothers,  
41 with partners, who reported how there is a general assumption that all young  
42 mothers are single parents.  
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46 When the young women were sharing their experiences of this hostility they reported  
47 that initially, during the pregnancy and following the birth it was felt more intensely.  
48 However, over time they became more accustomed to it although there were some  
49 occasions when it was impossible to ignore the hostility. The young women's  
50 assertions that they became accustomed to the hostility would suggest that the  
51 behaviour had become normalised and accepted. The young women reflected on  
52 how this hostility towards them was perceived as a reflection of their ability to be a  
53 mother.  
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3 The mothers reflected upon the comments made to them and in particular those that  
4 questioned their ability to look after their child. They reported that the individuals  
5 making the comments had no knowledge of their previous experiences, situation or  
6 circumstances, which often included looking after younger siblings and other family  
7 relations. The account from Adele (17 years old) was typical from the majority of the  
8 young women:  
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11 Being the oldest, I took care of my brothers and sisters since I was about  
12 seven.  
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15 However, it would appear that the individuals, who were responsible for the hostility  
16 towards the young mothers, failed to show consideration of the young woman's  
17 background, situation and circumstances. Instead they made assumptions and  
18 judgements. This was highlighted by Courtney (16 years old) when she shared her  
19 experiences of being shouted at by an older woman during the latter stages of her  
20 pregnancy:  
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24 The woman had no idea of what I've been through, people like that make me  
25 sick.  
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28 Courtney's account illustrates how the comments are distressing, insensitive but  
29 again demonstrates no appreciation of the young woman's situation and  
30 circumstances. Courtney did not elaborate further, but this highlighted how people  
31 did not demonstrate self-awareness, compassion or the potential anguish they were  
32 causing. The young women were adamant that age was irrelevant with regards to  
33 looking after children. They referred to their previous experiences, but also their  
34 energy when playing with their children. All of the young women felt that they were  
35 able and capable of being good mothers and were more than able to look after their  
36 children.  
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40 When the young women were reflecting on their experiences of people looking at  
41 them and making comments, they reported that initially, during pregnancy and  
42 following the birth it appeared to be more intense, but how this behaviour became  
43 accustomed to although there were some occasions when it was impossible to  
44 ignore. The following account was an experience Liz (18 years old) shared during an  
45 interview.  
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48  
49 You have looks and stuff like that you're bound to get funny looks but it's better  
50 to walk away. It's like I remember I was stood in a queue at [name of  
51 newsagents] looking at chocolate that sort of stuff thinking what can I treat  
52 myself to and this woman randomly went to shove in front of me. So I said  
53 "don't worry about me love" it weren't as if I was waiting or owt [anything] you  
54 know what I mean obviously I had my baby in the pram and this woman didn't  
55 hear me and her daughter was stood behind me and she walked up mouthing  
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3 and telling her mum what I said. And this woman after I had been served stood  
4 and waited for me and this woman said "oorr look at state of you typical teenage  
5 parent" this that and the other. I said "old on a minute love this has got nothing  
6 to do with you". I said 'and besides if it weren't for people like you putting us all  
7 in stereotypical group' I said 'we wouldn't act the way we do', it's, we wouldn't if  
8 they didn't paint everyone with the same brush but people these days feel as if  
9 they've got a reputation to uphold.  
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13 Liz's account illustrates how the hostile behaviour becomes normalised and  
14 acceptable 'you're bound to get funny looks', as if the whole notion of being in a shop  
15 with your own child is an unacceptable or an unknown phenomenon. Liz also  
16 highlights how she was referred to as a 'typical teenage parent', which raises the  
17 question of where does the image of a stereotypical teenage parent arise? What  
18 does a 'teenage parent' look like? And, are they all the same? The problematisation  
19 discourse of young mothers by the government and media would suggest that they  
20 are a homogenous group and thus presents an inaccurate portrayal of young  
21 motherhood.  
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## 24 25 **Discussion**

26  
27 The dominant discourse identifies young women who are also mothers as a problem.  
28 These young women are often associated with welfare dependency, lacking formal  
29 educational qualifications and as single parents. However, the dominant discourse  
30 fails to appreciate the hostility these young women experience on a daily basis. The  
31 findings indicate that hostility would appear to be founded on assumptions,  
32 stereotypes and perceptions of young women who have children in their teenage  
33 years. Despite the dominant discourse, the hostility appears to transcend class and  
34 the rhetoric by the government, media and the general public that young mothers are  
35 from single parent households, welfare dependent, and lack formal educational  
36 qualifications. Young women with children are placed within a homogenous group  
37 and as such experience similar experiences in relation to being judged, stereotyped,  
38 labelled and problematised. Nevertheless, the contextualisation of young mothers as  
39 a problem is not a new phenomenon and may have historical connotations  
40 (Bainbridge 2009, Cherrington and Breheny 2005). It is from these historical legacies  
41 that the vilification and problematisation of young motherhood may exist, which are  
42 particularly reminiscent of the unwed mother who does not meet societal norms and  
43 expectations and who have, throughout history, been criticised and problematised  
44 (Wilson and Huntington 2005). Thus, having a child out of wedlock is a moral issue,  
45 in need of control, and a burden on society:  
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53 From the late sixteenth century in England, the unmarried 'Lewd Women' who  
54 produced bastard children became 'typical' of what was morally wrong with  
55 society ... The 'lewd' woman was reprehensible both in herself, and as the  
56 'stand-in' for early modern social evil (Cregan 2001, p.126).  
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4 Cregan illustrates how the unwed mother was regarded as both morally wrong and  
5 evil. The unwed woman was blamed for the ills of society. The reference to  
6 'unmarried' and 'unwed' mothers is also pertinent because it 'underscores the  
7 devaluation of single mothers and shows that their perceived offence lies partly in a  
8 violation of marital norms' (Schur 1984, p. 63). Furthermore, following the 1980s  
9 political rhetoric and the notion of young single mothers as the 'national evil' (Skeggs  
10 2005, p. 965) they continue to be regarded as a problem. When contextualising  
11 these historical legacies into contemporary society, the current discourse relates to  
12 single parent households who are frequently blamed for many of the social problems  
13 that exist today, although 'single parent' usually insinuates 'bad mothering' (France  
14 et al. 2012, p. 121). The discursive dialogue surrounding the problematisation of young  
15 motherhood supports the notion of the historical contexts, which could relate to both  
16 the contextualisation of the unwed mother and functionalist perspective of the  
17 nuclear family. Through the historical lens the prejudice, stereotyping, labelling and  
18 hostility is legitimised.  
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24 Driscoll (2002) refers to, the transition from 'girl' to 'woman' the latter including  
25 marriage and having children, in that order complies with the normative femininity  
26 and the traditional societal and canonical expectations of a woman. Thus the young  
27 woman establishes her career, delays motherhood and follows the expectations of  
28 nominative femininity (Harris 2004). Conversely, the young women who do not  
29 proceed through this contemporary life course trajectory are classed as 'at risk'  
30 because they either disengage, or do not continue, in formal education and do not  
31 have a planned professional career (Harris 2004). They have a child. These young  
32 women, still in their teenage years, are referred to as 'teenage mothers'. These are  
33 perceived as a 'symbol of social decline, social failure or social backwardness'  
34 (Macvarish 2010, p. 2). Clearly the implicit discourse remains focused upon the  
35 heterosexual relationship and the notion of marriage: 'feminine adolescence as  
36 growing-up is measured by the womanly roles of motherhood, feminine sexuality,  
37 and wifedom, which proscribe end points to that process' (Driscoll 2002, p. 57).  
38 Anything other than is 'perceived' as deviant.  
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44 Adam (1978) associates deviance with the inferiorisation of individuals and  
45 subsequently stigmatisation. Thornicroft et al. (2007) link stigma with ignorance,  
46 prejudice and discrimination, while Link and Phelan (2006) illustrate the  
47 intersectionality of labelling, stereotyping, identifying individuals as undesirable,  
48 polarising and discriminating individuals along with exercising power with  
49 stigmatisation. Drawing on the work of Thornicroft et al. and Link and Phelan the  
50 conceptualisation of stigma is evident in the language used in relation to young  
51 women who are mothers. They are described as a 'problem', as a 'risk to society'  
52 and previously associated with the 'underclass' and more recently 'Chav'. Reference  
53 to married, unmarried, along with labels such as underclass and Chav, in addition to  
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3 the problematising and identifying them as a risk, polarise people and thus suggests  
4 that some individuals are, as Adam (1978) proposes, inferior.  
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7 Individuals who initiate such hostility have their own interpretation, attach meanings,  
8 and have their own ideological beliefs in relation to young motherhood. However, the  
9 consequences of such are the assumptions they make about the lives of these  
10 young women. It is evident that Adam's (1978) notion of inferiorisation is illustrated  
11 through the actions and interactions towards young women who are also mothers.  
12 This inferiorisation in the form of labelling and stereotyping is resulting in the  
13 disparaging and denigration of young women who are mothers. The young mothers  
14 were, at times, intimidated, but also angry and distressed by the 'looks', 'stares' and  
15 'verbal abuse'. These experiences of hostility demonstrate how dominant 'macro'  
16 narratives, the dominant discourse, impacts on the everyday 'micro' experiences of  
17 young people.  
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## 21 **Conclusion**

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24 The young women's narratives indicated that they were subjected to hostile  
25 reactions on a day-to-day basis. These reactions have the capacity to provoke a  
26 myriad of emotions including intimidation, distress, but also confusion, frustration and  
27 anger. The young women did not understand why they were being treated in such a  
28 manner. They felt that they had not done anything wrong and that the looks, intense  
29 stares and verbal comments were an assault on them. Many of the mothers thought  
30 that health and social care professionals were disrespectful towards them. The  
31 majority of the young women had observed that the midwives had generally directed  
32 their conversations towards their mothers or fathers and their partners and not  
33 directly at them. Professionals undermining young women who were pregnant, or  
34 who had children, was a frequent discussional topic. Existing research (Cliff-  
35 Mathews 2010) suggests that young pregnant women are less likely to engage in  
36 health related services; when listening to the experiences of the young women in the  
37 current study it is not surprising that they did not engage in services. The narratives  
38 indicated disparaging comments, insensitivity, disrespect, and a lack of consideration  
39 of the young women's circumstances.  
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45 Reflecting upon their experiences, the young women said that the hostility was more  
46 prominent during pregnancy and immediately following the birth. They became  
47 accustomed to this behaviour, which formed part of everyday life. This normalisation  
48 of such hostile behaviour does not excuse it, but demonstrates how the young  
49 women are situated within institutional and societal discrimination, stigmatisation and  
50 have to tolerate prejudicial attitudes. This includes when they are with professionals,  
51 within the public gaze, and confronted by a discourse and media representation that  
52 constructs and portrays them as a problem when they are doing what so many  
53 young women have done previously. It is unlikely that such hostility would be  
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3 accepted in any other population of society where equality, diversity and  
4 individualisation are promoted.  
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6 Contextualising young motherhood as a problem, in addition to the negative  
7 projected lifecourse trajectory and a whole range of other labels, positions young  
8 mothers as deviant and thus potentially criminalising their behaviour. The notion that  
9 all young mothers are a risk to both themselves and to society is also flawed. As  
10 Macvarish (2010) suggests the risk is to the young women and this risk relates to the  
11 construction and discourse of young motherhood. However, such connotations are  
12 not new, pregnant young women and young mothers, have been ascribed to certain  
13 social groups, such as the underclass and have been branded for example Chavs.  
14 The rationale for such labels is that they are not accepted, and to some extent within  
15 the expected cultural norm of marriage first, followed by childbirth, but this does not  
16 take into consideration the changing nature of social structures and contemporary  
17 constructs of the family. However, it does have undertones of a historical context, for  
18 example the unwed mother, the normative femininity and gender ascribed roles.  
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24 The cumulative effect of such labelling, government policies and rhetoric and media  
25 representation is potentially placing the young women and their children at  
26 considerable risk. Risk is multi-dimensional and the detrimental consequences of  
27 such continuous and subsequent acceptance of negativity could have detrimental  
28 consequences in relation to parenting ability, child development in addition to the  
29 physical threat. However the ideology of young mothers as a problem and deviant  
30 also situates them as inferior, and thus contributes towards the marginalisation and  
31 stigmatisation of young motherhood. Nevertheless, young women who are mothers  
32 are caught up in a vortex of political rhetoric to which the media then sensationalises  
33 the discourse and as a result portrays young mothers as escalating to epidemic  
34 proportions, unemployed, welfare benefit dependent, a risk to society, unfit mothers  
35 and acquiring social housing. The interplay between the structural factors and the  
36 socio-historical context of unwed mothers and the contemporary portrayal of single  
37 mothers compounds the negativity further. Both the government and the media fail to  
38 differentiate between the young woman's age and/or family situation or  
39 circumstances. This issue needs addressing. Hostility towards young mothers needs  
40 addressing through the raising awareness of unacceptable behaviour, the potential  
41 impact on health and well-being, including self-esteem and inferiorisation of young  
42 mothers. These areas require further research that also includes the potential long-  
43 term impact on young women, whether these areas impact on their parenting ability,  
44 in addition to the possible risk factors the young women and their children may be  
45 exposed to. Furthermore, if, as suggested, the historical legacies are a significant  
46 factor along with the stereotypical perspective of normative femininity and traditional  
47 family structures, then these need to be challenged and young mothers need to be  
48 placed within the context of contemporary family structures and valued as  
49 individuals.  
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