

Childhood, Youth, and Social Work in Transformation

Implications for Policy and Practice

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Claiming Rights and Responsibilities

Deborah Freedman Lustig

By having children, teen mothers seek to assume the mantle of the good mother, yet in mainstream American culture the teen mother is the antithesis of the good mother. Discourse on teen mothers is a discourse of (im)morality, blaming teen mothers for the decline of American society. As one columnist claimed, "We face a quagmire of increased unwed motherhood, burgeoning dependence on social welfare programs, spiraling criminal activity, and a consequential ballooning prison population—problems caused, like it or not, by the proliferation of inadequate parenting," which is later equated with teen parenting (Erbe 1994:A1S). *People Magazine's* cover story, "Babies Having Babies," was typical of the dominant representation of teen mothers in the U.S. media prior to the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, also known as welfare reform (Gleick, Reed, and Schindehette 1994).

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Teen mothers were most often represented as either irresponsible babies incapable of making mature decisions or conniving schemers, bearing children to get on welfare or to keep their boyfriends (Dash 1989). Even sympathetic portrayals reduced teen mothers to passive, innocent victims of older men.

In this chapter, I contrast teen mothers' self-representations with public images of teen mothers in the media just prior to the passage of PRWORA, which limited welfare terms to a lifetime maximum of five years; required teen parents to live with a parent or grandparent; and limited possibilities for welfare recipients to pursue higher education. PRWORA was a drastic change from our previous entitlement system, which was based on the philosophy that the government was obligated to provide for those in need (although, among many other problems, it did not actually provide enough for families to live on). In practice and in philosophy, PRWORA led to a radically different system with less responsibility on the part of the federal government, the end of welfare as an entitlement, and temporary assistance for those who fulfilled certain requirements. With this legislation, public decision makers undermined the liberal democratic commitment to the government's responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, exemplified in the New Deal, and embraced the neoliberal belief that individual well-being is best served by the free market, not by the government (Harvey 2006).

Welfare reform had widespread public approval, yet most people knew about welfare recipients, including teen mothers, only through the media. Media representations of teen mothers, developed and elaborated in the context of an increasingly individualistic and retributive society, helped shape approval for welfare reform by portraying teen mothers as immoral and undeserving. Just as there is no unitary "mainstream," the media are not a monolithic entity: there were exceptions to these characterizations in alternative magazines such as *The Progressive* and *Ms.* (Males 1994; Woodman 1995). I draw from newspaper and magazine articles and a National Public Radio program, which convey "mainstream" views of teen mothers as childish and thoughtless, promiscuous, and selfish.¹ As I will illustrate, there were two predominant representations in the media: the Left, which portrayed teen mothers as passive victims, and the Right, which portrayed teen mothers as wanton parasites. Neither discourse engaged with teen mothers' own understandings of their circumstances and commitments, which suggest alternative policies and practices.

Most public discourse about teenage motherhood suggested that it is a social problem caused by the actions of individuals. This perspective was reflected in the popular press in the prevalence of "profiles," or mini case studies. The

scant analysis in the profiles is sometimes contradicted by evidence presented in the same article. For example, one article described a young woman who had a baby in tenth grade; she graduated from high school and was attending junior college and working part time, well on her way to attaining her goal of becoming a nurse. "Marielle's decision to have a child almost guaranteed that she'd be poor. Families headed by teenage mothers are seven times more likely to be poor as other families, experts say. One reason is that most teen mothers drop out of school to raise their babies and miss the education they need to find good jobs" (Maran 1987). The mismatch between the "expert" judgment and Marielle's experience insinuates that even if some teen moms appear to be successful, they are exceptions, and that teen mothers are poor and drop out of school because they have children. The title of this article, "The New Faces of Poverty; the U.S. Economy Is Healthy, but More Americans Are Poor Than at Any Time since the 1960'S," further suggests that individuals, not the economy, are to blame. In actuality, families that are headed by teen mothers are more likely to be poor mostly because teen mothers are more likely to come from poor families (Geronimus and Korenman 1992).

REPRESENTATIONS OF TEEN MOTHERS

Teen mothers in mainstream (both Right and Left) accounts are two-dimensional: they exist only as "teen mothers" and not as persons. As Gans writes in a general critique of the dangers of labeling the poor: "One of the purposes of labels is to strip labeled persons of other qualities. That a welfare recipient may be a fine mother becomes irrelevant; the label assumes that she, like all others in her category, is a bad mother, and she is given no chance to prove otherwise" (1995:12). This labeling denies teen mothers' morality and agency and their commitments to be responsible mothers. These negative depictions of teen mothers facilitated the passage of PRWORA.

In stark contrast to their public representations, my research with young mothers revealed women who were making decisions about their lives, albeit based on limited options and sometimes imperfect information. For young women in my study, having children is in itself an expression of agency as they seek to move from the status of child to that of adult. While teen mothers were commonly referred to as "children having children" or "babies having babies," the term "teen mother" includes 18- and 19-year-old women who are legal adults in our society. Scholars who observe and listen to teen mothers, regardless of

their legal status as children or adults, find that for most of them, motherhood is not a consequence of uncontrolled sexuality, but the result of their desire to enter the adult world, to use their power to bear children, and to embrace the responsibilities that accompany that power (Gabriel and McAnarney 1983; Williams 1991). Ladner (1972) found that having a child was the most important marker of adult status for young African American women in the inner city. Since then, options for young poor women who don't succeed at school have become even more limited. In Kaplan's study, one teen mother revealed that "I can be a mother if I can't be anything else" (1997:181).

As Kelly (1994:10) explains, for many poor urban teenagers, motherhood "is not a deviation from but a path to approximate dominant norms." In this chapter, I will highlight the voices of school-age mothers as they articulate these dominant norms. They align themselves with mainstream morality even as they recount their decisions to have a baby as an unmarried teenager. This apparent contradiction between words and action can be seen as an example of an "aligning action." As Stokes and Hewitt explain, "members of a society facing altered circumstances but still cognizant of culture may use aligning actions to square their altered conduct with those prevailing standards" (1976:848).

To elaborate further, school-age mothers, by giving birth, engage in a behavior that they themselves often judge as wrong *in general* (they are often harsh critics of *other* teen mothers). Nevertheless, this behavior sets them on the road to a status as a mature, moral person, and they display their baby's pictures as evidence of their status as good mothers (Lustig 2004). Horowitz describes the way unwed motherhood among Latinas in the United States can serve to transform a "potentially 'loose woman' to a good mother. ... Her past actions are reinterpreted in light of her new status as a mother" (1983:130-31). A similar process occurs among the young women I interviewed.

Public opinion of teen mothers finds so many things "wrong" with them: they are young; most of them are poor; most are unmarried; and they are constructed in the dominant discourses as "shameless." Although they are strongly identified as African American in the public eye, more and more of them are European Americans. Prior to the passage of PRWORA, teen mothers were the scapegoats, but not only for the ills of the urban poor—they were framed as both the cause of and the evidence for the moral collapse of American society. This muddled category of teen mother resonated with great force. Part of the force stems from the very fact that teen motherhood mixes up two categories: children and adults. "The teenage mother, by breaking the chronologies of the hegemonic culture, pollutes the category *child* and becomes a deviant *adult*" (Lawson 1993:105).

I do not replace the public demonization of teen mothers by canonization: teen mothers do not always act responsibly, but they do evaluate their own and others' actions and intentions according to a very high standard. While they do not always measure up to their own standards, neither do mothers or fathers of any age group. Like any other group, teen mothers vary tremendously in their level of responsibility and maturity, and, as well, any individual teen mother can change her behavior over time. In Luttrell's (2003) study of pregnant teenagers' self-representations through art and performance, she reveals their individual complexities and ambiguities. I elaborate teen mothers' discourses of rights and responsibilities in order to show that teen mothers are not "babies" but mothers-mothers who judge themselves and others according to moral principles. They apply these principles in considering childbearing, abortion, their children's fathers, their parents, school, and welfare.

METHOD

This paper is based on an ethnographic study of teen mothers and their school experiences (Lustig 1997), which includes a comparison of African American, Asian American, European American, and Latina teen mothers in an urban area of California. At the time of my research (1993-1994), base closures, plant closures, and an ongoing recession made jobs scarce, especially in the inner city. I conducted formal interviews with 78 young mothers, ranging in age from 14 to 19. I spent a school year as a participant-observer at a school program for teen mothers (School-Age Parents, or SAP).²¹ I interviewed students at SAP and at other schools, and young women who had dropped out of school. When I began my research, I did not intend to investigate morality among school-age mothers; I did not ask questions about whether particular behaviors or attitudes were "right." This analytic focus developed after young mothers at school and in interviews brought up these topics and their moral implications repeatedly.

CONSIDERING MOTHERHOOD

Teen pregnancy is usually seen as an unintended consequence of sexual intercourse. The stereotypes of hormone-driven teenagers and promiscuous African Americans (Solinger 1992) coalesce into the image of the oversexed and ignorant teen mother. Writing about teen pregnancy, Faye Wattleton, former president of Planned Parenthood, claims that "[L]arge numbers of teens say they do not

use contraceptives because they are 'swept away' by passion Only seventeen states and the District of Columbia mandate comprehensive sex education. As a result, many teen-agers are abysmally ignorant about their reproductive functions" (1989). Suggesting that teenage pregnancy is due to uncontrolled sexuality and ignorance, Wattleton denies teenage mothers' self-control and agency. In contrast, the young women in my study saw themselves as exercising agency and making choices, if often heavily constrained ones.

Some of my informants sought to become pregnant. Others chose not to terminate an unplanned pregnancy. Many teen mothers have had abortions, either before or after their child's birth, so their decisions to bear children should be examined in the context of alternatives. These young women struggled to weigh the practical and moral implications of their pregnancies. The two factors that influenced these young women most were the timing of the pregnancy and the quality of their relationship with the baby's father. Several of the young women terminated pregnancies when they were younger because they were not ready to have a baby. Others, pregnant shortly after the birth of one child, terminated pregnancies. It was too soon to have another child, they believed, and thus unfair to their already born child. In both these situations, the women evaluated their capacity to care for a(nother) child and found it lacking. Explaining that she would have had an abortion if she felt the circumstances weren't right to have a child, Rosa said, "Why would I bring a baby to suffer, if I wasn't going to be able to be responsible and take care of it? The baby was just going to come to suffer. Not like my daughter, thank God, she has what she needs. She doesn't suffer."

According to the moral codes of some of the young women I interviewed, abortion is an irresponsible and selfish act. By accepting the consequences of their sexuality, young mothers can demonstrate their maturity. Both in private interviews and in informal conversations in the classroom, I often heard a variant of this statement of Arlene's: "If I'm woman enough to have sex, I'm woman enough to have the baby." Similarly, Thompson describes one of her interviewees, Brenda, a successful student who got pregnant: "[She] thought of herself as the kind of girl who wouldn't have an abortion—the kind of girl who met challenges and responsibilities rather than ducked them She'd framed her hopes in terms of her responsibilities to others rather than her own rights or happiness, and she couldn't help thinking now in terms of her responsibility to the next generation" (1995:121).

Charles Murray, author of *The Bell Curve*, is one of the most outspoken of the right-wing critics of young mothers. He feels that teen mothers are incapable of caring for their children, and that they know they are incapable: "To bring

a child into the world knowing that you are not intellectually, emotionally, or materially ready to care for that child is wrong" (Murray 1994).

In contrast, I found that young women engaged in a complex decision-making process when deciding when to become pregnant, carry a baby to term, terminate a pregnancy, or place their baby for adoption, including an assessment of their own readiness to be a mother. While most did not have the *material* resources to care for their children, they actively reflected on their emotional and intellectual readiness to care for a child. In response to my interview question about her family's reaction to her pregnancy, Teshay said, "If anybody was to have a baby, my mother always knew that I would be responsible, because I always kept everything in order, you know. When she would leave I was always the one in charge of everything. So I knew that I could take on the responsibility of having a baby." Like Teshay, most of the mothers had experience in taking care of others' children and based their self-evaluation on their demonstrated abilities. As Aisha said, "Well I really feel that it's not such a big deal because I raised two kids [her cousins] from birth. So I felt that I was ready to raise a baby when I had mine 'cause I already had raised two of them."

The young mothers I interviewed described adults, usually their mother, questioning them as to whether they were really ready, and they described their affirmative answers to these questions. In her interview, Yatay recounts her mother's involvement in the decision-making process:

DEBORAH: How did your mom react when you told her [you were pregnant]?

YATAY: [After I told my mom I was pregnant] she was like "Are you ready for this?"

And I said, "Yeah, I'm grown" and so she had to talk to Jamal [the baby's father]. He's like, "Yeah, I'm ready." But if I could do it all over again I wish I woulda just listened to my mother, cause it's very hard. She was tellin me it's hard, and I was like "No, he's gonna help me he's gonna be there," which he was a little, but we're not married like I thought we was gonna be.... When I went back to Jefferson High my mom was watching her. I wasn't gain to school. I was just like ya know gettin' high or whatever and tryin' to ya know kick it [relax] with my friends, knowin I had responsibilities, but I wasn't even tripp in [worrying] about my responsibilities, and when my mama found I wasn't gain to school she made me do it by myself. It was hecka hard, and I found out I can't take everything I have for granted, cause she didn't have to help me, but she did. I just took advantage of her and what she did, and so I learned my lesson. So I got out there and hustled for a job, found me a job. Then I wanted to be back in school cause I knew I had to make a better life for me and my daughter, so I just found out about SAP, then I enrolled, and I finally got day care.

Yatay and Jamal had both felt ready to take on the responsibility of a baby. Yatay was wrong about Jamal's commitment and initially wrong about her own. She is no longer involved with Jamal, a drug dealer, because she decided the relationship was not good for her. But even when Yatay was shirking her responsibilities, she was aware of them.³

For some young women, being a parent is a chance to start a new family and to escape an oppressive family situation. Having a child can be an act of hope for a young woman living in a desperate situation. Jacobs (1994) describes how teenage women often turn their lives around after the birth of a child, leaving behind drugs and gangs. Far from ruining her chances for a good life, motherhood may be a young woman's first step toward a good life. According to *Essence* magazine, "for teenage mothers, parenthood ... means a premature and often traumatizing end to the relative simplicity of childhood" (DeWitt 1994). Yet many young mothers, like Gloria, never had a "simple" childhood.

DEBORAH: Tell me about your family, when you were growing up, who lived with you?

GLORIA: [My mom] had leukemia, cancer of the blood, I had all the responsibility.

I was four, [my sister] was not even a year, so I took care of my sister from the time I was four years old until today. I'm still taking care of her. I raised my sister, I took care of my sister, I cooked, I was cleaning, and I learned how to do that at four years old. I was bigger than the normal four year old. I was much smarter, I could read, I could do math, I could do anything, and I've always been like that. So I did have a lot of responsibility. At that time, when I was growing up, my mom and my dad were into drugs and alcohol. They're both addicts and alcoholics, that's how I grew up. I grew up in a real abusive home, my dad was always hitting my mom, not just a slap or this or that, I mean he really beat the shit out of her. And that's how I grew up. I was the only one that could take care of either my dad, my mom, my sister or all three of them at the same time.

For Gloria, pregnancy was not "the gray cloud that immediately casts a grim shadow over a young girl's relatively carefree life" (DeWitt 1994). On the contrary, the birth of her son gave her a chance to create a new healthy family.

BABYDADDIES

Like Yatay, teen mothers may end up raising a child without the child's father, but before having children they consider not only their own maturity and responsibility, but also their partner's characteristics and the quality of the relationship.⁴

Charles Murray (1994:3 - 4) suggests that we should "tell young women from the outset - from childhood - that they had better choose the father of their babies very carefully, because it is next to impossible for anyone, including the state, to force a man to take on the responsibilities of fatherhood." He is implying that the large number of single mothers is evidence that young women do not choose their partners well, but I think it is more compelling evidence that most young women already know how hard it is to force a man to fulfill his responsibilities as a father. Teshay knew right from the start that she didn't want to have a baby with someone who already had a child with another woman. "I knew that I would never have kids with somebody that had kids already. Every time I would talk to a boy, I would ask if they had kids. I never wanted to deal with nobody with kids, because that's already enough for them to deal with." Carefully and rationally, she sought a man who would stay with her and their child, rejecting men who had already left their first child. Among the young women I interviewed, having a man's first baby is generally considered more prestigious, and some teen mothers look down on their peers (male and female) who have children with more than one partner. When I asked Teshay if she wanted more children, she said that she did, but only if she was still together with her daughter's father: "I don't want a whole bunch of kids by a whole bunch of different men. I hate that, ooh, I hate that. It's kind of tacky ain't it?"

But while the teen mothers in my study value a father who will care for their child(ren), who will not be drawn away by children from a different mother, they did not expect the fathers to be equal partners in child-rearing. They anticipated taking primary responsibility for their children; contributions from the father were beneficial, but not essential. They were always aware that they might have to raise their children alone. Latika's new boyfriend was helping her raise her son, but he wanted her to have *his* baby.

He don't understand why I don't want a baby. I said, "I got a baby, it's hard enough with one, and what I look like with two?"

"I'm here for this one, what makes yOll think I'm gonna run off and leave my own? Haven't I been helping you with this boy and blah blah, this and that."

I be like, "Yeah, but still, when you gone, what I'm gonna do?"

Lanisha was also wary after her son's father left her and the baby, so she decided to have an abortion when she got pregnant by another man.

Basically I'm afraid. I feel that if I have another baby that the babyfather end up leaving me or won't be around, and now I take care of my son by myself. I grew up

without my father and I know how it feels and I don't want to have all my kids like that. For BJ he'll probably grow up without his father. If he do see him it won't be on purpose, it'll probably be by accident. And so I don't want no more kids.

Many fathers *are* gone, and based on this reality, teen mothers make few demands on those fathers who are still around. I asked one pregnant woman if she thought the father would support the baby financially. Expressing hope, not expectation, Sharee exclaimed, "He better! I mean, he doesn't *have* to, but I think he will. He gives me money now to put in the baby's savings account."⁵

Young mothers seeking support from their children's fathers consider their ability to pay and the source of the money. In an economy with massive unemployment among young, uneducated men, especially African American men, young mothers usually could not expect much in the way of financial support from legitimate sources (Wilson 1978). Yvonne saw herself, her boyfriend, and their daughter as a family, and she was proud that he came over every day and helped with child care. But when I asked about financial assistance, she hesitated. "Well, he's still out on the streets [dealing drugs], but I'm trying to get him away from that. So I don't like to ask for anything, because I know how he's going to get the money."

While the mothers do not count on financial support, they expect some combination of financial support and child care if the father is to maintain rights to the child. Especially if the mother and father are no longer partners, the mother demands a certain (minimal) level of responsibility from the father in return for allowing him to *see* his child(ren). The expectations vary from mother to mother, and each young woman struggles to decide what is acceptable to her. I observed a poignant support group where several of the young women dashed over whether they should allow their children's fathers to show up after long absences to shower the children with gifts, only to leave again for an indefinite time. Drawing on their own experiences of growing up with fathers who were there with varying levels of commitment, some participants contended that any paternal involvement is preferable to none, while others countered that no father is better than an undependable, unpredictable father. Each woman was trying to figure out what would be best for her child: even as they vehemently supported their own points of view, they assessed others' experiences as potential models. In general, these young women revealed a deep critical engagement with practical and moral issues around fatherhood. These accounts suggest that instead of assuming that young mothers choose prospective fathers frivolously and blaming the mothers when their children grow up without fathers, we should teach

young men from childhood what their responsibilities are and ensure that they have the skills and jobs to fulfill those responsibilities.

WELFARE

A common misperception is that welfare erodes personal responsibility: "The great problem at present is that unwed mothers on welfare, and the young men who impregnate them, are indirectly told that they do not have to be responsible for their behavior [because of welfare]" (Bethell 1993). From the point of view of young, poor mothers, welfare is a means to fulfill their responsibilities. While many of the young women resent the forms, the waiting, and the impersonal bureaucracy of the welfare system,⁶ they are resigned to the paternalistic questioning, rather than humiliated by it. Especially for women who were previously on welfare as part of their own mother's "case," having a baby, moving out, and establishing their own case are signs of maturity. They do not have children in order to get on welfare, but once they have children, they want to manage their own money.

One of the provisions of PRWORA is that teen mothers cannot receive welfare unless they live in the same household with their parents or grandparents. This provision is based on the assumption that such arrangements provide the best care for mothers and babies alike. Reports from the young women in my study offer a more complicated picture. Some, like Gloria, move out of their mother's house to escape an abusive situation; others, like Iris, to escape from normal mother-daughter conflict. After Yatay moved out and proved to herself and to her mother that she could take care of *herself* and her daughter and do well in school, she moved back in with her mother, both for the help and for the financial savings. Yvonne had established her own welfare case, but she still lived with her mother and paid rent, despite serious ongoing arguments that led to *blows*.? She simply could not afford much of an apartment on her own. "I'm not going just because I can't stand my mother. I'm not going to move out into a squished-up studio or somebody else's house or into the streets and then have my baby in a predicament where we don't have a stable place to stay." Yvonne could not afford to pay the rent for an apartment because even a run-down one-bedroom apartment in a dangerous neighborhood cost 400 dollars a month; Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments were only 490 dollars a month for a woman with one child. Actually subsisting on welfare is next to impossible.

My informants feel they have the right to a roof over their heads and food on the table, and they are willing to work for it. "I'm just gonna try to look for a job because I'm not gonna depend on welfare all my life. That's nothing to depend on. It's not enough to be dependent on, especially when they cutting the checks and stuff, that's not enough to depend on to live, you know." Murray (1994) claims that "the poorer [a young woman] is, the more attractive the welfare package, and the more likely that she will think herself enabled by it to have a baby." Saying that welfare "enables" poor young women to have babies is using the language of codependency to suggest that the government is supporting young mothers /junkies in their "habit" of procreating. By the government's own calculation of poverty-level income, welfare is not enough to live on, and it is never "attractive." In a classroom discussion before the 1994 elections, the teacher pointed out that the students should be concerned since many of the candidates were threatening to cut welfare. The students responded forcefully that it didn't matter to them because they weren't going to be on welfare much longer. Many of them will stay on welfare or go on and off it, but they are not *planning* a life on welfare. Contrary to widespread popular belief that welfare "begins" with teen motherhood (Offner 1994), the evidence is that welfare dependency begins with the lack of jobs that pay a living wage and the lack of education to qualify for better-paying jobs.

SCHOOL

Young mothers experience a conflict between their current responsibilities as mothers, which often keep them out of school, and their future responsibilities, which lead them to value an education for its own sake and for the better job prospects that it brings. Staying out of school to fulfill family responsibilities is a familiar pattern to many teen mothers (Fine 1991); even before they had their own children, they often missed school to care for other family members. Rosa explained, "My mom doesn't speak really good English so when she had to take my brother to the doctors then I had to go too. He has asthma. So I had to be home a lot." Once they became mothers, they often had to miss school to keep appointments with doctors, public health programs, and welfare, each time losing a whole day because of long waits and bus transportation. Although California has a mild climate, during the rainy season school attendance dropped dramatically, as the young mothers were reluctant to take their babies out to wait for two buses in the rain. They insisted that it was not worth risking their child's health to go to school.

Before young mothers can feel comfortable about returning to school at all, they must find a reliable child care arrangement. In part because low-cost child care is frequently of poor quality, and in part because of media hype about the dangers of child care and the benefits of mothers caring for their own children, many young mothers are reluctant to send their children to a child care center, preferring to have a relative care for them. "For a mother who regards having a child as the only worthwhile thing she has ever accomplished, leaving that child with someone she does not know or trust requires a major leap of faith" (Quint, Musick, and Ladner 1994:135).

A few mothers were not ready to leave their children to go back to school after the six-week maternity leave allowed by the SAP program. Yvonne eloquently defended her decision to stay home with her baby.

I didn't know if I wanted to leave her home with nobody, and another thing I didn't want her to get attached to nobody else. I feel that if you have a baby you should take on the responsibility yourself, you know. Now, if you get a job that's one thing, but I feel that when school comes-I don't feel that it's right to have somebody else watch your baby-they had a day care and stuff but I don't really trust that too much. And then some people have their parents or somebody at home that can help them, but I don't feel that it's their responsibility because they didn't have the child and I feel that I should be here with the child. Let me just be honest, if they didn't have independent study to offer I just wouldn't go back. Because I would rather be here and raise my child, and if I had to get my GED or if I just had to just not go back, I wouldn't because I feel that I had her, and I shouldn't burden nobody else with watching her, putting up with her, because I don't think nobody could treat her like I could.

Yvonne decided that a good mother is with her child all the time, and that this responsibility was more important than going to school. Moreover, she felt that she could care for her daughter better than anyone else could.⁸

On the other hand, for many of my respondents, becoming a mother led to a new commitment to educational achievement. Many in my study returned to or stayed in school because they wanted to be able to better provide for their children. After taking a year off after the birth of her first child, Olivia took after-school classes and went to summer school to finish high school in three years, during which time she had another baby. "I want to be prepared to have a job because I want to be able to work and have money to support my children. I don't want to depend on other people." Some young mothers see staying in school and obtaining basic skills as a sign of maturity and of being a good

parent. They wanted to be able to tell their children that they graduated from high school; they wanted to be able to help their children with their homework. Demetria, age 14, explained how it felt to be one of the youngest in the SAP program: "I feel that I'm just as old as the other ones but just my number of my age [is less]. I'm mature. I know how to write, spell. I feel that for me to be so young, I'm taking care of my child, taking care of my business, doing what I got to do, *and* [staying] in school. It don't bother me."

For an assignment to write an essay defining intelligence, two students said that being a good mother was part of being intelligent. Like Demetria, they see being in school and being a mother as complementary. Being a (good) mother is a sign of maturity and intelligence. Latika wrote:

There are many ways to define or talk about intelligence. I think intelligent people are problem solvers and good mothers. An example is a teen parent who is under 18 and is still in school and is living on their own and taking care of herself and their child. Like me, for an example; I am still in school and taking care of business.... The most important criteria [for defining intelligence] overall is being a good mom And just because you have a baby that doesn't make you a mother. You're not a mother until you take on your responsibility of being a mom because any female can have a baby ... A good mom makes sure her baby comes first before any man. And her baby has everything he/ she needs and she gives her baby lots of love.

"AN ANGEL OR SOMETHING"

A major reason young women have children is that they want to be responsible members of society. This desire is completely missed by their critics and those who view them as victims: "We cannot have a free society ... unless the great majority of young people come of age having internalized norms of self-restraint, self-reliance, and commitment to a civic order" (Murray 1994). Teen mothers *have* internalized norms of self-restraint, self-reliance, and commitment to a civic order. One after another they explained how they put their children first. Olivia: "It's not whatever *I* want to do, it's whatever's right for my daughter and my new family." One after another they explained how they strive to be independent. Gloria explained:

It's not like a big deal for us, like the way other people look at us, "Oh, you guys are so young to be doing this. Oh this that." [My boyfriend] busts his ass, he works.

I'm not on welfare, I don't get any AFDC, food stamps, I don't get none of that. He works and he takes care of me and the baby, and our son's like the biggest thing, the big deal to us. We take care of him, and then I'll start working when I get out of school."

One after another they explained how they plan to heal their families and communities. Tawina was moving to be near her family members, whom she described as pimps and prostitutes. During the interview, I asked her why she wants to move near them.

TAWINA: 10 help them. 10 help them.

DEBORAH: SO you're going to be taking care of yourself and this baby and your whole family?

TAWINA: I don't know. That's how it is. I'm an angel or something. That's how I see it. Just to help them.

Tawina's commitment to the values Murray prescribes is likely to keep her in poverty, as she spreads her time and resources among her family members, like many capable young women growing up in poverty (Quint, Musick, and Ladner 1994). In Carol Stack's (1974) groundbreaking study of African American kinship networks, *All Our Kin*, she demonstrated that a complex and structured exchange of goods, services, and children made survival possible for poor families, but that the collective orientation necessary for group survival made it unlikely for individuals to escape from poverty.

Selflessness, not laziness, keeps many teen mothers in poverty. And even more than selflessness, poverty keeps teen mothers in poverty:

The very poor have used their families to cement and patch tenuous relations to survival; out of their belief in "family" they have invented networks capable of making next-to-nothing go a long way. In response, they are told that their notion of family is inadequate. It is not their notion of family that is deficient, but the relationship between household and productive resources. (Rapp 1987:234)

Teen mothers are often portrayed as teen Others, but teen mothers' values *are* "American family values." As Luker explains, "Oddly enough, the conservative dream of "family values" plays itself out in perhaps its purest form among teenage mothers in poor communities. These young mothers express a commitment to moral values over material advancement, a passionate attachment to children, and a willingness to try to sustain a family (albeit a nontraditional one) whatever the social and financial cost" (1996:164). As I described above, some

teen mothers decided to have a baby as a way to embrace their moral values. In settings where they endured poverty, family discord, and limited options and resources, being a "good mother" was a commitment that many sought to fulfill. Others tried to redeem their accidental pregnancies by doing the right thing and having and raising their babies. The action of giving birth, even as a teenager, can make it possible for a young woman to live her values as a responsible, moral person.

I have emphasized that young women talk about their childbearing and rearing in deeply moral terms. Once we recognize that teen mothers can and do take responsibility for their actions, they are no longer "babies having babies." They are young women who, in the face of great adversity, are affirming their ability to nurture a child. Instead of blaming them for their children's poverty, we could provide jobs that pay a family wage, universal health care coverage, and high-quality, subsidized child care. Yet due in part to the public perception of teen mothers as parasites, PRWORA was passed, with its punitive and adversarial relationship to young mothers. As PRWORA was debated annually from 2002 until its reauthorization in 2006, the debate focused on whether the legislation had succeeded in getting people off welfare; there was much less discussion about what had happened to those who left the welfare rolls (Albelda and Withom 2002). The state has not yet reclaimed responsibility for meeting its people's basic needs. The state's irresponsibility is made more palatable by portrayals of teen mothers as irresponsible.

While teenage mothers are not in the news so frequently today, when they are discussed, it is in the same terms as helpless children or as social parasites. A 2006 editorial in the *Toledo Blade* stated that "certainly teen mothers face well-documented hurdles as children raising children." In a 2006 government report stating that teen pregnancy, abortion, and birth rates are at their lowest ever, the authors still included the following: "The costs of teenage childbearing in the United States are substantial These costs include public assistance, health care, child welfare, and other expenses" (Ventura et al. 2006). Teenage childbearing is a cost to our society because in general teen parents live in poverty, but the report implies that the costs are due to individual behavior, not structural factors. Goodkind (this volume) explains how a focus on girls' "good" or "bad" choices obscures the social context of those choices. In a 2006 article in the *Atlanta Business Journal* on the economic savings due to the declining teen birth rate, Jane Fonda was quoted as saying, "Clearly it makes good fiscal sense, not to mention moral sense, to throw everything we've got into preventing youngsters from getting pregnant and to motivate young mothers to avoid second pregnancies." On the basis of my research with teen mothers, I would "throw everything

we've got" into public education, housing, transportation, and job training that leads to family-friendly careers, not minimum-wage jobs.

Teen mothers are neither helpless victims, as public discourse on the Left asserts, nor immoral schemers, as public discourse on the Right suggests. Examining teen mothers as subjects (rather than subjects of "in-depth" coverage) reveals that young women who bear children have complex motivations, histories, and dreams. If we listen to their words and observe their actions, we hear and see responsible actors who choose to exercise their rights from a foundation of morality. In contrast to the way the mainstream marginalizes them as aberrant, immoral, or weak, teen mothers' values *are* mainstream values. By deciding to have children, they act on these values, conducting a careful moral calculus and embracing the responsibilities that accompany motherhood.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What representations of "teen mothers" do you encounter in the popular media, professional literature, or everyday conversation? What makes these representations compelling to their audiences?
2. What notions about teen mothers are challenged in this chapter? How have these notions come to be part of professional and popular understandings? What is at stake in challenging these ideas?
3. Lustig asks us to question the dichotomy that is created in our understandings of "teen mothers" and "good mothers." What are the implications for social work practice of challenging this dichotomy?
4. How do the perspectives of the young women described in this chapter alter or enrich your understandings of their situations?
5. What new possibilities for practice with young women does this chapter inspire?

NOTES

1. Other forms of media, such as television and the movies, can also be plumbed as guides to "mainstream" understandings of teen mothers. In discussing this chapter with one of my informants, she singled out television talk shows, and especially the *Jenny Jones Show*, as particularly offensive in their portrayal of teen mothers because of the way they showcase the individual psycho-pathology of teen mothers.
2. "SAP" and all the names of young women quoted are pseudonyms.

3. Notice that her daughter was not neglected during this time but was being well cared for by her grandmother. After Yataydid return to school, she maintained straight As and a perfect attendance record.

4. African American teen mothers usually refer to their child's father as their "baby-daddy," a contraction of "baby's daddy."

5. As it happened, she chose well: he continued to support the baby, and the couple married just before the child's second birthday.

6. See Susser and Kreniske (1987) for a graphic account of the waiting and harassment involved in the welfare process.

7. The physical altercations were between Yvonne and her mother. Yvonne's baby was not hurt.

8. When her baby was about six months old, she did begin independent study at adult school.

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