

**Nicola Bailey, Geraldine Brown,
Gayle Letherby, Corinne Wilson**

“The Baby Brigade” *Teenage Mothers And Sexuality*

In this article we draw on data from a completed project which focused on the general experience and specific housing needs of young mothers in the UK. The research was undertaken by four researchers from the Centre for Social Justice at Coventry University (UK) and was funded by Coventry Health Authority. The impetus for the research was the UK Government’s commitment to provide semi-supported housing for all teenage mothers who need it by 2003 and our aim was to talk to young mothers about their housing needs and experience.¹ However, inevitably when talking to people about one particular aspect of their lives they tell you about other related issues *they* consider to be important. We are writing specifically about housing experience and needs and about the more general experience of young motherhood elsewhere but in this paper we concentrate specifically on one aspect of our data—that of “sexuality and young motherhood.”

Our data provides an “insider” perspective by giving a voice to a group that is largely excluded from public discussion of family life in general and teenage parenthood in particular. The main body of this article is divided into two main sections. In “Dominant Discourses of Young Motherhood: an “outsiders”” perspective” we consider how the experience of young motherhood is characterized by moral and political discourses which position this experience as “other” to the “norm.” In “Young Motherhood in Coventry: an “insiders’ discourse” we focus on the experience of our respondents. After briefly outlining our methods and some methodological concerns we consider how dominant discourses affect young mothers’ experience. Finally, we end with a “Reflections” section where we reflect on the data and on the project. Within this we consider the complex relationship between the “insider” and “outsider” perspectives.

Dominant discourses of young motherhood: an “outsiders” perspective

It is possible to argue that young mothers' experience of motherhood is affected by various discourses. Foucault (1980, 1984) suggests that discourses are historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth and that through discourses we are encouraged to see what is and what is not “the truth.” As Ransom notes, for Foucault: “Discourses are not merely linguistic phenomena, but are always shot through with power and are institutionalized as practices” (1993: 134).

Thus, power is constituted in discourses and it is in discourses that power lies. The dominant discourses of motherhood affect all women whether they are mothers or not:

In western society, all women live their lives against a background of personal and cultural assumptions that all women are or want to be mothers and that for women motherhood is proof of adulthood and a natural consequence of marriage or a permanent relationship with a man. (Letherby, 1994: 525)

So motherhood is something that all women are expected to do, but only in the “right” social, economic and sexual circumstances. Thus, as DiLapi (1989) argues there is a hierarchy of motherhood and teenage mothers along with lesbian mothers, older mothers, disabled mothers, non-biological mothers and so on are defined as “inappropriate.” As Kent (2000) notes the legal and social concept of the “child” which has developed in modern society became divorced from sexuality and this has meant that it is particularly difficult to acknowledge the emotional and physical capacity of teenagers for sexual activity. Ironically, a teenage girl seeking an abortion may be seen as acting responsibly whereas this is often seen as a selfish and heartless option in an older married woman. Young mothers are not only stereotyped as a burden on the state (see, for example, Phoenix, 1991) but despite evidence to the contrary (see Phoenix, 1991; Ussher, 2000) teenage mothers are stereotyped as bad mothers and their children severely disadvantaged. As Kent (2000) adds in both cases it is the so-called loose morals of these women which is in question and in each case moral discourses are harnessed to define the “competent”/“incompetent” and/or “fit”/“unfit” mother.

Arguably though it is not the age of the woman that is the primary issue but the fact that younger pregnant girls/women are more likely to give birth outside marriage. Hollway (1994) suggests that the *Male Sex Drive* discourse and the *Have/Hold* discourse each affect the dominant views of young unmarried mothers. The *Male Sex Drive* discourse implies that men have biological urges/and women's sexual needs are subservient to this male sex drive. Moore and Rosenthal drawing on Hollway suggest that: “According to this discourse, women who openly exhibit an interest in sex are considered to be inferior and

amenable to exploitation, as loose women who deserve all they get" (1993: 87).

The *Have/Hold* discourse on the other hand implies that sex is only considered appropriate within a committed heterosexual relationship sanctioned by marriage. Young motherhood then marks women as sexually active and as "inappropriate" mothers (DiLapi 1989) and women.

This is ironic because as Lawson and Rhodes notes: "In many cultures, over many centuries, teenage pregnancy and childbirth have been a normal reproductive pattern" (cited in Bernardes, 1997: 107).

Although teenage pregnancy is not a recent phenomenon, politically it is an issue that is receiving more attention than ever before. Arguably this is due to the fact that teenage mothers are becoming increasingly reliant on the state for provision of money and housing rather than bringing up their children within the patriarchal family unit (Phoenix, 1991). Teenage pregnancy is regarded as "often a cause and a consequence of social exclusion" (Teenage Pregnancy, 1999: 17). This notion has led to an abundance of research focusing on "preventing teenage pregnancy and alleviating the direct negative health and social effects of teenage pregnancy" (NHS CRD, 1997: 2). Within the UK this focus on prevention can be argued to be a direct result of the link between teenage pregnancy and social exclusion and statistical evidence that "The United Kingdom has the highest rate of teenage conception in Western Europe" (TPSE, 2001: 1).

Political discourse then individualizes the problems of teenage motherhood due to the focus on age rather than an examination of the structural factors that affect young peoples' lives (Phoenix, 1991). While the Labour Government has in some ways attempted to highlight structural inequalities that affect young people experiencing teenage pregnancy and parenthood, government initiatives can reinforce negative images. By placing the issue of teenage pregnancy and parenthood under the remit of the Social Exclusion Unit, the UK Government is recognizing that there can be a detrimental impact on the lives of those involved. But this can also reinforce the pervading notion that teenage pregnancy leads to an inevitable exclusion from mainstream society.

Young motherhood in coventry: an "insiders" perspective

The negative focus is produced by people who are not, themselves, "young mothers" but rather outsiders. There is generally disjunction between "outsider" and "insider" perspectives. (Phoenix, 1991: 86)

Methods and methodology

With this in mind our aim was to undertake a grounded study focusing on the views and experience of young mothers themselves. Our respondent groups consisted of 29 individuals (including one man—a partner of one of our female respondents who wanted to be involved). Respondents' ages ranged between 15 and 25: ten were under 18 when we spoke to them, and 18 were under 25 years

of age. Eight of our respondents were living or had previously lived in semi-supported housing, others were living in their parental home or in private or council housing. Approximately a third of those we spoke to had a long-term partner.

The research team undertook five focus group interviews with eighteen respondents in total. Some of these took place in respondents' homes, some in day centres. Focus group interviews gave respondents the opportunity to share not only practical information but also to identify commonalities and differences in their experiences and to reflect on these. The women who took part in the focus groups viewed the experience positively. Helen's comment is typical: "It's nice to have someone just sit and listen to us."

The research team also undertook ten one-to-one interviews. Interviews were conducted with four young mothers who are under 18 and six under 25. All of these interviews took place in respondents' homes. Single interviews enabled young women who did not feel comfortable sharing their experiences with other respondents a chance to contribute to the research. These women, like those involved in focus groups, spoke about the importance of being listened to. Furthermore, one-to-one interviews added another dimension to the research as one interviewee was joined by her partner (Paul) who shared his experiences of being a young father: "No-one's really asked me what I thought... it's all around young single mums. I'm not saying that's not important but..."

One-to-one interviewing and small focus group work allow researchers to explore issues in greater depth than would be possible with larger groups (Gilbert, 1993). Furthermore, as Stanley and Wise note "the best way to find out about people's lives is for people to give their own analytic accounts of their own experiences" (1993: 167).

Data and discussion

We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. Discourse transmits and produces power: it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it feasible and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, 1984: 100)

So, where there is power there is resistance and resistance to power comes through new discourses. These produce new truths—"counter discourses" which oppose dominant truths. Attention to the accounts of the women in our study suggests that here (as in other areas) it is hard for a stigmatized and marginalized group to resist the dominant discourse.

All of the young women that we spoke to reported feeling that they were

being judged by others. Clearly, the dominant discourses that characterise the "outsider" perspective impinge on young women's experience. Many respondents spoke negatively about their relationships with midwives, nurses, doctors, health visitors, and doctors' receptionists. For example, Marie who did not realise that she was pregnant until late in her pregnancy felt that the midwife who confirmed her pregnancy was both patronising and brusque. Elizabeth had a very negative experience at the Women's Health and Information Centre and was told by the abortion counsellor that she would "end up a single mum, claiming benefits for the rest of her life living in a flat in Hillfields [very rundown local area]." Significantly, several young women did not attend antenatal clinics and parentcraft classes because they felt that they would be subject to negative reactions from staff and other women. For example Tina said: "I didn't go, I should've though but I felt that if I went people would look at me all the time. I just didn't want to go."

These fears were confirmed by some of the women who did attend such classes. Leanne said:

I think we need more support because I went to parental classes but it was horrible because I felt I got looked down on because everyone there was in their 20s or 30s. I didn't like it so I didn't go again ... I think there should be separate classes for younger mums.

As Thomas argues dissatisfaction with maternity services in the UK has a long history:

While earlier research had concentrated on some women's underuse of the services ... a series of later studies sought to explore women's experiences of both antenatal care and of labour itself... Central themes of this research have been the contrast between the perspectives of those who use the services and those who provide them ... or conflicts with the image of pregnancy as presented by health care providers. (1998: 44)

There have been some recent positive developments. For example the *Changing Childbirth Report* (Department of Health, 1993) recommends that "the childbearing woman should be fully involved in choosing her care, and thus enabled to feel involved and empowered" (Weaver, 2000). However, although the implication of this is that pregnant women themselves inform maternity services both Thomas (1993) and Weaver (2000) detail remaining tensions. Our data adds another dimension to their critique.

On "breaking the news" of their pregnancy a large number of our respondents also experienced an initial negative reaction from families and partners. Alison and Sandra were both thrown out of the family home, Louise's parents argued, blaming each other for Louise's pregnancy and several others

were encouraged by parents to have an abortion. Clearly as pregnancy and motherhood in young women is often seen as a stigmatizing condition it is treated with pity and disdain which as Pfeffer and Woollett note “are the hallmarks of socially stigmatizing conditions” (1983: 82). We would suggest that also significant here is the fact that young motherhood stigmatizes a family rather than “just” an individual. Although, not considered in our research we would also suggest that because of the double standard of the *Have/Hold* discourse the impact on the families of young fathers is likely to be less significant. Clearly then the stigma of teenage pregnancy coupled with other “outsider” discourses affect young mothers relationships with family members as well as those with others outside of the family.

Ironically, those women in our respondent group who were in relationships found it hard to stay with their partners. Those who were living at home sometimes found that their parents were not as supportive of their relationships as they would have liked. For example, Leanne said that “living at home put a strain on our relationship because he could not stay the night and he had to leave at certain times.” Another respondent who lived unofficially with her partner felt that she could not afford to divulge this information to the various authorities, as it would mean an immediate reduction in her state benefits.² With reference to the benefit system, housing issues and the associated problem of couples staying together, Paul said: “It is hypocritical that all we ever hear about is families and that my family was almost forced to split up by the lack of support we received. They want people to be families but we get no help ... that’s not right is it?”

Moore and Rosenthal (1992) suggest that the relationship between dominant discourses and young people’s views of appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior is complex. This is supported by our study in that the young women we spoke to hoped for marriage and “traditional” family life even though they resisted the negative, stereotypical characterization of them and their family relationships.

All of the women we spoke to experienced concerns regarding safety, danger and harassment. The following accounts are typical of many of the young women we spoke to who were well aware of the stigma and stereotyping attached to young motherhood:

... but the problem is you get so much shit off people ... I don't want to be part of this community if they're going to make us feel shit all the time. My own family don't treat me like that. (Melanie)

... they look at you like you are a slag or something. No one smiles at you or anything, they just give you dirty looks. (Sandra)

Sometimes the problem was worse for those women living in semi-supported housing who also report harassment and abuse from other residents’

visitors. Related to this is the fact that living in semi-supported housing identifies the women as teenage mothers which highlights them as a focus for harassment. As Melanie said "They call us the baby brigade."

All of this accords with Lees (1986, 1989, 1993) work on girls and sexuality. Lees suggest that discourses on adolescent sexuality are overwhelmingly characterized by double standards. A girl's reputation can be negatively affected by sexual activity whereas a boy's is only enhanced. Girls as well as boys are likely to hold these views:

I would think that she is too easy, not a slut but I would say she doesn't feel anything.... People say we should be equal and the same, but the fact is it is not. For a man to have many sexual partners is okay but for a girl to have many sexual partners, she is considered pretty low and a guy is considered what a man, a stud. He has had some experience, he is great. (16-year-old girl from Lees 1996 study cited in Moore and Rosenthal 1993: 12)

Furthermore, whereas the sexual activity of many young women may be the subject of discussion and ridicule once a woman is pregnant her pregnancy and child become a symbol of her "inappropriate" sexual behavior. All of this is ironic as recent studies suggest that girls are coerced into sex with boys in order to "prove" their heterosexuality (e.g., see Martin, 2002).

Dominant "outsider" discourses are pervasive then. For our respondents this was also the case with respect to maternal care. All respondents felt intense pressure to be "perfect" mothers and felt that yet again they were being judged by others. For example, Elizabeth said: "It's like when I'm on the bus and she starts crying and I see people looking and I know they think because I'm young I'm not a good mum."

Mary said: "The hospital are doing tests to see if my son has got Chrones' disease. His dad blames me and says it's all my fault."

These young women then felt the stigma of young motherhood: as unmarried young mothers they felt keenly not only that others would judge them in terms of their sexual behavior but also find their mothering skills wanting. Indeed, it is hard to resist these dominant "outsider" discourses and the "insider" perspective itself appears at times self-judgmental. As Cheryl said: "From the moment my baby wakes up until he goes to bed I don't leave his side. I feel I have to be with him all the time."

Smart argues that nineteenth-century discourses of law, combined with medicine and social science brought into being a "problematic feminine subject" in need of "surveillance, regulation and tutelage." Specifically with reference to motherhood she argues that: "... the concept of motherhood implies the terms and conditions under which mothering is deemed appropriate (1992: 30-31).

Smart adds that this construction of women's bodies as unruly and as a

continual source of potential disruption to the social order has enabled the development of more “sophisticated and flexible mechanisms for imposing restraint and achieving desired docility” (1992: 30-31). Our research highlights this well. Yet, like Smart (1992) we would argue that it is important not to characterise women as inevitably oppressed. There is always resistance and challenge or as Foucault suggests “counter discourses” (1980, 1984). With reference to the young women to whom we spoke, despite the pressures they feel, many of them talked positively about being a mother. For example:

It's great I love it. She's really good, she hasn't got any teeth yet but she's doing all the other things, crawling, pulling herself up the stairs, trying to walk... (Tina)

Yes I love her and everything, I'm glad I had her when I did. I don't regret it ... I'm glad I had her when I was young ... she's not much trouble really. (Sandra)

I had her three days after my 16th birthday so she was a nice present. (Louise)

Reflections

Our data suggests that the “outsider” perspective of young motherhood is hard to resist. Young mothers themselves are drawn into accepting aspects of the “outsider” perspective and their experiences of motherhood are framed within dominant discourses. This is reinforced by the latest UK Government policy initiatives. As previously mentioned within these policies there is a recognition of support needs, however prevention is paramount:

For example, while the Supporting Families Green Paper offers many tempting morsels to those who would wish to see the development of some form of family policy, closer examination suggests that it has a strong social control agenda embedded within the rhetoric. (James and James, 2001: 224).

This reinforces the view that the sexual activity that young women engage in is inappropriate and that this sexual “promiscuousness” automatically marks them as “bad mothers.” Yet, it is important not to suggest that young motherhood is a totally negative experience. Like Phoenix (1991) we found that young mothers distance themselves from some of the negative assumptions associated with young motherhood. Yet, we would add that although young mothers resist aspects of the negative dominant discourse they accept and aspire to other aspects of it. Thus, the “insider” perspective is not a simple rejection of the “outsider” view but a complex mixture of acceptance and resistance.

Particularly significant in policy terms is the danger of the social exclusion

of young mothers (and their children) due to being pregnant as a teenager and being a teenage parent. Structural factors and the prevailing "common-sense" view that teenage pregnancy is not appropriate have wide ranging consequences: "Families do not exist in a vacuum, isolated from each other. They are ... profoundly affected by their social and material environment" (Coote *et al.*, 1998: 113).

As a vulnerable group pregnant teenagers, teenage mothers and their partners and children need support but any support that is offered needs to acknowledge that this group is not inactive or inarticulate. Therefore, policy changes and initiatives need to take into account the "insider" discourse. In concluding our report for Coventry Health Authority one of our recommendations was that further research was needed not least in the area of young mothers experience of antenatal and postnatal services. We have just begun a project on this issue funded by two local health authorities (including Coventry). It seems then that the "insider" discourse is being taken seriously.

¹"Semi-supported" housing is generally understood to be living accommodation in a shared housing complex with other young mothers. A variety of practical, educational and emotional support is provided to residents.

²We did not name this particular respondent for fear of identification.

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